
Marshall Walter “Major” Taylor was an extraordinary person who achieved much in his short life. An individual of unequalled athletic ability, he rose from humble and poor Hoosier origins to become United States and world champion in the now largely forgotten professional sport of bicycle racing. In 1901 he embarked upon a three-month tour of Europe that earned him $10,000 and accolades from citizens all over the continent. That he accomplished all of this before his twenty-second birthday is extraordi-
Major Taylor with Daisy Taylor and Three-Year-Old Sydney, Paris, 1908

Courtesy of Indiana State Library.
nary enough; that he did so at the time when Jim Crow and imperialism were flourishing makes his achievements all the more remarkable because he was an African-American. Neglected by historians, Major Taylor emerges from journalist Andrew Ritchie’s engaging biography as a complex and fascinating figure.

With varying degrees of success, Ritchie discusses Taylor’s life against the backdrop of larger social and cultural developments, such as urbanization, the rise of modern sports, and race relations. This provides an indispensable understanding of the meteoric rise and subsequent decline in Taylor’s fortunes. Taylor’s self-confidence and dogged determination, which enabled him to climb to the top of his sport, created many enemies among whites in the United States. At the same time, his grace under pressure as well as his respect for and deference to the white world enabled him to befriend and obtain at crucial points the support of several important bicycling promoters both at home and abroad.

Ritchie convincingly portrays Taylor as a man whose feet were planted in two different worlds but who belonged totally in neither. Suspended halfway between the man-made heaven of the superstar athlete and the hell of racial oppression, Taylor lived a precarious dual existence. He was simultaneously praised and cursed, applauded and assaulted. With the end of his bicycling career Taylor’s life, according to Ritchie, entered “a gradual process of loss and decline.” Financial failure was followed by the collapse of his marriage and the loss of his health. When Taylor died in Chicago in 1932, he was penniless and alone.

In spite of the hardships he endured as an African-American in a white world, Ritchie concludes that Taylor “never became a bitter man” or “sank permanently into self-pity” (pp. 258, 252). Undoubtedly, his profound commitment to giving the best that was in him, both on and off the track, constitutes his enduring legacy. By illuminating the contours of that commitment and legacy, Ritchie’s biography dramatically recaptures the man, his times, and his significance.

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Henry A. Verslype was not content to spend his retirement from the Ball-Band plant in Mishawaka in idle pursuits. Moved by the memories of his Belgian immigrant parents moving to the city