Jesse Owens, Taking a Stand Against Hitler

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Jesse Owens ruled the 1936 Olympics by winning his events and disproving Hitler's Aryan race theory. At that time, Jesse was the most famous person in the entire world – an amazing feat considering Jesse was born into a very poor family of sharecroppers, who had no chance to live freely in the world because of their color. Having almost died many times as a child, Jesse didn't think he'd even live to see his teens. Moving north, the Owens family was able to restart their lives. "One chance is all you need," stated Owens. Jesse soon started to become recognized for his running and jumping talents in the sport of track and field, but scandalous hardships were endured. Jesse managed to win four gold medals, break or equal nine Olympic records, and also set three world records at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin -- a path that would change the world's view of African-American people forever.

During the early 1900's, black people who lived in the South were discriminated against. There was no way for them to live the American dream because of discrimination. Slavery had been abolished, but segregation and Jim Crow laws had taken many of their rights away, making it difficult to support a family. Black people had to give white people the right away at all intersections, couldn't shake a white man's hand, or show affection towards anyone in public.

James Cleveland (JC) was the grandson of a slave and the son of a sharecropper. The Owens family had six children who lived past childhood. JC was the youngest, born on September 12th, 1913. Living in the town of Oakville, Alabama, the Owens family was governed

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by Jim Crow laws. John Clannon was the Owen's family landlord, boss, and supplier. Even though they worked the largest plot all day, the money made wasn't even enough to keep the shack they were renting.\(^4\) The Owen's family, amid racial slurs and discrimination, knew it was time to leave the South.

In 1922, while JC was only 9 nine years old, the Owen's family decided to move North. In a matter of hours after the decision, they were gone. Without any sense of direction, they made their way to Cleveland, Ohio, where they were able to find work, housing, better clothing, and better meals. They knew a better life was on the horizon.\(^5\)

On JC's first day of school his name was forever changed to Jesse after his teacher heard "Jesse" instead of JC during attendance.\(^6\) Jesse loved school. Jesse's fifth grade gym teacher, Charles Riley, proposed an idea for Jesse to run track in high school. Charles said he saw something inside of Jesse while he was running around in gym class. Jesse was excited at the opportunity and prepared and trained with Riley on a daily basis before school.\(^7\)

Jesse lost his first race, a 400 meter race, because he kept looking at the location of the other racers. Riley, a very knowledgeable coach, took Jesse to horse races and showed him how the horses don't look at any other horses during their race. Jesse started winning races using this technique and went on to an undefeated high school track career. Scholarships came

\(^5\) Owens, Jesse - Blackthink
raining down on him, some including a car, food, and housing. Riley had a different point of view; he told Jesse to not take a single scholarship and work to pay for college on his own.⁸

Jesse was accepted at Ohio State University and ended up not taking a scholarship. He only asked that if a job opened up on campus, it be given to his father. He was the first person in his family to pass high school. Jesse had to keep up three different jobs to pay for college tuition.⁹ Jesse quickly became a star at the collegiate level, but it was hard for him to withstand the racism. The black athletes had to ride in old cars and couldn't eat at most restaurants with the team.¹⁰ At the beginning of Jesse's second term of college, he was named to the 1933 All-America Track and Field Team by the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU).¹¹ Jesse won most of his college races and performed well.

The 1935 Big Ten Conference Championships was going to be the highlight of Jesse's career. Five days before his race he became injured. The day of the race, he didn't know if he would be able to compete. But Jesse did race and broke 4 world records, Jesse broke the world record in the 100 yard dash with a time of 9.3 seconds. He set another world record at the broad jump with a distance of 26 feet 8 ¼ inches. He set yet another world record at the 220 yard dash with a time of 20.3 seconds. Finally, he also set the 220-yard hurdles world record by over 0.4 seconds with a time of 22.6 seconds.¹² Everybody in the entire stadium went wild. They had just witnessed one of the greatest performances in track and field history. Jesse was

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⁸ Owens, Jesse — Jesse, The Man That Outran Hitler
¹⁰ Owens, Jesse - Blackthink
¹¹ NBC Sports - More Than Gold: A Jesse Owens Documentary
becoming a very famous man throughout the world and people looked at him as a representative for the black community. Anything he did changed how people viewed black people.

After his great performance at the 1935 Big Ten Conference Championships, Jesse traveled all over the United States to compete in track events. Jesse went home and married his girlfriend Ruth. After the wedding, Jesse was promoted to be the Captain of the Ohio State Track Team. 13 He then focused on training for the Olympics. Many people tried to influence Jesse to boycott the Olympics. 14 There were rumors going around that Hitler was segregating Jewish people. Jesse knew that this could be a chance to take a stand.

In July 1936, Jesse qualified for the Olympics in the 100-meter dash, 200-meter dash, and broad jump. 17 other black athletes represented Team USA by qualifying at the Olympic Trials. A week later, Team USA left port en route to Berlin, Germany. 15

Germany had taken down all anti-Semitism propaganda for the Olympics. This gave some athletes and spectators a different view on Germany compared to the information given to them before arriving. Germany looked as if there were no biases anywhere.

Jesse was a huge cynosure as soon as he stepped foot off the boat. People were constantly taking pictures of him and asking for autographs. Before he even started to train, two of out three pairs of his shoes were stolen by fans. 16 He could barely even fall asleep

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13 Owens, Jesse – Jesse, The Man Who Outran Hitler
15 McDougall, ChroÌs - Trailblazing Sprinter
16 Owens, Jesse – Jesse, The Man Who Outran Hitler
because of the people crowding his windows. Throughout all of the attention, he stayed very calm and positive.

   Jesse was not able to go to the Olympic opening ceremony because he had to prepare for his race the next day, but as a reporter said after the opening ceremonies, "A demonstration of Nazi organizing efficiency, a personal tribute to Adolf Hitler and pageant such as the modern world seldom has witnessed." The next day, Hitler and the entire Nazi regime would be proven wrong.

   Jesse was very relaxed before the 100-meter preliminaries while everyone else was very tense. He won this race easily and tied his own world-record of 10.3 seconds. Jesse's coach had braced him for a forbidding silence, but the opposite happened. The crowd roared with applause. Hitler despised Jesse winning because it disproved his theory that all white people were the best race. Hitler angrily stormed out of the stadium when Jesse won because Jesse was black and Hitler would never shake a black mans hand, which made everyone realize he was a bad person.

   The next day in the quarter finals, Jesse won running a 10.2 second, 100-meter race. This would've been a new world record but a strong wind pushed Jesse back to 10.3 seconds. He also won the semi-finals. Jesse was very positive going into the finals and won the gold medal in a time of 10.3 seconds, again tying the world record. The stadium shook as everyone

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17 Nelson, Stanley- Jesse Owens
18 Owens, Jesse - Blackthink
cheered for Jesse. Owens said not long after winning, "This is the happiest day of my life. I guess it’s the happiest I will ever have."\(^{20}\)

Jesse ran the preliminaries of the 200-meter race in a time of 21.1 seconds, tying the current world record. He won the finals in a time of 20.7 seconds giving him the gold medal and a new world record. The crowd worshipped Owens. Again, Hitler did not shake his hand or acknowledge him.\(^{21}\)

During the preliminaries of the broad jump, Jesse was jumping sloppily and was in danger of elimination. His rival, Luz Long, told him to place a towel one foot before the jump line. Jesse didn’t know what to do because Luz was one of Hitler’s best athletes, but he followed through and cleared the qualifying distance easily. Jesse and Luz both got to the finals and were the last two left. They kept beating each others’ jumps until Jesse jumped a distance of 26’ 5 ¼”, giving him the Olympic record. Luz could not reach that distance and Jesse was crowned gold once again. Luz congratulated Jesse by saying, "You did it! I know you did it!" Luz started screaming Jesse’s name and lifted up Jesse’s arm. The whole stadium started chanting "Jazze Owens, Jazze Owens!"\(^{22}\) Over and over again they repeated his name. Hitler was the only one not cheering. Instead he was glaring down on Jesse with deep hatred. Later, Jesse claimed Luz was his sacred messenger from God, even though Luz didn't believe in God. They formed an

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\(^{20}\) Owens, Jesse – Jesse, The Man Who Outran Hitler
\(^{22}\) Owens, Jesse – Jesse, The Man Who Outran Hitler
amazing relationship and were together until Jesse left Berlin. Jesse and Luz became close friends and wrote to each other until Luz died in World War II in 1942.

The United States 400-Meter relay team was made up of Draper, Wykoff, Glickman, and Stoller. Glickman and Stoller were the only Jewish members on the entire U.S. Olympic team. Quickly before the race, Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalf were switched into the relay instead of Glickman and Stoller. The track coaches claimed it was to make sure that they would beat the German relay team, but rumors went around saying that Hitler demanded they be kicked out. Owens felt terrible but had no choice but to listen to the coaches. The U.S. relay team ended up winning the gold medal and setting a world record of 39.8 seconds, beating all of the other teams by over fifty meters.

During and after Jesse's events, many racial slurs were said. Jesse avoided all of the racial comments and focused on his races. German newspapers claimed that black people weren't true Americans and shouldn't be running for them. Hitler wrote in his journal, "White humanity should be ashamed of theirs-selves, the Olympics are a scandal with black people winning." This made many Europeans, Americans, and black people call Jesse an inspiration for disproving Hitler's theory and having everyone on his side. Jesse won four gold medals at the Olympics and was the first American to ever do it. He left the Olympic games in Berlin as a role model for the entire world. Many Jewish people also looked up to Jesse as the person who

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26 Nelson, Stanley – Jesse Owens
stood up for their entire community, as Jesse would learn many years later.\textsuperscript{27} There wasn't a single person in the entire world who didn't know who he was.

Owens was a global star after finishing the Olympics. The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) forced him to go on a tour across Europe so they could make money, and Jesse had no choice but to go because otherwise the AAU could suspend him from events.\textsuperscript{28} Jesse left early and went back to America.

The AAU was furious and suspended Jesse indefinitely from amateur track meets. Owens was promised many huge cash offers for easy jobs as soon as he made it back. People rushed at him everywhere, taking pictures and asking for autographs. Also, Jesse joined several Olympic athletes for a parade in New York when getting back from the Olympics. Jesse was the star and people from all over the United States came to see him. Someone even threw him a paper bag containing $5000.

Jesse was the happiest he had ever been in his entire life, but he was becoming a little too cocky. Jesse spent lots of money on things he didn't need to buy. The offers that had promised him lots of money before seemed to disappear. The people who had promised him money didn't have any money to give him so he left New York with not a single job. To make matters worse, Jesse had only $40.16 left of the $5000 he had from the paper bag.\textsuperscript{29} He left for Cleveland as soon as he could.

\textsuperscript{27} Owens, Jesse – Jesse, The Man Who Outran Hitler
\textsuperscript{28} McDougall, ChroÌs - Jesse Owens, Trailblazing Sprinter
\textsuperscript{29}Owens, Jesse – Jesse, The Man Who Outran Hitler
Jesse scrounged for ways to support his family. He became a playground instructor and was paid $28 a week. He started racing horses which paid fairly good money but quit because of all the shame it put on him. He started the Jesse Owens Dry Cleaning business with two other men. Jesse was paid large amounts of money by the two men so he would think the company was doing well, but the company was actually getting more and more in debt. The two men disappeared and left Jesse with $114,000 in debt. Jesse would've never got a loan but the banker was Jewish and told Jesse that he stood up for their entire race. 30

President Roosevelt put Jesse in charge of supervising the hiring of people for the wartime effort in the Ford Motor Plant in Detroit, which paid Jesse enough to pay off his debt. Close to the end of the war, both of his parents died. He moved to Chicago after the war ended and took job offer after job offer. He traveled all over the world coaching athletes and speaking. He had many different jobs, most of them aimed at helping children. Owens was always helping children.

In 1974, Jesse was inducted into the USA Track and Field Hall of Fame and in 1976 was given the Medal of Freedom by President General Ford. In 1979, he was diagnosed with lung cancer caused by his smoking habit in his later years. Owens died on March 31, 1980 at the age of 66. 31

Jesse changed the entire world's view on black people throughout his entire lifetime. People of all colors looked up to him as a role model. People treated black people differently

30NBC Sports - More Than Gold: A Jesse Owens Documentary
because Jesse showed them how everybody is the same. Jesse also changed the lives of many children in his later years when he worked in facilities in rougher neighborhoods. When he disproved Hitler's theory, almost everybody praised him. It was one of the greatest events that changed how people treated black people. Jesse Owens managed to win four gold medals, break or equal nine Olympic records, and also set three world records at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin -- a path that would change the world's view of African-American people forever.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:


~ This brief article written from the Baltimore News Post acknowledges Jesse's times and winnings at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin as well as other athletes.


~ This article the New York Times printed explains every little detail of the 1936 Berlin Olympics opening ceremony. It provided useful information that showed how much Hitler was showcased.


~ I searched for quotes from Jesse Owens and many came up on this website. It provided reliable information and quotes from Jesse himself.


~ This newspaper article from The Cleveland Press contained all information from day four of the Olympics and contained information about Jesse winning gold in the broad jump. It had a little bias because it was from Jesse's home state.


~ This clip from the Olympics shows footage of many different sports and events from the 1936 Olympics as well as footage of Hitler.


~ This source from the New York Times holds information about Jesse's 200-meter race. It also had information from day three and day four of the Olympics.


~ This source showed me how Germany and Hitler view Jesse Owens. It was a very useful source as it helped me see both sides. I translated it with the German teacher at my school, Lori Williams. It was hard for even her to understand because it was written in old fashioned German.


~ This source gave me lots of information from Jesse's 100-meter race and how everyone in the final placed. This source was a little bias as it was from Jesse's country.

~Paul Gallico and the San Francisco Chronicle wrote this article which contained information about the first day of the track events at the Olympic games and gave information about Jesse's quarter-final and semi-final races.


~This photo of Jesse Owens and Luz Long at the Olympics gave me information on how of a close relationship they formed during their time together. It was a primary photo taken during the Olympics.


~PBS created a documentary of Jesse's entire life and it gave me information from his childhood, the Olympics, and his elderly times. It gave me endless information and showed many videos and pictures taken of Jesse during his life. (Contained mostly primary but also some secondary)


~The Olympic Committee put together a video with videos of all of Jesse's events from the 1936 Olympics. This video contains primary video showing Hitler and Jesse in the 1936 Olympics. It showed me exactly what Jesse looked like as he was in the Olympics.


~From this article I got information about Jesse's 100-meter and 200-meter races and other events during those days in the Olympics. This article contains the same information as many of the other newspaper articles.


~Jesse stared in this television show and told the story of his entire life. Many special figures in Jesse's life were came to the show too. It was a very helpful source because it showed Jesse himself and how much of a relationship he had with people in his life.


~The New York Times printed a fairly large obituary that gave a brief history of Jesse's entire life and his cause of death. It talked about everything from his birth to his death, but just very briefly.

Luz Long wrote a letter to Jesse four days before he died in World War II. Luz asked Jesse to tell his son about him and then signed the page. This source helped me realize how close they Luz and Jesse were and how much they trusted each other.


This source shows results, times and places from the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin. This source is very reliable, useful, and shows exact information.


Jesse wrote about all of the hardships he faced because of the color of the skin in this book. He shared many experiences he had to endure and how he fought through it. This source gave me information to write how he influenced the world.


Jesse wrote this autobiography to show the world his life story. He wrote every detail from the time he was born until his time of living at 64 years of age when he wrote the book. This book gave me information throughout my whole paper and gave me Jesse's thoughts on all the events that he went through.


This source gave me information on Jesse's races from the 1936 Berlin Olympics.


This brief interview with Jesse at the Olympic games in Berlin gave information on Jesse's life in the Olympic Village. This interview was reliable but hard to understand as the technology in 1936 was not nearly as nice as todays.


This newspaper article gave me information on Jesse's quarter-final and how the record was tossed out. It helped me a lot and gave reliable information.


This letter showed me how much the people of the United States didn't want Jesse to go to the Olympic games. In this letter, the man writing deeply did not want Jesse to go to the Olympics.
Secondary Sources:


~This source contains a brief run-through of Jesse's life. It contained a lot of information about his Olympic events.


~From this source I found a lot of information from the Olympics. This source gave me a lot of reliable information.


~This source showed me many different ways that Jesse impacted the nation and changed peoples point of view on black people. It was a very helpful source.


~This source holds some information involving Jesse's life as a kid and about the Olympics but mostly contains information about the many awards Jesse was given after the Olympics and his visits with the presidents.


~In this book I found very informative and reliable information on the entire lifetime of Jesse. I found a lot of information of Jesse's college and Olympic career in this book but it also contained very specific information about Jesse’s elderly years.


~This documentary contains a lot of valuable information involving Jesse's entire life. It specialized on Jesse's athletic accomplishments in College and in the Olympics. This video was very informative.


~From this website I received a list of all the laws the Owen’s family and black people had to deal with while living in the south.


~This book contained a lot of information involving the Olympics and the sport of track & field. It contained a lot of information that the primary sources contain also.

~From this website I found many different people, things, and ways that Jesse changed the world. It was a fairly useful source but I have better sources.