

Jesse Owens



(In lieu of no public domain book found for the life of Jesse Owens, the following biographical summary from the on-line encyclopedia *Wikipedia* is offered for student reading. The content reflects the on-line date of December 10, 2009. For updates and footnoted references, access the [Wikipedia site](#).)

Childhood

The tenth child of Henry and Emma Alexander Owens was named James Cleveland when he was born in Danville, Alabama on September 12, 1913. "J.C.", as he was called, was nine when the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where his new schoolteacher gave him the name that was to become known around the world. The teacher was told "J.C." when she asked his name to enter in her roll book, but she thought he said "Jesse". The name stuck and he would be known as Jesse Owens for the rest of his life. James Cleveland Owens was born in Lawrence County, Alabama, in the Oakville community, to Henry and Emma Owens. When Owens was nine, he moved to the Glenville section of Cleveland, Ohio. Owens was called Jesse by a teacher in Cleveland who did not understand his Southern drawl when the young boy said he was called *J.C. Owens* – i.e. James Cleveland Owens.

Owens had taken different jobs in his spare time: He delivered groceries, loaded freight cars and worked in a shoe repair shop. During this period Owens realized that he had a passion for running.

Throughout his life Owens attributed the success of his athletic career to the encouragement of Charles Riley, his junior-high track coach at Fairmount Junior High, who had put him on the track team. Since Owens worked in a shoe repair shop after school, Riley allowed him to practice before school instead.

Owens first came to national attention when he was a student of East Technical High School in Cleveland; he equaled the world record of 9.4 seconds in the 100-yard (91 m) dash and long-jumped 24 feet 9 ½ inches (7.56 m) at the 1933 National High School Championship in Chicago. Owens's record at East Technical High School directly inspired Harrison Dillard to take up track sports.

The Ohio State University



Jesse Owens on running track.

Owens attended The Ohio State University only after employment was found for his father, ensuring the family could be supported. Affectionately known as the "Buckeye Bullet," Owens won a record eight individual NCAA championships, four each in 1935 and 1936. (The record of four gold medals at the NCAA has been equaled only by Xavier Carter in 2006, although his many titles also included relay medals.) Though Owens was enjoying athletic success, he had to live off campus with other African-American athletes. When he traveled with the team, Owens could either order carry-out or eat at "black-only" restaurants. Likewise, he slept in "black-only" hotels. Owens was never awarded a scholarship for his efforts, so he continued to work part-time jobs to pay for school.

Owens's greatest achievement came in a span of 45 minutes on May 25, 1935 at the Big Ten meet in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he set three world records and tied a fourth. He equaled the world record for the 100-yard (91 m) sprint (9.4 seconds) and set world records in the long jump (26 feet 8¼ inches (8.13 m), a world record that would last 25 years), 220-yard (201.2 m) sprint (20.7 seconds), and 220-yard (201.2m) low hurdles (22.6 seconds to become the first person to break 23 seconds). In 2005, both NBC sports announcer Bob Costas and University of Central Florida professor of sports history Richard C. Crepeau chose this as the most impressive athletic achievement since 1850.^[4]

Owens was a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, the first intercollegiate Greek-letter organization established for African Americans.

Berlin Olympics



Owens performing the long jump at the Olympics

In 1936, Owens arrived in Berlin to compete for the United States in the Summer Olympics. Adolf Hitler was using the games to show the world a resurgent Nazi Germany. He and other government officials had high hopes German athletes would dominate the games with victories (the German athletes achieved a top of the table medal haul). Meanwhile, Nazi propaganda promoted concepts of "Aryan racial superiority" and depicted ethnic Africans as inferior. Owens surprised many and showed the fallacies of racial supremacy by winning four gold medals: On August 3, 1936 he won the 100m sprint, defeating Ralph Metcalfe; on August 4, the long jump (later crediting friendly and helpful advice from Luz Long, the German competitor he ultimately defeated^[7]); on August 5, the 200m sprint; and, after he was added to the 4 x 100 m relay team, his fourth on August 9 (a performance not equaled until Carl Lewis won gold medals in the same events at the 1984 Summer Olympics).

Just before the competitions Owens was visited in the Olympic village by Adi Dassler, the founder of Adidas. He persuaded Owens to use Adidas shoes, and it was the first sponsorship for a male African-American athlete.

The long jump victory is documented, along with many other 1936 events, in the 1938 film *Olympia* by Leni Riefenstahl.

On the first day, Hitler shook hands only with the German victors and then left the stadium. Olympic committee officials then insisted Hitler greet each and every medalist or none at all. Hitler opted for the latter and skipped all further medal presentations. On reports that Hitler had deliberately avoided acknowledging his victories, and had refused to shake his hand, Owens recounted:



Jesse Owens on the podium after winning the long jump at the 1936 Summer Olympics

“ When I passed the Chancellor he arose, waved his hand at me, and I waved back at him. I think the writers showed bad taste in criticizing the man of the hour in Germany. ”

He also stated: "Hitler didn't snub me—it was FDR who snubbed me. The president didn't even send me a telegram." Jesse Owens was never invited to the White House nor bestowed any honors by Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) or Harry S. Truman during their terms. In 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower acknowledged Owens's accomplishments, naming him an "Ambassador of Sports."

Hitler's contempt for Owens and for those races he deemed 'inferior' arose in private, away from maintaining Olympic neutrality. As Albert Speer, Hitler's architect and later war armaments minister recollected in his memoirs *Inside the Third Reich*:

"Each of the German victories and there were a surprising number of these made him happy, but he was highly annoyed by the series of triumphs by the marvelous colored American runner, Jesse Owens. People whose antecedents came from the jungle were primitive, Hitler said with a shrug; their physiques were stronger than those of civilized whites and hence should be excluded from future games."^[13]

Despite Hitler's feelings, Owens was cheered enthusiastically by 110,000 people in Berlin's Olympic Stadium and later ordinary Germans sought his autograph when they saw him in the streets. Owens was allowed to travel with and stay in the same hotels as whites, an irony at the time given that blacks in the United States were denied equal rights. After a New York ticker-tape parade in his honor, Owens had to ride the freight elevator to attend his own reception at the Waldorf-Astoria.

Post Olympics

After the games had finished, Owens was invited, along with the rest of the team, to compete in Sweden. However he decided to capitalize on his success by returning to the United States to take up some of the lucrative commercial offers he was receiving. American athletic officials were furious and withdrew his amateur status, ending his career immediately. Owens was livid: "A fellow desires something for himself," he said.

With no sporting appearances to bolster his profile, the lucrative offers never quite materialized, being left with such offers as helping promote the exploitation film *Mom and Dad* in black neighborhoods. Instead he was forced to try to make a living as a sports promoter, essentially an entertainer. He would give local sprinters a ten or twenty yard start and beat them in the 100 yd (91 m) dash. He also challenged and defeated racehorses although as he revealed later, the trick was to race a high-strung thoroughbred horse that would be frightened by the starter's shotgun and give him a bad jump. Owens once said, "People say that it was degrading for an Olympic champion to run against a horse, but what was I supposed to do? I had four gold medals, but you can't eat four gold medals."^[14]

He soon found himself running a dry-cleaning business and then even working as a gas station attendant. He eventually filed for bankruptcy but, even then, his problems were not over and in 1966 he was successfully prosecuted for tax evasion. At rock bottom, the rehabilitation began and he started work as a U.S. "goodwill ambassador." Owens traveled the world and spoke to companies like the Ford Motor Company and the United States Olympic Committee. After he retired, he occupied himself by racing horses. He would always stress the importance of religion, hard work, and loyalty.

Owens refused to support the black power salute by African-American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Summer Olympics. He told them,^[15]

“ The black fist is a meaningless symbol. When you open it, you have nothing but fingers – weak, empty fingers. The only time the black fist has significance is when there's money inside. There's where the power lies. ”

After smoking for 35 years, Owens died of lung cancer at age 66 in Tucson, Arizona in 1980. He is buried in Oak Woods Cemetery in Chicago.

A few months before his death, Owens had tried unsuccessfully to convince President Jimmy Carter not to boycott the 1980 Moscow Olympics, arguing that the Olympic ideal was to be a time-out from war and above politics.

In 1984 an Emmy Award-winning biographical film of his life, *The Jesse Owens Story*, was released. Dorian Harewood portrayed Owens in the film.

Personal life and family

Owens and Minnie Ruth Solomon met at Fairmount Junior High School in Cleveland when he was 15 years old and she was 13 years old. They dated steadily throughout high school and Ruth gave birth to their first baby daughter, Gloria, in 1932. They were married from 1935 until his death and had two more daughters: Marlene, born in 1937, and Beverly, born in 1940.

Owens's great-nephew Chris Owens, an American professional basketball player, was a member of German league team ALBA Berlin before transferring to a Turkish league team Galatasaray.

Jesse Owens

(In lieu of no public domain book found for the life of Jesse Owens, the following biographical summary from the on-line site THE VOICE OF AMERICA is offered for student reading. The content reflects the on-line date of December 11, 2009. For updates and audio version, access the VOICE OF AMERICA site.)

Jesse Owens, 1913- 1980: He Was Once the World's Fastest Runner

He was the first American in the history of Olympic track and field events to win four gold medals in a single Olympics. *Transcript of radio broadcast: 20 December 2008*

VOICE ONE:

This is Gwen Outen.

VOICE TWO:

And this is Steve Ember with People in America in VOA Special English. Every week we tell about a person who was important in the history of the United States. Today we tell

the story of athlete Jesse Owens. He once was the fastest runner in the world.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

In the summer of nineteen thirty-six, people all over the world heard the name of Jesse Owens. That summer, Owens joined the best athletes from fifty nations to compete in the Olympic games. They met in Berlin, Germany. There was special interest in the Olympic games that year.



Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympic Games in Germany

Adolf Hitler was the leader of Germany. Hitler and his Nazi party believed that white people -- especially German people -- were the best race of people on Earth. They believed that other races of people -- especially those with dark skin -- were almost less than human.

In the summer of nineteen thirty-six, Hitler wanted to prove his beliefs to the world. He wanted to show that German athletes could win every important competition. After all, only a few weeks before the Olympics, German boxer Max Schmeling had defeated the great American heavyweight Joe Louis, a black man.

VOICE TWO:

Jesse Owens was black, too. Until nineteen thirty-six, very few black athletes had competed in the Olympics for the United States. Owens was proud to be on the team. He was very sure of his ability.

Owens spent one week competing in four different Olympic track and field events in Berlin. During that time, he did not think much about the color of his skin, or about Adolf Hitler.

Owens said later: "I was looking only at the finish line. I thought of all the years of practice and competition, and of all who believed in me."

VOICE ONE:

We do not know what Hitler thought of Jesse Owens. No one recorded what he said about this black man who ran faster and jumped farther than any man of any color at the Olympic games. But we can still see Jesse Owens as Hitler saw him. For at Hitler's request, motion pictures were made of the Berlin Olympic games.

The films show Jesse Owens as a thin, but powerfully-built young man with smooth brown skin and short hair. When he ran, he seemed to move without effort. When he jumped, as one observer said, he seemed to jump clear out of Germany.

Jesse Owens won the highest award -- the Gold Medal -- in all four of the Olympic competitions he entered. In the one-hundred meter run, he equaled the fastest time ever run in that Olympic event. In the long jump and the two-hundred meter run, he set new Olympic records. And as part of a four-man team, he helped set a new world record for the four-hundred meter relay race. He was the first American in the history of Olympic track and field events to win four Gold Medals in a single Olympics.



Jesse Owens at the medal ceremony for the long jump competition at the 1936 games

VOICE TWO:

Owens's Olympic victories made him a hero. He returned home to parades in New York City and Columbus, Ohio, where he attended the state university. Businessmen paid him for the right to use his name on their stores. No one, however, offered him a permanent job.

For many years after the nineteen thirty-six Olympic games, Jesse Owens survived as best he could. He worked at small jobs. He even used his athletic abilities, but in a sad way. He earned money by running races against people, motorcycles and horses. He and his wife and three daughters saw both good times and bad times.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Poverty was not new to James Cleveland Owens. He was born in nineteen thirteen on a farm in the southern state of Alabama. He was the youngest of thirteen children. His parents did not own the farm, and earned little money. Jesse remembered that there was rarely enough food to eat. And there was not enough fuel to heat the house in winter.

Some of Jesse's brothers and sisters died while still young. Jesse was a sickly child. Partly because of this, and partly because of the racial hatred they saw around them, Jesse's parents decided to leave the South. They moved north, to Cleveland, Ohio, when Jesse was eight years old. The large family lived in a few small rooms in a part of the city that was neither friendly nor pleasant to look at.

Jesse's father was no longer young or strong. He was unable to find a good job. Most of the time, no one would give him any work at all. But Jesse's older brothers were able to get jobs in factories. So life was a little better than it had been in the South.

VOICE TWO:



Jesse, especially, was lucky. He entered a school where one white teacher, Charles Riley, took a special interest in him. Jesse looked thin and unhealthy, and Riley wanted to make him stronger. Through the years that Jesse was in school, Riley brought him food in the morning. Riley often invited the boy to eat with his family in the evening. And every day before school, he taught Owens how to run like an athlete.

At first, the idea was only to make the boy stronger. But soon Riley saw that Jesse was a champion. By the time Jesse had completed high school, his name was known across the nation. Ohio State University wanted him to attend college there. While at Ohio State, he set new world records in several track and field events. And he was accepted as a member of the United States Olympic team.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Owens always remembered the white man who helped change his life. Charles Riley did not seem to care what color a person's skin was. Owens learned to think the same way.

Later in life, Owens put all his energy into working with young people. He wanted to tell them some of the things he had

learned about life, work and success: That it is important to choose a goal and always work toward it. That there are good people in the world who will help you to reach your goal. That if you try again and again, you will succeed.

People who heard Owens's speeches said he spoke almost as well as he ran. Owens received awards for his work with boys and girls. The United States government sent him around the world as a kind of sports ambassador. The International Olympic Committee asked for his advice.

VOICE TWO:

In about nineteen seventy, Jesse Owens wrote a book in which he told about his life. It was called "Blackthink." In the book, Owens denounced young black militants who blamed society for their troubles. He said young black people had the same chance to succeed in the United States as white people. Many black civil rights activists reacted angrily to these statements. They said what Owens had written was not true for everyone.

Owens later admitted that he had been wrong. He saw that not all blacks were given the same chances and help that he had been given. In a second book, Owens tried to explain what he had meant in his first book. He called it "I Have Changed." Owens said that, in his earlier book, he did not write about life as it was for everyone, but about life as it was for him.

He said he truly wanted to believe that if you think you can succeed--- and you really try -- then you have a chance. If you do not think you have a chance, then

you probably will fail. He said these beliefs had worked for him. And he wanted all young people to believe them, too.

VOICE ONE:

These were the same beliefs he tried to express when he spoke around the world about being an Olympic athlete. "The road to the Olympics," he said, "leads to no city, no country. It goes far beyond New York or Moscow, ancient Greece or Nazi Germany. The road to the Olympics leads -- in the end -- to the best within us."

In nineteen seventy-six, President Gerald Ford awarded Jesse Owens the Medal of Freedom. This is the highest honor an American civilian can receive. Jesse Owens died of cancer in nineteen eighty. His family members operate the Jesse Owens Foundation. It provides financial aid and support for young people to help them reach their goals in life.



Jesse Owens showing his four Olympic gold medals

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

This program was written by Barbara Dash. It was produced by Lawan Davis. This is Steve Ember.

VOICE ONE:

And this is Gwen Outen. Listen again next week for People in America in VOA Special English.