



## Owens pierced a myth

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Jesse Owens  
named  
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For most athletes, Jesse Owens' performance one spring afternoon in 1935 would be the accomplishment of a lifetime. In 45 minutes, he established three world records and tied another.

But that was merely an appetizer for Owens. In one week in the summer of 1936, on the sacred soil of the Fatherland, the master athlete humiliated the master race.



Owens won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics.

Owens' story is one of a high-profile sports star making a statement that transcended athletics, spilling over into the world of global politics. Berlin, on the verge of World War II, was bristling with Nazism, red-and-black swastikas flying everywhere. Brown-shirted Storm Troopers goose-stepped while Adolf Hitler postured, harangued, threatened. A montage of evil was played over the chillingly familiar Nazi anthem "Deutschland Uber Alles."

This was the background for the 1936 Olympics. When Owens finished competing, the African-American son of a sharecropper and the grandson of slaves had single-handedly crushed Hitler's myth of Aryan supremacy.

He gave four virtuoso performances, winning gold medals in the 100- and 200-meter dashes, the long jump and on America's 4x100 relay team. Score it: Owens 4, Hitler 0.

A remarkably even-keeled and magnanimous human being, Owens never rubbed it in. Just as sure as he knew fascism was evil, he also knew his country had a ways to go too in improving life for African-Americans.

"When I came back to my native country, after all the stories about Hitler, I couldn't ride in the front of the bus," Owens said. "I had to go to the back door. I couldn't live where I wanted. I wasn't invited to shake hands with Hitler, but I wasn't invited to the White House to shake hands with the President, either."

Owens wasn't complaining. That wasn't his style. He believed it was his job "to try to make things better."

Born James Cleveland Owens on Sept. 12, 1913, in Oakville, Ala., he was often ill as a child, suffering from both chronic bronchial congestion and several bouts of pneumonia. Inadequate housing, food and clothing didn't help his health.

By the age of seven he was expected to pick 100 pounds of cotton a day. At nine his family moved to Cleveland. When a teacher asked his name, he answered, "J.C.," which is what he was called. The teacher misunderstood his Southern drawl and the name was Jesse from then on.

As a teenager he set or tied national high school records in the 100- and 220-yard dashes and the long jump (called the broad jump then). At Ohio State, he was not a good student but he was easily the swiftest on the track.

Two weeks before the 1935 Big Ten Championships, Owens was involved in some playful hi-jinks with his roommates. But the prank backfired and he slipped on water during his getaway, severely injuring his tailbone.

On May 25 in Ann Arbor, Mich., Owens couldn't even bend over to touch his knees. But as the sophomore settled in for his first race, he said the pain "miraculously disappeared."

3:15 -- The "Buckeye Bullet" ran the 100-yard dash in 9.4 seconds to tie the world record. 3:25 -- In his only long jump, he leaped 26-8 1/4, a world record that would last 25 years.

3:34 -- His 20.3 seconds bettered the world record in the 220-yard dash.

4:00 -- With his 22.6 seconds in the 220-yard low hurdles, he became the first person to break 23 seconds in the event.

Some credit Owens with setting five world records, saying he also beat the marks for the shorter 200 meters and 200-meter low hurdles.

In his junior year at Ohio State, Owens competed in 42 events and won them all, including four in the Big Ten Championships, four in the NCAA Championships, two in the AAU Championships and three at the Olympic Trials.

In Germany, the Nazis portrayed African-Americans as inferior and ridiculed the United States for relying on "black auxiliaries." One German official even complained that the Americans were letting "non-humans, like Owens and other Negro athletes," compete.

But the German people felt otherwise. Crowds of 110,000 cheered him in Berlin's glittering Olympic Stadium and his autograph or picture was sought as he walked the streets.

On Aug. 3, the 5-foot-10, 165-pound Owens won his first final, taking the 100 meters in 10.3, edging out Ralph Metcalfe, also an African-American.

The next day, Owens was almost out of the long jump shortly after qualifying began. He fouled on his first two jumps, though he was stunned when officials counted a practice run down the runway and into the pit as an attempt.

With one jump remaining, Luz Long, a tall, blue-eyed, blond German long jumper who was his stiffest competition, introduced himself. He suggested that Owens make a mark several inches before the takeoff board and jump from there to play it safe. Owens took the advice, and qualified.

In the finals that afternoon, Long's fifth jump matched Owens' 25-10. But Owens leaped 26-3/4 on his next attempt and won the gold medal with a final jump of 26-5 1/2. The first to congratulate the Olympic record holder was Long, who looked like the model Nazi but wasn't.

"It took a lot of courage for him to befriend me in front of Hitler," Owens said. "You can melt down all the medals and cups I have and they wouldn't be a plating on the 24-karat friendship I felt for Luz Long at that moment. Hitler must have gone crazy watching us embrace. The sad part of the story is I never saw Long again. He was killed in World War II." Owens, though, would continue to correspond with Long's family.

In the 200-meter dash on August 5, Owens won in an Olympic record of 20.7 seconds, beating out Mack Robinson, the older brother of Jackie Robinson.

That was supposed to be the end of Owens' Olympic participation. But from out of the blue, Owens and Metcalfe replaced Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller, the only Jews on the U.S. track team, on the 4x100-meter relay.

The rumor was that the Nazi hierarchy had asked U.S. officials not to humiliate Germany further by using two Jews to add to the gold medals the African-Americans already had won. Glickman blamed U.S. Olympic Committee president Avery Brundage for acquiescing to the Nazis.

On August 9, the 4x100 relay team, with Owens running leadoff, won by 15 yards and its world-record time of 39.8 seconds would last 20 years. Upon Owens' return to New York and a ticker-tape parade, he had to ride the freight elevator to a reception in his honor at the Waldorf-Astoria. He was treated as a kind of curiosity. When endorsements didn't come his way, he made money by, among other activities, running against horses and dogs.

"People said it was degrading for an Olympic champion to run against a horse,

ZONE POLL

but what was I supposed to do?" Owens said. "I had four gold medals, but you can't eat four gold medals."

Not until the fifties did he achieve financial security, becoming a public speaker for corporations and opening a public-relations firm.

In a 1950 Associated Press poll, he was voted the greatest track and field star for the first half of century, outpolling Jim Thorpe by almost three to one.

In 1976, President Ford presented Owens with the Medal of Freedom, the highest honor the U.S. can bestow upon a civilian.

Owens, a-pack-a-day smoker for 35 years, died of lung cancer at age 66 on March 31, 1980 in Tucson, Ariz.

Four years later, a street in Berlin was renamed in his honor.

A decade after his death, President Bush posthumously awarded Owens the Congressional Medal of Honor. Bush called his victories in Berlin "an unrivaled athletic triumph, but more than that, a triumph for all humanity."