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Saga Of Jesse Owens

A heartening thing comes to our disturbed times this week. James Cleveland Owens, at the Berlin Olympics, is putting on the same one-man track show he originated on cinder paths here. He now holds or shares world records for three events, and Paavo Nurmi's is the only name in the history of modern athletics they can find to toss in with his.

This slender Cleveland Negro youth with the tiny ankles, long legs, and light chocolate skin becomes a character for the whole world's wonderment, six brief years from the days when he raced on E. 107th Street in tennis shoes. Reichsfuehrer Hitler salutes him with an arm wave and a smile for beating the Nordic heroes. In Rome, the Scandinavian countries, Cairo, the planters' clubs in Oriental jungles, Australia, everywhere the cables go, men and women who follow the sport climax (and how few do not!) are reading about, talking about trying to visualize Jesse Owens. His victories must be a comfort to poor Haile Selassie in exile. It is conceivable that Il Duce, Edward VIII, Stalin, Emperor Hirohito, President Roosevelt, Governor Landon, J. P. Morgan and even Anthony Eden must have noticed these last few days, the name and performances of Jesse Owens; possibly sighed for their own youth-times and wondered what life would have been like had they been able to run a 10.2s 100-meter dash.

Owens' fame is Cleveland's fame, in a year when Cleveland is having good advertisements of its achievements. And to have produced such an athlete is a fine reputation for a city.

Born on an Alabama farm, one of eight children, to sharecropper parents. Raised in the abject poverty of southern tenant agriculture, the Owens family migrated to Cleveland in the industrial trek of the war years and James Cleveland became one of the thousands of colored children living in the congested East Side. In time he reached Fairmount Junior High School, where teaches Charles Riley, one-time athlete and volunteer coach of schoolboy runners. It was a piece of luck for James—by now called Jesse from having given his name in school as "J. C."—to know Teacher Riley, for most junior highs have limited athletic activities.

Building a boys' track team, Riley met Jesse, timed him in a sprint down E. 107th, was startled, and immediately dedicated himself to hunting that coaches' will-o-the-wisp, the perfect sprinter. Riley learned all about the boy, took him under his wing, walked with him in the parks, talked to him about things far more important than racing; about life, perfection, 100 per cent mental as well as physical fitness. On some days

after school, training was merely a lecture in terms understood by a bright boy, on philosophy. So Jesse came to not only a great but an understanding track athlete. He was passed along to a high school coach with experience and feeling similar to Riley Ed Weil of East Tech, and when he was ready for college Ohio State's staff was primed and eager for him.

The Owens are colored, so they do not have quite an even chance in this civilization. They returned to poverty in the depression years and know what it is to go hungry. Jesse told in Berlin this week how on some days his family lived on carp caught by neighbours. The Owens are good people, churchgoers, good citizens unafraid of hard work. Jesse's mother is better than an average student of the Bible and trusts God completely. She and her husband have dignity and sensitiveness which no poverty, no bitter blows by life can overcome. They raised a son who not only could be a great athlete, but could also remain modest about it to the point of embarrassment.

So this week you saw a fine debt being repaid. The sharecropper's boy owes something to nature and a great deal to his father and mother. He owes something to a city which gave him Charles Riley, school teacher, a city which stands for giving a chance to every boy who will work and train. He owes something to Ohio State University's tradition of giving opportunity to merit, and to the taxpayers of a state proud of its university. He owes something devout to America. In what other country would this saga of Jesse Owens come true? And now in a week of astounding physical performance and courage before the eyes of the world, Jesse Owens is paying much of these debts—not the least by remaining the gentle, modest happy boy Cleveland knows. An American Negro youth ventures onto the stage occupied prominently by a Nazi dictator and steals the spotlight from him for a little while. The bright glow of romance hovers over such a feat.

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The strength on an Ox
The tenacity of a bull dog
The daring of a lion
The patience of a donkey
The industry of a beaver
The versatility of a chameleon
The vision of an eagle
The meekness of a lamb
The disposition of an angel
The resignation of and incurable
The loyalty of an apostle
The heroism of a martyr
The faithfulness of a prophet
The tenderness of a shepherd
The fervency of an evangel
The devotion of a mother.