

COMMENTARY

Major Taylor was much more than a world cycling champion

By Albert B. Southwick

Years ago an old man told me about seeing Marshall "Major" Taylor at Easton's years before. Easton's, located at Harrington Corner in downtown Worcester, in those days was a popular place where politicians, businessmen, lawyers and almost everybody gathered for coffee, ice cream sundaes, light lunches and gossip.

"Major Taylor was being escorted out the door," he said. "Why, I don't know."

I think I do know. That incident must have happened in the late 1920s, long after Mr. Taylor had electrified the bicycle racing world by winning a sensational string of races, including the world championship at Montreal in 1899. He later toured England, France and Australia, beating the best riders they had to offer, and winning a worldwide reputation.

Bicycle racing was one of the premier sports of the early 20th century, outstripping baseball and football in fan support. Worcester built a velodrome on Shrewsbury Street where Mr. Taylor periodically displayed his amazing talents. But those glory days were long past when he was escorted unceremoniously out of Easton's.

By then almost everything that mattered to him was gone. Most of the considerable wealth that he had won years before was gone. He had had to give up his nice home in Columbus Park. His wife had left him, taking their daughter with her, and he must have felt alone as his world collapsed around him.

But he did not give up. He was determined that his achievements on the track would not fade into oblivion, and so he decided to write his autobiography. It was printed here in Worcester by the Commonwealth Press in 1928 with the title: "The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World." Its subtitle read: "The Story of a Colored Boy's Indomitable Courage and Success Against Great Odds."

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In ordinary times, the book might have interested enough people hereabouts to become a modest commercial success. But 1929-30 was not a good time for books or for much else. Most people were worried about getting enough to eat, not about reading.

Without an agent and with no experience in the book trade, Mr. Taylor was reduced to going from door to door, trying to peddle his autobiography. I suspect that the reason why he was being hustled out of Easton's was because he had annoyed some of the patrons there with his persistent efforts to sell his book. It may have seemed almost like panhandling.

In 1930 he gave up on Worcester, filled his car with copies of his book and headed for Chicago. For the next two years he lived a hand-to-mouth existence, trying to sell his books and living at the Y. He died on June 21, 1932, at age 54 in the charity ward at Cook County Hospital, and was buried in the paupers' section of the Mount Glenwood Cemetery. He may have strained his heart during those 15 years when he dominated the racetracks of the world.



In 1948 a group of former bicycle racers, black athletes and Frank Schwinn, owner of the Schwinn Bicycle Co., had his body exhumed and reburied with a stone and appropriate plaque. Ralph Metcalf, the Olympic sprinter, gave the tribute. Next Wednesday Major Taylor will be honored again at the Worcester Public Library, when his memorial is dedicated with distinguished guests on hand. It's about time.

Major Taylor is known primarily for his exploits on the bicycle racing circuit, and that will be the theme of the ceremonies next week. But to my way of thinking, he was much more than an athlete. His autobiography, written in his years of decline and defeat, shows a man of high ideals, sterling character and perseverance against odds.

He had a strict code of conduct — no drinking, no smoking, no carousing, no competing on Sundays, etc. Young people of today, especially young athletes, may find that hopelessly retro. But everyone needs standards to live by, and any person will do well to emulate Major Taylor in living up to whatever standards he believes in.

Mr. Taylor's book is filled with accounts of long-ago bike races, including many in which he was cheated by illegal tactics, such as being boxed in by other riders so that he could not break out in one of his amazing sprints. More interesting are his comments on life and sportsmanship. He gives generous credit to those riders and fans who were willing to judge him by his skill, not by his skin color. He is appreciative of those white people who helped him on his way to success, including the wealthy Southard family, who, in racist Indianapolis, took him in and raised him as a companion to their own son, Daniel.

He dedicated his book to his lifelong friend, Louis D. "Birdie" Munger. Mr. Munger early on was impressed by the bicycle skills of the young black teenager, and when Mr. Taylor was banned from using the Y in Indianapolis, Mr. Munger pulled up stakes and moved his bicycle plant to Worcester, largely so that he could pursue his dream of making his protégé the "fastest bicycle rider in the world," a dream that he lived to see fulfilled.

It may seem odd that the Taylor memorial will be located at the Worcester Public Library instead of at the YMCA, but it really makes sense. Major Taylor, after his career was over, applied to WPI because he wanted to learn engineering. But he was turned down for lack of a high school diploma. With more education, his business career may have been more successful than it was.

Were he here, he surely would be telling young people, especially young athletes, to stay in school, to use the library, to perfect their reading skills and to always play the game fair and square. A verse he wrote for his autobiography sums up his philosophy:

*A fair field and no favor, but man to man,
A square deal to all, to win if you can,
A fair field and no favor in every game,
A square deal and honor are always the same.*

Major Taylor did not always experience a fair field and a square deal. In 1894 the League of American Wheelmen banned black cyclists from membership, a move that curtailed his career in America. That ban, long ignored and forgotten, was lifted officially in 1999, more than a century later.

Major Taylor's life story has been included in the new African-American National Biography, published by Harvard University. He would have liked that. If he were here, he also would feel honored and perhaps somewhat vindicated to see the ceremony at the library next week.

Albert B. Southwick's column appears regularly in the Telegram & Gazette.