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**Living/FYI**   

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**On a mission to ride**

One man strives to show blacks the power of riding bicycles

By JAMES A. FUSSELL  
The Kansas City Star

Kenneth Walker couldn't have imagined a prouder moment.

As he gazed at the medal stand at the end of the 2005 Tour of Kansas City bike race in August, he saw something no one had seen in its 43-year history — a black rider standing on top. It was his 15-year-old son, Christian, who had just captured the 12- to 18-year-old junior division with a powerful burst of speed.

Few saw such a performance coming. Christian hadn't exactly struck fear into the hearts of flashier riders the year before, finishing 12th out of 25 in his division in the 11-mile race.

And why would he? The others that year rode \$1,500 racing bikes. He rode a 1980s model his dad bought for 10 bucks at the swap-n-shop. They sported \$150 cycling shoes made to maximize grip on the pedals. He wore his brother's 4-year-old track cleats.

None of that mattered. The race was about heart and desire, and in 2005 that belonged to Christian — and his dad.

Christian knew how important his father had been to his victory. Without him Christian wouldn't even have been in the race — or on a bike for that matter.



Leib Dodell (left) is a member of the Major Taylor Flaming Sprockets urban bike club, founded by Kenneth Walker. Dodell, president and CEO of Media Professional Insurance in Kansas City, has arranged for his company to sponsor Walker's efforts.

“I’d be sitting at home watching TV or being lazy,” he said.



For years Walker, of Kansas City, had been a sort of cycling Yoda for Christian, urging him to practice, believe in himself and find the force inside. He provided similar inspiration to his older son, Thomas, 16, who won a cycling race in Sedalia, Mo., weeks later.

Now Walker, a 44-year-old who works with young people at the Whatsoever Community Center at 12th and Ewing in Kansas City, dreams of inspiring countless other riders —especially blacks in the urban core who may never have been exposed to serious cycling. To that end he started an urban bicycle riding club in March that his sons named the Major Taylor Flaming Sprockets, intentionally misspelling the word “sprockets” for fun. (See story, Page F-5).

Walker (left) and Mark Thomas of Merriam enjoy a weekly Saturday ride down the Paseo.

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- African-American

Through his single-minded passion —and relationships he has made with other riders —he has received more than \$10,000 in donated bikes, helmets and cycling gear to encourage new riders.

Why bicycles?

“No. 1, there’s the health benefits,” he said. It can help you look better, feel better, develop a routine, gain self-esteem. I mean I feel good about myself, and I’m doing things now that I would never dream that I could ever do.”

But can one man with a bike and a dream really make a difference?

Christi Lynne, co-owner of Acme Bicycle Co., an urban bike shop in downtown Kansas City where the bike club meets, believes he can.

“One person or a small group of dedicated people are all that’s ever made a difference,” she said.

Riding with the pack

Every Saturday morning at 11:30, between one and two dozen riders in the Major Taylor bike group gather in front of Acme Bicycle at 412 E. 18th St. They ride six miles to Cliff Drive, then back —12 miles round trip.

“I’ve lived in KC my entire life, and for more than half of it I’ve been riding a bicycle,” Walker said. “And I can’t recollect a time when I have ever seen a group of African-Americans riding a bicycle together in my city. When we ride 10 or 12 strong, it’s absolutely amazing. We’ve actually seen accidents happen at least three times because (drivers) were watching us instead of watching the road.

“When we ride through neighborhoods, they can’t believe it. They go into their houses, ‘look at this, look at this.’ Kids run out. ‘Are you racing?’ they say. That’s self-esteem for us. We’re doing something that hasn’t been done in Kansas City before. We’re pioneers. And it’s fun, man. Especially with the youth. You can see the changes in them.”

Besides the fun and the healthy exercise, Walker said, cycling presents an opportunity for black kids not found in many other sports.

“It’s not congested,” he said. “Every black kid in Kansas City wants to play basketball. Every black kid wants to play football. What are the chances they are going to move on or get noticed? Very small. My boys have been racing in the five-state area for the last summer, and we stick out like a sore thumb ... and we have a chance to do great things.”

That’s why they ride, Saturdays, without fail. Young and old. Some are veterans. Others have virtually no experience.

On a mission

That’s fine with Walker. He didn’t start riding until he was 26 and then only out of necessity. Needing to go eight miles to his job in North Kansas City as a paint stirrer at Cook Paints, but with little money to buy a car, he hopped on a bike.

At first it was purely practical —free pedal-powered transportation. But as the miles rolled by, something happened. He began to like his bike. It not only made him strong and fit, but it also made him proud of his aerobic accomplishments.

As his abilities grew he began to ride on his own time, at night and on the weekends. Last year, for the first time, he began riding with a group of cyclists from Brookside who shared his two-wheeled passion. He loved riding in the group, and the people he met were wonderful. But one glaring fact always bothered him. Out of 70 cyclists in his group, he was the only black rider.

Why weren’t there more people who looked like him, he wondered?

He didn’t know. He still doesn’t.

For years, as Walker rode past non-bike riders, he thought how different it would be if they knew about the power and the beauty of cycling —and how sad it was that no one had ever taken the time to show them.

And then it occurred to him. Maybe he could show them.

After all, he had introduced Christian and Thomas to cycling, and trained them. Why not others?

“Ever since I asked those questions of myself and went out and started to make a difference, things have changed,” he said. “Now I am going to do whatever I can do to get more black folks on bicycles.”

He has already seen success.

There are his sons, of course, who now race for a sponsored cycling team out of Lawrence called Velotek. They say they plan to continue their competitive cycling as they get older.

Then there’s Angela Green, a charter member of the Major Taylor Flaming Sprockets who calls Walker a friend and cycling mentor and who develops 4-H programs for the University of Missouri Extension department. Walker not only inspired Green to start riding, but he also has helped her with bike-riding programs she started at Central, Southeast and Nowlin middle schools in the Kansas City School District.

“Kenneth was excited about my doing this,” she said. “He came over the next day and gave me so much more information about bicycling ... I didn’t know about group riding or racing.”

And finally, there’s the Broadway Miracle, which might be Walker’s biggest success of all.

Benefactor

It happened in June at 35th and Broadway. Walker and his sons were out on a ride when they passed a rider going the other way who caught their eye. He smiled and waved.

Walker could have ridden on. After all, not many serious cyclists would interrupt their ride to stop and talk to a stranger. But there was something about this man, Walker thought, something that told him to stop.

The man introduced himself as traffic roared by on the busy roadway.

“Leib Dodell,” he said, pronouncing his first name to rhyme with babe. “Just moved here from San Francisco, and I was just wondering if you know any good roads to ride around here?”

As a matter of fact, Walker did. He invited Dodell to come ride with the Major Taylor group the next Saturday.

When Saturday came, so did Dodell. Over the next month he became a regular. Sometimes, even when Walker couldn't make it, there was Dodell, helping to organize the ride.

One day Dodell told Walker some people at his work were interested in knowing more about the new cycling group. He asked if he'd come talk to them.

Sure, Walker thought. The more people who know about the bike club the better. When the time came he rode his bike to Dodell's workplace, Media Professional Insurance, which occupied the eighth floor of a downtown high-rise.

As Walker looked at the gleaming wood and artsy appointments, his bike shoes clacked loudly across the highly polished tile floor.

“Swanky,” he thought. Suddenly he felt a little underdressed in his bike gear.

Dodell greeted him and began to introduce him to his co-workers. He had his sleeves rolled up and looked very different from the man on the bike, more pencil pusher than pedal pusher.

“Let's duck into this room, and we can sit down and talk,” he said.

And Walker will never forget what happened next.

“We go into this room, man, and there is this beautiful, beautiful, corner office overlooking the city. So we sit down and start talking. And I notice that on the table he had a card holder. So I just picked one up, and it said “Leib Dodell, President and CEO.” He never told me, man. That's where I actually found out who he was. It just blew my mind.”

The meeting went so well Dodell asked Walker to come back a week later with some of his young riders to make a formal presentation to the company's diversity committee.

He brought six of them.

“And get this,” he said. “They came to pick us up. They chauffeured us to their office and took us home. Incredible!”

After Walker's 20-minute Power-Point presentation, Dodell said the company would like to sponsor the fledgling group.

“Kenneth is a very charismatic guy,” Dodell said. “Our folks were bowled over by his personality, his charm and his earnestness about this. Now we're just trying to evaluate what we can do to support his cause.”

Walker was stunned by the turn of events —and even more his new friend, Leib Dodell.

“What kind of impression do you think that left on my kids?” he said. “They said, ‘Man that's pretty cool.’ He wasn't the type to flaunt his affluency around.”

Now, though specific dollars haven't been discussed, his little cycling group has a big-time partner.

"Verbally, Media Professional has said to me and said to the boys that we are going to support you. I couldn't tell you what that support is going to be. But right now, to me, it's enough for somebody to say they believe in us and what we are doing."

But Dodell wasn't done. He arranged for lawyers at Shook Hardy & Bacon to help the group set up a tax-exempt status so it could legally accept donations.

"The idea of bringing this sport to urban kids who might not otherwise have the opportunity or the access is a wonderful goal and one that I would like to be a part of," Dodell said. "I really think this is just the beginning. I think there is a lot that Kenneth can do, and I think it will be very beneficial to our community."

Now when Walker looks to the future he sees nothing but blue skies, dry road and a world full of possibilities.

"Monetarily my pockets aren't very full," he said. "But I am the richest poor guy there is. Because this sport has enriched my life."

He can only hope now it will now enrich many others.

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### Salute to 'Major' Taylor

□ More than a hundred years ago, in a sport historically dominated by whites, the fastest bicycle racer in the world was black.

□ When it came to raw speed, Marshall "Major" Taylor simply had no peer. In 1898, when bicycle races were so popular they filled Madison Square Garden, Taylor held seven world cycling records, and was the biggest draw the sport had ever seen. The Worcester, Mass., native even raced overseas where he beat all the European champions and was hailed as a hero in France.

□ Being a champion did not come easily for the man dubbed the "Worcester Whirlwind" and the "Colored Cyclone." Taylor faced racism off the track and violence on it. In 1897 he lost a chance at a national points championship when Southern race promoters denied him entrance into pivotal races. In one race in which he did ride a white competitor pulled him from his bike and choked him into unconsciousness.

□ Taylor never stopped racing. Or winning. If competitors were outraged, fans were appreciative. His bicycle career made him one of the most popular, recognized —and wealthiest —blacks in the country. In 1910, at age 32, Taylor retired from competitive racing, having already amassed a small fortune. Later in life illness and a series of business reversals left him destitute. In 1932 he died in Chicago at age 53 and was buried in a pauper's grave.

□ Through it all he maintained a quiet dignity.

□ "Life," he once wrote, "is too short to hold bitterness in your heart."

□ In the 1950s, with money from Schwinn Bicycle Co. owner Frank Schwinn, former pro bike racers had Taylor's remains exhumed and reburied in the more prominent Mount Glenwood Memorial Gardens in Glenwood, Illinois.

□ A plaque at his grave reads:

□ "World's champion bicycle racer who came up the hard way without hatred in his heart, an honest, courageous and God-fearing, clean-living, gentlemanly athlete ..Gone, but not forgotten."

SOURCES: The Major Taylor Association and Major Taylor: The Extraordinary Career of a Champion Bicycle Racer by Andrew Ritchie

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