

# The World of Black Athletes: Money, Race, & Critical Thinking



Which famous athlete is credited with integrating sports yet found it difficult to make a living because of racism?

1. Muhammad Ali
2. Satchel Page
3. Frank Robinson
4. Jesse Owens
5. None of the Above

The answer is at the end of this post.

## **Jesse Owens: A Biography Part 1**

Why would an American athlete, winner of four gold medals who had gained the adoration of a coliseum full of German people decide to open a dry-cleaning establishment at the height of

his career? To many outsiders, it might seem a puzzling choice.

Imagine if you can, Olympic icons Michael Phelps or Shaun White after winning their first gold medals deciding to open a business that would essentially put the athletes behind a desk.

Winning the gold at the Olympics leads to lucrative contracts for athletes. But not so in the 1930s U.S. for an African American. And it would take 40 years before Jesse Owens would be awarded his due.

When KQED PBS recently rebroadcast the story of Olympic legend Jesse Owens, I wondered how the decision to start up a dry-cleaning establishment was reached. Entrepreneurship is one path that some athletes take but why that venture was chosen was not explained and I wanted to know more.

Maybe he had taken over a family business, I mused because operating a cleaning establishment did not appear to be a good fit for the personality and level of activity enjoyed by the athlete profiled. I began searching online and found *Jesse Owens: A Biography* on Google Books authored by Jacqueline Edmondson. And I found an explanation about the origin of the start-up, which not only had a ring of truth but, unfortunately, is one of the ways ill-conceived ideas are chosen.

Approached by others with the idea, the plan was to capitalize on the success at the Olympics by starting a chain of dry-cleaning stores using the famous athlete's name. An idea that did not work out well, to say the least (Edmondson).

## **Part 2**

With a family to support, Mr. Owens hoped to take advantage of endorsements that had initially flooded in after his wins, and he had returned to the U.S. declining to participate in further Olympic Games, a move that angered officials and

resulted in a sanction (American Experience).

But according to the Jesse Owens Foundation, some of the information reported in American Experience surrounding the circumstances that led to the USOC sanction and Mr. Owens' loss of his amateur standing were inaccurate. First, after 1936, there were no games until 1948. So, Jesse Owens did not refuse to return to another Olympic game.

It was with the support of his coach in 1936 that the athlete, exhausted and homesick decided to return home and not continue a European Exhibition tour. A decision that angered Olympic president, Avery Brundage. Jesse Owens was stripped of his amateur athletic standing, If there had been an Olympic game in the 1940s, Owens would not have been allowed to participate.

That racism played a role in the lack of employment opportunities for Mr. Owens after the Olympics was not only discussed in the PBS special The American Experience but is outlined in Jacqueline Edmondson's well-documented biography. Owens experienced racism his entire life.

As a college student, the athlete was not allowed to live on campus; he received no scholarships and was not allowed to eat with his teammates when they traveled.

And he did not receive the same level of nutrition as his teammates during training at Ohio State University, a circumstance that likely contributed to undernourishment. His coach would have him come to his home for Sunday dinners (Edmondson).

And it is debatable whether Owens violated his Olympic contract, which was the explanation offered for the AAU's sanction after his multi-medal wins, states Edmondson, a vice-president and associate dean at Penn State and the author of several biographies on famous sports and music figures.

Debates occurred then, as they do now, over what an "amateur"

athlete is. Mr. Owens gradually discovered that lucrative endorsements were not forthcoming...unable to return to The Ohio State University (Edmondson), he took work wherever he could find positions.

Documented economic realities confronted the gold medal winner in the 1930s and in the years that followed. But search Google Books further and you will find a second book on the athlete's life with a somewhat ironic subtitle ...*Revised Edition* and with a different point of view.

For instance, to paraphrase, the author states that Jesse Owens had plenty of money, but poor spending habits caused much of his financial struggles... Glancing through the book, published by a sports publisher, questionable content is apparent. And the content is contrary to the PBS special, or Jacqueline Edmondson's biography.

### **Now I extended the why's further**

Did the author of the sports bio fail to fact check?

Or did bias override critical thinking practices?

Could an argument be made that the statements in the sports bio illustrate what U.C. Berkeley, Professor David Wellman has defined as subtle racism and the unwillingness of many to acknowledge the historical nature of the issue?

Perhaps best summarized in the textbook *Psychology & the Law*

"Some researchers say...barriers for minorities have lessened visibly, but are no less substantial..."

Ironically, the issue affects people of all races. Understanding that history reflects past and present trends, behaviors, and attitudes in society, and the cultural experiences of all people are key. Distorting personal histories or facts hinders the ability to gain an accurate view of society.

**Which critical thinking steps will you take to fact-check information from seemingly factual accounts?**

# References

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Answer: 4

Jesse Owens