

# *Black Gold: The Effects of the 1936 Olympics on American Racism*

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Black athletes and their visible role in the 1936 Olympics filled three needs in American society. First, Black Olympic medalists symbolized the victory of American democracy in the larger struggle against fascism in the 1930s. Second, the success of Black Olympians like Jesse Owens eased White guilt about the pervasive racism in America. Third, the visible presence of Blacks on the Olympic team forced the issues of segregation, civil rights, and equality in America under the glare of public scrutiny. These dynamics were functioning simultaneously and did not necessarily apply to all Americans.

The Berlin Games occurred in a period when American racial discrimination was being challenged in the most significant ways since Reconstruction. However, the Depression era also witnessed a rise in discrimination and racial violence. Against this backdrop of racial change, Black athletes participated and won medals at an unprecedented level in 1936.

The role of Blacks as champions of American democracy was based on their participation in international competition, particularly against Germans. There was a great irony in using Blacks to represent the power of democracy because they were concurrently the victims of America's most undemocratic institution, Jim Crow.

However, American desires to discredit Hitlerism and its premise of Aryan supremacy forced American Whites to challenge their own ideas about race and celebrate the success of Blacks like Jesse Owens and Cornelius Johnson. When the 1936 presidential elections approached and both major political parties actively sought the Black vote for the first time in over fifty years, it was no coincidence that each party wanted Jesse Owens to campaign for them. No Black public figure from the arts or politics or any other field could fill the role like a man who had "defeated Hitler."

The easing of White guilt was the second major dynamic operating in the celebration of Black Olympians. Although most Whites did not actually practice lynching, they did need to ameliorate their own guilt about such racially driven crimes. Unable or unwilling to enact widespread civil rights reform in the 1930s, Whites could look to a Black man like Jesse Owens and reconcile their own conflicted feelings as well as deflect international criticism of American racism.

The 1936 Olympics provided a vehicle for Black Americans and the issue of civil rights to enter public life in ways that were both unprecedented and unavailable in any other context. Stories of Nazi anti-Semitism sparked a large boycott movement and debate in the United States. The debate was reflected in the mainstream White and Black newspapers and almost always addressed the paradox of challenging anti-Semitic exclusion abroad but not racism at home. The success of Black medalists in Berlin also provided a steady stream of positive publicity and beneficent news coverage of Black people generally. Lastly, the Games produced a new cohort of nationally recognized Black "heroes" at the exact historical moment when American society needed them for its initial movement toward overturning racial discrimination.

This paper relies on a variety of primary sources from archival collections and contemporary newspapers. It uses Hearst newsreel coverage of Black Olympians and the Jesse Owens papers in the manuscript division of the Ohio State University Archives, the NAACP papers at the Library of Congress, and the papers of Charles H. Houston, Robert L Vann, and Art Carter at the Moorland Spingarn Research Center of Howard University. It emphasizes the language used to cover the success of Black Olympians in both the mainstream and Black presses. Black press coverage is also examined, including relevant issues of the *Chicago Defender*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *New York Amsterdam News*, *Cleveland Gazette*, and the *Baltimore Afro-American*. The mainstream press will include a geographic diversity from the *New York Times* to *San Francisco Chronicle*.