He was born James Cleveland Owens, but was nicknamed "J.C." by his family. On his first day of school, his teacher misheard his Alabama drawl and thought he said "Jesse" instead of "J.C." Owens was too shy to correct her, and he was called "Jesse" for the rest of his life.

He grew up in poverty in Oakville, Alabama, and had to walk nine miles each way to school. His family eventually moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where he discovered his talent for track and field.

In 1935, Owens achieved track and field immortality in a span of 45 minutes during the Big Ten meet at Ferry Field in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where he set three world records and tied a fourth. He equaled the world record for the 100-yard dash (9.4 seconds) (not to be confused with the 100-meter dash), and set world records in the long jump (26 feet 81⁄4 inches or 8.13 metres, a world record that would last for 25 years); 220 yards (201.2 m) sprint (20.3 seconds); and 220-yard low hurdles (22.6 seconds, becoming the first to break 23 seconds). This day is known as "Owens' Day."

At the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, Owens won four gold medals in the 100-meter run, 200-meter run, long jump, and 4×100-meter relay. He was the first American track and field athlete to win four gold medals at a single Olympic Games. His performance was a major blow to Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime, which had hoped to use the Olympics to promote Aryan superiority.

After the Olympics, Owens returned to the United States to a hero's welcome. He was invited to the White House by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, but was not given the same opportunities as white athletes. He struggled to find employment and endorse products, and eventually turned to racing against horses and other animals to make a living.

Despite his financial struggles, Owens remained a positive role model and inspiration to people of all races around the world. He continued to speak out against racism and injustice, and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Richard Nixon in 1976.

Owens was a gifted athlete in other sports as well, including basketball and baseball. He played professional basketball for the Harlem Globetrotters and the Indianapolis Clowns, and also played minor league baseball for the Toledo Crawfords.

Owens was a devoted husband and father. He married Ruth Solomon in 1936, and they had three daughters together. He was a loving and supportive father, and he always encouraged his daughters to pursue their dreams.

Owens was a successful businessman after retiring from sports. He founded a public relations firm and a line of sporting goods. He also worked as a motivational speaker and television commentator.

Owens died of lung cancer in 1980 at the age of 66. He left behind a legacy as one of the greatest athletes of all time and a champion for social justice.