

Sunday Telegram
Worcester, Mass.
May 4, 2008



Marshall W. 'Major' Taylor 1899 world champion bicycle racer

Vital statistics

Born Nov. 26, 1878, in rural Indiana; moved to Worcester in 1895; died June 21, 1932, in a hospital charity ward in Chicago.

What he did

Mr. Taylor was considered the world's fastest cyclist from 1898 to 1904. Promoters deprived him of becoming the 1897 U.S. cycling champion by refusing to allow him to enter races in the South because he was black, but he set seven world records in 1898 and won the world 1-mile cycling championship in Montreal on Aug. 10, 1899. He followed boxer George Dixon as only the second black world champion athlete. He won the American sprint championship in September 1900. A loyal member of the John Street Baptist Church in Worcester, Mr. Taylor resisted competing in Europe because races were held on Sundays. He finally relented in 1901 and dominated cycling in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the United States through 1904. He was especially revered in France.

Mr. Taylor was just 5 feet, 7 inches tall and slightly built, but had muscular thighs. He was athletic and trained rigorously. He didn't smoke or drink. While racists dismissed black boxing champions as mere brutes, Mr. Taylor infuriated them with his tactical, intelligent racing. Because white riders worked together against him, he usually was forced to seize the lead early and hold it — the most difficult way to win because he couldn't draft off his opponents.

Opponents threw ice water at him and tossed nails in front of his tires. Riders purposely boxed him in. A white competitor yanked him from his bicycle in a Taunton race and choked him to the point that he lost consciousness. His assailant received only a \$50 fine.

In his words

"Life is too short for a man to hold bitterness in his heart," Mr. Taylor said of his feelings toward racists who prevented him from racing and harassed him during competitions.

Something you may not know

Blacks were excluded from many bicycle races in the United States. One time Mr. Taylor sneaked onto an Indianapolis track and set the 1-mile Capital City record in 2 minutes, 11 seconds, a full 7 seconds faster than the record that the white Walter Sanger had set earlier in the day. Mr. Taylor was then barred from competing on any track in the city. Determined to continue racing, Mr. Taylor tried to bleach his skin white. For several days, Mr. Taylor's manager, Louis "Birdie" Munger, poured some concoction on Mr. Taylor. His skin turned somewhat lighter, but the mixture was poisonous in heavy doses so the attempt was halted.

Making a name for himself

Mr. Taylor was called “Major” because of the military uniform he wore while performing bicycle stunts as a youth in Indiana. Newspapers called him the “Colored Cyclone” and he was also known as the “Worcester Whirlwind.”



4 Hobson Ave., Worcester

His imprint on Worcester

Mr. Taylor was greeted with more tolerance when he moved to Worcester in 1895 with Mr. Munger. At the time, Mr. Taylor, 16, was the U.S. black champion and Mr. Munger opened a bicycle factory in the city. Mr. Taylor joined the YMCA, which he was not allowed to do in his home state of Indiana, and eventually bought a home in Columbus Park. The house still stands today at 4 Hobson Ave.

The world in which he lived

The popularity of bicycling was at its peak at the turn of the 20th century. Automobiles barely existed and most people rode bicycles to get around. Baseball was in its infancy. Pro football and basketball leagues didn't form until decades later. There were 650 professional bikers in the United States in 1900 and Mr. Taylor was the world's highest-paid athlete, earning \$25,000 a year when Ty Cobb and Christy Mathewson, both future Hall of Famers, made \$4,500 for playing baseball. But Mr. Taylor died in anonymity and poverty. He had been forced to sell his properties in Worcester to pay bills and he lived in a YMCA in Chicago the last two years of his life. He was selling his self-published autobiography door to door at the time of his death.

What others said

“He was the first African-American to take on the power structure of the sport and insist on and succeed in his right as a black man to compete on equal terms with everybody else against the incoherent and consistent racist opposition from officials and rivals.” — Andrew Ritchie, author of “Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer.”

Worcester tributes

A memorial dedicated to Mr. Taylor will be unveiled at noon May 21 at Worcester Public Library. It is the first monument in the city dedicated to an African-American. Three-time Tour de France winner Greg LeMond and three-time Olympic medalist Edwin Moses will speak at the ceremony.

A portion of Worcester Center Boulevard, one of the city's main arteries, was renamed Major Taylor Boulevard in 2006.

-- *Compiled by Bill Doyle*

Sources: Andrew Ritchie, author of "Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer"; Telegram & Gazette; T&G cycling columnist Lynne Tolman; "Major: A Black Athlete, a White Era, and the Fight to Be the World's Fastest Human Being," by Todd Balf; www.majortaylorassociation.org; "Hearts of Lions," by Peter Nye.