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RITCHIE, ANDREW. *Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988. 294 pp. Postscript, photographs, illustrations, picture sources, credits, glossary, bibliography, and index. \$15.95.

Andrew Ritchie has a masterpiece in *Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer*. This is the remarkable story of a young African American male not only in sport, but society. Ritchie candidly traces his plight from the beginnings of working in a bicycle shop, to pioneering the sport in art form as a champion cyclist, to his eventual downfall and hard times following his glory days on the track. Taylor defined class and was intelligent, dedicated, and a true believer in spirituality. While race relations during the 1900s were far from harmonious, Taylor somehow figured out that by learning to live in two worlds—black and white—one could reap many rewards. The key, in his mind, was to avoid full inclusion in either.

Keeping in mind that Taylor had no distinct role models in the sport of bicycling, he drew attention even before his early competitions. At a local grocery store, Taylor would perform tricks on his bike that would draw customers in for business. As he expressed, “I made a fancy mount on my bicycle in the middle of the store and immediately drew the attention of Mr. Hay. He asked me who taught me that trick, and when I replied, ‘Myself,’ he smiled doubtfully I told Mr. Hay that was one of my easiest tricks and that I had a number of others that I would like to show him if he was interested.” Taylor continued, “The exhibition was so good that Mr. Hay, his mind ever alert for good advertising for his store, invited me to repeat them in the street in front of his place of business. In a short time there was so much congestion on the spot that the police were called to open it for traffic” (p. 18).

This originality would carry Taylor to new stardom and allow him to become the king of the bicycle world. His career is one of the more stunning in sport history, and it involved several themes in relation to the construction of sport in society. The young African American male, however, simply pursued what he loved to do. Institutionalized racism was around in the form of Jim Crow laws, as well as the National Cycling Association making up rules to benefit the white establishment in terms of money and limiting what Taylor and other bike racers could and could not do. Not only did an entire sport that was white have to deal with a black competing in the cycling arena, but the reality that he was the best astounded all in attendance. Racial stacking could not prevent Taylor from getting all that he deserved. Unlike team sports, bicycle racing awarded one champion at the end of each race. This fact allowed Taylor to compete and encompass all the traits and connotations that go with a sport as strategic as cycling. “Intelligence,” “organization,” and “leadership” had to go next to Taylor’s name, and white people were angry about this fact. As the *Morning Telegraph* stated, “It is, of course, a degradation for a white man to contest any point with a Negro. It is worse than that, and becomes an absolute grief and social disaster when a Negro persistently wins in the competitions” (p. 116).

Illusion played a strong role, as Taylor’s peers would stop at nothing to assure that they won the race, thus appearing to have won fair and square. But as Ritchie indicates, “The White riders, led by the Butlers, continued to pocket and obstruct him. They restricted his freedom of movement on the tracks, hoping—sometimes plotting—for a White victory. Most of the time they stopped short of fouling

him physically. Whereas the White riders could always find an ally, could hope to spring a surprise jump, Taylor was always alone, a closely watched and marked man” (p. 128).

Outside of hurrying through Taylor’s last years of his life, Ritchie has published a piece that has big implications for society, but more importantly the plight of the African American athlete. The ethnography Ritchie composes puts this biography on a different level. One of the persistent themes of his book is the eventual career transition from sport to the “real world” and how the lack of opportunity for black athletes to make a smooth transition becomes a sad reality. Taylor was good at managing money at the beginning of his career, but a weak marriage and family beggars sealed his fate of despair and loneliness. Not being allowed (institutionalized) to attend a higher and postsecondary institution after his career hampered his education and his career options. Taylor went into the automobile industry and originated a tire, but others later stole his ideas and made a profit (yet another familiar theme still prevalent today).

Ritchie, most important, has exposed the notion that African American men are “natural” at sports, especially football and basketball, as a hoax. Much like anything else, when given the opportunity to perform and develop, this race could excel at anything! Ritchie’s book illuminates dominant conceptions of African American men in sports unthinkable in earlier eras. This biography demonstrates that the race construction of black males in certain arenas was not always the same and continues to change each day. Society will learn that many of the great African American athletes like Marshall Taylor achieved such status because of hard work, dedication, intelligence, and persistence.

Thank you, Marshall Taylor, for paving the way.

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