

Image for the ages

City proudly honors its world-class cyclist

By Dave Nordman

TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER— Gen. Dallas C. Brown Jr. didn't realize how much this city cared for his grandfather until he tried to book a hotel room here recently.

Surprised that the hotel had no vacancies, Brown searched the Internet to see where exactly it was located.

"It brought tears to my eyes," Brown said.

The Hilton Garden Inn is located at 35 Major Taylor Blvd.

"I felt guilty because I'd done nothing to enhance his legacy," Brown said. "But this city has done so much."

Worcester and the world turned out by the hundreds yesterday afternoon at the Public Library for the unveiling of a granite and bronze monument honoring Marshall Walter "Major" Taylor, a black man of faith and conviction who overcame racism and prejudice to become a world champion cyclist in 1899.

The large monument at 3 Salem Square includes a bronze likeness of Taylor standing in front of his single-speed bicycle at an Australian velodrome on the front, and the cyclist in competition with two other riders on the back.

"He's standing in front of his bike because I wanted to honor Major Taylor the man, not just the cyclist," said sculptor Antonio Tobias Mendez, whose statue is the first to honor a cyclist in the United States and the first in the city dedicated to a minority.

"He walked a tightrope as a black man in a white man's world," said Lynne Tolman, a founding member of the Major Taylor Association and the person most responsible for the decade-long effort to honor the athlete known as the "Worcester Whirlwind."

When the ropes were untied and the white and blue parachute was pulled off the monument, an overflow crowd that stretched into the library's parking lot applauded loudly. Invited guests included three-time Tour de France



T&G Staff Photos/ CHRISTINE PETERSON

Greg LeMond, keynote presenter yesterday, holds up a shirt he was to sign before the unveiling of the sculpture.



The Marshall "Major" Taylor sculpture is unveiled yesterday at the Worcester Public Library with hundreds in attendance. From left, Robert Nasdor, Lynne Tolman and Edwin Moses pull free a parachute covering the statue of the "Worcester Whirlwind," created by sculptor Antonio Tobias Mendez.

winner Greg LeMond and three-time Olympic medalist Edwin Moses, as well as city and state officials and members of the cycling community from as far away as Oregon, Minnesota, Tennessee and Washington, D.C.

“Major Taylor was a man of all time in the world of sports.”

EDWIN MOSES,
Olympic medalist

Moses, the honorary national chairman of the Major Taylor Association, said Taylor’s name deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as others who have broken racial barriers, such as Arthur Ashe, Tommie Smith, Muhammad Ali, Hank Aaron, Jack Johnson, Jesse Owens and Jackie Robinson.

“Today, Marshall ‘Major’ Taylor takes his place at the top of that list,” said Moses, who quoted Edmund Burke, who said “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

Taylor found few good men in his native Indianapolis when he moved to Worcester in 1895 at the age of 17. Four years later, he won the mile championship in Montreal to become the second black world champion, after boxer George Dixon.

“Major Taylor was a man of all time in the world of sports,” Moses said.

LeMond reminded those in attendance that cycling was the biggest sport in the world at the turn of the century.

“And it was a sport dominated by white men,” he said. “I know what it’s like to be a target in a race, but Major Taylor was a target of discrimination. ... But he had courage and was able to endure in a sport that was very competitive.”

Others in attendance included Nelson “the Cheetah” Vails, a former New York City bike messenger who became an Olympic silver medalist, and John Howard, an Olympic cyclist and past winner of the Ironman Triathlon. They were joined by Bill Humphreys, a member of the famous cycling “Raleigh Boys,” who toured Europe in the 1970s, and Terry Longsjø, the wife of late Fitchburg cyclist and speedskater Arthur Longsjø, who competed in both the Winter and Summer Olympics in 1956.

Tolman said the “finish line looked so distant” when the Major Taylor Association first came up with the idea to honor Taylor with a statue 10 years ago. The group received a big boost courtesy of \$205,000 in state funds, which supplemented hundreds of private donations.

Robert Nasdor, president of the Major Taylor Association, said he often had doubts yesterday’s unveiling would ever happen, but credited Tolman for never giving up.

“There were some very difficult times when I just thought we should put a plaque on George Street (one of the city’s steepest hills where Taylor used to train) and call it a day,” Nasdor said. “But Lynne wouldn’t hear of it.”

“It’s been a long road — more of a test of endurance than speed,” Tolman said.