Jesse Owens Biography

Jesse Owens was a track and field star. His most famous moment came in the 1936 Olympics when he won four gold medals – much to the annoyance of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party who hoped the Olympics would be a showcase for Aryan supremacy. In his later life, Jesse Owens became a goodwill ambassador for America and athletics.

“The battles that count aren’t the ones for gold medals. The struggles within yourself — the invisible, inevitable battles inside all of us — that’s where it’s at.”

– Jesse Owens (from autobiography)

Short bio – Jesse Owens

Jesse Owens was born in Alabama and aged 9 the family moved to the Granville section of Cleveland. His early life was marked by poverty and he was forced to take many menial jobs such as delivering goods and working in a shoe repair shops. However, he was able to develop his passion for running and athletics; from an early age he was marked as having great potential talent. In later life he gave much credit to Charles Riley, his high school coach who encouraged him and made allowances for his difficulty in making evening training sessions because Jesse had to work in a shoe repair shop.

Jesse Owens rose to national prominence in 1933, when he equalled the world record (9.4 seconds) for the 100 yard dash. He attended Ohio State University, but without a scholarship he had to continue working part time. At the time, America was a highly segregated society and when travelling with the team, Jesse had to suffer the indignities of eating at separate restaurants and staying at different hotels.
One of his great athletic feats occurred in 1935, where in one track meet he broke three world records. This included the long jump (record stood for 25 years), 220 yards and 220 yards hurdles. He also equalled the record for 100 yards.

**Jesse Owens at 1936 Olympics**

Jesse Owen’s finest moment came in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. He won Olympic gold in the 100m, long jump, 200m and 4* 100 metres relay. (An achievement not matched until Carl Lewis in 1984). It was a powerful rebuttal to the Nazi’s hopes of displaying ‘Aryan superiority’. Hitler gave medals to German athletes on the first day, but, after that decided not to give any medals. Albert Speer later wrote that Hitler was annoyed that the negro, Jesse Owens had won so many gold medals.

“….but he was highly annoyed by the series of triumphs by the marvelous colored American runner, Jesse Owens. People whose antecedents came from the jungle were primitive, Hitler said with a shrug; their physiques were stronger than those of civilized whites and hence should be excluded from future games.”

Yet, with great irony, Jesse Owens was treated well during his stay in Germany, he didn’t experience the segregation that he did back home in United States and many Germans sought his autograph.

During the games Jesse Owens displayed the sportsmanship that he became renowned for. During the long jump final, he found time to massage his German rival Lang. Lang later acknowledged the great spirit of sportsmanship that Jesse Owens embodied. Jesse Owens was grateful for the friendship that Lang displayed. Later, Jesse Owens remarked:

“It took a lot of courage for him (Lang) to befriend me in front of Hitler… You can melt down all the medals and cups I have and they wouldn’t be a plating on the 24-karat friendship I felt for Lutz Long at that moment. Hitler must have gone crazy watching us embrace. The sad part of the story is I never saw Long again. He was killed in World War II.”

Despite, achieving a remarkable athletic achievement, Jesse Owens was denied the commercial reward or praise that he might have expected. He was never given a reception by F.D. Roosevelt or future US presidents. In 1936, the American Olympics association rescinded his Olympic status after he refused to travel to Sweden to try and cash in on some commercial enterprises back in America.

Jesse was forced to take part in various ‘athletic showcases’ such as racing against horses, or racing against local runners with a 10 yard head start. As Jesse Owens wryly remarked

“After I came home from the 1936 Olympics with my four medals, it became increasingly apparent that everyone was going to slap me on the back, want to shake my hand or have me up to their suite. But no one was going to offer me a job.”
He moved into business but it was not successful and it ended in bankruptcy in the 1960s. He was even prosecuted for tax evasion. However, in 1966, with the civil rights movement gaining impetus, Jesse Owens was given the opportunity to act as a good will ambassador speaking to large corporations and the Olympic movement.