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Dan Hodges is a former Labour Party and GMB trade union official, and has managed numerous independent political campaigns. He writes about Labour with tribal loyalty and without reservation. You can read Dan's recent work here



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Jesse Owens: the Olympic superstar that keeps soaring

By **Dan Hodges** **Sport** | Last updated: August 3rd, 2012

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Jesse Owens's legacy is political, but his greatest triumph was personal

So the 2012 games have finally begun. The cycling, swimming, rowing, gymnastics and strange diagonal horse dancing have all been intoxicating. But the athletics are the Olympics, and the Stratford Stadium is their true home.

Coincidentally the opening rounds of the athletics coincide, to the day, with a significant Olympic anniversary. It was on August 3, 1936 that Jesse Owens won his first Olympic medal. Owens is usually described as a sprinter, but in truth he was an elite all-rounder. As well as winning gold in the 100 metres, 200 metres and the relay, he also secured success in the long jump.

This has led some people to compare him to that other exceptional US athlete Carl Lewis, who won gold medals in those same events in four Olympics, spanning 1984 and 1996. But the comparison is baseless. Lewis won nine golds, plus a silver, to Owens's four. Lewis competed, and triumphed in, four successive Games. Owens: only one. Yet while Lewis was the greater athlete, Owens is the greater Olympian.

There was lots of talk in the run-up to these Games about how the Olympic ideal was being subsumed by corporatism and suffocated beneath a blanket of oppressive security. Indeed, I wrote myself: "It would be hard to envisage an event that less encapsulates the purity of the Olympic ideal than a modern Olympic Games."

Well, there's one event that might manage that. And that's the Nazi Olympics in Berlin. When the Olympic flame arrived in Downing Street last week, David Cameron was photographed alongside the bearer. But



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the Prime Minister was forbidden from holding or even touching the torch itself. That rule is a direct legacy of '36, where Hitler attempted to hijack the games and turn them into a propaganda vehicle for National Socialism.

Over time, Owen's performances at those Games have become mythologised. According to the narrative, a lone black athlete single-handedly exposed Hitler's boast of Aryan supremacy, humiliated him to such an extent he stalked from the Olympiastadion in fury, and derailed the Führer's evil plan to appropriate that sacred event.

Sadly, it didn't quite work out like that. Hitler was delighted as Germany topped the medal table with 33 golds. The supposed snub of Owens actually came later when the Olympic officials informed Hitler that if he wanted keep shaking hands with the athletes, he had to do so with all the winners, not just the Germans. And as the American journalist William Shirer wrote at the time, "I'm afraid the Nazis have succeeded with their propaganda. First, the Nazis have run the Games on a lavish scale never before experienced, and this has appealed to the athletes. Second, the Nazis have put up a very good front for the general visitors, especially the big businessmen".

It's true Hitler was surprised and angered by Owen's performance, and decided that, after Germany had won the war, black athletes would be excluded from future Games. But then if Hitler won the war, securing long-jump gold would have been the least of a black athlete's problems.

Ironically, in the years after the Games Owens chose to highlight the racism he experienced on his return to the United States, rather than his experiences in Berlin. Invited to appear at a victory dinner soon after he arrived home, Owens was allowed to acknowledge the applause of the audience, and was then asked to leave as it was deemed inappropriate for a black man to sit down to dinner with whites. Subsequently, he was forced to become what was effectively a travelling showman, and frequently found himself running against racehorses to entertain crowds, instead of other athletes. Asked years later about that time, Owens remarked: "Hitler didn't snub me – it was FDR who snubbed me. The President didn't even send me a telegram".

Owens was belatedly brought back into the Olympic fold, and travelled as an official with the US delegation to the 1968 games in Mexico. While there, he tried to convince US athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos to apologise for their Black Power salute. "The black fist is a meaningless symbol. When you open it, you have nothing but fingers – weak, empty fingers", he told Smith, though he later changed his view, writing in 1972, "I realised now that militancy in the best sense of the word was the only answer where the black man was concerned, that any black man who wasn't a militant in 1970 was either blind or a coward".

Owens's legacy is political. But his greatest triumph was personal. Today we watched Jessica Ennis step out into that marvellous stadium in Stratford, and acknowledge the crowds. But imagine for a moment that stadium bedecked not in the flags of the competing nations, but the red and black of the swastika. Instead of applause, picture straight-arm salutes. Contemplate what it must have been like not hear roars of encouragement, but roars of "Sieg Heil".

Interviewed about his achievements in Berlin, Owens recalled the long jump that brought him his second gold. "I decided I wasn't going to come down. I was going to fly. I was going to stay up in the air forever" he said. And he has.

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