Overview

Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum, located in Oakville, Lawrence County, Alabama, is dedicated to telling the life story of the famed athlete.

Born in Oakville, Alabama, on Sept. 12, 1913, James Cleveland “Jesse” Owens was one of ten children born to parents Henry and Emma Owens. As a young child, Jesse was sickly and weak. The Owens were sharecroppers, which meant that they gave half their crop to a landowner for allowing them to live and work on his property. The sharecropping system meant that the family could not get ahead, and after World War I the family joined the Great Migration of African Americans moving north to find living wages and opportunity. The Owens family settled in Cleveland, Ohio. Although the move initially brought improved economic security to the family, the Great Depression and a bad car accident that crippled Jesse’s father once again made life difficult.

In Cleveland, Jesse attended public schools. He met his future wife, Ruth Solomon, in junior high school, and they married in 1930. He also met Coach Charles Riley, a physical education teacher and track and field coach who realized Jesse’s potential. Coach Riley began training him and by 1928 Jesse set two world records in his age group for the high jump and the long jump. Riley continued to coach Jesse through high school and remained a friend and mentor, while Jesse continued to win races and break records.

Jesse enrolled at Ohio State University. As a Black athlete, he was not allowed to live in a dorm with white students and had to work to pay his tuition and living expenses. But he excelled in sports and in 1935 he set world records in the long
jump, 220-yard dash, and 220-yard low hurdles at the Big Ten Championships in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He set these records and tied the world record for the 100-yard dash in less than an hour. According to the Encyclopedia of Alabama, track and field fans consider his performance the “greatest in the history of the sport.”

The 1936 Olympic Games were held in Germany, where Adolf Hitler was leader. Realizations about Nazi Germany led many to call for the United States to boycott the games, but ultimately the U.S. participated, and Jesse competed. There he won gold medals in the 100-meter dash, the 200-meter dash, the long jump, and the 4 x 100-meter relay. His records were unbeaten until 1984 when Alabamian Carl Lewis surpassed him.

Jesse challenged Hitler’s belief in the superiority of whites and the Aryan race, and he became a national and international hero. But while he may have been the most famous person in the world, back home he still faced racism and prejudice. Over the years his fortunes rose and fell, and sometimes he ran exhibition races against racehorses for prize money.

In 1955, President Dwight Eisenhower named Jesse Ambassador of Sports and he represented Eisenhower at the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia. In 1976 President Gerald Ford presented Jesse with the Medal of Freedom, the highest honor the nation gives a civilian. In 1979, President Jimmy Carter presented him with the Living Legend Award.

Throughout his life, Jesse was dedicated to supporting youth and encouraging participation in sports. He died on March 31, 1980, at the age of 66.

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