

Book Reviews

Baker, William J. *Jesse Owens: An American Life*. N.Y.: The Free Press, 1986. Pp. xii, 289. Illustrated. \$19.95

Historians these days are not likely to pay much attention to Hippolyte Taine's advice that we concentrate on *milieu, moment, race*, but these words do come to mind when one reads Baker's biography of Jesse Owens. Berlin, 1936. On the cinder track of the Olympic stadium, a twenty-three-year-old black American runner crouches in anticipation of Herr Franz Miller's starting gun. In the stands, Adolf Hitler and a hundred thousand German spectators watch intently. Miller fires, Owens sprints, Hitler winces. It was a moment when the ritualized drama of the Olympic Games was intensified by the symbolic confrontation of opposed ideologies. And the "moment" lasted for days as Owens followed his 100-meter triumph with victories in the 200-meter dash, the long-jump, and the 400-meter relay. Leni Riefenstahl's fabulous documentary film, *Of Olympia*, which the French appropriately entitled *Les Dieux du stade*, imprints on the mind images of Jesse Owens, Adolf Hitler, the beflagged stadium, the impassioned spectators. Baker's dramatic biography helps us to understand what happened in Berlin—and a great deal more besides. It is characteristic of Baker's narrative skill that he turns briefly from Jesse Owens in order to discuss the fights between Joe Louis and Max Schmeling. I, frankly, had never stopped to realize that the 1936 Olympics came after Schmeling's unexpected victory and before Louis's revenge, which meant that Owens's feats were especially satisfying to all black and to many white Americans. Ironically, given the degree of concern over Hitler's anti-Semitism, the only Jews on the American track team were dropped from the 400-meter relay by coach Dean Cromwell of the University of Southern California; he replaced Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller with two runners from his own university, one of whom both Jews had beaten in what was supposed to have been the final race of the selection process. The "Nazi Olympics," were not short on drama.

The first half of the book builds gradually to the climax at Berlin. Since Owens was a hopelessly unreliable source about his own early life, Baker went to work and dug up the facts. Working chiefly with interviews and, once Owens became a public person, with the black press, Baker tells how the son of a barely literate sharecropper moved with his family from rural Alabama to Cleveland and how he was "adopted" by Fairmount Junior High School coach Charles Riley (who seems to have stepped directly out of Boys' Town), recruited by Ohio State (which was then a hotbed of racism), and groomed by track coach Larry Snyder for the 1936 Olympics. The Owens who sailed for Bremerhaven on the *S. S. Manhattan* was not exactly an unknown. On May 25, 1935, at the Big Ten

Championships at Ann Arbor, Owens had in a single hour set three world records and tied a fourth. But, then as now, most Americans were mesmerized by ballgames and prize fights and gave only momentary notice to track and field. The “Nazi Olympics,” however, were special; preceded by a long and hard-fought boycott campaign, they attracted just about everyone’s attention. And they immortalized Owens. Hitler did not refuse to shake Owens’s hand, but Baker understands the power of myth and astutely likens the moment that never happened to George Washington’s unchopped cherry tree and the log cabins that Abraham Lincoln never lived in. (Baker also questions the story that Owens’s German rival, Luz Long, gave Owens the tip that enabled him to win the long-jump. I regret the loss of this legendary moment of fair play.)

The challenge to the biographer was what to make of the *rest* of Owens’s life. The climax came in 1936; the man lived to 1980. In fact, the second half of the book justifies Baker’s subtitle: an American life. A quarrel with the AAU over the post-Olympics track-and-field tour ended in Owens’s disbarment, but the athlete’s troubles were partly of his own making. Owens had never studied seriously while a student and never earned a BA degree. After the Olympics, he was dazzled by Bill “Bojangles” Robinson and others who tantalized him with visions of big money in the entertainment world. As a campaigner for the hapless Alf Landon, Owens did briefly earn big money, but he was also a big spender and a poor planner. Much of Baker’s book is a tragicomic account of repeated business failures. In the 1950’s, Owens’s patriotism and commitment to individual initiative as the key to success seemed appropriate to the times. The State Department sent him abroad as a “good will ambassador” (while J. Edgar Hoover, an intellectual midget if ever there was one, investigated him for subversive activities). In 1960 Owens campaigned for Richard Nixon. Eventually, a contract with ARCO guaranteed him (and his widow) a good income. In the 1960s, his inability to understand institutional racism and the anger of young blacks made him, in their eyes, an Uncle Tom. The low point in his “American life” probably came in 1968 when he clashed with Harry Edwards and other black athletes over the proposed boycott and actual protests of the 1968 Olympics. The storm blew over, but Owens played a similarly pathetic role in 1972. Official honors came in the last years, but Baker reminds us that the monument erected in Owens’s birthplace, Oakville, Alabama, was vandalized before it was a day old. It was, indeed, a very American life.

If my comments on Baker’s biography seem uncritical, it is because there is very little to criticize. In my opinion, Baker has overcome the problem of what to do with the humdrum decades after the great athlete’s great moment. Inevitably, there are unimportant errors. If Owens set a world record in the 220-yard dash in 1933 (p. 32), how could the record he set in 1935 have replaced a mark unbroken since 1924 (p. 50)? It was not Nazi policy before 1936 to bar Jews from German sports clubs; as Hajo Bernett shows in *Der juedische Sport im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland* (1978), the leaders of private sports organizations voluntarily expelled Jewish members in 1933 in an attempt to curry favor with a government that was, ironically, trying to persuade the

International Olympic Committee that it was *not* curtailing the chances of Jewish athletes. Avery Brundage was born in Detroit, not Chicago, and he became president of the IOC in 1952, not 1949. Other historians will doubtless detect other minor errors. No matter. Jesse *Owens* is a fine biography. It may be good enough to distract a few Americans from their obsessive focus on the Super Bowl.

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