

Jesse Owens

Owens, Jesse



Record Information

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Date: b. 1913–d. 1980

Also Known As: James Cleveland Owens;

Description:

James (Jesse) Cleveland Owens became known at first for having set three world's records in one afternoon while still in college in 1935. Then, while at the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, he broke ten Olympic records and matched two, winning four gold medals. His victories at the Olympics had a special significance, for the games that year were held in Nazi Germany. Owens did much to counter the notion of "Aryan race" superiority. His victories also helped contribute to the integration of American sports.

At first, **Jesse Owens** was famous for having set three world's records in one afternoon while still in college in 1935. Then, while at the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, he broke 10 Olympic records and matched two, winning four gold medals and helping the U.S. team win 12 of 23 men's track-and-field events. **Owens** also set a world record at the Olympics in the broad jump.

His victories at the Olympics had a special significance, for the games that year were held in Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany. Hitler had preached the overall superiority of the "Aryan race," or more specifically northern white Europeans, and the athletic successes of **Owens** did much to counter this racist propaganda.

Owens received no official recognition for his feat in his own country until 40 years after the fact, when he was awarded a 1976 Presidential Medal of Freedom, in recognition of his lifetime achievement.

Jesse Owens was born on September 12, 1913, the seventh of 11 children, in the rural hamlet of Oakville, Alabama. His parents were sharecroppers—farmers who rented their land in exchange for giving up a share of the crop. Originally **Jesse** was called "James Cleveland **Owens**," but when his family later moved north to Ohio, the "J. C." for James Cleveland was interpreted as "**Jesse**," and the name stuck.

As a child, Owens was thin and frail, and he came near death while suffering from recurring pneumonia. But his mother nursed him back to health—as she would do time and again.

Owens was still young when, largely out of concern for his having better health care, his family moved north to Cleveland, Ohio. Times were hard for the future star athlete, since Henry Owens, his father, was past 40 and not trained for work other than farming; he could neither read nor write. Emma Owens, his mother, worked as a domestic, and the Owens brothers all got jobs. Jesse worked for a grocery and a greenhouse.

Owen's athletic coach was concerned about his poor health, the result of his four bouts with pneumonia. The coach encouraged Owens to run, in order to strengthen his lungs for the cold northern winters. However, Owens couldn't come out for track, as he had to work after school. The coach encouraged him to come to school an hour early for a morning workout and would bring Owens a large breakfast each day as further practical support. The sickly Owens soon became a champion athlete. He was popular at Cleveland's East Technical High School, and, despite being one of the few black students there, he was elected student council president. His family was still poor, so Owens shined shoes while attending high school. Even then, he was an outstanding athlete, winning a broad-jump championship.

His athletic feats brought him many scholarship offers from colleges and universities. Initially, however, he turned them down. Even though he had already married at the age of 16 and needed to support his wife, he told his coach that he couldn't bear the thought of living well while the rest of his family went hungry.

Once again his supportive coach took action. He arranged for the coach at Ohio State University to get Owens's father a permanent state job. Then Owens enrolled in the school—but stuck to his plan to do without a scholarship. Instead, he held several jobs at the school—waiting on tables, working in the library, and operating an elevator—and paid his own way.

At Ohio State, Owens continued to excel as an athlete. When he was a sophomore, Owens had one particularly spectacular day—on May 25, 1935, at a Big Ten track-and-field meet in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Although Owens was still complaining of a sore back from a fight he had recently been in, he broke three track-and-field records, in the broad jump, the 220-yard dash, and the 220-yard low hurdles, while matching the world record for the 100-yard dash. He accomplished all of this in 75 minutes of one afternoon.

When Owens went to the Olympics, he was closely watched by both black and white Americans, all of whom had heard of Hitler's theories about black "inferiority." Perhaps because of the symbolic quality of his victories, there was a rumor that Hitler had snubbed Owens at the Olympics and had refused to shake his hand.

However, Owens himself denied that it had happened, as did a sportswriter who attended the games.

His victories helped to contribute to the integration of American sports. After the 1936 Olympics, a writer asked Horace Stoneham, president of baseball's New York Giants, how long it would be before blacks were playing with whites on professional baseball teams. "Within 10 years," Stoneham answered, anticipating Jackie Robinson's 1947 debut with the formerly all-white Brooklyn Dodgers.

After his Olympic victory, Owens won the Associated Press's Athlete of the Year citation. But this time, he and his wife had had a child and were expecting a second (they eventually had three daughters). He couldn't afford to finish school, and he was only able to find a job as a \$30-a-week Cleveland playground instructor. He eventually earned his tuition by racing against a horse—a degrading but profitable feat. Later, his name was used to promote a chain of cleaning stores, and he was made full partner in the operation, returning him enough income to buy a new house. But the business suddenly went bankrupt and his partners deserted him, leaving him with a \$55,000 debt. He managed to pay off this and his other debts by recruiting black workers for the Ford Motor Company during World War II.

Owens eventually settled in Chicago. By this time he had become a charismatic public speaker and he traveled extensively, speaking about sports, civil rights, and his own life. In 1955, President Eisenhower named him "Ambassador of Sports," and he toured the world for the State Department. Later, he started a jazz radio program and developed a public relations agency, finally achieving financial security. He spoke out critically of some black activists in his 1970 book *Blackthink* (New York: William Morrow). However, in 1972, Owens rethought his position and published his new views in a book called *I Have Changed* (New York: William Morrow). In 1971, as a result of health problems, Owens retired and moved to Phoenix. He died of lung cancer on March 31, 1980. In 1983 he was inducted into the Olympic Hall of Fame.

References and Further Information

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