Jesse Owens

Jesse Owens has been regarded as perhaps the best known Olympic athlete of all time. The television sports network ESPN says, "...Owens' story is one of a high-profile sports star making a statement that transcended athletics, spilling over into the world of global politics." James Cleveland "Jesse" Owens was born in 1913 in Oakville, Alabama in a time of unyielding segregation in America. Perhaps no one in the first half of the 20th Century did more to change the way the world and his country viewed black athletes and black citizens more than Jesse did. The youngest of ten children born to Henry, a poor sharecropper and son of a former slave, and Emma Owens, James was called "J.C."

Times were tough for the Owens family. Leaving his home at the age of 8, his father moved the family to Cleveland, Ohio in search of employment opportunities. On his first day in the public school in Cleveland, the teacher misunderstood J.C.'s name and recorded it as "Jesse." The new name stuck with him the rest of his life. The job opportunities for his father were few and far between and the family remained in poverty. Young Jesse worked at several jobs when he wasn't in school. He delivered groceries, loaded freight cars and worked in various other odd jobs. It was during this time that Jesse discovered he enjoyed running, which would prove to be the turning point in his life.

One day in gym class, at Fairmont Junior High, the students were asked to race. Coach Charlie Riley noticed the speed of a fast, young athlete while timing a 60-yard dash. "I'd noticed him watching me for a year or so, especially when we'd play games where there was running or jumping." Riley immediately invited Owens to come out for the track and field team. Jesse's demanding work schedule meant that he would have to practice in the early mornings, but Coach Riley was willing to put the time in to help shape the natural talent he saw in his young, new recruit. Matriculating on to Cleveland East Technical High School, Jesse continued to stand out in track.

He broke the World Record for the 100-yard dash in High School and tied it again in Chicago in an interscholastic meet. He also excelled at the broad jump. His prowess was so well known, that many colleges and universities sought to recruit him the superb athlete. He chose to attend Ohio State University, but his struggles were just beginning. He faced segregation at every turn. He was not allowed to live on campus, eat in restaurants with the white members of the track team on the road, and rarely was allowed to stay in the same hotel with most of his teammates.

Because he was not offered a scholarship, Jesse had to continue to work off campus to support his education. On May 25, 1935 the Big Ten Championship competition in Ann Arbor, he had fallen and injured himself the week prior to the meet. His coach wasn't sure Jesse was physically able, but Owens insisted that his injuries were healed enough to compete. They were. He tied his own World Record in the 100-yard dash. Then set new World Records in the broad jump, the 220-yard dash and the 220-yard hurdles--all within a span of forty-five minutes! No one had ever broken three world records and tied in a fourth in the history of track and field.
That same year Jesse made two momentous life decisions. He married his high school sweetheart, Ruth Solomon and decided to join the United States Olympic Team. The highly politicized Olympic Games of 1936 were controversial to say the least. They were held in Berlin, Germany. At that time, Germany was ruled by the powerful Adolph Hitler, the Nazi dictator, whose beliefs in racial supremacy were soon to plunge the world into World War II. This was to be Hitler's showcase of the superior Aryan "Master Race." His unswerving belief that blacks and Jews were genetically inferior was about to be shattered, not only by Jesse, but many other black and Jewish athletes.

The European media insulted Jesse and the other 11 African-Americans competing on America's team. Jesse won four gold medals at that Olympics, in the 100-meters sprint, the 200-meter sprint, the long jump and the 400-meter relay, setting two Olympic records and one world record. His long jump record stayed intact for 25 years. Angered at first, even Chancellor Hitler and the German spectators were awed by his feats. The crowds began cheering him on as he continued to astound the world with his athletic prowess.

A false story has been told that Hitler was in the stadium for some of Owens' events but had refused to acknowledge him after his remarkable performances. In fact, in Owens' Autobiography, The Jesse Owens Story, Owens himself recounted how Hitler had stood up and waved to him. He said, "When I passed the Chancellor he arose, waved his hand at me, and I waved back at him. I think the writers showed bad taste in criticizing the man of the hour in Germany." Ironically, President Franklin Roosevelt, then involved in an election and concerned about the reaction in America's southern states, refused to see Owens at the White House. Owens later remarked that it was Roosevelt, not Hitler, who snubbed him.

When Jesse returned home to the United States, he was celebrated in New York City with a ticker tape parade, and many honors. It is said that he had to ride the freight elevator to a reception in his honor at the Waldorf-Astoria. He was treated as a kind of curiosity. When endorsements didn't come his way, he made money racing professionally. He raced against thoroughbred horses around the country and other "fast" runners. Jesse would come to a town and be matched against the town's speedster. Jesse would usually spot him about ten to twenty yards then blow past him with his Gold Medal, lightening speed.

It was not until the 1950s that he achieved financial security, becoming a public speaker for corporations and the US Olympic Organization. In a 1950 Associated Press poll, he was voted the greatest track and field star for the first half of century (outpolling Olympic great Jim Thorpe by almost three to one). On the speaking circuit Jesse encouraged young disadvantaged athletes of all races in their desires to become champions. He was an articulate and entertaining lecturer. He would stress the importance of religion, hard work and loyalty. In fact, Jesse was so well-liked and successful that he started his own public relations firm.

In 1956, President Dwight Eisenhower asked him to be his personal representative at the Olympic Games in Australia. He traveled around the world speaking and encouraging
young athletes on a grander scale. President Gerald Ford presented Owens with the Medal of Freedom, the highest honor the U.S. can bestow upon a civilian in 1976. Unfortunately, Jesse, a habitual smoker, died of lung cancer on March 31, 1980. President George H. W. Bush awarded Jesse Owens the Congressional Medal of Honor (posthumously accepted by his widow, Ruth) in 1990. The President referred to his 1936 Olympic victories in Berlin as "...an unrivaled athletic triumph, but more than that, a triumph for all humanity."

Permission is granted to reprint this article provided the following paragraph is included in full:

Jim Mathis, CSP is an international Certified Speaking Professional, executive coach and trainer. To subscribe to his free personal and professional development newsletter, please send an email to: subscribe@jimmathis.com with the word SUBSCRIBE in the subject. An electronic copy will be sent out to you every month. For more information on how Jim and his programs can benefit your organization or group, please call 888-688-0220, or visit his web site: www.jimmathis.com.