

OLYMPIC APOCRYPHA: THE NON-SNUB OF 1936

by Donald Sayenga

Sports anecdotes very often can attain a general credibility even if they lack any factual basis. The Olympic Games are no exception. I suggest we should have a section in *Citius, Altius, Fortius* called “Olympic Apocrypha” to explore these fascinating subjects. As a starter I propose one of the most widespread modern examples is probably believed by millions of people in the United States at this time. It is the supposition that a famous Black American track star, James Cleveland “Jesse” Owens, was deliberately slighted by a powerful German politician, Adolf Hitler, at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games.

On the record, Owens himself denied the snub, while remaining active in the Olympic Movement for many years. Why then do a majority of people in the USA believe that the snub did happen? Why is the snub cited by journalists on a regular basis, most recently relating to the “Butch” Reynolds affair? The answer seems to be derived from a most fascinating case of revisionist history double-whammy.

Obviously, we have revisionists working over the record of Hitler, who, at the time of election to office, was one of the most popular politicians ever to attain public office in Germany. When world events after 1939 proved so horrible and so devastating, the minority view of Hitler became the majority view. Thus, portrayals of Hitler’s behavior as of 1936 have been negatively shaded in hindsight. A snub of Jesse Owens therefore “should have been expected from Hitler” even if it did not happen.

Other revisionists are confronting the “Jim Crow Era” of American cultural history which began around 1890 and continued until Jackie Robinson became active in the 1950’s. The [Leni] Riefenstahl film shows that Owens received overwhelming popular acclaim from the German public in 1936. Such adulation was not readily available to him in the USA. (His achievements were not even reported in many 1936 U.S. newspapers.) Owens is often portrayed in 1993 as an American hero of 1936, although other Black Americans such as John Woodruff continue to be obscure. The racial discrimination Owens suffered from the American public and the 1936 U.S. Olympic team, has been shifted, conveniently, to Hitler personally.

In the current Olympic literature available at most American public libraries, there are four main versions of “what really happened” :

Apocryphal Version Number One

The most commonly believed apocrypha derives from a misinterpretation of the medal ceremonies. Although Hitler, a politician, was Guest of Honor (thus more than a mere spectator) he had no official role to perform in connection with the awards. Version Number One, however, portrays Hitler as a participant in the awards protocol. According to Version Number One, Hitler’s refusal to take part in (or his abrupt departure away from) a medal

ceremony or handshake process at the time when Owens was being honored, is cited as token of the politician's rude personal behavior and abominable racist beliefs.

Typical examples (of many) for reference comparison:

“When Adolf Hitler refused to present him medals he had won in the various competitions, Owen's fame became even more widespread as a result of the publicity.”¹

“In fact, the Führer's famous snub of Owens - he left his seat under the pretense of rain rather than rise for the black American - was only one of his notable departures.”²

Apocryphal Version Number Two

Version Number Two is similar to Version Number One except for a special refinement that one (or two) other Black American(s), not specifically Owens, are identified as the target of Hitler's deliberate rudeness. This version may have been the original source from which all non-snub apocrypha arise. Version Number Two apparently was created and sustained by a single American newspaperman, Arthur J. Daley of *The New York Times*. Several 1936 wireless stories filed by this reporter contain heavy allusions to political conflict and racism at the Games.

According to Version Number Two, the non-snub actually did occur on the first day of the Games but the men snubbed were the Black American high jumpers Cornelius Johnson and David Albritton. These two (who remain relatively unknown in the United States as of 1994) won medals on the opening day of the Games. A few writers striving for accuracy have tended to sustain Version Number Two as their form of supporting the revisionist condemnation of Hitler's role while yet still recognizing that Owens wasn't involved. Some recent writers favoring Version Number Two sometimes imply they are correcting the historical record concerning Version Number One.

Reference examples for comparison:

“HITLER GREETES ALL MEDALISTS EXCEPT AMERICAN, LEAVING BEFORE THEY ARE HONORED . . . Hitler himself witnessed the victories . . . he spent the afternoon watching the Games. He greeted the victors with a warm handclasp and a friendly pat on the back . . . But for politically minded persons there was one rather disquieting incident. 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.”³

“HITLER IGNORES NEGRO MEDALISTS . . . The Führer apparently played no favorites . . . But an investigation was made by some who had taken his departure yesterday as meaning he wished to avoid shaking hands with the Negro high jumpers Cornelius Johnson and David Albritton. This investigation produced information which seemed corroborative.”⁴

¹Harry Plotski and Roscoe Brown, in *The Negro Almanac*, New York, 1967, p. 43.

²Louis Jacobson, *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 August 1992.

³Arthur Daley, *The New York Times*, 3 August 1936, p. 1.

⁴Arthur Daley, *The New York Times*, 4 August 1936, pp. 1, 23.

“Now came the problem. Herr Hitler had received and congratulated the other Olympic victors . . . would the political pontiff of the Nazi creed . . . grasp the hand of a Negro who had just demonstrated . . . his superiority over the whites of the world? Newspaper writers from many nations kept their eyes glued on Der Führer’s box. There was a sudden hustle and bustle down there. Herr Hitler was leaving the stadium in haste. The official explanation was that it was very late in the day and it looked like rain. Down on the field, crowned with the Olympic wreath of victory, the black-skinned Corny Johnson saw the hurried departure - and grinned. Thus the first day of track & field competition was brought to a close.”⁵

“In a sudden commotion, the Führer abruptly left the stadium; no one doubted he did so to avoid honoring the black men . . .”⁶

“There is a famous myth that after Jesse won the 100 meters in Berlin he was snubbed by Adolf Hitler, who refused to meet Owens after he had personally congratulated three earlier gold medal winners. Actually, if such a snub did occur, the recipient was not Jesse Owens, but Cornelius Johnson and David Albritton . . .”⁷

Apocryphal Version Number Three

According to Version Number Three, which appears to be a version promulgated mainly by Avery Brundage, Hitler was unavoidably rude to a number of non-German athletes, not merely to Owens or other Black Americans. The non-snob arose because he was attempting to upstage the Olympic awards process as part of his large-scale propaganda campaign involving a “photo-opportunity” to link champion athletes with the German head of state.

In one of the first events on the first day of the Games, a German woman named Tilly Fleischer broke the Olympic javelin record. After receiving her award she was escorted off the field into the spectator seats where Hitler was photographed congratulating her. He next greeted several other German medalists in the same way, and also the Finns who triumphed in the 10,000 metre run. The Berlin stadium was not fully illuminated, so when darkness came, Hitler departed before the evening events were concluded.

The Hitler “photo opportunity” ritual was discontinued after the first day, without any public explanation. Apocryphal Version Number Three purports to accurately portray Hitler’s political opportunism, by claiming that Hitler departed from the stadium during impending darkness on the first day or inclement weather on other days and actually was not present to “snub” anyone. More recent accounts of Version Number Three also include an elaborate background story, explaining that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) intervened, off the record, to prevent continuation of Hitler’s “photo-opportunities” after the first day.⁸

⁵John Kieran and Arthur J. Daley, *The Story of the Olympic Games*. 5th Revised Edition. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1965. p. 162.

⁶Karolyn Ide, *American Heritage*, 2 August 1986, p. 109.

⁷David Wallechinsky, *The Complete Book of the Olympics*, New York: Penguin Books, 1984. p. 7.

⁸See the accompanying article by Karl Lennartz concerning the intervention of the IOC in this issue of *Citius, Altius, Fortius*.

Examples for reference:

“Chancellor Hitler attended the afternoon program and personally congratulated most winners. He was photographed with the German girl javelin champion, while the crowd roared, but Der Führer left before the ‘ceremonie Olympique protocolaire’ which saw two American Negroes, Johnson and Albritton, lead the high jumping sweep . . . ”⁹

“Reichsführer Adolph Hitler was driven from his official box by a heavy downpour just after Owens flashed across the finish line for his third triumph [200 metres] and wasn’t among the thousands of die-hards who remained and thundered acclaim when the Negro stepped up for the third time to be crowned.”¹⁰

“By the time the German entrants in the high jump were eliminated it was dark, and so he [Hitler] was not there to shake hands with the three American winners, two of whom were black. This led the President of the International Olympic Committee to inform the Führer that, as guest of honor, he should henceforth congratulate all victors or none. Hitler chose the latter course and so did not meet Jesse Owens, who won four gold medals.”¹¹

“At the summer games, Baillet-Latour intervened dramatically in a frequently misreported and misunderstood incident. In legend, the incident concerned Jesse Owens. It is alleged that Hitler refused to offer Owens his hand after the first of his four track & field victories. In actuality, Hitler never had a chance to congratulate Owens . . . Baillet-Latour was furious . . . and complained the next day to [Karl Ritter] von Halt [President of the Berlin Organizing Committee] and was accompanied by him to call upon Hitler, whom the Belgian then scolded for this infraction of Olympic protocol. Hitler excused himself and subsequently greeted German victors in private.”¹²

Apocryphal Version Number Four

This version is a subtle modification of Version Number Three which relies on German sources not readily available to American historians. Version Number Four includes the notion that Hitler fully intended to make an attempt to shake hands with all victors and medalists to upstage the Olympic awards process. According to Version Number Four, however, he personally balked in private when his advisors told him the plan would include Black American winners. The subtle implication of Version Number Four is that the non-snob would have occurred if an opportunity had been allowed.

⁹Reports of August 1936 by Associated Press Sports Editor Alan Gould. Published in several similar forms in many United States’ newspapers.

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¹¹John Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 1976. p. 393. Also see the accompanying article in this issue of *Citius, Altius, Fortius* by Karl Lennartz which discusses the actual text of the statement issued concerning this fact.

¹²Allen Guttman, *The Games Must Go On*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984. p. 78. Guttman cites *Bulletin du CIO*, Nos. 37 and 51 as his sources for this version.

Examples for reference:

“When Shirach suggested . . . Hitler . . . be photographed with . . . Owens, the Führer blew up and screamed . . .”¹³

“Hitler pflegte Siegern in seiner Loge mit Handescutteln zu gratulieren. Doch Owens war ein Farbiger, und Hitler weigerte sich, ihn zu beglückwünschen. ‘Ich lasse mich nicht fotografieren,’ sagte er, ‘wenn ich einem Neger die Hand gebe.’”¹⁴

¹³Richard Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics*, New York: Macmillan, 1971. p. 236. Mandell cites Baldur Von Shirach, *Ich Glaubte An Hitler*, Hamburg: 1967, pp. 217-218, as his source,

¹⁴Jochen von Lang, *Der Hitler Junge*, p. 206.