

Name: _____ Class: _____

Jesse Owens

By Shelby Ostergaard
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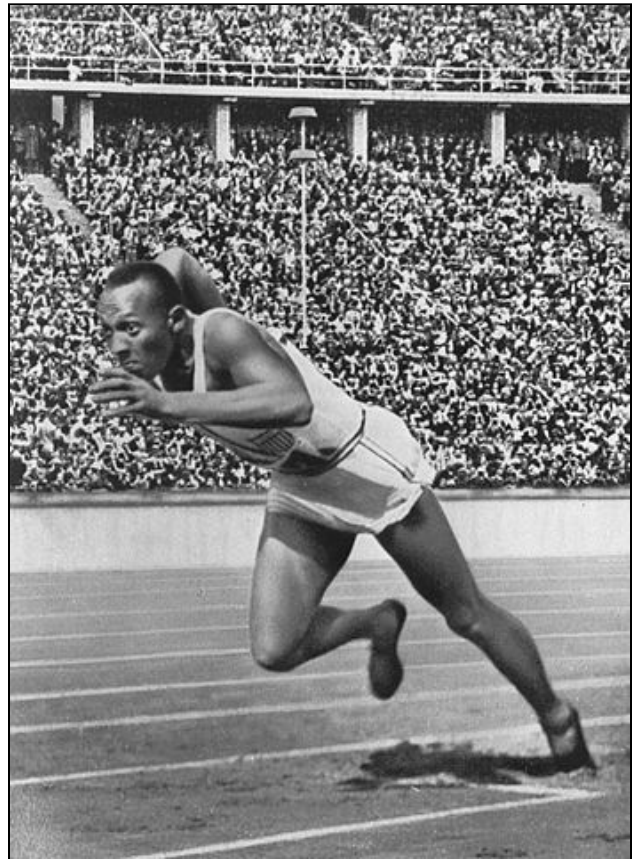
James Cleveland "Jesse" Owens (1913-1980) was an African American track and field athlete. Owens won four gold medals at the Summer Olympics in Germany in 1936. In this informational text, Shelby Ostergaard provides additional information about Owens' life and success in the Olympics. As you read, take notes on the challenges that Owens faced in sports and in life.

- [1] Jesse Owens could run. He could run faster and jump longer than anyone in the world. But when he set out to prove this at the Summer Olympics in Berlin in 1936, no one wanted him there. No one wanted him running that race. He wasn't even welcome in the country, let alone the stadium. But Jesse Owens was an expert at overcoming hurdles and blazing his own path forward. He was determined to compete, no matter how many barriers were in his way.

Early Life

Jesse Owens was born on September 12, 1913, in the town of Oakville, Alabama, but he moved to Cleveland, Ohio, when he was nine. He was actually named James Cleveland Owens and nicknamed J.C. — but in Ohio, one of his teachers couldn't understand his thick Southern accent. She thought he called himself Jesse. It stuck.

His athletic career began at East Technical High School. He won three track and field events while competing in the 1933 National Interscholastic Championships. He went on to race for Ohio State University and was later nicknamed "The Buckeye Bullet," as Ohio is known as the Buckeye State. While at university, he matched one world record in the 100-yard dash and broke three others: the long jump, the 220-yard dash, and the 220-yard low hurdles. Owens was used to winning. He competed in 42 different collegiate events in 1935 and won all of them.



"Jesse Owens3" by Unknown is in the public domain.

Owens was a star track performer in college, but he also faced major challenges. His school did not offer scholarships for track and field, as the sport was not as well respected back then, so Owens had to work a series of jobs throughout college to pay for his tuition. In addition, the University did not allow Owens to live on campus because of his race. Owens, like many African Americans during this time period, was subject to racist treatment and was often discriminated against.

- [5] He would not let this deter¹ him, however, and continued to succeed on the track. Owens enjoyed running because, as he said, “it was something you could do by yourself, and under your own power.” It was this mindset that would lead him to the pinnacle² of athletics, where he would face even more challenges.

The Olympics

At the 1936 Summer Games, Jesse Owens became the first person ever in Olympic history to win four gold medals in track and field, claiming victory in the long jump, the 100-meter dash, the 200-meter dash, and as a member of the 4x100 meter relay. His feats remained unmatched until the 1984 Summer Olympics. But what Jesse Owens — the son of a sharecropper³ and the grandson of slaves — did was particularly special because of when and where he did it.

The 1936 Summer Olympics were the first to be broadcast on television and took place in Berlin, Germany, during a turbulent⁴ time. Fascism⁵ was spreading across Europe, and Germany’s Chancellor, Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, was at the center of it. International tensions were high. Europe was on the brink of World War II, which officially broke out three years after the Summer Olympics. People were terrified. But the games and the excitement surrounding them continued in spite of the impending war.

The reception Owens received in Berlin was cold. Hitler criticized the United States for including athletes of color and Jewish athletes on the roster. He believed that they were inferior to white athletes and could not believe that the United States had chosen people of diverse ethnicities to represent itself on the world stage. Owens was called racial slurs in public and was generally mistreated by the Berliners.

The heightened exposure of the games that broadcast television provided was exciting for Hitler; he believed it was a chance for favorable world news coverage of Nazi Germany. Hitler planned to use the Summer Olympics to prove his theories that “Aryans,” or white Europeans, were a superior race to all others. Jesse Owens’ success at the Olympics undermined this completely, proving that athletes of color were not in any way inferior to white athletes. Hitler was angered by Owens’ success. He stormed out of the stadium and refused to shake Owens’ hand. Instead of stories about German successes, the papers were filled with articles about Owens breaking records and Hitler’s overblown response to his wins. Both Owens’ medals and Hitler’s reaction catapulted Jesse Owens into international fame.

After the Olympics

- [10] But fame did not lead to post-Olympic success. Athletes didn’t come home to multi-million dollar endorsements deals then as they do now. Owens was only 22 when he became an international hero, but he never again competed as a traditional athlete. Owens found that there were many people willing to congratulate him on his success but few who would offer him a job. To earn money after the Olympics, Owens raced against cars and horses, and he even played for the basketball exhibition team, the Harlem Globetrotters.

1. **Deter (verb):** to discourage someone from doing something
2. the most successful point
3. a farmer who gets a portion of the crop they harvest for a landowner
4. **Turbulent (adjective):** characterized by conflict or disorder
5. a political system characterized by a very powerful leader and state control of social and economic life

Despite his achievements as a national hero, Owens was still a black man in a deeply divided and racially segregated United States. He faced discrimination and aggression when he returned home. Even as a gold-winning Olympic athlete, he wasn't allowed to ride in the front of the bus. He couldn't use the front door to enter public buildings. He couldn't raise his family where he wanted. Jesse Owens wasn't invited to shake hands with Adolf Hitler after his biggest win, but he wasn't invited to shake hands with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, either.

He eventually set up a public relations and marketing business in Chicago, Illinois, and traveled the country to speak at conventions and other business gatherings. He encouraged individual achievement, regardless of race, class, or creed.⁶ His speeches often called back to why he fell in love with running in the first place — it was something he could do himself without having to rely on others to allow him to do it.

Jesse Owens died in 1980 from cancer. His accomplishments continue to inspire even after his passing. It is difficult to achieve something that you have never seen someone else achieve. Before Jesse Owens, there were few black athletes whose success shown so bright. Jesse Owens was celebrated around the world and cheered on by people of every race. He did not let the opinions of anyone hold him back or stop him from running.

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6. the beliefs that a person lives by

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement best expresses the central idea of the text?
 - A. Jesse Owens used his platform after his win at the Olympics to bring attention to how white and black athletes are treated differently.
 - B. Even after Jesse Owens returned from the Olympics, he continued to better himself as an athlete and compete.
 - C. When Jesse Owens returned from the Olympics, he demanded respect and to be treated like the hero he was.
 - D. Jesse Owens didn't allow the racial discrimination he faced at home or abroad to keep him from doing what he loved and succeeding at it.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "He would not let this deter him, however, and continued to succeed on the track. Owens enjoyed running..." "it was something you could do by yourself, and under your own power." (Paragraph 5)
 - B. "Instead of stories about German successes, the papers were filled with articles about Owens breaking records and Hitler's overblown response to his wins." (Paragraph 8)
 - C. "To earn money after the Olympics, Owens raced against cars and horses, and he even played for the basketball exhibition team, the Harlem Globetrotters." (Paragraph 9)
 - D. "He eventually set up a public relations and marketing business in Chicago, Illinois, and traveled the country to speak at conventions and other business gatherings." (Paragraph 11)

3. What is the author's main purpose in the text?
 - A. to show how the Olympic games have changed over time, specifically in the treatment of black athletes
 - B. to provide information about Jesse Owens' famous wins and the effect that they, and his attitude, had on others
 - C. to criticize the United States for disrespecting Jesse Owens in the past and not giving him the credit he deserved
 - D. to emphasize the discrimination that black athletes from all nations faced during the Olympic games

4. How do paragraphs 9-10 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
 - A. They provide students with important historical information about segregation.
 - B. They prove that the United States wasn't impressed with Jesse Owens' win.
 - C. They emphasize how poorly Jesse Owens was treated, even as an Olympic winner.
 - D. They show how little the United States used to care about Olympic winners.

5. What is the relationship between Jesse Owens' attitude and his success as a runner?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the text, Jesse Owens is described as an international hero. Why were his actions in the Summer Olympics heroic? Despite his heroic status, how was Owens treated and why? How do you think a hero should be treated?
2. Jesse Owens overcame several obstacles, both in America and when he competed in the Olympics abroad. How did he approach these obstacles? How did his attitude help him overcome them? Describe a time when you faced something difficult and what you did to overcome it.
3. Throughout his life, Owens faced prejudice because of his race, even after winning gold Olympic gold medals. What were the effects of this prejudice? Do you think Owens would have continued to compete if it weren't for the prejudice he encountered when he returned to America? Why or why not?