

Sports Stars: Jesse Owens

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Jesse Owens at start of record breaking 200 meter race during the Olympic games 1936 in Berlin Reproduction of photograph in "Die Olympischen Spiele, 1936" p.27, 1936

Synopsis: Jesse Owens, also known as the "Buckeye Bullet," was born on September 12, 1913, in Oakville, Alabama. In high school, he won three track and field events at the 1933 National Interscholastic Championships. Two years later, while competing for Ohio State University, he equaled one world record and broke three others. In 1936, Owens won four gold medals at the Olympic Games in Berlin. Owens died March 31, 1980.

Early Years

The son of a sharecropper and the grandson of slaves, Jesse Owens was born James Cleveland Owens on September 12, 1913, in Oakville, Alabama. As a child, Owens was often sick from lung problems. Still, he was expected to work. At age 7, he was picking up to 100 pounds of cotton a day to help his family put food on the table.

When he was 9 years old, Owens moved with his family to Cleveland, Ohio. There, the young "J.C." faced many changes. Gone was the one-room schoolhouse he had attended in Alabama. It was replaced by a bigger setting with stricter teachers. Owens earned the nickname that would stick

with him the rest of his life. One of his teachers, misunderstanding his Southern accent, believed he said his name was "Jesse," when he had said "J.C."

Rising Star

At East Technical High School, Owens became a nationally recognized sprinter. He set records in the 100- and 200-yard dashes and the long jump. After high school, Owens went to Ohio State University, where he continued to shine as an athlete. He became known as the "Buckeye Bullet."

At the 1935 Big Ten Championships, he tied a world record in the 100-yard dash and set a long-jump record. His long-jump record of 26 feet, 8 ¼ inches was unbroken for 25 years. Owens also set new world marks in the 220-yard dash and in the 220-yard low hurdles.

That was just the start. He won four events at the NCAA Championships, two at the AAU Championships and three at the Olympic Trials. Owens competed in 42 events that year, and won them all.

1936 Olympic Games

For Adolph Hitler and the Nazis, the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games were expected to be a German showcase. Hitler believed certain Germans, the Aryans, would outperform blacks and Jews. Germany had excluded Jewish athletes from its Olympic teams. Hitler criticized the United States for including black athletes on its teams.

However, blacks won six of the United States' 11 Olympic gold medals. Owens had the most wins. He captured four gold medals, in the 100-meter dash, the long jump, the 200-meter dash and the 400-meter relay. He also broke two Olympic records. Owens' world record for the long jump lasted 25 years until being broken by Olympian Ralph Boston. After Owens won the 100-meter event, Hitler stormed out, though some reports say that Hitler later congratulated him.

After the Olympics, President Franklin D. Roosevelt did not meet with Owens to congratulate him. U.S. presidents usually met with champions. Finally, in 1976, President Gerald Ford awarded Owens the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

The mild-mannered Owens did not seem surprised by his country's actions. "When I came back to my native country, after all the stories about Hitler, I couldn't ride in the front of the bus," he 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."

Later Years

Following the Olympic Games, Owens started to earn money for his physical talents. He raced against cars and horses. For a time, he played basketball with the Harlem Globetrotters.

Owens later worked in marketing. He started a business in Chicago and traveled around the country to speak at business gatherings.

Owens died of lung cancer in Arizona, on March 31, 1980. He had smoked cigarettes for much of his life. Cancer is an illness that is often caused by smoking.

Quiz

- 1 What is the MAIN idea of the section "1936 Olympic Games"?
- (A) Despite Jesse Owens' success in the Olympics, he still faced problems back in the U.S. because he was black.
 - (B) Hitler didn't allow Jewish athletes on German Olympic teams, and thought blacks shouldn't be included either.
 - (C) President Franklin D. Roosevelt did not shake hands with Jesse Owens after he won gold medals in the Olympics.
 - (D) During the 1930s, black people in the Southern U.S. could not sit at the front of the bus or live where they wanted.

- 2 Read the section "Rising Star." Which detail BEST reflects Owens' athletic success in college?
- (A) Owens became known as the "Buckeye Bullet" because he was so fast.
 - (B) Owens gained national fame as a sprinter in high school.
 - (C) Owens participated in several championship games during college.
 - (D) In 1935, Owens won all 42 events he competed in that year.

- 3 What is the purpose of including the synopsis at the beginning of the biography?
- (A) to explain how Owens got his nickname
 - (B) to show Owens' birth and death dates
 - (C) to give a short overview of Owens' life
 - (D) to highlight Owens' success in the Olympics

- 4 Read the following paragraph from the section "1936 Olympic Games."

However, blacks won six of the United States' 11 Olympic gold medals. Owens had the most wins. He captured four gold medals, in the 100-meter dash, the long jump, the 200-meter dash and the 400-meter relay. He also broke two Olympic records. Owens' world record for the long jump lasted 25 years until being broken by Olympian Ralph Boston. After Owens won the 100-meter event, Hitler stormed out, though some reports say that Hitler later congratulated him.

Which of the following BEST shows how the paragraph is organized?

- (A) It highlights the records Owens broke at the Olympics, and states how long they lasted.
- (B) It compares Owens' victories during the Olympics to the records he set in college.
- (C) It explains how Owens won four gold medals, and contrasts him with the other U.S. athletes.
- (D) It lists all of Owens' wins in the Olympics, and shows how his success affected Hitler.