

Jesse Owens transcends all races

In his centennial year, it's good to remember he still has no equal as greatest track athlete

September 07, 2013 | Philip Hersh | Globetrotting

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It is impossible to define Jesse Owens with mere numbers, for it would suggest that a life story so consequential could be told fully in quantifiable terms.



Jesse Owens flies through the air during the long jump event at th...

Yet a number is at the genesis of this remembrance, so it would not be wrong to begin with a few more to give perspective on just how extraordinary Owens was in simply athletic terms — for his time and for all time.

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The 100th anniversary of his birth is Sept. 12. For one-fourth of that time, 25 years, his long jump of 26 feet, 81/4 inches at the 1935 Big Ten championships stood as the world record.

No track and field world record other than those set in the doping Wild West era of the 1980s has lasted as long.

Even more remarkable: At the 2012 Olympics, only two men jumped farther than Owens had on May 25, 1935.

And that jump distance was only one of the stunning numbers that record Owens' achievements during the



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greatest day any person ever had in the nearly 3,000-year history of track and field.

In just 75 minutes, the Ohio State sophomore won the long jump, 100-yard dash, 220-yard dash and 220-yard hurdles. He broke five world records (in the longer races, he ran faster than the times for the metric equivalents) and tied one, in the 100, where his time of 9.4 seconds would not be bettered for 13 years.

And those are not even the sports achievements for which James Cleveland Owens — called Jesse since an elementary school teacher heard him pronounce the initials "J.C." — is best remembered.

"What Jesse Owens achieved on the track is singular," said ESPN's Jeremy Schaap, author of "Triumph," an Owens biography. "That alone would put him among the handful of greatest athletes ever.

"What he achieved against the backdrop of the Berlin Olympics, in a country where he was officially something less than a full-fledged human being, with so much pressure, with his (financial) future literally at stake ... all that makes his achievements the most spectacular in the history of sport."

Schaap's book fleshes out the rich, multiple dimensions of Owens' story and puts them in the context of their times.

It was an era when track and field ranked with baseball, boxing and college football as the most popular sports in the country, when a black champion still could not eat and sleep where he wanted in many parts of the United States (including on-campus housing at Ohio State), when Adolf Hitler had proclaimed blacks and Jews to be inferior races unworthy of German citizenship — or, as the Holocaust soon would prove, even of being alive.

A 22-year-old sharecropper's son from Alabama would be thrust into that environment and emerge triumphant. His four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics put the lie to Hitler's ideas about Aryan supremacy and gave black Americans a sporting hero to wear the mantle Joe Louis dropped briefly when he lost his first fight with Germany's Max Schmeling six weeks before the Berlin Summer Games.

"Jesse was the person who pointed the way," said Ralph Boston, who would break Owens' long jump world record in 1960. "Looking at what he did and how he did it, in the face of what was happening in the world at that time and of what had been done to him, you knew Jesse was the *creme de la creme*."

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To look at it in athletic terms, a fine place to start is Bud Greenspan's 1964 film "Jesse Owens Returns to Berlin." The images of Owens running and jumping with the primitive equipment and track conditions of the time are compelling.

Owens and the other athletes had no starting blocks. They used trowels to dig holes to support their feet at the start of races. The tracks were cinder, and rain turned them to mud, especially in the inside lane where everyone congregated in any event longer than 400 meters. Jump runways deteriorated similarly in bad weather.

One only can imagine what Owens would have done running and jumping on the synthetic modern tracks that favor sprinters.

In the 100 meters, he drew the inside lane and tied the world record. In the 200 meters, with a middle lane but a light rain, he broke the Olympic record. In the long jump, on a rainy, windy day, he set an Olympic record (26-51/2) that lasted until Boston broke that one in 1960 as well. In the 400 relay, where the omission of Jewish sprinters Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller from the U.S. team owed plainly to anti-Semitism among U.S. officials all too willing to please Hitler, Owens ran the first leg, leading to a world record that lasted 20 years.

But for a couple of meaningless post-Olympic meets, that was the end of Owens' competitive career. His financial future was far from assured.

Ralph Boston was born in Mississippi three years after the Berlin Olympics. As he grew up, Owens already was both mythic and symbolic to a young black athlete in the South.

"To me, what he did meant I have a chance," Boston said. "As an African-American, he opened the door for a lot of people in a lot of things."

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