



## THE FASTEST BICYCLE RIDER IN THE WORLD

Ian Warden evokes the thrill and drama of 'Major' Taylor's 1903–04 cycling tour of Australia

If a fairy godmother granted us just three wishes for excursions back into history, where and to what period of time would we go? Some of us would be tempted to make one of the three treats a night at the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) in 1903 or 1904 during the tours of 'Major' Taylor, the black American cycling 'Champion of the World'.

To read reports of these occasions in the sometimes purple-prosed press of the day is to hanker to have been there.

'Seldom has such a brilliant assemblage been seen at a cycle race meeting,' a reporter for *Table Talk* rhapsodised about a March 1903 event. The author went on:

From a spectacular point of view, the well-packed ground was a beautiful one. The whole of the stands and the pavilions, which almost circle the track, were outlined with thousands of frosted-white electric globes, which shed a soft light over the variegated hues of the ladies'

summer costumes. The picture was almost like fairyland, with the warm electric light over the stands and lawns, merging itself into the brilliant and dazzling acetylene light of the many powerful shaded lamps suspended over the racing track.

At these treasured Sydney social-sporting occasions (special trams were put on to transport the throngs of sometimes 25 000 souls), bands played and people promenaded. Then, moments before the running of races between the cream of the world's cyclists (for cycling was booming in Australia and Australian prize money was irresistibly bountiful), for great dramatic impact, all lights in the arena would be switched off save for the lights that illuminated the special concrete track with an eerie green light. And then the races themselves, sometimes sprints of only a mile (four laps of the SCG), were designed to

above:

Unknown photographer  
*Two Great Rivals, Taylor and Walker* c.1903  
reproduced from *The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World: The Story of a Colored Boy's Indomitable Courage and Success Against Great Odds, an Autobiography* by Marshall W. 'Major' Taylor (Worcester, Mass.: Wolmley, 1928)

below:

Unknown photographer  
*Cycling Carnivals by Night at Sydney Cricket Ground*  
reproduced from *The Town and Country Journal*, 14 January 1903 (Sydney: Frank and Christopher Bennett)





above:  
A.W. Hawkins  
*Hugh D. McIntosh, 1937*  
pencil drawing; 50.8 x 32.0 cm  
Pictures Collection  
nla.pic-an6054872

below right:  
Unknown photographer  
*Major Taylor*  
reproduced from *The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World: The Story of a Colored Boy's Indomitable Courage and Success Against Great Odds, an Autobiography* by Marshall W. 'Major' Taylor (Worcester, Mass.: Wolmley, 1928)

make for thrillingly close finishes.

'Cricket matches [at the SCG] find a polished, courteous crowd in the pavilions,' *Sydney's Bulletin* lectures in March 1904:

But when there's an exciting cycling finish then the same well-bred crowd rears up and shows just how much of the wild beast it hides under its chiffon. At the last night of the Sydney Thousand [a cycling tournament with a breathtaking £1000 prize money] women's flounces were torn off while they struggled on to the backs of seats to see exciting finishes.

The megastar in the firmament of these glittering events was Marshall Walter 'Major' Taylor, 24 years old when he arrived in Sydney for the 1903 season.

The visionary entrepreneur and Sydney entertainment magnate, Hugh D. 'Huge Deal' McIntosh, brought Taylor (and other American riders) to Australia in 1903 and 1904. Then, to further exploit the presence of this expensively-imported commodity, McIntosh staged—with his Summer Nights Amusements syndicate—the great cycling spectacles at a fabulously lit SCG.

Taylor, now forgotten (even though he may have been the most gifted and most admired African American athlete ever to come to Australia), was forced to make long sea voyages to travel to cycling competitions outside America, but he was notoriously vulnerable to seasickness. On one Atlantic crossing, he is said to have begged the captain to put him out of his misery by throwing him overboard. As a result, upon his arriving in Australia, it took him some days to get the wobbliness out of his bemuscled and much-admired legs. After that, though, he was always the man to beat and seldom lost unless he was 'pocketed' (blocked by riders ganging up against him) or could not quite make up the leeways imposed on him by the handicappers.

To immerse oneself in the National Library of Australia's holdings of the newspapers of the time is to notice a peculiar popular 'Major' fever. The papers

report displays of excitement and adulation at his appearances. Some publications, especially the determinedly tall-poppy-scything *Sydney Bulletin*, sometimes lose patience with what that journal called 'the blind worship of negro cyclist Taylor' and try to dent and tarnish his halo. The *Bulletin* pounces on Taylor's mild-sounding pronouncements about his faith, saying they show that Taylor is a Christian Narcissus. 'Cyclist Taylor may be criticized,' the *Bulletin* seethes in January 1904 'as a sanctimonious cycle-buster who feels the finger of God whirling his pedals round a bit faster when the enemy gets in front'.

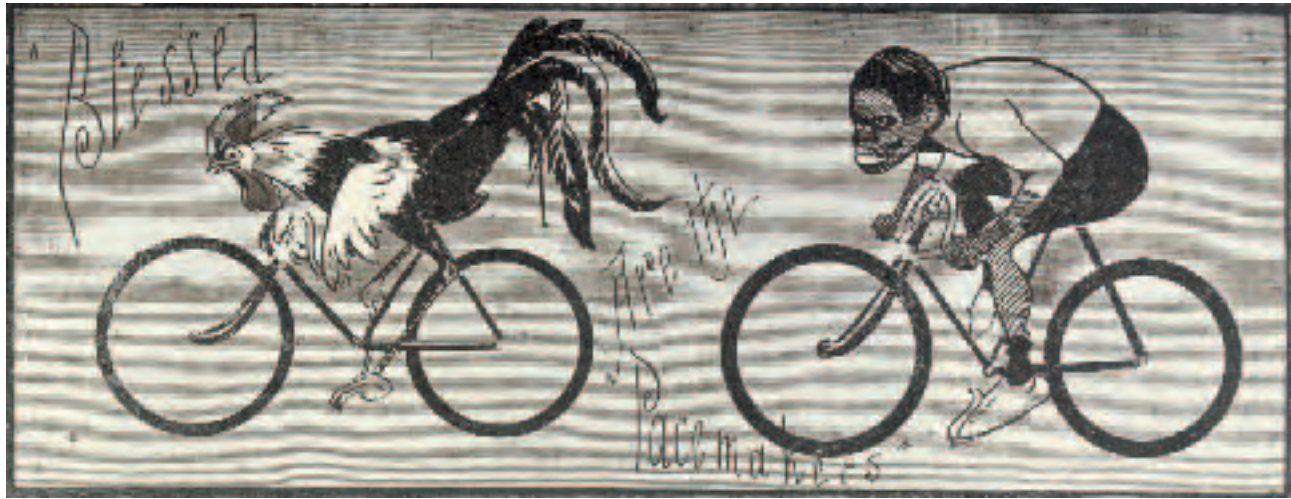
'But,' the same article concedes 'he's always a favourite with the Sydney crowd and men and women shout for the coloured brother and at the slightest apprehension of [other riders] blocking him howl like wolves.'

Why was there such 'Major' worship? How did the Australian people love him? Let us count the ways.

There was the exoticism of his colour combined with his having been a petite David of only about five foot seven while many of his opponents were Goliaths. So he seemed, racially and physically, a kind of brave little battler.

Then there was the fact of his being (from the clean way he rode and from the considered interviews he gave) so obviously a decent man in a sport ('the odour of a fish market is eau-de-cologne compared to it')





above and left:  
Unknown artist  
Cartoons from the *Bulletin*,  
17 January 1903 (Sydney: John  
Haynes and J.F. Archibald)

for example—brought out to give serious competition to Taylor in 1904—was a towering six foot and four inches tall) it was not just a matter of size but of Taylor's perceived goodness contrasted with the wickedness of others. Taylor never raced as part of a plotting, spoiling, tactical 'team', but many of his opponents did it to thwart him because he was a tall poppy and a tall, *black* poppy at that. For some, it was insufferable to be beaten by a man of an 'inferior' race.

Moreover, Australians loved him because his manner and his reported words showed that *he* loved *them*. Then, as now, Australians lapped up the praise of distinguished foreigners and Taylor made appreciative remarks about Australian cycling fans.

And, late in the long 1904 tour (in May), when his wife gave birth to their first child, the appreciative Taylors called her Rita Sydney after the city in which she was born. At the time of writing, Rita Sydney is still alive and aged 102.

The Australia to which Taylor endeared himself was the Australia of the White Australia Policy. Clergy who were opposed to the policy seized on Taylor's presence and, the *Bulletin* noted jeeringly, sermons were trumpeting that the 'Major' was 'a black and brilliant reproach to the White Australia policy'.

But the fans who found him brilliant probably never entertained a wilfully racist thought about this exceptional black man.

the *Bulletin* accuses) notorious for foul play and corruption.

And if the fans thought of him as a decent David among all the hulking Goliaths (the thuggish, much-fined and much-suspended, racist, white American ace Floyd McFarland,

Few of the popular press references to the sweet hero's negritude are negative. Journalists use names like 'The Ebony Streak', 'The Coloured Cyclone' and 'The Black

Flash' that may make us wince a little when we read them today, but they are used in articles that sing Taylor's praises as a man and an athlete. This writer is a newspaper journalist and sports writer and is sure that what we see in 1903 and 1904, when the press routinely gives the 'Major' these titles, is not racism at all but is only what we see today when tennis journalists, battling to give some sparkle to their otherwise repetitive reportage, call someone a 'blonde bombshell' or refer to Martina Hingis as the 'Swiss Miss'.

Some writers thought it a further proof of Taylor's oft-demonstrated love of Australia that when he left in June 1904 (never to return), he took with him aboard the Frisco' mailboat *Sierra* what *The Referee* described as 'a small menagerie of cockatoos and parrots, and a very lively wallaby'. The *Bulletin* reported that Taylor had wanted to take a platypus and a bunyip too.

With the Taylors and their menagerie on the *Sierra* went Major's friend and fellow Christian, Don Walker, the spectacularly mustachioed Australian champion. The Australian press had just weeks before been describing the Australian fondness for the 'Major' but, within hours of disembarking in the United States, the Taylors and Walker were turned away (because of the Taylors'

colour) from restaurants and from hotels even though they badly needed lodging for the baby. Walker was shocked and distraught.

'Do you prefer,' he marvelled to his friend 'to live in a country where you're treated like this than to live in my country where you're treated like a white man and where inducements are made to get you to return and live? I can't understand this kind of thing.'

Taylor, shaken by this same contrast between his treatment in Australia and in his own country, had a nervous breakdown and shut himself up in his home.

He emerged eventually and raced again until a bad accident in training in 1911 ended his racing career. He devoted much of the rest of his life, before dying in June 1932, to the Methodist Church and to the service of the God who, though He had not let the 'Major' race on Sundays may, on every other day of the week (if the suspicions of the *Bulletin* were correct) have helped whirl the athlete's pedals faster than any other mortal could whirl them.

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below left:  
Unknown photographer  
*The Taylors*  
reproduced from *The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World: The Story of a Colored Boy's Indomitable Courage and Success Against Great Odds, an Autobiography* by Marshall W. 'Major' Taylor (Worcester, Mass.: Wolmley, 1928)

below right:  
Medals won in Australia by Taylor  
reproduced from *The Fastest Bicycle Rider in the World: The Story of a Colored Boy's Indomitable Courage and Success Against Great Odds, an Autobiography* by Marshall W. 'Major' Taylor (Worcester, Mass.: Wolmley, c.1928)

