

JESSE OWENS

by Jon Hendershott

Greatest. A term used loosely, freely and frequently when referring to heroes in any sport. So-and-so is the greatest thing since sliced bread, or bottled milk, or Mom's apple pie. No matter that maybe a year ago no one had heard of him.

An athlete's competitors often call him "the greatest." Fans are often polled to name their particular "greatest." Athletes themselves sometimes lay claim to the tag. The media furthers the whole game by periodically announcing the "greatest" this or that.

What determines the greatness of an athlete? Is it all these hyped-up artificialities? Or is it the person's achievements as an athlete and a human being and how those achievements and that person stand the test of time?

The achievements of Jesse Owens have been repeated over the years and to succeeding generations until the man has become the proverbial legend in his own time. But, then, history has never seen a trackman like Jesse Owens.

His superb career culminated in four victories in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin—10.3 100m, 20.7 200, 26-5½ long jump and leading off the US's 39.8 400 relay—but it is debatable if that achievement can exceed probably track's most sensational day, May 25, 1935 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The sequence of events on that day: 3:15—Owens equals 100 yard record of 9.4; 3:25—his only long jump spans 26-8¼; 3:45—20.3 for the straight 220, claiming 200m also; 4:00—22.6 for the straight 220 lows, again collecting the metric mark as well. Five records set and one tied in 45 minutes. The world hasn't seen the likes of it since.

Time hasn't tarnished Owens' accomplishments. His winning marks in Berlin would have won Olympic sprint medals through '64 and in the long jump through '68. His 26-8¼ stood as the world mark for 25 years.

Nor has time tarnished the renown of Jesse Owens. Owens is one of the true heroes in American sport. In a 1973 poll sponsored by Pepsi Cola, sports writers voted Owens' Berlin quadruple win, plus his subsequent snubbing by Adolf Hitler, the most significant sports story of the century. He was an obvious choice for recent induction into the US Track Hall of Fame as one of the Hall's initial honorees.

He was born James Cleveland Owens in Danville, Ala., Sept. 12, 1913, the son of a sharecropper. He was called "J.C." as a child, which one teacher ran together to become Jesse. From humble beginnings and hard times even after his athletic success, Owens today at age 60 is the owner of a



Owens today.

successful marketing and public relations firm.

Time seemingly has not tarnished Jesse Owens either. When he enters a room, he doesn't so much take it over as envelope it; he is friendly to all, outgoing and gregarious. In quieter moods, though, he is thoughtful and reflexive. He uses "we" and "you" interchangeably with "I" in referring to himself and his voice often rings like a preacher on Sunday morning.

Time has imparted perspective to Jesse Owens, about his athletic achievements, about the changing world and the places of blacks and whites in it, about life.

T&FN: There are probably few, if any, athletic achievements as well known as your four victories in Berlin.

Owens: Well, we were fortunate to come along when we did, at a time when things were the best they had ever been in track. Facilities weren't as great as they are today, but Berlin was the finest at that time. The competition was as fierce as today, but there wasn't as much of it.

The differences can be seen in children today. The average child is simply bigger than in my youth. The average athlete is bigger, stronger, more agile, competitive and he's coachable. Coaches know more, about events, anatomy, physics, psychology. As they learn more, they have more to work with.

T&FN: You had a clear superiority over your opponents; your winning marks in Berlin would have won you a medal up to '68. You were literally far ahead of your time, but what would you say winning the

four golds has meant to your life?

Owens: It opened doors—and kept me alive over the years. Remember it happened a lifetime ago, 38 years. I think a lot of it, too, is that you remember what you were taught when you were coming up. I had very fine people directing me from the very start of my track career, who taught me not only about track but about the personal qualities which can apply everywhere.

We all have dreams. But in order to make dreams into reality, it takes an awful lot of determination, dedication, self-discipline and effort. These things apply to everyday life. You learn not only the sport, but things like respect of others, ethics in life, how you are gonna live, how you treat your fellow man, how you live with your fellow man.

You learn to play the game of life according to the society in which we live. If you remember these things and try to live them day by day, then I think there are people you tough day after day who won't forget the things you did. Therefore, you walk the streets of your home 10 feet tall because you never know how many kid wish to emulate what you have done.

T&FN: Do you ever find it hard to live up to this kind of reputation?

Owens: Sometimes. Occasionally, I will sit at home and think back on the day and think, "Have I offended someone? Have I done something today which does not represent what people have said about me?"

T&FN: How did you regard your four victories at the time?

Owens: At that moment, it meant the fulfillment of a dream—the golden pot at the end of the rainbow if you will. Then as the years went by, a responsibility came with it. We came along in those days in an extraordinary period of history, when a man named Hitler extolled the theory of racial supremacy. But God made us all and endowed each of us with certain rights and talents. He didn't give any more to one than another, regardless of color.

T&FN: How did you regard the snub of you by Hitler at the time?

Owens: That didn't bother me. I didn't go over there to shake hands with Hitler. I went to run and I wasn't running against Hitler but against the best that 54 other nations had to offer.

What people don't understand is this—and I really don't like to bring this up because America has been very good to me—the social structure of our country at that time was entirely different than the structure is today.

I was taught at a very early age by my

coaches that even though ours was a social structure which prohibited people from mingling and eating and living and riding together, that eventually many things would change through deeds, through what you accomplished. I thought then about those things because when I came back, after all the stories about Hitler and his snub, I came back to my native country and I couldn't ride in the front of the bus. I had to go to the back door, I couldn't live where I wanted. Now what's the difference?

I wasn't invited up to shake hands with Hitler—but I wasn't invited to the White House to shake hands with the President either. So these years I have endured this. Joe Louis and I were the first modern national sports figures who were black. But neither of us could do national advertising because the South wouldn't buy it. That was the social stigma we lived under. But he continued to win fights and became a household word and you continued to run and do things which were uplifting all the time.

T&FN: *A black Olympic champion once asked what real good an Olympic gold medal was to a black man in the US, since he couldn't set it on his dinner table and tell his wife to carve it up. Did it bother you that you came back to your own country and ended up racing horses?*

Owens: Sure it bothered me, but you have to remember there is a vast difference between my time and today's time. Young blacks today are living in a world that is changing, a world in which a man with ability and who is prepared can work and succeed at what he is doing. We had to be slapped on both sides of the face, and bled on both sides of the face, but still we wouldn't stand up and say it is not here. I know no other country in the world. *Let me make it here.* No other nation owes me anything and I don't expect to get anything. All that I have and all I expect to get is under this flag.

The things Joe Louis and I did opened doors. Men like Branch Rickey in baseball took a chance and Jackie Robinson took abuse, a lot of it. But he continued to open that door. So these young champions shouldn't tell me what opportunities are not like and what a gold medal *doesn't* mean to you. Because it's not just you; it's those who are gonna follow you. Any black who strives to achieve in this country should think in terms of not only himself but also how can he reach down and grab another black child and pull him up to the top of the mountain where he is. This is what a gold medal does for you.

T&FN: *Was it a matter of the heightened racial awareness of today versus 1936?*

Owens: It's not racial awareness, it's achievement. The opportunities are here for everybody, regardless of race.

T&FN: *In both '68 and '72 you were a representative of the USOC to the athletes but were called an Uncle Tom and a tool of whites by some athletes of both*



Owens yesterday: winning '36 Olympic 200 from teammate Mack Robinson (l).

races. Did you ever try to tell the athletes your feelings?

Owens: I just tried to get them to realize nobody owes you anything in this country. Whatever you want is there for the taking, if you have the ability and desire to take it.

T&FN: *Were you able to gauge your own reactions, and those of your teammates, to the tremendous racial overtones of the '36 Games?*

Owens: We all knew about it but we couldn't read German so we couldn't read what was being written about us, being animals and all that. But the German people were tremendous. Every day we got a standing ovation from the multitude of people. They were looking at you, not as a black man but in terms of the ability you displayed. This is the Olympics and there was spillover into your own country. You made headlines here and people saw them and they had second thoughts, about you and about blacks, instead of making just a categorization.

T&FN: *Some black athletes have said that despite their success they still felt less than men, that their talents went undeveloped and unused and the doors of opportunity remained closed. And despite the outward signs of "equality"—you can live anywhere, apply for any job—there is still a grain of inbred inequality.*

Owens: A white person can't visualize this, but I'm not looking for any crutches or excuses for my inability to be able to do something. If I'm competing with another man, I ask only for a fair situation. We have a lot of blacks who say you have to be

twice as good. Maybe in some instances, but today there are more black millionaires than ever before and why? They have a talent and they are using it and not thinking in terms of "You're holding me back." They are positive thinkers and you have to think positive in order to achieve anything. You can make as much money as you want to make in this country or as little. It all depends on you and how much you want to put into it.

From junior high school, I trained every day because I wanted to be in shape, because I was determined. I was born on a farm in Alabama, a sharecropper's son. I didn't want the life my father lived. I looked forward to having a family, to educating my family and I had some ability. That was the ability to run. Let me use that ability to achieve what I want.

There are no handouts; no one will lay a thing in your lap. Some of the kids on our last Olympic team seemed to think this way. They weren't as dedicated or disciplined as some other kids, mainly Europeans, who wanted to win. You can wear USA across your uniform when you walk onto that field, daddy, but today nobody sees nuthin' and you don't bring your press clippings with you. They don't roll over and die for you.

T&FN: *Was your reputation somehow larger in 1936?*

Owens: It wasn't larger. True, there had been a lot of publicity prior to our going; the five records set and a sixth tied in one day. You had the press in front of you, but I didn't think about that. You thought about competition, not that America was mistreating, refusing to serve you in a restaurant with your teammates. You weren't thinking about reputation. I lived with white kids from all over the south; kids from all over the world came to our cottage night after night to sing and talk. Two blacks in the whole building, Dave Albritton and myself. The athletic competition and the sportsmanship transcended all prejudice. But all you were thinking about was that dream you had. I wanted to be the fastest human being in the world. I listened to my coach, worked to be conditioned and at my peak because I was determined that day would be the culmination of my dream.

T&FN: *There has been so much said about blacks having something more than whites in terms of athletic ability.*

Owens: I wouldn't say blacks do, but I would say he is a little hungrier. He wants the success a little more because the other guy has had it all his life. He is willing to put in a little more. When you're fat, you're not hungry so who the hell worries about it? But when you're hungry, you want more and will do a little more.

T&FN: *Do you still work out?*

Owens: I walk two miles every morning and swim and lift weights at the Y in Phoenix. I weighed 163 at Berlin and 180 now. I don't jog because I can't run flat-footed. At 60-years-old, you're crazy to be out there running. □