

BERLIN, 1936

by Sven Ekström *



“The Greatest”

Throughout the days spent attending the athletic events in the marvellous stadium at Berlin, none were more impressive than the performances of the miraculous Jesse Owens.

At first I knew very little about this 21 year old student from Ohio. I knew only that he had lined up a sensational series of records during the university championships at Harvard in May 1935. He brushed the world record for the



100 yards in 9.4 seconds, he beat the world record for the 220 yard and 220 yard hurdles in 20.3 seconds and 22.6 seconds respectively. He also improved the long jump record by bringing it to 8,13 m and all this in less than two hours !

One wondered if he would justify his renown in the face of the tough Olympic competition. He held his promise.

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Jesse Owens made such a deep impression on me that I had no difficulty. 43 years later, in describing his exploits in an article published in the “Aftonbladet”, in which the most remarkable feats of the Olympic Games in Berlin were retraced.

Of all the sports champions that I have seen or met throughout the world, in the 45 years of my career as a journalist, I have never admired anyone as much as James Cleveland Owens, the phantom runner, who entered Olympic history by winning four gold medals in the sprint and long jump at Berlin.

What made him so extraordinary was not only the exceptional results (for his time) which he achieved in his chosen disciplines and the way in which he reduced all competition to naught ; his movements were imprinted with an ineffable rhythm and harmony, his whole way of moving was embodied in elegance. He maintained a perfect balance between the pleasure of running and at the same time cold concentration. These were the keys to his greatness.

A Swedish athletic specialist, Mr. Sven Lindhagen, of the newspaper “Idrottsbladet” spoke of Owens in the following terms after he had run a 100 m trial ; “everyone burst out laughing when Jesse Owens had covered a few metres in the 12th and final series. The race seemed ridiculous. One had the impression that he was not running but tiptoeing along ; nonetheless, he left behind his opponents, amongst whom, at the starting line, could be found some of the fastest men in the world.”

“This Owens is extraordinary” continued Mr. Lindgren “he has become the greatest attraction of the Games, the darling of the public, and he has even had the honour of shaking the hand of Hitler”.

“The darling of the public” is perhaps a little exaggerated. However, there was no mistake about the enthusiasm with which the German public greeted the tribute of Jesse Owens

But was it, in reality, an honour to shake the hand of Adolf Hitler ? Obviously not. After the Games, the information media would lay great stress on Hitler's irritation, as a racistist dictator, confronted with the repeated successes of a Black American. Witnesses have sworn that Adolf Hitler not only refused to



Lutz Long and Jesse Owens.

shake the hand of Jesse Owens but even turned his back on him. One of the many examples which I cannot avoid citing appeared in a Swedish newspaper :

"The black Negro from a poor workingclass family in Alabama, approached Hitler, and his dream of an universal Nazi empire".

Taking into account the events in Europe and the world between 1939 and 1945, one might say that the Swedish journalist had on the one hand underestimated Adolf Hitler, and on the other, overestimated Jesse Owens.

After 1936, I had many opportunities to meet Jesse Owens, the celebrated hero of the Berlin Games. The longest interview took place in 1976 in Montreal, at the Olympic Games, which he was attending as a guest of honour.

When I asked him what had been his relations with Adolf Hitler, he gave a wry smile and replied "Often other people, especially those of you in the press boxes, know more than we, the athletes, do. I don't know what the relations with Hitler were during the Games in Berlin. As far as I can remember, he never shook my hand. I was so involved with the competition that I never looked to see if Hitler was present or not in the Olympic stadium..."

The same question was put to him in the English paper "Sportsworld 1975" and the reply was more or less the same : "I didn't go to Berlin to shake Hitler's hand. I went there to compete".

In the course of the same interview, Jesse recalled other memories: "The German I remember best was Lutz Long, my most dangerous opponent in the long jump. As I was concentrating before my last jump, Lutz came towards me and told me I should adjust my marks. I took his advice and carried off the competition thanks to this jump ! Long, who up until this time had been leading the competition, finally took second place. This episode sealed the beginning of our friendship, which lasted a long time through correspondence, until the invasion of Poland by Hitler. Shortly afterwards, I received a message telling me that Lutz Long had died in the war. Afterwards, I kept in touch regularly with his son. One of the finest souvenirs of Berlin has been the friendship of a fellow sportsman who helped me bring back a gold medal, without thinking of himself."

Next I asked him "Did you see the Olympic Games in Berlin as an enormous Nazi propaganda machine ?"

"Not during the Games. As I have already said, for me, the most important things were running and winning. Later, however, I understood that the Games marked the beginning of a German propaganda campaign. Hitler began to dream of the domination of all Europe, cradled by his own illusions, and convinced that it was possible to reign by tyranny."

This time, his remarks were full of pathos.

The last years of his life were very active ; this extraordinary man lived in Phoenix, Arizona, where he ran a prosperous advertising company. He died on 28th March 1980 at the age of 66, the victim of cancer.

Another great celebrity : Kitei Son

The other striking personality of the Games at Berlin, who won my sympathy and admiration, was Kitei Son, the Japanese hero of the marathon.

This 42 km race was the scene of many cruel sights along the final kilometres : runners at



the end of their strength, having lost all sense of time or place, stumbling in an ultimate effort to reach the end before breaking down. Not so for the great Japanese champion however, with his supple, rhythmic style, as he entered the stadium. He did not seem in the least tired after this gigantic effort and ran as though this were the 1500 m.

The Stockholm journalist, Mrs. Hertha Lindström, who became a legendary personality of the Olympic Games, introduced me to Kitei Son during the Games at Munich in 1972. The years had of course left their mark on this old gentleman, but he was nonetheless as slim as ever, and, apparently, in fine physical shape. At his home in Seoul, he ran a souvenir shop. His interest in sport had not faded. He was involved in administration through the Olympic Committee of Korea.

So Kitei Son is in fact Korean. His participation under the Japanese colours at the Olympic Games in 1936 came about simply because Korea was at that time annexed to its great neighbour.

Mrs. Hertha Lindström had already met the victor of the Berlin marathon under rather dramatic circumstances. After the race, she tried to enter the changing rooms of the Japanese team to interview Son. Unhappily, she met the head of the Swedish delegation who showed her to a nearby room and locked her in. After much knocking and shouting, she managed to get out and reach the Japanese changing rooms.

"There", she recounts, "I found Kitei Son lying on a bench, surrounded by officials and friends of the Japanese team. There was no sign of his having just run 42 km. There was no difficulty in interviewing him".

Let me now tell you of an episode which convinced me of the servitude of the German people to their new leaders.

The scene took place in the "Deutschlands-halle", during the final events of the greco-roman wrestling competitions. I found myself somewhere in the crowd watching the Swede, Rudolf Svedberg – who later carried off the gold medal in the welterweight event – grappling with the Finn Nirtanen. Suddenly, Rudolf Hess, Hitler's chosen successor, entered the VIP box, with great pomp and ceremony. The spectators, for the most part Germans, stood up and made the Nazi salute, shouting "Heil Hitler".

I did not remain seated myself either for long. A heavy hand descended on my shoulder and turning round I met the cold blue eyes of my neighbour, a middle-aged man, with shaven head and grey uniform, who whistled at me with an air of indignation "Warum stehen Sie nicht auf ? Sehen Sie nicht wer angekommen ist ?" (Why aren't you standing up ? Can't you see who has just come in ?")

I had no wish to run away, or enter into a discussion. There was only one thing to do – stand up...

S. E.

