

Berlin Olympics

Americans Show Up Germany's So-called Master Race

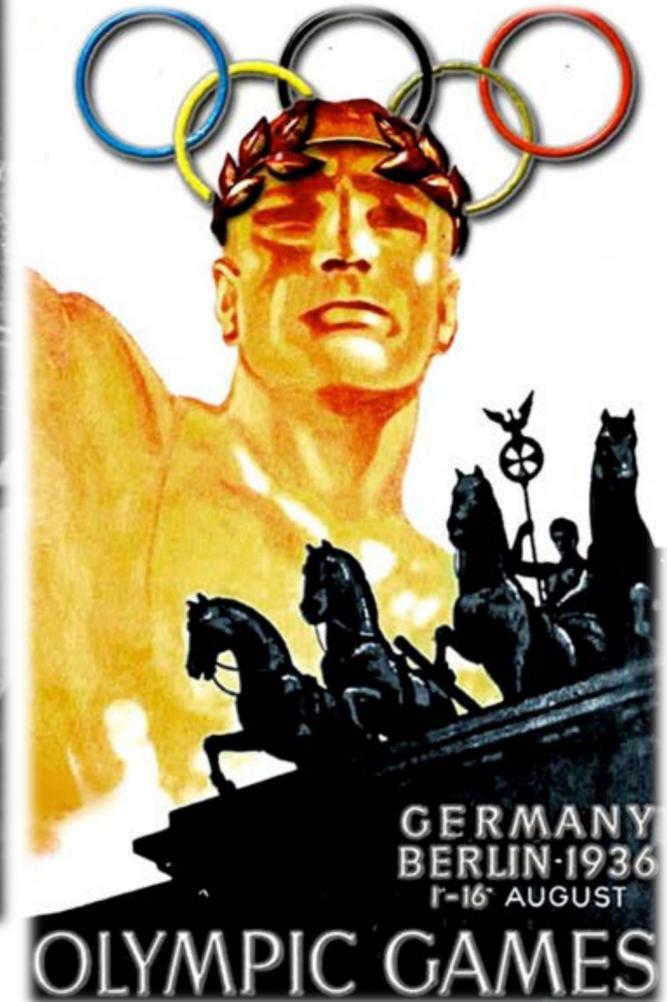
1936

Talent

Dignity

Victory

Triumph



Adapted from original text by Olympics scholar Stephen L. Harris

Berlin Olympics

Americans Show Up Germany's So-called Master Race



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

A Historic Moment for Black Athletes

It was the time of Jesse Owens (among the most respected 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 with family in Columbus, Ohio: mother Mary, wife Ruth, father Henry; early summer, 1936. Owens would win four gold medals at the Berlin Olympics.

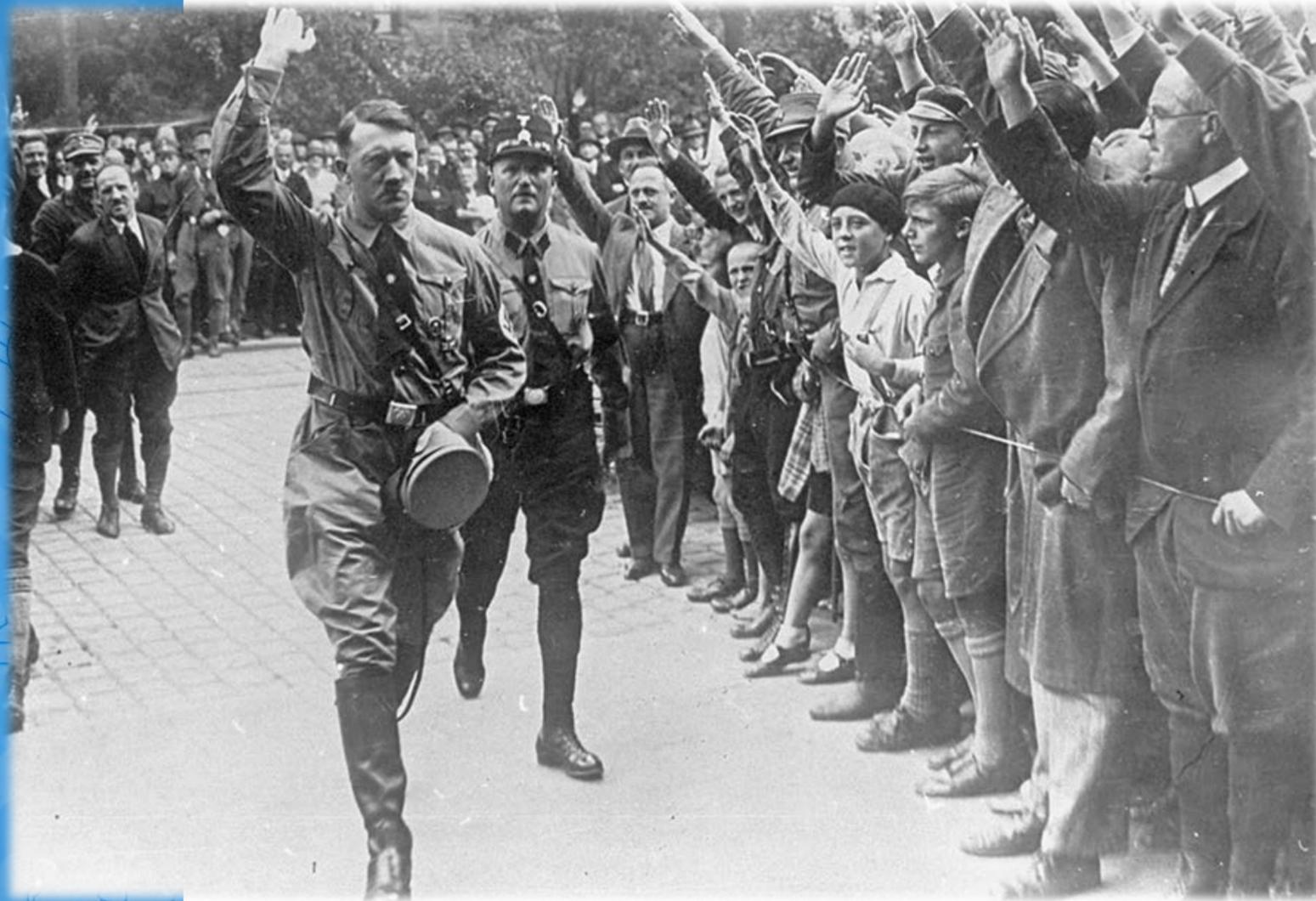
Worldwide Turmoil



Ethiopian Soldiers on Horseback

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.

Worldwide Turmoil



Hitler in pre-WWII Germany

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 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.

A treaty is an agreement between countries. Do you think it is important for countries to hold to their agreements? Is there ever a good reason to break a treaty?

The So-called “Master Race”

And worse, Hitler’s National Socialist Party—which believed in a perverted form of national identity that proclaimed Germans a “master race,” superior to all other peoples—enacted the Nuremberg Laws, denying citizenship to Germany's Jews.

But it wasn’t just Jews that the Nazis wanted to “master.” It was every race, including 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.



An Amazing College Championship



Why was Owens was called the "Buckeye Blizzard?" Does your school or city have a nickname?

But the year before the Berlin Olympics, one athlete gave a performance that may never be equaled.

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.

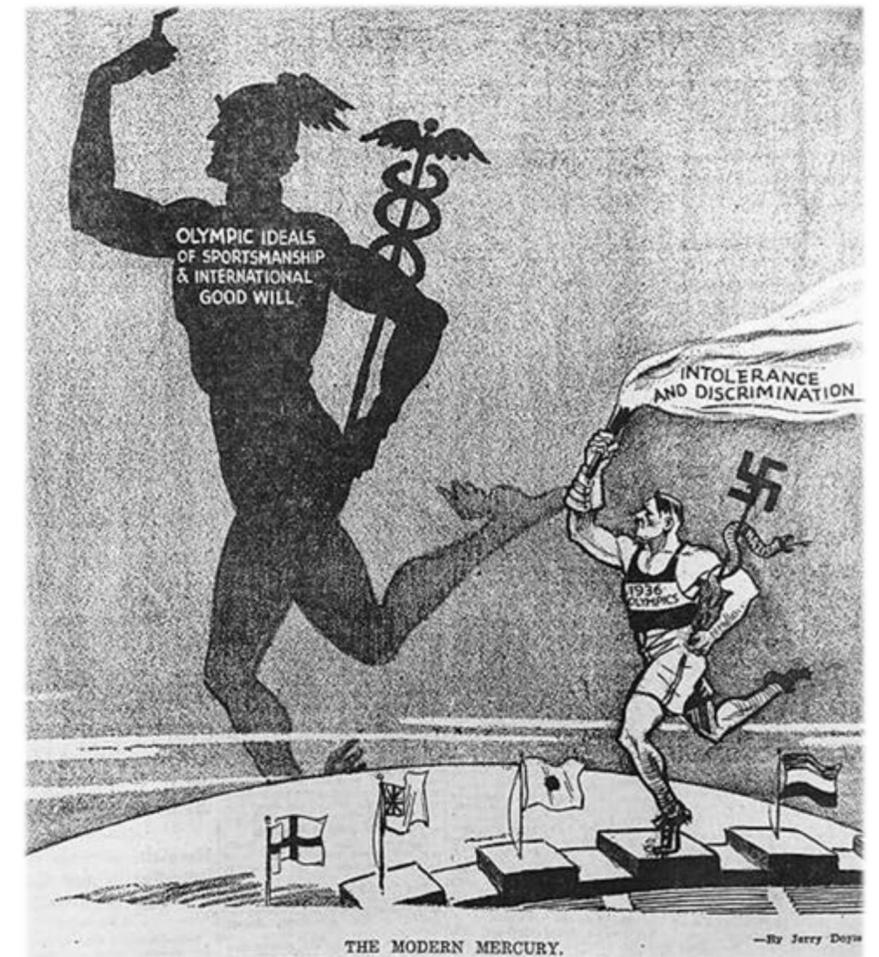
Following that astonishing performance, Owens, honored by Cleveland as its "Goodwill Ambassador" to the world, was ready to lead his country's Olympic Team to Berlin, a team of 359 athletes that included a record-number 46 women, 18 African Americans and seven Jews, as well as a full-blooded Native American.

A Call to Boycott the Olympics

However, the American team almost didn't get the chance to compete. Some Americans thought the United States should boycott the Olympics because of Germany's treatment of its Jewish people.

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.

The Olympics have been boycotted several times, usually in protest of the policies of the host country. Do you think it is important to speak out when an injustice is being committed?



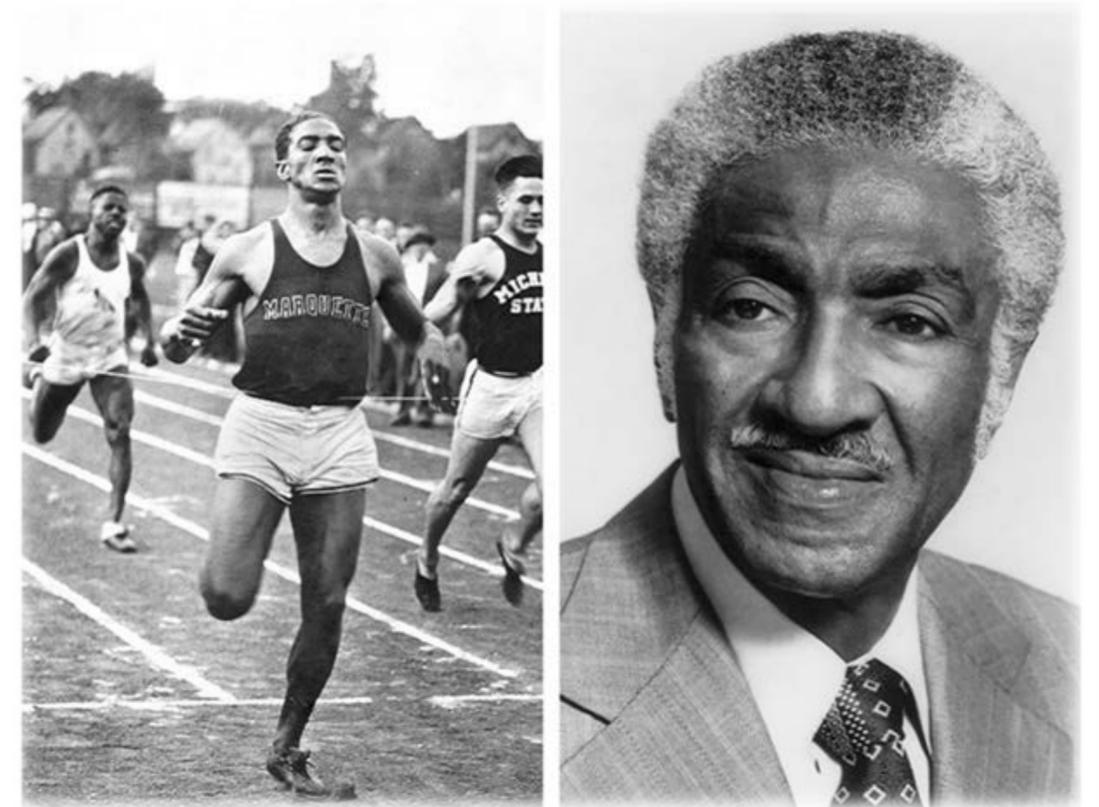
Editorial comic of Hitler as an athlete, carrying a swastika, serpent, and torch burning with "intolerance and discrimination." He casts a false shadow of Olympic values.
Jerry Doyle, Philadelphia, 1935.

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 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 February 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.”

Do you think national pride is a good thing? Why or why not?

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, 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”).

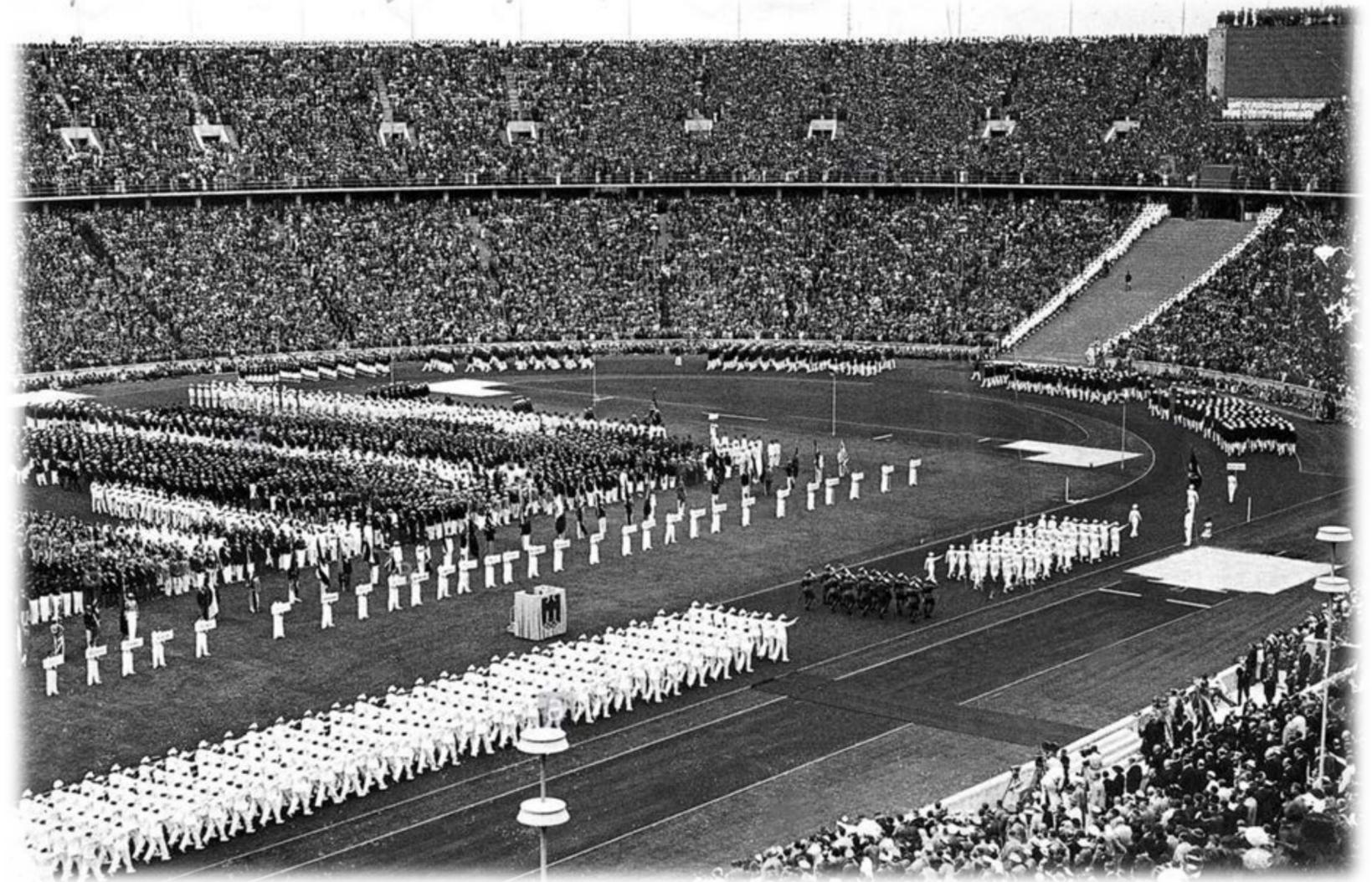
Wrote American sports journalist Grantland Rice, “I never have seen such a demonstration anywhere at any time. The outbreak of national feeling is beyond belief.”

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.



Games Begin & Hitler Greet the Medalists

On the first day, four champions were crowned. The first two events were won by German athletes. After receiving their medals, they 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."



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 Owsn 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.



Jesse Owens and the international press at the 1936 Olympics.

Arthur Daley wrote in the New York Times: “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 Black 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, as the Star Spangled Banner was played, 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 Olympic historians, that's what the three Americans did to honor their country.



American Athletes Heat up the Track

The following day and in 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 drifted to a win in the semifinals. Metcalfe won his heats as well, with a 10.5 sprint.

The other American qualifier was 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. Dutch speedster Tinus Osendarp was another force to reckon with.

Jesse Owens of the United States in a 200-meter preliminary heat at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin.



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 the American high jumpers, Hitler was apparently told by the president of the International Olympic Committee that he either congratulate all medalists or none. Hitler chose to congratulate none, perhaps because he was unwilling to shake the hands of the many athletes of color who were likely to win.

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. In the 100, Owens finished first, Metcalfe finished second and Tinus Osendarp from the Netherlands, described as “the fastest White man,” took 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, sprinted to the tape and won.



July, 1936 on the SS Manhattan, headed for Berlin. Left to right: 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 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.
Lutz Long is behind Owens as the silver medalist.

Do you think Long believed in “Aryan supremacy” after becoming Owens’ friend? Do you think someone who didn’t share Hitler’s beliefs might have still fought in the German army?

Jesse Owens: Victorious



On day five, Owens obtained his third championship in the 200-meter.

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, Jackie Robinson, who in 1947 broke Major League Baseball’s color barrier.

By winning the 200, Owens became the first Olympian to take three gold medals in one Olympics since 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 Berkley, nailed down what seemed to be last gold medal for African American men when he won the 400 meter. 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.

Many of the Olympians highlighted in this lesson went on to be successful in careers other than sports. What lessons can sports teach us that promote success in life?

... and a Stumble

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

Although qualifying to run the 4 x 100 relay, Stokes and Pickett were shunted from competition, replaced by white runners with slower qualifying times. They watched the race, won by their White teammates, from the sidelines.

Pickett later 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 6th 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 Olympic: the 4 x 100 meter 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 Jewish.

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 stated, "It was unjust to leave two athletes off the team just because they were Jewish."

Glickman blamed both Cromwell and Avery Brundage, President of the US Olympic Committee, because he believed they were both "sympathetic to the Nazis." Some have questioned whether Black athletes would be any less problematic for someone who agreed with the Nazi's cause.

Triumphant Performances by American Athletes

Despite his offer not to run, Owens competed. The USA won in a world-record time of 39.8 seconds. 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.

Vocabulary

Nazi

Surreal

Propaganda

Sepia

Martial Law

Aryan

Eugenics

Shunt

Fascist

Turmoil

Boycott

Treaty of Versailles

Chancellor

Führer

Allegiance



Composite of images of Jesse Owens showing sprinting positions from start to full stride.
June 18, 1935. Underwood Archives/Getty Images



WOODSON
CENTER

BLACK *History*
and **EXCELLENCE**