

Greater expectations

Pursuing potential is frightening, but achieving adequacy is terrifying



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As graduation approaches and my career as a professional student draws to a close, I find that I have more questions now than when my higher education began.

Perhaps this is only natural, as that motherly conscience in my head assuages. But I can't ignore the suspicion that would seem to refute the very formula I'd hoped would hold all the answers when I was a fresh-

man.

After five tedious years and several thousand dollars in student loans, college seems to have been little more than a glorified process of elimination.

Although college may have fallen somewhat short of the "greatest years of my life" — at least, I hope it has — I can't chalk the experience up as a waste of time, either. The friends I've made and the wisdom I've gained outside the classroom have made these years unforgettable.

But my passions remain as elusive as ever, challenges have been few and far between, and inspiration has proved a rarity over the past few years.

I'm pretty sure I'm not alone in coming to this conclusion. Perhaps this is a dilemma peculiar to liberal arts majors — as my grandfather would likely assert — but, knowing a few engineering and math majors, I have a feeling it's common to more analytical minds, as well.

Who's to blame for my quan-

quandary? Complaining about academic rigor and faculty quality make for convenient catharsis, but I can't blame my beloved third-tier alma mater.

Indeed, if college has been good for anything, its adequacy has alerted me to my own inadequacies.

Many people are convinced that if they are good at something, it must follow that they enjoy it and make a living at it. I have a feeling that path leads to a cubicle full of disappointment for me.

College has made me well aware of several vocations that I could serve acceptably — perhaps even exceptionally.

But I have yet to discover that elusive calling that will serve me.

As I walk across the Bob Devaney Sports Center stage at next month's commencement and am bequeathed the piece of paper that guarantees my equal footing in the job market, I'll have to finally address that nagging question that's been put to me ad nauseam by

friends and relatives:

What now?

I'm starting to suspect that my process of elimination has only begun. It will not find a satisfactory conclusion when I shake my dean's hand and stumble into full-time employment. Rather, the process will be a lifelong pursuit (or liveslong, if you're into that sort of thing).

As I'm coming dangerously close to writing about the meaning of life here — far be it from opinion columnists to write about something of which they know nothing about — I'll back off a bit.

Accepting adequacy at the cost of potential is a sacrifice that countless people have accepted as simply being realistic. Indeed, "paying the rent" may be the single most commonly accepted meaning of life the world over.

On the other hand, ignoring adequacy for the pursuit of potential is a much more frightening prospect because true potential is never attainable. Like that proverbial carrot on a

string, it will always be just out of reach.

This sort of idealism does not seem to allow for much satisfaction — and herein lies the reason why the pursuit of potential is the frightening road less traveled.

At this point, however, I find the prospect of taking stock of my life 20 years from now — when I'm balancing a hectic schedule, an unfulfilling job and an often neglected family — downright terrifying. There may be a bit more traffic on this road, but I suspect the destination.

So instead I'll spend those 20 years, and likely the next 20, devoting my passion to those pursuits that have eluded my adequacy, and my process of elimination will inevitably continue.

And the next time someone confronts me with that question that strikes fear in the hearts of so many college graduates — "What are you going to do after graduation?" — I'll know what to say:

Everything.

A lesson learned in time

Role model athlete wrongly forgotten simply because of race



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I read a book last week.

Actually, I read three. Something about trying to bust out a credit's worth of independent study credit in a week. Procrastination at its finest.

Of the three one, really stood out. It's the first book I've ever read for a class where I didn't think about skipping ahead a few chapters. In fact, this sounds really bad, it's probably the first book I've read cover-to-cover in a prompt manner since my last purchase of a "Far Side" book.

Told in the pages of the book in question was the life story of a man who was arguably one of the greatest American athletes of the century, perhaps ever.

His name was Marshall Taylor.

Name doesn't ring a bell, does it?

How about Major Taylor, the name he competed under?

Still doesn't ring a bell, does it?

Well, shoot, it's time to learn something.

From 1895 to his retirement in 1910, "The Major" was one of the world's most dominant bicycle racers. He broke several world records many times over and was the American sprint champion of 1899 and 1900. A world championship in 1899 was the icing on the cake. From 1901-04, Taylor toured the world becoming an athlete of international fame.

During this time period, bicycle racing, both in America and abroad, was a sport that drew thousands of spectators every weekend. It was not uncommon to have 5,000 people squeeze into Madison Square Garden to watch racers zing around a tightly banked oval track. With the automobile not yet invented, these cyclists were the fastest humans on earth.

It should also be noted that Major Taylor was a black man.

Almost half a century before Jackie Robinson's debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Major Taylor had broken into a sport that to this day is close to 99 percent white and he didn't just participate, he dominated.

Born in 1878 on a dusty farm outside of Indianapolis, Marshall was the

youngest of eight children. His grandparents were freed slaves and his father had fought for the North in a black regiment during the Civil War.

Around 1887, his father took a job in the city as a stable master for a wealthy family. The family had one child, who was the exact same age as Major. It wasn't too long before he began to live with the Southards as a hired friend to their son Daniel. While "working" for the Southards, he received the finest education, was exposed to many things unavailable to someone of his background and, when Daniel got a bike, Major was given one also.

After a couple of years, the Southards moved to Chicago and Major moved back to the farm, bicycle in tow.

To help his family out, Major took on a paper route in Indianapolis. It was 11 miles each way, and this paper route was the foundation for the skill that would make him a champion a few years later. By age 13, he landed a job at a local bicycle store performing tricks and other stunts outside to draw customers into shop.

While working there, the shop sponsored a bicycle race in which he forced Major to participate. Literally kicking and screaming at the start, Major rode the race with tears of fear soaking his face. When he crossed the finish line the tears of fear were replaced by tears of joy. Major had beaten a field of racers twice his age by six seconds.

The race that was the catalyst for Major turning professional occurred in 1895 at age 16. It would also be his first confrontation with racial violence. It was a 75-mile race from Indianapolis to the town of Matthews. Halfway through, Major moved up to the front and was instantly berated with racial slurs and death threats.

Instead of quitting, he rode faster than ever. In fact, he was the lone finisher after the other 99 white competitors thought the pounding rain was too much to handle.

Not long after this victory, Major and his mentor, professional racer Birdie Munger, moved to Worcester, Mass., to escape the hostile climate that surrounded him in Indiana and nearby states.

Still, this didn't help much. The League of American Wheelmen, the governing body of racing, tried to structure its bylaws to exclude Major from competition. It worked to an extent — Major could still race in northern cities but was chased out of the South.

In the races in which he could compete, Major was literally racing for his

life. It was never eight men racing against each other, but seven white men trying to take out Major at over 30 miles per hour.

Instead of quitting, Major kept on keeping on, and avoided danger by out-riding everyone. The slew of victories that followed resulted in massive amounts of money and made Major one of the most prominent athletes in the world. Even though newspapers in his home country referred to him as a "darker," reports in Europe labeled Major a hero.

When he did go abroad, Major received the attention and praise he deserved in America but was never given because of his color.

He repeatedly went back to Europe and to Australia to race simply because he could do so without fearing for his life. When he won abroad, he'd ride a victory lap with an American flag, proud to be a representative of a country that hated him.

In 1932, the former champion of the world died penniless in Chicago after he lost his fortune in a series of failed business ventures. His accomplishments were all but forgotten with the rise of the automobile and the decline of bicycle racing.

Today in Europe, he is still a household name, but in America he's all but forgotten.

Why?

Racism.

As fascinating as it was learning about his triumphs, the greatest lesson to be learned from "Major Taylor" by Andrew Ritchie, which is available at the lovely Love Library, is that racism is the most ignorant idea ever.

As a person, Major was of the highest morals. He refused thousands of dollars offered for racing on Sundays, his time to honor God. He had a sip of champagne just once. He almost never indulged in anything harsher than water.

To the blacks in America, he was the best role model they could have asked for. And he probably wouldn't have died broke if he hadn't given so much of his money to the poor.

He was a better athlete, a better person and better educated than his American competitors, but was hated simply because his skin was a different color.

And that's just stupid.

