

The Four Gold Medals that Horrified Hitler and Changed the World

J13P-1



Senior Division: Journeyperson

Jesse Owens was born in Oakville Alabama on September 12, 1913. His first home was a small wooden house where he was the last of 10 children. His mother and father were Henry and Mary Emma Owens. Jesse's birth name was James Cleveland Owens. His family lived on a slightly large farm which they rented from a sharecropper. The Owens family had very little money. The floors of the house were bare wooden plates; the children walked them barefoot. Even though his family was poor, he had a happy boyhood. He was free to run and play in their field and forest near his house. Jesse was not as enthusiastic about school. He paid little attention to his lessons, he had trouble learning to read, and he skipped school for long periods of time. Each year as the planting in harvest season came around, school closed so the children could help in fields. No matter how hard the Owens family worked their farm, they could not get ahead. Every year they had to give half of their crops to the landowner to pay the rent, and they could not raise enough money to buy their own land. They were always in debt. Any extra money they had was used for clothes and other necessities. Jesse's clothes had already been worn and needed to be patched up. His ragged clothes embarrassed him so much that he hid from neighbor girls to escape from their glances. One of the Owens' children, Lilly, moved to Cleveland, Ohio. Lilly's letters convinced Emma Owens that the rest of her family should also moved to Cleveland. Sometime in the early 1920s, the Owens family packed up and boarded a northbound train.

When the Owens arrived, they moved into a small apartment on the east side of Cleveland. They soon discovered that the neighborhood was full of strangers from the south, but also immigrants from Poland, Italy, and other distant countries. In a busy city like Cleveland, even these people could find a job at factories, stores, and construction sites which paid low wages.

Although he went to school in Oakville, Alabama, he had to start all over at Bolton Elementary School. He was placed in the first grade. The teachers and principal told him that he had a lot of work to catch up with the other children his age. In a short time, Jesse was in second grade. After he finished in Bolton Elementary, he went to Fairmont Junior High, and he was able to stay in school while he had a job. At Fairmont, he also met a girl named Minnie Ruth Solomon who would later be his wife. Minnie also had been born on a southern sharecroppers land.

Fairmont was also where Jesse was in his first organized sport. He ran track. Physical education class helped strengthen his legs and lungs. Charles Riley was his gym teacher and was the coach of the Fairmont track team. Riley saw that Jesse had the potential for track and field. He told Jesse that he should do the high jump and the broad jump. Since Jesse had to work after school, he agreed to work out in the morning before school. Riley carefully coached Jesse on his running form. He taught the boys on his team to run as lightly as possible. Riley told them that a great runner makes no unnecessary movement and waste no energy. To practice, he had him run longer distances than he would. When he trained, he ran a quarter-mile. In his track meets, he ran 220 yards 200 yards, and the 100-yard dash. After Riley's coaching, Jesse clocked himself and he was running 11 seconds flat on the 100-meter dash. And he jumped 22 feet, 11 inches. While Jesse remained training with Riley, his family kept on working.

In 1930, he enrolled at East Technical High School. Student at East Tech prepared for jobs instead of preparing for college. They could take courses in mechanics and other hard laboring subjects. By 1930, Jesse was concentrating on one career - track and field. In his junior year, he was dominating every meet he entered.

During Jesse's first year in college, he could not join the Ohio State University track team. The coach put him through intensive training but he still thought he needed more practice. His coach had his feet closer together at the start so that he could go faster. One day he was recognized by the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) and asked to be on their team. One day he went to a meet in New York that was organized by the AAU. At the meet, he ran the 100-meter dash; he got second place behind Ralph Metcalf. At another meet, the judges let Jesse take a run to see how fast he was. With a running start, he ran 100 meters in 8.4 seconds.

Larry Snyder worked with Jesse more than 1000 times on his start. Larry thought that if Jesse improved on his start, his time would be faster. Jesse astonished his coach and everyone at the Ann Arbor meet. When he ran the 220-yard dash, his time was 20.3 seconds. He also did the running long jump. He jumped 26.8 feet far. In the 220-yard low hurdles, he timed 22.6 seconds. Each one of these marks was a new world record. He also held the world records for the 200-meter dash and the 200-meter hurdles. After the track meet his teammates told him captain of the team. With his coaches, Larry coaching him and Riley encouraging him, he was running at peak form but he still had academic problems. Only 100 out of 14,000 students were African-American. Because he was black he could not live on campus. He had to live off campus in a boarding house with other African American students. Jesse's new job allowed him to run as much time, as he wanted to and study. Only in the evenings, he worked elevators when cleaning crews needed to clean different floors.

In 1932 the American international Olympic Committee decided to have the 1936 Olympics in Germany in Berlin Germany. Since 1933 the German Olympic team trained for the 1936 games. On the American team there were two Jews. These Olympics were during World War II. The Nazis did not like the Jews, as they would send them to concentration camps and kill

them. To keep them safe, they did not go to the Olympics. In order for Jesse to compete in the Olympics, his grades had to be to improve, and he did it.

In 1935, Jesse and his track team to the west coast into California. After his world records, he was a track star to see. Newspapers devoted even more attention to him on and off the track. On the track, Jesse won 10 events in a row.

On July 5, 1935, he married Minnie Ruth Solomon; they got married in her home in Cleveland. Jesse became a father, but it was hard for him to be at home.

In 1936, he trained for the Summer Olympics. The AAU had a large representation on the American Olympic Association, and its rules were very strict. Jesse knew that being in the 1936 Olympics, if he should make the team, was his best chance of ever place himself among the best.

Before he went to the Olympics he had a race with his Ohio State University team against the University of Wisconsin. The Big Ten race was held in Jesse's home state of Ohio. He ran the 100-yard dash in 9.3 seconds. He won all of the events that he entered. His toughest challengers were Eulace Peacock and Ralph Metcalf. Ralph had already 13 Olympic gold medals. Jesse and Ralph both wanted to make the Olympic team. They easily made it to the finals. The finals were held on Randall's Island. Owens and Metcalf easily made the team. Jesse won all three of his events, the 100-meter dash, the 200-meter dash, and the broad jump. Jesse and Ralph were two of the 19 African-Americans that made the Olympic team in 1936.

Before Jesse went to the Olympics Walter White of the NAACP wrote Jesse of that decent fourth 1935. White was trying to persuade coins to not participate in the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

White wrote:

The very preeminence of American Negro athletes gives them an unparalleled opportunity to strike a blow at racial bigotry and to make other minority groups conscious of the sameness of their problems with ours and puts them under the moral obligation to think more clearly and to fight more vigorously against the wrongs from which we Negroes suffer.

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Olympics

Did not send

My dear Mr. Owens:

Will you permit me to say that it was with deep regret that I read in the New York press today a statement attributed to you saying that you would participate in the 1936 Olympics games even if they are held in Germany under the Hitler regime. I trust you will not think me unduly officious in expressing the hope that this report is erroneous.

I fully realize how great a sacrifice it will be for you to give up the trip to Europe and to forego the acclaim which your athletic prowess will unquestionably bring you. I realize equally well how hypocritical it is for certain Americans to point the finger of scorn at any other country for racial or any other kind of bigotry.

He did not send the letter.

In Berlin, Hitler thought that the German team would win the whole Olympics; but Jesse destroyed Hitler's dreams by winning the 100-meter dash the 200-meter dash, the 400-meter relay, and the long jump. To Hitler's horror, the Germans cheered Jesse on. During the 200-meter dash, he passed by his own teammate Matthew Robinson, the older brother of the famous Jackie Robinson, who would become the first African-American major-league baseball player in

history. In Berlin Jesse set two Olympic records and a world record for the long jump that he held for 25 years. When he returned to New York they gave him a tickertape parade.

At the 1936 Olympics, Jesse Owens was the first American to win four gold medals in a single Olympics. He also met a German long jumper named Luz Long who became friend with Jesse during the competition. After the Olympics they vowed to each that they write to each other. After the Olympics Luz fought in World War II for Germany, and he wrote to Jesse about what was happening in the war. He died in the war.



Jesse had already suffered racial discrimination and racism as a young athlete in high school and college. But after the Olympics Jesse's agent was making hundreds of calls on his behalf. He arranged for Jesse to endorse products in newspapers and radio and give speeches at ball games. However, after the Olympics it was hard for him to find steady job.

Jesse Owens, the world's fastest man, died in 1980.

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Jesse Owens

Owens, Jesse. "An Open Letter to a Young Negro. **Addressing Black athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos.**"