

James Cleveland ("Jesse") Owens was born in Oakville, Alabama (southwest of Huntsville) on the 12th of September, 1913. Until he was 9 years old, Owens was called "JC."

Soon after his family moved north—to Cleveland, Ohio—Jesse's new teacher misunderstood the new student's name. It may have been Owens' southern accent which caused his teacher to hear "Jesse" instead of "JC." Whatever the reason, the new name stuck.

A fantastic athlete, Jesse shattered three world records—and tied a fourth—within the span of 45 minutes on the 25th of May, 1935. His greatest achievement that day—a long jump reaching 26 feet 8¼ inches (8.13 meters)—set a new world record which stood for 25 years.

In the 1936 Olympics, Owens won four gold medals—including one for the 400-meter relay in which he was not originally scheduled to compete. His long jump, at those Berlin Games, is documented in the film *Olympia* (by Leni Riefenstahl).

In this clip, from a 1960 episode of "This is Your Life," Jesse tells Ralph Edwards (the program's host) about his background and accomplishments.

The International Olympic Committee (also known as the IOC)—whose website contains many photos of Jesse's feats at the 1936 Olympics held in Berlin—provides more information about Jesse Owens:

Sporting history

In 1935, Jesse Owens made sporting history when he broke five world records and equalled a sixth in the space of 45 minutes. One of these world records, 8.13m in the long jump, would last for 25 years.

Berlin 1936

At the 1936 Berlin Games, Owens won four gold medals, in the 100m, 200m, 4x100m relay and the long jump. He managed to break or equal nine Olympic records and also set three world records. One of those world records was in the 4x100m relay. The quartet set a time that wouldn't be bettered for 20 years.

Defying Hitler

Adolf Hitler hoped that the 1936 Berlin Games would prove his theory of Aryan racial superiority. Instead, Owens' achievements led the people of Berlin to hail him, an African-American, as a hero.

Years later, during the Cold War—when Berlin was a divided city—Jesse Owens went back to the place where the whole world had learned his name. He narrates a not-to-be-missed documentary about the 1936 Summer Olympics, and his amazing role in those games.

After his athletic career was over, Jesse—unfortunately—smoked about a pack of cigarettes a day for around 35 years of his life. When he died of lung cancer, he was only 66 years old. The IOC's tribute continues:

Posthumous Honors

Jesse Owens died of lung cancer in 1980. Since then a street and a school have been named after him in Berlin, two US postage stamps have been issued in his honor, and a memorial park has been opened in Alabama, amongst other tributes.

Although he is gone, Jesse's words of advice still ring true:

The battles that count aren't the ones for gold medals. The struggles within yourself—the invisible, inevitable battles inside all of us—that's where it's at.

In 2016, Jesse Owens is being honored with a feature-length movie about his life. Called "Race," it recreates his amazing feats during the 1936 Olympics where, to him, what mattered more than "black or white," "Aryan or non-Aryan," was "fast or slow."

Jesse was fast. He was the fastest of them all.

Credits:

Clip from a 1960 episode of "This is Your Life," online via YouTube.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Jesse-Owens-Video-Interview>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Jesse-Owens-Video-Interview>