

## Jesse Owens



## Getting started

In pairs. What do you know about the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the black athlete Jesse Owens?

What is 'fair play'? What examples from sport can you think of?

## Reading

- 1 6.10 Listen and read *Background* and the text: *Jesse Owens and the 1936 Berlin Olympics*. Did Jesse Owens's life improve after the Olympics in 1936?

## Background

Adolf Hitler became the leader of Germany three years before the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The Nazi Party wanted to prove that Germans were part of a 'master race', superior to all other peoples of the world. Germany's athletics superstar was Lutz Langer, an example of the blonde-haired, blue-eyed stereotype of the German race. The most famous athlete at the games was the USA's Jesse Owens, an African American. Hitler thought that black people were 'subhuman', and was horrified that the USA had black athletes in its team. The 1936 Berlin Olympics was not just about races, but also about race.

- 2 Find six words you don't know in *Background* and the text, and guess their meaning. Check in the Glossary (pp.328–338).

- 3 Read *Background* and the text again. Answer the questions.

- 1 Why did the Nazis think Lutz Langer was the perfect example of a German athlete?
- 2 Why was Hitler horrified that the USA had black athletes in its Olympic team?
- 3 What are the two meanings of the word *race*?
- 4 What do these dates and numbers refer to: seven, 200, 25, 1976, 40?
- 5 How did people treat Owens in Berlin during the Olympics?
- 6 How did Owens help the company Adidas?
- 7 What did Owens do to make money after the Olympics?
- 8 What recognition did Owens get from the American government?

## FACT FILE

**Name:** Jesse Owens (James Cleveland Owens)

**Dates:** 1913–1980

**Nationality:** American

**Job:** athlete

**Known for:** success at 1936 Berlin Olympics

## JESSE OWENS AND THE 1936 BERLIN OLYMPICS

James Cleveland Owens was the youngest of ten children, born to a poor family in Alabama, USA. He often had bronchitis and pneumonia as a child, but like all black children in Alabama then, he went to work in the cotton fields aged seven.

When he was nine he moved to Cleveland, Ohio and started school. He told his teacher his name was 'J.C.Owens', but the teacher heard 'Jesse', and everyone called him this.

Owens was a successful athlete at school and university, and broke three world records at a university athletics event. At the Berlin Olympics he won four gold medals. He won the 100 metres, 200 metres and 400 metres relay. He also won the long jump. Owens's 1935 world record in the long jump lasted for 25 years, and few athletes have ever jumped further.

During the Berlin Olympics, Owens stayed in the same hotels as all the other white athletes. This was something he couldn't do at home. He was a very popular athlete. The German people enjoyed Jesse's performance

and a German long jumper's advice helped him to win. Another Adolf – 'Adi' Dassler – asked Jesse to wear the running shoes his company made. Jesse's success helped Adi's business, which later became the famous company 'Adidas'.

But after the Olympics, when Owens went back home, he had difficulty finding work. He raced against cars, dogs and horses to earn money. Owens was angry at the reactions of people in the USA to a black athlete's success. President Roosevelt didn't meet Owens and congratulate him, as was normal with Olympic champions. Owens said, 'When I came back to my native country, after all the stories about Hitler, I couldn't ride in the front of the bus. I couldn't live where I wanted.'

The American government recognised him later in life, and he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1976. It was 40 years after the Berlin Olympics.

“ We all have dreams, but in order to make dreams come into reality, it takes an awful lot of determination, dedication, self-discipline and effort. ”

