



Alabama Public Television Education

Interviewing an Artifact: Jesse Owens' Shoes



Jesse Owens' track shoes from the 1936 Olympics

"I let my feet spend as little time on the ground as possible. From the air, fast down, and from the ground, fast up." Jesse Owens

Primary sources are the raw materials of history. They are the original documents or artifacts that were created at the time.

Things to Think About

- The tracks that Jesse Owens had to run on in 1936 were made from cinders. (Cinders are what is left after wood is burned.) All the tracks at the time had a cinder surface, and this surface was used at every Olympics through

1964. (Most of these tracks are used today for horse racing.) Today's tracks are modern surfaces that feel like rubber when athletes run on them.

- Runner athletes today use starting blocks, which is a fixed object with an angled surface that allows the athlete to push off at the start of a race. Jesse Owens used a small gardening shovel or **trowel**, to dig a small hole in the cinder surface so that he could push off at the beginning of the race.
- Adidas provided Jesse Owens his running shoes, which were handcrafted out of leather with extra-long, hand-forged spikes. (Adidas was a new company, founded by a German, Adolf Dassler. He wanted the publicity that would come from Jesse Owens and all Olympic athletes wearing his shoes during the games.)

Directions: Using the photograph of Jesse Owens' shoes, answer the questions below. Observe first! Take a few moments to inspect, describe, and take notes on the artifact before you begin.

- How do you think the object feels?
- Why do you think the spikes are only on the front of the shoes?
- Do you think that the shoes had padding or support in them?
- Using the Internet, do some research and look at some Olympic track shoes that are used today.
 - What are the similarities and differences between the shoes?
 - Which shoes do you think would be heavier? Why?
 - Why would the weight of the shoes be important?
 - Describe the materials used to construct today's running shoes.