

# Race: Jesse Owens and the 1936 Berlin Olympics

By Alan Gilman and David Walsh  
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*Directed by Stephen Hopkins; written by Joe Shrapnel, Anna Waterhouse*

*Race* chronicles the storied athletic career of Jesse Owens, which culminated in his four gold medal performance at the 1936 Nazi-sponsored Berlin Olympics.

Directed by Stephen Hopkins, the film begins in 1933 with a young Owens (Stephan James) arriving at Ohio State University to run track. Owens is immediately confronted with racial bigotry, particularly from members of the all-white football team.

His track coach, Larry Snyder (Jason Sudeikis), recognizes Owens as an extraordinary talent. Snyder impresses on the youthful athlete that if he demonstrates single-minded, fanatical focus he will be unstoppable, not only on the college level, but also at the 1936 Olympic Games to be held in Berlin.

Owens follows Snyder's advice, despite the pressures of fatherhood (he has a baby daughter with his girlfriend, Ruth Solomon (Shanice Branton)). He quickly becomes a top collegiate track athlete, and in 1935 at a meet in Ann Arbor, Michigan performs the astonishing feat of breaking three world records (long jump, 220-yard dash and 220 low hurdles) and tying a fourth (100-yard dash) in 45 minutes. This is widely considered one of the greatest single-day performances in athletic history.

Meanwhile, a campaign is underway within the American Olympic Committee, led by Judge Jeremiah Mahoney (William Hurt), to boycott the Berlin Games because of Nazi racism and anti-Semitism.

Avery Brundage (Jeremy Irons), a builder and real estate developer, and future International Olympic Committee president, leads the anti-boycott forces. Brundage shrugs off Germany's anti-Semitic and racial issues, "It's not our place to tell a sovereign nation what to do, and besides, when was the last time any of you nay-voters socialized with a Jew or a Negro?"

To help resolve this dispute Brundage agrees to embark on a fact-finding mission to Germany and meets with Joseph Goebbels (Barnaby Metschurat), the Nazi propaganda minister, who "promises" the Germans will not discriminate against any athlete, including Jews. With this agreement in hand, Brundage is able to defeat the boycott forces by a vote of 58 to 56.

Later, during the Olympics, when the Germans break their promise not to discriminate, Goebbels quickly puts an end to Brundage's feeble protests by threatening to expose a commercial agreement—essentially a bribe—the two parties have entered into.

Other groups, including the NAACP, continue to support

boycotting the Olympics, and place pressure on Owens. Ultimately, with the support of his family, he decides to go to the 1936 Games.

In Berlin, Owens is surprised to find that within the Olympic Village the American athletes are housed in integrated housing, something that never occurred in the US. Outside the Olympic venue, however, we see scenes of Jews being beaten and rounded up by the Nazis.

Owens proceeds to win four gold medals, in the 100-meter dash, 200-meter race, long jump and 400-meter relay. He is the most successful, and wildly popular, athlete at the Games and is credited with having delivered a devastating blow to the Nazi myth of "Aryan supremacy."

In one of the more poignant scenes in the film, German long jumper Carl "Luz" Long (David Cross), the European champion, befriends Owens. After Owens fouls on the first two of his three attempts to qualify for the long jump, Long marks a spot several inches in front of the takeoff board, pointing out to Owens that if he takes off from there he will still jump far enough to qualify. Owens does just that and then goes on to defeat Long, who wins the silver medal.

Long is the first to congratulate Owens after the event, shaking his hand. The pair pose for photos and run a victory lap together.

That evening Long explains to Owens that he detests the Nazis for what they are doing and that many other Germans feel the same. At the end of *Race* there is an acknowledgement that Owens and Long continued their friendship for several more years and that the German athlete was killed in Sicily during World War II.

Owens' last race is the 4 x 100 relay, an event that he has not trained for and is not scheduled to run. He participates because the team's only two Jewish athletes, Marty Glickman (Jeremy Ferdman) and Sam Stoller (Giacomo Gianniotti), are benched at the last minute, on the demand of the German authorities. (Glickman went on to become one of the most prominent and talented American sportscasters in the postwar period, the voice of several New York sports teams, only retiring in 1992.)

As the film ends, a title notes that Owens was never invited to the White House or congratulated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

There are some valuable elements and moving moments in *Race*. The story of Owens' accomplishments, in the face of considerable odds, inevitably touches on some significant historical questions.

Jesse Owens was the youngest of 10 children born to Mary

Emma Fitzgerald and Henry Cleveland Owens, a sharecropper, in Oakville, Alabama. His impoverished family took part in the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the Northeast, Midwest and West, moving to Cleveland's east side in the early 1920s. Owens' father and older brother worked in steel mills, the former only irregularly.

As the result of his athletic prowess, Owens stumbled onto the stage of world politics in the 1930s. The opposition of Avery Brundage, head of the Olympic movement in the US, to a boycott of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, held under the aegis of the Nazi regime, had a significant ideological and political content.

Historian Carolyn Marvin explains that the foundation of Brundage's world outlook "was the proposition that Communism was an evil before which all other evils were insignificant." His other views or beliefs included "admiration for Hitler's apparent restoration of prosperity and order to Germany," the conception "that those who did not work for a living in the United States were an anarchic human tide, and a suspicious anti-Semitism which feared the dissolution of Anglo-Protestant culture in a sea of ethnic aspirations." Brundage described opposition to American participation in Berlin as a "Jewish-Communist conspiracy."

The vile machinations of the Hitler regime in regard to the Olympics are also part of the historical record. The leading Nazi newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, editorialized in the strongest terms that no Jews or blacks from any country should be permitted to compete. Faced with the possibility of an international boycott, however, the Nazi government relented, even adding one token participant, a female fencer with a Jewish father, to the German team.

The fascist regime also temporarily took down signs denouncing Jews from areas of Berlin where visitors were likely to see them. The German Ministry of the Interior instructed the city's police to round up all Romani as part of a "clean up" and place them in a concentration camp. Pro-Nazi director Leni Riefenstahl was in charge of filming the Olympics (she is portrayed ambiguously in *Race* by Carice van Houten), and produced her grandiose two-part documentary, *Olympia* (1938).

Racism and the Depression in the US, fascism and anti-communism, the run-up to the Second World War ... big issues all of them.

Hopkins' *Race* refers directly to a few of these questions, hints at others and merely side-steps another category.

The film suffers from a generally formulaic approach. James and Branton as Jesse Owens and Ruth Solomon are given little dramatic room to breathe. Their conventional, roller-coaster relationship does not shed much light on their personalities or the nature of the times. Nor does Owens' affair with a woman he meets on the road as a now-famous athlete or his relations with his coach help out much. There is something hagiographic about the presentation of Owens in particular, although certain of his failings come in for treatment.

The general dramatic arc of *Race* is predictable—initial difficulties, first successes, crisis and failure, final triumph. Even if the viewer did not know ahead of time how Owens would ultimately fare in Berlin, he or she would have little difficulty in seeing what was coming.

Sudeikis is more impressive as Snyder. The actor-comic has performed amusingly in a number of works, but smugness (for example, in the *Horrible Bosses* films) has threatened to sabotage his efforts. Here he is relatively convincing as Owens' hard-driven, but fair-minded coach. Irons is always on the mark, although the portrayal of Brundage is not as devastating as it might have been. Kross (*The Reader*) is memorable as Luz Long, as is Metschurat as the menacing, monstrous Goebbels and Andrew Moodie, in a small part, as Owens' long-suffering father.

To its credit, the film is not laced with identity politics, but a more "old fashioned" liberal humanism. *Race*, despite its title, preaches a sort of solidarity of Jews, blacks and anti-Nazi Germans against Hitler and pro-fascist Americans.

There are distinct limitations to this approach. Hopkins' presentation of various racist and anti-Semitic incidents, although moving, is largely devoid of any historical content or deeper understanding of the social forces involved.

The weakest aspect of *Race* is its attitude to the various questions of political or moral principle that arise: the first involves US participation or boycott of the Berlin Olympics; the second, Owens' decision to go or stay home; and, finally, the exclusion of the Jewish athletes from the relay race and the response of the rest of the American Olympic team.

In each case, Hopkins and screenwriters Joe Shrapnel and Anna Waterhouse create justifications for the various, often self-serving decisions taken by the characters, thus allowing the narrative to move forward toward its inexorable conclusion. There is something pragmatic and rather unprincipled about this: Owens in particular always emerges morally unscathed from the sordid goings-on.

There is no need for that. A more profound and historically insightful film than *Race* would have found a truthful way to deal with the contradictions and concrete social obstacles that reality, not mythology, presents.

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