

Jesse owens essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Owens was able to cross social and philosophical boundaries as he rose from poverty to national fame after winning a record breaking four gold medals in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The fact that he did this in a time where African Americans were considered inferior to whites in every way made his story more inspiring .

Along with his success, his charm and personality attracted his fans and followers around the world to follow in his footsteps. Owens impacted the lives of many people around the world as he crossed social and philosophical borders and made himself the most important person in helping African Americans become fully integrated into society. “ Jesse Owens: An American Life” by William J.

Baker is a biography of Jesse Owens’ life. It talks about how Owens, the tenth child of Alabama sharecroppers, rose from poverty to become one of the most influential African American athletes of all time. It tells the tale of his rise to fame after he won four gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the many peaks and valleys in his life afterwards. While describing his very hard life, the book stresses that the one thing that remained constant was that Owens remained a popularizing figure to the end of his days. In the end, it explains how his life impacted and inspired the lives of many others. Owens had to overcome many social borders throughout his whole life to become the world renowned man he became.

Born on September 12, 1913 in O Seville, Alabama, Owens had a rough childhood. He had many illnesses like pneumonia and had abnormal growths on legs and chests that had to be removed by his mother with a

knife (Baker pag. 7). When Owens was 10, his family moved to Cleveland hoping for a better opportunity (Baker pag. 16). However, this was not the case as he lived ghetto that even ASK members steered away from (Baker pag. 18).

Growing up Alabama and Cleveland, Owens had to deal with racist attitudes from the beginning. Lucky for him, he went to an integrated junior high and high school that welcomed all ethnicities. It was during his junior high days that he met his mentor, Charles Riley. Riley, the school's white track coach, was the first person to take Owens under arm.

Riley would often bring Owens breakfast and bring Owens home to eat with his family. Their relationship was warm and respectful, and it was from this relationship that Owens truly began to grow up into a man and learned to deal with people of all races (Baker pag. 22). When asked about Riley, Owens said, " He was the first white man really knew, and without even trying, he proved to me beyond all proof that a white man could love a [black man]. He trained me to become a man as well as an athlete. " (Baker pag. 23) As a senior in high school, Owens finally burst into the national spotlight as he broke numerous world records. As one reporter put it, " He dazzled fans not only with his amazing athletic ability, but with his demeanor; He worked quietly and hard without any showboating.

(Baker 31) With this attitude, it was hard for whites and blacks alike to hate him. However, when he reached college, it was a different story. Owens was forced to live in an off-campus apartment instead of a dorm because all the dorms at Ohio State were reserved for whites. When he got a job in an

elevator, he was only allowed to run the freight elevator out of gig HTH from the normal elevator where his white teammates, who were paved much more than him, helped take other white people up and down the elevator (Baker peg. 8) . Even when Owens and the rest of the track team traveled to meets, him and his fellow black teammates were forced to stay in the car while his white teammates ate. Some times, the store owners would not even let the white teammates bring food back to the car for the rest of the team because they didn't want " to feed no [black men]" (Baker peg. 67).

Despite this segregation, he didn't once fight back. After " defeating' Hitler and Nazi Germany in the Berlin Olympics, the discrimination still continued. Owens returned to a heroes welcome and received a few endorsements that gave him money, but he was never offered a permanganate.

" After I came home from the 1936 Olympics with my four gold medals, it became increasingly apparent that everyone was going to slap me on the back, want to shake my hand or have me up to their suite. But no one was going to offer me a job. " (Baker peg. 150) He left Nazi Germany for racist America where he had to go back to sitting at the back of the bus and struggle to find a secure job that fit his skill set. Despite his inability to hold down a job, Owens was still charm the world as he spoke out on political and social issues and traveled around the country to speak to young people. Fragmentariness to influence and inspire the masses. Owens was able to cross all of these social borders as he overcame a rough childhood to become a prominent, influential and inspirational figure in society. Owens also dealt with many philosophical border crossings throughout his life. In 1933, he became the first person in his family to graduate.

At a time where many people dropped out of high school to support their family, like his siblings had, Owens did not only become one of the few African Americans that graduated high school, but one of the even fewer that went on to college. Less than 15% of the overall population pursued college degrees and the percentage of African Americans to do so was much smaller (Baker pg. 33). Along with being considered dumb, Africanizing athletes were said to be inferior and subhuman. Owens and his fellow black teammate disproved this myth as they dominated in track and field at the 1936 Olympics.

The magnitude of their accomplishments was exhibited when Owens received the warmest ovation of his life from the Germans at the 1936 Olympics because his athletic achievement transcended any racial prejudices (Baker pg. 92). Later, in the 1930s, when Africanizing athletes were rebelling and shaking America, Owens spoke out and said how he would not have been able to rise into the figure he became without America and proclaimed that he was “an American first and a black man second.” (Baker 206) Hearing the complaints of the younger generation of African Americans who always complained of being treated unfairly, Owens got angry. He spoke out about the tremendous progress that had been made by blacks in society since he was a kid, even though there still was some prejudices and in fervor schooling.

Even with these prejudices, he went on to say, “If the [black man] could soonest succeed in today’s America, it is because he has chosen to fail.” (Baker 213) Owens crossed philosophical borders as he was able to prove African Americans could make it through school and thrive in sports as well as

advocating for America to unite as one instead of having people of different colors to go around blaming each other for the way things were. Owens became an inspirational figure and inspired many people of the young generation to strive to be their best. One person he inspired was a fellow track star Carl Lewis. Owens had a simple but effective message as he spoke to Lewis at middle school track meet when Lewis was still smaller than everyone else and before he started to become a stand out. Owens said, “You’re a little kid, but you can beat the big guys if you work hard.” (Dyer par. 3) This became the motto for Lewis as he came to be known as a hardware.

In the 1984 Olympics, Lewis won a gold medal in the same four events Owens did in 1936: the 100 meter, the 200 meter, the 4x100 meter relay and the 4x400 meter relay (Dyer par. 4). Owens spoke to other athletes and bus news groups as well, preaching motivation and values, religion, patriotism and hard work (Baker pag. 217). He also, traveled a lot to talk to boys and girls clubs to talk about hard work and encourage them to overcome being raised in a disadvantaged situation. In all these speeches, Owens had a presence that few other speakers had. One reporter observed, “When he enters a room, he doesn’t so much take it over as envelop it; he is friendly to all, outgoing and gracious.” (Baker pag.

218) Owens able to become an inspirational figure who traveled around and inspired many people, young and old, to work hard and be the best they can be. Owens crossed many social and philosophical borders on his way to becoming the most important person in helping African Americans become integrated into society.