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Iver Johnson Sponsored Major Taylor

The newspapers called him “the Worcester Whirlwind,” but a Fitchburg connection helped 1899 world champion bicyclist Marshall “Major” Taylor stay at the top of his game.

The Iver Johnson Arms and Cycle Works, with its sprawling factory complex on River Street in Fitchburg, sponsored Major Taylor in 1900 and 1901. Riding Iver Johnson bikes, Taylor racked up points in a series of races to win the 1900 national championship, then took Europe by storm in 1901.

Like many manufacturers in the 1890s, Iver Johnson expanded its product line to take advantage of the bicycle boom. Gun makers were in a good position to exploit the soaring popularity of bicycles because they already had the manufacturing processes, skilled labor, and equipment to shape steel into tubes.

Iver Johnson’s backing of Major Taylor, who broke the color barrier in his sport nearly half a century before Jackie Robinson did it in baseball, was one of the earliest corporate sponsorships of a Black athlete.

In the spring of 1900, the American Racing Cyclists Union drew the color line, excluding Taylor because he was Black. But public opinion favored Taylor’s reinstatement, and in May, the ARCU’s executive board voted him back in. Biographer Andrew Ritchie wrote: “In the end, they were allowing Taylor back into bicycle racing not because they liked him, admired him, or respected him, but because the public wanted to see him, and because they did not want it said that they were afraid of him.”

At that time, Fred Johnson of the Iver Johnson company employed Taylor’s former trainer, Bob Ellingham. With all the press coverage of Taylor’s plight raising the champion

cyclist’s profile, Ellingham and Johnson saw a business opportunity. Taylor’s reinstatement came with a \$500 fine, and Johnson paid it and agreed to sponsor Taylor for the rest of the season.

For his part, Taylor agreed to ride Iver Johnson cycles, marking his return to chain-driven bikes. He had set numerous world records on makes such as Orient and Stearns with a Sager chainless gear, but the traditional chain and sprocket system was more responsive...

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to his jump, his signature move of igniting a sprint at the last moment to shoot ahead of his competitors on the track. The Fitchburg Sentinel reported in its Local Matters column on Oct. 3, 1900, that "Major Taylor, the champion short distance bicycle rider, was in this city, Tuesday, looking after racing wheels which are being built for him at the Iver Johnson factory."

Later that month, The Cycle Age and Trade Review pointed out in a headline that among the few bicycle makers to sponsor individual racers, "Some Find It Profitable to Do So." The Oct. 25 article noted Iver Johnson's wise investment, given Taylor's "almost unbroken string of victories."

The article went on to quote Fred Johnson: "I must own that I was rather skeptical at first at this, for us, very radical departure in advertising. We gave the new departure, however, a fair trial. Not only did we make the Major's victories prominent in our display advertising, but we kept our agents constantly informed on his successes on the Iver Johnson bicycle. I am now absolutely convinced that his riding of our wheel was a most profitable advertising investment."

An advertisement showed headshots of Major Taylor and fellow cyclist Harry Elkes in the wheels of an Iver Johnson racing bike. One model was named the Major Taylor. Another ad declared, "Harry Elkes and Major Taylor, Champion Riders of America, win their races on Iver Johnson wheels." Dealer cards handed out during Taylor's season in France used the same images of Taylor

and Elkes and gave the address in Paris of an importer of Iver Johnson bikes. Souvenir pinback buttons featured a drawing of the young champion sporting a blue and red racing kit, encircled by the words "Major Taylor - Iver Johnson Cycles."

After Taylor retired from racing in 1910, Fred Johnson joined him in a business venture, helping to develop an innovative automobile tire and raise capital for the enterprise. Unfortunately Taylor's idea was overtaken by other advances in automobile technology, and they did not get beyond a prototype. Taylor lost a large investment of his own money in the tire project. Ultimately he would die in poverty and obscurity, and it would be decades before his achievements again came to the fore.

Despite that sad coda, it was Taylor's glory days that provided a more lasting imprint of the Fitchburg manufacturer's link to "The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World," which was the title of Taylor's autobiography. In March 1901, while Taylor was on a steamship heading across the Atlantic on his first trip to Europe, his photo appeared on the cover of the French sports magazine *La Vie Au Grand Air*. This was the turn-of-the-century equivalent of being on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. Bold block letters spelling IVER are visible across the chest of his shirt, with the surname JOHNSON underneath obscured as he bends forward over the handlebars, chin tucked, gaze forward, eyes on the prize.

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