

Jesse Owens, sports legend and humanist



What more can be said of the phenomenal sports exploits of James "Jesse" Owens, the humble son of an Alabama sharecropper who felled world records in succession and laid claim to four Olympic gold medals? His accomplishments in the realm of athletics were indeed astonishing—on one remarkable afternoon in May 1935, while competing in a university event in Ann Arbor, Michigan, Jesse Owens equalled or bettered six world records, among them the 100 m, the 200 m., the 4 x 100 m. and the long jump. Many of his marks remained world standards long after he ceased his competitive athletic pursuits. (His long jump record of 8.13 metres, set in Ann Arbor, was to remain intact for 25 years until 1961, when it was broken by Ralph Boston with a leap of 8.21 metres) Most memorable, however, were his victories at the Olympic stadium in Berlin in 1936, including the famous gruelling duel in the long jump event with his German adversary Lutz Long. Jesse Owens's splendid feats and the goodwill they generated among people of all races were the very essence of the Games of the XIth Olympiad.

But Jesse Owens will be remembered as well for his humanist outlook and unceasing efforts for those less fortunate than he. He was the spirit of Olympism embodied. Two values were epitomised most by the man who proved the equal or every opponent save cancer: determination and concern for his fellow citizen. He strove to improve the lot of blacks in his American homeland, sought to overcome the calamitous effects of poverty and, above all, believed in tolerance and understanding. He held the Olympic Games to be the purveyor of these ideals and consistently encouraged young people to take an active part in amateur sport, maintaining that by their very participation they could help overcome the groundless prejudices generated by problems raging in contemporary society.

In many moving addresses, he appealed for the application of the ideals governing activity on the sports field to every other field of human endeavour. *"In order to make dreams into reality, it takes an awful lot of determination, dedication, self-discipline and effort. These things apply to everyday life. You learn not only the sport, but things like respect of others, ethics in life, how you are going to live, how you treat your fellow man, how you live with your fellow man."*

A great athlete and a champion of human dignity has passed away, but his achievements in and outside the stadium will certainly inspire young people the world over to seek and achieve ever-higher goals.

Funeral services were held on 4th April at the Rockefeller memorial chapel at the University of Chicago, following which Jesse Owens lay in state at the Arizona state capital. His remains were subsequently transported to the Griffin Funeral Home in Chicago.