



JESSE OWENS MEMORIAL PARK & MUSEUM

Jesse Owens Death

News Articles

Praised by president

Owens runs 'last relay'

PHOENIX, Ariz. (AP) — "To me, life is like a relay," former Olympic gold medalist Jesse Owens once said.

"Each generation is like a leg of that relay. And if you teach your children well, they will pass on that baton of responsibility."

Monday, at the age of 66, Owens completed his leg of the "relay." The man whose life "symbolized the struggle against tyranny," and whose track ability 44 years ago showed a quiet grace to a world headed for war, died of lung cancer at the University of Arizona Medical Center in Tucson.

"Perhaps no athlete better symbolized the human struggle against tyranny, poverty and racial bigotry," President Carter said after learning of Owens' death. "His personal triumphs as a world-class athlete and record-holder were the prelude to a career devoted to helping others."

Gov. Bruce Babbitt of Arizona has

declared Wednesday as Jesse Owens Day, and has ordered flags flown at half staff. In addition, Owens' body will lie in state that day at the new Capitol Rotunda from 11 a.m. MST until 8 p.m., with Babbitt and other state officials participating in a 1 p.m. memorial prayer service.

Mourners were permitted to view the body today at Universal Memorial Center in Phoenix.

Owens' body will be flown to Chicago, probably Wednesday or Thursday, with services to be held at Rockefeller Chapel on the University of Chicago campus. The date and time for those services were not immediately known, however.

It was last December that doctors found that Owens, a Phoenix public relations executive, had adenocarcinoma, a lung cancer that normally is linked to cigarette smoking. Owens smoked an average of a pack of cigaret-

tes daily for 35 years.

James Cleveland "Jesse" Owens gained worldwide fame when he went to Berlin in 1936 to compete in the Olympic Games. Adolf Hitler planned to have the Games prove his theory of racial supremacy, but the 22-year-old Owens, the son of a black Alabama sharecropper, shattered those visions.

Owens believed that athletic competition was the answer to racial and political problems, and spoke against Carter's call for a U.S. boycott of this summer's Olympic Games in Moscow.

Politics should be kept out of the Olympics, said Owens of the president's planned protest of the Soviet Union's military intervention in Afghanistan.

"I would like to teach our young people that, yes, it's great to win, but I'd ask what are they going to win in life?" Owens once said in an interview.



In Chicago

Owens' funeral scheduled today

CHICAGO (AP) — Funeral services for Jesse Owens, winner of four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics, were scheduled today in the University of Chicago Rockefeller Chapel.

Burial will be at Oakwoods Cemetery on the Southeast Side.

The son of an Alabama sharecropper and grandson of slaves, Owens, 66, died Monday in a Tucson, Ariz., hospital following a three-month bout with lung cancer.

The eulogy will be delivered by Dr. Archibald Carey, Jr., a circuit judge who is also minister emeritus of Quinn Chapel of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

All day Thursday, thousands paid tribute at a South Side funeral home.

Owens' body was dressed in a light blue suit and the cover of the casket was decorated with the interlocking-rings symbol of the Olympics. The casket was surrounded by United States, state, city,

and church flags.

Owens embarrassed Hitler's theories of Aryan superiority when he dominated the 1936 Olympics in Berlin to become the greatest and most famous athlete in track and field history.

Owens ran to victories in the 100 meters, the 200 meters, the broad jump and the leadoff leg of the 400-meter relay. He set world records in the 200 meters and the broad jump.

Hitler did not shake the hand of Owens or present the gold medals as he had done when German athletes had won previously. It was called a "snub" by some but others wrote that the International Olympic Committee told Hitler if he presented awards to German athletes, he should do the same for all winners. Hitler obeyed the dictum by not making any other presentations.

Owens' funeral set today in Chicago

Continued from page B1

invited to the White House to shake hands with the president either."

Owens had achieved track immortality a year earlier in one of the most spectacular performances in the annals of sports.

On May 25, 1935, in the Big Ten track meet at Ann Arbor, Mich., Owens broke three world records and tied a fourth within a period of 45 minutes.

Owens was unable to warm up for the events because of a back injury suffered when he fell downstairs while wrestling with a fraternity brother at Ohio State.

Coach Larry Snyder had decided to scratch Owens because of the injury but Owens insisted on attempting to run the 100-yard dash. He won in 9.4 seconds, tying the world record held by Frank Wycoff.

Ten minutes later, Owens soared 26 feet, 8 1/4 inches, in the broad jump, surpassing the world record by six inches. That record was to stand for 25 years.

Twenty minutes later, Owens ran the 220 in 20.3, breaking the world mark by three-tenths of a second and another 15 minutes later he set another world record when he ran the 220-yard low hurdles in 22.6.

To this day, all four of Owens' marks stand as Big Ten records.

Owens was born James Cleveland Owens Sept. 12, 1913, in Oakville, Ala. The son of a sharecropper, he picked cotton until the family moved to Cleveland when he was 9.

When asked his name by a schoolteacher, he answered J.C. She thought he said Jesse, and the name stuck.

Colleges became interested in Owens after he tied the world record of 9.4 in the 100-yard dash at Cleveland East Tech High School.

Although Ohio State had no track scholarships, Owens chose to go there, paying his own way while earning money pumping gas and working as an elevator operator.

Owens didn't fare much better following his Olympic successes. He became a playground janitor, raced against horses, worked as a road representative for the Harlem Globetrotters and also a disc jockey before finally running his own public relations and marketing firm, first in Chicago and later in Phoenix.

He became a celebrity and a spokesman on political, social and sports issues. He praised the virtues of patriotism, clean living and fair play.

During the 1968 Olympics in Mexico

City Owens tried to mediate with militant American black athletes on behalf of the U.S. Olympic Committee. Critics called him an "Uncle Tom." In 1970 he wrote a book decrying racial militancy. Two years later he wrote another book claiming the ideas in his first book were wrong.

He finally received official recognition from his own country in 1976 when President Ford presented him the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Three years later President Carter gave him the Living Legends Award.

One of his proudest moments came in 1960 when his daughter, Marlene, was named homecoming queen at Ohio State.

"When I was a student at Ohio State I would have been turned down in any restaurant in Columbus," said Owens. "Yet I returned to Ohio State to see my daughter crowned homecoming queen. I know how much progress has been made."



Grave of Jesse Owens in Oakwood Cemetery. Chicago, Illinois





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