



Berlin Olympics

Americans Show Up Germany's So-called Master Race

1936

Talent

Dignity

Victory

Triumph



Text by Olympics historian **Stephen L. Harris**

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At the end of the first Olympic torch relay, the Olympic flame arrives in Berlin, 1936.

A Watershed Moment for African-American Athletes

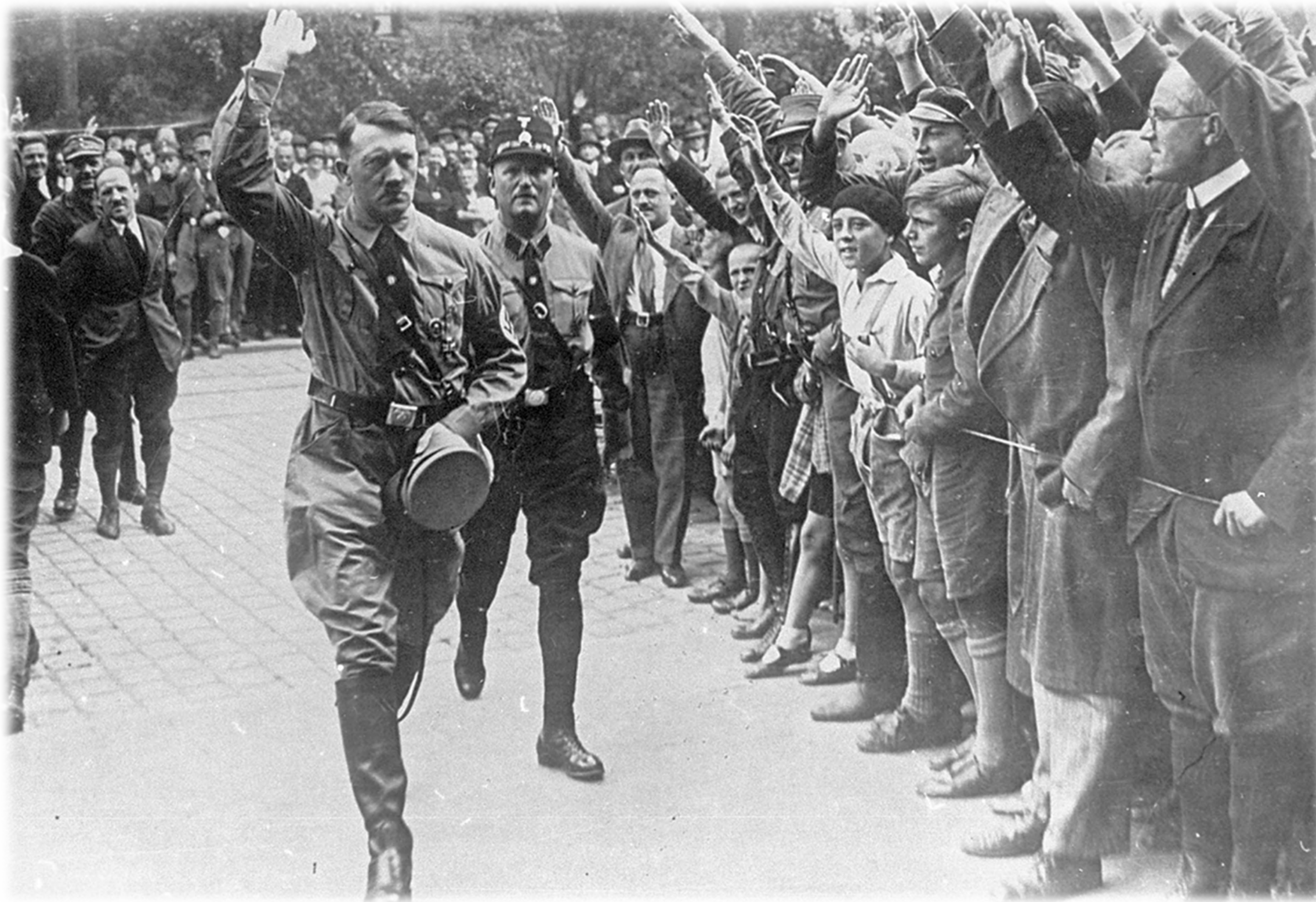
It was the time of Jesse Owens (among the most revered Black athletes in the United States); Adolph Hitler and the rise of the National Socialist Party (better known as the Nazi Party); and the showdown in Berlin between these two men—one representing that which is good in the world and the other all that is evil.



Jesse Owens of the United States in a 200-meter preliminary heat at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. Owens won four gold medals and showed up Adolph Hitler's idea of Aryan supremacy.

Worldwide Turmoil

Leading up to the Games, the world was in turmoil—heading toward another world war. The Japanese government was nearly overthrown. Tokyo was under martial law. Civil War was tearing apart Spain. Fascist Italy invaded and then conquered Ethiopia, killing thousands of Africans. Hitler was now chancellor of Germany, and known in Germany as the *Führer*.



In March of 1936, defying the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War One, Hitler brazenly sent 20,000 soldiers marching into the Rhineland, a strip of land that bordered France, Belgium, and the Netherlands that he claimed belonged to his country.

Hitler in pre-WWII Germany

The So-called “Master Race”

And worse—Hitler’s National Socialist Party, believed in a perverted form of the Aryan race that proclaimed Germans a “Master Race,” superior to all other people, enacted the Nuremberg Laws that denied citizenship to its own Jews.

But it wasn’t just Jews that the Nazis wanted to “master.” It was every race — and that included Black people.

A fundamental purpose of National Socialism was the creation of a healthy, pure and beautiful race. They sought to raise children who believed in Germany and their leader, Hitler.

These propaganda posters represented the Nazi’s idealistic image of the master race to be developed through eugenics.



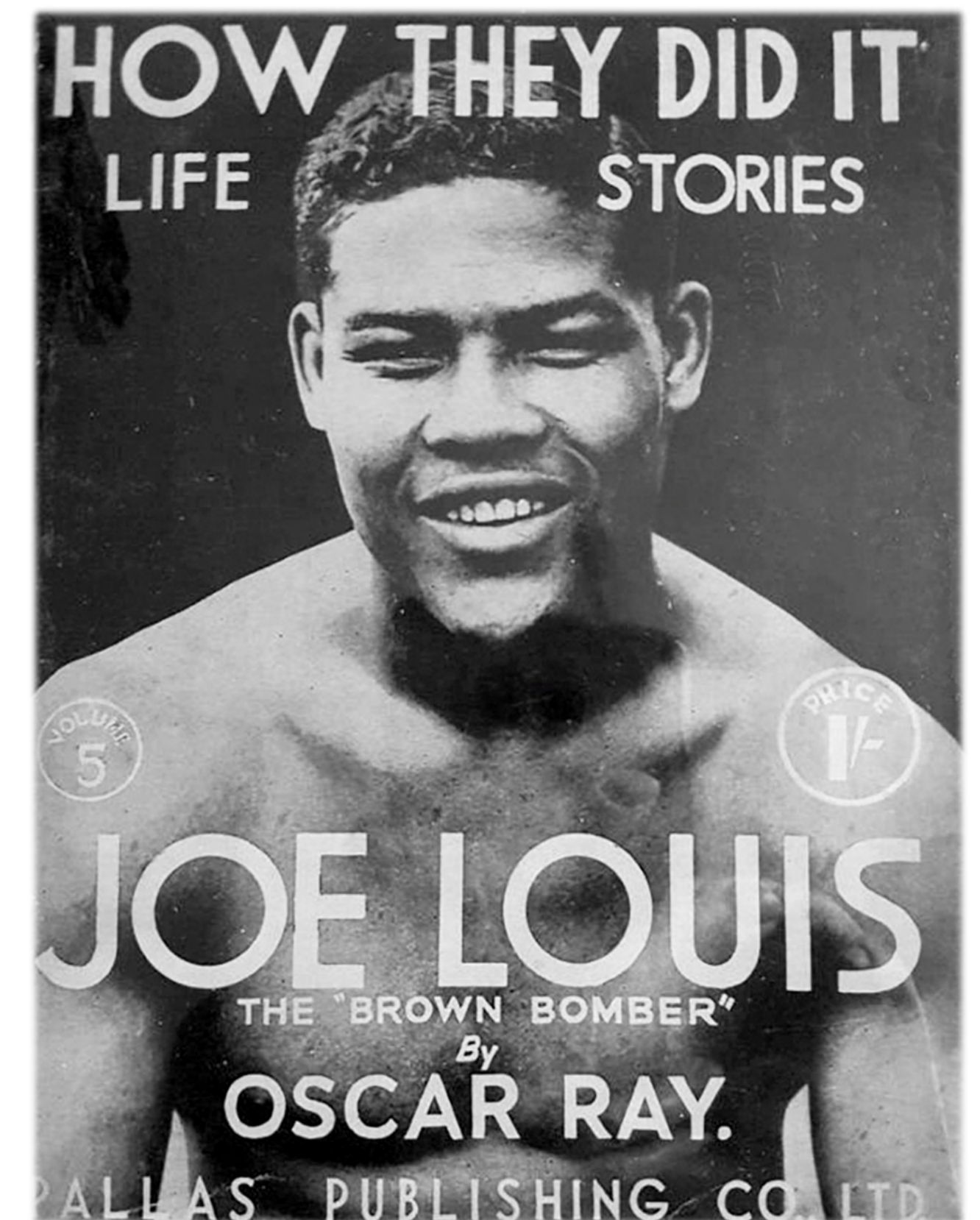
Joe Louis: The Brown Bomber



In 1935 (the year before the Berlin Olympics) a heavyweight boxer, born the grandson of slaves, struck a blow for freedom-seeking people everywhere.

Nicknamed the Brown Bomber, Joe Louis knocked out former world heavyweight champion, Italian behemoth, Primo Carnera. Because it came on the heels of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia, Louis's defeat of Carnera was seen as a victory for the international community, particularly among Black Americans sympathetic to an African country in its desperate fight for freedom.

The Associated Press selected Louis as its 1935 "Athlete of the Year."





Jesse Owens

But perhaps the AP should have taken a closer look at another African-American athlete who, a month before Louis's knockout of Carnera, did something so remarkable it most likely will never be duplicated.





Jesse Owens' Amazing College Championship

At the Big Ten championships on May 25, 1935, Ohio State University track star, 21-year-old Jesse Owens, set five world records and equaled a sixth—all in 45 minutes! The Alabama native and now Cleveland resident tied the world mark in the 100-yard dash and then set records in the long jump, 220-yard and 200-meter dashes and 220-yard and 200-meter low hurdles.

Following that astonishing performance, Owens, honored by Cleveland as its “Goodwill Ambassador” to the world, was ready to lead the U. S. Olympic Team to Berlin, a team of 359 athletes that included a record-number 46 women, 18 African Americans and seven Jews as well as a full-blooded Native American.

Jesse Owens at the Big Ten Conference Track and Field meet at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Mich., May 25, 1935



A Call to Boycott the Olympics

Before the Americans arrived in Berlin, two things occurred. One almost derailed the United States from sending a team and the other broke the hearts of people all across the country.

The first was a call to boycott the Olympics because of Germany's treatment of its Jewish people. The second, which took place 42 days before the opening ceremony, saw Joe Louis knocked out by German Max Schmeling, the former heavyweight champion of the world, but, most importantly, a Nazi symbol of Aryan supremacy. It was Louis's first loss after 24 wins. Schmeling was seen as a hero back home, in Germany, because his knockout proved the theory that Germans were indeed the "Master Race."



Meanwhile, even as the call to boycott the Berlin Olympics gained momentum, the president of the American Olympic Committee, Avery Brundage, convinced Americans that the German government had assured him all athletes would be welcomed and treated with fairness. Whether this statement was true or not is still debated among Olympic historians. **The boycott was called off.**

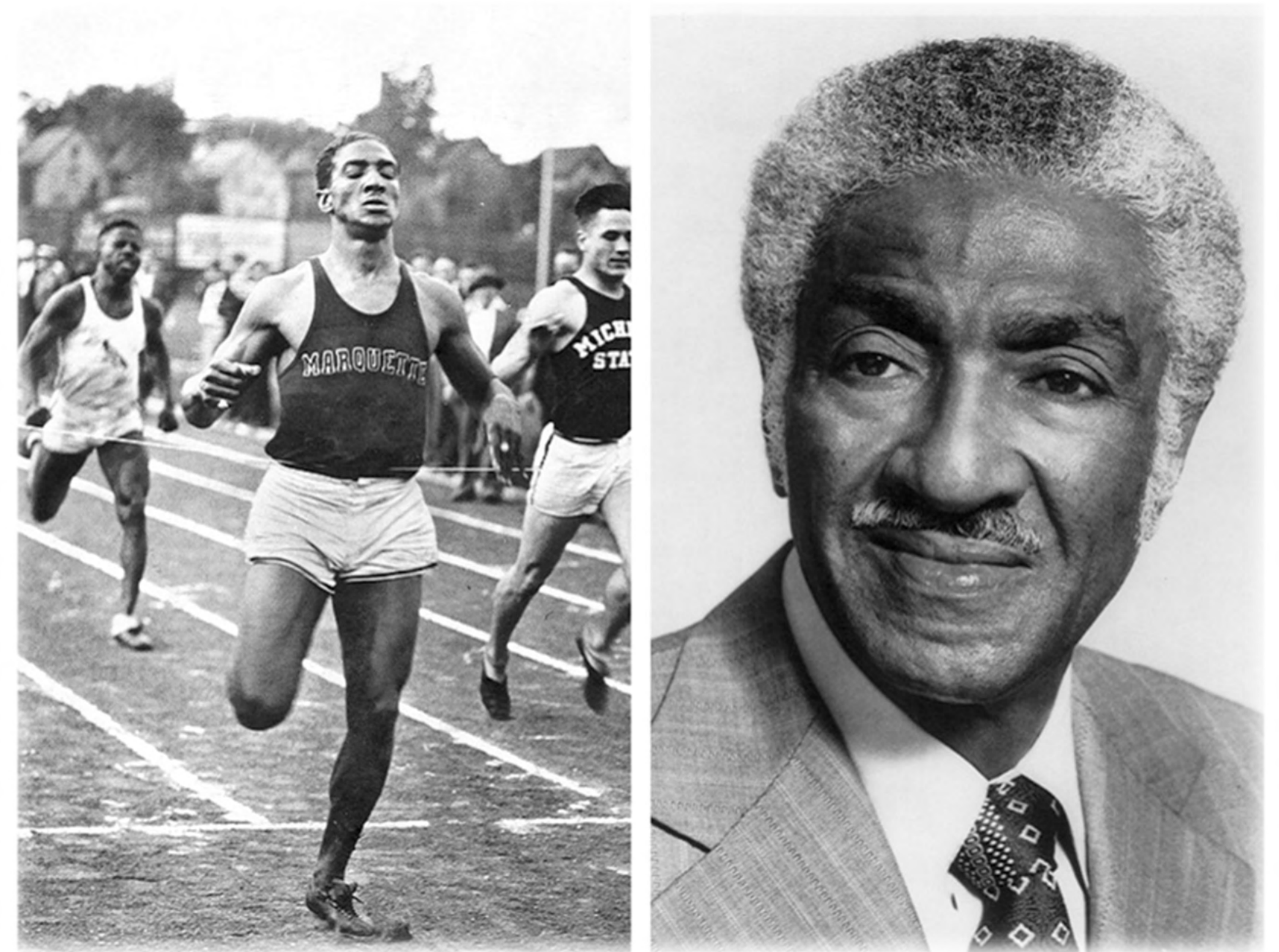


Off to Germany!

In mid-July the American Olympic team set sail for Germany. Of the 18 African Americans on board, several were Olympic veterans. Among them was track star Ralph Metcalfe.

Metcalfe, born in Atlanta, but raised in Chicago, had won silver and bronze medals at the 1932 Los Angeles Games, finishing in both the 100-meter and 200-meter dashes behind Eddie Tolan, an African American known as the “Midnight Express.” Metcalfe would meet the same fate against Jesse Owens in the 100 meters.

After the Olympics, Metcalfe went on to be a beloved Illinois Congressman. He sponsored legislation creating the Congressional Black Caucus as well as making February “Black History Month.”



Ralph Metcalfe as a college athlete and a U.S. Congressman

Opening Fanfare

The Berlin Summer Olympics opened on August 1, 1936.

Hitler arrived in a motorcade as thousands lined the way and more than 200,000 crowded just outside the brand new Olympiastadion, while 100,000 more jammed inside, cheering and yelling “Heil Hitler!”

Hitler in a motorcade at the Feb. 1936 Winter Olympics held in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in Bavaria, Germany.





Opening Fanfare

When Hitler entered the stadium to the blare of a trumpet and the raising of the Führerstandarte, with a red swastika, the deafening roar could be heard throughout greater Berlin. Everyone jumped to their feet and most flung out their arms in the “Nazi Salute.”

As Hitler strode to the “honor loge,” he stopped to accept a bouquet of flowers from a blond-haired girl—symbolic of the master race. When he reached his box seat and stood up, facing the field of play, his arm straight out, the orchestra played the German national anthem, Das Lied der Deutschen (the song of the Germans).

Wrote America’s preeminent sports journalist Grantland Rice, “I never have seen such a demonstration anywhere at any time. The outbreak of national feeling is beyond belief.”

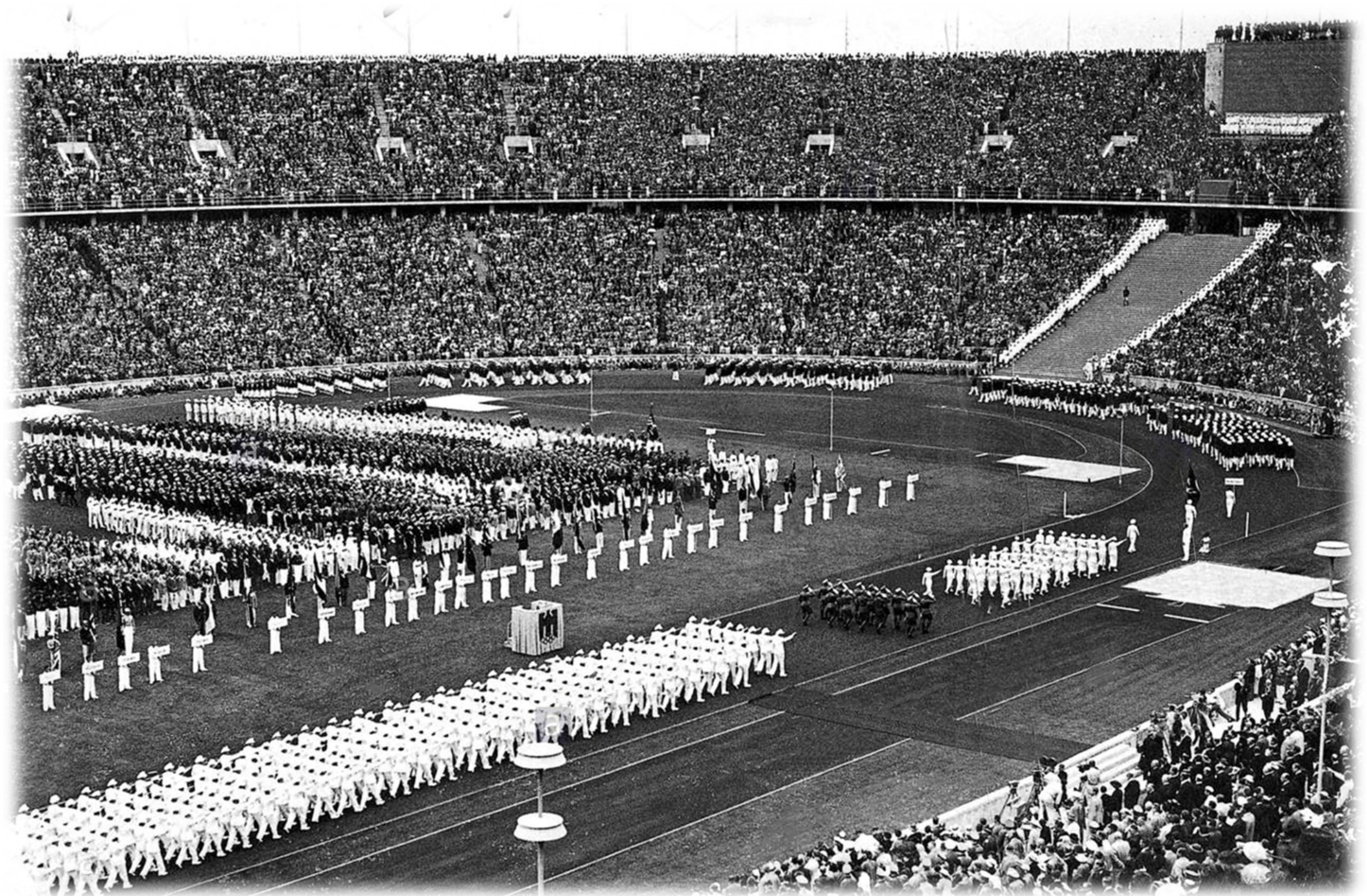


Refusal to Bow the Flag to the Fuhrer

During the march into the stadium of the competing nations, all carrying their country's flags, many athletes gave the Nazi salute. As each nation passed by Hitler's private box, the flagbearer then dipped the flag in honor of the German leader. But one country did not dip its flag, offending the Führer.

Ever since the 1908 London Games, when it marched in front of England's royal family, the United States has refused to dip "Old Glory" before the head of any state.

If Hitler thought America's protests were over, he was mistaken.





Hitler Greets the Medal Winners

On the first day, four champions were crowned. Hans Woellke, a 25-year-old Berlin policeman, won the first event, setting an Olympic record in the shot put. After receiving his gold medal, he and the silver and bronze medalists were escorted to Hitler's private box amid great fanfare and there the Führer warmly shook their hands as the great crowd rang out, reported The New York Times, "with the frenzied cheers."

Woellke's victory was followed by another German capturing the gold medal. Tilly Fleischer set a world record in the women's javelin. Her teammate, Luise Krüger, came in second. The women, including the bronze medalist from Poland, were escorted to Hitler's box where he shook their hands, patting Fleischer on the back. The crowd roared.



*Medalists in women's javelin with Hitler.
Tilly Fleischer is on the right.*

Americans Sweep the High Jump

Then three Finnish runners swept the 10,000 meters. Hitler welcomed the athletes to his box, certainly disappointed none of them represented the master race.

But down on the field of play, just as the sun dipped behind the stadium, Americans were going one-two-three in the high jump. Two of them were Black.

Cornelius “Corny” Johnson took the gold. David Albritton, the other African American and a classmate of Jesse Ows at Ohio State, grabbed the silver. The bronze went to Delos Thurber.

High jump gold medalist Cornelius Johnson mid-flight during the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin.



Hitler Leaves the Stadium

Instead of inviting the three Americans up to his box to congratulate them, Hitler left the stadium. The implication was not lost on the Americans.

Arthur Daley of *The New York Times* nailed it in the August 3rd edition of his newspaper. “The Fuehrer had greeted all three medalists in other events—the Germans and the Finns—with a handclasp and words of congratulations. But five minutes before the United States jumpers moved in for the ceremony of the Olympic triumph Hitler left his box. Johnson and Albritton are Negroes. None of the others were.”



Daley then wrote that it was not yet time to pass judgment, stating there would soon be other Negro winners, especially Owens.

How would Hitler treat them?

The Bellamy Salute

The American jumpers were not going to wait to find out. They stood on the podium, received their medals and then, as the Star Spangled Banner was played, they saluted and then thrust their arms out in what many took as the Nazi salute.

But it wasn't.

In those days, school children in the United States had been honoring their country during the Pledge of Allegiance with a military salute and then when the words "to the flag" were spoken, swung their arms out at a forty-five degree angle with palms pointing upward. It was known as the "Bellamy Salute." According to some Olympic historians, that's what the three Americans did to honor their country.



American Athletes Heat up the Track

The following day and the days to come, African-American athletes showed their amazing prowess on the track and on the field, led by the “Buckeye Blizzard,” Jesse Owens.

On day two, Hitler was in his box, again arriving with much fanfare.

In the first heat of the 100 meter dash, Owens tied the Olympic record at 10.3 seconds. He then posted a wind-aided 10.2 in the second heat and then drifted to a win in the semifinals. Metcalfe won his heats as well, with a 10.5 sprint.

The other American qualifier was USC veteran standout Frank Wykoff, who had captured gold medals in the 4 x 100 relays in 1928 and in 1932. Germany’s Erich Borchmeyer, also a veteran Olympian, qualified. Borchmeyer had set the world mark three times in the 1930s, but each time it was erased from the record book on technicalities. Dutch speedster Tinus Osendarp was another force to reckon with.



Jesse Owens

Congratulate All or None

In the 800-meter qualifying rounds, John Woodruff, a University of Pittsburgh freshman, finished third in his heat, but then won the semifinal, making the African American a favorite in the championship race set for August 4.



Count de Baillet-Latour, President of the Olympic Committee standing between Hitler (right) and Hess, at the 1936 Winter Olympics opening ceremony.

After obviously shunning American high jumpers, Johnson, Albritton and Thurber, Hitler was apparently told by the president of the International Olympic Committee (Belgian, Henri de Baillet-Latour) that he either congratulate all medalists or none.

Hitler chose the latter, perhaps realizing he'd be clasping too many hands of a different color, and that he was loathe to do.



The “Sepia Squad”

Over the next week to 10 days, African Americans, dubbed by sports reporters as the “Sepia Squad,” dominated track and field. It began on day three in the 100-meter finals and then the 800 meters. Owens and Metcalfe finished one-two in the 100, with Tinus Osendarp from the Netherlands, described as “the fastest White man,” in third place.

Woodruff next captured the 800 in bizarre fashion. Hemmed in by other runners and suffering a gash on his leg, he knew he didn’t have a chance if he couldn’t break away. He suddenly stopped running, standing still until the runners passed him. Then he moved to the outside lane and sprinted first to the tape.



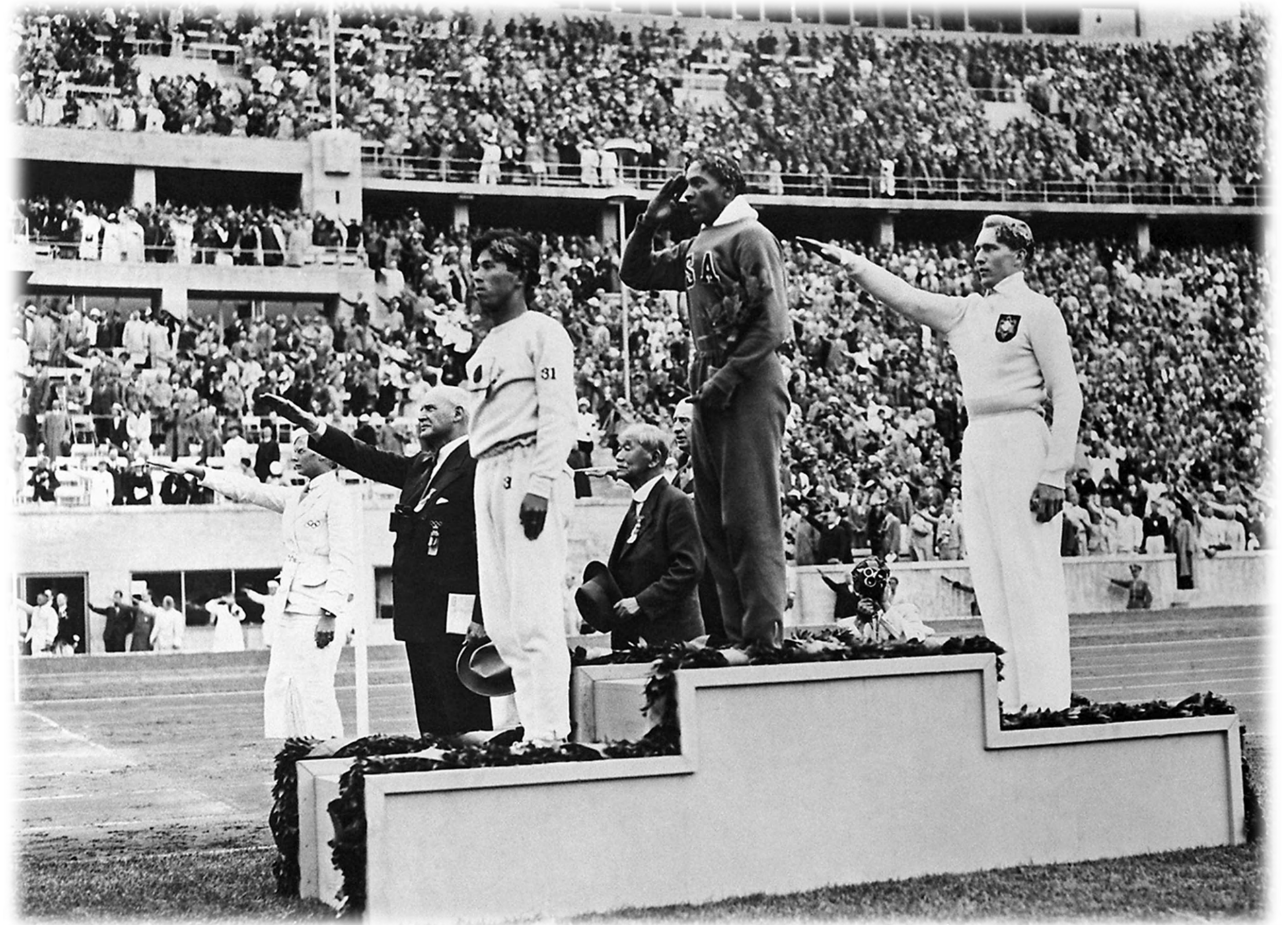
July, 1936 on the SS Manhattan. L-R: James LuValle, 400m Bronze Medalist; Archie Williams, 400m Gold Medalist; John Woodruff, 800m Gold Medalist; Cornelius Johnson, High Jump Gold Medalist; Mack Robinson, 200m Silver Medalist.

Jesse Owens Makes a Friend

On day four, Owens again was the star. He earned gold in the long jump, besting Lutz Long, a blonde, blue-eyed German. Legend has it that Owens and Long became fast friends.

Long and Owens wrote letters to each other after the games, including a heartfelt letter from Long right before he was deployed as a soldier in Germany's army.

Long was killed in the war.



Jesse Owens on the podium after winning the long jump at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. Lutz Long is behind Owens as the silver medalist.

Jesse Owens: Victorious

On day five, it was Owens garnering his third championship in the 200 meters. This time he outran teammate Matthew MacKenzie “Mack” Robinson, a Pasadena Junior College standout. Although he became an Olympic medalist, in later years he would play second fiddle to his younger brother, who in 1947 broke Major League Baseball’s color barrier, Jackie Robinson.

By winning the 200, Owens became the first Olympian to take three gold medals in one Olympics since famed Finnish long-distance runner, Paavo Nurmi, who accomplished the feat in 1928. The Ohio State star was now finished competing. Or so he thought.

Jesse Owens in 1936 – and one of his medals





More Wins...



Archie Williams and Jim Luvalle aboard the SS Manhattan – the steam ship that transported the 1936 Olympic team to Germany.

Meanwhile, Archie Williams, a mechanical engineering major at the University of California at Berkley, nailed down the seeming last gold medal for African-American men when he won the 400 meters. He later taught aviation at the Tuskegee Institute during World War II and retired a lieutenant colonel.

Finishing behind him in third place was Jim LuValle, later the first Black to earn a doctorate degree at California Institute of Technology and received three United States patents for research in color photography.

... and a Stumble

For the two African-American women, Louise Stokes (from Boston) and Tidye Pickett (from Chicago), there'd be no medals.

Although qualifying to run the 4 x 100 relay, Stokes was again shunted to the sidelines where she watched the race, won by her White teammates.

Pickett competed, racing in the 80-meter hurdles. In the semifinals, she stumbled and finished sixth. Even though it kept her out of the finals, Pickett became the first African-American woman to actually compete in the Olympics.



1936 Women's Track & Field team including Tidye Pickett in front row (1st from left) and Louise Stokes (in back row sixth from left).

Controversy over Jewish Runners

As it turned out there was one more race to be run for Jesse Owens. For the United States it proved the most controversial, and ugliest, moment of the Olympics—the 4 x 100 relay.

The four-man team had already been selected following the Olympic Trials. Making the team were veteran Wykoff, Roy Draper, like Wykoff, from USC; Sam Stoller from the University of Michigan; and Marty Glickman from Syracuse University. Stoller and Glickman were Jews.



Stoller & Glickman on the SS Manhattan en route to Germany.



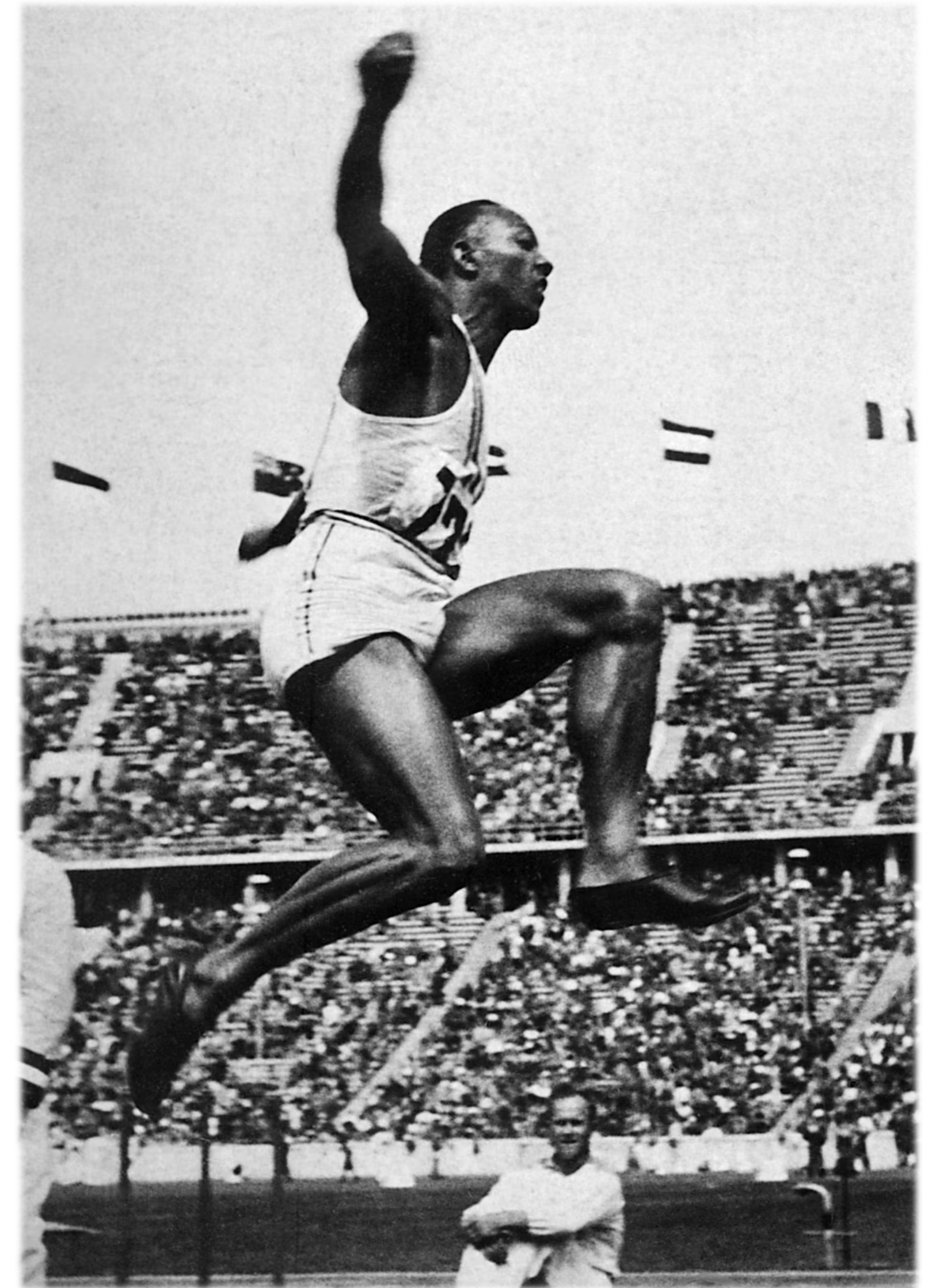
Owens Offers his Place

Before the qualifying heat, a meeting was called.

Coaches Dean Cromwell of USC and Lawson Robertson, an Olympic veteran himself, told Stoller and Glickman that they would not be running. Instead, they'd be replaced by Metcalfe and Owens.

According to Glickman, who went on to become one of America's top sportscasters, "Jesse was magnificent. He said 'I've had enough. I won three gold medals. Let Sammy and Marty run'." Metcalfe later lamented, "It was unjust to leave two athletes off the team just because they were Jewish."

Glickman blamed both Cromwell and Brundage because he believed they were both "sympathetic to the Nazis."



Owens leaps to victory over German Luz Long.



American Triumph

Despite his offer not to run, Owens competed. The United States won in a world-record time of 39.8 seconds, with Wykoff running the anchor leg. For Owens, it was a record-tying fourth gold medal in a single Olympic Games.

It was also an astonishing display of talent among America's Black athletes in front of Hitler and the hundreds of thousands of screaming German spectators, who jammed into Berlin's Olympic Stadium, representative of the "Master Race."

Or so they believed, until proven otherwise by the integrated American team that included 18 African-American athletes.



In a surreal moment after the long jump competition, for which Jesse Owens won gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the United States flag flew alongside the flag of Nazi Germany and the flag of Japan.

How did this image foreshadow the decade ahead?

American Triumph

“Welcome Olympians!”

*Jesse Owens and other
American Olympians were
honored with a ticker-tape
parade in New York City on
September 3, 1936.*



Vocabulary

Aryan
turmoil
Führer
eugenics
behemoth
boycott
allegiance
sepia
garner
shunt
surreal



Jesse Owens and the international press at the Berlin Olympics.



WOODSONCENTER