

Seattle Times, 5/11/09

Seattle bicycling clubs for disadvantaged kids get rolling

Seattle's Cascade Bicycle Club launches biking clubs — named for African-American cycling champ and pioneer Marshall "Major" Taylor — for disadvantaged kids around King County to promote the activity as a form of fitness, recreation, alternate transportation and independence.

By [Marc Ramirez](#)

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Major Taylor Cycling Clubs

A project of Cascade Bicycle Club

THE PROGRAM, named for the African-American cycling champ of the late 19th century, encourages cycling among young

people in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

Where: Clubs have started at Global Connections High School in SeaTac; Bike Works, an agency that teaches Rainier Valley youth to ride and repair bikes in Columbia City; and the YES Foundation, a social-service agency in White Center. Organizers hope to start clubs at Garfield High and Rainier Vista Boys & Girls Club.

How it evolved: Former King County Executive Ron Sims, inspired by similar efforts in Chicago, approached Cascade about the possibility of starting clubs in underserved communities around Seattle. The program is funded by groups such as King County Metro, Group Health Cooperative and Seattle's Recycled Cycles, and each club uses bicycles and helmets provided at a discount by Kent's Redline Bicycles.

For more information

To help, donate or learn more: Call Cascade Bicycle Club at 206-522-2453.

Source: Ed Ewing, program director, Major Taylor Bicycle Clubs

Other bicycle programs



COURTNEY BLETHEN / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Oliyad Beyene prepares his bike before a ride Friday with the Major Taylor Cycling Club at SeaTac's Global Connections High School.

Bicycle Sundays Lake Washington Boulevard will be closed to traffic between Seward Park and Mount Baker Beach from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Sundays through June 28, again on July 12 and July 19, and from Aug. 9 to Sept. 27 (www.seattle.gov/parks/bicyclesunday).

Bike to Work Day On Friday, cyclists may stop at one of 44 commute stations throughout the Puget Sound region to have their bikes checked for free before heading to work (www.cbcef.org/btw/btw_day.html).

Before joining the after-school cycling club at SeaTac's Global Connections High, Oliyad Beyene had never heard of Marshall "Major" Taylor.

But after a ride through nearby Des Moines Park, the diminutive 15-year-old, three years removed from his native Ethiopia, could tell you one thing: He'd never ridden 10 miles before. Now, thanks to the Major Taylor Cycling Clubs, he had.

"We get to see other cities, and rivers. We exercise and we get to see the neighborhoods," said Oliyad, who joined at the urging of principal Rick Harwood.

"It makes me feel good that I can go somewhere by myself," he added.

Such independence is the driving force behind the Major Taylor Cycling Clubs, a project of Seattle's Cascade Bicycle Club that aims to launch such clubs in disadvantaged areas throughout King County.

"Before the Greg LeMonds, before the Lance Armstrongs, there was Major Taylor," said project director Ed Ewing. "If you grow up in the sport and you are African American, you know about Major Taylor, just like you know about Jack Johnson or Muhammad Ali."

Born in 1878 to African-American parents who'd left Kentucky around the time of the Civil War, Marshall Taylor grew up in the home of a well-to-do Indianapolis family who'd hired his dad as coachman.

Given a bicycle, he learned to ride and did stunts in front of a local bike shop while costumed in a soldier's uniform, earning the nickname "Major."

Eventually, he'd go on to become the first African-American cycling champ and the second African-American athlete — after bantamweight boxer George Dixon in 1890-91 — ever to win a world sports title.

He earned his laurels in the face of what he called "that dreadful monster prejudice" — being refused hotel lodging, banned from some tracks, impeded on others by white cyclists who ganged up to block his path, even attacked by one rider after a race.

But for a time, he was the fastest man in the world's most popular sport, setting seven world records in 1899 alone and setting the stage for other breakthrough African-American athletes such as Jackie Robinson and Althea Gibson.

One recent Friday afternoon, Oliyad wore a T-shirt bearing Taylor's image as he and a dozen fellow Global Connections students donned helmets and climbed aboard their racing bikes.

Oliyad, the youngest son of a single mom raising three kids, still struggles with English, his second language. He likes that Harwood and other school faculty members, including his math teacher, join in on the rides, taking the lead or trailing protectively behind.

"They tell us better ways to use stuff," he said. "They are giving me good tips."

Creating access

As a kid in Minneapolis, Ewing, director of the clubs' program, sometimes felt like the only African-American cyclist of his age around.

Every day, he'd watched his dad bicycle off to work, and weekends meant two-wheeled family day trips around town.

But cycling, he knows, can be cost-prohibitive. "Not all kids have access to it," he said. "It's like golf, or tennis. So this is all about creating access. ... A lot of people don't know how to take that first step."

The program employs several former pro cyclists as instructors and a six-week curriculum that includes safety, mechanics, parking-lot drills and, eventually, field trips to sites such as Marymoor Park's Velodrome.

Once they've provided know-how, project leaders say the focus is on instilling cycling in kids' minds as a real option for exercise, recreation and transportation.

At Global Connections, where more than half the students are on free or reduced lunch, the club's 15 members represent European, Ethiopian, Syrian, Somali and Latino backgrounds. Some were prodded to join by teachers but now energetically show up every Friday. One girl had never ridden a bike at all.

"For them, a bike symbolizes a chance to get out and have fun and to not worry about all the other things they have going on," said Danielle Rose, the project's curriculum chief and fundraiser.

"Are we ready to roll?" asked instructor Dan Harm, a retired pro cyclist, as the group began its third weekly session. "Has everyone done their A-B-C quick-check? Does everyone remember what that is?"

Oliyad and friend Raj Singh, a 17-year-old senior, signal completion of their pre-ride maintenance checks, a list that includes air, brakes, chains and wheel quick-release mechanisms. Harm reviews hand signals and gear ratios for climbing "super-gnarly hills," and soon they're on their way to Des Moines Park.

Two hours later, after a 10-mile ride through the park and a stop to enjoy the Puget Sound view, the riders return. "To end up on a bike trail, at a place where they've gotten to only by car, was pretty cool," principal Harwood said.

Already, even as he traded playful helmet swats with classmate Raj, Oliyad was anticipating the following week's field trip to Marymoor Park, where the two planned to race. He enjoys being part of a group, he said, where half the cyclists on a ride stay behind to help someone with a flat tire.

"We stick for each other," he said. "We're like a team."

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