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Longsjo Classic bike race to roll in Worcester

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WORCESTER — The bright colors of the peloton will roll through downtown Worcester this summer as the prestigious Longsjo Classic expands in Central Massachusetts.

The road race stage of the revitalized 2012 Longsjo Classic will start in Worcester and head to Princeton June 30 on the third stage of the four-day event.

"We think we have a pretty good plan that will be very exciting," said Ed Collier, executive director of the race.

The junior and pro men and women categories will start at the Major Taylor statue at the public library at Salem Square. In a rolling parade, or controlled neutral field, the racers will proceed to Front Street and around the Common, then right on Main Street, through the tunnel and out to Salisbury Street, and then begin racing full tilt at the Park Avenue intersection in Worcester before the course winds through Holden into Princeton and Westminster.

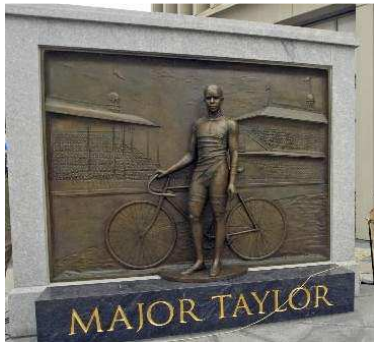
"It's going to be such a gorgeous sight," Collier said. "There's nothing better than a parade of 150 cyclists. It's an incredible sight to see. It's going to look like the Tour de France on Main Street."

The Longsjo Classic is reenergized this year with a return to four stages. Financial difficulties forced the Longsjo to cut back to a one-day bicycle race last year, then a downtown Fitchburg fire canceled the event.

The 52nd Longsjo race this year will kick off with a new twilight criterium in downtown Leominster June 28. The second stage will be the time trial, but organizers are still considering either a challenging hill course or a flat time trial. The road race will be the third stage. The final stage will be the popular criterium in downtown Fitchburg July 1.

Though the race has been concentrated in Fitchburg over the years, organizers recently have been talking with other communities.





The prestigious Longsjo Classic bike race will start at the Major Taylor statue at the public library at Salem Square this summer.
(T&G Staff/BETTY JENEWIN)

Leominster and Worcester are both new venues for the Longsjo. With the expansion in Central Massachusetts, Collier said organizers are dropping Fitchburg from the name — formerly the Fitchburg Longsjo Classic — and entertaining options from sponsors for the rights to name the race. It is presently being called the 2012 Longsjo Classic, but a sponsor's name may be added.

“Someone could come in now and be considered a savior. And it's less of an investment than you might think,” Collier said. “The reality of the situation is that a sponsor could come in with a significant contribution to the race and receive the naming rights.”

“The Fitchburg criterium will always be a part of the race. Fitchburg will always be a part of the Longsjo, but maybe not in name,” he said.

The race started in 1960 as a one-day criterium in Fitchburg and expanded to a four-day stage race in the early 1990s. The race is named after Art Longsjo, an Olympic speed skater and cyclist from

Fitchburg who died in a car accident in 1958. The list of cycling legends who have competed in the classic race over the years reads like a who's who of North American cycling, including seven-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong, Hall-of-Famer Davis Phinney, Connie Carpenter, Tyler Hamilton, Louis Garneau and Frank McCormack.

Financial struggles in recent years have forced organizers to consider new options.

Worcester became one of those options after the downtown Fitchburg fire forced organizers to call off the race last year.

Collier said Bob Murdock, director of sales for Destination Worcester, contacted him after the fire and expressed interest in bringing the race to Worcester. After several months of talks they were able to incorporate Worcester in the event.

“It's been a positive experience working with the city, which wants to have a cycling presence,” Collier said.

Murdock said it's a win-win, for the city of Worcester and the race.

“There's a strong cycling community here and it's a cool thing for the city,” Murdock said. “The Longsjo is such a prestigious event.”

The Major Taylor statue at the library was the perfect start location, Collier said.

Marshall “Major” Taylor, the 1899 world cycling champion, moved from Indianapolis to Worcester early in his career. The black cyclist, also known as the “Worcester Whirlwind,” persevered with dignity in a white man's world during the era of Jim Crow segregation. A statue in his honor was erected at the Worcester Public Library in 2008. A bike race called the “Worcester Whirlwind” was held in his name in Worcester in 1980 and 1981. The Bike Challenge for Major Taylor has been held for 10 years on George Street, where Major Taylor once trained.

Three fields will race out of Worcester for the 16-mile trek into Princeton: juniors, pro men and pro women. The first group will start about noon and the other groups will begin in 15 minutes intervals. Collier said all three groups will be out of Worcester in about one hour.

From downtown Worcester, the race will head up Salisbury Street into Holden, then turn right on Main Street (Route 122A) in Holden and quickly turn left on Malden Street and left on Wachusett Street, which merges with Route 31; the course then takes Route 31 into Princeton Center, where it will connect with the 11.4-mile loop. The number of laps on the 11.4-mile loop varies with each category. The amateur groups will not start in Worcester, but will race on the 11.4-mile course in the morning.

The 11.4-mile course is basically the same it has been for years. From Princeton Center, the course heads north on Mountain Road to Route 140, turns south on Route 140 to Route 31 and back to Princeton Center, where the race finishes. The exact start for the amateur races has not been finalized.