



Major Taylor: The Fastest Biker in the World

Despite racism, hostility, champion racer rose to prominence in 1890s

By Brian Stimson
Of *The Skanner News*

You might not know it, but at the turn of the 20th Century, bicycle races were bigger than baseball.

And much like today, the racers were largely White, affluent males. But in 1896, Marshall

“Major” Taylor emerged on the track-racing circuit. He would become one of his era’s biggest stars, breaking more than 8 world track records and pushing against the era’s violent and repressive Jim Crow laws 20 years before Jackie Robinson was even conceived.

Born in 1878, Major Taylor

spent much of his adolescence living with a wealthy, White family in Indianapolis. After receiving a bike from his adopted family, the Southards, at the age of 12, Major Taylor soon earned a living performing stunts outside a bike shop, and quickly moving onto competition racing as a young teen.

When “The Colored Cyclone” first hit the track in Indianapolis at age 15, he got himself banned. Not because of bad behavior – Taylor was well-known for his ethics and easy-going demeanor – but because he had the audacity to actually win. He had broken the 1 mile amateur track record.

The persistent racism led Taylor to move to Worcester, Mass., where he enjoys fame and competitions in his name to this day.

Lynne Tolman, a Major Taylor expert and spokesperson for the Major Taylor Association told *The Skanner News* that she and others are working hard to educate people about Taylor’s accomplishments. The association has erected

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a full-size bronze statue in his honor, holds annual cycling events in his name and also provides teachers a Major Taylor curriculum for use in the classrooms.

Despite overcoming rampant racism in competition – which ranged from threats of violence to being turned away from competitions because of his skin color – and holding multiple world bicycle speed records during his life, Major Taylor’s legacy has largely been forgotten.

Tolman thinks it has less to do with the man than the sport.

“Cycling turned into a fringe sport,” she says. “It was huge in



his day. That changed with the advent of the automobile... and World War I took out a whole generation of young men. It never

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