

Jesse Owens: Famous American of the 1930s

By Gabriel F. Grade 3

In 1936, Jesse Owens won four gold medals at the Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany. This performance was not again equaled until the 1984 Olympic Games when Carl Lewis matched his record by winning four gold medals.

Jesse Owens was born in 1913. He came from a poor family, and he often took jobs to help out. In high school, Jesse realized his love of running. Because Jesse had to work after school, he could not participate in track practices. The coach saw potential in him and had him come early in the morning to train. As a senior in high school, Jesse tied the world record in the 100-yard dash.



Many colleges wanted Jesse, but he decided to stay close to home and attend Ohio State. These were difficult times for Jesse. There were many challenges facing Jesse, not only on the field but in life as well. This was a time of segregation. Segregation meant that African Americans did not have the same rights and privileges as white Americans. Even though he was a star on his team, he had to eat in “blacks-only” restaurants and sleep in “blacks-only” hotels. African Americans had to use the back door and use the stairs instead of the elevators.

On May 25, 1935, there was a Big Ten Meet. It was there that Jesse set three world records and tied a fourth in a matter of 45 minutes! While still in college, Jesse decided that he wanted to compete in the 1936 Olympics. Because Nazi Germany hosted the games, it became known as the “Hitler Olympics.” Jesse triumphed, the first American to win four gold medals in the history of the Olympic Track and Field competition.

In 1976, President Gerald Ford awarded Jesse Owens the highest honor that can be given to a civilian, the Medal of Freedom. On March 31, 1980, Jesse died of lung cancer. In 1990, ten years after his death, Jesse Owens was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal by President George H.W. Bush.

Jesse Owens did not let racism or segregation stop him from showing the world that African Americans did in fact belong in the world of athletics.

Did you know...?

The Delaware County Athletes Hall of Fame opened its Delco Olympians Exhibit on Saturday, February 23, 2008, at the Delaware County Historical Society Museum. The focus will be on the achievements of Delaware County Athletes at the 1936 Olympics, but the exhibit will also cover Jesse Owens. The exhibit runs through September 1, 2008. The Delaware County Historical Society Museum is located at 408 E. Avenue of the States, Chester, PA 19014. The telephone number is 610-872-0502.