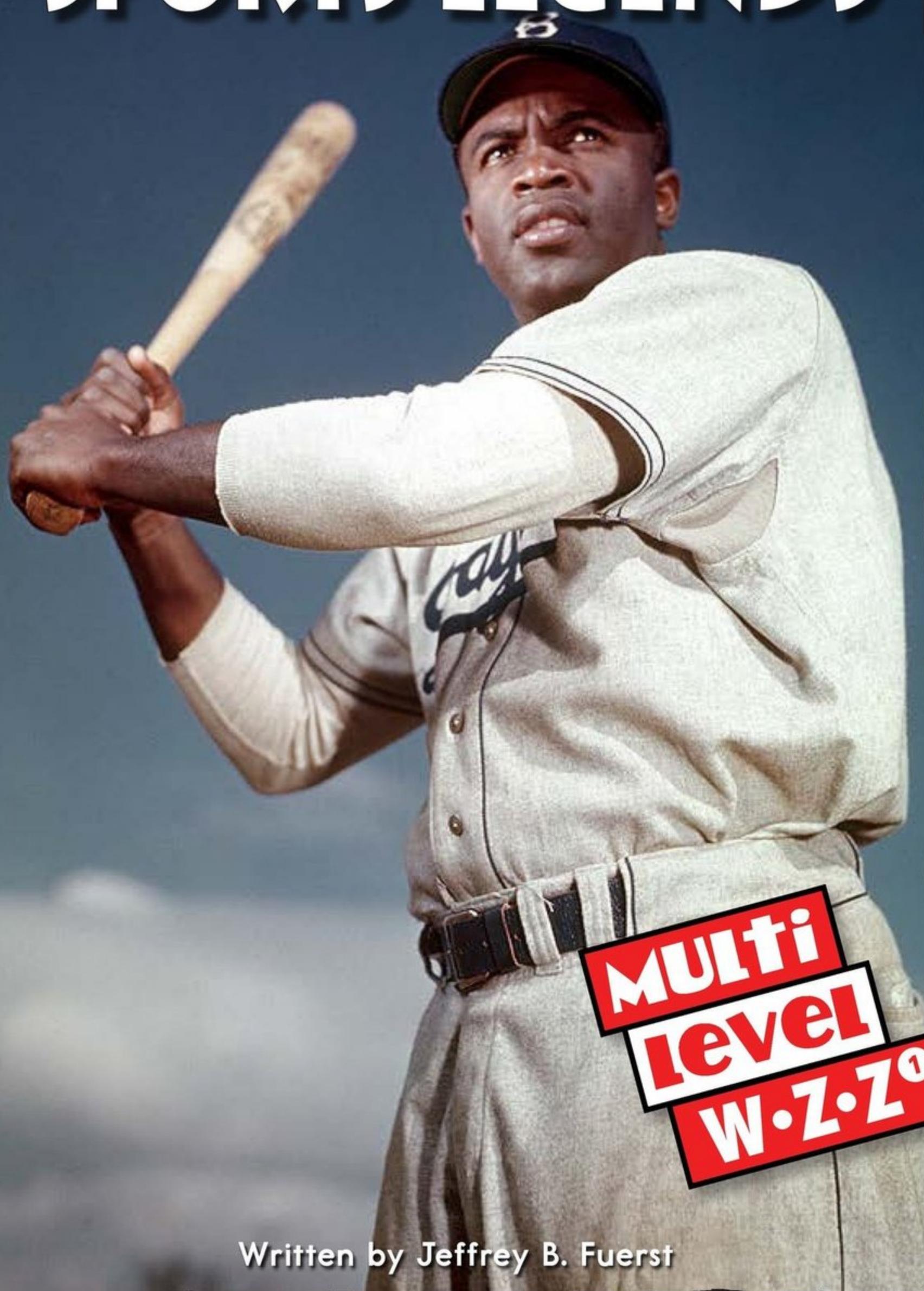


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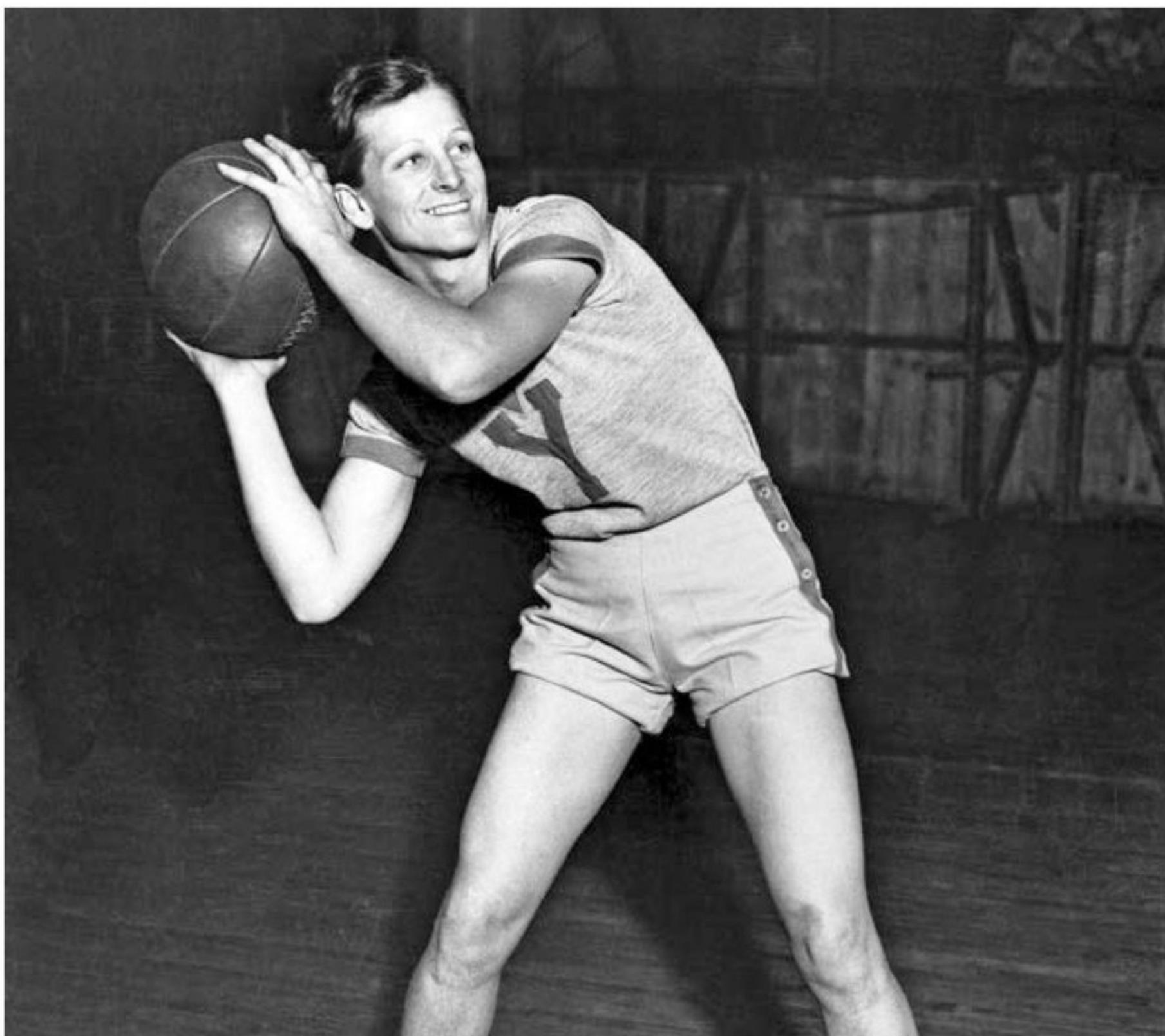
# AMERICAN SPORTS LEGENDS



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Written by Jeffrey B. Fuerst

# AMERICAN SPORTS LEGENDS



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## Focus Question

Who are some American sports legends,  
and why do we remember them?

# Words to Know

commitment  
controversial  
determination  
discriminated  
integrate  
intimidated

legacy  
modest  
ordeal  
racism  
revolutionized  
sharecropper

Front cover: Jackie Robinson

Back cover: Jesse Owens set the long jump record at the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936. His record held for twenty-five years.

Title page: Mildred Didrikson Zaharias

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## The Greatest Athlete of the 20th Century: Jim Thorpe (1887–1953)

Who would you say was the greatest athlete from the last century? Soccer's Pelé? Basketball's Michael Jordan? Hockey's Wayne Gretzky?

Good choices. These record-setting superstars **revolutionized** their sports and deserve to be in the running for that No. 1 spot. But the athlete named the greatest of the great was Jim Thorpe, a Native American born in Oklahoma in 1887. He played professional baseball, was the biggest football star of his day, and performed legendary feats in track and field.

Let's go back to 1912, to Stockholm, Sweden, during the Summer Olympic Games . . .

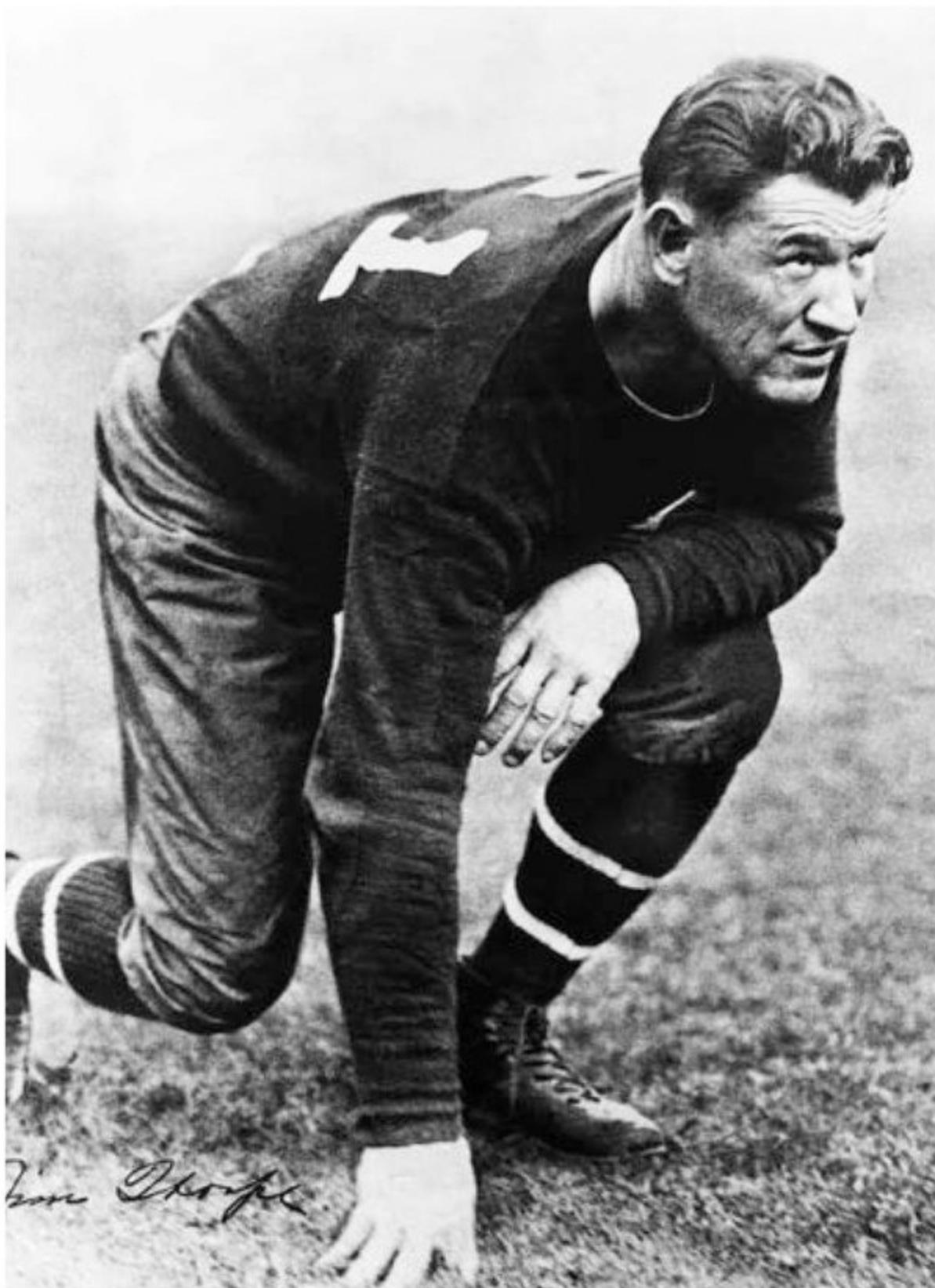
*The Native American runner from the Sac and Fox tribes crouches at the starting line for the Olympic 200-meter dash. It's the third event of five in the grueling pentathlon. "On your mark," calls the starter. "Get set . . ."*

*Jim Thorpe bursts out of the blocks. He had already scored an easy victory in the long jump, but had placed a disappointing third in the javelin throw. I need this race, he thinks as he sprints down the track.*

*But, running his hardest, it seems he just can't pull ahead of the other runners—until the last moment. At the finish line, Jim Thorpe wins by a hair!*



Jim Thorpe throws the shot put.



Jim Thorpe poses in a football uniform.

Before he appeared at the Summer Olympics of 1912, Jim Thorpe was already a well-known college football star. As an All-American halfback from Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, he thrilled

crowds with his blinding speed and strength. He could just as easily run over would-be tacklers as run past them. He was also his team's punter and place kicker.

Thorpe starred on the school's baseball and basketball teams, too. He excelled in golf, tennis, swimming, and just about any sport he tried.

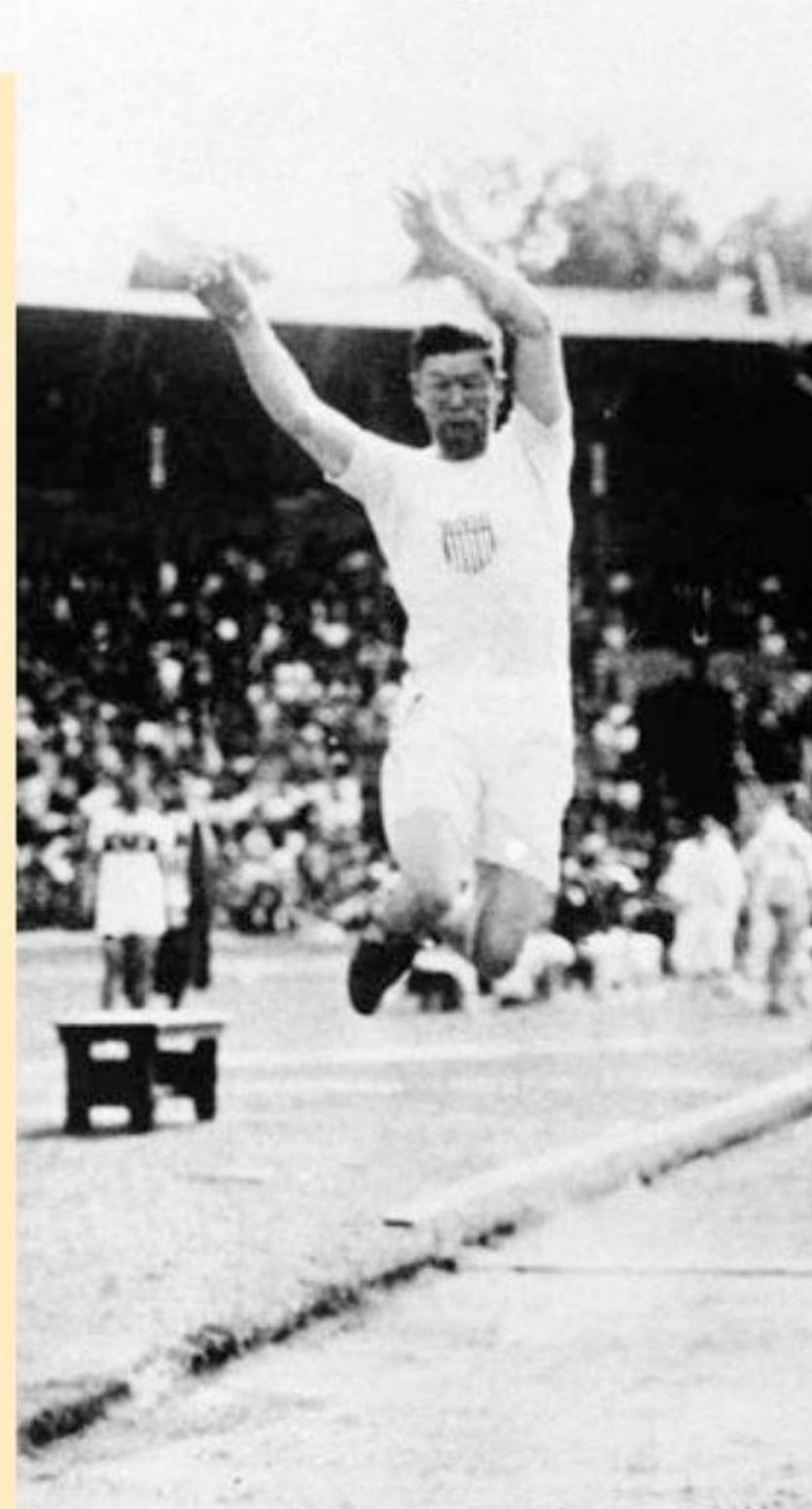
At the 1912 Olympics, Thorpe represented the United States in the two toughest track-and-field events: the pentathlon (five events) and the decathlon (ten events).

## Do You Know?

The difficult Olympic athletics pentathlon and decathlon required a variety of skills. The combination of events tested an athlete's all-around ability.

**Pentathlon events:** long jump, javelin, discus, 200-meter run, 1,500-meter run

**Decathlon events:** 100-meter run, long jump, high jump, shot put, 400-meter run, 110-meter hurdles, discus, javelin, pole vault, 1,500-meter run



Jim Thorpe in the long jump

Over the span of a few days, Jim Thorpe achieved the unimaginable. He won four of the five events in the pentathlon, set a world record for the decathlon, and won the gold medal in both events—amazing! No one in Olympic history had done this before Jim, and no one has done it since.

When King Gustav V of Sweden called Jim to the awards stand to get his medals, he said, “You, sir, are the greatest athlete in the world.”

Always a man of few words, Jim replied, “Thanks, King.”

## Jim Turns Pro

After the Olympics, Jim was famous the world over. He received a letter of congratulations from the White House. Professional sports teams offered him rich contracts. He turned them down to return to Carlisle to play one more season of college football. He scored twenty-five touchdowns and made a total of 198 points. He married his college girlfriend, too. What a year!



Then, in 1913, he became a professional baseball player with the famous New York Giants. He was great at swinging a bat, and his superior strength and

speed also made him great at covering the outfield.

Although Jim was good at baseball, he preferred football. In 1915, when professional football was just getting started, Jim joined the Canton (Ohio) Bulldogs. He led his team to three championships: in 1916, 1917, and 1919—while also playing baseball in the summer months.

## Do You Know?

James Francis Thorpe's Native American name, Wa-Tho-Huk, means "bright path." Jim certainly lit up playing fields wherever he went.

His all-around athletic ability is said to have come from his mastery of traditional Native American skills as a boy. In his later years, Thorpe championed the portrayal of Native American roles in films.



Jim Thorpe in 1932, dressed in traditional ceremonial regalia

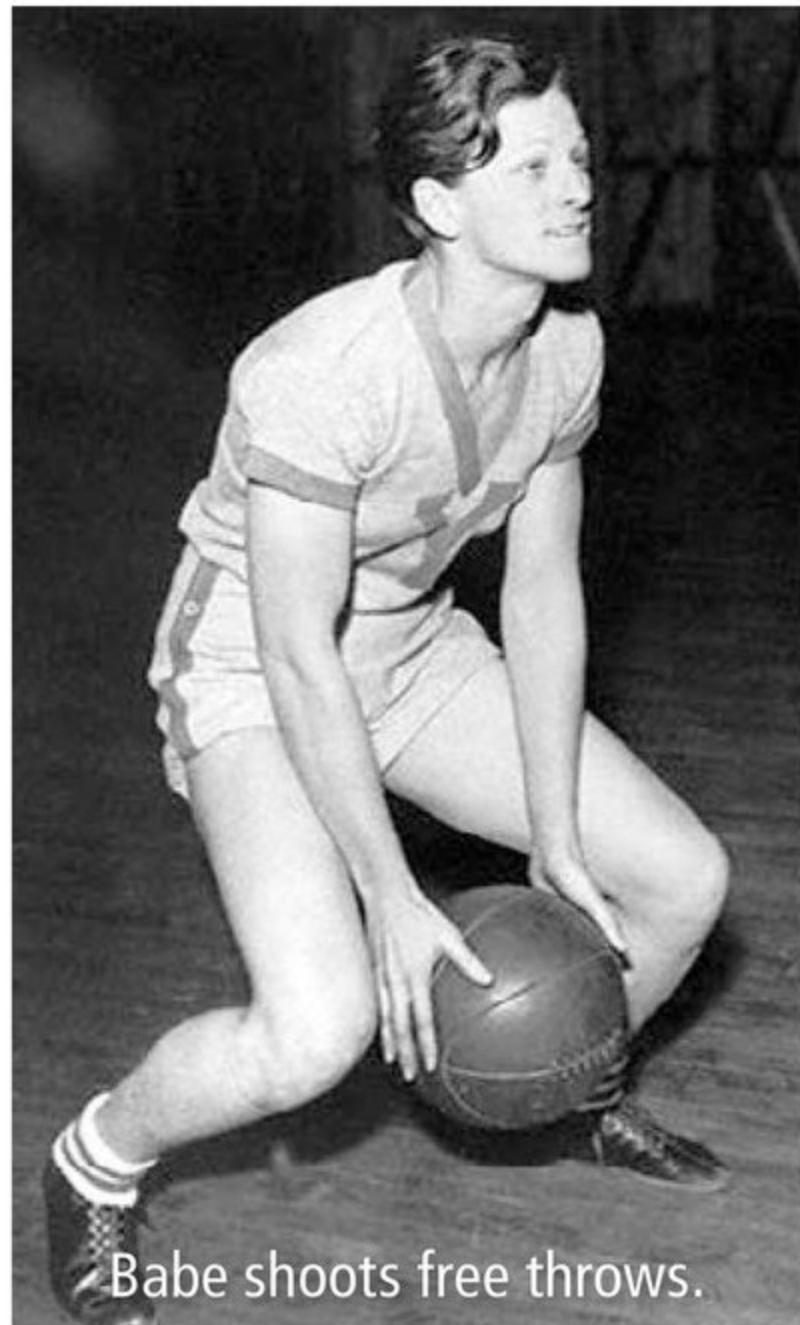
In 1920, Jim became the first president of the American Football Association, which later became the National Football League. One of his goals was to make the game more popular. To excite the fans at halftime, Jim would stand at the fifty-yard line and drop-kick a ball over the goalposts. Then he would face the other direction and do it again!

Today, a statue of Jim Thorpe greets visitors to the Football Hall of Fame. It is a tribute to the founding father of professional football and its first true star, the greatest athlete of the 20th century.

## The Other Babe: Mildred Didrikson Zaharias (1911–1956)

Jim Thorpe may have been named the greatest athlete of the 20th century, but sports lovers might also consider another all-around candidate. Mildred “Babe” Didrikson was an all-around athlete who dominated women’s basketball, track and field, and golf in the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s. Her nickname was borrowed from baseball’s famous Babe Ruth. She was a serious, rough-and-tumble competitor at a time when women, even athletes, were expected to be **modest** and ladylike.

Babe Didrikson was born in Texas in 1911, the sixth of seven children. In high school, she was



Babe shoots free throws.

a standout in volleyball, baseball, swimming, tennis, and especially basketball, the most popular women’s sport of the time. Her high-school team never lost a game. Never. She often scored thirty points by herself when twenty was considered a respectable total—for the whole team!



Babe Didrikson, right, smashed another world record when she sprinted the 80-meter hurdles in 11.7 seconds.

Babe's interests shifted to track and field. A firm believer in strength training, Babe lifted weights, which few women did at that time. Babe's serious workouts and natural abilities paid off at a national track meet in July 1932. She entered eight events and won five. What's even more astonishing is that she single-handedly won the meet, competing against teams with twenty members.

A few weeks later at the Summer Olympics, Babe won gold medals and set world records in the 80-meter hurdles, javelin, and high jump. Now a celebrity, Babe drew attention to women's basketball by putting together a team that toured the country playing against men's teams.

## No Game She Can't Play

Babe's real fame was yet to come, and in a different sport: golf. Although Babe didn't pick up a club until age twenty-one, she practiced her swing with focus and **determination**. She would hit one thousand balls a day, taping over blisters that formed on her hands. Just a year later, in 1935, she won her first championship.

In the next twenty years, Babe won eighty-two tournaments, including an astonishing seventeen in a row in 1946 and 1947. She helped found the LPGA (Ladies Professional Golf Association) in 1949.

In 1953, while at the top of her game, Babe was diagnosed with cancer. Following an operation, her doctors thought she would never play again. Only four months later, she was back on the pro tour.

*It is the 18th hole of the Serbin Women's Open Tournament in Miami Beach. Babe Didrikson's booming first shot lies in the center of the fairway. She takes out a 5-iron and smacks the ball. It soars high and straight before landing on the green. Babe pulls back her putter and sinks the ball. She has won the tournament—just ten months after cancer surgery.*

Her family and millions of fans were devastated when the cancer returned the following year, and Babe Didrikson passed away at age forty-five.

Her life of sports achievements gained her a place in two Halls of Fame: golf and track and field. But her real **legacy** is the lasting example of her independent spirit. Babe was a courageous, outspoken individualist who blazed a path for future women athletes by playing her own way.



Babe drives for the green.

## Do You Know?

- Didrikson got her Babe Ruth-inspired nickname after hitting five home runs in a youth softball game.
- She excelled at golf, track and field, softball, baseball, volleyball, tennis, swimming, diving, bowling, and billiards. “The only thing I don’t play,” Babe joked, “is dolls.”
- She was voted “Woman Athlete of the Year” six times. No other person has been honored so often.



Jackie Robinson

## Baseball's Most Daring Player: **Jackie Robinson (1919–1972)**

What would Major League Baseball be like today without superstars such as Frank Thomas, Derek Jeter, and Alex Rodriguez? How might the Hall of Fame look without Hank Aaron, Willie Mays, Roberto Clemente, and so many other brilliant African American and Latino ballplayers?

Hard to imagine that omission, but very possible—were it not for the courage and determination of Jackie Robinson. In 1947, he became the first African American to play Major League Baseball.



The Washington Senators, a Major League Baseball team, at a time when black players were still excluded from the league

During this time, black and other non-white people were **discriminated** against in many ways, including in sports. Only white players were allowed to play in the Major Leagues. So baseball-loving black players formed their own Negro Leagues. They developed their own talented stars—and lots of fans.

The general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Branch Rickey, knew it was wrong to keep talented players out of the Major Leagues. It was wrong for the players and wrong for baseball. He wanted to **integrate** the teams, but he knew it would take a very special person to stand up against **racism** and break the color barrier. Then he discovered Jackie Robinson.



## Do You Know?

Jackie had won a scholarship to UCLA, where he earned varsity letters in four sports: baseball, basketball, track and field, and football. He had also been one of the few African American officers in the Army in World War II.

Jackie's intelligence and leadership abilities were a big part of why Branch Rickey knew he could handle the pressures he would face.

Jackie Robinson could hit, run, and field as well as anyone. His daring style of running bases excited fans and unnerved opposing players. A fierce competitor, he could beat opponents with a bunt, a blast, and—most importantly—his brain.

After a year in the minor leagues, in which he led the league in batting and his team to a championship, Jackie, now twenty-eight, joined the Brooklyn Dodgers. Robinson's rookie season was an **ordeal**. Opposing players yelled insults at him. Pitchers purposely threw at him. Fans booed. Even some of Jackie's teammates treated him badly.

Jackie took it all with quiet dignity—and determination. He never lost his temper and never fought back with his fists. Instead, he let his skills on the diamond speak for him. In his rookie year, he hit solidly, led the league in stolen bases, and won the Rookie of the Year Award. In 1949, he won the National League batting title and also the highest honor, the Most Valuable Player Award. By 1950, he was the highest-paid Brooklyn Dodger and the team's leader.

Jackie Robinson and Dodger teammates on his first official day in the Major Leagues, April 15, 1947



*It is the first game of the 1955 World Series, a match between the rival New York Yankees and Brooklyn Dodgers. The Dodgers have been in seven World Series—and have lost every one. “Wait ‘til next year!” had become the fans’ annual cry.*

*Jackie Robinson leads off third base. He’s thirty-six years old now and at the end of his career. But he is still a dangerous base runner and a joy to watch. He takes an extra step toward home plate, then another. He dives back to third, safe.*

*Jackie dusts himself off. He stares down the pitcher and resumes his big lead. He darts right, then left, then . . . off he goes! The pitch flies to the plate, but not in time—Jackie is safe at home! The fans go wild!*

*Jackie’s bold steal of home pumps up his teammates, and they go on to win the World Series. In Brooklyn, “next year” has finally arrived!*



Jackie steals home.



The Arizona Diamondbacks baseball team in 2001 shows how baseball has become fully integrated.

Jackie Robinson showed that ability was what mattered. Any player who could perform at that professional level belonged in the Major Leagues. Soon, other teams began to hire black and Latino players. Today, the national pastime of the United States is composed of players and management of all races and nationalities.

Jackie Robinson didn't break any baseball records, but he will be remembered long after the records are forgotten because he broke baseball's color barrier. His inner strength and **commitment** to equality made it possible for all players to participate equally in professional American sports.

## The Fastest Man: Jesse Owens (1913–1980)

Sprinting legend Jesse Owens burst onto the sporting scene in junior high school in Cleveland, Ohio. He set world records for his age group in the high jump and long jump.

The high school track coach invited Jesse to join the team. But Jesse was very poor. He had to work after school and couldn't practice. Instead, he got up at 5:00 a.m. to train with his coach.

Jesse's legend grew. At a national high school track meet, the teenage star tied the world record for the 100-yard dash and set a new world record for the long jump.

### Do You Know?

Jesse chose to go to Ohio State University even though it was one of the few colleges that did not offer him a scholarship. He worked as an elevator operator, waiter, and gas station attendant to support himself and his young wife, Ruth.

In 1935, at a college championship meet, Jesse set new world records for the 220-yard dash, long jump, and 220-yard low hurdles. He tied the world record of 9.4 seconds for the 100-yard dash. Never before had a track-and-field athlete accomplished so much. And he did it in about an hour—with a back injury. Yet, for all the records he set, his greatest triumphs lay ahead.



Jesse Owens races several strides ahead of everyone at the 1936 Olympics.

## An Olympian for Eternity

In 1936, just before the start of World War II, Jesse traveled to Berlin, Germany, for the Summer Olympic Games. But his participation in the Olympic Games was **controversial**. Nazi leader Adolf Hitler ruled Germany. Nazis believed that Aryans—non-Jewish white people—were a “master race” superior to all others. They called black people “primitive.”

Jesse was not **intimidated** by Hitler’s attitude or by threats. He firmly believed that individual excellence, not race, color, or where you were from, distinguished one person from another. And he proved it on the track in Berlin.

*It is August 1936, the final day of the Olympics. Jesse Owens has already breezed to the gold medal in the 100-meter and 200-meter races. Chancellor Hitler has left the stadium rather than shake his hand.*



*Being snubbed does not bother Jesse Owens. He is focused on the long jump. Although it is his best event, he almost did not qualify because earlier, a German judge claimed he fouled. Now Jesse and Luz Long, a German, have both jumped 25 feet, 10 inches.*

*It is the final round. With a few deep breaths and*

*long strides, Jesse sprints down the path. He springs into the air and sails into the landing pit for a record-setting leap of 26 feet, 5 1/2 inches. Another gold medal!*

Jesse set out to do his best at the 1936 Olympics. He earned four gold medals, a first in Olympic history. And, by letting his accomplishments speak for themselves, he embarrassed an evil dictator.

Jesse returned from Germany to a ticker-tape parade and cheers of admiration, but little else. At that time, black athletes did not get product endorsement or appearance contracts. His fame produced little income or stability for his family. To earn a living, Jesse participated in promotional stunts. He raced racehorses and motorcycles. At Negro League baseball games, he raced the fastest players, often giving them a ten-yard lead!

He went on to be a playground director for the city of Cleveland and a well-known speaker. He toured the country and the world inspiring young people to do their best. The government named him America's Ambassador of Sports. Later in life, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Jesse Owens' grandfather had been a slave. His father was a **sharecropper** who worked on other people's farms. Jesse demonstrated that it is not where you come from that determines what you achieve. That is the legacy of Jesse Owens, a man who was always a step ahead.

## Glossary

<b>commitment</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	dedication; determination (p. 19)
<b>controversial</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	causing much disagreement (p. 21)
<b>determination</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the commitment or drive to work toward a difficult goal; resolve (p. 12)
<b>discriminated</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	treated a person or group unfairly because of gender, race, age, religion, or other differences (p. 15)
<b>integrate</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	to bring different ideas or groups of people together (p. 15)
<b>intimidated</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	made to feel frightened or overwhelmed (p. 21)
<b>legacy</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	something handed down from the past to the present (p. 13)
<b>modest</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	humble; not likely to brag or seek attention (p. 10)
<b>ordeal</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a hard or difficult experience (p. 17)
<b>racism</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the belief that one race is better than another; unequal treatment based on such a belief (p. 15)
<b>revolutionized</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	made enormous changes (p. 4)
<b>sharecropper</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a farmer who works someone else's land in return for part of the profit from the crops (p. 23)

# American Sports Legends

*A Reading A-Z Level Z Leveled Book*  
Word Count: 2,363

## Connections

### Writing and Art

Imagine being a newspaper reporter interviewing one of the athletes from the book. Write an article about the interview including both the questions and answers.

### Social Studies

Choose one of the athletes from the book. Create a timeline of that athlete's life. Record at least ten events including his or her birth and death.

The logo for Reading A-Z features the word "Reading" in a large, bold, red sans-serif font. Above the letter "e", there is a stylized icon resembling a sun with rays. To the right of "Reading", the letters "A-Z" are written in a smaller, bold, black sans-serif font.

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