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# Major Taylor

**1899 WORLD CHAMPION BICYCLE RACER**

“Life is too short for a man to hold bitterness in his heart.”

[www.majortaylorassociation.org/who.htm](http://www.majortaylorassociation.org/who.htm)

“Worcester Whirlwind”

## Black cyclist breaks records, defeats bias

A hundred years ago, when bicycle races drew crowds that filled Madison Square Garden, the biggest draw of all was Major Taylor. He was the Michael Jordan or Tiger Woods of his time.

Taylor won his first race at age 13 in Indianapolis. Soon bicycle manufacturer and former racer Louis “Birdie” Munger hired Taylor as a factory helper and nurtured his racing career.

Blacks were banned from amateur bike racing in the United States in 1894, just as bicycling’s popularity surged. But the move stimulated the growth of black cycling clubs and black races, which gave Taylor his early opportunities to prove his ability.

By the time Munger decided to set up a factory in Worcester -- in part to take advantage of the biking boom, but also to find a more tolerant atmosphere for his black protege -- Taylor was black champion of the United States.

“I was in Worcester only a very short time before I realized that there was no such race prejudice existing among the bicycle riders there as I had experienced in Indianapolis,” Taylor wrote in his 1929 autobiography, “The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World.”

## Major Taylor *biography at a glance*

- > **Nov. 26, 1878:** Marshall W. Taylor is born in rural Indiana.
- > **1892:** Nicknamed “Major” because of a soldier’s uniform he wears while performing cycling stunts outside an Indianapolis bike shop.
- > **Fall 1895:** Moves to Worcester, Mass., with his racing manager.
- > **Aug. 10, 1899:** Wins world 1-mile championship in Montreal to become the second black world champion athlete, following boxer George Dixon.
- > **September 1900:** Wins American sprint championship.
- > **October 1900-January 1901:** Performs in vaudeville act with Charles “Mile-a-Minute” Murphy, racing on rollers on theater stages across Massachusetts.
- > **1902-1904:** Competes as a superstar in Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the United States, with a brief comeback in 1907 after a two-year hiatus.
- > **1910:** Retires from racing at age 32.
- > **June 21, 1932:** Dies in a Chicago hospital charity ward.
- > **May 1948:** Ex-racers have Taylor’s remains moved to a more prominent spot in Mount Glenwood Cemetery in Illinois and put up a marker stating, **“World’s champion bicycle racer who came up the hard way without hatred in his heart.”**

### Book list

- \* Major Taylor by Andrew Ritchie (1988/1996/2009)
- \* Major Taylor by Lesa Cline-Ransome (2004, for children)
- \* Marshall ‘Major’ Taylor by Marlene Brill (2007, youth)
- \* Major by Todd Balf (2008)
- \* Major Taylor in Australia by Jim Fitzpatrick (2011)

In 1897, the “Colored Cyclone,” as the newspapers called Taylor, had to abandon the quest to become national sprint points champion when Southern promoters refused him entry to key races.

When he did compete, he faced hostility from white riders, including threats and physical assault. But Taylor didn’t lose his nerve, or his popularity.

He held seven world records in 1898 and won the world championship in 1899.

Taylor was a steadfast member of the John Street Baptist Church in Worcester. For years, he resisted invitations

to compete in Europe because he refused to race on Sundays. He finally signed a European contract in 1901, was welcomed as a hero in France, and went on to beat every European champion.

In 2008 the Major Taylor Association put up a monument in Worcester recognizing Taylor’s strength of character, marked by his sportsmanship, concern for the less fortunate, devotion to God, and personal struggle for equality. Donations help with education efforts and statue maintenance.  
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