

Jesse Owens

Celebrate the Century - 1930s

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James Cleveland Owens was born in Oakville, Alabama on September 12, 1913. He was the seventh of ten children born to Henry and Emma Owens. James' family worked as sharecroppers on an Alabama farm and by the time he was seven he was expected to pick 100 pounds of cotton a day. James was afflicted with chronic bronchitis as a child and also suffered several bouts of pneumonia during the winter months. The family was too poor to afford doctors and hospitals so James had to recover on his own.

When he was nine years old his parents moved to Cleveland, Ohio in search of work and James entered the public school system. On his first day at the new school one of his teachers asked him for his name and he replied J.C. The teacher misunderstood his Alabama drawl and thought he said Jesse. Jesse was his name from that day forward.

Jesse excelled at track and field in both Junior High School and High School. He set Junior High world records in the high jump and the broad jump.

In High School, Jesse won every major track event and the state championship three years in a row. During Jesse's senior year at the National Interscholastic Meet, he set the world record for high schools, running the 220 yard dash in only 20.7 seconds.

Jesse enrolled at Ohio State University in 1933. Although he was one of the university's star athletes, he still had to put up with racial prejudice and intolerance. Jesse and the other black athletes were required to ride to the meets in separate vehicles from the white athletes. They were forced to live off

(the all white) campus and when traveling had to stay in Blacks Only hotels and eat in Blacks Only restaurants.

In 1935 while participating in a Big Ten track meet, Jesse set three new world records in the Broad Jump, the 220 Yard Dash, and the 220 Yard Low Hurdles.

The 1936 Olympics were held in Nazi Germany and Hitler intended the events to be a showcase for his Superior Aryan Athletes. The black athletes from the United States were ridiculed and called non-humans by Nazi officials.

Jesse won his first event, The 100 Meter Dash on July 3. Another African American, Ralph Metcalfe placed second. In spite of all the Nazi propaganda, the German crowds loved Jesse and cheered him whenever he appeared. The next day Jesse won the Long Jump with an Olympic record jump of twenty-six feet, five and one half inches.

On August 5, Jesse set another Olympic record, winning the 200 Meter Dash in 20.7 seconds. Jesse and Ralf Metcalfe also were a part of the 400 Meter Relay team that won the gold medal and set another world record time.

Jesse left Ohio State in his senior year. He worked at odd jobs and raced professionally to provide a living for his family. He even raced against horses and dogs at carnival shows.

In the 1940s Jesse began earning money as a public speaker and he opened a public relations firm in the 1950s.

In 1976 Jesse was awarded the Medal of Freedom by President Ford and in 1990 President Bush posthumously awarded him The Congressional Medal of Honor.

Jesse Owens died of Lung Cancer on March 31, 1980 in Tucson, Arizona.

Sources:

Encyclopedia Africana

Encyclopedia Britannica