

Jesse Owens: Champ

For sheer humn drama, there have been few Olympic moments to match those provided by the late Jesse Owens of the United States during the 1936 Games in Berlin. Turn back the pages of history, if you will: In 1936, Adolph Hitler was reaching the crest of his terrifying wave of power. The German war machine was invincible. Individual rights were being trampled under the boots of stormtroopers. Booming Nazi propaganda threatened to drown out everything that summer, including the Olympic Games. Joseph Goebbels, one of the architects of German superiority, boasted that his Nazi athletes would "... win every Gold Medal." There was electricity and fear in the air. Into this cauldron of noise and political frenzy stepped a graceful black athlete, the son of an Alabama share-cropper. It was to be his destiny to explode the myth of Aryan supremacy. In the short space of 48 hours, with the blare of Hitler's trumpets ringing in his ears, Jesse Owens would win four Gold Medals in track and field (100- and 200-meter runs, the broad-jump and 400-meter relay), break three world records, and stamp his name and personality indelibly on the history of the Games. As Owens stood motionless at the start of the 100-meter dash, he heard someone whisper to him, "They're all up there, Jesse. . . Hitler and Goering and Himmler, all of them." But Owens never looked up; he had eyes only for the tape 100 meters down the track. He exploded off the line, leaving four rivals in his wake, and won the event in a record 10.3 seconds.

As Jesse was being led to the winner's platform to receive the first of his four Gold Medals, 110,000 Germans rose to their feet in subdued and shocked admiration. But Adolph Hitler was not among them;

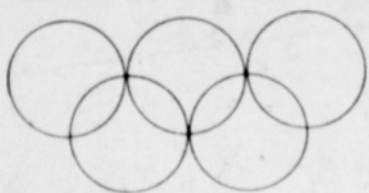


Jesse Owens races to victory at the 1936 Olympic Games.

when Owens flashed across the finish line, almost a blur, the Fuehrer, followed by Goering and Himmler and the rest, stormed out of his official box at Olympic Stadium, not wishing to share this moment of triumph with a black American. You won't find Hitler's name in Berlin today but, on a bronze plaque imbedded in the Marathon Gate of Olympic Stadium, the name Jesse Owens appears four times.



Owens dons the victor's oak-leaf crown during presentation of Gold Medal at Berlin following his triumphant long jump; one of four firsts.



Harrison Dillard

The track shoes that carried the legendary Jesse Owens to fame in the 1936 Olympic Games also helped a youngster named Harrison Dillard escape the cement playgrounds of Cleveland and become the greatest hurdler of his time. It was the year 1940 and Owens, a national hero as a result of his Berlin triumphs, spotted the kid they called "Bones" in a playground track meet. Jesse instantly saw something in the youngster that reminded him of his own boyhood days in this same Cleveland: a lean, hungry look, a quiet determination and, above all, God-given natural speed, raw, flowing, graceful speed. After the meet, Jesse presented Dillard with a pair of the shoes he had worn in the Berlin Olympics. "Stick with it, kid," Owens said. It was as if the young runner had suddenly grown wings on his heels. Wearing Jesse Owens' spikes, he raced to national fame as a high hurdler. By 1948, he was the best in the world; he had won 82 straight races and he was unbeatable in his specialty. But shockingly, Dillard failed to qualify for his favorite event in the Olympic Trials—and he made the London-bound U.S. track squad only by virtue of a third-place finish in the 100 meters, a race he rarely ran. As a hurdler, one of the great upsets Bones Dillard would have



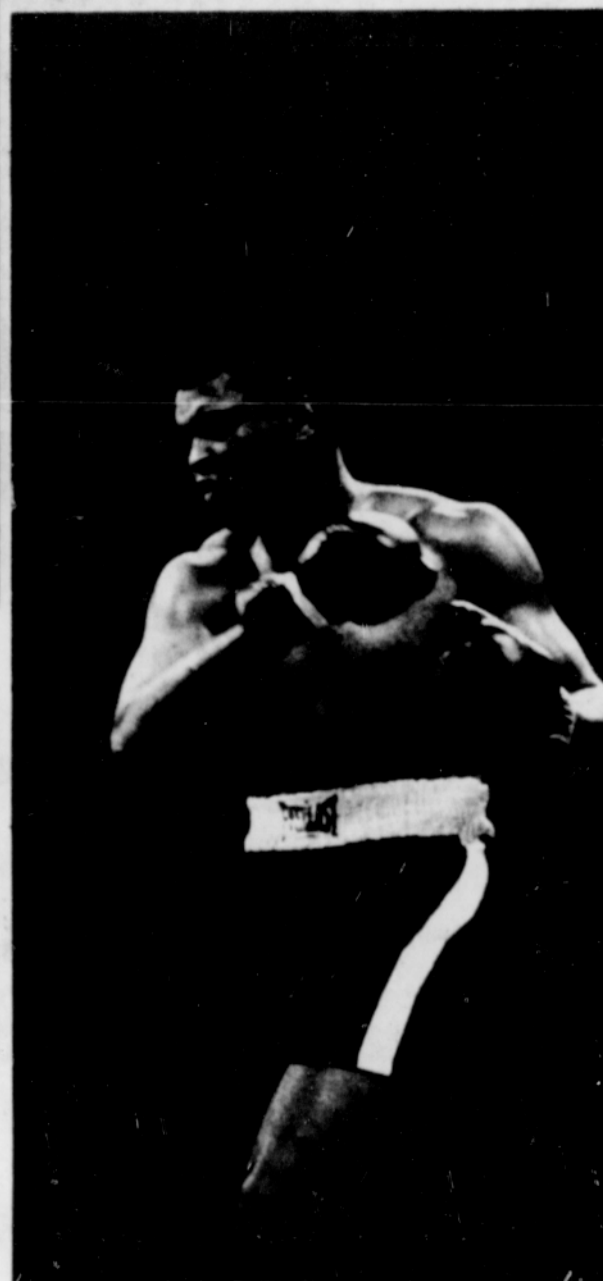
been a solid favorite for the Gold Medal in the 110 high; as a 100-meter qualifier, however, he was given little chance against 68 of the world's fastest sprinters. But somehow Dillard made it to the finals in London and, in defeated teammate Barney Ewell, the favorite, and Panama's Lloyd LaBeach to win the 100-meter championship. It was a performance fashioned of the very same determination Jesse Owens had seen in the eyes of a young boy in a Cleveland playground eight years earlier.

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Muhammad Ali won the Gold Medal in boxing in the Light-heavyweight class at the 1960 Games in Munich at the age of 18. As heavyweight champion of the world (professional!) he became the world's best known athlete.



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