‘WORLD’S FASTEST MAN’ TELLS LIFE STORY OF PIONEER BLACK CYCLIST

July 21, 2019

BOOK REVIEW


365 pages.

$30.

BY DR. GLENN C. ALTSCHELER

SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

In the 1890s, millions of Americans became “bicycle crazy.” While horses plodded through city streets, towing a buggy at a gait of around four miles an hour, cyclists could go where they pleased at three times that speed or more, free from the stench of manure. And suddenly, bicycle races became America’s most popular spectator sport.

In a nation dominated by Jim Crow segregation, Marshall “Major” Taylor somehow became an internationally recognized champion of cycling and our nation’s first Black sports hero.

In “The World's Fastest Man,” Michael Kranish, an investigative reporter for the Washington Post, tells the story of this long-forgotten racial pioneer who deserves a place of honor beside Jack Johnson, Jesse Owens, Jackie Robinson and Arthur Ashe.

A MARKED MAN

Throughout Taylor’s career, Louis “Birdie” Munger, a White former champion, served as his mentor. That said, Taylor encountered racial prejudice every step along the way, in Europe and Australia, as well as in the United States.

He was excluded from the Indianapolis branch of the YMCA. Contending that “the presence of this little negro would not be right,” Kranish reveals, race promoters at several venues, including Madison Square Garden, refused to grant Taylor a license. Instead, they suggested that he “shine the Fifth Avenue gentlemen’s shoes.”
When he was permitted to race, Taylor became a marked man; his competitors tried to box him in, cut him off, make him crash, knock him off his bike.

**‘WHITER’ EXPERIMENT**

Convinced that he would be barred from the sport, Munger convinced Taylor to apply ointment over his entire body to make him look “four or five shades whiter.” Taylor writhed in pain, his hair turned red, and his skin burned.

Although he seemed to be turning whiter, Munger and Taylor stopped the “experiment.”

Fortunately, as promoters found that White versus Black contests attracted large audiences, Taylor was permitted to “break the color barrier.”

**MAN OF DISCIPLINE**

“The World’s Fastest Man” highlights Taylor’s discipline, dignity and integrity. Taylor’s exercise, nutrition, and training regimen, Kranish indicates, was remarkable.

An early riser, he began the day with stretches; ate high-protein meals; alternated between a rolling pace and a sprint (to increase aerobic capacity) on his bike; used pulleys and punching bags to enhance upper body strength and sharpen reflexes; and did not smoke cigarettes or drink alcohol.

A devout Christian, Taylor refused to compete on Sundays. “It isn’t as though I had lots of money,” he told reporters, but “I’m sure if the general public knew my heart as God knows it, they would appreciate what I am doing even better than they do.”

**RACISM RESPONSE**

Not surprisingly, racism took its toll on Taylor.

“I am a Negro in every sense of the word and I am not sorry that I am,” he emphasized. Taylor acknowledged the assistance he had received from White people, especially Birdie Munger.

Nonetheless, he had “no great admiration for white people as a whole,” because they had “no great admiration for me or my group.”

He continued to live by a precept of Booker T. Washington: “I shall allow no man to narrow my soul and drag me down, by making me hate him.”

Following his retirement, Major Taylor struggled, personally and financially. He invested in
several businesses and watched his savings disappear.

**DIED IN CHARITY WARD**

Wondering how he would be remembered when “I am finally run off my feet and flattened by Father Time,” Taylor wrote an autobiography but could not find a publisher.

Estranged from his wife and daughter, Taylor moved from Worcester, Massachusetts to Chicago. He died on June 21, 1932, in the charity ward of the Cook County Hospital.

When no one claimed his body, the 53-year-old world champion was buried in Mount Glenwood Cemetery, a final resting place for Blacks.

But now, thanks to Michael Kranish, we can remember him as a “larger part of history, not just the narrow world of cycling records,” who became a transformative figure in the battle against racism.

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