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Jesse Owens 1913-1980 American track and field athlete Few athletes have transcended their sports to become a symbol of an era as did Jesse Owens.

Enduring a childhood marked by grinding poverty in Alabama, Owens became a star athlete in high school after his family moved to Cleveland, Ohio. His achievements earned Owens several lucrative offers to attend college as a track-and-field athlete, and he enrolled at Ohio State University in 1933. On May 25, 1935, Owens made national headlines for setting five world records and tying another record at the Big Ten Intercollegiate Championships in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Although many historians consider Owens's performance that day the greatest achievement by any track-and-field athlete in a single day, his participation in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games made him into a legend. After winning one team and three individual Olympic Gold Medals in an atmosphere charged with German Chancellor Adolf Hitler's declarations of Aryan racial superiority, Owens became an American hero.

Although his professional career endured several struggles after his retirement as an amateur athlete, the public's admiration of Owens never dimmed. In the last decades of his life, the former star athlete became a sought-after public speaker. Using his own life's experience as a model, Owens preached the values of hard work, self-esteem, and patriotism. Prior to his death in 1980, Owens was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and in 1983 was inducted posthumously into the US Olympic Committee Hall of Fame. Part of the Great Migration Jesse Owens was born in the rural hamlet of Danville in northern Alabama on September 12, 1913.

He was the youngest of the ten children of Henry and Mary Emma (Fitzgerald) Owens who had survived childhood. Like most of his African-American neighbors, Henry Owens struggled to provide for his family as a sharecropper and barely managed to keep his children fed and clothed.

After their daughter, Lillie, moved to Cleveland during World War I, Mary Owens encouraged her husband to move the family North to take advantage of the higher wages, steadier work, and personal freedom that their daughter had described to them. Henry Owens took two of their older sons to Cleveland after the war and found conditions promising enough to bring the rest of the family to the city around 1922. In their decision to move North to escape the poverty, limited opportunity, and virulent and sometimes violent racism of the South, Mary and Henry Owens were part of one of the greatest movements of people in American history, a phenomenon known as the Great Migration. Given a labor shortage in the North induced by World War I and a halt to European immigration, a massive wave of African Americans from the rural South took place to keep America's northern industries running.

Between 1915 and 1920 at least 400, 000 African Americans left for the North, and as many as one million joined them in the following decade. By 1920 an estimated 65, 000 African Americans from Alabama alone had made the journey northward. Life indeed was different for the Owens family in the North—so different that a fearful Mary Owens kept the drapes closed in the family's modest apartment for several months after they moved in.

The family's east-side neighborhood was racially diverse and economically disadvantaged; after Henry Owens and three of the older Owens sons gained employment in local steel mills, the family nonetheless made a promising start in Cleveland. The youngest Owens enrolled in Bolton Elementary School on the East side, where he was initially placed in the first grade with students much younger than himself. After proving that he could read and write, Owens advanced to the second grade.

He also took on a new name, although not by choice. Named James Cleveland at birth, Owens went by his initials " J. C." for the first several years of his life.

He adopted the name by which he would become famous after his first teacher in the North failed to understand his southern drawl and put his name down as " Jesse." Too modest to correct his teacher, Owens kept the name.

Athletic Success as a TeenagerOwens enrolled in Cleveland's Fairmount Junior High School around 1927 and quickly attracted the attention of a mentor who would prove crucial in his future athletic success. Charles Riley worked at the school as a physical education teacher and track-and-field coach and immediately realized that Owens was a naturally gifted athlete who had not yet taken up serious training. Riley started a rigorous training program for Owens in special morning sessions before school.

Within a year, Owens was running the 100-yard dash in eleven seconds and in 1928 he set two world records for his age group in the high jump, at six

feet, and the long jump, at twenty-two feet, eleven and three-quarters inches. Under Riley's instruction to run as though the track were on fire, Owens also improved his times on the track. Of the seventy-nine races he entered in high school, Owens won seventy-five of them. Owens also formed a warm personal relationship off the track with Riley, who continued to coach him after he entered East Technical High School in 1930. After Henry Owens suffered a traffic accident in 1929 and experienced extended periods of unemployment in the Great Depression, Riley's role as a surrogate father was especially important to the young athlete.

Chronology

1913 Born September 12 in Danville, Alabama to Henry and Mary Owens

1922 Owens family moves to Cleveland, Ohio

1928 Sets two world junior-high school records in high jump and long jump

1930 Sets high school records in long jump, 100-yard dash, and 200-yard dash

1933 Leads East Technical High School to National Interscholastic Championship

1933 Enters Ohio State University on track-and-field scholarship

1935 Marries Minnie Ruth Solomon

1935 Sets five meet records at the Big Ten Track and Field Championship

1936 Wins four Gold Medals at the Berlin Olympics

1936 Ends amateur athletic career

1943 Works in personnel department of Ford Motor Company

1946 Opens public relations firm in Chicago

1953 Receives appointment to Illinois State Athletic Commission

1965 Receives conviction for income tax evasion.

1968 Criticizes African-American athletes at Mexico City Olympic Games for giving "Black Power" salute on awards stand

1974 Induction into the USA Track and Field Hall of Fame

1976 Receives Presidential Medal of Freedom

1980 Dies in Tucson, Arizona on March 31

1983 Induction into the US

Olympic Committee Hall of Fame As an East Tech track-and-field sensation, Owens became a nationally renowned athlete while still in his teens. Although he failed to make the national team in his tryout for the 1932 Olympic Games to be held in Los Angeles, his performance at the June 1933 National Interscholastic Championship, held in Chicago, was stunning.

Winning the long jump, 220-yard dash, and 100-yard dash, Owens set and tied the world records in the latter two events. When he returned to Cleveland, the nineteen-year-old was honored with a parade. Several universities competed to offer Owens a place on their track-and-field squads, but Ohio State University (OSU) came up with the best offer. In exchange for an undemanding job as a page in the Ohio State Legislature and the promise of a weekly stipend for attending local civic functions, Owens enrolled at OSU in the fall of 1933.

The school also agreed to overlook Owens's lack of a high school diploma, as he had left East Tech before completing all of his required courses. Now earning a substantial sum of money during the depths of the Depression, Owens sent much of funds back to his parents as well as to longtime girlfriend, (Minnie) Ruth Solomon, who had given birth to their daughter on August 8, 1932. The couple married on July 5, 1935, allegedly after a Cleveland newspaper reporter threatened to publish a photo of their daughter along with an unflattering portrait of the athlete's personal life.

The Owenses subsequently had two more daughters. Although talk about his infidelities persisted throughout their union—including his siring of a child by

another woman—the couple remained married up to the time of Jesse Owens's death in 1980. Ruth Solomon Owens died in 2001 at the age of eighty-six. Owens indeed had a lot to lose in a scandal, as he had vaulted into the front ranks of Olympic hopefuls with his masterful performance at the Big Ten Track and Field Championship held in Ann Arbor on May 25, 1935. Suffering from a sore back in the early stages of the meet, Owens surprised everyone in the final rounds of the competition. His 220-yard dash, 220-yard hurdles, 200-meter dash, and 200-meter low hurdles times were all new world records—as was his winning broad jump effort—and his time in the 100-yard dash tied the existing world record of 9.4 seconds.

Owens's achievement stands as perhaps the best single-day accomplishment of any track-and-field athlete in the history of the discipline. For his feats at the 1935 Big Ten Championship, Owens seemed certain of winning the James E. Sullivan Award, given annually by the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) to the country's best amateur athlete. When it was revealed that OSU sponsors had paid some of the athlete's travel expenses in the guise of reimbursing him for his job in the State Legislature, however, Owens was taken off the list of candidates for the award. More troubling to his future, he had also been threatened with being stripped of his amateur status altogether by the AAU.

In the end, the AAU decided that Owens's offense was unintentional. Owens faced another challenge when he was placed on academic probation by OSU for his continuing poor performance in his course work. Owens managed to continue as a full-time student through 1936, but later took classes only

intermittently; in 1941 he left OSU altogether without completing a degree.

Related Biography: Coach Charles Riley Charles Riley was born in 1878 and grew up in Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania, where he labored as a miner and mill worker. Although he dropped out of high school to work, Riley later attended Temple University in Philadelphia and eventually secured a job as a teacher and coach at Fairmount Junior High School in Cleveland, Ohio. The job paid so little that Riley had to work as a playground superintendent during the summer to support his family, including one son who was born crippled.

Immediately realizing Jesse Owens's potential, Riley took the junior high schooler under his wing with extra practice sessions held in the morning so as not to interfere with the youngster's after-school work obligations. He also invited Owens to his home and treated him like a member of his own family, rare in a time of both informal and legal racial segregation. Owens considered Riley as his second father, and Riley held Owens in equal regard. Riley's contributions to his student's development occurred both on and off the field. Riley helped to refine Owens's running style; after taking him to see race horses in training to inspire his student, Owens's performance improved markedly. Owens also credited Riley with telling him to run as though the track were on fire, with quick fluid steps and an upright carriage.

The advice was a departure from the standard running style of the time and gave Owens an edge against his competition. Off the track, Riley's relationship with Owens gave the young man the confidence he needed to break the racial barriers that then frequently denied equal opportunities to

African Americans. Riley retired and moved to Florida in 1943. Between 1946 and 1960 he had no contact with his acclaimed former pupil, an experience that left him disillusioned.

Despite the disappointment, he accepted an invitation to honor Owens at a 1960 television broadcast of *This Is Your Life*. It was the last time that the coach and his former pupil would meet, as Riley died later that year. Awards and Accomplishments
1928 Gold Medals, 100-yard dash and 200-yard dash, National Interscholastic Championship
1935 Gold Medals, 100-yard dash, 220-yard dash, broad jump, 220-yard hurdles, 200-meter dash, and 200-meter low hurdles
1936 Olympic Gold Medals, 100-meter dash, long jump, 200-meter dash, and 400-meter relay
1936 Associated Press Athlete of the Year

1974 Induction into the U. S. A.

Track and Field Hall of Fame 1976 Presidential Medal of Freedom
1983 Induction into the U. S. Olympic Committee Hall of Fame
Star of the 1936 Berlin Olympics
Along with boxer Joe Louis, Owens was one of the best-known African-American athletes by 1936. Owens was also one of the most popular athletes for the sportsmanship he demonstrated on the field. In one competition in mid-1936, Owens offered to run a 50-yard dash again when he learned that a competitor, Eulace Peacock, had suffered from a faulty starting block; the race was conducted again, and Owens came in second to Peacock. He did not contest the outcome and earned public praise for his sense of fair play. Thus, when he earned a place on the U. S.

track-and-field delegation to the 1936 Olympics, Jesse Owens was the most admired and talked-about athlete in the contingent. Owens surpassed all expectations of his performance at the Berlin Games. On August 3, 1936, he took the Gold Medal in the 100-meter dash; his time of 10.

3 seconds set a new world record in the event. Owens also set Olympics records in his winning long jump of twenty-six feet, five-and-one-quarter inches and Gold Medal 200-meter dash of 20. 7 seconds. Owens's fourth Gold Medal came in the 400-meter relay race; not originally part of the team, Owens and Ralph Metcalfe had been enlisted for the relay in place of two Jewish runners, Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller.

Glickman immediately accused the U. S. track coaches of giving into the prevalent anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany, although he held Owens blameless for the decision. The relay team won the race in a world- and Olympic-record setting time of 39. 8 seconds. That Owens won four Gold Medals at the Berlin Olympics was astounding; yet his feat also represented a rebuke to the Nazi Party's theories of Aryan racial superiority.

Owens later capitalized on his triumph over Nazi ideology by claiming that Adolf Hitler was so upset by his achievements that he refused to congratulate him as he had the other winning athletes. In reality, Hitler only met personally with Gold Medal winners on the opening day of the games; any deliberate snub was unplanned. Yet Owens went on to retell the story of “ Hitler's Snub” so many times that it became reported as fact.

What was undeniable was that Owens emerged from the games as an American hero. Checkered Post-Athletic Career Owens gave up his amateur status after the 1936 Berlin Games and took on numerous paid speaking engagements, including appearances for Republican presidential nominee Alf Landon in the 1936 election, for which he earned \$10, 000. Owens put some of his earnings into a dry cleaning business in Cleveland, which soon went out of business.

With the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) filing suit against Owens for unpaid taxes from his 1936 earnings, Owens declared bankruptcy in May 1939 and struggled to pull his finances together. He took a position in the personnel department of the Ford Motor Company, where he worked from 1943 to 1945, and then pursued a short-lived venture with a sporting goods business in Detroit. In 1946 Owens moved with his family to Chicago, where he started his own public relations agency and remained active in Republican Party politics. After polishing his skills as a public speaker, Owens was able to make a comfortable living as a motivational speaker and his political connections helped him gain an appointment with the Illinois State Athletic Commission in 1953.

As a public relations executive and motivational speaker, Owens finally hit his stride in his post-athletic career. He also began a lucrative association with the Atlantic Richfield Company, which began sponsoring the Jesse Owens Games for Chicago youth in 1965. The next year, however, Owens was convicted for tax evasion. The IRS revealed that Owens had failed to file tax returns between 1954 and 1962 and he was ordered to pay restitution in

the amount of \$3, 000 in addition to his back taxes. Owens emerged from the scandal with his reputation fairly intact.

Yet he courted controversy again when he criticized the protest of two African-American athletes at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games. The athletes had given a “ Black Power” salute of raised fists on the awards podium, which Owens deemed inappropriate. In 1970 Owens published a book that chided Black Power activists, *Blackthink: My Life as a Black Man and White Man*, although he

offered a more conciliatory tone in his 1972 book *I Have Changed*. The Legend of Jesse OwensThe last decade of Owens’s life brought him renewed acclaim. In 1974 he was inducted into the USA Track and Field Hall of Fame and in 1976 President Carter honored him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Taking up retirement in Scottsdale, Arizona, Owens suffered from physical ailments brought on by his pack-a-day smoking habit. The habit resulted in a diagnosis of lung cancer for Owens in 1979.

He died in Tucson, Arizona on March 31, 1980 from the disease, leaving behind his wife, Ruth Solomon Owens, and three daughters. He was honored posthumously by an induction into the US Olympic Committee Hall of Fame in 1983. One of the first African-American athletes to emerge as a truly national hero, Jesse Owens was an important figure in the sporting history of the United States. His participation in the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games resulted in four Gold Medals, two with new world records and two with new Olympic records. Indeed, his achievements demanded recognition from sports fans regardless of his ethnicity and inspired future generations of

African-American athletes to pursue their own dreams of Olympic greatness. Although his post-Olympic career generated some negative publicity for his business troubles, Owens remained an Olympic legend for the rest of his life. His eventual work as a corporate spokesman and motivational speaker allowed him to burnish this legend to the point where the 1936 Olympics seemed to be all about a confrontation between Owens and Hitler.

In the end, his accomplishments alone were enough to rebut all the Nazi claims of Aryan superiority; the legend of Jesse Owens's performance did not need embellishment. SELECTED WRITINGS BY OWENS:(With Paul G. Neimark) Blackthink: My Life as Black Man and White Man, William Morrow, 1970.

I Have ChangedFor my whole life was wrapped up, summed up—and stopped up—by a single incident: my confrontation with the German dictator, Adolf Hitler, in the 1936 Olympics. The lines were drawn then as they had never been drawn before, or since. The Germans were hosting the Games and, with each passing day, were coming to represent everything that free people have always feared.

To me and my American buddies, most of the German athletes, the German officials, even the hundreds of thousands of German citizens who crammed the stadium those days in Berlin, weren't really our enemies. How could Lutz Long—the Nazi record-breaking broadjumper—be an enemy after he came over and put his arm around my shoulder and told me what I needed to do when I was on the verge of fouling out of that key event and maybe blowing the entire Olympiad? But Hitler—he was something else. No one with a tinge

of red, white, and blue doubted for a second that he was Satan in disguise. Not that I was too involved with Hitler in the beginning.

I'd spent my whole life watching my father and mother and older brothers and sisters trying to escape their own kind of Hitler, first in Alabama and then in Cleveland, and all I wanted now was my chance to run as fast and jump as far as I could so I'd never have to look back....