Controversy at the 1936 Olympics

America had some of the fastest runners in the world, in 1936. But there was a serious political problem brewing.

The political problem did not just involve whether America should send a team of athletes to Berlin—a city dominated by swastika flags and anti-Jewish laws—although that was a serious consideration.

The political problem also involved the makeup of the American team. The track team had two Jewish members—Sammy Stoller and Marty Glickman. Both were very fast runners, and their specialty was the 400-meter relay.

What if a winning team—particularly a gold-medal-winning team—had two Jewish members? Would that matter to Hitler, an antisemitic man who was presiding over the 1936 Summer Olympics?

Once America made the decision to participate in the Berlin games, it seemed clear to everyone that Stoller and Glickman would represent their country as two of the four athletes in the 4 x 100. But on the morning of the first 400-meter relay, something had changed.

Neither Stoller nor Glickman would participate ... at all. Both runners were stunned.

How did this come about? After assembling his team, Lawson Robertson, the U.S. track coach, announced that he was pulling Stoller and Glickman in favor of Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalfe.

Why would he do that when both Stoller and Glickman were trained, in top form and ready to go? Glickman, in a later video interview, related the coach's explanation:

> *The 400-meter relay was selected beforehand. Sam Stoller would start, I was to run the second leg, Foy Draper run the third leg, and Frank Wykoff run the anchor leg.*
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> *The morning of the day we were supposed to run in the trial meets, we were called into a meeting, the 7 sprinters were, along with Dean Cromwell, the assistant head track coach, and Lawson Robertson, the head track coach, and Robinson announced to the 7 of us, that he had heard very strong rumors, that the Germans were saving their best sprinters, hiding them, to upset the American team in the 400-meter relay, and consequently, Sam and I were to be replaced by Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalfe.*
>
> *We were shocked, Sam was completely stunned, he didn't say a word in the meeting.*

Marty challenged Robertson:

> *Coach, you can't hide world-class sprinters.*

Jesse Owens was also stunned. Stoller's friend, Jesse had already won three gold medals. He protested, during the meeting:

> *Coach, I've won my 3 gold medals. I'm tired. I've had it. Let Marty and Sam run, they deserve it.*

Dean Cromwell, the assistant coach, silenced Jesse with these cryptic words:

> *You'll do as you're told.*

Jesse Owens did do what he was told and, in so doing, he and his three team members won the 400-meter relay. Not only did they win it, they smashed the world record.

Jesse had earned his fourth gold medal of the Berlin Games.

Missing from the spectators, watching the finals, was one important participant. Sam Stoller had decided not to watch. After the games, he declared he would never run again (although he walked-back that pronouncement).

Marty Glickman was more public in his criticism of the decision. His comments—which he made on the day of the pronouncement—were published in the August 9, 1936 issue of the *LA Times*:

> *The heats failed to show the necessity for shaking up the line-up after Stoller and myself long practiced the stick-work. We did not know until this morning's conference with Head Coach Robertson just who would run. It looks like politics to us.*

Marty did watch the finals. Later, in a video interview about the events, he recalled his emotions at the time:

> *Watching the final, all sorts of emotions flashed through my being. Frustration, certainly. Anger, certainly. I look out on the track and I see Metcalfe passing runners down the backstretch he ran the second leg. And, that should be me out there, that should be me, that's me out there.*
>
> *Antisemitism was the basic reason, I believe, that Sam and I didn't get to run in the Olympic Games.*

In the summer of 1936, Hitler and his Nazis had not-yet invented the "Final Solution" for the "Jewish Question." Auschwitz-Birkenau had not-yet become the place of death it would become soon after.

With the knowledge of those later events in his mind, Glickman reflected on the meaning of his antisemitic treatment compared with what was to come:

> *But here were two rather obscure Jewish American athletes, who could be kept from the winning podium, so as not to further embarrass Adolf Hitler. But what happened to me was as nothing compared to that which took place later on* [i.e., the Holocaust]*, there's just no comparison. I was there, and that mattered. What took place was much, much, more important afterwards.*

What took place, afterwards, for Jesse Owens, was also distressing. Although he had won four gold medals in Berlin, he—and other African-American Olympic stars—returned to a country dominated by discriminatory Jim-Crow laws and policies.

Knowing that he was a really good athlete, Glickman thought he could make-up for the disappointment in Berlin by performing well in the next Olympics. After all, he was only 18 years old in 1936. Except ... the next Olympics—scheduled for Tokyo in 1940—were scrubbed because World War II was already underway in Europe.

And ... the Olympics after that—scheduled for London—didn't happen, in 1944, because World War II was still dragging on.

By the time the next Summer Olympics were held—in London, during 1948—Glickman and Stoller could not compete at levels expected of Olympic athletes.

In his report, following the 1936 Summer Games, Avery Brundage—U.S. Olympic Committee chairman for that year—said that rumors, regarding the decision to pull Stoller and Glickman from the 400-meter relay, were unfounded:

> *An erroneous report was circulated that two athletes had been dropped from the American relay team because of their* [Jewish] *religion. This report was absurd.* (Quoted by Marty Glickman in *The Fastest Kid on the Block: The Mary Glickman Story*, at page 36.)

This declaration did nothing to eliminate criticism leveled at the decision. In his 1996 autobiography—where Glickman acknowledges that he couldn't beat Owens or Metcalfe but he "could beat everybody else because I was faster"—Marty underscores this fact:

> *In the entire record of American participation in track and field during the modern Olympic Games since 1896, I know of no American athlete, unless he or she was ill or injured, who did not get to compete - except Sam and me, two Jews.* (Glickman, at page 40.)

Years later, in an attempt to right the wrong, William Hybl—the U.S. Olympic Committee Chairman for the 1998 Games—awarded the USOC's initial General Douglas MacArthur medals to Sam Stoller (who, by then, was deceased) and Marty Glickman. Acknowledging two of America's Olympians, Hybl said:

> *We regret this injustice and we feel it was an injustice. We're not only atoning for this but recognizing two great individuals.*

It was 62 years after the two track stars had been pulled from competition.

At the top of this page, we see Glickman (left) and Stoller (right) practicing aboard the ship *Manhattan*, as they traveled to Europe for the 1936 Games.

Click on the image for a better view.

Credits:

Image of Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller, running in uniform aboard the ship "Manhattan,"—as they traveled to Europe for the 1936 Olympic Summer Games—online via the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Photo provided to the USHMM by Marty Glickman.

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