

BLACKTHINK: A BOOK BY

MY LIFE AS A BLACK MAN

AND A WHITE MAN

JESSE OWENS

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How can we forget an athlete like Jesse OWENS. This uncontested black champion of the 1936 Games in Berlin, who must have made a mockery of HITLER's theory of the races and won over the hearts of German youth and the whole world through his remarkable performances and his congenial personality.

As an experienced coach to the U.S. Olympic team for many years, Jesse OWENS has written a book. This is neither a novel nor a biography in the true sense of the word, but more a profession of faith in the power of sport as a solution to personal problems and human contradictions.

His life is a never-ending struggle. He was born in the south of the United States, the son of a cotton plantation worker, a witness to all his father's humiliations. His childhood is one of sheer misery and the little boy must struggle for survival because of a disease of the lungs. His resolute desire for independence and his strong will to stay alive bring him to sport, allowing him to strengthen his frail body and, later, to cope in competition. Thanks to his untiring work, for which he must take time off from his studies, his versatility and his energy do not retard his development. Soon, he numbers among the best of them.



Even becoming a member of the U.S. Olympic team does not bring an end to his suffering from racial prejudices by his compatriots outside his circle of friends. Despite his resounding successes, he must, like all the other black athletes, put up with humiliation after humiliation. However, his personality is strengthened by bad luck. Thanks to his untamable will not to be beaten, he continues to see the positive aspect in everything, whatever the circumstances.

Even after the Berlin Olympic Games, where he was the most prominent athlete, he is humanly duped. His compatriots, who nevertheless joined in his glory, are hardly inclined to offer him work commensurate with his capabilities, despite his successfully-completed studies. He is obliged to 'sell' his sporting performances in order to keep his family of five from dying of starvation. However, he does not lose heart and succeeds in gaining complete material independence. His difficult experiences have made him harsh but he is far from being bitter. Through sport he has gained good friends everywhere. In Berlin, for example, the German Lutz LONG, his most dangerous rival in the long jump, enabled him to qualify and consequently, to be in a position to win his gold medal, by explaining to him the way of avoiding stepping on the line of take-off. Jesse OWENS was deeply struck by this attitude of his rival, who himself, had to be content with the silver medal.

Only the sudden death of Lutz during the War brought an end to this beautiful friendship, which continues however to bind OWENS to Lutz's family. OWENS related this anecdote in 1969 to the International Olympic Academy, where he had accepted my invitation to attend. He spoke of his experiences in a modest and objective way, without adorning or glorifying anything, thus deeply impressing the young speakers from all over the world. Here is a man, who inspires sympathy and who can, with all the humiliations he has had to endure because of his colour, appreciate the good points of sport and impart successfully such a sentiment to the young.


Apart from his pedagogical abilities, OWENS also shows a political acuteness. As a great friend of the late Martin Luther KING, he has the courage to persuade his young black compatriots not to resort to violence without their having to accept injustices. He wants to lead them gradually to recognise the efforts made in the United States during these last 10-20 years for the integration of the minorities and step by step to become the champion of politics.

Similarly in sport, one hears his moderating voice. In Mexico, when his compatriots and coloured brothers had organised a demonstration of Black Power on the top of the victory podium, he had cried to them: *"You have used the wrong battlefield for your demonstration"*.

He carries on with pride and dignity, convinced that violence is not the answer to the problem of the minorities. In his view, this can only be solved by a progressive development of mutual comprehension.

For him, it is not a question of resigning himself to fatality or using discrimination as an excuse. All that counts is the affirmation of his position as a man and a citizen, in everyday as well as professional life. In using his recognised authority, he strives to be an example and to cut out gradually the prejudices against those of his race, in order to smooth the way to equal rights for his friends.

The energetic character of Jesse OWENS, originated through sport, is reflected all through the book, emphasising the grave error of those who profess to the fact that the Olympic Spirit cannot be transposed from the stadium to everyday life and that it has no general pedagogical value.

The book is worth reading, not only by all sportsmen but also by those who are searching for a peaceful solution to the problem of the minorities. 

G. W.

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