The Indomitable Olympian: Jesse Owens

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1,932 words
"Perhaps no athlete better symbolized

the human struggle against tyranny, poverty, and racial bigotry."

~ President Jimmy Carter, on the death of Jesse Owens

Introduction

Black people and Jews are not as good as people with white skin and blue eyes. It is very hard to believe, but that is what Hitler and the Nazis thought. Jesse Owens took a stand against racism and against people who thought he should not participate in the Olympics. African-American sprint champion Jesse Owens’ historic decision to represent the United States in the 1936 Berlin Olympics forced the world to face the perils of Hitler's Nazi regime and widespread racism in America.

The Beginning

Approximately 50-100 lynchings of blacks were occurring in the U.S. from 1889 into the 1920's, mostly in the southern states. Blacks were also met with racism in the North as they competed for jobs during the Depression. Race riots were not uncommon in major cities. Some race scientists asserted that genetics determined whether a person was poor or would be a criminal. They used this theory to validate the unequal treatment of African-Americans.


2 “The Story of Race Transcript.” understandingrace, © 2016 American Anthropological Association. All rights reserved.
On September 12, 1913 in Oakville, Alabama, James Cleveland Owens was born to sharecroppers Henry and Emma Owens and was a grandson of a slave. In the early 1920s, the Owens family was struggling on a sharecropper's income because they had to support ten children. They decided to move from Alabama to Cleveland, Ohio where Henry Owens was able to obtain improved employment. On his first day of school his teacher asked him his name and she thought he said “Jesse” instead of “J.C.”, and from then on he just went with the name Jesse.

The Next Step

While Jesse Owens attended East Technical High School he was dubbed "The Buckeye Bullet" and he won three track and field events in high school (see Figure 1) in the National Interscholastic Championships. In junior high school Jesse had met Ruth Solomon, who would eventually become his wife. What attracted Jesse to Ruth was her dignified demeanor and he treated her like a princess. Ruth's family was very poor, but Ruth seemed unaffected by her family's status. While both Jesse and Ruth's families assumed they would eventually marry, they were unhappily surprised when 16-year-old Ruth became pregnant.

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3 “Jesse Owens.” Biography.com, © 2017 Bio and the Bio logo are registered trademarks of A&E Television Networks, LLC.

4 “Growing Up.” library.osu.edu, Copyright © 2010, The Ohio State University Archives

5 Triumph, p.21

6 "Synopsis." Biography.com, © 2017 Bio and the Bio logo are registered trademarks of A&E Television Networks, LLC
Now let’s go back to Owens’ high school career. Jesse's high school track performances were so outstanding that several Big Ten universities recruited him. Several days after the birth of his daughter Gloria, Owens competed against select athletes from Europe who had just competed in the 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. Before a crowd of 50,000 people, Jesse Owens stunned the audience by sprinting to a victory in the 100-yard-dash on a curved track in only 9.6 seconds.\(^7\) Jesse chose The Ohio State University because they gave him the opportunity to train, compete and have a part-time job while attending classes.

In the fall of 1933, Owens began his career at OSU.\(^8\) When the nation was encountering segregation problems, Jesse Owens and other black athletes had to eat and stay at "black-only" establishments, and were not allowed to use the elevators.\(^9\) During the 1935 Big Ten Championship, while Jesse Owens was a sophomore at OSU, he tied the world record in the 100-yard dash, set a new world record in the long jump, 220-yard dash and the 220 low hurdles, all in less than an hour.\(^{10}\)

\(^7\)Triumph, p. 27-28

\(^8\)“Owens and The Ohio State University.” Ohio State Library, Copyright © 2010, The Ohio State University Archives.

\(^9\)“The Color Barrier.” United State History.

\(^{10}\)“About Jesse Owens.” jesseowens.com, © 2017 Jesse Owens Trust c/o Luminary Group LLC
Jesse Owens was fortunate to have Lawrence Snyder as his track coach while at The Ohio State University (see Figure 2). Coach Snyder had an impressive career, coaching his athletes to 14 world records, 52 All-American certificates and eight Olympic gold medals. Jesse was voted captain of his track team at OSU, the first Big Ten team captain to be African American. His personal triumphs as a world-class athlete and record holder were the prelude to a career devoted to helping others.

**Hitler’s Dream**

The Germans implemented state-of-the-art radio transmission equipment which reached people all around the world as never before. It also gave Hitler and his Nazi regime a platform for their propaganda. Hitler facilitated his political ambitions even through the architecture of the Olympic facility by using exclusively German materials for its construction and by erecting statues of famous Aryan athletes. He also instructed that the stone pylons be named after early Germanic tribes. Only three years later, Hitler would use that Olympic stadium for his famous address on "Lebensraum". He used the word to promote his desire for the Nazis to expand into other countries to provide "living space" for the expanding German race. It would drive Hitler's racial policies as well as his military conquests. On September 1st 1939, Hitler invaded Poland.

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11 “Larry Snyder.” *USA Track & Field*, © 2001-2017 USA Track & Field, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

12 “Owens and the Ohio State University.” *The Ohio State University*, Copyright © 2010

13 “Hitler’s Ambitious Plans for the 1936 Olympics.” *History News Network*, Copyright 2017. All rights reserved.
Standing Up for Olympic Ideals

Under Hitler's rule, Jews were banned from German sport facilities. From 1893 through 1935 Jews saw exclusion from boxing, gymnastics, chess, swimming and even playgrounds as Nazis imposed their "Aryan only" policy.

"...Sport is prostituted when sport loses its independent and democratic character and becomes a political institution...Nazi Germany is endeavoring to use the Eleventh Olympiad to serve the necessities and interests of the Nazi Regime rather than the Olympic ideals." — Committee on Fair Play in Sports, New York, November 15, 1935

Questions about participating in Olympics sponsored by a country that was excluding athletes based on their faith began to arise. Avery Brundage, president of the American Olympic Committee, stated: "The very foundation of the modern Olympic revival will be undermined if individual countries are allowed to restrict participation by reason of class, creed, or race." The Olympic Charter bans discrimination of any kind.

The Nazis worried that the games may be moved out of Germany so they manipulated the committee by lying, assuring that German Jewish athletes would be treated fairly. In June 1933, the International Olympic Committee secured a promise from the German Olympic Committee that they would comply with the Charter's principles. Although many did not believe them, it was eventually decided that the U.S. would not boycott the games. Anxiety over the safety of black athletes participation in Nazi Germany's Olympics was then brought to a close, and most African American
newspapers supported participation. There were other black organizations that felt the U.S. and African Americans should not participate in the Olympics.  

Walter White was the director of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in 1936 when American participation in the Berlin Games was being debated. He wrote a letter to Jesse Owens stating his conviction that participation by American athletes in Germany under Hitler's rule, especially by black athletes, would have negative consequences. White ultimately did not send this letter. Jesse Owens stood up to many who felt he should boycott. He stated, “After all, since we are all Americans, Negroes should have a chance in every sport. Certainly the showing of Negroes in track events shows that if they have half a chance, they produce the goods”. He was heading toward his destiny.  

Jesse Owens at the 1936 Berlin Olympics

The world was fascinated by Jesse Owens when he entered the 1936 Berlin Games as the famed athlete of his era. The Olympic stage for him was the most

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14 “Exclusion of Jews.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

15 “THE NAZI OLYMPICS BERLIN 1936: AFRICAN AMERICAN VOICES AND ‘JIM CROW’ AMERICA.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Copyright © United State Holocaust Memorial


17 “Jesse Owens.” PBS.org, Website ©1996-2013 WGBH Educational Foundation.
spectacular in history. 49 countries sent a record 4,066 athletes and it featured 3.77 million spectators!\textsuperscript{18} His acceptance and attention enraged the Nazis. Even though Jesse had to withstand racial slurs, crowds across the globe were rallied by his athleticism and modest grace.\textsuperscript{19}

Jesse Owens competed in four events in 1936 Berlin Olympics: the 100m dash, long jump (see Figure 3), 200m dash (see Figure 4) and 4x100m relay. He won gold medals in all of these events, breaking nine Olympic records and setting three world records! The time recorded in the relay would not be broken for 20 years.\textsuperscript{20} Jesse Owens' momentous performance showcased him as the first American track and field athlete to win four gold medals in a single Olympics. Jesse Owens, the African-American sharecropper's son, championed even in the face of intolerant bigotry, proving himself as a world hero as he stood against racism. He proved Hitler's theory of a dominant master Aryan race wrong, showing instead that individual talent and perseverance, not race or origin, as the recipe for greatness. \textsuperscript{21}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18}“Hitler’s Ambitious Plans for the 1936 Olympics.” \textit{History News Network}, Copyright 2017.
\item \textsuperscript{19}“Jesse Owens.” \textit{PBS.org}, Website ©1996-2013 WGBH Educational Foundation.
\item \textsuperscript{20}“Berlin 1936.” \textit{Olympic.org}, © Copyright 2016
\item \textsuperscript{21}“About Jesse Owens.” \textit{jesseowens.com}, © 2017 Jesse Owens Trust c/o Luminary Group LLC.
\end{itemize}
Coming Home

Arriving in the U.S. after the 1936 Olympics, Jesse found that although he was a hero in the sports arena, not much had changed in racial equality. He still had to ride in the back of the bus and had to use servant’s elevators. To supplement his income, Jesse ran races opposite horses and cars. He was also a member of the Harlem Globetrotters for a period of time. Jesse Owens ultimately found success in public relations and marketing, starting his own business in Chicago, Illinois. He would use this platform when attending conventions and business conferences as a motivational speaker. When Jesse could have been bitter and resentful about the slow progress of racial equality, he instead chose to work in his humble and eloquent manner.  

After his amazing athletic career, Jesse volunteered with charity groups and worked with the Boys' Club of America as a role model for adolescents. In 1973, Jesse Owens was selected to be ambassador for the Special Olympics in Massachusetts. He was asked to speak to the handicapped participants and award medals at the closing ceremony. This was only one of Jesse's many inspirational contributions to the Special Olympics across the country. His work with youth athletes, as an unofficial ambassador overseas and as a spokesman for freedom, is a rich legacy to his fellow Americans.

22 “Later Years.” Biography.com, © 2017 Bio and the Bio logo are registered trademarks of A&E Television Networks, LLC.

23 “Owen's' Legacy: a National Icon.” The Ohio State University, Copyright © 2010, The Ohio State University Archives.
Jesse Owens said,

"The Olympic games is the only platform that we have in this world where you can bring young people, and like in 1972, 117 nations of the world with 12,000 young people that came together, broke bread together, sang together and danced together competed upon the field of competition. Friendships that were born in those Olympic games are everlasting friendships and this is a tradition of the Olympic games--where people in various parts of the world will come together and youngsters of this country and of other countries have dreams about being members of the Olympic team and be able to find and meet new friends." 24

Having been given plaques and other memorabilia over the years, Jesse Owens finally received the highest nonmilitary honor of the U.S. Government when, in 1976, President Gerald Ford (see Figure 5) granted him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. 25

In Conclusion

You can see that Jesse Owens was a great person, not just in sports but in life as well. Owens had lots of other achievements besides sports. His achievements prove that Hitler’s theory was wrong and color of skin does not matter. Owens took a stand against racism and he stood up to people who thought he should boycott the Olympics.

25 “Owens’ Legacy: a National Icon.” The Ohio State University, Copyright © 2010, The Ohio State University Archives.
Figure 1: Jesse Owens East Technical High School track and field team. Image courtesy of The Ohio State University Libraries.
Figure 2: Jesse and his track and field coach Lawrence Snyder at The Ohio State. Image courtesy of The Ohio State University Libraries.
Figure 3: Owens competing in the long jump in 1936 Olympics. Image courtesy of The Ohio State University Libraries.
Figure 4: Jesse competing in the 200 meter dash in the 1936 Olympics. Image courtesy of The Ohio State University Libraries.
Figure 5: Jesse shaking hands with President Ford after getting the Medal of Freedom. Image courtesy of The Ohio State University Libraries.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

“East Technical High School Track Team, 1930s.” The Ohio State University Libraries, The Ohio State University, 1930, hdl.handle.net/1811/53284.

This website provided me with a picture of Jesse Owens’ high school track team. This picture was helpful to me because I am able to use this picture to show Jesse as a young track star. This website is sponsored by The Ohio State Library.

“Jesse Owens and Coach Larry Snyder posed for a portrait, 1935.” The Ohio State University Libraries, The Ohio State University, 1935, hdl.handle.net/1811/53311.

This website provided with a picture of Jesse Owens and his track and field coach at The Ohio State University. This website was sponsored by The Ohio State Library.

“Jesse Owens Interview.” Jesse Owens Interview, uploaded by Dave Svens, © 2017 YouTube, LLC, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMqs-P33Li.

This YouTube video I used was able to give me a great primary resources. It was helpful because it gave me a quote from Owens and it talked about his work with Special Olympics.

“Jesse Owens competing in the broad jump at the Olympics, 1936.” The Ohio State University Libraries, © 2014 The Ohio State University - University Libraries, 1936, hdl.handle.net/1811/53239.

This website was able to provide me with a picture of Jesse competing in the 1936 Olympics. This was useful because it shows that he was a great athlete. This website is sponsored by The Ohio State Library.
“Jesse Owens competing in the 200 meter dash at the Berlin Olympics, 1936.” *The Ohio State University Libraries*, Ohio State University, 1936, hdl.handle.net/1811/53248.

This website was able to provide me with a picture that was useful because it showed Jesse competing in the 200 meter dash in the Olympics. This picture was useful because it shows his running ability - by himself because he is probably ahead of everyone else.

This website is sponsored by The Ohio State Library.

“President Gerald Ford shaking hands with Jesse Owens, 1976.” *The Ohio State University Libraries*, The Ohio State University, 1976, hdl.handle.net/1811/58054.

This website was able to provide me with a picture of Jesse Owens with President Gerald Ford after getting his Medal of Freedom. This picture was helpful because it showed Jesse getting honored for what he did in the Olympics in 1936. This website is sponsored by The Ohio State University.
Secondary Sources


I was able to use this information in the paragraph about Jesse Owens at Ohio State in my paper. On this website I learned about Jesse Owens at the 1935 Big Ten Championship in Michigan and about Hitler's beliefs in the 1936 Berlin Games. This website is sponsored by the Jesse Owens Trust c/o Luminary Group.


I used the information that I found on this website in the part of my paper about people wanting the United States to boycott the 1936 Berlin Olympics. This information was about Walter White, the director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, who wrote a letter to Jesse Owens about boycotting the Berlin Games but never sent it. This website was sponsored by Library of Congress.


This website provided me with a summary of the events Jesse was in during the 1936 Olympics. This was helpful because I was able to get a better understanding of what Jesse did in the Olympics. This website is sponsored by the Olympic Committee.

This website provided me with information about the segregation in the United States and that Jesse and his track teams had to eat and stay at black-only establishments. This was useful information because it helped me understand more what Jesse Owens was going through at the time. This website is sponsored by United States History.


From this website I was able to get a quote that President Jimmy Carter said about Jesse Owens on his death. President Carter talked about how Jesse symbolized human struggle because of all the racial bigotry Jesse faced. This website was sponsored by The American Presidency Project.


This website was able to provide me with information about Hitler’s Aryan only policy that had to do with the exclusion of Jews from certain places from 1893-1935. This was helpful information because I was able to get a feel for how Hitler treated Jews during that time. This website was sponsored by United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
“Greatest 45 minutes ever in sports.” *Sports Illustrated*, © 2017 Time Inc. All Rights Reserved.,
www.si.com/more-sports/2010/05/24/owens-recordday.
This website provided me with information about the Big Ten Championship for track
and field in 1935. This was helpful information because it talked about the records Jesse
Owens broke in the Big Ten Championship. This website was sponsored by Sports
Illustrated.

“Growing Up.” library.osu.edu, Copyright © 2010, The Ohio State University Archives,
library.osu.edu/projects/jesse-owens/owens_story2.html.
This website provided me with information about Jesse and his family moving from
Alabama to Ohio because there were more jobs available for his dad. This information
was helpful because it talked about his family's struggle to support 10 children on a
sharecropper's income. This website was sponsored by The Ohio State Library.

“Hitler’s Ambitious Plans for the 1936 Olympics.” *History News Network*, Copyright 2017. All
rights reserved., historynewsnetwork.org/article/6875.
This website provided me with information about the Berlin Games being the largest to
date and all of the people that watched the games because of Hitler. This information was
helpful because it gave me a better understanding of how powerful Hitler was. This
website is sponsored by History News Network.
“Jesse Owens.” *Biography.com*, © 2017 Bio and the Bio logo are registered trademarks of A&E Television Networks, LLC.,

www.biography.com/people/jesse-owens-9431142#synopsis. This website gave me information about when Jesse was born and what his parents did to support their 10 children. This information was helpful because it told me where Jesse’s story started.

This website is sponsored by A&E Television Network.

“Jesse Owens.” *PBS.org*, Website ©1996-2013 WGBH Educational Foundation.,

www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/introduction/owens/.

This website provided me with information about the four medals Jesse won at the Olympics and that the segregation in the U.S. had still not changed since Jesse had gone over to the Berlin Games. This website was sponsored by WGBH Educational Foundation.


The topic was about Larry Snyder, Jesse Owens’ track and field coach at The Ohio State University and all of his achievements he had at OSU with the track and field stars he has coached over the years. This source was very useful because it gave me a general overview of Larry Snyder and his achievements and that is all I needed to know about Jesse Owen’s coach at OSU. This website was sponsored by The Hall of Fame of Track and Field People in United States.
“Later Years.” Biography.com, © 2017 Bio and the Bio logo are registered trademarks of A&E Television Networks, LLC.,
This website gave me information about what Jesse Owens did for a job after the 1936 Olympics. This was helpful because it gave me a perspective on how racial tension in the U.S. had still not changed. This website was sponsored by A&E Television Network.

“THE NAZI OLYMPICS BERLIN 1936: AFRICAN AMERICAN VOICES AND ‘JIM CROW’ AMERICA.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Copyright © United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC,
This website gave me information on the U.S. thinking about boycotting the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany. This was helpful for me to understand the severity of issues with race. This website is sponsored by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

“Owens and The Ohio State University.” Ohio State Library, Copyright © 2010, The Ohio State University Archives, library.osu.edu/projects/jesse-owens/story_ohiostate.html.
This website talked about lots Ben Ten Universities wanting Jesse Owens to be on their track and field team. This was useful information because it was able to help me talk about is great athletic abilities. This website is sponsored by The Ohio State Library.
“Owens’ Legacy: a National Icon.” The Ohio State University, Copyright © 2010, The Ohio State University Archives, library.osu.edu/projects/jesse-owens/story_legacy.html.

This website gave me information about Jesse on a personal level instead of an athletic level on his work with the Boys’ Club of America and the Medal of Freedom he was given by President Ford in 1976. This was useful information because it helped my understand there was more the Jesse Owens than just an athlete.


This website gave me information on anyone being able to reach their goals despite there odds because of racism or any other things they may face. This was useful in my paper because it helped me understand what Jesse had to go though to win four gold medals.


This book gave me information about Jesse’s wife Ruth and how he was able to go right back to becoming an Olympic champion right after the birth of his daughter Gloria. This information helped me understand more about Jesse’s family life while training for the Olympics.

This website gave me information about the lynchings that were going on in the 1920s. This information was able to help me understand what Jesse had to go through growing up in the south. This website is sponsored by American Anthropological Association.


This website was about to give me information about Jesse’s parents. This information helped me understand more about Jesse’s family and what they did. This website is sponsored by the Jesse Owens Trust.

“Synopsis.” Biography.com, © 2017 Bio and the Bio logo are registered trademarks of A&E Television Networks, LLC.,

www.biography.com/people/jesse-owens-9431142#synopsis. This website talked about Owens’ achievements in high school on his track and field team. This was great information to help me understand why Jesse was recruited by so many Big Ten colleges.