

Black Americans of Achievement
LEGACY EDITION

Jesse Owens

CHAMPION ATHLETE



Tony Gentry

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Muhammad Ali
Frederick Douglass
W.E.B. Du Bois
Marcus Garvey
Alex Haley
Langston Hughes
Jesse Jackson
Coretta Scott King
Martin Luther King, Jr.
Malcolm X
Thurgood Marshall
Jesse Owens
Rosa Parks
Colin Powell
Sojourner Truth
Harriet Tubman
Nat Turner
Booker T. Washington

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Introduction

Nearly 20 years ago, Chelsea House Publishers began to publish the first volumes in the series called **BLACK AMERICANS OF ACHIEVEMENT**. This series eventually numbered over a hundred books and profiled outstanding African Americans from many walks of life. Today, if you ask school teachers and school librarians what comes to mind when you mention Chelsea House, many will say—“Black Americans of Achievement.”

The mix of individuals whose lives we covered was eclectic, to say the least. Some were well known—Muhammad Ali and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, for example. But others, such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, were lesser-known figures who were introduced to modern readers through these books. The individuals profiled were chosen for their actions, their deeds, and ultimately their influence on the lives of others and their impact on our nation as a whole. By sharing these stories of unique Americans, we hoped to illustrate how ordinary individuals can be transformed by extraordinary circumstances to become people of greatness. We also hoped that these special stories would encourage young-adult readers to make their own contribution to a better world. Judging from the many wonderful letters we have received about the **BLACK AMERICANS OF ACHIEVEMENT** biographies over the years from students, librarians, and teachers, they have certainly fulfilled the goal of inspiring others!

Now, some 20 years later, we are publishing 18 volumes of the original **BLACK AMERICANS OF ACHIEVEMENT** series in revised editions to bring the books into the twenty-first century and

make them available to a new generation of young-adult readers. The selection was based on the importance of these figures to American life and the popularity of the original books with our readers. These revised editions have a new full-color design and, wherever possible, we have added color photographs. The books have new features, including quotes from the writings and speeches of leaders and interesting and unusual facts about their lives. The concluding section of each book gives new emphasis to the legacy of these men and women for the current generation of readers.

The lives of these African-American leaders are unique and remarkable. By transcending the barriers that racism placed in their paths, they are examples of the power and resiliency of the human spirit and are an inspiration to readers.

We present these wonderful books to our audience for their reading pleasure.

Lee M. Marcott
Chelsea House Publishers
August 2004

The Nazi Challenge

Adolf Hitler awoke on the rainy morning of August 1, 1936, looking forward to his grandest day yet as Germany's chancellor. He was to attend the opening ceremonies of the summer Olympics later that afternoon. The eleventh Games in modern history, the Olympic festival was slated to take place in his country's capital, Berlin, with 52 nations participating.

Three years earlier, shortly after he had come to power, Hitler said of the Games, "If Germany is to stand host to the entire world, her preparations must be complete and magnificent." To assure this, he had personally supervised a large part of the planning. With the help of 2,600 men, a stadium that could seat 100,000 spectators was erected out of stone on the western outskirts of the city. A swimming stadium, hockey arena, and dormitories for the athletes were also built. Century-old trees that bordered the city's avenues were dug up and moved to the athletic complex to make a park for the visitors.

Throughout the preparations, the Games were heavily promoted, often with colorful touches. The zeppelin *Hindenburg*, the world's largest airship, towed an Olympic flag across the Berlin sky. Thousands of people, from schoolchildren to soldiers, rehearsed for months, with marching bands and parading regiments slated to take part in the opening ceremonies. More than 3,000 runners were asked to carry the Olympic torch a kilometer each from Athens, Greece, to Berlin, so that the flame would arrive at the huge stadium just as the festivities were about to begin.

At precisely 3:00 P.M., a motorcade of sleek and powerful convertible limousines left Hitler's quarters, with the man dubbed the Führer (German for "leader") in the head car. The procession traveled down streets lined with flags bearing the Nazi swastika emblem before turning onto the rain-slick boulevard leading to the Olympic stadium. A fanatical shout went up from the thousands of people lining the route.

Dressed in his military uniform, Hitler stood in the front seat, his eyes set straight ahead. "The Leader came by slowly in a shining car," wrote American novelist Thomas Wolfe, "a little dark man with a comic-opera moustache, erect and standing, moveless and unsmiling, with his hand upraised, palm outward, not in Nazi-wise salute, but straight up, in a gesture of blessing such as the Buddha or Messiahs use." Following the limousines and motorcycles came a runner carrying the Olympic torch on the last kilometer of its 10-day journey.

The ovation that greeted Hitler's arrival in the main stadium was nearly matched by the cheers for the approach of the Olympic torch. As soon as the runner lit the huge fire bowl in the stadium, the procession of the athletes began. Hitler and the 100,000 other spectators stood to salute the representatives of all the nations that had come to compete. With martial music blaring over loudspeakers, the athletes marched smartly around the track. Among them were blacks, Jews, Hispanics,



German Nazi soldiers salute during the opening ceremonies of the XI Summer Olympic Games at the Lustgarten in Berlin, Germany. In the foreground is the Olympic torch.

Asians, and Arabs, none of whom fit the Nazi model of a proper human being.

The German coaches had purged their Olympic team of nearly every competitor who was not Aryan (Caucasian) and non-Jewish. Hitler would have preferred that the other nations do the same. Yet if they saw fit to enter what he considered “subhumans” alongside his Aryan athletes, then his team would simply have to defeat them, proving to the world the strength of his “racially pure” athletes.

Radio broadcasts and leaflets had blanketed Germany for months, promoting the brilliance of the nation’s athletes,

even as Jewish stars, born and raised in Germany, were hounded from the team. So the Games began, with Hitler's Aryans, cheered on by 100,000 spectators, facing off against everybody else. The cards, it seemed, were stacked. With the Germans on their home turf, the world was about to be taught a lesson.

THE WORLD'S FASTEST HUMAN

Competition began the next day, on Sunday, August 2. The first event was the preliminary eliminations of the men's 100-meter dash, generally considered the most glamorous of the track-and-field events because the winner has the right to call himself "the world's fastest human." German fans held high hopes for their best runner, Erich Borchmeyer, who Americans thought looked more like a football player than a runner. The Germans also had an eye out for the black American college student Jesse Owens, who held the world record in the 100-yard dash. As he stepped onto the rain-muddied track for his warm-ups, all eyes turned his way, wondering how the unassuming young man would do at this slightly longer distance.

Borchmeyer won his preliminary heat in a time of 10.7 seconds. An American sprinter, Frank Wykoff, bettered Borchmeyer's time by a hair in another heat.

Finally, just before noon, Owens got his chance. The hosts had furnished each sprinter with a silver hand shovel to help dig toe holes at the starting line (the aluminum-and-rubber starting blocks used by runners today were unheard-of then). Owens looked over the damp cinder track, which was already pocked and scarred by the feet of other runners, and got down on his knees to dig a foothold.

When the starter fired his gun, Owens shot off his mark, arms and legs pumping, even before the sound of the gun reached the upper seats of the stadium. In just a few steps he attained full speed. He ran with a fluid, easy stride; his eyes looked straight ahead, as if his only opponent were the tape

stretched across the track fewer than 100 meters away. His feet hardly seemed to touch the ground.

Owens finished yards ahead of his closest competitor, coasting effortlessly across the finish line in a time that equaled the world record of 10.3 seconds. The crowd went wild. Even fervent Nazis could not ignore the speed of this young man.

That afternoon, Owens ran in the second round of heats. Again, he made it look easy. No other runner even came close during the race. This time Owens shaved a tenth of a second off his earlier standard, breaking the world mark. The judges decided that his time had been aided by the wind, however, so they could not award him the record.

That did not matter to Owens or to the crowd. He would run again the next day, and the next. Who could say how fast he might run in the 100-meter semifinals and finals? It was even possible that the 100-meter dash was not his best event. Didn't he also hold world records in the 220-yard dash and the long jump? Moreover, he was clearly at the top of his form, prepared to trounce all comers beneath the gray skies of Berlin.

German youngsters seeking autographs eagerly surrounded Owens on the way back to his room. On the very first day of the Olympic Games, he had proved a sensation. With speed

IN HIS OWN WORDS...

Hitler viewed the 1936 Olympics as an opportunity to showcase the new future he was carving out for Germany, but Jesse Owens ignored the competition's political focus that year:

I wanted no part of politics. And I wasn't in Berlin to compete against any one athlete. The purpose of the Olympics, anyway, was to do your best. As I'd learned long ago from [coach] Charles Riley, the only victory that counts is the one over yourself.



Jesse Owens waves from an open car during a ticker tape parade along New York City's Broadway Avenue. Owens was celebrating the four gold medals he won at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, when he was only 22 years old.

and grace he had proved that Hitler's Aryans were not superior to all others.

Jesse Owens upstaged Adolf Hitler at what was meant to be a triumphant display of German prowess. He performed as no one has since, captivating a worldwide audience and proving the falseness of the Nazis' racist notions.

Within the span of a week, Owens would become an international hero, prompting people everywhere to wonder who this incredible athlete was, where he had come from, and how he could possibly be so fast.

“Fighting the Wind”

James Cleveland Owens was born on September 12, 1913, in Oakville, Alabama—unimaginably far from the lights and fanfare of Berlin. Nicknamed J.C., he was the 10th (and last) child of Henry and Mary Emma Owens. He had six brothers—Prentice, Johnson, Henry, Ernest, Quincy, and Sylvester—and three sisters: Ida, Josephine, and Lillie.

Like thousands of families, black and white, throughout the South, the Owens family lived as sharecroppers. This meant that a local landowner, Albert Owens, allowed them to live in a ramshackle house on his property and use his farm equipment in exchange for their hard work and half the season’s crop from the land they farmed. The Owens family sold the other half of the crop, and with the little bit of money they earned they bought clothing and a few basic supplies.

A predominantly white community of 1,000 residents, Oakville was situated along a red dirt road amid the rolling

hills and tall pines of northern Alabama. Most of the Owens' neighbors were sharecroppers, too. They plowed the fields in the spring with a mule, hoed the long rows of corn and cotton throughout the scorching summer, then picked cotton from sunup to sundown during the backbreaking two-week-long harvest in the fall. It was a constant struggle to make their harvest money stretch through the winter.

With so much work to be done, all the Owens children were expected to pitch in. The youngest son, J.C., was not able to work like his brothers and sisters. He was small and sickly, and he needed to be nursed through one cold winter after another, a hardship for a family that lacked the funds to pay for medicine or a doctor. As the drafty old house rattled with every icy blast, little J.C., wrapped in soft cotton feed sacks in front of the stove, coughed and sweated and cried with pneumonia for weeks at a time.

As if that were not enough, terrifying boils appeared on J.C.'s chest and legs. His father had to hold the crying child while his mother practiced makeshift surgery in her own home, carving the boils out of his flesh with a red-hot kitchen knife. Years later, in his autobiography, *Jesse*, Owens recounted one of those doctoring sessions in all its harrowing detail: "Real pain is when you don't have any choice any more whether to cry or not, and then maybe you don't even cry because it wouldn't help. I always hated to go to sleep at night, but now for the first time in my life I wanted to pass out. Something inside wouldn't let me. All I felt was the knife going deeper, around and around, trying to cut that thing loose, all I saw were the tears running down my father's face, all I heard was my own voice—but like it was somebody else's from far-off—moaning, 'Aww, Momma, no . . .'"

FIGHTING THE WIND

Through sheer will and the determination of his long-suffering parents, little J.C. somehow survived these brushes with death.

By the age of six, he was well enough to walk the nine miles to school with his brothers and sisters.

School amounted to a one-room shack that doubled on Sunday as the Baptist church for the blacks of the area. The teacher was anybody who had the time and the inclination. During spring planting and at harvest time, students worked the fields instead of arithmetic problems. In spite of all the drawbacks and interruptions, J.C. learned to read and write.

Meanwhile, his parents struggled to make a better life. First, they moved their family to a larger farm in Oakville, where they worked 50 acres of land, still barely able to make ends meet. The children endured the hard times by concentrating on happier moments: fishing, raccoon hunts, swimming, berry picking, games of hide-and-seek, and pranks. “We used to have a lot of fun,” Owens recalled. “We never had any problems. We always ate. The fact that we didn’t have steak? Who had steak?” His family, like most sharecroppers, did not think of themselves as poor because all their neighbors were poor, too.

With hard work and good weather, a family could pick enough berries for jams and collect enough wind-fallen apples, pears, and peaches to last through the winter. They canned tomatoes and beans from their garden and slaughtered a hog after harvest time. Even though the Owens family did not have much money, there was usually enough to eat.

Even with all that, there was time for play. It was in the low hills of Alabama that J.C. first began to run. He recalled in his autobiography that even as thin and sickly as he was, “I always loved running. I wasn’t very good at it, but I loved it because it was something you could do all by yourself, and under your own power. You could go in any direction, fast or slow as you wanted, fighting the wind if you felt like it, seeking out new sights just on the strength of your feet and the courage of your lungs.”

As the Owens family continued to eke out an existence from the red dirt of Oakville, prospects of better opportunities beckoned at last. One of J.C.'s sisters, Lillie, had moved to Cleveland, Ohio, and she soon wrote home that she had found work there earning more money than she had ever seen before. She begged her parents to pull up roots and join her in this worker's paradise.

Henry and Mary Emma Owens, however, did not jump at the chance to leave their tattered farmhouse amid the cotton fields. The Owens family had roots in northern Alabama that ran back for a century, into slavery days. They had never known anything but farm life. As fellow members of the Baptist church, their friends and family spread for miles around in the northern Alabama hills.

J.C.'s father understood particularly well how ill equipped he was to face urban life. He had never learned to read or write or even to calculate the value of the cotton he harvested. He was a good farmer and a well-respected deacon of the church, but none of that would matter in the big city.

J.C.'s mother argued strongly in favor of the move to Cleveland, countering each one of his father's reasons for staying in the south with an argument proving that Cleveland could only be better. When he reminded her how unschooled he was, she asked him if he wanted his 10 children to grow up just as ignorant. When he told her how he would miss the farm life, she waved her hand through their dark, unpainted rooms, showed him the all-but-empty kitchen shelves, ran a finger through the holes in her apron, and laughed.

For Mary Emma Owens, the family had nothing to lose and everything to gain from catching the first train north. When J.C. turned nine years old, they sent him down the road to sell their mule to a neighbor. With that money, they all bought train tickets, and as their youngest child later recalled, he stood with his folks on the platform at the Oakville station and asked, "Where's the train gonna take us, Momma?" She answered only, "It's gonna take us to a better life."

CLEVELAND'S EAST SIDE

That better life, however, lay a little more than a train ride away. The Owens family moved into the only apartment they could afford, in a ghetto neighborhood on Cleveland's East Side. Back in the country, the view beyond the windows of their house had expanded for miles across open fields beneath the limitless blue sky of Alabama. In the city, their windows opened onto bedraggled alleys and the walls of the building next door. Emma Owens more often than not kept her curtains closed.

Now that she had convinced the family to move north, J.C.'s mother was not about to forget her dream. She took jobs all over town, cleaning houses and washing laundry and put her daughters to work doing the same. The older sons took jobs in a steel mill, where the foremen appreciated the strength and endurance the Owens boys had developed in the fields. J.C., too young for such grueling labor, found a part-time job polishing shoes and sweeping up in a cobbler's shop.

For Henry Owens, who was in his 40s, the move north had perhaps come too late. Worn down by a lifetime on the farm, he could not keep up with his sons in the mill and had to settle for whatever part-time work he could find. Still, for the first time in his life, his labor earned him a paycheck. At the end of the week, the family pooled its money to buy luxuries they had only imagined in the South: new shoes, new clothes, and good, sturdy furniture.

The bustling city swirled about them. Mill work proved exhausting and closed in, run by time clocks and strict supervisors. Shysters waited on every corner to cheat a man out of his wages. Around the dinner table in their ghetto home, the Owens family acted out a story repeated in millions of urban households all over the country during the first half of the twentieth century—that of rural people in crowded apartments, bewildered and harried by their new environment, weighing in their minds the advantages and disadvantages of the move they had made to the city.