

Sports

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Jesse Owens

1 It is not surprising that James Cleveland Owens, known to the world as Jesse, is the choice of *The Birmingham News*-commissioned panel as Alabama's top sports performer of the century.

But who could have dreamed it when Owens, as a lad, was picking cotton on the farm his father sharecropped in Morgan County? Who could have envisioned it when he was plowing an uncooperative mule, busting uncooperative ground near Oakville?

Owens, who died in 1980, was a child when he left Alabama for Cleveland, Ohio, a move that would set the stage for his becoming the most famous person in the history of track and field.

Competing for Ohio State in the 1935 Big Ten meet, on a sunny May afternoon in Ann Arbor, Mich., Owens tied the world record in the 100-yard dash. Then he set world records in the 220-yard dash, the 220-yard low hurdles and the broad jump.

All this despite a bruised back that had led to suggestions he withdraw from the meet.

As magical as that performance was, it was not the one that would define Jesse Owens, that would cause his name to live not only in sports history but in the history of humankind.

Adolf Hitler's terrifying power was near its crest when the 1936 Olympics were held in Berlin. He boasted that the games would prove that German athletes were the supermen of the world. The Olympics would provide a world stage for his theory of Aryan supremacy.

Owens had other ideas. He entered four events and won four gold medals.

He tied the world record in the 100-meter dash. He broke the Olympic records in the 200-meter dash and the long jump. He ran the first leg on the 400-meter relay team that set a world record.

Owens ran until he was almost 35. Only when he could no longer sprint 100 yards in less than 9.7 seconds did he quit.