

THE INSPIRING STORY OF A BLACK
CYCLIST AND THE MEN WHO HELPED HIM
ACHIEVE WORLDWIDE FAME

Major Taylor

CONRAD KERBER
& TERRY KERBER

A Forgotten Legend

FOREWORD BY
**GREG
LEMOND**



MAJOR TAYLOR



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FOREWORD

BY GREG LEMON

Major Taylor's extraordinary story of triumph over adversity is near and dear to my heart. In order to reach the pinnacle of their chosen sport, all professional athletes have to endure countless setbacks and unforeseen hardships. It is, in fact, their singular capacity to endure such hardships that often separates them from their competitors. And it is when they reach their lowest ebb, with thoughts of giving up racing in their heads, that they inevitably seek inspiration from those pioneering souls who suffered and endured before them.

For me, that nadir presented itself while hunting with relatives shortly after becoming the only American to win the Tour de France. It was the spring of 1987; I was just twenty-six years old, a two-time World Champion, seemingly on my way to a string of consecutive Tour wins. It was as if I was on top of the world. But while camouflaging behind spring foliage near the foothills of the Sierra Nevada that spring morning, scouring the bushy landscape for turkeys, the world as I knew it twisted upside down.

There was the startling sound of shotgun fire from behind me, the sulfurous odor of spent shells, the sight of scattering birds, and the piercing pain of sixty pellets lodging in my heart lining, liver, back, arms, and legs. I slipped into a surreal state of shock, largely detached from the world around me. As if from out of nowhere, the twirling blades of a helicopter soon swooped down from the sky. Within minutes, I lay recumbent in a hospital bed, a few breaths away from bleeding to death.

Instead of looking forward to the July day when I could defend my yellow jersey, I spent the next two years hobbling in and out of hospitals, fretting over my physical and mental health. I was concerned about my contract and my ability to pursue my life's passion. I convalesced, searching for answers and inspiration.

Eighty-three years earlier, a similar cloud hung over Taylor's seven-bedroom home in Worcester, Massachusetts. In 1904, during a match race in front of yet another packed house at a bike track in Australia, Taylor was knocked unconscious by the wheels of an envious rival. He spent the next two years away from the sport he loved. He slid into a state of depression, struggling to overcome nearly a decade of racial abuse, both physical and emotional.

Though we captivated the racing world with our attempted comebacks, both of us were left with divergent scars. I still have numerous lead pellets embedded in my heart lining, arms, and legs, which act as a constant reminder of how precious life is and how close I was to an early, shocking death. Taylor's racial scars, like the sins of our nation's past, could never be removed. His entire life story, deftly recited in all its drama by authors Conrad Kerber and Terry Kerber, is the stuff of legends, especially his courageous fight to become sprint champion of America and then world champion, and his highly publicized match race against French Triple-Crown winner Edmond Jaquelin. But it was his comeback that has inspired me the most over the years, as well as the honest and ethical way he lived his life.

There are so many lessons in the pages of this epic story, but perhaps none are nobler than Taylor's transcendent ability to forgive those who tormented him on and off bike tracks. That is why I was honored to speak at the unveiling of the Major Taylor statue at the Worcester Public Library, to stand in the very city that sheltered him from the racial storms a century before. I am equally honored to write

the foreword to this engrossing book, written by two gifted writers and passionate cycling fans who just happen to live near my suburban Twin Cities' home. As the sport of bike racing and our nation attempt to transition to a new and refreshing era of transparency, we would all be well-served to seek wisdom and guidance from the lessons left behind by this remarkable sportsman.

PROLOGUE

In 1907, amid a time of unspeakable racial cruelty, the world's most popular athlete was not pitcher Cy Young or Christy Mathewson. It wasn't shortstop Honus Wagner, center fielder Ty Cobb, nor was he a baseball player. During a period of frequent lynchings, the world's most popular athlete wasn't even white. He was an oft-persecuted, black bicycle racer named Marshall W. "Major" Taylor.

At the height of the Jim Crow era, Taylor became an inspirational idol in America, Europe, and Australia, experiencing adoration so profound that it transcended race. Long before Jackie Robinson, people of all colors passed under Major Taylor billboards, exchanged Taylor trading cards, cooled themselves with Taylor accordion fans, and wore buttons bearing his likeness. When he competed, his admirers swarmed local streets, spilled out of "Major Taylor Carnival" trains, flooded the cafés, and waited for him in the rain outside packed hotels. His face stared out from newspaper pages on four continents. His appearances shattered attendance records at nearly every bike track and drew the largest throng ever to see a sporting event. At a time when the population was less than one quarter its current size, more than fifty thousand people watched him race, a crowd on par with today's baseball games. Countless thousands paid just to watch his workouts, while thousands of others gathered at train stations to greet him and his elegant wife.

But his immense fame, achieved in what was one of the nation's most popular sports, came again at incredible odds. He was repeatedly kicked out of restaurants and hotels, forced to sleep in horse stables, and terrorized out of cities by threats of violence. On the more than one hundred bike tracks called velodromes, he endured incessant racism, including being shoved headfirst into track rails. On a sweltering New England day in 1897, a rival nearly choked him to death, a violent incident *The New York Times* called among the most talked-about events that year.

Along his turbulent path that began as a penniless horsetender from bucolic Indiana, Taylor received help from the most unlikely of men, all of whom happened to be white. When hotel and restaurant operators refused him food and lodging, forcing him to race hungry, a benevolent racer-turned-trainer named Birdie Munger took Taylor under his wing and into his home. One of Taylor's managers was the famed Broadway producer William Brady, a feisty Irishman who had brawled with Virgil Earp in cow town boxing rings. He stood up for Taylor when track owners tried to bar him from competing. While winning more than one thousand bike races himself, Arthur Zimmerman, America's first superstar, mentored Taylor even though others called him a useless little "pickanninny." In the mid-1890s during a devastating depression, the extraordinary kindness these men bestowed helped elevate Taylor from rags to riches.

But for Taylor and his helpers, it was merely the start of a fourteen-year journey filled with suffering and jubilation. From 1896 to 1910, Taylor emerged as one of history's most remarkable sportsmen. Endowed with blazing speed and indomitable bravery, he traveled more than two hundred thousand grueling miles by rail and ship, started two-mile handicap races as far back as three hundred yards, and set numerous world speed records. His danger-filled struggle for equality on American tracks eventually drove him overseas where he became the most heavily advertised man in Europe, was talked about often as presidents of countries, and captured more attention than some of the world's wealthiest citizens. His dramatic match races with French Triple Crown winner Edmond Jacquelin, which attracted barons, dukes, and paupers from nearly every nation in Europe, were widely remembered a quarter

century later. And in 1907 after a fall instigated by an envious rival—a severe injury that led to a mental breakdown—the much-maligned black man attempted a comeback many thought impossible.

But it wasn't just athletic prowess that attracted people to him. Carrying the Scriptures with him always, this deeply religious man turned down enormous sums of money because he refused to race on Sunday. Thousands were captivated by his eloquent, peaceful delivery of messages about faith and kindness, and his mystical capacity to forgive those who persecuted him.

During his ride from anonymity to superstardom, the gentle black man and the few white men who helped him starred in an epic story for the ages.

It began with two boys on bicycles, riding free.

PART I

Chapter 1

THE WAR BETWEEN WHEELMEN AND HORSEMEN

Marshall Taylor felt a powerful force tugging at him—a force not unlike that of a sheet of steel or a giant magnet. In the spring of 1891, he was thirteen, tired of rural life, and even more tired being at the whims of slow, sometimes unruly horses. He was a restless and ambitious boy, and later photos were any indication, he was tautly muscled yet thin as a rail. He had frizzy hair and smooth charcoal-colored skin that would later be described as polished ebony. The most successful jockeys at the time were African Americans—winning twelve of the first twenty-two Kentucky Derbies—and with his short, wiry frame, Taylor too had the makings of an ideal jockey. His father, Gilbert, a noble, white-haired Civil War veteran, taught his son all he knew about tending horses on their rustic Indianapolis farm. But even at a young age, Marshall had other aspirations. He was country born and bred, but rural life stifled him. He desperately wanted to expand his horizons. On a warm day that spring, he would grasp his chance.

Despite his family's penury, his childhood seems to have been a decent one. Born November 26, 1877, Marshall was the most ambitious member of the staid but proud Taylor family. His mother, Saphronia, raised eight genial, jaunty children while his father, Gilbert, worked long, hard days as coachman for a wealthy Indianapolis railroad family named Southards. Marshall helped out with the horses, trimming their hooves, hunching over an anvil to forge their shoes, mucking their stalls, feeding them oats, carrots, and water, exercising them, then washing, grooming, and brushing their manes and tails. Intense and competitive, young Marshall probably competed with his siblings over who could tend to the horses the quickest, hoping to fall into his father's good graces. It was a rugged existence for man and beast. "All we had was just what we needed," he would later say, "and only such comforts as farm life affords."

But Gilbert and Saphronia still found time to smother their children with affection, instill a strong work ethic, and weave the word of God into their lives—words that would guide Marshall's judgment and channel his energies throughout his life. In the Taylor home, a well-worn Bible was surely always open, a piano played, James Bland songs sung, Civil War stories spun.

One of three boys and five girls, Marshall may have been the only one with itchy feet. His brother William was said to be athletic, but he seems to have been more content with farm life. Seeing Marshall's restlessness, his parents must have known he wouldn't stay in the countryside for long.

Marshall's first taste of the broader world came sometime around the age of eight. During his duties as a coachman, his father began taking him to the Southards' quarters on the outskirts of Indianapolis. There, young Marshall was introduced to Daniel, the Southards' eight-year-old son. The young boy, oblivious to their color differences, soon became best friends. Eventually he was employed as Daniel's playmate and companion, was provided with clothing, and was given access to a playroom filled to the rafters with every toy imaginable. But Marshall preferred whiling his time away in the great outdoors, playing on the grassy fields of the Southard estate or in their family workshop where he could tinker with machinery. Each day, a private tutor stopped by the Southards' Victorian home to instill

rudimentary education into the two boys. Back on the family farm, Taylor's siblings, educated by a man named Milton Lewis, continued to toil away. This difference surely caused family friction.

Taylor played with young Daniel, licking him in impromptu roller-skating, running, and tennis matches. He also handled the farriery needs of his father's horses and waited for something exciting to come along. It came when Daniel and several of Daniel's friends wearing euphoric smiles returned to his sprawling estate atop strange, two-wheeled contraptions. Reportedly all of Daniel's friends, except penniless Marshall, had expensive new machines some were calling "wheels." Seeing the forlorn expression on Marshall's face when they rolled in each day, Daniel talked his parents into buying one for him.

For centuries, man had been concocting outlandish devices in the futile attempt to replace the horse as the primary means of personal locomotion. Most of these early "bone-shakers," "hobby horses," and "velocipedes" were ponderous, impractical, and a serious threat to one's manhood. But in the 1860s a handful of men with nothing better to do dreamed up the first semiworkable models and shoved them on the market. The peculiar men who bought those first versions often blew half a year's wages on these absurd steel skeletons known as high-wheelers. Many of them would repent their decision. Initially, the public and the press didn't know what to think of them. Thus the machines—and the odd individuals who first rode them—were rebuked and disparaged, especially by horsemen.

Their loathing was not without merit. So exciting at first glance, those "high-wheelers" with their giant front wheels, tiny rear wheels, and solid rubber tires, were in reality a public nuisance, and scared the wits out of veteran draymen, teamsters, dogs, and midsummer strollers.irate local lawmakers—many with extensive ties to the livery industry—responded with laws ranging from the absurd to the draconian. In the early 1880s, an Ohio legislator was among the first to weigh in, proposing punitive legislation after his prized horses had twice been "frightened" by a high-wheelsman. Jersey City ordered that if the driver of a buggy or wagon raised his hand at the approach of a cyclist, this signal constituted a warning that the horse was getting skittish. The gesture repeated was a direct command for the invading cyclist to pull over, dismount immediately, then quietly tiptoe around the sacred beast. Not to be outdone, the Illinois legislature floated a bill compelling cyclists to dismount anytime they came within one hundred yards of teams of horses.

Many cities mandated that bikes be saddled with bells, gongs, whistles, sirens, and kerosene or carbide lanterns. And if all those gadgets didn't slow a rider down, the six-mile-per-hour speed limit imposed in some towns did. Some legislators simply couldn't take all the complaints from horsemen. In several urban centers, including Boston, Massachusetts, and Hartford, Connecticut, they went so far as to ban wheelmen from riding their bicycles on public streets or in parks, effectively outlawing all bicycles from those cities. To add further insult, pedestrians—also no friends of the wheelmen—joined with the teamsters and horsemen to pass laws dictating where bicycles could be used and at what speed.

According to one early report, there was a brief but "obligingly friendly" détente between the horsemen and this new breed of "wheelmen." But as more and more cyclists took to the streets, the horsemen responded the best ways they could think of: by spreading glass, scrap metal, and tacks to keep the intruders off "their" roads. When they were in a really diabolical mood, horsemen took the law into their own hands, gleefully pointing their horses at the nearest cyclists and purposely running them down. The wheelmen retaliated, carrying small pistols from which they squirted diluted ammonia or overly aggressive horsemen or barking dogs. These first instances of road rage triggered a war between the wheelmen and horsemen that would span decades. "For some reason the equine mind has a distinct aversion to motion whose secret it does not understand," hollered a sympathetic *Brooklyn Eagle* reporter.

Bewildered politicians agonized over just how to classify bicycles and bicyclists. “He is not a pedestrian and cannot be catalogued as a horse,” said one lawmaker, “and consequently he is ordinarily at war with commissioners, superintendents, and policemen.” In nearly every instance, the omnipotent League of American Wheelmen (LAW), soon to be “the most powerful athletic group in the world,” rumbled into town, fighting the mighty horsemen tooth and nail, paving the way for people like young Marshall Taylor to ride freely.

Finally, riding those first high-wheelers was a precarious endeavor. Without multiple gears, climbing even the most innocuous hills required Herculean efforts. With crude brakes or no brakes at all, descending those hills became a bloodcurdling adventure. And with the front wheel much larger than the rear, these tipsy, top-heavy machines required exceptional handling skills, an unusual desire for risk, and a high threshold for pain. Countless times, battered men stumbled into hospitals dirty and bloody, with hands over their broken noses, after taking a “header.” But for some people, living in an era before practical helmets, a mere broken nose was the least of their concerns. In fact, until the safety bicycle came along, riding high-wheelers turned into such a bloodbath some newspapers created special obituary sections titled “Death by Wheel.” “Get a bicycle,” Mark Twain recommended after his eighth lesson on the high-wheeler, “you will not regret it, if you live.”

Whatever type of bicycle Daniel Southard gave his friend Taylor, he could not have had any inkling where it would eventually lead him. In the short term, it would become the instrument of his freedom from the drudgery of rural life, a life for which he would later proclaim he detested. In the long run, it would mean a great deal more.

After his private daily tutoring, dressed in Sears & Roebuck denim overalls, Taylor surveyed the Southards’ vast estate from the leather saddle of his sparkling new wheels. There, his legs spinning out of time, face radiating an endorphinic glow, Taylor, like many children at the time, probably first dreamed of being a professional bike racer. Whenever he found time, he’d square off with Daniel and his friends in ad hoc races, fulfilling his need for risk, danger, and speed—things he lacked at home. On the bicycle Taylor found a welcome diversion from his family’s staid lifestyle. When he wasn’t whipping his friends in mock races, he practiced trick riding for hours on end, imagining a large crowd watching him pedal with his hands, his bare feet pointing to the sky. Dashing across the undulating countryside, his thoughts were being forged by the bicycle. Until the day he died, he would remember those early days speeding under the broad Indianapolis skies.

Where horsemen saw a colossal irritant, Taylor saw potential. He strapped makeshift panniers on his bike, then talked a local newspaper into giving him a job as a delivery boy at five dollars a week. Loaded down with bundles of papers, he scampered around the outskirts of town, zipping by angry horsemen, putting on base riding miles that would put him in good stead later. In the evening, off in the distance he could see the glow of brush arc lamps flickering in the bustling industrial city of Indianapolis.

The same powerful force that had tugged at young Marshall had driven him to the Southard estate. There, he developed a love affair with the bicycle, mingled with whites as if there was no difference between them, and experienced the privileged lifestyle of the wealthy. Both his father—who had chosen him over his other children—and the Southards—who entrusted him with their son—must have seen something special in young Taylor. Perhaps it was because he was a quick learner and intensely inquisitive. Or maybe it was his curious combination of coyness and assertiveness. Most notably, even at an early age, he had a way about him, something intangible.

But on a gloomy afternoon, sometime in the waning days of the 1880s, this happy scene came to an abrupt halt. The Southards sold their sprawling estate, packed their bags, and headed west to Chicago.

Suddenly, teenaged Taylor had lost his best friend. What's more, he was forced to move back to his parents' modest farm where a never-ending stream of tedious barn duties awaited. "I dropped from the happy life of a 'millionaire kid,'" he wrote in his 1928 autobiography, "to that of a common errand boy all within a few weeks."

Marshall Taylor was saved by a problem with his bike. He had become mechanically inclined from the tinkering in the Southards' workshop, but in the spring of 1891, his bicycle needed a repair he couldn't fix on his own. With his broken-down bike dangling out the back of his wagon, he and his horse strayed into Indianapolis and the beginning of a new life. It was quite a sight for the impressionable thirteen-year-old to see. On either side of North Pennsylvania Street, extending as far as the eye could see, was "bicycle row," a stretch of bicycle manufacturers, wholesalers, and retail bike shops. Amid a beehive of activity, his horse by chance paused in front of the Hay & Willits Bike Shop. Inside, owner Tom Hay, twisting a strip of jerky in his mouth, peered out the window at the reedy black boy dismounting his well-traveled horse. Taylor rolled his bike inside and gawked wide-eyed at a new model beckoning him from the front window.

After his repairs were completed, Taylor spontaneously mounted his bike and began performing stunts right in the middle of the bike shop. Mr. Hay stood dumbfounded as this unknown black boy rolled around his shop, flawlessly performing one daredevil trick after another. Curious, Hay asked where he learned to ride like that. Quick to answer, Taylor told him he was self-taught, a pioneer of sorts. Having never seen anything like it before, Hay cleared his shop floor and asked Taylor to carry on. Countless hours spent riding with Daniel Southard paid off; Hay was blown away.

Word of Taylor's unique talent quickly spread to nearby businesses. As inquisitive people began gathering inside, Hay had a brainstorm. He shoed Taylor and his antics out to the street, a marketing strategy that drew such a large assembly, the police had to gallop onto the scene to move the stalled traffic. Anyone attracting that kind of publicity in a highly competitive industry deserved a reward. Hay offered the boy a job paying six dollars a week, a buck more than his paper route. Taylor hesitated, muttering something about first needing his mother's approval. Ever the businessman, Hay upped the ante, adding the Holy Grail—that shiny new bike in the window. Taylor was sold hook, line, and sinker. "My eyes nearly popped out of my head," he remembered later. He immediately raced home and appealed to his mother. Saphronia, knowing she couldn't possibly contain such an ambitious boy in the confines of their small farm, hastily okayed the new job offer.

Taylor got busy sweeping and dusting Hay's shop in the morning, then donning a colorful military uniform with bright buttons and a military cap to put on a streetside exhibition in the afternoon. Curious crowds continued to congregate. On a scorching summer day, one legend has it, someone saw him in his military outfit outside Hay & Willits and first uttered the word "Major." This nickname would eventually echo around the world and stick with him until death.

Taylor was, by all accounts, a productive worker. But he had one notable weakness. Shop owner Hay, chief sponsor of a popular ten-mile road race, left the future winner's gold medal glistening in his store window. "I spent more time fondling that medal than I did wielding the duster," Taylor admitted. One afternoon when his boss wasn't looking, he pulled the medal down from the windowsill and pinned it on his lapel. He drew up in front of a mirror, stared at himself, and then strutted around proud as a peacock.

When the day for Hay's ten-mile race arrived—an event that attracted the better local amateurs—Taylor camped out at the starting line to see the riders off. Hay spotted Taylor and, for the benefit

of a few good laughs, insisted that he enter the race. Only thirteen, Taylor refused, kicking, screaming and crying. “I know *you can’t* go the full distance,” Hay whispered in his ear, “but just ride up the road a little way, it will please the crowd . . .”

Taylor’s competitive ears perked up, as they would for the next few decades whenever he heard the words *you can’t*. This, and the fifteen-minute handicap (in other words, a head start) he received because of his age, convinced him to start his first official bicycle race. Thousands of fans lined the sides of the road as the riders pushed off, dust drifting up and darkening their faces. Taylor sped through a corridor of noise, listening as the “friendly” crowd egged him on. When the more experienced riders began closing on him toward the end of the race, Hay rode up alongside the boy, dangling the gold medal in front of his eyes. Physically he was drained to the bottom, but the sight of the medal spurred him on. “It gave me a fresh start,” he remembered, “and I felt as though I had only just begun the race.”

Within sight of the finish line, Walter Marmon lunged for the finish line. Still in front of the pack, Taylor gritted his teeth, crossing the line just seconds ahead of a speeding Marmon. Taylor collapsed in a heap on the side of the road, only to be revived by the sight of the crowd and the medal about to be pinned on his chest.

The fact that he had been given a fifteen-minute head start didn’t quell his excitement. Somehow, he found the strength to ride home where he laughed and cried in his mother’s arms, his gold medal glinting in the Indiana sun.

Emboldened by his win, Taylor continued poking around the racing scene. By the summer of 1890 he had saved enough from his meager earnings to leave home and compete in a track meet. He booked a train west and hopped off in Peoria, Illinois, a racing mecca at the time. It was a memorable experience. Reporters were crawling all over the place, jotting down enough notes to fill columns for several days before and after the multiday event. Following his impressive third-place finish in the under-sixteen category, Taylor lingered around the track waiting to watch the headliner event. He sat spellbound as national stars—men like Windle, Van Sicklen, Lumsen, and Spooner—competed before a large and boisterous crowd. They were riding safety bikes sporting the latest and most significant invention called pneumatic tires. Those ungainly high-wheelers with rock-hard tires had gone the way of the hobby horse and boneshakers. With these exciting inventions, a galaxy of known stars, and large paying crowds, bicycle racing was well on its way to becoming America’s most heavily attended sport.

Sitting alone in the grandstand that summer day, viewing the world with childlike wonder, Major Taylor knew he wanted to be part of it.

In the spring of 1893, Taylor drifted into a larger, more established Indianapolis bike shop called H. T. Hearsey’s, owned by Harry Hearsey. By then the bicycle craze had shifted into a higher gear. Seemingly everyone was either already riding or desperately waiting to learn how to ride. Supply followed demand; sleek new riding schools began webbing the land from coast to coast. In New York, the Vanderbilts and Goulds honed their skills at the prestigious Michaux Club. As wheelmen moved up the social ladder, horsemen and the insular world they had spawned were slowly being replaced by the whirling eddy of bicycle spokes. Saddle-makers and harness-makers either went out of business or began making bicycle saddles. Horse riding academies were converted into bicycle schools, forcing riding masters to begin life again in other occupations. Modernity, spearheaded by the bicycle, was penetrating the suburbs, cities, and countryside. Guests at William K. Vanderbilt’s Newport mansion began requesting bicycles; before they had always thrown their legs over a horse. John D. Rockefeller was already well prepared, stocking his vast estate with thirty-eight bicycles for visiting friends.

Bike shops geared up for the historic conversion; the most successful ones had staff dedicated

teaching people how to ride. With his history of trick riding and showing well in a few competitions, Taylor was able to talk his way into a job as head trainer at Hearsey's shop. He gave free lessons to the locals, making the conversion from horseman to wheelman easier for customers. Despite his color, customers apparently took well to his teaching and showed their patronage by buying new bicycles in vast quantities. The lessons and subsequent riding adventures even brought families closer together. "Why, I feel as if I had never known my mother," beamed one twelve-year-old girl, "until we came here for lessons."

It seems natural for Taylor to have found his way into Hearsey's high-end shop. All the famous local riders—and on occasion national "cracks"—lingered there for hours conversing in the jargon of cyclists, soft arguments over gear ratios, wheel size, frame material, and components. Taylor especially enjoyed hearing tales of their racing exploits, stories that often grew in animation over time.

From inside his riding school room, Major Taylor could look out at a city slowly being overrun by the instrument of his passion. The year 1893 was the first year Americans bought more bicycles than horses—a fact affirmed every time he peered at the streets below his school's window. All around Indy and in nearly every city and village in the country, people were viewing the world through new lenses. Railcars were refitted to carry bicycles. Newspapers were snowed under with bicycle-related ads and commentaries detailing every aspect of the sport and recreation. Families sat around their fireplaces listening to the Regina music boxes churn out *Bicycle Built for Two*, *The Cycle Man*, and *The March of the Bloomer*. Preachers spoke of bicycles during sermons, doctors during exams, barbers during haircuts. The bicycle influenced what people wore, enhanced the nation's roadways, and improved map-making. Politicians ran on platforms of "being friendly to wheelmen." One-third of all patents issued that year were bicycle-related. Those who could not afford them simply employed a little American ingenuity. "Will swap my wife," read one classified ad, "28 years old and trim looking, for any two-wheeled bicycle." The bicycle phenomenon, exulted the *New York Tribune*, is "one of much larger importance than all the victories and defeats of Napoleon."

The notion that a steel mechanical device should enjoy the same rights as God's creatures was still hard for some people to grasp. Over time, committed horsemen would put up the good fight, continually lobbying against the advance of wheelmen. But theirs was a fading world, a world in which their once-mighty powers would continually erode until the automobile came along to feed on whatever carcasses remained. This erosion brought about some unusual consequences for an animal that had perhaps been taken for granted before the bicycle. "It is pleasant to read in our livery trade," wrote one horseman, "that people who own good horses are treating them better than they use to."

In the coming years, significant opportunities would materialize for ambitious men in what was becoming one of the fastest growing industries in history. But few of these men were, or would be, black. In the racially charged milieu of 1890s America, if Major Taylor wished to stake *his* claim in the industry, he would need help. Without black role models, this young pioneer would have to align himself with strong, benevolent white men who didn't care about the color of a man's skin.

Sometime that summer, in the crucible of Hearsey's Bike Shop and the busy streets of Indianapolis, two such men would find him.

Chapter 2

ZIMMIE AND THE BIRDMAN

Louis Munger's racing career was rolling backward with all the might of an onrushing tsunami. In the summer of 1893 he was thirty, and in the youth-obsessed world of bike racing his strong but aging legs had all but spent themselves on the nation's tracks. He was a stylish man, firmly muscled, with a full crop of hair rarely allowed to creep out of place and, at times, a Napoleonic mustache.

Born in Iowa in 1863 and raised in Detroit, Michigan, Munger was a tall, good-looking bachelor whose humor and charm seldom left him wanting for attention from those around him. He had a pronounced bird-like nose, giving rise to his nickname "Birdie." He moved with a gentle swagger, a kinetic pantomime of silent confidence that some people could mistake for cockiness. No one seemed to know why, but when he spoke, he often raised his voice to a thunderous level; perhaps a serious accident involving his bicycle and a horse cart had caused partial hearing loss for which he compensated by speaking with a deep, penetrating voice. Regardless of the reason, people could hear him coming. His voice, quipped one acquaintance, "was a cross between the noises made by a cornet five miles away, two cats over a clothes line, and a man churning mush with a feather duster."

Known in racing circles as "The Western Flyer," Munger was a well-traveled man. Before arriving in Indianapolis, he lived on the road of the racing circuit, sleeping in long-ago motels, hostelries, or homes of admiring fans. Other times, the train or train station served as his home, and his bicycle was his best friend as the circuit looped almost nonstop from Detroit to Illinois to Kentucky, then up and down the East Coast. His past had the yesteryear feel of tire tracks on dusty country roads. The exact times and places of his early days are unrecorded, but there were always racing bikes, dirt or wooden ovals, and that familiar clatter of passenger trains rolling over windblown rails.

While Taylor had been befriending young Daniel on the grassy knolls near the Southards' estate, Munger set a few records on the road, receiving medals that he clung to like the child he'd yet to have. Despite the records he set in those early days, he remained a middling rider on the track, never to become among the nation's elite. But the perfectionist in him left him wanting more. Since his early years, he'd had tunnel vision, viewing the world from eight feet up, perched high atop the leather saddle of a high-wheeler. So it seemed natural for him to eventually climb down and slip into the business end of the bicycle world.

Arriving in Indianapolis from Chicago in the early 1890s—"he left after his voice," joked a reporter—Munger brought with him his medals, big dreams, and vivid memories of the speed and pageantry of the early days of bike racing. Hoping to regain his youthful form, he entered local competitions, but his racing career continued eroding there. So Munger quickly staked his business claim, parlaying his racing winnings into a prosperous firm called the Munger Cycle Manufacturing Company. He made good use of his racing notoriety as well as his newfound manufacturing and marketing skills, creating an ultra-light safety racing bicycle ingeniously called "The Munger." Though of little importance to the average person for whom casual biking was becoming an obsession, Munger's eponymous bikes would prove to be popular among the racing fraternity. Perhaps if he had sought the favor of the common rider and concentrated on wider rims or broader seats, his company may have joined the ranks of Schwinn and

Co. But Munger was unable to shake the infectious racing bug, so his products followed his passion.

~~First a racer, then a manufacturer, Munger had dedicated himself so enthusiastically to bicycles it was as if he was deficient without them—an affliction not uncommon at the time. “Munger,” wrote one cycling historian, “lived, ate, talked, slept, and breathed bicycles.”~~

When he wasn't on the road peddling his racing bike to dealers nationwide, Munger would stroll in various shops along Indy's bicycle row to mingle with other wheelmen. Though his bittersweet legend preceded him, he was a big enough star to become a hero in the eyes of many who gathered there. One day in 1893, he stumbled into H. T. Hearsey's Bike Shop. With his winning percentage dropping to a woeful level, perhaps he was already thinking about training or managing aspiring young riders.

He couldn't help but stare at him. Munger was roaming Harry Hearsey's Bike Shop, probably trying to smooth-talk old Harry into placing another order for his racing models, when a reedy black kid strutted around the training room with a riding talent and composure that belied his youth. Customers looked on inquisitively. Each time Munger returned to the shop, the same smooth black face with the same underfed look piqued his curiosity. When he had time, Munger watched the youngster's surprisingly seamless interaction with both black and white customers. There's something about this kid, he thought. If Munger had already been thinking about race managing or finding a rider to lead a future cycling team for his company, he could not have stumbled upon a more unlikely prospect than little Taylor.

Practically speaking, Taylor was everything that an 1890s race manager would have run away from. Unlike road racers, short-distance track racers often carry extra brawn for the requisite fast-twitch explosiveness, especially in their meaty thighs and sturdy upper bodies. Physically, Taylor was still a runty speck of a kid, with spindle-shanked legs and round, protuberant knees—seemingly a lesson in frailty. His upper body was a poignant continuation of his lower—short, slight, toothpick arms, flaired back, and puny shoulders no wider than his waist. When he showed up at bike tracks, trainers sure thought he was lost, pointing him to the horse track where all the like-sized black jockeys converged at the time. Given his diminutive size, one wouldn't think Taylor would ever possess the leg or lung power to blow out a candle, much less compete with international sprint giants. Sure, he could grow into it, but neither his circumstances nor his bloodlines seemed to suggest future greatness.

Without prosperous parents or any real money of his own to help defray extensive travel and equipment costs, Taylor would be a risky investment. And to top it all off, he was black. At that moment in American history, few managers would have had any interest in someone like Major Taylor other than as a servant or a low-paid manual laborer. No “darkey,” one race reporter wrote, had ever amounted “to a pinch of snuff in the racing game.” Major Taylor and all his worldly ambitions would have been viewed by virtually everyone as a hopeless cause, especially those who were calling him a little “pickaninny,” a highly offensive term that was then used to describe throwaway black kids.

Everyone, that is, except Louis D. “Birdie” Munger. If Taylor possessed unseen attributes ripe for elite track racing, Louis Munger had the mind of a prophet, saint, or both.

On a day in 1893, he and Taylor came face-to-face. The two stood on opposite ends of the racing spectrum. Munger was a refuge from the vanishing world of high-wheelmen who had been squeezed out; Taylor was a boy hoping to blaze trails on the new safety bikes, moving bravely forward with the eager, naïve eyes of youth. Munger was trying to pave the nation's tracks with the tread of his new racing machine; Taylor was dreaming of the day when he could ride on those same tracks atop such a bike. Munger had the wisdom and the machine; Taylor had the determination and, perhaps with endless schooling, the engine.

From skills honed over a decade of viewing other riders, Munger had developed a knack for finding hidden talents and rare qualities in people. Spending as much time at Hearsey's shop soaking up the local flavor as he did his own company, Munger was impressed with the vibrant, young Taylor as he gave lessons in the store's custom riding school. He first noticed his inherent skills with a bicycle that despite its dominance at Hearsey's was still an awkward new possession for folks. He was also impressed with Taylor's work habits and inquisitiveness; the boy constantly drilled him with questions on bike racing tactics and the latest trends in racing bikes.

The two slowly formed an unlikely friendship away from Hearsey's. Taylor followed Munger to races, begging him to let him try out his latest racing bike. Munger eventually obliged, and the two wheelmen rode together on Indy's hilly scapes lined with oak trees, enjoying the competition as much as the companionship. While younger riders were often too aggressive, blowing through their physical reserves like jackrabbits early in a ride, Munger conveyed a calming presence. He taught Taylor that the stronger man can lose to the most cunning. He instructed Taylor how to conserve his energy and control his emotions while feeding off his opponents' aggressiveness. Taylor had a tendency to obey the bike's mechanical imperatives, its instinctive quest for perpetual motion. Using the all-important technique of drafting behind rivals to cut down on wind resistance—a technique that can save 30 percent of a cyclist's energy—Munger taught Taylor to restrain himself early on and then unleash his fastest sprint at the finish.

When on the tracks, Munger taught Taylor to weigh the unique angles, surfaces, speeds, and propensities of each individual one. He would have told him to build dossiers on his competitors—slow starter, fast closer, hugs the pole, loves the rail—and track the subtleties of each race like wind direction and the best spot to begin his sprint. He schooled in him the import of proper eating habits, and more importantly, to stay away from alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, and cigars—all used in mass quantities at the time. Always a willing student, Taylor didn't just listen; he heard.

Sharing years of invaluable insight into the secrets of racing, Munger was amazed at the relentless pace Taylor kept on their rides, sometimes even challenging his more experienced form. Initial thoughts of becoming a manager-trainer began to percolate. And as Taylor's endurance and pace improved after nearly every outing, it appeared as if the young lad speeding alongside him might be a good, albeit trouble-bound pupil. But Munger wasn't above having considerable fun at Taylor's expense. On one occasion, he and a few riding buddies got him to bleach his pitch-black hair inside a velodrome locker room. "We will bleach you and make you white," joked Munger. To great laughter, Taylor's black head was then nudged out onto the track sporting a sticky, tangled head of platinum blondish-red hair. "The effect was ludicrous," joked Charles Sinsabaugh, a preeminent race reporter and the man who named Chicago's baseball team the Cubs.

Hundreds of wheelmen had passed through Hearsey's Bike Shop and fixed their gaze on Taylor's pint-sized black body, but no one had seen the possibilities that Munger saw. One had to look beyond the small frame, the black skin, and deep into his psyche. Clearly, a fire burned there. That's why, after spending time with Taylor training and tinkering in his workshop, he offered to hire Taylor away from Hearsey's. Munger's "famous" bachelor's apartment above his warehouse, which was used to entertain countless wheelmen and women, was a disaster—business books, periodicals, and clothing were strewn everywhere. Munger, who employed ninety workers inside a three-story building half the size of a football field, needed a porter, cook, and all-around handyman. Excited about the possibilities, Taylor signed on, agreeing to do various jobs around Munger's apartment and factory, including, in those days before widespread telephone use, delivering messages.

Under Munger, a regimented pattern developed. They would wake early, work long, hard days, train

until dark, and hit the sack early. Like many teenagers at the time, Taylor probably rolled his bicycle inside at night, washed the wheels, polished the spokes, and fell asleep with its shiny exterior at his feet. With almost a canine loyalty, Taylor committed himself to his sundry new responsibilities as he had a few others. “He was as faithful and conscientious about the servile duties of those days,” a reporter later wrote, “as he is in his training today . . .”

While Taylor was impressed with Birdie’s knowledge and race stories, what really endeared him to Munger was the patient and kindly intimacy of his friendship—and that he did not care about the color of a man’s skin. “Mr. Munger became closer and closer attached to me as time went on,” he remembered. “Had I been his own son, he could not have acted more kindly toward me.” The sentiment was mutual. “Munger,” recalled a reporter, “took to Taylor as a duck takes to water.”

On a sweltering August day, Munger gave Taylor his most momentous assignment. The Zig Zag cycling club led by Harry Hearsay, Tom Hay, and Bert Willits had organized an important local race with national significance. They had invited some of the best riders in the country. Munger handed over the name of an acquaintance who had committed to the race and directed Taylor to pick him up at the train station and escort him for the weekend. His hands trembling with emotion, Taylor instantly recognized the name.

At the train station in the warm Indianapolis summer of 1893, Major Taylor first laid eyes on Arthur Augustus Zimmerman. He was quite a sight for the young boy. Everything about Zimmerman exuded kindness, warmth, and success. Draped over his nearly six-foot-tall frame was a gabardine jacket tailored to his broad chest and shoulders, a crisply laid tie, and a silk pocket square. His Swiss watch was made of real gold, and he sported genuine green snakeskin shoes. As was the style, diamonds glinted from his tie, badge, and as many fingers as taste would allow.

A ladies’ favorite, Arthur had a hard chin, sagacious eyes, midlength blond hair parted a lick off center, and occasionally a restrained handlebar moustache. In his body language, Zimmie, as his friends called him, spoke with a stutter. He walked with a surprisingly slow and shambling gait. Yet when stationary, he stood straight up military style, no doubt stemming from his days as a military school cadet.

As a general rule, Zimmerman wouldn’t speak in front of large crowds—at a banquet in his honor, he once famously strayed into the hotel saloon for a cocktail, leaving British dignitaries scrambling onstage. But alone with close friends or admiring fans, he was chatty and spoke with a pleasant South Jersey drawl that blended with his jovial disposition. Unlike many athletes of his era, he was an intellectual before his racing days, he considered going the way of academia—immersing himself in writing and law school. Yet much to the chagrin of his rivals, he delayed his education, only to become an author later. In the summer of ’93 he was twenty-four, rich, jovial, and chock full of life. He also was the greatest rider the sport had ever seen, and one of the world’s most popular athletes. “We are in favor of Zimmerman for president of the United States,” gloated one reporter. “He would get it if he would only start.”

On June 11, 1869, in the rapidly growing industrial region of Camden, New Jersey, Arthur was born to Theodore and Anna Zimmerman. After moving to Asbury Park, his parents used their rambunctious boy’s athleticism as a good excuse to boot him out of the house and into military school. There, his natural talents and long legs found him winning running meets. In an era when medals were awarded for the long jump, high jump, and hop, skip, and jump, Zimmerman medaled in all three. Unlike Taylor, who took to two wheels at a very young age, Zimmerman would not discover cycling until he was seventeen years old. But the attraction was instant. “I liked it so well,” he said, “that I jumped into

the game with all the spirit that was in me.”

The elite racing world that Zimmerman plunged into was a colorful one. This was racing in its pure form: raw, unrefined, quick, and often flat-out dangerous. And people could not get enough of it. In cities and burgs up one coast and down the other, hundreds, then thousands, then tens of thousands fought their way into packed bleachers. They spilled onto the infield and cheered their favorites, often nose-to-nose finishes.

The sport grew so rapidly, entrepreneurs were unable to build new tracks fast enough, leaving cycling fans temporarily bumping elbows with horse racing fans as they raced around horse tracks before the daily equine matches. But once bike racing crowds began to rival those for horse racing, entrepreneurs jumped into action. Thousands of small ovals built specifically for bike racing sprang up in villages nationwide. Dozens of modern tracks, called velodromes, were erected in larger towns, usually equipped with press boxes, smooth wooden or concrete tracks, concessions stands, training and massage rooms. A third type of track combined the two, with a dirt horse track on the outside and a concrete or wooden bicycle track on the inside.

While technically considered amateurs before 1893—stars like Zimmerman won hordes of gifts that when cashed in, may have exceeded earnings of any other athletes, save a few prizefighters and matadors. According to the *New York Times*, Zimmie’s haul for 1892 included twenty-nine bicycles, several horses and carriages, half a dozen pianos, household furniture of all descriptions, and enough silver plates, medals, and jewelry to stock a jewelry store. All this was augmented by his earnings as the main sponsor of Raleigh bikes, a stack of Raleigh stock shares received at ground floor prices, and royalties from Zimmie shoes, Zimmie toe clips, and Zimmie clothing. In 1893, the first year of America’s massive economic downturn and when other sports were reeling, his earnings were estimated to be well over \$10,000.

The sporting world had never seen anyone quite like Arthur Zimmerman. From the first day he roared around a track, he proved to be a dominating figure, winning fourteen hundred races by the time he retired. He was a spectacular sight for all to see with his muscular body hovering over his bike, his hands grasping the bars, his eyes leveled on the finish line, and his legs spinning like pistons. His form was stealthy, a paragon of balance, agility, and prepotency. “It was as if the man was mounted on rails,” wrote Victor Breyer, a noted cycling journalist, “so complete is the absence of wobbling and the semblance of effort.”

The press followed his every move. Photographers snapped and sketch artists drew pictures of a calm, cool-looking Zimmerman passing a field of riders in various degrees of agony, their faces and bodies twisting and contorting under the strain. “He at present runs a chance of being pictured more extensively and in more varied styles,” wrote one editor during the ’92 election campaign, “than either of the presidential candidates.”

Because he trained fewer hours than many of his rivals, Zimmerman was labeled lazy by some sportswriters. In reality he was among the first to employ a more scientific, interval training approach while his rivals, haunted by a fear of losing their jobs, marched through the same rigid daily routine riding for long hours at the same pace. Unhindered by tradition, superstitions, or old wives’ tales, Zimmerman rode fewer hours but varied his distance and speed. He trained on the road and track, used “Professor Roberts’s dumb-bell drills” for increased explosive power, played basketball and handball, and ran during the offseason. “Perhaps I can stand a little more than my share of rest,” he said coyly when someone questioned him about his brisk workouts. But he was not, nor did he like being called indolent, as one newspaper that made such a claim found out. “I’ll go down and clean out that office,” he threatened, “if they don’t set me right in the matter.”

After successfully conquering America, Zimmie shipped overseas with similar effect. In England where oversized Zimmerman posters hung all over the place, there was talk of a riders' "strike" because of his dominance. "His path," complained one scribe, "was littered with the defeat of England's best men." In a nation with a rich tradition of athlete prowess, his supremacy caused such a stir that one B. actually called for a public hearing on the matter. "What happened to our eccentric riders?" she demanded to know. "Why doesn't she ask Zimmerman?" retorted a London columnist.

In an era when fouling and rough play happened fairly often, Zimmerman prided himself on good clean riding, becoming a perfect role model for an aspiring young rider like Taylor.

Along with his phenomenal racing success came equally remarkable folktales: how he outpaced a speeding train or passed a greyhound at full stride. One story had him defeating the great racehorse Salvator in a man-versus-horse match race, with Zimmerman, of course, riding on an older and slow high-wheel bicycle. The rumor stuck and made for spicy conversation until someone discovered Salvator wasn't even alive at the time of the alleged race.

To racing fans, especially young boys who played with toy models of his likeness, Arthur Zimmerman was a godlike figure. He was for the sport of bike racing what James Corbett was for boxing, Salvator was for horse racing, and Cy Young would become for baseball.

From the outset, Arthur Zimmerman was several tire treads ahead of Birdie Munger and all other wheelmen. With the benefit of more than seven decades watching hundreds of bike racers from all over the world, French journalist Victor Breyer summed up Zimmerman's talents thus: "He was simply the greatest pedaler of all time."

When Taylor arrived at Union Station, he had no difficulty distinguishing Zimmerman from the large group of cyclists, some of whom had come from as far away as South Africa. There was a crush of fans, journalists, and race organizers enveloping him, clamoring for his autograph or a prized interview. Taylor slithered through the crowd while a large brass band filled the air. He slipped past Zimmie's porter, trainer, manager, and biographer, who had been recording his every feat down to the finest detail. Taylor recognized the affable smile, the fine clothes, and the glittering jewelry from the many pictures that filled the newspapers. Unaware of Zimmerman's attitude toward blacks, Taylor was excited and fearful as he neared the celebrated white man. He peered nervously up at his towering figure. Their eyes met. Taylor mentioned that Munger had sent him to escort him back to his home. Zimmerman, who despite his fame was surprisingly approachable, extended his white hand. With a warm smile on his face, he shook Taylor's small, black hand, instantly putting him at ease.

The slow carriage ride back to Munger's home would be the most inspirational experience of Taylor's early life. After returning from Europe with "a trunk full of gold and silver," and then winning the World Championships in Chicago earlier that month, Zimmerman had returned to his New Jersey home to one of the most intense hero's welcomes ever seen. More than five thousand people had greeted him, tossed him on their shoulders, then carried him into town. Nearly every home, business, and government building in the Manasquan borough, and later in Asbury Park, flew American flags with a giant "Z" attached. Large blue streamers with national colors in graceful folds adorned every cornice. The parade route, which had been heavily advertised weeks before his arrival, was lit up with Chinese lanterns, Roman candles, and Greek fires. The air crackled with the endless thunder of cannon fire. Late in the evening, Parkers Hall was taxed beyond capacity. Thousand more spilled out onto South Street never to make it inside. Young boys had shimmied up the columns of the building's portico, fighting for a glimpse of Zimmerman through the windows. "The town is yours," proclaimed the mayor.

And here was Taylor, a fourteen-year-old obscure black boy from rural Indianapolis, already with

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