

JESSE OWENS

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

The seventh child of Henry and Emma Alexander Owens was named James Cleveland when he was born in Alabama in 1913. "J.C.", as he was called, was nine when the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where his new schoolteacher gave him the name that was to become known around the world. The teacher was told "J.C." when she asked his name to enter in her roll book, but she thought he had said "Jesse". And Jesse Owens was the name he used for the rest of his life.

Owens had a sensational high school track career and was being sought by dozens of colleges by the time he reached his senior year.

His athletic career began in 1928 in Cleveland, Ohio where he set new world records for Junior High Schools by jumping 6.0 feet in the high jump, and 22 feet 11 3/4 inches in the broad jump. During his high school days, he won all of the major track events, including the state championship for three consecutive years. At the National Inter-Scholastic meet in Chicago, during his senior year, he set a new world record for high schools by running the 100 yard dash in 9.4 seconds to tie the accepted world record, and he created a new high school world record in the 220 yard dash by running the distance in 20.7 seconds. A week earlier he had set a new world record in the broad jump by jumping 24 feet 11 3/4 inches.

Owens chose the Ohio State University over all of the colleges pursuing him, even though OSU had no track scholarships to offer at the time. He supported himself and his young wife, Ruth, with a variety of jobs - as a night elevator operator and a waiter, by pumping gas and working in the library stacks, and through a stint as a page in the Ohio Statehouse, all of this in between practice and record setting on the field in intercollegiate competition.

Athletes didn't return from the Olympics to lucrative advertising and product endorsement campaigns in those days, and Owens supported his young family with a variety of jobs. One was of special significance - playground director in Cleveland. It was his first step into a lifetime of working with underprivileged youth, which he said gave him his greatest satisfaction.

After relocating to Chicago, he devoted much of his time to underprivileged youth as a board member and former director of the Chicago Boys' Club, an organization that served over 1500 youngsters. He was, for five and a half years, the Sports Specialist of

the State of Illinois Youth Commission. In the 1950's, Owens accepted commissions from the State Department and the President on two occasions. In 1955, named by the State Department as America's Ambassador of Sports, he spent two months touring India, Singapore, Malaysia and the Phillipines, meeting with government and sports officials and, as always, talking to underprivileged children. In 1956, he was named the personal representative of President Eisenhower to the Olympic Games in Australia. His itinerary also included visits to schools and youth clubs.

Owens traveled widely in his post-Olympic days. He was an inspiring speaker and was sought after to address youth groups, professional organizations, civic meetings, sports banquets, PTAs, church organizations, brotherhood and black history programs, as well as high school and college commencements and ceremonies.

He was also a public relations representative and consultant to many corporations, including Atlantic Richfield, which still sponsors the annual ARCO/Jesse Owens Games. Owens spearheaded the founding of the games in 1964, and over a million boys and girls aged 10-15 are reached and participate each year.

A complete list of the many awards and honors presented to Jesse Owens by groups around the world would fill dozens of pages. An example of his international popularity comes from Africa, where the government of the Ivory Coast named the street on which the U.S. embassy is located "Rue Jesse Owens". He attended the dedication ceremony in 1971. While there, he also conferred with the Minister of Youth and Sports and met with the nation's top athletes, who considered Owens their greatest hero. In Berlin, Germany a street leading to the Olympic stadium is named Jesse Owens Allee. The Owens family attended the dedication ceremony as guests of the German government in 1982.

His own nation awarded him its highest civilian honor, the Medal of Freedom, in ceremonies at the White House in 1976. President Ford presented the medal, with the 250 member U.S. Montreal Olympic team in attendance. In February, 1979, he returned to the White House, where President Carter presented him with the Living Legend Award. On that occasion, the President said, "A young man who possibly didn't even realize the superb nature of his own capabilities went to the Olympics and performed in a way that I don't believe has ever been equalled since...and since this superb achievement, he has continued in his own dedicated but modest way to inspire others to reach for greatness". In 1990, President Bush honored Jesse Owens with the Congressional Gold Medal presented to his widow, Ruth S. Owens.

Jesse Owens died on March 31, 1980, and President Carter added his voice to the tributes that poured in from around the world.

"Perhaps no athlete better symbolized the human struggle against tyranny, poverty and racial bigotry. His personal triumphs as a world-class athlete and record holder were the prelude to a career devoted to helping others. His work with young athletes, as an unofficial ambassador overseas, and a spokesman for freedom are a rich legacy to his fellow Americans".

█. As he once said, "It behooves a man with God given ability to stand ten feet tall. You never know how many youngsters may be watching." In this way, Jesse was equally the champion on the playgrounds of the poorest neighborhoods that he was on the oval of the Olympic games.