

# Comprehension

## Genre

A **Biographical Sketch** tells the story of a specific period of a person's life written by another person.



## Make Inferences and Analyze

### Fact and Opinion

As you read, use your Fact and Opinion Chart.

Fact	Opinion

### Read to Find Out

What are Marshall Taylor's accomplishments?

# MAJOR TAYLOR

## CHAMPION CYCLIST



BY **Lesa Cline-Ransome**  
ILLUSTRATED BY **James E. Ransome**

**I**n Indianapolis, Indiana, there was a street lined with bicycle shops from one end to the other. Visitors would marvel at each window displayed with the most up-to-date models along that stretch of North Pennsylvania Avenue locals called Bicycle Row.

Right at the center sat the Hay and Willits Bicycle Shop: Thomas Hay, Bert Willits, proprietors.

It was this shop young Marshall Taylor visited when his own bicycle needed fixing. Marshall was thirteen years old, and waiting patiently was not one of the things he did best. So while he waited, he kept himself busy trying out new stunts. Then, the repairs made, he used one of his fancy mounts to climb quickly onto his bicycle. If he hurried, he could still finish his newspaper route before supper.

As Marshall left, Mr. Hay shouted, “Hey, son, that was some stunt work.”

“Oh, those,” said Marshall. “I have a lot more, wanna see?”

And without waiting for an answer, he began his **demonstration** with an acrobatic mount. Round and round the store he rode, first backward, then forward on the handlebars, each move more daring than the last. By the time he’d finished, everyone in the store was applauding for more.

“How’d you get so good?” Tom Hay asked the boy.

Marshall explained that he’d taught himself quite a collection of tricks riding on the long stretches of country road between his newspaper stops.

“Are you looking for work? For six dollars a week, all you need to do is sweep, straighten, and show off some of those stunts, and you’ve got yourself a job.”

“Six dollars to clean and do tricks?” Marshall asked. Why, that paid a dollar more than his paper route.

“Okay, okay, we’ll throw in a new bike, too,” countered Bert Willits.

“I’ll take it!” Marshall shouted.



*How did a thirteen-year-old black teenager in 1891 come to be such a crackerjack cyclist—or even to own a bicycle?* Mr. Hay and Mr. Willits wondered. And so Marshall told them of his father’s job as a coachman to the **prominent** Southard family and how at the age of eight he’d been hired as the live-in companion of their only son. It was then that Marshall began his new life of **luxury**: private tutoring, fine clothing, a playroom stacked with toys.

But what Marshall loved most was the bicycle the Southards had given him. He’d never seen anything like its smooth curved lines of metal, so shiny and new and so utterly modern. He jumped on at once, knowing those wheels could carry him faster than his legs ever could.

And sure enough, in no time he became the top cyclist in the neighborhood. Amongst stately Victorian houses and tree-lined streets, in each and every race, Marshall breezed by the other boys, aware only of the wind against his face and the road he left behind.

For the days when Marshall was to perform, Mr. Hay outfitted him in a uniform with elaborate braidings and shimmery gold buttons.



Crowds gathered afternoons at 4:00 P.M. sharp to watch Marshall on the sidewalk outside the store. They were amazed by the young man in military uniform so **adept** on two wheels.

“He looks like a little major!” they would marvel.

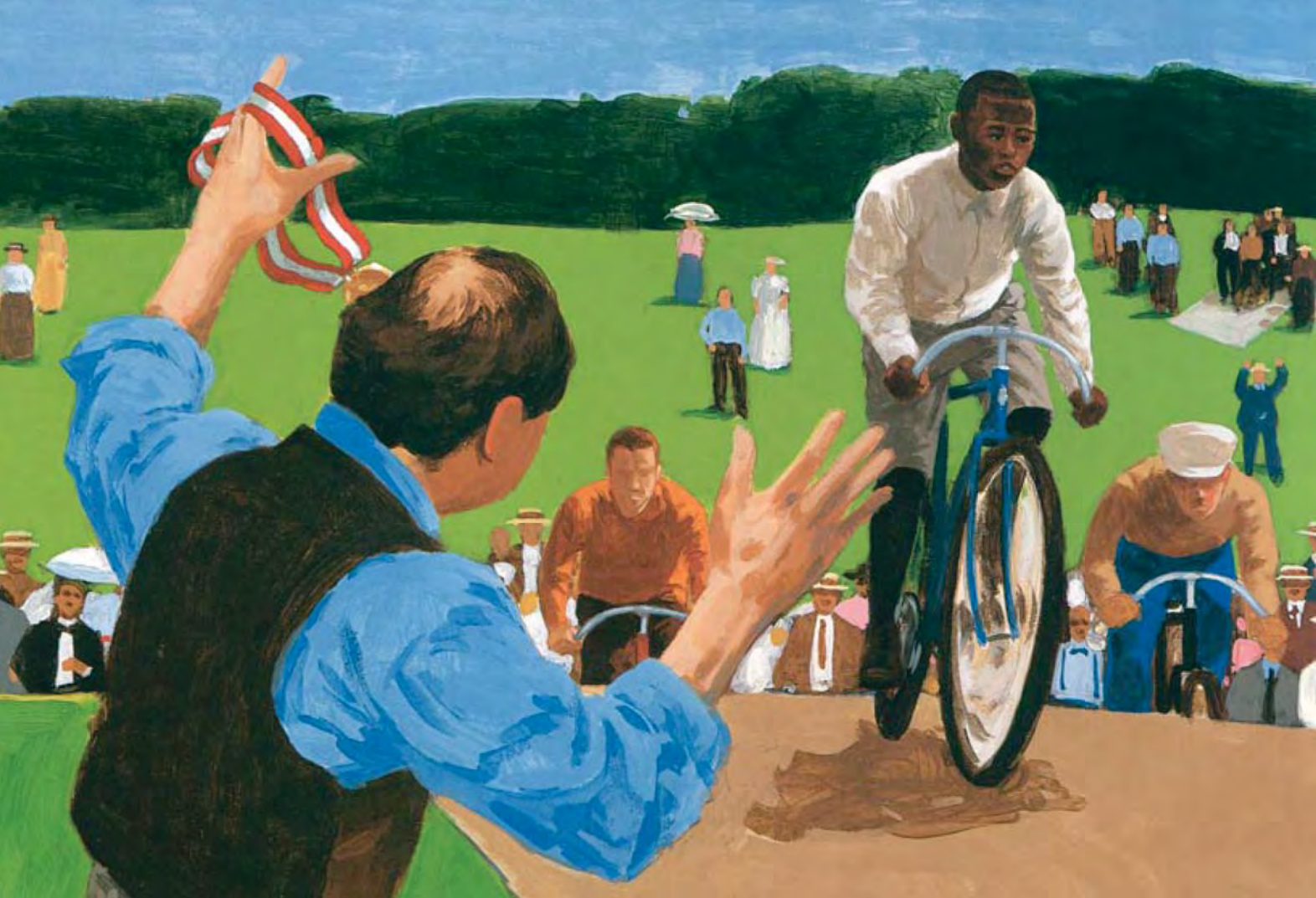
Then they’d filter into the store to request private lessons and try out the bicycles that could make that little major do his tricks.

Hay and Willits Bicycle Shop had finally made a name for itself, and the owners had the kid everyone now called Major Taylor to thank for it.

The annual ten-mile road race, sponsored by Hay and Willits, was one of the biggest sporting events in Indianapolis. Each year an elaborate gold medal for the winner was displayed in their window, on view for all. Marshall liked to put down his cleaning rags and stop to admire it. He’d adjust it, polish it, and hold it up to the light to watch it sparkle. Once, he even tried it on, smiling at his own reflection in the window.

“Major Taylor, Champion Cyclist,” he whispered to himself.





Early on the morning of the race, Marshall took his place among hundreds of **spectators**. He'd never seen a bicycle race up close and he didn't want to miss a single detail.

When Mr. Hay spotted Marshall, he waved to him. "Come on over here, young man; you must start in this race," he insisted.

"I don't think I can do it," Marshall protested.

"Why, it's no different than riding with your friends," he encouraged. "Look, just start up the road and come back when you're tired. The crowd will love it."

*Bang!* The starting pistol sounded, and Marshall was off, pedaling hard and fast, hoping only to keep pace with the others.

"Just till I get tired . . . just till I get tired . . .," he kept repeating, his legs pumping as fast as his heart. Gradually the rhythmic creaks of the other bicycles faded and all he could hear was his own panting. Time fell away as he struggled to maintain speed, and the wind whipped his face. Out of nowhere Mr. Hay appeared, shouting and dangling the gold medal.



“You’re a mile ahead! Keep going!”

Now he thought he could make out a swell of spectators gathered at the finish. Pushing, pushing with everything he had, his legs cramped with exhaustion, he burst through the winning tape . . . and then collapsed.

When he came to, sore, stiff, and exhausted, the crowd’s cheers were ringing in his ears.

At thirteen years old, Marshall Taylor had won his first race.

Back at the shop, Marshall’s dreams now stretched far beyond the walls of Hay and Willits. More than anything, he wanted to be a professional cyclist.



### Fact and Opinion

Identify one fact and one opinion about Marshall Taylor.



One by one, he committed to memory the names of racers who'd visited the shop—Arthur Zimmerman, Willie Windle of Massachusetts, and Louis “Birdie” Munger, who had recently opened a racing workshop in town.

As Marshall grew to know Munger, he began spending more and more time at his shop. He'd follow him to the track, pleading, “Tell me about the race when . . .”

Birdie was tickled by Marshall. In fact, the boy reminded him of a younger version of himself. “You've got talent, but you've got to keep working,” Birdie instructed after one of Marshall's many wins. Soon Marshall had been hired as his assistant, running errands and doing chores.

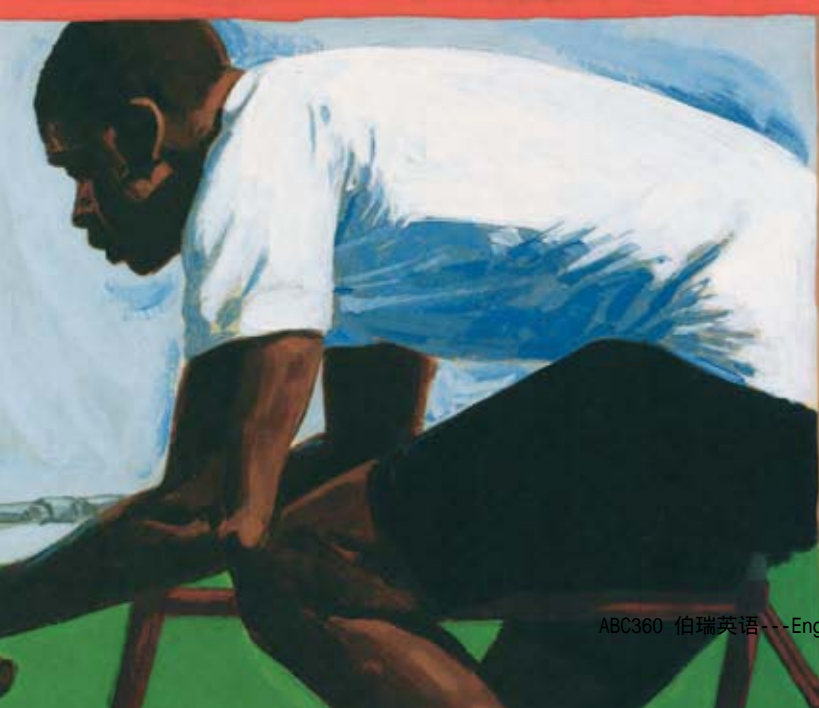
When Birdie decided to move to Worcester, Massachusetts, he invited Marshall along. After a fond farewell to his family, Marshall set off with Birdie to begin training. To anyone who'd listen, he would boast, “I am going to make Major Marshall Taylor the fastest bicycle rider in the world.”

Marshall's talent grew as fast as his popularity. It wasn't long before racing fans—although they may not have known the name Marshall Taylor—knew there was a young Negro causing quite a stir.

But by the time Marshall turned professional at age eighteen, challenges off the track began to trail him like a shadow. All of the large purses won in races all over the country couldn't buy him a meal in a restaurant or a room in a hotel.

Cities like Louisville, St. Louis, and even Indianapolis wouldn't permit a black man on their tracks—their entry forms read, “For White Riders Only.” Still that couldn't keep Marshall down. As the only Negro granted membership in the League of American Wheelmen, he was entitled to compete on any track he chose.

“You're never going to finish this race!” riders would holler above the noise of the crowd, or “This race is going to be your last,” they'd taunt. Working as a group, they'd box him out. Racing next to him, they'd poke and jab him. They agreed that if they defeated him, the winner would split the prize money with the others. But usually there was no prize money to split: For every trick they tried, Taylor had his own.



Marshall's style had always been to stay behind the pack. "Save it for the finish," he would recite to himself. Wearing his lucky number 13 armband, he'd keep pace, then ride full speed in the final yards. But when the competition turned crueler, he had to adjust his style. As soon as he'd spot a clearing in the pack, he'd cut through and make his way to the front. And that's where he stayed, all the way across the finish line.

The "Black Whirlwind," as he was called by the press, had his own set of rules: "Ride clean and ride fair." Asked by reporters how he managed to keep calm despite attacks by other cyclists, Marshall answered, "I simply ride away."

Munger's prediction years earlier had come true. Major Marshall Taylor was now the fastest bicycle rider in the world. After he won the 1899 World Championship title, beating out the Butler brothers, offers to compete abroad flooded his home. Promises of money and racing against the world's best cyclists were too much to resist.

In 1900 friends and family said good-bye as Marshall boarded the *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*, proud to be representing his country on his first European racing tour.

From the moment he arrived in France, fans swarmed around him, welcoming "le Nègre Volant," the Flying Negro. At every Parisian café, hotel, and track, they followed for a chance to shake his hand. The press reported his every move, and he was invited into the homes of aristocracy. Halfway around the world, Marshall Taylor was finally getting the recognition and respect he had worked for his whole life.

It was not on a starting line but rather at the Café Esperance that Marshall met the French champion, Edmond Jacquelin. "Welcome to Paris, Monsieur Taylor!" he greeted, smiling broadly. And with that, the two became instant friends.



### Fact and Opinion

Can the statement ". . . the two became instant friends" be verified? Explain your answer.

Jacquelin, winner of the 1900 World Championship, French Championship, and Grand Prix of Paris—the Triple Crown of racing—was a sharp contrast to the 1899 World Champion. Everyone wondered who would **prevail** in the next race—the quiet, gentlemanly Taylor or the explosive, larger-than-life Jacquelin?

Long before Taylor and Jacquelin arrived at Le Parc des Princes velodrome for their race, crowds had gathered, straining for a glimpse of the two rivals. Shivering against the cold, Taylor stood at the starting line dressed in layers to protect himself from the biting wind. Was this the Flying Negro from America the fans had heard so much about?

Meanwhile Jacquelin strode onto the track.

“Vive Taylor! Vive Jacquelin!” shouted the crowd as more fans huddled beyond the gates.

The race was on.

When it was over, roars of applause rang out to the beat of the French national anthem.

“Edmond Jacquelin, the victor in two straight heats,” came the announcement.

To schedule a rematch so close to the first race was unheard of, but the crowds demanded it.

“Who will be king?” asked *L’Auto Velo*. Would it be the 1899 or the 1900 World Champion, America or France, Taylor or Jacquelin?

As the men took their positions at the start of the first heat and strapped their feet to their pedals, the crowd held one **collective** breath.

*Bang!*

Jacquelin jumped comfortably into the lead. Marshall concentrated on erasing all thoughts of their first race from his mind. He leaned lower over his handlebars, and from high in the stands fans looked down on the shadow of a figure lying almost flat, inching closer and closer to his rival.



For one brief moment the two became one. Side-by-side and wheel-by-wheel they sped to the finish. It was only in the final lengths that one seemed to edge ahead.

In the blink of an eye, the heat was over. Taylor had come from behind to cross the finish line first. The crowd roared, yet the victor was still to be decided: The winner had to take the best of three heats.

In the second heat, again Marshall waited for just the right moment.

When he noticed a shift in Jacquelin's closely guarded position, he **maneuvered** his bike as adeptly as he had in front of Hay and Willits Bicycle Shop years ago. And once again all eyes were on little Major Taylor.

The wind, which Marshall had once so loved against his face, now pushed at his back, carrying him well ahead of his rival and first through the winning tape.

Two races and two straight heats brought American fans to their feet. While Jacquelin quietly rode off the track, Marshall tied the American flag to his waist. As he rode his victory lap, he heard the familiar tune of "The Star Spangled Banner," and all the world watched the colors red, white, and blue billow and fly in the wind.



# Take a Ride with Lesa Cline-Ransome and James E. Ransome

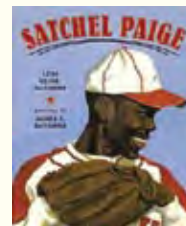


**Lesa Cline-Ransome** stood at the top of George Street, the hill in Worcester, Massachusetts, where Marshall Taylor trained. She visited the house he used to live in and read everything she could about his life. Her research helped this book feel real. Lesa wrote this book as a companion to *Satchel Paige*, her book about the renowned baseball player.



**James E. Ransome** started writing and illustrating books—about himself and his friends—in elementary school. He worked on this story with his wife, Lesa, and went with her to George Street. Seeing where Marshall Taylor trained, he says, “really brought him to life.”

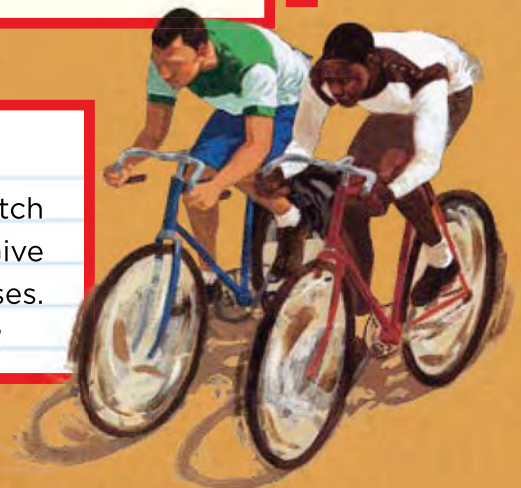
**Another book** by Lesa Cline-Ransome and James E. Ransome: *Satchel Paige*



Find out more about Lesa Cline-Ransome and James E. Ransome at [www.macmillanmh.com](http://www.macmillanmh.com)

## Author's Purpose

The Ransomes wanted this biographical sketch to be both entertaining and informative. Give examples of how they achieved both purposes. How might the selection also be persuasive?





# Comprehension Check



## Summarize

Use your Fact and Opinion Chart to help you summarize *Major Taylor*. What are the facts of Marshall Taylor’s life leading up to his victory in France?

Fact	Opinion



## Think and Compare

1. Reread the first paragraph on page 441. What facts does the author include? What opinions does the author state?  
**Make Inferences and Analyze: Fact and Opinion**

2. Do you think the author approves or disapproves of how Marshall Taylor was treated during his bicycle races? Use specific references from the text to support your answer. **Analyze**

3. Marshall Taylor was called the “Black Whirlwind” and “le Nègre Volant.” Think of your own nickname for Taylor based on his accomplishments using information from the text. **Synthesize**

4. Why do you think we should remember Marshall Taylor? What can we learn from his achievements? **Evaluate**

5. Pretend you are Marshall Taylor. Write a letter to the author of “Bike Ride, Anyone?” on pages 428–429 telling the author how learning to ride a bicycle changed your life. **Reading/Writing Across Texts**

