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The Olympic Glory of Jesse Owens:
A Contribution to Civil Rights and Society

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

by
Casey Aaron Nash
December 2012

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Dr. J. David Briley
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Berlin, African American, Adolph Hitler, 100 meters

ABSTRACT

The Olympic Glory of Jesse Owens:
A Contribution to Civil Rights and Society

by

Casey Aaron Nash

Jesse Owens was the star of the Berlin Olympics in 1936. His four gold medals in Hitler's Germany, as an African American, had far reaching implications back in the United States. Despite segregation and a social hierarchy that was an impasse to both black opportunity and achievement, Owens created a lasting legacy that drastically impacted race relations. The purpose of this thesis was to examine what the Olympic glory of Owens represented for society. Owens as an Olympian in 1936 manufactured a brand of social capital that tied people together in commonality—as Americans. As well, in both myth and deed, Owens has been traditionally credited with challenging Hitler's beliefs of Aryan Supremacy. Yet, Owens was also a race pioneer, as his athletic feats were read in newspapers all over the country, and as a result, helped shift the consciousness of Southerners who were historically ignorant of black achievement.

DEDICATION

To dad whose “thumbs up” is all I ever needed

To mom who has always been proud of her “little man”

To Bubba who toughened me enough to respond to the world

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First, I would like to thank Professor Mel Page for making it possible to pursue my graduate degree by helping me to secure an assistantship in the college. I appreciate his advice and sincerity in those various matters that graduate students must endure. Professor Page always seemed to be there whenever and wherever help was needed. It is the stuff of comic books. Thanks as well to the faculty and staff of eLearning for allowing me to be a part of the department.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Olympic Games of 1936 was an explosion of energy. It was a time of superlatives. The XI Olympiad was at the pinnacle of national prestige for competing nations, the last Olympic competition played prior to the deadliest war of the twentieth century. As a battleground to put Aryan supremacy to the test, staunch Nazi leader Adolph Hitler built the largest state-of-the-art facilities yet seen. Record crowds thronged to the event, with well over a million people turning out to see the greatest athletes from around the world perform in Berlin.¹ News organizations from around the globe relayed to the masses the knowledge of unprecedented events and records that were shattered during the Games. Taking center stage was the largest African American track team ever assembled. Led by heralded star Jesse Owens, records were shattered in one of the greatest displays of courage and athleticism in Olympic history.

In the seventy-six years that have transpired since the Olympic Games in Berlin, questions are still unanswered as to the implications of his victories. His four gold medals placed him in the upper echelon of Olympic athletes and pushed him into the spotlight of popular culture in America. As an African American, the “world’s fastest man” was recognized in the segregated white world as even the deepest parts of the South carried news and photographs of his victories. Many sportswriters and historians alike have credited Owens for paving the way for Civil Rights, framing his victories in terms of overturning theories of race. The writer of this thesis, while exploring the alleged assault on white supremacy theory, will attempt to examine Owens according to new developments in scholarship. Analyzing primary and secondary sources across several disciplines—including Olympic and Sports History, African American history,

Sociology, Race Science, and Civil Rights—the goal of this work is to understand the impact of Jesse Owens’ Olympic stardom and to illuminate what his achievements meant to society.

On an individual basis, it is a difficult task to find and extract the exact meaning of the lives of those early pioneers of the Civil Rights Movement. Perhaps the power of those brave men and women is best understood in the context of a larger phenomenon, each individual taking part to contribute to a movement that is more than the sum of its parts. Athletes are not simply agents of change in themselves, and it is also dangerous to ascribe to a few talented individuals the achievements of many. Yet Owens mattered. That is, Owens was a conduit of change in which further change would take place. At any rate, the purpose of this work is not to enumerate a generic list of ways in which Owens is connected to the fight for civil rights, and thereby limit the continuing influence of his legacy, as his impact is still apparent on playing fields and in gymnasiums across America. Instead, the point is to put forth a meaningful examination of his Olympic victories in such a way as to ascertain a viable contribution he has made while providing deeper insights into the complexity of that legacy. In doing so, the hope is to create nuances in methods to analyze other influential figures.

This paper relies heavily on primary sources. Newspapers—as one of the two dominant mediums (radio) in 1936—provide the crux of the investigation in demonstrating how the 1936 Olympics and the story of Owens unfolded. Artifacts from the Ohio State University Archives as well as information obtained from the Jesse Owens Museum lend a great deal of support to arguments central to the thesis. Additionally, Paul Neimark was the first to collaborate with Jesse Owens and commit the stories and events of his life to prose. Owens’ autobiographies *Blackthink: My Life as a Black Man and White Man, I have Changed*, and *Jesse: A Spiritual Autobiography*, offer much information in establishing a modern interpretation of his life.

In secondary literature, William J. Baker's biography, *Jesse: An American Life*, is leaned on throughout each chapter. To date, it is the most complete treatise on Owens. His erudite exploration was an exegesis of the dogma that shrouded the mythical Owens. Without his painstaking research an inquiry such as this thesis would not be possible, nor would the work of other scholars of Owens, as Baker provided the foundation for all subsequent research.² Mark Dyerson has also written extensively on matters of Owens. He has published several articles on Owens and race theories that were consulted in this work including, "Prolegomena to Jesse Owens: American Ideas About Race and Olympic Races from the 1890s to the 1920s" and "American Ideas About Race and Olympic Races in the Era of Jesse Owens: Shattering Myths or Reinforcing Scientific Paradigms." Other works such as David Clay Large's *Nazi Games* and Richard Mandell's *the Nazi Olympics* supply a great deal of the background information of the 1936 Games. Jeremy Schaap's *Triumph: the Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics* is used to supplement Baker's Biography.

Chapter 1 is an attempt to explain the role that Owens played in bringing people—those of different races—together as Americans. Dyerson was the first to mention Owens in the concept building "social capital."³ This "social resin" was a result of the national spirit and intrigue of the Games. The point of the chapter is to expound on the idea by providing examples of how Owens was able to continue the manufacture of such a vital currency. Fundamental to this claim was the association that developed between Owens and Hitler. From the beginning Hitler allegedly "snubbed" Owens without congratulating him as he did others after Owens won his gold medals. To the public, after World War II Owens became a sport icon and Hitler became the manifestation of evil. The relationship continued to evolve through the years until the details were no longer relevant. Owens' Olympic feats ceased to be mentioned without reference to

Hitler's Aryan ideals and were celebrated by sportswriters as though Owens had competed against Hitler himself.

In the second chapter, racism is traced from its primitive roots to the pseudo-scientific Aryan beliefs espoused by Hitler in *Mein Kampf*. Berlin was the arena where Hitler would showcase Nazi dominance through his Aryan athletes. In America, the issue of race had historically been a tragic one. White supremacy in America was only a variation of those beliefs held around the world, which manifested itself in the form of bigotry and blood spill. Despite many African Americans who had proved their worth in many fields, several claims of refuting Aryan Supremacy were attributed to more prominent blacks such as former heavy weight champion Jack Johnson early in the twentieth century. The refutation of Aryan Supremacy was also added to Owens' resume. This chapter is an analysis of the shifting paradigms of race during this time, calling upon Montague Cobb's examination of Owens concerning the perceived anatomical advantage of African Americans in track and field events.⁴

In the final chapter, the history of the South is investigated in the build-up to Berlin. In the South, blacks being segregated from whites by law meant that whites were forced to pay little attention to black affairs. Yet as a result of the Olympics in 1936 the Southern press reported the gold medal events of Jesse Owens. This chapter offers an analysis of the newspapers of the South in order to gain an understanding of how freely positive news of African American success was disseminated. Also, some of the assertions of Robert Drake in his article "Jesse Who?: Race, the Southern Press, and the 1936 Olympic Games," are challenged.⁵ The *Birmingham News* is closely examined because of the newspaper's proximity to Owens' hometown of Oakville, Alabama.

NOTES

1. David Clay Large, *Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 191-200.
2. William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life*. (New York: Free Press, 1986).
3. Mark Dyerson, "American Ideas about Race and Olympic Races from the 1890s to the 1950s: Shattering Myths or Reinforcing Scientific Racism," *Journal of Sport History* 2 (Summer 2001): 175-176.
4. W. Montague Cobb, "Race and Runners," *Journal of Health and Physical Education* 7 (January 1936): 3-7.
5. Robert Drake, "Jesse Who?; Race, the Southern Press, and the 1936 Olympic Games," *American Journalism; the Publication of the American Journalism Historians Association* 28 (2011): 81-110.

CHAPTER 2

THE CREATION OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

Jesse Owens is considered one of the great race pioneers of the twentieth century. Nearly 30 years before Martin Luther King, Jr. declared “I have a dream,” almost 20 years before the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board*, and just over a decade before Jackie Robinson encroached on the sport of the Babe, Owens raced and leaped his way to Olympic victories in the 100 meter, 200 meter, 4x100 meter, and the broad jump. Owens, the grandson of a former slave, was born into the fires of segregation. Having been raised in the harsh conditions of the South, his childhood took place before the collected efforts now known as the Civil Rights Movement had taken root. Remarkably, he defied his social standing and became one of the first African-Americans to be launched into national fame. However, the power and the lore of the Owens saga lay not so much in the unlikely scenario of four gold medals being won by an African American in the 1930s, as much as the stroke of luck and timing and the setting in which his athletic dominance was displayed. As fate would have it, Owens’ indelible mark occurred during those unforgettable events of 1936 in what Richard Mandell has called *The Nazi Olympics*.¹

Because Hitler in 1936 was already an infamous figure in world politics (and in the postwar era, the sinister figure of history), Owens was able to benefit from the creation of a nemesis by the American public in which American ideals could arise a victor; that is, Jesse Owens as a four-time Olympic gold medalist in Hitler’s Germany was the creator of a type of social capital which unified and altered American society. As a result, his accomplishments served as a great stepping stone in the quest for equality. His story is a remarkable and fortuitous one in that, due to the dynamics of the Berlin Olympics—an intricate set of circumstances that created the most

illustrious stage—Owens was able to transform the events of a single fortnight into a lasting legacy that continues to provide American society with symbolism, inspiration, and hope.²

Social Capital

Social capital is an idea introduced and discussed at length by social theorist Robert Putnam. He refers to social capital in much broader terms as the “connections between individuals.”³ More specifically, social capital is the social bond, the unifying agent, or the result of those connections between individuals that lends itself to fraternity and a common identity in societies. This social capital, as opposed to physical capital (objects) and human capital (individual talents in relation to economic opportunity), is—simply put— the galvanizing adhesive in society.⁴ It is created by a society when ideas are commonly shared by a network of individuals, underscoring a sense of camaraderie by confirmation. Such capital can occur from events that range in scope from serious to trivial, a result of crises such as wars and deprivation or seemingly innocuous circumstances such as chili cook-offs and games of poker.⁵ These bonds can be strengthened or weakened depending on the ebb and flow of social and cultural phenomena present at any given moment in time. But at its base, it is the agreement upon the common denominator (consciously and unconsciously), if you will, in a collective identity.

Furthermore, this collective identity enables collective solutions to collective problems. It serves to install trust in systems, institutions, and individuals thus allowing progressive societies to “advance smoothly,” and subsequently create an awareness of how individual fates are inextricably linked to the greater whole.⁶ In this Putnam asserts, “social capital turns out to have forceful, even quantifiable effects on many different aspects of our lives. What is at stake is

not merely warm, cuddly feelings or frissons of community pride...our economy, our democracy, and even our health and happiness depend on adequate stocks of social capital.”⁷

So it is established that social capital exists and is virtually present at all times in some form. So then, if according to Putnam our society depends on it, how was Owens able to manufacture such a type of social capital? In short, Owens’ biographer William J. Baker asserts “Jesse Owens was a rare individual whose importance transcended athleticism.” About the creation of the Owens legacy Baker explains that “an athlete becomes a national hero only when his personality, achievements, and image fulfill a cultural need beyond the athletic arena.” The details of this accomplishment, however, a bit more obscure, contain complexities which will be explored further.⁸

Owens was, in fact, the sole creator of a type of social capital that encompassed a great deal of variables. The Owens brand of social capital was an ever evolving development that waxed and waned in significance but with nuances and the passing of time became more influential and substantial. The focus of a pivotal moment in time, Owens was able to turn national intrigue into inspiration. The process of events—his meteoric rise—arose of unique circumstances, that in turn created myth and lore, that in turn ultimately became cemented as the Owens legacy—which is of itself a viable source of social capital. Owens embodied a form of social capital that he generated, was a part of, and promoted.

Politics and Sport

First and foremost, a condition that allowed Owens such an unparalleled opportunity is the placement of the Olympics betwixt sports and politics. Political debate in a progressive society is a form of social capital. Sports are too, of course. And as will be seen throughout this work,

sports and politics have intersected more prominently at distinctive points in America's history, magnifying both the results and their interpretations, none more so than in the Berlin Olympics. While a few maintain that the assumed marriage of sports and politics is a rather imperceptive analysis, P. Kissoudi explains in his article "Sport, Politics and International Relations in the Twentieth Century" that a "common sense view of politics and a broad knowledge of history" would lead one to infer systematically that "[s]port and politics cannot be isolated."⁹ Baker confirms such notions. Prior to his seminal work on Owens, he wrote in *Sports in the Western World* "in each successive epoch of human history, sports are integrally related to the political and social structures dominant at the time [reflecting] divisions of power, wealth, and class."¹⁰

Just as in modern sports when a player acknowledges the crowd from the field of play such as waiving his hands in an upward motion to incite them, such an action indicates a mutual understanding: an agreement of effort sustained by, and in exchange for, support. Followers of sports are participants by their interaction. Many even feel they have something invested in the outcome of events. Not long after the turn of the twentieth century, as a result of the increase of leisure time and demand for entertainment, sports rapidly integrated into mainstream society. By the 1930s, sports had evolved within itself a unique ability to draw large crowds of not just spectators but followers, enthusiasts, and commentators. Populations were being forged together as supporters in a social realm of sports. This phenomenon led pragmatists to understand the value of such a tool. For its strong cultural appeal, its ability to shape public opinion, and the then growing perception of the Olympic Games as the pinnacle of national prestige, it was accepted that "sport creates politically usable resources."¹¹

In the debate between the separateness of sports and politics, using the Olympics as a gauge, seldom are they. And that the Olympics are political should come as no surprise. They

inherently lie in the crosshairs of sports and politics as a result of international competition. Christopher Young, who has written on the aesthetics of the Berlin Games, argues that “war, mass popularity, maturation, and internationalization” have led to the Games “inevitable increase in its political dimensions.”¹² Moreover, the modern Olympic Games were born of a nationalistic age. Revived in 1896 by Pierre de Coubertin after lying dormant for more than 1500 years, the Games were conspicuously and curiously reintroduced near the end of a century in which nations were carving up territories, acquiring resources, and vying for power in their quest for self-determination.¹³ Thus the “Nazi Games” were overtly political, neatly ensconced between an inter-war period in which Benedict Anderson observes, “the great wars of this century are extraordinary in not so much in the unprecedented scale on which they permitted people to kill, as in the colossal numbers persuaded to lay down their lives.”¹⁴

If the extent of the relationship between Olympics and political ambition seems exaggerated, one needs only to examine the cancelation of the Olympics during times of war (e.g. 1916, 1940-44) and the use of the Games as a raised area for demonstration when nations competed. When the Games go on as scheduled, they are often embroiled with activism and dissent. Two instances that come to mind involving the U.S. are the raised black-gloved fists of John Carlos and Tommie Smith from the victory stand in Mexico City (1968) and the absence of the United States team in Moscow (1980) in a boycott against its Russian hosts. The Russians retaliated when they boycotted the 1984 Games in Los Angeles. But there is perhaps no more dramatic and salient point than the German “abuse” of the Games in 1936 in the quest to display a “triumph of Nazi will and efficiency.” While the protest in Mexico City centered on race relations in America and the Moscow demonstration was an act of defiance on par with Cold

War tensions, the 1936 Olympics was a gross misuse of political ideals, propaganda, and ethnic pride at the expense of sport by its Nazi hosts.¹⁵

However, the quest for political gain in Berlin was not lost on the Nazis alone. The United States hoped to parlay its dominance of the 1932 Games in Los Angeles into a victory abroad of its own ideals, the triumph of liberty over fascism, democracy over dictatorships. After a movement to boycott the Games lost momentum in the early months of 1936, Americans shifted their hopes away from withdrawal but instead trusted to undermine Nazi legitimacy through athletic competition. Ironically, international competition meant opportunities for African Americans in what had been a rather inopportune period at home. Using African Americans for political gain? What had changed in American society?¹⁶

Social Capital, Black Athlete

Black Americans had competed in the Olympics since George Poague captured two silver medals in the 400 meters and 400 meter hurdles in the 1904 Olympics in St. Louis. In those Olympics, against few international competitors, Poague's medals lacked significance and did not stir much attention. Additionally, the Games were young, not yet having developed the national notoriety and prestige that accompanied the Olympics that followed. In the succeeding years blacks competed intermittently in various track and field events, mostly sprints and jumps, without overwhelming success. Sickness, injuries, and other misfortunes—a slow start, a misstep—prevented many exceptional black athletes from earning a coveted gold medal and securing their place in Olympic stardom. It is in their stories that the vicissitudes of an Olympic career become fully realized and the accomplishments of Owens take on new meaning. On a single day, in a single event, and a given moment in time, the athlete is required to participate at

peak performance, perhaps during the prime of his athleticism, which then must have coincided with the quadrennial fashion of the Olympiads.¹⁷ Though Blacks had dominated local meets and collegiate championships in the North for quite some time, it wasn't until Paris in 1924 that an African American first captured a gold medal for the United States when Dehart Hubbard leaped 24'6" in the broad jump. After a disappointing showing by the U.S. in the Amsterdam Games of 1928, the 1932 Games in L.A. were led by two black sprinters Eddie Tolan and Ralph Metcalfe who in a flourish had captured gold and silver, respectively, in the 100 meters, the first medals won by African Americans in the event.¹⁸

For a multitude of reasons, these watershed events failed to capture the hearts and minds of the American layman. They failed to enter national dialogues with any resounding force as there were few reporters in the mainstream proclaiming the ascension of African Americans. The segregation of society is no doubt partially to blame, whites having to think very little about black affairs. And whether aided in part by the lack of imagination concerning the significance of the events, or quite possibly, the familiarity of the status quo with the Olympics occurring at home, the most likely culprit, in retrospect, is that society was simply not yet ready for the news. Putting Putnam's theory of social capital to the test, race relations in the late 20s and early 30s were not a source of cohesion but a source of division. The revelations of black achievement still rankled.¹⁹

The racial climate in the early part of 1936, on the other hand, was not so much different from times past, save for the slight variation of events that altered existing perceptions of black Olympians. For many Americans, the location of the Olympic Games was the point of much protest. As further discussed in chapter 2, the protests contributed in increasing public awareness to the circumstances comprising the Games. Proponents of equality were quick to point to the

racial ideology espoused by Hitler and subsequently the discriminatory actions taken by his regime in the German capital. Detractors were keenly aware of the political victories Hitler could score if the Games were allowed to continue with U.S participation. It was also widely known that in addition to drastic racial policies installed in the Reich, German sports programs and fitness regimens had been overhauled to create the conditions more conducive for victory, a program suited to build a more militaristic, austere German youth. However, the U.S. desire to compete could not be quelled. When the Olympic boycott movement failed by several votes, eagerness replaced the measure of unwillingness and an ensuing atmosphere of enthusiasm and expectation became pervasive.²⁰

In order to score Olympic and political victories of its own over the Aryan *Übermensch* (superhuman), the American team desperately needed and called upon the most unlikely of heroes in a squad of African Americans led by Jesse Owens. For those Americans who clung to the traditions of the past, such a request would come at a great price. In fact, the cost of publicly extolling American victories for political gain, unknowingly perhaps, meant that the American social, political, and cultural landscape would be changed forever.²¹

In stark contrast to the 1936 Games, the Los Angeles Olympics of 1932 lacked plot. The LA Games were political only in its organization, the display of gamesmanship, and the medal count that separated the U.S from the rest of the field, not race.²² Far from meaningless, but still void of the socio-political implications that hovered around Owens, the victories of the likes of Tolan and Metcalfe, and Hubbard who preceded them, failed to transcend the athletic arena and create significant social change. Sadly, their names have faded with time, and there are few historians, sports or otherwise, who have redeemed them or explored the meaning of their lives. As a result, they have now been relegated to the wider context of black achievement, their

accomplishments important only in so much as how they are connected to the larger events that have reverberated into the future.²³

Owens and the Creation of Social Capital

To be fair to those Black Olympians who came before Owens, the acclaim stemming from the Berlin Olympics was unmatched by any other Olympics before it or after. Aside from the battlefield, Hitler's Germany served to be the grandest proving grounds on an international field that an African American had ever seen. But to be fair to Owens, he was unlike any other Olympian before him, and to be sure, the limelight that had shined brightest on Owens and cast a shadow on the accomplishments of his predecessors was not without credence. The moment had indeed created the opportunity for Owens, but it was Owens who fulfilled its prerequisites and exceeded expectations.

Naturally, there were a few Americans who remained indifferent to the events in Berlin. Conceivably, many were disinterested in the Olympics itself, dismissing them simply as games. Others remained steadfast in the perception of the Games being played in the Coubertin ideal: competition between nations based on sportsmanship, sports without politics, and that "the importance of the Olympics lays not so much in winning, as in taking part."²⁴ But such aloofness and contentment with mere participation was not enjoyed by all. The hype was all around, and many understood fully that "sports and politics impinge on one another."²⁵

As it were, Owens was already creating a significant amount of social capital before he ran a single heat in Berlin. Steven P. Gietschier explains, Owens before Berlin was already a renowned figure, stemming from his incomparable display of athleticism at the Big Ten Championships in what he called "*The Greatest Day*." While a junior at Ohio State in 1935,

Owens overcame an injured lower back and raced and jumped his way to four world records in the span of 45 minutes. But for Owens, as remarkable as it was, it was nothing new to him. With Coach Charles Riley, a patriarchal figure who took Owens under his wing, Owens had been etching his name beside records since he moved to Cleveland in his youth. In middle school he set world records for his age group in the high jump and the long jump. At East Technical High School Owens carried his team to three state championships, while he continued to lessen the time that recorded his speed. During his senior year, while setting a national high school record in the long jump, he set scholastic marks in the 220 and 100 yard dashes culminating in the national high school championship in Chicago. Destined for the Olympics, “Owens was as close to a national sensation as a young athlete could be before the advent of television.”²⁶

Owens aside, during the summer of 1936, U.S. citizens were well informed of the current state of world affairs, about the spread of fascism—Spain was erupting in civil war, and as previously stated, Americans were already sensitive to the Jewish plight in Germany, sparking public debate of participation in those Games.²⁷ The knowledge of Hitler’s coercive actions was freely disseminated to a receptive American public. Propaganda from German officials and attempts to conceal violent incidents within the Reich could not hide the fact that Hitler’s Aryan philosophy was front and center of his political agenda for the Games, a reality evinced by the ominous detail to even the most remote facets of the XI Olympiad, making “sport an arm of political propaganda.”²⁸ Staving off the threats of a boycott, Hitler had constructed a political sporting event for the ages, with the facilities and the preparation for the Games to match the height of the moment.²⁹

According to Richard Mandell, in his definitive work *The Nazi Olympics*, “the artistic and falsifying aspects of festivity were in the modern Olympics since the beginning.”³⁰ But for the

Nazis it was clear that not only were the Summer Games of 1936 the ceremonial event to unveil a new Germany, it was the preliminary showcase of a Reich that would reign a thousand years. The spectacle of “mass pageantry” elucidated the grandiose ideations and unrelenting commitment of the Nazi hosts, if not of conquest to the potential for it.³¹ Likewise, David Clay Large explains that the technical successes and innovations—the transportation of athletes and visitors, the Olympic construction, and the formal procedures—of the Los Angeles Games only provided a template for the Nazi’s to emulate and then extend in scope so much as that the Nazis “left nothing to be desired in the realm of cult and culture—except possibly restraint.”³² He explains in *Nazi Games*:

The Nazi’s ritual was intended not as merely for propagandist effect—it reflected the movement’s sense of itself as a kind of political religion. The 1936 Games amounted to a one-time extravaganza pulling together and magnifying such typical annual shows as the Nuremberg Party Rallies, celebrations of Hitler’s birthday, and commemorations of the Beer Hall Putsch... the Berlin Olympiad was designed to show the entire world that when it came to the sacralization of sport, nobody could do it better than the [Nazis].³³

The obsession of the hosts created an atmosphere of angst that even the minutest of actions became a symbolic representation of something significant which needed to be interpreted and discussed. During the parade at the opening of the games, there was a great question of which teams would dip their flags in honor of the host country and to the Fuhrer. In previous Olympic Games the U.S. had intermittently refused to lower the flag, with the first act of rebelliousness occurring at the 1908 Games in London which was justified, as legend has it, “this flag dips to no earthly king!” In Berlin the trend continued. Marching in alphabetical order, nation after nation (including the French) dipped their respective flag and gave the Olympic salute, except for the United States, which upon entering as the penultimate team upheld their defiance of Olympic propriety,

a tradition that has continued into modern Games. The discontent of the mostly German spectators might have lingered had it not gave way to the ovation and roaring applause for the German team who entered last.³⁴ Even the modern tradition of the torch relay—torches set aflame in Greece and ran to the Olympic sites around the world—was first initiated in 1936. The flame ignited in Olympia was trekked across Europe to Berlin as to demonstrate the association between the New Germany and classical Greece, a tribute to what the Nazis opportunely imagined was their white heritage.³⁵

The punctuality, the marching bands, the goose-stepping, the military symbolism, the swastikas, the rhetoric, the composer Levi Strauss, the Hindenburg Zeppelin, the spectacle of thousands of performing youth, and jubilant salutes of “Heil Hitler!” from the mass of spectators all decreed the seriousness and the fervor to which its hosts had planned the Games.³⁶

The American author Thomas Wolfe summarized what he saw from the festivities and the opening of the Games when he wrote “The sheer pageantry of the occasion was overwhelming, so much so that [one] began to feel oppressed by it.”³⁷

Logistics and ceremony however were not the only menacing aspects of preparation for the Nazi Games. While the United States was committed to its isolationist stance and the nations of Europe were consigned to appeasement, the Nazis clandestinely installed a rearmament plan, against the restrictions handed down by the Versailles Treaty, that included the physical hardening of German youth. By early 1930s German athletic clubs had proliferated to the degree that a foreign observer noted the appearance of sport “as a popular substitute for Germany’s former mania for military training.”³⁸ Under the Hitler regime sport began to flourish. As he was fanatical about the aggression of a conditioned soldier, Hitler mandated physical activity on playgrounds across Germany as he believed virility was the prerequisite and foundation of the

state. Such policies fit quite nicely into the German's unrelenting quest to host the Olympics too. The agenda that was ultimately to prepare youth for service to the state, in so doing, was reinforced by the necessity to showcase the prowess of their new Aryan athletes—which proved the vitality of their nation and ultimately their readiness for war. Excluding Jewish participation from athletic clubs, and with full government support, German youth in Spartan-esque fashion gave themselves fully to gymnastics, boxing, track and field, and other traditional sports. By 1936, German athletes were primed for the Olympic Games.³⁹

Additionally, and coincidentally, there was another development that was responsible for adding a measure of intrigue to the Games. American visionaries had been dealt an unexpected and sobering blow just weeks before the Olympic torch was set to traverse Europe. On June 19, Joe Louis, the famed “Brown Bomber”, in a bout that was “soaked in nationalist and racial imagery”, was defeated brutally at the hands of Hitler's Aryan prize-fighter Max Schmeling in Yankee Stadium.⁴⁰ For African Americans and Louis, the loss was debilitating. For Louis, like Owens, was a humble hero. In a culture suffused with bigotry and disdain toward black endeavors, they were athletes who defied racial stereotypes. In fact, Louis was voted athlete of the year for 1935 with Owens finishing third. Because team sports were still segregated amid a strong current of anti-intellectualism, their successes meant more than just a positive image to confront established paradigms; their status as successful black athletes was a fundamental source of African American hopes. Their successes were black successes.⁴¹ However, no one embodied the struggle and the courage, the desire to physically combat oppression more than Louis. As a boxer, Louis was able to challenge, exchange blows, and dominate other white fighters in a ring—for many a symbolic battle against the human condition and the circumstance in which blacks had always been hopelessly pitted. In a time when there

was little reason for optimism, Louis is credited with uplifting his people and carrying their burden into a new era.⁴²

So when Louis fell to the canvas in the twelfth round, radio listeners and readers of the press were shocked at the outcome. What did it mean? The implications were soon realized as there was a tremendous outpouring of grief within the black community. Riots broke out in New York and Chicago. Once ambivalent, whites now celebrated the defeat of the boxer with vociferousness. Though eventually Louis would avenge his loss to Schmeling two years later, in what has been called the greatest bout of the 20th century, and would go on to be one of the greatest boxers of all time, the damage had been done. The Aryans had scored their victory as Schmeling was celebrated in his own right. He received telegrams from Hitler and other head Nazi officials thanking him for his victories.⁴³ Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels wired him a message indicative of his title, “Congratulations! I know you fought for Germany. Your victory was a German victory. Heil Hitler!”⁴⁴

The culmination of these facts, very well established, bolstered the fervency with which Americans backed their Olympic hopefuls. The unfolding of these events added complexity and enhanced the allure of the Jesse Owens saga as he purportedly challenged Hitler and his ideology on his own turf. The emerging supporters and followers of the 1936 Games, now sensitive to the aspect of race and the increased role of politics, created an opportunity for Owens that before would not have been possible. Therefore, based on the new-found public interest in the American track team, by then distinct for the team’s black athletes, Owens was able to further establish himself as a race pioneer.

Hitler v. Owens: The Ultimate Social Capital

As a result of the unique blend of ideas—patriotism, nationalism, racialism—for a two-week period, Berlin was the capital of the world. Had the Games taken place in Paris or Stockholm or Amsterdam or any other of the previous sites where the Olympic Games were held, the XI Olympiad certainly would have forfeited a great deal of the plot that made it so influential. Not only would the Games have been void of the competing ideologies which provided a significant portion of the backdrop of the Games, but it would have lacked the mass appeal created by the stark contrast of personalities between Hitler and Owens.

The Olympics of 1936 was an epic event, and there is perhaps no point more poignant that attests to the prolific amount of attention given to the Games, than the voluminous amount of pages dedicated to it. More than any other Olympic Games, the Nazi version has been the most analyzed, critiqued, and referenced in secondary literature. Selected authors and their subsequent works—Judith Holmes, *Olympiad 1936* (1971); Richard Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (1972); Duff Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Games* (1986); Christopher Hilton, *Hitler's Olympics* (2006) Guy Walters, *Berlin Games* (2006), and David Clay Large, *Nazi Games* (2007)—have meticulously and resoundingly recreated the events of 1936. Each, of course, has varying perspectives and insights, providing depth to the intricacies surrounding the fortnight, but each writer and work must also reiterate and expound upon the same centralized theme: Hitler's Germany, America's Owens. It is clear that as much attention that has been given to the various components and otherwise fringe events of the games, the attention to those details by historians—what has given the details meaning—is due in large part to the public fascination with the perceived clash of Owens and Hitler. The infamous “snub” of Owens by Hitler is one such instance that embodies the mythical duel between the two men.⁴⁵

Initially, the concern was not how Owens would perform, but how Owens would be received by the Aryan hosts. Few could predict how the events would unfold. On one extreme, some imaginings placed Owens in the center of Nazism—a hostile crowd in waiting, Owens the object of ridicule and viciousness.⁴⁶ Defying expectations, however, the Berlin crowd gave an overwhelmingly warm reception to Owens. In spite of a few propaganda pieces circulating outside of the stadium making references to the African American athletes as “black auxiliaries,” Owens was the “darling” of the seemingly unbiased German crowd, including loud cheers and according to some reports, sections of spectators chanted his name in their German tongue: “Owens!”⁴⁷ The lingering question was then how Owens was treated by Hitler himself. The answer was both fuel for imaginations as well as fodder for the American media. Perhaps presumptuous and hopeful about their paths crossing, such ideations served to create lore that would follow Jesse for the rest of his life.⁴⁸

The track and field events were to be held during the first week. After the finals of several events during opening day Aug 2, the German leader had called the gold medal finishers to his private box-seat to congratulate and shake hands with each, including the winner of the shot-put (German), women’s javelin (German), and 10,000 meters (Finns—all three placed). Conversely, as two black Americans Cornelius Johnson and David Albritton battled one another in the final stages of the high jump, Hitler had left his seat to exit the stadium.⁴⁹ The *New York Times* ran with the episode as headlines conveyed to readers back home, “Hitler greets all medalists except Americans” and then followed up with “Hitler Ignores Negro Medalists” the next day, claiming Hitler had left just minutes before Johnson won gold.⁵⁰

After the incident, the president of the International Olympic Committee reprimanded Hitler with the ultimatum that he should congratulate either all or none of the winners. Whether

for racism or practicality, Hitler chose to congratulate none. In doing so, he circumvented the issue of having to congratulate any of the black Americans, and thus would certainly never meet Owens face to face.⁵¹ His course of action created much media and public speculation. On August 3rd, after Owens had captured his first gold in the 100 meters, the *New York Evening Journal* informed, “Chancellor Hitler, who has yet to pay homage to the Negroes whose spectacular performance has done more than any other single factor to make these the greatest Olympics in history, left the stadium immediately after the conclusion of [Owens’s] race.”⁵² Within the week, a black newspaper out of Cleveland, the *Call and Post*, seized the opportunity for a political score when it emphatically declared “HITLER SNUBS JESSE.”⁵³

Despite attempts by historians to proffer some perspective on the account, the “snub” has endured to feature Jesse as the object of Hitler’s rebuke. Judith Holmes, who was one of the first writers to revisit and analyze the infamous report, explains “there are as many versions to this incident as there are people to tell them.”⁵⁴ David Clay Large asserts there was a “deliberate snub” of all black athletes based on Hitler’s response to the IOC’s request—Hitler being keenly aware of the expectation of blacks winning medals in the events to come.⁵⁵ Richard Mandell, who was less accusatory, contributed that “When all the German high jumpers were eliminated, Hitler left in darkness and threatening rain.”⁵⁶ Guy Walters mentions the Chancellery’s claim to state business and issues of traffic in the mass exodus following the final event.⁵⁷

In his book *Triumph*, Jeremy Schaap exposes a more ominous motive but leaves the reader to discern when he asks, “why did it happen? Was it because Hitler thought it would look bad for him to be seen with blacks? Was it because he was genuinely disappointed that blacks had won? Or was it because he was disgusted by the thought of pressing black flesh?”⁵⁸ William Baker credits the ingenuity of the American press. There is little evidence to support, despite his early

exit, that Hitler acted anything but indifferent. Hitler's Aryan ideals were no secret, but the advancement of his political agenda, as evidenced by years of meticulous preparation for the global affair, was of primary importance. In fact, there were efforts by the Nazis to minimize overt racialism within the Games, and undoubtedly, Hitler was well informed, if not prepared, for the likely success of one of America's track stars.⁵⁹ However, there was no custom, nor precedent set, for the host country's leader to congratulate any medalists; Hitler's experiment of congratulating Nordic types when he saw fit was an oversight that was exposed by the American media.⁶⁰ Baker contends, if there were a snub, it was for Owens' teammate Cornelius Johnson. Owens did not compete for his first gold until the following day. It was only that Owens was the notable athlete and star of the games, which explains why the story evolved to include him.⁶¹ It's probable that Hitler would have continued to congratulate only Nordics or of those of interest to him had it not entered public discourse. Nevertheless the picture was an embarrassment to the Nazis as the first day of events closed "with the story of Hitler's walk-out [on the Americans] echoing around the world."⁶²

The evolved version of the "snub" Baker described had its variations as well. In its most exaggerated, pop-culture adaptation, the story has been reduced and simplified to feature all of the highlights surrounding the Games. That is, Hitler was driven from his box in anger as Owens had captured gold while simultaneously the theory of Aryan Supremacy collapsed. Whatever the truth, the mere question of Hitler's actions towards Owens had a cultural and national appeal. Consequently, After Owens captured four gold medals under Hitler's watch, the two would be bundled together until Owens' death and beyond.

Expanding Social Capital

What had transpired at the Games marked a pivotal time in race relations in the United States. Riding expectations and the wave of public interest, Owens captured the hearts of America as he and the contingent of African Americans stole the show in what was the lone bright spot for the American team. The celebration of Owens in the media back home was so dramatic that a revived Germany which had actually dominated the Olympics, accumulating more medals than any country, was and is an after-thought. In regards to Owens as a race hero, such expectations were too lofty for the immediacy of the outcome. Despite the racial overtones of the Games, such an overhaul of attitudes that created a thick racial climate in the U.S. would take drastic measures and the efforts of many activists over a long period of time. At any rate, Owens garnered much fanfare through his circumstance and laid the foundation for the Civil Rights Movement. In such a dramatic change from Olympics past, there was great anticipation surrounding Owens and the other African American athletes to the extent that they were supported, emphasized, and even celebrated. Owens, among the parades he grand marshaled, “was treated as a war hero.”⁶³

However, Owens’ greatest achievement was not his gold medals alone. In the years that followed, the remembrance and the use of Hitler’s name against Owens continued to be a source of inspiration for the American people. In 1936, Hitler was an unruly dictator feared by democratic nations, and Owens was an Olympic star. In the post-war world, after the Nazi leader’s death, his political ambitions and heinous acts—the genocide of Jewish people and eugenics programs—were fully realized, and Hitler became one of the infamous leaders of human history, giving new meaning to the events that transpired nearly a decade before.⁶⁴ With American nationalism at an all time high, the legend of Jesse Owens began to expand. There was

no greater contribution as an African-American and no social capital more valuable than being championed as a man who defends America and its ideals against Adolph Hitler. Among the top black educators, preachers, poets, musicians, and scientists, Jesse Owens was now an essential part of a great culture, but as a national hero. Indeed, as Mayor LaGuardia informed the world, “Owens was an American that all America should be proud of.”⁶⁵ It was this narrative that became the Owens legacy.

In a book published in 1945 called *Great American Negroes*, Ben Richardson was one of the first to offer a revision of Owens’ feats and the events of 1936. Mere Olympic medals were exchanged for tales of evil, the wiles of Hitler, and “sadistic plans.” Despite being obviously laced with sentiment from the Second World War, Richardson captures an important concept addressing Jesse’s great contribution in that “Jesse’s victories were America’s victories.” Ben Richardson’s viewpoint represents a subtle but profound change in the collective psyche of America, a black man shaping an American identity. Richardson alluded to a more patriotic symbol of Owens, thus it was a popular act to support him. This outlook of Owens as a champion, and an American who contended against Hitler continued in mainstream discourse throughout the years turning Owens into a national folk hero.⁶⁶ Demonstrating this fact is a book written in the 1970s by George Vass called *Champions of Sports: Adventures in Courage*. In the book he titled a chapter of his biographical sketch of Owens “The man who made Adolph Hitler Run.”⁶⁷

In this grandiose type of retrospect, the Hitler-Owens relationship was symbolic of the dichotomy of liberty versus dictatorships, good versus evil. From this vantage point, Owens continued to extend his influence. World War II had allowed his accomplishments to gestate and reenter national dialogues with new fervor. While Owens at first resisted his role as protagonist

against Hitler, even speaking kindly of him in post-Olympic interviews, William Baker explains that “denial became too much of a bother.” In fact, it was too powerful and too profitable of an idea to ignore. In speeches, in interviews, in conversations with fans and strangers, Owens began to frame his dialogue around Hitler.⁶⁸

Hitler gave Owens legitimacy. Even in his autobiographical books, co-written with author Paul Neimark, Owens must periodically return to the pedestal that allowed him to stand above others. In *Blackthink* which is about his perspective and his experiences with racial inequality over the years since his Olympic stardom, Owens makes use of anecdotes and other methods to ensure Hitler is a part of the larger picture. In one instance, Owens recalls a nightmare he had in which he was “competing in the Olympics, against Luz Long, Hitler’s prize broad jumper and, really, against Hitler himself.” While the scenario is based on real events, in the dream, he explains, they never called his name, and he relates it to the “inborn fear every Negro must suppress every day of his life...that he’ll never get a chance to take *his* jump...” Then, everything is dark except the glowing skeleton of Hitler.⁶⁹ In another case, he recalled Hitler treating him as if he were “some kind of animal” despite the fact that Owens spoke no ill will of “the man of the hour” in 1936.⁷⁰ Owens further exaggerated when he rehashed the events of the broad jump against Luz Long. Owens wrote, “I looked around nervously, panic creeping into every cell of my body. On my right was Hitler’s box. Empty. His way of saying I was a member of an inferior race who would give an inferior performance.”⁷¹

His next work, *I have Changed*, was written as a series of letters, with commentary on each, to various people about regrets about his first book and also to explain how his perspective had changed. Fans, friends—like Joe Louis and Luz Long, his wife, and even enemies, were the recipients of his thoughts. He also wrote a letter to Hitler. About the letter he explained, “For my

whole life was wrapped up, summed up—and stopped up—by a single incident: my confrontation with the German dictator, Adolf Hitler, in the 1936 Olympics.” He continued:

But Hitler—he was something else. No one with a tinge of red, white and blue doubted for a second that he was Satan in disguise. Not that I was *too* involved with Hitler in the beginning. I’d spent my whole life watching my father and mother and older brothers and sisters trying to escape their own kind of Hitler, first in Alabama and then in Cleveland, and all I wanted now was my chance to run and jump as far as I could so I’d never have to look back. Sure, when I glanced over at the German dictator’s box and saw that constricted, twitchy face representing all that was bad in the world, it was nice to be on the other side.”⁷²

But perhaps the most telling of what the relationship between the former dictator and his accomplishments had become, Owens’ final book was a spiritual autobiography titled *Jesse: the man who outran Hitler*. In the book he relives the peaks and valleys that he experienced over his fabled career, and as the title implies, Owens uses the name of Hitler to personify the hardships and the adversity that he had endured in his life. He dedicated the book, among his mother and father and childhood coach, to “Two unmatched teammates: My wife of almost fifty years, Ruth and the Nazi who fought Hitler with me, Luz Long...” Owens had always spoken highly of Luz Long who befriended him during the Games. Owens explains, though Long was a Nazi and his competitor, Long encouraged him by offering advice during the second round of the broad jump when Owens nearly fouled out. Owens claimed that correspondence had strengthened their bond until tragically Long was killed in the North African desert during World War II. Owens recalled him as one of the best friends he’d ever had, and in the book, Owens viewed him as a compatriot who’d challenged Hitler alongside him.⁷³

Social Capital and a Lasting Legacy

In 1936, Owens had already gained a voice in politics, when he campaigned for Alf Landon. A once introverted Owens, and perhaps a bit out of character, decried of Roosevelt “Hitler didn’t snub me—it was our president who snubbed me. The president didn’t even send me a telegram.” In the political domain Owens was not taken too seriously, perceived as a bit naïve. To the American public, however, Owens would always be an iconic figure whose stature was never diminished.⁷⁴

As fate would have it, he would eventually meet Roosevelt, as Owens recalled “the first of four presidents whose hands I would shake.”⁷⁵ In fact, throughout his life, with Hitler as a backdrop, Owens was afforded opportunities that would not been available to him otherwise. In 1941, he was offered a position as head of the Civilian Defense Office’s Physical Fitness Program and by 1949 was traveling extensively speaking on athletics and race relations. In 1950, he was honored by the Associated Press as the Greatest Track and Field athlete for the first half of the century. President Eisenhower named Owens Ambassador of Sports enabling him to “tour the world promoting the virtues of amateur programs.” A year later he served as Eisenhower’s personal representative to the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne. Other president’s honored him as well. In 1976, President Gerald Ford awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor bestowed upon a civilian saying, “Your character, your achievement, will always be a source of inspiration.” President Jimmy Carter presented him with the Living Legend award in 1979.⁷⁶ In 1990, President George H. W. Bush posthumously awarded Owens with a Congressional Gold Medal, which Bush presented to Ruth Owens.⁷⁷

Perhaps most indicative of the cultural influence Jesse Owens wielded was when he was immortalized by ESPN. ESPN in 1999 revealed the extent of the Owens legacy when it

conducted a series of documentaries titled *SportsCentury*. A panel of writers ranked the top 100 athletes of the 20th century in a weekly, countdown-type fashion. Athletes were unveiled and then recognized for their athletic skills, influence on sports, and their historical, cultural, and social significance. The panel of judges placed Owens as the sixth greatest athlete of the century behind (from least to greatest) Wayne Gretzky, Jim Brown, Muhammad Ali, Babe Ruth, and finally, Michael Jordan.⁷⁸

Larry Schwartz, assigned to the web portion of *SportsCentury*, wrote a summary that embodies the legacy and common perception of Jesse Owens:

In one week in the summer of 1936, on the sacred soil of the Fatherland, the master athlete humiliated the master race. Owens' story is one of a high-profile sports star making a statement that transcended athletics, spilling over into the world of global politics. Berlin, on the verge of World War II, was bristling with Nazism, red-and-black swastikas flying everywhere. Brown-shirted Storm Troopers goose-stepped while Adolph Hitler postured, harangued, threatened. A montage of evil was played over the chillingly familiar Nazi anthem: "Deutschland Uber Alles." This was the background for the 1936 Olympics. When Owens finished competing, the African-American son of a sharecropper and the grandson of slaves had single-handedly crushed Hitler's myth of Aryan supremacy.

And then, elucidating a certain naiveté often exhibited by sportswriters when reflecting on the significance of sporting events, Schwartz said of Owens, "He gave four virtuoso performances, winning gold medals in the 100- and 200- meter dashes, the long jump and on America's 4x100 relay team. Score it: Owens 4, Hitler 0."⁷⁹ The contrived scoreboard in which Hitler was pitted against Owens symbolizes the relationship that has endured. Hitler was brought into the world of competitive sports, where Owens would always be the victor. Owens continued to defeat Hitler for the rest of his life.

A hint of this enduring legacy is made visible by the long-running game show *Jeopardy!*. It could be argued that the television trivia show is at least a measure of the intellectual heartbeat of

America. In an episode in 2010, ESPN analysts Mike Greenberg and Mike Golic, hosts of *Mike and Mike in the Morning*, gave the clues for the category “The Greatest in Sports.” The \$200 answer read “The most amazing Olympic event ever? It's the U.S. hockey team's ‘Miracle on Ice’ in 1980.” Greenberg then chimes in with, “Well, that was a good one, but what about this man's 4-gold-medal-winning performance in Berlin in 1936 that gave Hitler fits.”⁸⁰ The notion of a glory-seeking Jesse Owens performing before a frantic Hitler has survived and is widely accepted in popular culture. Going back to 1997, Owens has been mentioned on the show a total of 27 times.⁸¹

It was a theme for Owens. Throughout his life he was associated with Hitler. He received countless questions in public and interviews about his passage through Berlin, about winning his gold medals, and about what Hitler was like. In the name of metaphors and clichés, Owens never ceased in the endless repetition of familiar tales, some stretched as far from fact as his conscience would allow. Owens would answer for Hitler even until the end of his life.⁸²

Moreover, when Owens was hospitalized during the ides of March, 1980, after his battle with cancer had taken a turn for the worst, a longtime friend and college roommate of Owens was writing for a Cleveland newspaper. The columnist wrote a very timely piece reminiscing about the days they shared together at Ohio State. Segregated housing, Jesse's generous nature, soft-spoken personality, unique fashion sense, his appeal to women, and even his academic struggles were among the topics highlighted in the article. The author is certainly successful in conveying his sentiment and unique perspective of one of America's great heroes, but the article—for its content—reveals the ultimate summation for those who have curiously peered

into the life of Owens. The passage concludes with his connection to the notorious leader, the name that had given deeper meaning to his life.⁸³

Owens and his Olympic accolades were inseparable, a fact of life with which he had come to terms—yet he could never divorce himself from his role against Hitler, even in the minds of those who held a personal relationship with him. In obituaries around the nation, the stories were told of Owens. Eulogies about him could not and did not forsake the mention of his lifelong nemesis.⁸⁴ As a result, the Jesse Owens legacy remains. Owens bridged gaps where there were separate worlds before. Since his death, the iconic figure received much of the celebrity status modern athletes enjoy. Owens has been honored by stamps and comic books, posthumously endorsed by Adidas, and immortalized as an athlete on the cover of the Wheaties box. Jesse Owens due to circumstance and world affairs created interest, brought people together, and now his story continues to inspire a multitude of Americans.

NOTES

1. Richard D. Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 49. The Berlin Games of 1936 were the culmination of an ever escalating trend in Olympic festivity.
2. Mark Dyerson, "American Ideas about Race and Olympic Races from the 1890s to the 1950s: Shattering Myths or Reinforcing Scientific Racism," *Journal of Sport History* 2 (Summer 2001): 175-176. Dyerson was the first to mention Putnam's theory of social capital in relation to Owens. In his article he explains Owens's accomplishments were used in discourses about race and national identity.
3. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 19.
4. Putnam, 351, 403.
5. Putnam, 20-21.
6. Putnam, 288.
7. Putnam, 27-28.
8. William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life*. (New York: Free Press, 1986), 235.
9. Penelope Kissoudi, "Sport, Politics, and International Relations in the Twentieth Century," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 25 (November 2008): 1689.
10. William J. Baker, *Sports in the Western World*. (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), vii.
11. Kissoudi, "Sport, Politics," 1690-1692.
12. Christopher Young. "In Praise of Jesse Owens: Technical Beauty at the Berlin Olympics 1936," *Sport and History* 28 (March 2008): 84.
13. David Clay Large, *Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 3-15.
14. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. (New York: Verso, 1991), 144.
15. Kissoudi, "Sport, Politics," 1691. Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, 245.

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16. Baker, *Jesse Owens*.
 17. Arthur Barbeau, "Jesse Owens and the Triumph of Black Olympians," *Journal of the West Virginia Historical Association* 4 (1980): 47-50.
 18. Barbeau, 49-51.
 19. Dyerson, *American Ideas about Race*, 186-189.
 20. Arnd Kruger, ed., "United States of America: The Crucial Battle," *The Nazi Olympics: Sports, Politics and Appeasement in the 1930s*. (University of Illinois Press, 2003): 45-60.
 21. D. Kass "The Issue of Racism at the 1936 Olympics," *Journal of Sport History* 3 (March 1976): 223-235.
 22. Mandell, 38-43.
 23. Dyerson, *American Ideas about Race*, 173-188.
 24. Large, 17 28-29.
 25. Kissoudi, "Sport, Politics," 1692.
 26. Steven P. Gietscher, "The Greatest Day: Jesse Owens at Ann Arbor" 11 (May 1994): 4-9.
 27. The *New York Times* dedicated much press to these stories from 1935 through the Olympics August of 1936. Kass, "Issue of Racism."
 28. Kass, "Issue of Racism," 231-235.
 29. Frederick T. Burchall "11th Olympics Open Today in Gay and Crowded Berlin" *New York Times*, 1 August 1936.
 30. Mandell, Xxii.
 31. Mandell, 122- 158, xxiii.
 32. Large, 52-57, 190.
 33. Large, 190.
 34. "'To Dip or not to Dip': The American Flag at the Olympic Games since 1936," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 25 (February 2008): 163-184; Hart-Davis, *Hitler's Games*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), 155-158; Large, *Nazi Games*, 194-197.

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35. Hart-Davis, 51-54; Large, 4-9.
36. Mandell, 122-158; Large, 190-201.
37. Large, 212.
38. Baker, *Sports in Western World*, 245-47.
39. Hart-Davis, 59-81.
40. Jon Entine, *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We Are Afraid to Talk About It*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 190-191.
41. Joseph Dorinson, "Black Heroes in Sport: from Jack Johnson to Muhammad Ali," *Journal of Popular Culture* 1 (Winter 1997): 119-121.
42. Donald McRae, *Heroes Without a Country: America's Betrayal of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens* (New York: Ecco, 2002), 1-8.
43. McRae, 106-130.
44. Mandell, 114-119. Large, 172-179.
45. The "snub" myth in its most simplistic version is that Hitler, after witnessing Owens's domination in his quest for gold medals, stormed out of the stadium in anger.
46. Guy Walters, *Berlin Games*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 195.
47. Kruger, 61-62. *Der Sturmer* and *Der Angriff* are two of the official propagandists newspapers of the German press that used the phrase "black auxiliaries"; Mandell, 221- 226.
48. Mandell, 221- 226.
49. Large, 228-231.
50. *New York Times*, August 3 and 4, 1936.
51. Christopher Hilton, *Hitler's Olympics: The 1936 Berlin Olympic Games* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2006), 126.
52. Cited in Kruger, 61-62.
53. *Cleveland Call and Post*, August 9, 1936. Cited in Baker, 90-91.

54. Judith Holmes, *Olympiad 1936: blaze of glory for Hitler's Reich*. (New York: Ballentine, 1971), 104.

55. Large, 230-231.

56. Mandell, 228-229

57. Walters, 198-199.

58. Jeremy Schaap, *Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 180-181.

59. Large, 244.

60. Herbert Hoover never attended the Olympic Games of 1932 in Los Angeles.

61. Baker, *Jesse Owens* 3-4, 90-91.

62. Holmes, 103-104

63. Dyerson, "American Ideas About Race," 251-252; Quote on Entine, 187.

64. Entine, 207-208

65. Mayor LaGuardia about Owens, cited in Entine, 187.

66. Ben Albert Richardson. *Great American Negroes* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1945), 118-120.

67. George Vass. *Champions of Sports: Heroes in Courage* (Chicago: Reilly and Lee Books, 1970), 89-100.

68. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 91.

69. Owens, *Blackthink*, 24-25.

70. Owens, *Blackthink*, 110; *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* August 24, 1936

71. Owens, *Blackthink*, 186-187

72. Owens, *I Have Changed*, 17-18.

73. Owens, *Spiritual*, 17-120.

74. UP, "Snubbed by Roosevelt, Not Hitler, Says Owens," Oct 16, 1936; Cited in Schaap, 211.

75. Owens, *Spiritual*, 121.

76. Jesse Owens Museum, timeline. Also <http://library.osu.edu/projects/jesse-owens/timeline.html>

77. Jacqueline Edmondson, *Jesse Owens: A Biography* (West Port: Greenwood, 2007), 87.

78. <http://espn.go.com/sportscentury/> Accessed May 19, 2010

79. Larry Schwartz, "Owens Pierced a Myth." Espn.com, 2007. Available from <http://espn.go.com/sportscentury/features/00016393.html>; Internet; accessed 19 May 2010.

80. http://www.j-archive.com/showgame.php?game_id=3526&highlight=jesse+owens (accessed January 27, 2011).

81. A search for "Jesse Owens" yields a result of 27 instances in which Owens was a part of a question or an answer

<http://www.jarchive.com/search.php?search=jesse+owens&submit=Search> accessed 27 January, 2011

82. Martin Friedman, "Olympics fulfilled Owens's Dream," *Ohio State Lantern*, April 11, 1979.

83. George Anthony Moore, "Recalls days at OSU with Jesse Owens," copy of article. Source identified as a Cleveland Newspaper, March 14, 1980. Copied from files Ohio State University Archives.

84. See for Example Paul Hornung, "Jesse Owens Dies Of Cancer At 66," *Columbus Dispatch*, March 31, 1980.

CHAPTER 3

THE CHALLENGE TO ARYAN SUPREMACY

The stars aligned in 1936 to create the Berlin Olympics, a multifaceted showground on which the eyes of the world were fixed. Hotly debated and criticized for their devout belief in Aryan superiority and subsequently their treatment of Jews, the Nazi hosts created a forum that lay at the nexus of political, cultural, and social ideals and of race, science, and sport. The anticipation of the games surrounded an American team, which had dominated the quadrennial games since its reintroduction in 1896, and as fate would have it, that featured a track and field squad of an unprecedented twelve African Americans. Among the contingent of athletes was a highly touted young star expected to lead the way in a showcase of American dominance.

The element of intrigue, due to the racial components which comprised the games, was that Aryan supremacy theory was perceived to be on trial. Race science had reached its zenith in the 1920s and 1930s in the United States and across Europe, and the Olympics served as a “global laboratory” in which to extract, observe, and interpret data to disseminate to the masses.¹

Additionally, the men’s 100-meters is the *ne plus ultra* of Olympic events, with the winner carrying not only gold for his country but the loftiest of titles—world’s fastest human. Of course, the man standing atop of all the hyperbolic clout was Jesse Owens, an African American. Owens set a World record during the second heat of the event when he broke the line at 10.2 seconds.²

In light of these facts, amid a heightened sense of racial underpinnings, many writers have derived as Arthur Barbeau has in his article “Jesse Owens and the triumph of black Olympians” that Adolph Hitler intended to use the games to display a “revived Germany” and in doing so, “to vindicate his theories of Aryan supremacy.” He then concludes incorrectly, “[s]ingle-handedly, Jesse Owens gave lie to this myth.”³ Many writers have made the same connection with little

explanation. The reader is expected to fill in the blanks, or make the leap if you will, from the idea of Aryan superiority and the results of a foot race. Such generalizing sweeps though unaccounted for do not negate the veracity of the claim; however, the argument must be properly explored before a refutation of Aryan supremacy theory can be ascertained. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that Jesse Owens, as a result of his Olympic achievements in Berlin, was a symbol, a contributor—not the cause of the decay of the Aryan supremacy myth.

The Origin of Aryan Supremacy

Aryan supremacy, of course, has its root in racism. And of course, racism, in one form or another can be traced back to the earliest humans. In its most primitive form, racism first existed as xenophobia. Early humans, wary of strangers, maintained a presumption of distrust as a means of preservation.⁴ As time progressed and cultures developed, ethnic groups began to see other groups as inferior to their own. This ethnocentric view, entangled with perceptions of race, created new conflicts in societies when over the course of history, as a result of migrations (both voluntary and involuntary) several races existed within the same society. As racial conflicts ensued, more often than not a dominant race within the society emerged to play a more principal role, leading to further unrest if not extermination. In the least, the perceived inferior race was relegated to a lower caste.⁵

In more recent times, slavery, colonization, and other types of conquests, each shared the common denominator of racial superiority, both implicitly and intrinsically. The process of these acts in itself served as circumstantial evidence in which to ground more overarching theories. During the 1800s the alleged superiority and inferiority of races (also linked to languages) became a more pronounced belief when scientific explanations augmented such claims.⁶ In the

early part of the nineteenth century, in fact, science attempted to place humans within the greater taxonomy of living life forms on the basis of color: white, red, brown, black, and yellow.

Moreover, as H.G. Wells explains in *The Outline of History*, humankind had based perceptions of race, “consciously and unconsciously,” on the biblical narrative of Noah and his three sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth, races “having always been separate things.”⁷

On these premises, race theorists attempted to construct a model of hierarchy within the white race itself, resulting in the Aryan Supremacy theory and its corollaries (Teutonic, Alpine, Nordic, Anglo-Saxon, and in general White supremacy). Prejudices supported by the belief in the superiority of races were logical and was a widely accepted view in academic circles and in courts of public opinion throughout the United States and Europe. Purportedly supported by science, it was a justifiable explanation of the way things were. During these times racism was ubiquitous. Human inequality was a fact of life.⁸

Fast-forward to the twentieth century. Understandings of race and its implications had evolved to support a wide range of complex and sometimes convoluted interpretations.⁹ When Charles Darwin published *Origins of Species* in 1859, he revolutionized the thought process about race. Though it did little to change the race classification immediately as the science supporting evolutionary theory was still in its rudimentary stages, many came to misinterpret the data creating new theories labeled Social Darwinism. By the early 1900s racism was more advanced, supported by the empirical evidence of history, biology, and psychology. Typical views of White supremacy were based on pure blood lines. Proponents paid homage to whites such as the Greeks and Romans and other Indo-Europeans, who they believed created the virtues and culture necessary to enable the success of their respected civilizations. Conversely, the demise of these cultures was perceived to be the result of mixing with inferior races. Biologically

whites were thought to be more beautiful and physically superior due to their placement at the pinnacle of evolutionary development. What is more is the devout belief espoused by race science that whites were innately superior in all matters of mental abilities.¹⁰

Racist ideology was inescapable, as the prevailing viewpoint of white superiority created a thick cloud of racism that hovered over the developed nations of Europe and the United States. It was such a widely accepted and pervasive way of thinking that it was implemented in a top-down approach. For example, Rudyard Kipling's poem *the White Man's Burden* (1899) embodied the aspirations and history of British Imperialism.¹¹ Great Britain during 19th century, as a result of its superior military weaponry and navy, carved up territories around the world, colonizing the lands of "inferior races." In their quest for empire, the white man's burden was to civilize the nations of "... new-caught, sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child."¹²

In the United States racism was strongly connected to the institution of slavery but has endured long after emancipation. Indicative of the similarities in race relations among Europe and the United States near the turn of the century, D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) portrays blacks as antagonists who threaten the white way of life. The silent film, set during Reconstruction, depicts blacks as unruly and irreverent, and as a result of their mental inferiority, incapable of government. At one point, a black man (actually a white man in black face) savagely stalks a white woman through a wilderness where she only finds reprieve by willingly plummeting to her death. The film not only illuminates prevailing attitudes toward blacks in the early part of the century, it exposes the psyche of prejudiced whites as being fraught with fear, anxieties, and hatred.¹³

The Nazi version, the adaptation Owens was pitted against, was a more developed, overt, and devout strain of racial superiority. In the United States and Europe Anglo-Saxon supremacy

typically referred to the superior intellectual and physical capabilities of the white race. In Germany, as in the ideas espoused by Adolph Hitler, Aryan (and Nordic) supremacy contained not only the notion of a more advanced capacity for physical and intellectual superiority but a third and more crucial element, a matter of “spirit” which was believed to produce the uniqueness of German identity and culture. That is, Aryan superiority was an intricate belief woven into the fabric of the Nazi state; it created, enabled, and perpetuated it.¹⁴

Hitler’s ideas were not created in a vacuum however. In the 1850s, French aristocrat Count Gobineau published his *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* which placed the white race as the distinct creator of cultures. Ignoring social and environmental conditions, Gobineau put forth the assumption that the primary threat to the Aryan, the main division of the Caucasian race, was the decline of culture through the intermixing of blood, resulting in racial impurity.¹⁵ Though his theories served as fodder for the intelligentsia of many nations, the German thinkers—who had long been at work unraveling the mysteries of the Aryan—easily incorporated his ideas into a theory of Aryan supermen which needed protection against degeneration. Early German founders were also influenced by the work of Englishman Houston Stewart Chamberlain. *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* (1899) was received in Germany by Kaiser Wilhelm II as “a work of the highest importance.” Chamberlain enhanced racial thinking when he provided a historical context to which the Teutons were early founders and heirs of culture, a positive force, which thwarted the spread of Jewish influence. Moreover, he attributed the achievements of the nineteenth century, whether art or science or political activities, to the white race and blended it with a pseudo-historical account of the Teutons who he argued were responsible for the intellectual hallmarks of the Renaissance and the divine blood of Jesus.¹⁶

Hitler both directly and indirectly inherited these ideas. Hitler published *Mein Kampf* (1925) as a political treatise for the intent to underscore the concept of Aryan superiority on “the principle that men are not equal.” The title “my struggle” alludes to the Social Darwinian belief, like many shared before him, that the Aryan breed of humans is in a struggle for existence against inferior races.¹⁷ Hitler wrote dispassionately as if his philosophies were some objective truth about reality. He explained that in the mixing between superior and inferior beings, the result can never equal the superiority of the former. Concerning racial purity he drew parallels of human interaction to nature and the relationships between animals:

The fox is always a fox, the goose a goose, the tiger a tiger, etc., and the difference can lie at most in the varying measures of force, strength, intelligence, dexterity, endurance, etc., of the individual specimens. But you will never find a fox who in his inner attitude might, for example, show humanitarian tendencies toward geese, as similarly there is not cat with a friendly inclination toward mice. Therefore, here too, the struggle among themselves arises less from inner aversion than from hunger and love. In both cases, Nature looks on calmly, with satisfaction, in fact.¹⁸

He boldly asserted that “in every mingling of Aryan blood with that of lower peoples the result was the end of the cultured people.” He warned that Aryans, because genius was inborn, should avoid the “defilement of blood.” Through his work he promulgated concepts of Aryan superiority that became deeply ensconced in the minds of German citizens. The text was a fierce, assertive, and proactive set of ideas that set Germany in motion. German citizens accepted as a truism that “All the human culture, all the results of art, science, and technology... are almost exclusively the creative product of the Aryan.”¹⁹

White Supremacy and Sport

Owens met these ideas head on in Berlin but perhaps not in a way he could fully wrap his head around at the time. Challenging Aryan supremacy was a taboo subject. Few white writers dared to write openly about the topic, and many blacks remained conservative as well for fear of being ostracized or punished. A few black newspapers ever so often would wax bold and work such claims into headlines with impunity. Aryan supremacy was simply a topic much bigger than Owens prior to the games in 1936. There is also little evidence to suggest Owens felt much angst over the matter. “We were not as politically oriented at that time,” Owens later explained. “You don’t have time for that...I wasn’t running against Hitler.”²⁰ His later explanations are corroborated in his diary, a ritual he completed daily aboard the *Manhattan* on his voyage to the Olympics. Ideas of Hitler or Aryan supremacy are noticeably absent, replaced with trivial matters such as the weather, laundry, and mandatory meetings.²¹

Supplanting Aryan supremacy was a more complex situation. Up until that time there is a wide discrepancy in the athletic world between what was written about, what was interpreted, and the actual social reality. In other words, prior to Berlin there was a significant amount of data to suggest that Aryan supremacy or White Superiority had long been a farce. Blacks had long been upstaging whites where outlets were created. Therefore, Aryan supremacy theory or scientific racism in other forms, as well as the idea of refuting it, was nothing new when the challenge was supposedly laid before Owens.

Joseph Dorinson in an article examining black sports heroes credits the pugilist Jack Johnson as the first who “punctured the myth of Anglo-Saxon supremacy.”²² Indeed Johnson, “the incarnation of the deepest fears of white racists,” dominated boxing and white prizefighters so handily, and had stirred so much controversy in doing so, that he created the search for the

great white hope, a man who might redeem the sacred place of whites at the top of sport.²³

However, Johnson for all his achievements in the early part of the twentieth century was easily discarded by white America. His bombastic persona, coupled with a flamboyant lifestyle (escorting white prostitutes), defied social mores and led both W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington to agree that the great Jack Johnson actually hindered race progress rather than promoting it.²⁴

In the same manner of dominance, high profile major leaguers—Babe Ruth, Jimmie Fox, Dizzy Dean, and similar ilk were frequently dealt defeats when barnstorming against the Negro League teams. Of the documented interracial games, the tally is scored at 268 games to 168 in favor of the Negro teams. These facts led essayists Montye Fuse and Keith Miller to conclude that by “repeatedly outplaying their white counterparts, African Americans refuted the shibboleth of white superiority.”²⁵

Likewise, in the 1928 Olympics an Algerian runner representing France was the first to break the tape, ahead of his Scandinavian counterparts, in the marathon. Boughera El Ouafi appeared as an anomaly as he was the first nonwhite to win the event since the reintroduction of Olympic events in Athens in 1896. *The Negro World*, the product of outspoken black leader Marcus Garvey, heralded the victory as disproving Nordic supremacy. Black Newspapers echoed the sentiment, noting that the level of stamina and energy required to win such a grueling event was perceived to only be possessed by the Aryan.²⁶

One will see in these few examples that ascribing the undoing of scientific held inclinations is mostly a revisionist undertaking. That is to say Historians have worked backwards and drawn conclusions as new information has come to light despite the glaring absence of evidence to contemporary realities. Logically the results of these separate but similar events should have

altered existing concepts of race, but the truth is America was a segregated society de jure since the 1890s. The “separate but equal” ruling emanating from *Plessey v. Ferguson* widened the great chasm between the races in the public domain. As a result, black newspapers were written to black readers and vice versa. And consequentially, whites were forced to pay little attention to black affairs. As mentioned, few white writers came to the fore to lambaste widely accepted ideas of white superiority, mostly for fear of backlash. Such topics eluded the majority of whites and thus public opinion was not so fickle as to sway on the results of single sporting events. Public opinion and race relations remained virtually intact well into the 1930s in America.²⁷

The paradigm shift that occurred in the wake of Owens concerning racial theories and science was certainly a result the accomplishments of blacks prior to Berlin and athletes like Joe Louis who carried the torch into the war era. Needless to say, without their advancements Owens would not have been afforded the opportunity. Owens, in fact, was not the first black American to be an Olympian. He was not even the first to win a gold medal, nor was he the first to win the 100 meter dash. So then how might such an opportunity to challenge Aryan supremacy arise for Jesse Owens?

In the 1932 games in Los Angeles Eddie Tolan and Ralph Metcalfe, both African Americans, finished first and second in the 100 meters. Tolan duplicated the result in the 200 meters earning his second gold medal and an Olympic record, while Metcalfe settled for bronze. It was unprecedented. Tolan had become the first black gold medalist in both races. He triumphed amidst a great wave of black track and field athletes who had participated at the Olympic trials and the handful who competed at the games. It was the signaling of a new era, a time in which “black powerlessness decreased” and African Americans found certain doors pried open, ever so slightly, by the Harlem Renaissance—the “New Negro” it was called.²⁸

No black athlete had represented the United States Olympic teams until 1904; the first gold medal waited until 1924 in Paris when Dehart Hubbard won the long jump. Hubbard's gold, however, like most black achievements in segregationist America, sparked little interest in the mainstream media.²⁹ Tolan, like Hubbard, and unlike Owens, found few writers in the white press decrying the end of Aryan hegemony, though they had defeated every white competitor in the field which theretofore had always won the events. Metcalfe and Tolan did make a few headlines in the newspapers and there were sporadic commentaries, but little connection was made to racial mythologies, and except for the black newspapers, race dialogue failed to enter public domain with much enthusiasm.³⁰

Interest in Aryan Supremacy at Berlin

Building on the progress of Tolan at Los Angeles, Owens left for Berlin with much anticipation of the outcome by the American media. In a dramatic shift in race relations, the Olympics of 1936 was the focus of national attention. A debate on U.S. participation in the Olympics served in drawing much interest to the racial implications of the games, as Hitler was to unveil a revived Germany based on Aryan Supremacy and Owens was participating as a highly favored victor.³¹

The commotion was first set off from the radical policies initiated by Germany after being awarded the games in 1931. Originally slated to host the games in 1916 but deferred due to the onset of war, the International Olympic Committee elected to return the games to Berlin. Berlin at the time was under the influence of the Weimar Republic.³² The Republic was hastily constructed after the war and fell apart under the financial burden of the Great Depression. Under such tenuous circumstances, Adolph Hitler rose to power in 1933, and the Nazi party

immediately began to implement sweeping changes—suspension of free speech and the elimination of dissent—creating a fascist state that distinguished between German citizens and its Jewish inhabitants and other pariahs.³³

News quickly made it to the United States. And as immediate as atrocities were committed in Germany, an unprecedented proposal of a boycott of the Olympics loomed. The notion of an Olympics in Berlin with the United States in absentia reverberated loudest in the Jewish community and the black press. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) also came out strongly against the United States' participation at the games.³⁴ Nevertheless the critics were unable to foment significant change. In fact, open disputes were made by few key figures; leaders in America, for the most part, were mum during the early part of the 1930s, remaining apolitical. However, in the fall of 1935, when the infamous Nuremberg Laws codified what was once a de facto position in Germany—denying Jews citizenship and stripping them of their civil rights—the simmered debate began to boil.³⁵ Mayor La Guardia of New York City hosted a rally railing against the hosts of the Olympics, “One of the finest things for world peace has been the Olympic Games held every four years in a different country. Athletic contests imply good sportsmanship and fair play, two qualities which are unknown to the Hitler regime.” Then La Guardia petitioned, “Our athletes, I hope, will refuse to lend respectability to Hitler and his followers. The American people, it would seem, are not in favor of sending their athletes to the meeting in Berlin.”³⁶

Just prior to the events at Nuremburg, Owens received a published letter from the *Amsterdam News* beckoning him to “strike this blow” against Hitlerism. The letter was also sent to seven other members of the amateur athletic union who were Olympic hopefuls.

Despite the limitations placed upon you as members of a minority group, you have fought your way to the top. You have challenged and vanquished the

myths of racial superiority and inferiority...you have become symbols of internationalism which is the ultimate goal of all civilization. The *Amsterdam News* however wishes to call your attention to another opportunity—the greatest in your brilliant careers. [sic] An opportunity to challenge the force which seeks to destroy everything you have devoted your best years to building. A force which seeks to deny the universal equality you have so laboriously established. And yet, a force which is not above using you and your achievements to strengthen itself so that eventually it may destroy you. This force is Hitlerism...Under Hitlerism, or the triumph in this country of similar forces you would have had no opportunity to become the international figures you are...The Nazi philosophy has bludgeoned its way into every field of human endeavor...you cannot afford to give moral and financial support to a philosophy which seeks the ultimate destruction of all you have fought for.

The letter goes on to admonish Owens:

Your appearance there in the 1936 Olympic Games, the use of your magic names to attract thousands of tourists and sport fans to that country would undoubtedly furnish this moral and financial support. Therefore, as an open protest... the *Amsterdam News* begs you to refuse to participate in the Olympic Games in Germany in 1936...We make this request not only of the 204,000 Negroes in Harlem, the 12,000,000 Negroes in America and the countless less darker exploited colonials throughout the world. We speak in the name of humanity, of civilization, of all forces of enlightenment which are threatened by Adolph Hitler and barbaric Nationalist Socialist philosophy.³⁷

The forceful letter, full of fanciful rhetoric, which heaped praise upon the athletes while painting an ominous (if not foreboding) picture of Hitler and the Nazi force, had achieved its intended effect. Owens was indeed swept up by the whirlwind of protest. When asked about his stance in a radio interview during November of 1935, Owens responded magnanimously, “If there is discrimination against minorities in Germany, then we must withdraw from the Olympics.”³⁸

Owens judgment reveals how influential and pervasive the current of protest surrounding him truly was. A Gallup poll confirmed that a strong tide of opposition existed to the extent that 43 percent of Americans were in favor of withdrawing from the ceremonies. And of those percentages, while a small majority still opposed the boycott, the ambivalence of Americans toward sending athletes to Berlin is worth noting.³⁹ The division over the proposition of a

boycott, elucidated by the polls, was centered on notions of fair treatment and equality of race. To be more precise, concerns about inhumane policies and the gross treatment of minority groups had entered American public opinion and thus entered the feedback loop, a hint that progress was slowly being made.

Owens, of course, would later renege on his statement of protest. Many came to his defense lamenting the glaring hypocrisy in withdrawing from athletic competitions on the basis of race relations in another country. Charles Snyder, Owens' coach at Ohio State, questioned poignantly, "Why should we oppose Germany for doing something that we do right here at home?"⁴⁰ A writer for the *New York World* elaborated when he asked if accommodations would be made such as the removal of signs reading "Whites on this side, Colored on that side" if the Olympics were held in "any one of the states below the Mason-Dixon line."⁴¹

After Walter White heard the news of Owens changing his stance, the secretary of the NAACP telegraphed Owens a note of deep regret. Though White wrote with the intent to reprimand Owens, and cautioning him on the severity of "Germany under the Hitler regime," he could not escape noting the hypocrisy. "[T]o point the finger of scorn at any other country for racial or any other kind of bigotry," he wrote, was hypocritical of Americans. But White also explained that stopping the influence of dictators should take precedent.⁴²

Avery Brundage, the president of the American Olympic Committee, who would soon become the Amateur Athletic Union president after the boycott failed to materialize, proved to be the decisive advantage. Staunch in his support of sending the athletes, Brundage, defended his position in a published letter addressed "to the Sport-loving Public of the United States:" "...we have many opportunities for the exercise of our altruistic impulses right here in the United States. It would seem only proper to set our own house in order before we attempt to reform the

world.”⁴³ In effect, he never seriously entertained the thought of anything to the contrary. In order to placate the protestors he staged a quasi investigation of German institutions where over six days he was entertained by the Nazi administration including Hitler himself. Naturally, he found little evidence to support the necessity of American withdrawal. Brundage felt that the Olympic forum was for competition and not for “political, religious or racial affairs.”⁴⁴ In December of 1935, the Amateur Athletic Union voted against further investigation of the Olympic hosts, and by a narrow margin, the boycott ended as it began—Olympic athletes and Jesse Owens destined for Berlin.⁴⁵

What interest wasn't spurred by the debate and Hitler's notoriety, Hitler intended to display Aryan supremacy via a revived Germany, and the Olympics were the grandest stage. The 1932 Olympic Games in Los Angeles demonstrated an extravagance and ceremonial elegance indicative of American nationalism, but it also served as a template for the eventual German hosts to emulate. When Hitler, who at one time was openly opposed to the Olympics, was convinced of the value of the Games—the journalists, the newspapers, the propaganda—he spared no expense and exercised little restraint in duplicating and surpassing all predecessors to produce the XI Olympiad. Hitler put his best architects to work constructing state of the art facilities around Berlin. The finest projects included an Olympic stadium for 110,000 spectators and an Olympic village that provided housing for the athletes under the most elaborate of conditions—equipped with theater, stores, swimming pools, and saunas. The modern structures were enhanced by infrastructural improvements and beautification measures culminating in a platform to allow Aryan supremacy to be unveiled to the world.⁴⁶

Hitler understood however that “buildings alone will not suffice to guarantee a showing by our athletes that is commensurate with Germany's world importance.” He called for a “schooling

and hardening” of athletic warriors.⁴⁷ Under the strict guidelines outlined in the Versailles Treaty, compulsory military training was forbidden. Germany in an attempt to circumvent such stipulations, as Hitler viewed sport as preparation for military service, established athletic clubs and sports organizations across Germany for its Aryan citizens. Hitler declared, “Give the German six million bodies of flawless athletic training, all glowing with fanatical love of their country, and inculcated with the highest aggressive spirit, and in less than two years if necessary a national state will have created an army.” To be sure, Hitler’s ideas were implemented in an unbridled fashion. Germany had ensured that the Aryan elites were able to compete at the highest level obtainable to represent Germany in the Olympics in 1936.⁴⁸

Also adding racial dimensions to the profundity of hype in Berlin, Jesse Owens was easily the most recognizable American athlete, and he was expected to dominate the events he was set to field. As mentioned, Owens had gained national notoriety in 1935 when he was a burgeoning star for Ohio State. Among a flourish of black athletes who were now beginning to compete in track and field in America (in the North), the Buckeye Bullet performed one of the most remarkable feats in track and field history. In the span of 45 minutes at the Big Ten track and field championships, Owens had broken three world records in the 220 yard dash, the broad jump, and the 220 low hurdles and had equaled a fourth in the 100 yard dash. As a result, When Owens had qualified for the Olympics, along with a contingent of accomplished black athletes, he was no longer an athlete mentioned with potential. He was expected to bring home gold for the United States.⁴⁹

Prior to Berlin, Owens entry into sports fame came so forcefully, even as several black athletes were starting to gain recognition where opportunity was provided, many had already began to rethink the paradigm established by race science. As early as 1935, ideas of black

inferiority had segued into black successes in track and field being linked to an anatomical advantage. Opinions surfaced of a longer heel bone, a stronger Achilles tendon, or various other genetic differences which make the black athlete more suitable for sprinting and jumping events. A black anthropologist William Montague Cobb came to the fore to account for both the alleged new successes of black athletes “especially conspicuous in the public eye” and Jesse Owens who had “performed the greatest track feats ever wrought by a single man.”⁵⁰ Over several days Cobb poked and prodded Owens and concluded that in most dimensions Owens’ body type more closely resembled a “Caucasoid” rather than “Negroid” type. He astutely explained that there is a greater variance between the competitors of different field events than the blacks and whites who participate in the same event. Ultimately, Cobb pleaded ignorance and extolled the lack of scientific analysis of his day, citing the variability of physical, physiological, and personality traits in each of the winners in track events since the turn of the century. Cobb’s motivation in dispelling such thoughts, while seemingly rather dubious in light of the pervasive racist thought by white supremacists, was black superiority in sport was being strongly connected to mental inferiority by some racialsists, as will be shown, after Owens in Berlin.⁵¹

Owens at Berlin

Among the newly erected architecture, reshaped German athletes in the Aryan and Hitler ideal, and the high expectations following Jesse Owens, a spectacle of pageantry enshrouded Berlin. Parades and festivities, flags bearing swastikas lining the streets, composers and anthems, the releasing of thousands of white pigeons, dirigibles flying overhead, a torch relay across Europe from Athens to Berlin, elucidated the sheer immensity of the moment. Germany had risen from the ashes of the First World War to produce the Olympic Games in which, as a writer

for the *New York Times* witnessed, "...years of such preparation as never have been made for an athletic occasion."⁵²

The eyes of the world watched, and Owens didn't disappoint. During the first week of the Olympics of 1936 Jesse Owens delivered one of the most thrilling displays of athletic dominance in twentieth century. He ran roughshod over every competitor in the field. His only close competition was in the broad jump when German leaper Luz Long pushed him to the finals when Owens unleashed his best jump for an Olympic record. In his other events he was equally impressive. Owens set a new world record in the 200 meters at 20.3. In the 100 meter he equaled the world mark, and in the 4x100 meter relay, he ran the first leg of a squad that was the first ever to finish under 40 seconds, earning a world record and his 4th gold medal of the games.

News poured in from Germany across the United States as headlines touted American Olympic feats. "Owens Dashes to World Mark," read the *New York Times* as an adjacent photo revealed the wide margin of victory at the finish line during the second heat of the 100 meters.⁵³ "Owens captures Olympic Title, Equals World 100 Meter Record," read the news after his first gold medal.⁵⁴ The *Christian Science Monitor* had liberally called him the "Athlete of the Hour," and on black achievements made no discrepancy of color when the paper posted "Americans at Front in Runs and Jumps," as pictures revealed the gleeful faces of Owens and other black gold medalists throughout the week.⁵⁵ The *Columbus Evening Dispatch* relayed results from the same day on August 4 when the front page read "Owens sets two more Olympic marks."⁵⁶ In the South, the *Nashville Tennessean* posted a radiophoto of Owens hurling through the air in the Broad Jump under the headline "U.S. Negro Stars Win at Berlin" as Owens, labeled the Tan Thunderbolt, had captured his second gold medal.⁵⁷ The next day headline was less vague when it informed "Owens Breaks another Record to Score Triple in the Olympiad."⁵⁸

The black press was quick to interpret the results. The *Pittsburg Courier*, the only black newspaper to staff the events, wrote in its review of the Olympics that “Negro America wrote her name indelibly on the records as having the best athletes in the world when our ten sons jumped and ran their way to six individual championships last week before Negro-hating Hitler and his professional heralders of the Aryan superman.”⁵⁹ By comparison, the official Nazi newspaper *Der Angriff* had written off the American medals by lamenting that Americans had resorted to using their “black auxiliaries.”⁶⁰

Unlike any other time in history press coverage was extensive, recording every exploit by Owens and other black athletes. The wealth of exposure during August of 1936, including the build up to the Olympics and the acclaim that would sporadically appear afterwards, was truly a dramatic shift in culture that was noticeably different from any time before it. Historian Al-Tony Gilmore observed that the “basic impulse of American Nationalism could suspend that of racism.” Thomas Wolfe, the American author, echoed such sentiment when he proclaimed “Owens was a black star, but it was our team, and I thought he was wonderful.”⁶¹ Owens returned home to a hero’s welcome. A tremendous outpouring of adulation followed him in each town as he received ticker-tape parades in Columbus, Cleveland, and New York. Photographs weeks after take of Owens at his homes capture him smiling from ear to ear, surrounded by congratulatory letters written from fans across the United States.⁶²

Challenging Aryan Supremacy

For the Nazis, however, they had not anchored their beliefs solely in the results of track events. While Americans gleaned from the results of the Olympics what they desired, history has shown Hitler was not deterred. Leni Riefenstahl, the film-maker who created the first ever

Olympic documentary during the games in Berlin, and had spent some time with Hitler, wrote in her memoirs that Hitler had not expected the Germans to win medals in the sprinting events. “Negroes will be their stars,” Hitler said.⁶³ For the Germans, the Olympics only cemented their beliefs in the superiority of the Aryan. In their hopes for displaying a revitalized nation on the backs of a more advanced species, Germans owned the Olympics both literally and figuratively. They claimed decisive victories in gymnastics, canoeing, weightlifting, boxing, yachting, fencing, cycling, and the equestrian events.⁶⁴ When the Olympic flame had been extinguished the Germans had compiled more gold, silver, and bronze medals than any other country, the U.S. a distant second. Hitler only saw this as the beginning of a new type of German.⁶⁵

To Americans, however, Aryan supremacy had been exposed. In America the reigning paradigm had to be altered as the mass of exposure offered contradictory evidence to white superiority that could not be ignored. For many, it was a brief moment which signaled the progress of a nation and a hope for racial harmony, believing Owens helped shape an American identity in the mold of “a melting pot of races.” The reality was much more limited in reach. Social change was a slow progression, and the pursuit for racial equality was a grueling battle that would reach its height over the next several decades.⁶⁶ To blacks Owens was a national hero. In the years to come as advancements in various sectors were made and the Civil Rights Movement came to the forefront of the national agenda, the achievements of Owens took on new meaning. He became a symbol, as it was viewed, of a time when great strides were made in spite of the social ills that plagued society. Owens was deemed a race pioneer as he had challenged Aryan supremacy on its home turf.

Despite his legacy, within a year of his monumental showing in Berlin, though Owens lived a more comfortable life than most blacks, he returned to the same racial climate and was

forced to conform to the segregationist laws he had always known.⁶⁷ In light of these facts, Mark Dyerson argues that Owens' domination of his Olympic events, along with the other black athletes, actually reinforced concepts of scientific racism. He asserts that a new paradigm arose to replace the previous version by providing a caveat for black success in sprinting and jumping. It was argued that black successes were due to their peculiar genetic advantage. Owens' Olympic coach Dean Cromwell explained, "The Negro athlete excelled because he was closer to the primitive." He added, "It was not so long ago that his ability to sprint and jump was a life-and-death matter to him in the jungle."⁶⁸ While Dyerson does not distinguish between the pervasiveness of the new paradigm and other modes of thinking, he does conclude that "the vision of Owens's feet as the greatest debunkers of Nazi racial theories proved far more popular in both the immediate aftermath of the 1936 games and in the longer struggle against racist ideologies in American History."⁶⁹

Jesse Owens was truly the harbinger of a new era, even if Americans were slow to fully comprehend the significance of what was happening, what was to come. The cognitive dissonance practiced by the majority of America in the wake of Owens in Berlin was curbed to some extent as a new black athlete emerged to carry the torch which Owens and his predecessors had held temporarily. Joe Louis, whose career was inextricably linked to his personal friend Owens, was a contributor to the cause of racial equality by his own merits. Louis as a boxer enjoyed a long and successful career, enabling him to build on the success of Owens and to shoulder the challenge to inequality well into the war period and beyond. By defeating white fighters and most famously by avenging his loss to the German Max Schmeling in 1938 which was a heavily political laced event, Louis only enhanced Owens' legacy.⁷⁰

Scientific Racism would eventually start its descent into the backwater of pseudo-scientific theories. In the years following World War II the atrocities committed by Hitler—who had carried scientific precepts of racism to its end—became widely known, and the retreat of a once ardent creed ensued.⁷¹ The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) formed in 1946 in the pursuit of bringing racial accord to the nations of the world. It declared in its constitution: “The great and terrible war which has now ended was a war made possible by the denial of the democratic principles of dignity, equality, and mutual respect of men, and by the propagation, in their place, through ignorance and prejudice, of the doctrine of the inequality of men and races.”⁷² UNESCO released the Statement of 1950 outlining the present knowledge of racial differences claiming “Scientists agree that mankind is one...”⁷³ Though there is no footnote needed to the claim that public opinion often lags behind scientific understanding, the events marked significant change in world opinion.

In conclusion, the Berlin Olympics of 1936 was an arena that enabled many blacks to participate and to show their mettle. Collectively, black Americans were so outstanding in sprinting and jumping events that of the six gold medals that were won, “without Owens, only the broad jump would have been lost.”⁷⁴ Nevertheless, Owens was the face of American victories, bringing home four gold medals against the worthiest of adversaries on the grandest stage. Thus Owens had challenged Aryan supremacy legitimately because it was simply believed to be so. Though his accomplishments produced a variety of interpretations, the end result was that Owens had challenged the status quo, instigated racial dialogues, and demarcated a line at which those who looked into the past could identify a recognizable change in American society. Owens had benefited from those who had come before him, and certainly there are those who

came afterwards—a great multitude, who benefited from his accomplishments. Owens was a contributor, a symbol of those who had shouldered the burden to challenge white supremacy.

NOTES

1. Mark Dyerson, "Prolegomena to Jesse Owens: American Ideas about Race and Olympic Races from the 1890s to the 1920s," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 25 (January 2008): 224-226. Dyerson has written several articles of similar content and title to this work which will be used in this chapter.
2. Jeremy Schaap, *Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 185-91. The record was later dismissed as judges ruled there was too much tailwind. In less accommodating weather conditions for the final Owens tied the world record at 10.3.
3. Arthur Barbeau, "Jesse Owens and the Triumph of Black Olympians," *Journal of the West Virginia Historical Association* 4 (1980): 46.
4. Louis L. Snyder, *Race: a History of Modern Ethnic Theories*, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1939), 20.
5. Hanz Marten, "Racism, Social Darwinism, Anti-Semitism, and Aryan Supremacy," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 16, (February 1999): 24; Snyder, 36.
6. Snyder, 39-45
7. H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History: Being a Plain History of Life and Mankind*. (New York: The Macmillan Company: 1961), 109.
8. Snyder, 20, 39-41.
9. Elazar Barkan, *The Retreat of Scientific Racism: Changing concepts of race in Britain and the United States between the World Wars*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1992), 16, 137.
10. Snyder, 21-22.
11. Snyder, 60.
12. Rudyard Kipling, *White Man's Burden*, 1899.
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/Kipling.html> (accessed April 16, 2010).
13. D.W. Griffith, *Birth of a Nation*, 1915.
14. Marten, 23-41.
15. Marten, 27-29.
16. Snyder, 46-53.

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17. Adolph Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, Trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), xix.
 18. Hilter, 285.
 19. Hilter, 284-329, 293.
 20. Martin Friedman, "Olympics fulfilled Owens's Dream," *Ohio State Lantern*, April 11, 1979.
 21. Ohio State University Archives, Jesse Owens collection. "Diary written by Owens as he traveled to the 1936 Summer Olympics: 1936."
 22. Joseph Dorinson, "Black Heroes in Sport: from Jack Johnson to Muhammad Ali," *Journal of Popular Culture* 1 (Winter 1997): 117.
 23. Lerone Bennett, "Jack Johnson and the Great White Hope." *Ebony* (January 2005): 111. It was the author Jack London who first used the choice words of a "great white hope."
 24. Dorinson, 117-118.
 25. Montye Fuse and Keith Miller, "Jazzing the Basepaths: Jackie Robinson and African American Aesthetics," in *Sports Matters: Race, Recreation, and Culture*, eds. John Bloom and Michael Nevin Willard (New York: New York University Press, 2002): 127-128, 119-140.
 26. "El Ouafi," *The Negro World*, Aug 18, 1928, 4. Quoted in Mark Dyerson, "American Ideas about Race and Olympic Races from the 1890s to the 1950s: Shattering Myths or Reinforcing Scientific Racism?" 28 no 2, (Summer 2001): 181-185.
 27. Dyerson, "American Ideas about Race," 185.
 28. William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life*. (New York: Free Press, 1986), 29; Dorinson, 117.
 29. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 24, 29, 100. There were no American blacks who qualified in 1928.
 30. Dyerson, "American Ideas about race," 248.
 31. William J. Baker, *Sports in the Western World*. (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), 248-252.
 32. Large, 32-39.
 33. Richard D. Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 45-52.

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34. Large, 87-88.
35. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 64.
36. La Guardia was speaking to a boycott rally organized by the Fair Play Committee December 3, 1935. Quoted in Jeremy Schaap, 87-89.
37. The Ohio State University Archives, Jesse Owens Collection (record group 41/d/6/13), "Correspondence: Amsterdam News: Letter to Owens, other U.S. Black Athletes Participating in Berlin Olympic: August 19, 1935."
38. Jeremy Schaap, 98; Baker, 65.
39. Large, 83.
40. Cleveland Call and Post November 14, 1935. Cited in Baker, 65-66.
41. Quoted in Large, 90.
42. Walter White telegram to Jesse Owens, December 4, 1935, Ohio State University Archives; Schaap, 100-101.
43. Avery Brundage, "Letter to Public," Ohio State University Archives.
44. Jacqueline Edmondson, *Jesse Owens: A Biography* (West Port: Greenwood, 2007), 38-40; Schaap, 63-73. quote 72.
45. Large, 99.
46. Large, 63, 152-165. Hitler insisted only German citizens with Aryan backgrounds be hired for construction projects.
47. Hitler, quoted in Large, 165.
48. William Baker, *Western World*, 247.
49. Stephen E. Ambrose, "Jesse Owens Breaks 4-Track Records," *American History Illustrated* 1, no. 3 (1966): 51-52; Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 50-53.
50. W. Montague Cobb, "Race and Runners" *Journal of Health and Physical Education* 7 (January 1936): 3-7, 52-54, 56.

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51. David K. Wiggins and Patrick B. Miller, eds., *The Unlevel Playing Field: a Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 158-163.
52. Frederick T. Burchall, "11th Olympics Open Today in Gay and Crowded Berlin," *New York Times*, August 1, 1936.
53. Arthur J. Daley. "Owens Dashes to World Mark" *New York Times*, August 3, 1936.
54. Arthur J. Daley. "Owens captures Olympic Title, Equals World 100 Meter Record," August 4, 1936.
55. AP, "Americans at Front in Runs and Jumps," *Christian Science Monitor*, Aug 4, 1936.
56. "Owens sets two more Olympic marks," *Columbus Evening Dispatch*, August 4, 1936.
57. AP, "U.S. Negro Stars Win at Berlin," *Nashville Tennessean*, August 5, 1936.
58. AP, "Owens Breaks another Record to Score Triple in the Olympiad," *Nashville Tennessean*, Aug 6, 1936.
59. *Pittsburg Courier*, Aug 15, 1936. Cited in John Stevens, "The Black Press and the 1936 Olympics," *American Journalism* 14 no. 1 (Winter 1997): 101.
60. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 100.
61. Al-Tony Gilmore, "Black Athletes in an Historical Context: the Issue of Race," *Negro History Bulletin* 58, no. 3 (Oct-Dec. 1995): 9-10; Thomas Wolfe quoted in Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 101.
62. "World's Newest Fastest Human with Admiring Members of Immediate Family" *Columbus Evening Dispatch*, August 25, 1936.
63. Leni Riefenstahl, *Leni Riefenstahl: a Memoir*, (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 179.
64. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 107.
65. Baker, *Western World*, 254-256.
66. Dyerson, *Prolegomena*, 225-231.
67. Gilmore, 10.
68. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 45.

69. Dyerson , “American Ideas about Race,” 248-257.

70. Jon Entine, *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We Are Afraid to Talk About It*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2000), 172-197

71. Barkan, 279-281.

72. Quoted in Snyder, 93.

73. Quoted in Snyder, 94.

74. Barbeau, 54.

CHAPTER 4

THE CONSCIOUS SOUTHERNER

The quotidian newspaper reader in the South discovered some rather conspicuous news in August of 1936. Contrary to the customs of the day, the white readership of America's most popular Southern newspapers was confronted with the adulation and accomplishments of America's new hero. In a single week of press clippings, Jesse Owens had altered the collective consciousness of a people who had previously maintained ignorance toward the positive aspects of their African American neighbors. For the South, it was only a fleeting moment, but such news was a glimpse of the progress that had been made and a sign of a future that was dramatically different than its past.

The South before Jesse

A dark veil of racism had shrouded the American South ever since slaves were first uprooted from their homelands and transplanted onto plantations all across its interior. After a brutal war, the North imposed its will on the Confederate States of America abolishing the practice of slavery. However, racial attitudes were not quelled with Southern defeat, as the agricultural based economy of the South shifted from slavery to sharecropping—an “entrapped and deprived condition”—as the primary method of labor.¹ Effectively maintaining the same labor intensive schedule and process, except now contractually bound and—in principle—“prohibited from physical coercion” of black laborers, reactionary measures were taken by southern landowners and leaders in order to preserve their way of life, a life of exploitation that emancipation attempted to transform.² Thus, Black Codes emerged with sharecropping as “a substitute for the social controls of slavery.” The Codes varied across southern states but

effectively placed new restrictions on the rights of blacks and put freedmen back to work on plantations. The Civil Rights act of 1866 nullified the Codes, but the law was ineffective in slowing the increasing racial tensions between former slave owners and the newly naturalized black citizens of the South throughout Reconstruction.³

The “New South” was characterized by a renewed resistance to the equality of races and the inability of Northern political leaders to provide the South with a definitive answer to “the Negro Question.” During this time deep-seated racism manifested itself in the form of a color line that descended on the South creating de facto social apartheid. J. William Harris explains in his article, “Etiquette, Lynching, and Racial Boundaries in Southern History: A Mississippi Example,” that “blacks in the South could not be locked out or driven away, because the South's economy was totally dependent on their labor... It was not the presence of two races in the South that created a boundary between them, but the presence of a boundary that created two races.”⁴ Harris further explains that this new boundary created a new strand of animosity based on the proper etiquette that black folks should maintain around and toward whites in public. The color line was however more than just greetings and contact. It affected the South in every sphere of life. Life for whites and blacks, who cohabitated the same bordered territory, evolved to become separate unequal realms under the same hierarchy.⁵

The Jim Crow era, as the social order came to be known, was essentially a caste system in which blacks were relegated to the bottom tier of society, still subordinate to the ruling white class. Gary Helm Darden has argued that this time period in American History is within the same context of the European order in relation to Imperialism and decolonization.⁶ He asserts that in the postwar South, revolutionary measures were implemented in order to establish an interracial democracy: former slaves had become citizens, earned male suffrage, and equal protection under

the law. However, they were laws the white denizens and “Jim Crow would later erase or undercut, reverting the fate of African Americans in the South to that of a colonial subject.”⁷

The 1896 ruling by the Supreme Court in the case of *Plessy V. Ferguson*—determining races to be “separate but equal”—cemented the already ritualized practice of segregation.⁸ Legal segregation then drew distinctions between races that waxed thick. It ensured that African Americans, due to the limited resources available to them and actual *inequality*, were subjugated to second class citizenship for future generations. *Plessy* became the codified backdrop for antipathy in race relations, the basis for ill-will towards impropriety and thus, punishment for any defilement of race etiquette. “The line was drawn in law, where African Americans were segregated and denied full citizenship, in speech and gesture, in joke and story, in mocking laughter and brutal violence.” The law in its application proved to be an oppressive ruling, responsible for ostensibly demarcating institutions on the basis of color indelibly. Jim Crow would endure for the next half century.⁹

The Southern Condition

At the turn of the twentieth century, Jim Crow had separated the worlds of blacks and whites in all facets of life. Of course, Jim Crow was an American ordeal, but it was most unsympathetic in the South. In the Solid South, race functioned as a social class, and the chasm between blacks and whites below the Mason-Dixon Line was as wide as the Atlantic Ocean that separated them nearly two centuries before. Segregation in the South, more than just a color line and separate circles of life, meant arrested political and social development, limited access to education, and little voice in affairs to change the status quo, amid a looming threat of violence.¹⁰

One of the key components of segregation was what Robert R. Weyeneth called “architectural isolation,” which was based on the ideal “that racial contact should be minimized.”¹¹ That is, public venues and institutions, as well as residential areas, were spatially used to preclude the mingling of races. Public spaces—parks, libraries, restrooms, restaurants, hotels, gas stations, water fountains, cemeteries, and institutions—hospitals, schools, universities, prisons, and even orphanages were all a part a system that was pragmatically designed to isolate communities by color.¹² However, segregation in the public sphere was only symptomatic of the prevailing racial views of white policy makers. Such enforced barriers carried ramifications that were more far reaching and, consequently, elucidate a more central aim of Southern elites.¹³

Division of races meant unequal access to the resources that created the system of white privilege. Separate railway cars and buses were only an inconvenience. The Southern brand of racism prevented access to the crucial building blocks that could initiate social uplift, namely housing, employment, and education. These three interconnected realms are at the confluence of what George Wilson labeled “life-chance opportunities.”¹⁴ For African Americans their segregated residential neighborhoods came with a myriad of disadvantages inherent in their locale. Surrounded by poverty, housing served as a pipeline to inferior schooling and training and networks, as well as damaging psychological effects—for having only known degradation.¹⁵

Additionally, there was a great injustice in the “everyday conflict waged by African American working-people.”¹⁶ Blacks faced exclusion from labor opportunities and limited mobility to improve their lot. For those few who found jobs in mines and mills, railroads, and factories, most suffered as victims of discrimination and harsh conditions.¹⁷ Black women typically found jobs as maids or other servants, “jobs that left little room for organization,

collectivity, or grievance.”¹⁸ Because black laborers—from farmers to teachers—were paid less than their white counterparts, their limited income only secured their fates, limiting the trajectory to which they might assail.¹⁹

In lieu of being disenfranchised and downtrodden, education was perhaps the most damning element of Jim Crow. Endemic in the South was the lack of funding, lack of emphasis, and lack of support white leaders gave to the education of its black members. Typically, blacks were taught in dilapidated buildings, while they were also in school for shorter periods of the year due to both harvest times and funding. There was a constant struggle to obtain instructional materials, and overwhelmingly black schools were inferior to white schools in every element. For example, in a county in Virginia, blacks did not attend high school until the mid-1920s; they were not bused there until 1938, but only after private donations and efforts by the black community. Whites operated high schools nearly two decades before and bused students at the expense of the public. The African American was at a disadvantage to compete intellectually in the white world of the South, and thus the wherewithal to escape the vicious cycle into which he was born.²⁰

Born into the Fire

Into such oppression was the fire of segregation that Jesse was born. Owens came to the world in September of 1913 in Oakville, Alabama, a rural town of a little over a thousand inhabitants, just over a modern hour’s drive North of Birmingham. Jesse was the last of his three sisters and six brothers born to Henry and Mary Emma Owens.²¹ Like his siblings, Jesse did not receive a formal education in Alabama. Due to limited educational opportunities, Jesse lagged behind. Most of his learning was from a few volunteers and supplemented like most African

Americans at the time by the church. In fact, the state or county did not provide a single trained teacher until several years after World War I. The Owens did not learn to read or write so well. More so, Jesse's family had keenly learned how to survive.²²

Henry Owens was a sharecropper and the son of a former slave. He was undoubtedly raised with the awareness of the potential harm white men posed. He was, as William J. Baker described, "A quiet, timid man, resigned to his fate."²³ From his father, Jesse had inherited a natural passivity to the conditions of his environment, if he never shared in his dad's fatalistic outlook. Oakville was a community of largely poor whites, which meant—color being the Owens' only distinction—the presence of racial bigotry was ubiquitous. For that reason, in a region with a long-established tradition of inequality and violence, deference was viable strategy in maintaining a livelihood.²⁴

Accommodation preserved the existence of the Owens family, as it has not been documented that any type of violence ever made its way to their doorstep. For other African Americans in Alabama and the South, however, brutality hit closer to home. Violence was an ever-present threat that reminded the African American of his place in the caste of the South. Typical aggression occurred most often in the day-to-day correctional variety, such as reprimands and physical beat downs for crossing "racial boundaries," for not using the back door, for not removing a hat, or for talking to a white woman. As J. William Harris laconically put it, "Etiquette maintained boundaries; when crossed, violence restored them."²⁵

Lynching was the most brutal form of these social controls to which whites resorted. A "cruel combination of racism and sadism," Robert A. Gibson explains that lynching most often involved hanging or shooting, but at times more atrociously meant "burning at the stake, maiming, dismemberment, castration, and other brutal methods of physical torture."²⁶ Of the

documented lynching that has occurred within the U.S. since 1882, nearly 73% were African American victims, and 79% occurred in the South.²⁷ In fact, Alabama had the 5th highest total of lynching in the U.S. from 1882-1965, outranked only by other states in the South, including Mississippi and Georgia at one and two, respectively.²⁸ Concisely, racially motivated vigilantes in the form of a mob murdered more than 3,000 blacks from the time of emancipation to 1930 in the South.²⁹

Jim Crow was a harsh reality. For such blatant racism and discriminatory policies, Johnpeter Horst Grill likened the early twentieth century of the South to the Nazi reign in Germany. The Nazis who were anti-Semitic but also “viciously anti-black” viewed “the African American as a threat to white civilization.”³⁰ He cites that “negrophobia”—violence, segregation, and hatred—in the American South was a point of observation and discussion for the German intelligentsia in dealing with their own fears of miscegenation.³¹ Similarly, though Nazis viewed the Jew as a more serious threat within their population, racism and propaganda toward blacks abounded, and blacks were included within the policies outlined in the Nuremburg laws.³² Though the American South was hardly sympathetic to Nazi brand of racism, condemnation via the southern press would have invited too close of a comparison—a comparison which did not escape the black press—a comparison, Grill, a professor at Mississippi State, saw as a “mirror image.”³³

A Golden Opportunity

The difficulties facing African Americans in the early twentieth century were for many too much to bear. Disbarred politically and legally, institutionally ostracized, and socially excluded in the course of impending violence, their plight was made worse when a downturn in agriculture

and the boll weevil all but secured their fates as slaves to destitution.³⁴ Economic disparity forged the conditions for radical change. Nonetheless, the forces that shook blacks loose from the cotton fields was the culmination of a single push factor—racism—as black southerners fled the South in a mass exodus, pouring into northern cities in hopes of a better opportunity.³⁵

Of the millions who went north in the Great Migration, often characterized by “the original and most enduring image... of an illiterate sharecropper, displaced from the rural South because of agricultural distress,” the Owens family helped shape the stereotype.³⁶ At the urging of Emma Owens, Henry Owens was dragged against his will, away from the only way he knew how to survive and into the great unknown. Jesse remembered the excitement of that day, knowing they were getting on a train, and his father trembling with worry.³⁷ Jesse sentimentally recalled of his father years later, “I admire my papa fiercely for the decision he made... I’ve tried to make something of my life, but when I put it against what Henry Owens did, it doesn’t seem like much, considering the opportunity I had.”³⁸

Like others from North Alabama, the Owens family had settled on Cleveland, Ohio. The leap of faith made all the difference in Jesse’s life. His mother and siblings found jobs which brought an income, though his father languished with no permanent employment but a few odd and end jobs.³⁹ For Jesse, he remembered the move fondly as an improvement to their quality of life; he had a few more shirts, and the family was able to eat “meat once a week!”⁴⁰ More importantly, at an integrated middle school, Jesse found teachers who devoted their energy to him, especially his gym teacher and future high school track coach, Charles Riley. Riley was a patriarchal figure who played an influential role in his development, training every morning, cultivating his unbridled speed.⁴¹

Of Charles Riley, Owens reminisced, he was “a rare man, as much a father to me as Henry Owens was.”⁴² Under the auspices of Riley, Owens blazed a trail through Cleveland, and then Ohio, and then the northern United States. At East Technical High school, he competed in dashes from 60 yards to 220 meters, hurdles of various distances, relays of up to 880 yards, and the long jump, etching his name beside high school, national, and world records, winning three state titles and finally a national championship.⁴³ His only losses were in meets against older, more mature sprinters like the Olympic trials in 1932 and AAU national championships in 1933.⁴⁴ Just a few years prior, Riley had arranged for former Olympic gold medalist Charley Paddock of the 1920 Games in Antwerp to speak to the school and meet Jesse. It was a moment that Owens found inspiration in his new hero, recognizing where his potential could take him.⁴⁵

In his spiritual autobiography, Jesse drew the distinction in his life when he wrote “I don’t think I’d be telling this story today if it hadn’t been for Cleveland, and for Charles Riley.”⁴⁶ The exactitude of his statement will never be known, but of his move from the South one can be certain of its importance. As mentioned, accommodation gave the Owenses an opportunity to survive and a means to live in Alabama. It allowed Jesse to become mild-mannered and pleasant, to smile, to develop the temperament that would later carry him across racial boundaries and warm the hearts of even white America.⁴⁷ In truth, his achievement and personality would take him places Henry Owens could have never dreamed. But Jesse Owens would have never been mentioned, never have become a household name, had he remained in Oakville; like the ancient burial mounds of the Copena Indians that dot the landscape of his hometown, Jesse would have been lost in the sands of time.⁴⁸

If a black athlete sought for a career, his only hopes were away from the South. There was no room for him in the white world of sports. What Owens and Joe Louis had in common with

Jackie Robinson, was not only that they were astonishing athletes with personalities to transcended color lines, but that their stories are only possible because they found opportunities by leaving the oppression of the South behind. Sports were subjected to the same matter of inequality as other institutions; sports were simply unavailable to African Americans, at least at any competitive level. Owens would have never won a track meet in Alabama. Instead he most likely would have inherited a small plot of land from his father to tenant, if his father ever achieved such a status. Joe's family moved from Alabama to Detroit. Jackie who was born in Georgia found his opportunity in Pasadena and then UCLA.

A Tale of Two Places

Since the time of plantations, black participation in sports were consigned to holidays. On those special days, black slaves would race, box, and even play baseball, more commonly to pacify themselves and sometimes as a sport for white owners.⁴⁹ There was indeed "little opportunity for African Americans to make pastimes out of physical activity, or to organize games and sport."⁵⁰ However slight the advancement, the late 1800s presented a few opportunities to which an African American might assert himself. And if there were only a few but limited ways a black athlete might participate in sports, there were an even smaller number represented in the South. (note)

In the South a few African Americans had proved their mettle as horse jockeys, achieving success and acclamation. Based on the tradition of slaves tending horses, the emphasis was placed on the horse and not the rider. As the prestige and money increased, and as the African American's notoriety for riding became more widespread, the black jockey was scaled back and eventually returned to the stables from whence he started. Jim Crow was inescapable.⁵¹

During that time, black colleges in both the North and South began to offer sports in basketball, baseball, and football. However, the majority of these athletes were from parents of upper middle class families who had stressed education and culture. The same was true of the few African American football players who made teams on white northern campuses; they went on to successful careers as lawyers and doctors, jobs concomitant with their social standing.⁵² Professional baseball initially began with a few integrated teams in the North as well, but they were soon disbanded, establishing a color barrier that Jackie Roosevelt Robinson would break down nearly 60 years later.⁵³

The state of sports at the turn of the twentieth century was not so dramatically different except for the incremental progress achieved in the North. As a result, A few black athletes in the North were able to rise to prominence. Most notably, Jack Johnson established himself as a premier pugilist of the era and finished his career in 1915 as one of the greatest to ever enter the ring. Johnson, as William J. Baker explains in *Sports in the Western World*, would never had received his shot at the title had the heavyweight division been so depleted of contenders, with most whites refusing to box black challengers. In his title shot against champion Tommy Burns, the outrage and fear of racial backlash forced the fight from the U.S. to Sydney, Australia. When Johnson floored Burns in the 13th round, America went in search of the “Great White Hope” to redeem the wounded pride of white superiority. When these “great hopes” were dashed, riots broke out in cities across America. Eventually, Papa Jack, whose lifestyle landed him in disrepute with racist whites, was outmatched by the hatred he spawned. Perhaps the victim of a witch hunt, Johnson was arrested for escorting a prostitute across state lines and vilified by the white public.⁵⁴

James Weldon Johnson writing for the *Black Manhattan* in 1930 provided commentary and context to the achievement of those early African Americans. The history of “the Negro in professional baseball makes not even a full page...He never gets so fair a chance in those forms of sport or athletics where he must be a member of a team as in those where he may stand upon his own ability as a individual.” For James Weldon, even more than horse-racing, the “prize-ring” was the greatest opportunity to prove African American ability. He said of Jack Johnson, whom he knew well, that his victories spurred “vicarious” beatings of individual blacks in various parts of the country.⁵⁵

By the 1920s and 30s the race relations gap in sport between the two oldest regions of the U.S. grew increasingly wider. Football, because it started as a college sport, had always had select universities that featured a black player. Those players and teams would encounter prejudice and resistance when facing teams that had barred blacks from participation. In other sports as well, black players would intermittently be scratched from games at the behest of a rival.⁵⁶ Overwhelmingly, Southern sports were played without black participation. At times when southern teams competed against northern teams, they too would pressure northern teams to play without their black players—in many cases, threats caused black players and coaches to acquiesce to Southern demands. If Northern teams were stubborn, games were cancelled altogether.⁵⁷

Likewise, in 1927, a track meet scheduled for Louisiana, hosting universities from around the country, became a site of debate. Because African Americans were on a number of squads of traveling Northern teams, those universities banded together and refused to sit their black athletes. “Were members of the superior race to be vanquished by inferior Negroes in the plain sight of thousands of descendants of Confederates who had fought for four bloody years to keep

the blacks in bondage?” contemptuously asked a writer of the *Pittsburg Courier-Journal*. The Amateur Athletic Union was forced to move the meet from New Orleans to New York City.⁵⁸

The inaccessibility of sports was a recurring theme. On every level of sport, of any sport, there were perhaps a great number of potential athletes whose absence was due to the restrictions of environment. Edwin Bancroft Henderson wrote profoundly, elucidating the discrepancy between schools of the North and South in 1936 when he wrote:

Athletics, in the main, begin with school life. In the South, after we leave the border states, are found the poorest of schools, and in a sampling survey made by the writer, there was found to be practically no physical education programs or athletics in schools for Negroes below the college level...However, the great trek of Negroes northward put a generation of colored boys in the schools of the more liberal states. There the physical education programs gave them their chance.⁵⁹

The same forces at work against the black youth of the South would have prevented Jesse Owens from any athletic achievement on the track. His move to the North offered him the opportunity to stand on his merits, to develop the precision that would hone his natural skills. If not shut out then, in the build up to the Olympics in Berlin, the debate raged about U.S. participation in the Games—the reason was cited as to the concern of the Nazi treatment of Jews and their exclusion from sports clubs, barring them from participation in the Olympics. The President of the American Olympic Committee, Avery Brundage, and General Charles Sherrill, a representative of the International Olympic Committee, as their titles imply, were some of the most outspoken advocates of the Games being played. Sherrill turned the argument on its head when he deftly, if not poignantly, retorted, “As to obstacles placed in the way of Jewish athletes or any others trying to reach Olympic ability, I would have no more business discussing that in Germany than if the Germans attempted to discuss the Negro situation in the American South...”

Ironically, two Jewish teammates of Owens, Sam Stoller and Marty Glickman, were late scratches on the relay, allowing Owens to claim his fourth gold medal in world record time.⁶⁰

Northern Exposure

In the North, despite its own color line and random acts of violence, the African American had gained momentum in sport and otherwise. There, Jesse Owens was a rarity but not an anomaly. He was a part of a new group of African Americans that resulted from the influx of black migrants into cities across the nation, a spirit that stemmed from the progress made, by the efforts of a great number of disillusioned blacks, the “New Negro.” He was a product of The Great War, the Great Migration, Jack Johnson, the NAACP, the black press, DuBois, Washington, Garvey, and the black intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance—the African American could thrive in areas where his energy was applied.⁶¹ To William Baker, “Cleveland was no golden apple” for migrants.⁶² However, for Owens his success there put him within reach of “Kollege” and a launching pad into worldwide fame.⁶³

Jesse received scholarship offers from colleges from all over the North but settled on Columbus at the Ohio State University.⁶⁴ As a freshman in 1933, Owens was an immediate sensation. On campus, there were still forms of traditional hardships and discrimination, backdoors and separate living facilities, but far from being excluded, he became the heralded Buckeye Bullet. By 1935, Owens had received national attention. In his junior year, Owens was entering the prime of his athletic career, a fact made obvious by his unprecedented display of dominance at the Big Ten championships at Ann Arbor.⁶⁵ In less than an hour, Owens broke three world records—the 220 yard dash, 220 low hurdles, long jump—and tied a fourth in the

100 yard dash.⁶⁶ During that season the Ohio St. captain “established eight new world records and tied another.”⁶⁷

By comparison, the University of Alabama, two hours from Oakville, and despite previous efforts, did not allow the admittance of a black student through its doors until 1963. In that fateful episode, Governor George Wallace stood in the doorway in protest, refusing entry to two African American students. At the behest of the federal government, Wallace could only watch as the two students broke down another color barrier in the Deep South.⁶⁸ Earlier that year, Medgar Evers, an African American field secretary for the NAACP and WWII veteran, was gunned down for his active role in the desegregation of the University of Mississippi.⁶⁹ Instead, under different circumstances, Jesse Owens was put on display. He appeared in school newspapers and was featured in athletic programs. He was invited to colleges like Harvard to put on exhibitions before he ever donned a USA uniform.⁷⁰ He rose from obscurity with such force, he was “the most famous amateur athlete in the world.”⁷¹

The mid-1930s seemed advantageous for African Americans in sport. In white America and especially the South, there was a staunch current of anti-intellectualism. Black achievements in music, science, literature, and the arts were met with indifference, whereas sports have always been closer to the American layman’s psyche.⁷² Some black writers had warned of the danger of eulogizing black athletic achievements in the quest for equality for fear of marginalizing the efforts of those in perhaps more important fields. Others such as the writers of *The Crisis* understood the value of sport and its impact on American minds: “It is not the infinitesimal intellectual America which needs conversion on the race problem; it is the rank and file... The beautiful breasting of the tape by Jesse Owens and the thud of the glove on the hand of Joe Louis carry more ‘interracial education’ than all the erudite philosophy ever written on race.”⁷³

It was through sports that the African American earned respect; sports were to be a foothold in a door that the Civil Rights Movement would pry open. However, racism, though not static, was formidable, and color barriers gave rise to what David K. Wiggins called “parallel institutions”—that is, organizations that mimicked their white counterparts.⁷⁴ The Negro Leagues, for example, which also expanded to southern cities, served as an equivalent to the major leagues, allowing black baseball players to pursue careers and provide entertainment to their fan base. Yet, just like those black colleges of the South, separate institutions meant sports were played safely away from white spectators.

Black News, White Press

Exposure to the black world of sports and other positive elements of African American society was limited at best. In the Southern states, not only was African American achievement unseen, it was often blatantly hidden. Consequently, segregation had deleterious effects upon Southern society. Paula B. Johnson of the University of California explains these effects in her study of Jim Crow on Los Angeles. She first asserts that segregation is most harmful in that it creates a condition of “black invisibility” in “the perceptual world of the white American.”⁷⁵ She believes segregation first physically isolates whites from blacks, ensuring few contacts are made. Doubly, in those serendipitous circumstances in which interaction is required, African Americans are psychologically invisible due to their placement in a typical “inferior role—waitresses, nurse’s aides, and trash collectors—to which whites are generally indifferent.”⁷⁶ Furthermore, she describes the potential yet harmful ways in which the media play a role in shaping racial attitudes:

Given that whites have very little direct personal knowledge of blacks, the mass media could potentially fill an important gap, communicating to whites the

attitudes, feelings, life styles, and the very existence of black people. Indeed, it is apparent that, without the aid of the media, most whites are likely to get very little information of any kind about blacks...First, media attention reflects the degree of black visibility to whites in America at any given time... Second, media attention partially governs black visibility [to whites], by partially determining the amount of second-hand communication whites receive about blacks.⁷⁷

Newspapers are of a particular interest in the case of Jesse Owens. It is one of the two mediums that directed and distributed the national conversation of the 1930s. Because segregation meant the absence of blacks in white circles, it also meant newspapers followed a color line, and the white press paid little attention to black affairs. Even worse, black coverage in white newspapers was reserved for only the most deplorable segments of the African American community—mostly when they involved white people as the victim of a black perpetrator—typically robbery or murder. Such instances served to reinforce negative stereotypes and white fear.⁷⁸

In addition to negative articles about blacks, newspapers often ran comic strips lampooning black culture. For instance, the *Nashville Tennessean* ran a single frame daily comic called Sunflower Street which depicted the rural life of blacks as backwards and ignorant—just feeling their way through civilized society. In one strip a group of little black boys are yelling into a chasm in which the reverberation of an echo is answering a boy's question, "Tell us yo' name Mister Echo!" the boy says. The echo responds accordingly, and another boy answers "he say his name Mister Echo!" The story's theme is then revealed in the bottom corner "Received and Answered."⁷⁹ In another, the older characters who were mainstays are sitting in a colored only diner—made clear by the black cook at the counter. The elderly black woman starts "Dere ain't nothing more better dan a nice, cold dish of vanilla ice cream is dev, Papy Henty? I kin eat any flavor, but ev'ry time I has my choice I takes vanilla." The elderly man then replies, "I likes vanilla de bes', too, Granny Lou! It seem strange dat we bof likes vanilla."⁸⁰ Such use of words

and topics typified a certain “use of dialect and malapropisms [which] positioned African Americans as a group as naïve and unable to assimilate. These characters represent our nations permanent immigrants, always arriving, never arrived.”⁸¹

Similarly, starting in the 1920s AM radio spread waves into the ether. Unsurprisingly, radio stations offered the same resistance toward African Americans as print media; they only mirrored the limited opportunity for voice and identity in a white hegemonic world.⁸² Much like the newspapers, white dominated radio offered “racial ventriloquy.” Judy L. Isaksen explains, “the wildly popular show, *Amos n’ Andy*, and equally popular characters not only lampooned African Americans, but also perpetuated the already existing denigrating images within the minds of white America.”⁸³ These roles exemplified the minstrel characters of the time, those whites dressed in black face as Toms, Coons, Mammies, Bucks, and the oft used pickaninny.⁸⁴ Black DJs on the radio were scarce as well. For black listeners, whites—many who were trained by blacks—actually posed with ethnic sounding voices to pass as authentic black disc jockeys in tune with their style.⁸⁵

Even Owens in his later years observed that media “mirrors our culture.”⁸⁶ Despite the rivalry between radio and newsprint at the time, the media of Jim Crow centered on “*un-telling* a story of black prosperity and development.”⁸⁷ In a colonial-type relationship, Gary Helm Darden argues that whites in Jim Crow “effectively undercut vital sources of black leadership, vital sources of black capital, and a vital source of black role models.”⁸⁸ With such limited representation blinding southern whites to the potential, if not the humanity of their African-American counterparts, the black press offered them their only voice.

The black press extolled the successes of African Americans in sport as cultural victories, as examples of their worth and equality. When black sports crossed over to white arenas for

competition like the Harlem Renaissance Five and barnstorming professional baseball teams, the black press brought forth their best praise.⁸⁹ In those same instances, there is not so much of an echo in the white press that reality had inched any closer toward progress. It took a momentous event for an African American to make the leap from the pages of black newspapers to those of white America.⁹⁰

One such instance was the 1932 Games in Los Angeles, when Eddie Tolan and Ralph Metcalfe made it into the back pages of the white press. Tolan won two gold medals in the 100 and 200 meters, the first African American to do so in either event, while Metcalfe won silver and bronze in the same events. The news was freely disseminated across the nation, as big city newspapers like the *Chicago Tribune* and even the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* noted Tolan's record setting finish in the 100 meters.⁹¹ David Welky noticed during those Games that coverage of whites and blacks were distinctly different. Even in the North, a lack of photographs and a prevalence of labels emphasizing blackness accompanied African American feats, as well as the use vivid imagery in describing the events like the *Chicago Tribune*—even if the writer's true purpose is lost—explained of Tolan, “no white runner was close enough to flick him with a buggy whip.”⁹²

For whatever the cause, whether there was a lack of interest in the Games being played on home soil during a depression, or a result of cognitive dissonance exhibited by white Americans who simply could not assimilate the information they read, white readership showed little concern in the celebration of race heroes; the significant event failed to resoundingly reach the hearts and minds of segregated white America. More than likely, the culprit was a combination of those elements including the fact the Olympics of 1932 lacked the central focus and expectations of a particular outcome. In other words, the national interest in the obscure names,

at the time, of Tolan and Metcalfe did not have the same appeal as Jesse Owens and Adolph Hitler in Berlin.⁹³ Those few days in late July and early August of '32 were an irregularity. There were no conclusions to draw, and there were few across the South who cheered such a monumental feat for its significance.⁹⁴ To his credit, the mayor of Atlanta signed a declaration for Ralph Metcalfe Day in recognition of “the internationally known athlete who was born in Atlanta, and who, if he had remained here, would probably have been a rose ‘born to blush unseen, its fragrance wasted on the desert air.’”⁹⁵

Dawn of a New Era

By 1936, the successes of African Americans began to resonate in the national consciousness, as a host of new athletes, including Metcalfe himself, gave validity to those achievements just four years prior. The 1936 Games received national and global attention. The United States was focused on world affairs, not only Germany, but Spain had erupted in a civil war that would make the front page throughout the Olympics.⁹⁶ The XI Olympiad was also framed as a nationalistic endeavor, and as mentioned in previous chapters, knowledge of Hitler and his Nazi policies and Aryan beliefs led to a nationwide debate on participation, which thickened the already stark contrast between Alabama and Germany. Hitler was featured on the cover of *Time* Magazine in April of 1936, and, as early as 1933, the *New York Times* had published open letters elaborating on the quality of fair play for the Games.⁹⁷

On August 1, 1936, newspapers across the U.S. informed the public of the formal occasion and festivities—the extent to which Germany ornamented the Games—that unfolded on the opening day of ceremonies of the Berlin Olympics.⁹⁸ On the first day of events, Aug 2, 1936, telegraphs wired back that Owens had broken the World’s 100 Meter record; only to be negated

by German officials on the account a strong tailwind, the nation collectively understood the hype surrounding the Games and that America, indeed, had sent her best to represent the country.⁹⁹

For the next week, press reports from North to South would carry Owens' name in headlines and articles, telling of the degree to which he dominated the Olympic Games. For those Southerners who clung to the traditional attitudes of the past, the news was perhaps unsettling, yet the fact remains that readers of Southern newspapers were in fact conscious of the achievements of one of its former sons, one of its own who would not have had an opportunity had he not escaped the oppression of the very culture and cities that now spread the information.¹⁰⁰

Across the U.S. Owens filled print in newspapers as a hero. For example, prior to the opening ceremonies the *Christian Science Monitor* showed little restraint in its attention to Owens, even calling Owens the “athlete of the hour,” and then quipping “at least as far as public interest is concerned.”¹⁰¹ Owens, before competing in a single event, was referenced for his previous records and those that were yet to be established, despite being labeled as the “Ohio State Negro.”¹⁰² Using the Associated Press the newspaper proclaimed the victories of Owens and other African Americans in bold headlines.¹⁰³ Stories of their triumphs were accompanied by photos, including a photo-shopped collage of Owens with gold medal high jumper David Albritton suspended in air behind him.¹⁰⁴ It was clear that Owens was *the* story of the Olympic Games as various headlines displayed: “Jesse Owens Heads Parade By Americans,” “Owens Captures Third Olympic Title and Smashes World and Olympic Record,” and there was even a feature about his former coach—“Owens’s Success Seen by Riley in 1929” and an editorial on “Olympic Sportsmanship,” which referenced the sportsmanship exhibited by the German broad jumper Luz Long who showed “genuine pleasure in the world’s record of Jesse Owens, though it meant his own defeat...the two walked back arm in arm.”¹⁰⁵

Pamela C. Laucella, in her dissertation titled *An Analysis of Mainstream, Black, and Communist Coverage of Jesse Owens in the 1936 Olympics*, shows that newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Daily News* treated Owens as an ambassador of the United States. Despite heavy use of vivid prose in describing black athletic prowess and race monikers in marking their distinction as Negroes, which did not violate propriety at the time, Owens was celebrated for his contribution to American prestige abroad.¹⁰⁶ Arthur Daley of the *New York Times* was critical of German actions, such as Hitler's unwillingness to congratulate U.S. athletes, and framed Owens' and the other black track stars' feats as American achievements.¹⁰⁷ Paul Gallico of the *Daily News* was congratulatory toward Owens, observing that track and field—led by the largest contingent of African Americans yet—was the lone bright spot for the U.S. in the Games, which was dominated by the Germans who won more gold, silver, bronze, and total medals than any other country. Gallico credited Owens with having the “greatest single Olympic performance of modern times.”¹⁰⁸

In the South, Jesse Owens appeared in newspapers as though he belonged there. The Associated Press, “a collective news gathering agency” which was the dominant news wire of the time, supplied coverage of Owens for a majority of Southern newspapers.¹⁰⁹ Members of the AP were required to gather breaking news within a certain radius of their city or territory—depending on size—exclusively for the association, and then each member in its association reciprocally received access to the flow of stories within the association prior to publication.¹¹⁰ The methods of the association were debated early and often since its inception, as evidenced by an Illinois Supreme Court ruling in 1900 against its monopolistic tendencies. The state's Supreme Court cited the unfair advantage that individual newspapers had in competing against it and that the AP “was of vast importance to the public, so that public interest is attached to the

dissemination of that news.”¹¹¹ As a result, and after a few alterations, however, in August of 1936 articles on Owens were freely passed from one city to the next, which were selected from, headlined, and edited to each newspaper’s liking.¹¹²

As Baker had first stated about Owens’ victories, “Even the Southern newspapers such as the *Nashville Tennessean*, the *Arkansas Gazette*, and the *Chattanooga Times*, which normally ignored black athletes altogether, carried Associated Press wire photographs of Owens in action. Americans, Southerners included, loved a winner, whatever his color.”¹¹³ It was true. Dailies all over the South embraced Owens in the moment. Baseball which typically dominated sporting news made room for the Olympic Games and stories of African American triumphs. In the *Charlotte Observer* “An amazingly unbeatable Jesse Owens” fit nicely into the sports section in headlines, subtitles, articles, brief clippings, and side stories.¹¹⁴ On August 5, perceived to be last day of competition, completing the three events for which he was originally slated, the sports editor for the Associated Press, Alan J. Gould, wrote of Owens, “Jesse Owens, whose blazing bursts of speed and jumping ability have entertained nearly half a million spectators on four successive days, completed his classic Olympic triple title conquest in record-smashing style in the rain today.”¹¹⁵

The *Nashville Tennessean*, as Baker first mentioned, and despite the typical negative news, venerated Owens.¹¹⁶ After the first day of competition, a headshot of Cornelius Johnson was placed next to a similar photo of a suit-wearing Jesse Owens under the subtitle “U.S. Sweeps Hi Jump as Owens Cracks Record.”¹¹⁷ The next day, large print informed, “Owens wins 100 Meter Crown as U.S. Speedsters Dominate Track.” The following page also featured a large radio-photograph of Owens leaving his competition behind in his record setting heat as well as a news brief that read “Chancellor Hitler exchanged hand waves with Owens but if there was any move

on foot to have the American negro visit Der Fuehrer's box nothing came of it.”¹¹⁸ On August 5, “Olympic Blacks Shine for Red, White and Blue Team” headlined a photo centered on a mid-air leap of Owens in an Ohio State uniform—from the previous year, and transposed on the corner of the picture, was the 800 meter winner, John Woodruff.¹¹⁹ Photos and articles of white baseball players were juxtaposed to those of Owens until he had collected his four gold medals and intermittently until the closing of the Games.

The same was the case for other AP carriers as well. The Charleston *Post and Courier* (SC) followed Owens after the Olympic qualifiers, “Negro Contingent Grabs off Chunk of Olympic honors in Track and Field Contests.”¹²⁰ The *Kentucky New Era* updated on August 4th, “U.S. Takes Four More Firsts and Jesse Annexes Second Title.”¹²¹ The same day the *Independent* operating from St. Petersburg, Florida informed “Records Fall Before American Athletes” as the subtitle specified: “Jesse Owens Shatters Marks Twice in each of Two Events.”¹²² In Arkansas, between the *Blytheville Courier News*, the *Fayetteville Daily Democrat*, and the *Hope Star* “each carried at least two front-page articles detailing his victories.”¹²³

Jesse and the South

Robert Drake, in his article “Jesse Who?: Race, the Southern Press, and the 1936 Olympic Games,” is critical of the Deep South in the exposure of Jesse Owens and other African Americans during the Olympics. Drake’s holistic study includes 83 newspapers from regions around U.S. which were members—in any capacity—of the AP.¹²⁴ Drake discerns between the two regions of the South separating them into geographic categories: Other South/Border States and the Deep South.¹²⁵ Using content analysis of photographs and articles of Jesse Owens, he argues that the Deep South, in comparison to the North and Western parts of the United States,

minimized and censored information because of their “anti-African American message” and by depicting blacks as minstrel character types.¹²⁶ As a consequence, he asserts “balanced or conflicting coverage was never offered to readers in the Deep South” and that “Owens temporarily remained unavailable to them.”¹²⁷

While astutely questioning how newspapers in the South covered Owens, some of his findings are problematic. For one, while Drake admits that to live in the South in the 1930s “was to live in a racial caste system that was “codified...ritualized... and completely controlled by whites,” his expectations are unrealistic for the timely achievements of African Americans. That one might expect a disparity between the coverage and even racism of newspapers between the South and North seems conventional, as his findings support, but in proving his point he forgoes a great deal of information that limits the outcome of his research. In his conclusion, he claims that “eight of the 26 Deep South newspapers did not include *any* coverage of African American athletes.” Drake never specifies which of the twenty-six newspapers failed to cover him, but of the twenty-six newspapers that he did not cite directly in reference to Owens in his endnotes was the *Decatur Daily* (AL), *Albany Herald* (GA), *Lake Charles American Press* (LA), *Houma Times* (LA), *Ruston Daily Leader* (LA), *Gulfport Daily Herald* (MS), *Meridian Star* (MS), and *Natchez Democrat* (MS).¹²⁸

The reader is told little of the nature of the newspapers the author has selected but only that the author has chosen “small-to-medium sized cities.”¹²⁹ He claims to have chosen this method because “the editors of these newspapers would have a more intimate and personal relationship with their readers.”¹³⁰ Yet, his methodology does not match his theory. First, of those remaining newspapers there are discrepancies in what Drake has claimed. The *Gulfport Daily Herald* was actually a part of the *Biloxi-Gulfport Daily Herald* title that did carry coverage of Owens during

the Olympics. The *Houma Times* was a weekly paper that competed with another newspaper, the *Houma Courier* at the time.¹³¹ The *Ruston Daily Leader* was a 4-page daily that only offered only local news. The *Decatur Daily* actually covered Owens including a clipping from August 5th, which read, “The downpour quickened but the crowd sat through it, cheering wildly as Owens went through his third victory ceremony.”¹³²

Additionally, by forsaking the newspapers such as New Orleans’ *The Times-Picayune*, the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, or *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the author has not only overlooked the circulation and readership of a large audience who read about Owens but also has not considered the great deal of overlap that occurs in areas between newspapers of a wide circulation over those with smaller ones. According to Wikipedia, the circulation of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* had in its recent past reached all counties in Georgia and into surrounding states.¹³³ The newspaper was on the frontlines of coverage including a front page article introducing the start of the Games and then reporting of Owens featuring his name in headlines and acclaiming the achievements of other African American athletes.¹³⁴ Yet without these facts he imagines:

Because many whites in the Deep South had little possibility of learning about the outstanding accomplishments of African American athletes at the 1936 Berlin Games, they would have been deprived of information that conflicted with prevailing notions about race. That is not to say that this news would have changed their views on race, but they surely would have noticed that it did not fit neatly into their worldview.

According to Drake, the news of Owens was lost on the South, the very people “who most needed to hear of this message.”¹³⁵

There are other troublesome spots worth mentioning that call into question some of his methods. From a website he comes across a photograph of Metcalfe, Owens, and Frank Wykoff on the *U.S.S. Manhattan* on their voyage to the Olympics. Several newspapers showed AP snapshots of athletes on the vessel, but he notices that that particular shot “did not appear in any

of the 83 newspapers in this study.” However, the photo he found was property of the United Press, the AP’s competitor.¹³⁶ The author also expresses his dismay at the “story that went unreported” in the 83 newspapers concerning German broad jumper Luz Long and Jesse Owens. Legend has several versions of the story, but most centrally that Owens was at risk of fouling out of the qualifying rounds until Long approached him with advice, allowing him to advance and ultimately win gold, establishing a life-long friendship in the process. It was a story that Owens later embellished of his new found friend in Germany, but it was William Baker who put the myth to rest.¹³⁷ Drake did not consult Baker’s biography for his article but only used Jeremy Schaap’s *Triumph*. A reporter for the *Decatur Daily*, Deangelo McDaniel, has researched Owens for over thirty years. McDaniel actually met with Luz Long’s son—who was fond of Owens—dismissed the notion that his father and Owens maintained a friendship after the Games.¹³⁸ Luz Long was killed during WWII. Dramatically enough Long was a friend from those Games who Owens remembered dotingly.

“Raised not too far from here”

While Drake’s conclusion that Owens was virtually unheard of in the South seems dubious, his focus was on a very important aspect of Owens’ victories. Because of the historic race tension of the South, positive news against negative stereotypes would resemble a great leap in progress. And as a flow of events in history, the amount of attention and praise for Owens via the white press, as an African American, was unprecedented; his very placing in the Southern press was contradictory. Because the Olympics were at the center of national prestige and world interest, the presses of the world were fixed on Europe. Thus, the South was compelled to carry coverage of the Games. In any reputable newspaper that covered the Olympics with any

consistency, the name of Jesse Owens and the color of his skin were mentioned within the context of being an American and a winner. There is no footnote necessary to believe that the tremendous outpouring of words dedicated to Owens as an American meant that he was applauded more than any African American who had ever lived, in 1936.

To see the profound reach of the Owens saga, one has to look no further than the example of the *Birmingham News*, a city newspaper seventy-five miles south of Oakville. On August 1, the opening day of ceremonies, the front page headline of the paper read: “Madrid Digging In As Fascist Swarm Passes” as additional text expounded, “Crucial Struggle Is Believed Impending For Capital City; France, Fearing Germany, Italy To Stay Neutral.”¹³⁹ Yet in the endless pursuit to inform its readers, world news was often secondary to local news and local flavor, and typical of the white press in the South, there was often news reports pinned to African Americans involving crimes, when they occurred. In those instances, headlines usually emphasized blackness. There were several such stories that grabbed headlines around the South that appeared during the fortnight of the Olympic Games: “Negro Quizzed In Death Of Woman In Chicago Hotel” August 17, 1936.¹⁴⁰ “Negro’s Hanging Is Directed By Woman” August 14, 1936.¹⁴¹ “Negro Hall Boy Admits Slaying Of Clevenger Girl,” August 10, 1936.¹⁴²

There was also a breaking story out of Anniston, Alabama that continued to develop during Owens’ Olympic stand. The recurring news report leaves a chilling indication of the resentment still harbored by a great many of the region.

After an intensive two-day search, during which national guardsmen and state highway patrolmen were sent to this county, the Negro, who is alleged to have made an insulting proposal to a 16-year-old girl at her home several miles northwest of here was still at large Saturday night. A mob of armed men started searching for the Negro Friday morning when the girl reported the Negro had approached her as she was milking in the barn at her home and made an insulting proposal, adding: ‘I could just drag you off in the woods and no one would ever know the difference.’ Gov. Graves sent national guardsmen from

Talladega to the scene but, but they returned late Friday. Highway patrolmen remained with local officers and a few citizens who continued the search through Saturday. One Negro was apprehended in the territory into which the man sought is believed to have fled, but the girl said he was not the one.¹⁴³

In other negative news, the daily newspaper also featured a single frame cartoon strip called “Mammy’s philosophy.” In these shorts, a stereotyped African American “Mammy” is caricatured speaking in a half-learned language with mashed words offering her insights to the squabbles of the white world. In a slow Southern drawl she spoke, “Ole Miss, ef Eve had er been made BEFORE Adam, ‘stead uf AFTER, she could have BOSSED de job uv mekin him an’ den MAN would have been perftc’. Yassum.”¹⁴⁴ There was often an element of gender identification with women, as jokes were made of men “Ole Miss, looks lak mos’ enny beautiful ‘Oman is fascinatin’ ter er Man, providin’ uv course, dat he aint MARRIED TO HER. Naw’m.”¹⁴⁵

In a similar image to the Mammy philosopher, a frequently posted advertisement made use of a black maidservant—holding a broom and dustpan— whose placement gained attention to cheap housewares and products at a local store.¹⁴⁶ A daily run sketch, Ripley’s “Believe it or Not” mentioned odd facts involving African Americas as well. Ripley wrote ““Daniel’s Wisdom May I Know Stephen’s Faith And Spirit Choose John’s Divine Common Seal Moses’ Meekness Joshua’s Zeal Win The Day And Conquer All Murphy’ is the name of a Negro in Pilot Grove, Texas.”¹⁴⁷ In another, “Henry Sledge Blind Negro of Montgomery Alabama Can Recognize His Friends By Rubbing Their Hands and Smelling The Odor Therefrom.”¹⁴⁸ Other stereotypes were present too. A picture of two smiling boys in black face was captioned,

No you’re wrong! The boys in the picture are not little ‘colored’ fellows, although they’re black enough alright. Grady and Gordon Wilson are just acting in a skit put on by Mrs. Frye’s Kindergarten recently and they’ve got it down ‘pat,’ even to the watermelon. Both boys like to attend Mickey Mouse meetings.¹⁴⁹

There were some positive points as well. In the Sunday edition, a recurring column in fine print called “What Negroes are doing” featured a variety of encouraging appraisals of African Americans. On August 2, the write-up mentioned in several briefs news in the surrounding area including the collective effort by blacks to construct a camp for black children with Tuberculosis; the details of a convention to be held by the Fraternal Council of Negro Churches in America to discuss the contemporaneous “phases of negro life;” local clinical services dedicated to “check the infantile paralysis epidemic;” and even informed readers of several black entertainers who were being featured on an amateur hour radio show.¹⁵⁰ Still, in the spirit of the age, overwhelmingly the bold print and space was given to white affairs and to black denigration when needed.

The difference between the early part of August and the average daily news on other days during 1936 were the sections of the sports page that honored Owens. For each amazing accomplishment Owens brought forth, the *Birmingham News* supplied the details. Tapping into several news agencies, the *News* featured an array of perspectives of the Games, lending a credible amount of depth to the overall event. The predominant news source was Alan Gould and the AP, but articles by Grantland Rice and others were also used.

AP stories and headlines were about Owens early and often. On August 1, when the heading in bold print conveyed “Hitler Formally Declares 1936 Olympics Opened,” the AP also added a headlined story on Owens, meting out his and others’ records at the Olympic tryout set for a final decision.¹⁵¹ Of each of his gold medal performances, the AP forged “Jesse Owens Equals Record In Winning 100-Meter Final”; “Owens, Americans Go On Spree And Gather Points”; “Owens Joins Relay Team As Record Equaled”; and on Jesse’s perceived Olympic

finale, across the length of the page, “Owens Completes Olympic ‘Triple’ In 200 Meter Victory” as a photo captured his athleticism and grace.¹⁵²

After Jesse had wrought one of the greatest achievements in Olympic history, the newspaper followed up on Owens. Again, across the length of the page, the script announced “Jesse Owens Announces He Will Become Professional.” A day after the Olympics had ended an International News Service article told that “Fortune Will Not Go To His Head—Owens.”¹⁵³ Owens was also mentioned in the reports of other gold medal winners—events in which he did not compete. In the report of “Coast Negro Scores Sixth Win For Race,” Archie Williams won the 400 meters, but the article was not complete without mentioning “previously Jesse Owens won the 100 and 200 meter sprints and the broad jump for the first ‘Olympic Triple’, in 12 years.”¹⁵⁴

There were some ambiguous uses of headlines as well. In light of the race stories that ran during the Olympics, the editor’s use and placement of attention grabbing headlines seems questionable. Already mentioned was the subtle use of “Owens, Americans Go On Spree” headline, but Gayle Talbot writing for the AP, imposed her own creativity in her article titled “TREES.” She continued, “Owens Collects Them” in reference to the blossomed-acorn gold medal winners were given for their victories.¹⁵⁵ In between two stories of Owens, one by Talbot, Louis P. Lochner’s story was enhanced with bold letters claiming “MOBS” in which to tell of the record-setting attendance in Berlin.¹⁵⁶

Talbot also projected her drab image of the Games and of Owens when, not a few days into the events, she complained “Olympic Games Fail To Supply A Single Upset.” She continued her mixed message, “There have been thrill aplenty as Jesse Owens and others, aided by the stiff wind, scattered Olympic records...but the first one of the hundred thousand spectators who have

packed the stadium at each performance like birdshot in a bowl has yet to lift a startled eyebrow in token of an upset.” She also explains that Jesse was miffed about not at first being put on the relay team and for a ruling on one of his fouled attempts in the broad jump. Though her description Owens was not his style, Owens was brought into personal contact with white readers—his words elucidating his repose to Alabamians, “I was in a ticklish spot there after they charged me with a trial for that warm-up jump.”¹⁵⁷

Grantland Rice was a free lance writer in the competitive world of news in 1936. “With more than sixty-seven million words, 22,000 columns...and books that contributed to setting the agenda of American popular culture in the decades before the advent of television,” Rice’s articles during the Olympics were syndicated across the country, including the South.¹⁵⁸ “The dean of American sportswriting,” who was Southern bred and a graduate of Vanderbilt University, had a bird’s eye view from the press box for the Olympics.¹⁵⁹ Due to his military service and experience in World War I, Rice framed Owens’ and other American victories in nationalistic terms as having political implications.¹⁶⁰

Rice had two articles excerpted in the *Birmingham News*. Of the Olympic gathering he described as “an outbreak of national feeling beyond belief,” he said of Owens, “He tied the world’s record in the morning heat, beating the next man by eight yards. He broke the world’s record in his second start by six yards. No European crowd had ever seen such a combination of blazing speed and effortless smoothness.”¹⁶¹ In another, “all records for 200 meters under miserable conditions, with a rain-soaked track, left the athletes of 51 nations goggle-eyed with astonishment...international babble centered around Owens.” Rice added, “It looks to me, after a fair and honest survey, that the Olympic championship belongs to Africa. Owens alone could beat the 51 nations that entered.”¹⁶²

While Rice cited Africa as the origin of credit, there were others like Zipp Newman, a sportswriter for the *Birmingham News*, who held a different perspective. Newman reviewed, “Olympic heroics are fading in Owens twilight from the horizon.” The writer then praised Owens—with other Southern white Olympians—as one of Dixie’s own. Without realizing the irony of the path Owens had to take, he wrote, “it took the South a long time to get started in track athletics, like it did football, but the South has served warning. The next three years should see track athletics booming in Dixie with the examples Owens, Hardin, and Towns set for the youngsters.”¹⁶³

A Conscious South

In the wake of Owens’ Olympic splash, new parameters were being drawn where previously African Americans could not stand. In the fall of 1936, the University of North Carolina’s football team did not protest the participation of the New York University’s black running back, in what was the first instance a Southern team competing against an African American on the gridiron.¹⁶⁴ In the same year, Edwin Bancroft Henderson noticed the subtle shift in race relations that were taking place. He observed that in the press, as a result of Owens and others, “news columns, sporting sections, and editorial comments have referred to Negro athletic achievement more than to any other artistic, political or educational phase of Negro life.”¹⁶⁵

In the end, Owens stood in the gap between color and disenfranchisement and opportunity and achievement. His medals showed the white world of the South what was possible when given an opportunity, when an African American stood evenly at the starting gates with his contemporaries. The South was conscious of African American achievement, and though many would resist such change, it was a sign of the change to come.

NOTES

1. Ronald L. F. Davis, *Good and Faithful Labor: from Slavery to Sharecropping in the Natchez District, 1860-1890* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), 3.
2. Edward Royce, *The Origins of Southern Sharecropping* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 1-24. Quote on p. 3.
3. William J. Wilson, "Class Conflict and Jim Crow Segregation in the Postbellum South," *Pacific Sociological Review* 19, no. 4 (October 1976): 436.
4. J. William Harris, "Etiquette, Lynching, and Racial Boundaries in Southern History: A Mississippi Example," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (April 1995): 388.
5. Harris, 390-391.
6. Gary Helm Darden, "The New Empire in the 'New South': Jim Crow in the Global Frontier of High Imperialism and Decolonization," *Southern Quarterly* 46, no 3, (Spring 2009): 12.
7. Darden, 12-14.
8. Charles M. Payne, "'The Whole United States Is Southern!': Brown v. Board and the Mystification of Race," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 2004): 84.
9. Harris, 388.
10. Darden, 20; Harris, 389.
11. Robert R. Weyeneth, "The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past," *Public Historian* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2005), 13.
12. Weyeneth, 11-13, 15.
13. George Wilson, "Racialized Life-Chance Opportunities across the Class Structure: The Case of African Americans," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 609, Race, Ethnicity, and Inequality in the U.S. Labor Market: Critical Issues in the New Millennium (Jan., 2007): 215-232.
14. George Wilson, 218.
15. Joseph Heathcott, "Black Archipelago: Politics and Civic Life in the Jim Crow City," *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 713-714; George Wilson, 220.
16. Eric Arnesen, "Up From Exclusion: Black and White Workers, Race, and the State of Labor History," *Reviews in American History* 26 no.1 (1998): 160.

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17. Arnesen, 149-152; William J. Wilson, 439; Joseph Heathcott, 711.
18. Heathcott, 711.
19. Kara Miles Turner, "'Getting It Straight': Southern Black School Patrons and the Struggle for Equal Education in the Pre- and Post-Civil Rights Eras" *Journal of Negro Education* 72, no. 2 (Spring, 2003): 221; George Wilson, 220-221.
20. Turner 217, 221-223.
21. William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life*. (New York: Free Press, 1986), 7.
22. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 6-8.
23. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 12.
24. Jeremy Schaap, *Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 18.
25. Harris, 390-393.
26. Robert A. Gibson, "The Negro Holocaust: Lynching and Race Riots in the United States, 1880-1950," <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1979/2/79.02.04.x.html> (accessed September 10, 2012).
27. Stephanie P. Browner, The Charles Chestnutt digital archive. <http://www.chesnuttarchive.org/classroom/lynchingstat.html> (accessed September 9, 2012). The author also denotes that a number of the whites who were lynched on the suspicion of aiding blacks.
28. <http://www.electricprint.com/academic/departement/AandL/AAS/ANNOUNCE/vra/lynch/lynchstats.html> (accessed September 9, 2012). The website also gives a host of reasons for which African Americans were murdered, such as acting suspiciously to vagrancy, citing Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*, Urbana and (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992); It's also worth mentioning that the 1930s represented a sharp decline in documented lynching in the U.S. For example, in 1915 there were a total of 69 cases, while there were single digits reported in 1936 dwindling until 1965 and onward when there were no reported cases. <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchingyear.html> (accessed September 9, 2012); E. M. Beck and Stewart E. Tolnay, "The Killing Fields of the Deep South: The Market for Cotton and the Lynching of Blacks, 1882-1930," *American Sociological Review* 55, no. 4 (August 1990), 536. Beck explains that this downward trend was due to the net migration of blacks and increase in manufacturing and less of a percentage of workers in agriculture.

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29. Beck, 526.
30. Johnpeter Horst Grill and Robert L. Jenkins, "The Nazis and the American South in the 1930s: A Mirror Image?" *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 4 (Nov., 1992), 668.
31. Grill, 670-673, 684-686.
32. Grill, 676.
33. Grill, 688, 693.
34. Stewart E. Tolnay, "The African American 'Great Migration' and Beyond" *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29 (2003): 214.
35. Philip Bonner, "'The Great Migration' and 'The Greatest Trek': Some Reflections" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30, no. 1, Special Issue: Race and Class in South Africa and the United States (March 2004): 90-91.
36. Tolnay, 211.
37. Jesse Owens, *Jesse: A spiritual Autobiography* (Plainfield, N.J.: Logos International, 1978): 18-19. William J. Baker explained that the exact date of their departure to Cleveland is difficult to ascertain. *Jesse Owens*, 13-16.
38. Jesse Owens, *Blackthink: My Life as a Black Man and White Man* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), 41.
39. Owens, *Spiritual*, 27-29.
40. Owens, *Spiritual*, 28.
41. Owens, *Spiritual*, 30-32. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 21-28.
42. Owens, *Blackthink*, 96. Cited in Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 22.
43. Steven P. Gietscher, "The Greatest Day: Jesse Owens at Ann Arbor," *Ohio Historical Society*, 11 no. 3, (May 1994): 5-6.
44. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 29. In those meets he was bested by future Olympic teammate Ralph Metcalfe, a silver medalist in the 1932 Games and eventual gold medalist on the 4X100 relay with Owens at Berlin.
45. Schaap, *Triumph*, 25; Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 25.

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46. Owens, *Spiritual*, 33.
47. Joseph Dorinson, "Black Heroes in Sport: from Jack Johnson to Muhammad Ali," *Journal of Popular Culture* 1 (Winter 1997): 121; Schaap, *Triumph*, 18.
48. The Jesse Owens Museum was completed in 1996, just days before the torch relay came through Oakville en route to Atlanta. <http://www.jesseowensmuseum.org/>. When juxtaposed to the Oakville Indian Mounds Education Center, less than a mile away, one can catch a glimpse of the rich history of settlement in the area within the passing of 3,000 years. <http://www.oakvilleindianmounds.com/Ancient-Indian-Mounds.html>.
49. Frederick Douglas, "Holiday Times," excerpt in David K. Wiggins and Patrick B. Miller, eds., *The Uneven Playing Field: a Documentary History of the African American Experience in Sport*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 158-163.
50. Wiggins, 7.
51. James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, (New York: Knopf, 1930), 58-73. Cited in Wiggins, 59, 145-146.
52. S.H. Archer, "Football in Our Colleges," *Voice of the Negro* 3, (March 1906): 109-205. Used in Wiggins, 43-44; J.B. Watson, "Football in Southern Negro Colleges," *The Voice* 4 (May 1907): 165-69. Used in Wiggins, 45-46; William Clarence Matthew, "Negro Football Players on New England Teams," *Colored American Magazine* 9 (March 1905): 130-132. Used in Wiggins, 46-50.
53. Weldy Walker, "Why Discriminate?" *Sporting Life*, March 14, 1888. In Wiggins, 37-38.
54. Dorinson, 117-118.
55. James Weldon Johnson, in Wiggins, 148.
56. Roy Wilkins, "That Old Southern Accent," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 23, 1936. Used in Wiggins, 190-192; Letter from James D. Carr to William H.S. Demarest, June 16, 1919, Rutgers University Archives; reprinted in *Freedomways* (Summer 1969): 221-29. Wiggins, 177-180.
57. Wiggins, 190, 193.
58. "Cutting Off Its Nose," *Pittsburg Courier-Journal*, May 7, 1927. Used in Wiggins, 180-182.
59. Edwin Bancroft Henderson, "The Negro Athlete and Race Prejudice," *Opportunity* 14 (March 1936):77-79. Used in Wiggins, 186-190.

60. "Sherrill Rebuffs Olympic Ban Plea; Scores agitation," *New York Times*, October 22, 1935. Cited in D.A. Kass, "The Issue of Racism at the 1936 Olympics," *Journal of Sport History* 3 no.3, (October 1976): 223, 227.

61. Wiggins, 143.

62. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 17.

63. Owens, *Spiritual*, p.47.

64. Owens, to the dismay of many of his supporters who hoped he'd choose a more historically liberal college or black college, chose Columbus. It was close to home and his new wife Minnie Ruth Owens and his daughter, Gloria; Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 29-30, 34-37.

65. Stephen E Ambrose, "Jesse Owens Breaks 4-Track records." *American History Illustrated* 1, no. 3 (1966): 51-52. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 50-53.

66. The Ohio State University Archives, Biographical Files, "Owens, Jesse: 1935-180."

67. Larry Snyder, Football Program, November 16, 1935, Ohio State University Archives. Larry Snyder was the Ohio State Track and Field Coach and also was an assistant coach at the 1936 Olympics.

68. www.archives.state.al.us/govs_list/schooldoor.html (accessed September 9, 2012).

69. <http://www.biography.com/people/medgar-evers-9542324>. Evers became active in pursuing desegregation after he was denied entry into their law program.

70. Owens was featured often in newspapers and programs around Columbus and Ohio State, including football programs in which one contained a publicly addressed letter from Avery Brundage in support of the Olympic Games. A telegram from Harvard invited him for an all expense paid exhibition for the broad jump. Ohio State University Archives.

71. Gietscher,4

72. Wiggins, 143.

73. "Joe Louis and Jesse Owens" *The Crisis* 42 (August 1935): 241.

74. Wiggins, 85-87.

75. Paula B. Johnson and David O. Sears, "Black Invisibility, the Press, and the Los Angeles Riot," *American Journal of Sociology* 76, no. 4, (January 1971): 698. The result of the study was that the "invisibility of blacks in Los Angeles was indicated by the rarity of whites' contact with

blacks in their normal lives, and the low level of press coverage of blacks throughout the period sampled. Moreover, press coverage of blacks did not increase from 1893 to 1968, relative to the growth of black population in Los Angeles,” 716.

76. Johnson, 701.

77. Johnson, 702.

78. Johnson, 710-711.

79. Tom Little and Tom Sims, *Sunflower Street Nashville Tennessean*, August 3, 1936.

80. Little, August 6, 1936.

81. Judy L. Isaksen, “Resistive Radio: African Americans’ Evolving Portrayal and Participation from Broadcasting to Narrowcasting,” *The Journal of Pop Culture* 45, no. 4 (2012):750.

82. Isaksen, 757.

83. Isaksen, 750

84. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York: Continuum, 1994. P. 4-10, 20-23; Isaksen, 751.

85. Isaksen, 758-759.

86. Owens, *Blackthink*, 44.

87. Darden, 12; A rivalry exists between mediums when an established medium is threatened by the arrival of a newer one. Gwenyth Jackaway, “America’s Press-radio War of the 1930s: a Case Study in the Battles Between Old and New Media.” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14, no. 3 (1994): 299 Academic One File Web (accessed Aug 31, 2012).

88. Darden, 15.

89. Montye Fuse and Keith Miller, “Jazzing the Basepaths: Jackie Robinson and African American Aesthetics,” in *Sports Matters: Race, Recreation, and Culture*, eds. John Bloom and Michael Nevin Willard (New York: New York University Press, 2002):127-128, 119-140; “Incomparable Courteers,” *Inter-State Tattler*, April 5, 1929. Used in Wiggins, 102-105.

90. Such events were often during an overlap of both white and black interests such as Olympic Games and bouts between Joe Louis and white boxers.

91. George Shaffer, "TOLAN TIES WORLD RECORD IN OLYMPIC DASH," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 2, 1932. AP "America Scores 100 Meter Victory," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, August 2, 1932.

92. David Welky, *Everything was Better in America: Print Culture in the Great Depression*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 52.

93. Mark Dyerson, "American Ideas About Race and Olympic Races in the Era of Jesse Owens: Shattering Myths or Reinforcing Racism?" *International Journal of the History of Sport* 25, no. 2 (February 2008): 247-248. The black press celebrated the achievement. Tolan was featured on the cover of *The Crisis* in September of that year.

94. Mark Dyerson, "Marketing National Identity: The Olympic Games of 1932 and American Culture," *OLYMPIKA: The International Journal of Olympic Studies* 4 (1995): 18; Wiggins, 154.

95. Inspired by "Tolan Day" in Michigan Atlanta Mayor James Lee Key revealed in his proclamation of September 23, 1932 in honor of its native born Olympian who made his way to Marquette prior to the Los Angeles Games. "Metcalf Day," *The Crisis* 39 (November, 1932): 360.

96. See for example AP, "Streets of Madrid Now 'No Man's Land,'" *Birmingham News* August 2, 1936.

97. *Time*, 27, no. 15, April 13, 1936. Hitler was also featured on the cover of the weekly magazine on March 13, 1933 and December 21, 1931; Kass, 224-225.

98. See for example "U.S. Withholds Salute, Has Cool Olympic Reception" *Boston Globe*, August 2, 1936. Grantland Rice proclaimed, "one of the most impressive sights of sport or war."

99. The first day of athletic competition was before the largest crowd ever gathered in Olympic history. Cornelius Johnson also won the High Jump on the first day of events. David Clay Large, *Nazi Games: The Olympics of 1936*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 227-231.

100. Owens was covered extensively in newspapers across the South from Aug. 2 to Aug. 9, 1936.

101. "Owens athlete of the Hour," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 31, 1936.

102. AP, "World Records are Approved by Federation," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 1, 1936.

103. AP, "Owens and Metcalfe Run One, Two in Dash," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 3, 1936.

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104. AP, "Early Heroes In 1936 Olympics," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 3, 1936.
105. AP, "Jesse Owens Heads Parade of Americans," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 4, 1936; "Owens's Success Seen by Riley in 1929," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 5, 1936; "Owens Captures Third Olympic Title and Smashes World and Olympic Record," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 5, 1936; "Olympic Sportsmanship," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 7, 1936.
106. Pamela C. Laucella, "An Analysis of Mainstream, Black, and Communist Press Coverage of Jesse Owens In The 1936 Olympic Games," Chapel Hill 2004. Proquest Dissertation. Accessed August 10, 2012. 128-132, 196-198.
107. Laucella, 124-125.
108. Paul Gallico, "Olympics Concluded; Germany 1st, U.S.2nd," *Daily News*, Aug 17, 1936.
109. Gwenyth Jackaway, "America's Press-radio War of the 1930s: a Case Study in the Battles Between Old and New Media." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14, no. 3, (1994): 299. Academic One File Web. Accessed Aug 31, 2012. Article can be found for download <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01439689400260211#preview>.
110. Jonathan Silberstein-Loeb, "Exclusivity and Cooperation in the Supply of News: The Example of the AP, 1893-1945," *Journal of Policy History* 24, no. 3, (2012): 467, 470.
111. Silberstein-Loeb, 472-473.
112. Robert Drake, "Jesse Who?; Race, the Southern Press, and the 1936 Olympic Games," *American Journalism; the Publication of the American Journalism Historians Association* 28 (2011): 81-110.
113. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 109.
114. AP, "U.S Sure of Olympic Track: Captures 3 Firsts in Men's Events," *Charlotte Observer*, August 5, 1936.
115. AP, "Ohio Negro Winner in 200 Meter Race," *Charlotte Observer* August 6, 1936.
116. Several newspapers covered the murder of a white woman by a black man in a North Carolina hotel. "Negro Confesses Slaying of Co-ed," *Nashville Tennessean*, August 10, 1936. There were several other stories of black on white crimes reported throughout the Olympics. In one, a black man who killed an auto mechanic in Pulaski, "Negro Jailed Here after Killing Man on Pulaski street." Two columns over there was another story out of Anniston, Alabama, "Negro Arrested in Race Flare-up," August 12, 1936.

117. "U.S. Sweeps Hi Jump As Owens Cracks Record," *Nashville Tennessean*, August 3, 1936.

118. "Hitler waves at Owens," *Nashville Tennessean*, August 4, 1936.

119. AP, "Olympic Blacks Shine for Red, White and Blue Team," *Nashville Tennessean*, August 5, 1936.

120. "Negro Contingent Grabs off Chunk of Olympic honors in Track and Field Contests," *Post and Courier*, July 17, 1936.

121. "U.S. Takes Four More Firsts and Jesse Annexes Second Title," *Kentucky New Era*, August 4, 1936.

122. "Records Fall Before American Athletes," *Independent*, August 4, 1936.

123. Drake, 96.

124. Drake, 88, 91.

125. Drake, 91.

126. Drake, 81, 88.

127. Drake, 81.

128. Drake, 101.

129. Drake, 89.

130. Drake, 89.

131. In an Email from Rob Jenkins, on October 3, 2012 archivist at Terrebonne Parish Library wrote that the *Houma Times* ran on August 1st, 8th, and 15th during the Olympics.

132. Deangelo McDaniel who is a reporter for *Decatur Daily* has done research on Jesse Owens for over 30 years. In an email on October 12, 2012 he wrote that the *Decatur Daily's* coverage of Owens during the Olympics was "more than expected."

133. "Owens Sets New Record," *Decatur Daily*, August 5, 1936.

134. Several attempts were made to get an exact number for circulation and readership from the 1930s for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* from the newspaper itself.

135. AP, "Germans Give 'Bronx Cheer' To U.S. Athletes at Olympics," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 2, 1936. See for example "Owens Eclipses Olympic, World Records in Dash," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 3, 1936.

136. Drake, 100.

137. Drake, 95. Drake says he came across the photograph on popcultureinstitute.blogspot.com. The photo can be found here with the attached article: <http://frankwykoff.com/manhattan.htm>. (accessed October 1, 2012).

138. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 95.

139. Deangelo McDaniel, e-mail message to author, October 12, 2012.

140. AP, "Madrid Digging in as Fascist Swarm Passes" *Birmingham News*, August 1, 1936.

141. AP, "Negro Quizzed In Death Of Woman In Chicago Hotel" *Birmingham News* August 17, 1936.

142. AP, "Negro's Hanging Is Directed By Woman" *Birmingham News* August 14, 1936.

143. AP, "Negro Hall Boy Admits Slaying Of Clevenger Girl," *Birmingham News* August 10, 1936.

144. AP, "Calhoun Negro Still Fugitive," *Birmingham News*, August 2, 1936. See also "Anniston Negro Is Under Death Verdict" *Birmingham News*, August 4, 1936.

145. Dolly Dalrymple, "Mammy's Philosophy," *Birmingham News*, August 5, 1936.

146. Dolly Dalrymple, "Mammy's Philosophy" *Birmingham News*, August 8, 1936.

147. For example see advertisement of Pizitz *Birmingham News*, August 5, 1936.

148. "Ripley's Believe It Or Not" *Birmingham News*, August 16, 1936.

149. "Ripley's Believe It Or Not" *Birmingham News*, August 12, 1936.

150. "With The World's Largest Mickey Mouse Club," *Birmingham News*, August 16, 1936.

151. "What Negroes are doing," *Birmingham News*, August 2, 1936.

152. Alan Gould, "Hitler Formally Declares 1936 Olympics Opened," *Birmingham News*, August 1, 1936. AP, "Owens' Broad Jump Record Official Now," *Birmingham News*, August 1, 1936.

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153. AP, "Jesse Owens Equals Record In Winning 100-Meter Final," *Birmingham News*, August 3, 1936; AP, "Owens, Americans Go On Spree And Gather Points," *Birmingham News*, August 4, 1936; AP, "Owens Joins Relay Team As Record Equaled," *Birmingham News*, August 8, 1936; AP, "Owens Completes Olympic 'Triple' In 200 Meter Victory," *Birmingham News*, August 3, 1936.
154. AP, "Jesse Owens Announces He Will Become Professional," *Birmingham News*, August 10, 1936. David. P. Sentner, "Fortune Will Not Go To His Head—Owens," *Birmingham News*, August 18, 1936.
155. AP, "Coast Negro Scores Sixth Win For Race," *Birmingham News*, August 7, 1936.
156. Gayle Talbot "Trees," *Birmingham News*, August 4, 1936.
157. Louis p. Lochner, *Birmingham News*, August 5, 1936.
158. Gayle Talbot, "Olympic Games Fail To Supply A Single Upset," *Birmingham News*, August 5, 1936.
159. Laucella, 74.
160. Baker, *Jesse Owens*, 97; Laucella, 74.
161. Laucella, 80-83.
162. Grantland Rice, "Owens," *Birmingham News*, August 4, 1936.
163. Grantland Rice, "Africa," *Birmingham News*, August 7, 1936.
164. Zipp Newman "Dusting 'Em Off," *Birmingham News*, August 9, 1936.
165. Roy Wilkins, "That Old Southern Accent," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 23, 1936.
166. Henderson, cited in Wiggins, 187-190.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Owens was a figure who rose to prominence during the African American struggle for equality between Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement. The AP athlete of the year in 1936 was a beacon marking a transition between the traditional attitudes of the past and the progress of an entire race. The onus was not on him to change the hearts and minds of Americans, but it was his ability to transcend race that made his story so influential. Those few days in Germany in which he was able to keep his composure and to trust in his ability and training would mean so much in his later life. Berlin provided him with the means to be relevant, to be remembered, to share his experiences, and thus shape American perspectives.

For all his accomplishments, for all the lives he touched, and for the path he paved that makes current opportunities possible, Jesse Owens was very human. As Owens once said, “human lives are like patchwork quilts.”¹ Owens smoked cigarettes, he had liaisons, and he had a child in his youth before being married. He spent a great deal of his time away from home on speaking tours and other jobs. He had failed businesses and even complained at times about the lack of opportunities that resulted from Olympic fame. “You can’t eat gold medals,” he said. However, there is still an approach to Owens that is not lost on such details. Owens, long after Berlin, sought to make a difference in the world.

Accepted by whites, both Owens and Joe Louis were key players in African American hopes and accomplishments in the 1930s. Joe Louis had earned his fair share of press. In fact, Louis as a boxing champion meant more to the collective African American spirit than Owens ever did, but whites were often ambivalent toward the pugilist, finding it taboo to celebrate black victories over white fighters. Of Louis, Jesse once praised, “He never hurt anyone outside the

ring.”² But such words really are more indicative of his own character. Owens once said, “We all know what’s wrong with this world...I can’t change it with wild words...But I can bring two people, the other fellow and me, a little bit closer if I am a gentleman.”³ Both gentle giants were instrumental in easing race relations between a great number of Americans.

It was not until 1954 did the Brown v. Board ruling that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” was legal segregation overturned. Subsequently, the South became embroiled in a civil rights protest by its African Americans citizens in the years that followed. The late Howard Zinn in his seminal work *A People’s History of the United States* outlines in his chapter on the Civil Rights Movement “Or does it explode?” that race relations had reached a tipping point. Zinn said, “For blacks in the United States, there was the memory of slavery, and after that of segregation, lynching, humiliation. And it was not just a memory but a living presence—part of the daily lives of blacks in generation after generation.”⁴

As Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “*Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability.*”⁵ Owens had only helped prepare the ground for others to march, ride, and sit-in. Through his Olympic fame, Owens was the creator of social capital that bound people together. He helped shoulder the challenge to Aryan supremacy, and he brought the conversation of black success to the South, contributing to both society and civil rights.

NOTES

1. Jesse Owens, *I Have Changed*, (New York: Morrow, 1972), 17.
2. Jesse Owens, *Blackthink*, (New York: Morrow, 1970) 127.
3. Donald McRae, *Heroes without a Country: America's Betrayal of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers), 285.
4. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 443.
5. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail."
http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html (accessed October 10, 2012).

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