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**Ústav cizích jazyků**

**Jesse Owens and his role in the racially  
segregated sport**

Bakalářská práce

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Prohlašuji, že jsem závěrečnou práci vypracoval samostatně a za použití pouze uvedených pramenů a literatury.

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## **Abstract**

This bachelor thesis deals with the topic of racism in the US sport. Its main focus is the life of Jesse Owens. His life experience, failures, and success are used for a better understanding of the life of an Afro-American athlete in the US and Afro-Americans in the US in general. The thesis will be divided into five main parts – History of racism in US sport, Growing up in the South, Living in the North, 1936 Olympics, and Life after the Olympics. The main objective of the thesis is to show the Afro-American struggles in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century from a point of a famous athlete. It also explores whether Jesse Owens's successes brought any advantages to the US Afro-American community or himself.

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## Introduction

How often does racism occur in the United States and on what scale does it include the Afro-American athletes? The atmosphere surrounding these questions has always been tense and the tension only rises as we learn about the cases involving people such as Rodney King or George Floyd.

My thesis is focusing on the sports part of racial segregation. Throughout the thesis, we learn that people like Jesse Owens were pioneers in raising awareness of the abilities and predispositions of the Afro-Americans to sports, and together, they pushed the popularity of the Afro-American athletes to a new level. Their abilities brought significant contributions to U.S. sports and more importantly made Afro-American athletes' abilities famous throughout the world. "They changed and challenged America's conscience," states Joe Louis junior in the book (Edmondson, 2007, p. XV)

I divided this thesis into 5 main parts. The first part "History of racism in US sport" shows what were the beginnings of Afro-Americans in the sport in the US and when did first signs of racism and segregation in sports start to appear.

The following part "Growing up in the South" focuses on Owens and his family. In this section, we learn what was it like for Jesse to be growing up as a poor sharecropper's son in rural Alabama.

The third part "Living in the North" discusses what were the reasons behind massive immigration waves of Afro-Americans from South to North of the US and specifically the events which caused the Owens to migrate.

Additionally, the section also looks into the life of the newly immigrated Owens family and Jesse's schooling and athletics beginnings.

The fourth part "1936 Olympics" revolves around the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany. It shows the controversy of attending the so-called "Nazi Games" and how did the US public and athletes react, then it displays the course of the games from Owens's perspective and lastly informs about events that followed soon after.

The last part "Life after the Olympics" depicts what was life like for Owens after the famous Olympics success and how did he engage himself in the politics and civil rights movement. Lastly, the thesis explores the depiction of Jesse Owens in the movie *Race* (2016) and strives to determine how accurate the movie is to reality.



# 1 History of racism in US sports

Racism has been a part of US history since the first twenty slaves were brought to Point Comfort in Virginia in 1619. (Shah and Adolphe, 2019) Despite efforts to make the sport as apolitical and fair as possible it never escaped the racism and discrimination in the US.

## 1.1 Times of slavery

During the era of slaves, the Afro-Americans had only a little chance to come close to such things as sports. The slaves spent most of their day working on the cotton fields and when they got off they usually spent their free time recovering. The only time when the Afro-Americans got to participate in sports was when the white slave owners allowed them to. Afro-Americans, therefore, got the chance to do boxing for the whites' entertainment or to ride and train horses.

### 1.1.1 Afro-American jockeys and horse racing

During the time of slavery, African-Americans got to spend a lot of time in the stables and around the horses in general. Horses were used for work and occasionally for riding. The rich whites however preferred to ride their couriers and considered riding the horseback not fit for their image. Afro-Americans, therefore, got an opportunity to master the horseriding and horse caring. Some of them even managed to earn money when they were allowed to race against the white folk. This era produced great Afro-American jockeys that dominated the American Derbys. The most famous derby at the time was Kentucky Derby.

Kentucky Derby was and still is the most famous American horse racing event in the US. The first time the jockeys got to race in this derby was in 1875. At that time the derby was dominated by Afro-Americans

where 13 of the overall 15 jockeys were black. (Andrew, 2020). Black jockeys continued to perform in the Kentucky Derby and before they faced segregation they managed to win 15 out of 28 first derbies. However, as the Jim Crow laws appeared and segregation began to spread throughout the US South the Afro-American jockeys started to disappear very quickly. It all began with the death of the most famous one Isaac Murphy who died from a heart attack in 1896. Soon after the remaining jockeys faced maltreatment in form of being either denied the jobs or being attacked by the media and white jockeys. Eventually, the oppression took its toll and black jockeys left. Soon after 3 out of the 4 most famous Kentucky derby jockeys ended up committing suicide. (Mooney, 2017)

## 1.2 Reconstruction Era

During this period the Afro-Americans finally got their chance on a larger scale to show their talent. They excelled at sports such as boxing, cycling, baseball, or as has been previously mentioned horseracing. The most notable Afro-Americans of these days were the Walker brothers Moses and Weldy. They both got the chance to play in a professional baseball league organized by American Association. The other name worth mentioning is the jockey Isaac Murphy who to this day remains to be considered the best jockey in US history.

The reconstruction era gave hope to Afro-Americans for a better future. Throughout society, the blacks got the chance to prove themselves through work or sports. Unfortunately, they lost their opportunities soon after.

## 1.3 Jim Crow Era

During the Jim Crow era, people of color faced serious oppression. Despite sports being considered the neutral field for people to compete the Afro-American sportsmen didn't escape the segregation. Most notable cases are the previously described jockeys and baseball players. The black athletes soon had to leave the major leagues and decide to either end their careers or join the newly created negro leagues.

### 1.3.1 American Negro Leagues

In the late 1800s, Afro-American baseball players started to face more and more oppression. The major league teams made a “gentlemen’s agreement” about not hiring black players in their teams and later in 1887 the lower “International League” informally excluded all the Afro-Americans from their competition. (Davis, 2008, p. 3). They claimed the main reason behind this was a fear that they would lose income because of the majority white audience and that the participation of Afro-American players would lead to disputes within the team between them and the white players. This alone set a strong precedent for years to come and by the late 1890s black players were excluded from American baseball entirely.

In reaction, Afro-Americans and dark-skinned Latinos decided to create their own Negro Baseball Leagues. The most notable is the National Negro Baseball League and American Negro League. In these leagues, black players got the chance to compete against each other in purely black teams. In the leagues, they continued their careers and many of them improved their skills and abilities which later helped them in getting to the MLB. These leagues started to rise in the 1890s. Their most popular times were during the 1920s and 1930s. The last one the Negro American League lasted until 1962. (baseball-reference.com)

Recently an important thing happened when in December 2020 MLB officially recognized handful Negro Leagues. This formally made more than 3400 Afro-American players from these competitions part of their official statistics. This was an important historical event that will help future students in learning about the history of baseball. (Kepner, 2020)

#### 1.4 The civil rights era and current situation

During the civil rights era, Afro-Americans were gradually reintegrated back into sports official leagues. This started with Jackie Robinson being the first Afro-American to be signed into Brooklyn Dodgers and later other Afro-American players followed. By 1959 the MLB has been completely desegregated. (Davis, 2008, p. 6) American football and basketball followed the same fate as baseball, firstly after being segregated thanks to “gentlemen’s agreements”, they formed their own leagues, and later they were desegregated again during the civil rights era.

Today it is claimed by some that the sports industry is still segregated and racist. The allegation is that the Afro-Americans only reach lower positions and they are being disadvantaged by the system. These claims however are yet to be revised.

Overall it is clear that society has made significant progress and it is clear that racism is now merely an individual thing rather than an institutionalized unwritten rule which was the case in the past.

## 2 Jesse Owens

A name that is now not as popular as it once was, but an important one nonetheless. Jesse Owens was once as popular as Usain Bolt, however, his life was undoubtedly more difficult than Bolt's could ever be. He is often known for his success in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. For this achievement, he is often celebrated as a person who defeated Hitler. Despite all this, his life was full of struggles and misery. This thesis focuses on Owens's Olympic success as well as his life before and after it which is often overlooked. His winning 4 golden medals at the Olympics is often used as a soft-power tool by the US. "Defeating" Hitler and nazis before the war even started is an achievement on its own. However, Owens didn't receive the praise he deserved for doing so, at least not until he was old. This thesis will show why was Owens's life so difficult despite his accomplishments and what contributions did he bring as an Afro-American famous athlete to the US society.

### 3 Growing up in the South

Jesse Owens was born in 1913 in Lawrence County Alabama. Jesse's parents were poor sharecroppers. As sharecroppers, they had very little wage and since he had nine other siblings, growing up was often a struggle for survival. (britannica.com) The illnesses which Jesse encountered only amplified the difficulties of his life as a kid.

The overall harsh living conditions combined with the rough southern weather put Jesse's health in a series of problems. He would often catch pneumonia or another respiratory disease. These diseases not only threatened young Jesse's life but also made it difficult for him to work. Nonetheless, no matter how inhospitable the conditions were, Jesse had to work in the field. It almost led to his death. However, the work of children at this time was not unusual. Parents often produced offspring to provide for themselves and the rest of the family in the future or case they could not work. According to the "United States of Labor Statistics" in 1900, 25,000 of the 100,000 employees in cotton mills in the South were children. (Schuman, 2017).

One day, Jesse developed a large lump on his chest that began to make it difficult for him to breathe. The clot continued to grow, and as it got bigger, it restricted Jesse's breathing even more. Eventually, the clot became so large that his mother decided to remove it herself. The reason behind this drastic decision was that there was no doctor in the area and the family couldn't afford one anyway even if they wanted to. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 9)

Jesse later resorted to running since it meant a certain escape from the distressing conditions of his everyday life and his illnesses. As Jesse Owens himself stated in his biography: *"I always loved running. I wasn't very good at it, but I loved it because it was something you could do all by yourself, all*

*under your own power. You could go in any direction, fast or slow as you wanted, fighting the wind if you felt like it, seeking out new sights just on the strength of your feet and the courage of your lungs."* (jesseowens.com)

### 3.1 The economic situation in the 1910s in the USA

Even though the U.S. is the economic superpower today, it wasn't the case in the 1910s. Besides the factory plants in the north, the U.S. economy was not developed, and most workers worked in small stores or farms. (encyclopedia.com)

The conditions started rapidly changing with the further development of the industry and factories alongside the new inventions such as the first assembly line by Mr. Henry Ford, which he developed in 1913 (ford.com).

The factories in the northern states were relying on European immigrants for labor; therefore, the outbreak of WW1 meant a shortage of the labor force in these factories. The labor shortage was even amplified after the US joined to war and the US men started enlisting in the army (archives.gov)

This, together with the poor conditions in the South, resulted in one of the most remarkable migration events in the U.S., known as The Great Migration. The situation in the South was already barely bearable for the Afro-American sharecroppers as it was. World War 1, caused a shortage of European workers, as I previously mentioned and this created an opening for the poor Afro-American farmers to migrate north and seek new working opportunities and dignified lives. The other factor was the continuing mechanization of the farmers' work in the South so the need for farmers was decreasing.

By 1913, the usage of steam engines was growing in popularity, substituting farmers' labor. The Owens family became a part of the "Great

Migration”, and it was a breaking point in their lives, especially in the life of Jesse Owens. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 8)

### 3.2 The social conditions in the South

Despite the changes in the constitution after the Civil War, the social conditions in the South were as hostile as ever towards the Afro-American community. The most important changes were the 3 amendments the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment which abolished slavery, the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment which gave all the people born or naturalized in the USA citizenship, and the 15<sup>th</sup> amendment which gave all the citizens the right to vote no matter their race or origin. (archives.gov)

From the historical background, we can see the apparent differences which formed throughout the years. The first slaves were brought to the USA as early as 1619, but the demand for slaves has changed. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 3) The industrialization of the North meant that the need for slaves was much lower, and the abolitionists gained popularity and sympathy throughout the community. The northern states started banning slavery in the early 1800s, and by the year 1808, the importation of slaves was constitutionally prohibited. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 3)

However, the situation in the South was significantly different from the one up north. The southern states were heavily reliant on the slaves' labor. The southerners felt pressured by the northern legislation changes, and after the election of A. Lincoln as the 16<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, the tension broke into an open conflict. (History.com Editors, 2009).

These events set challenging conditions for the Owens family and young Jesse Owens to live in. Jesse Owens himself was only two generations



from slavery itself, and despite the abolition, his early life and the lives of his parents weren't that much different from the lives of the slaves.

### 3.3 Racial injustices affecting the Owens family

Jesse's parents were so-called sharecroppers. This meant that the family had to share part of their crops with the landowner to survive. In the case of the Owens family, it was Mr. Clannon.

The southern landowners didn't have enough money to pay their farmers. Therefore, to keep the farmers on the field, they created another form of agreement, where they would lend farmers the equipment, mules, and the land, and in return, they would demand part of the total crops as payment. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 5)

The main issue of the agreement was that it was changeable and totally in the landowner's hands. As we can see in the case of the Owens family, the landowner, Mr. Clannon, would collect a certain amount of the crops despite the crop failure putting the family in debt. But when the family had enough crops in 1920 to pay off the debt, he would change the agreement from 50-50 to 60-40. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 6)

We can see the cumulation of the issues which were commonly encountered by the Afro-Americans. We may observe the racial inequality in this particular case. However, the Owens family was not only exploited by the landowner but also the store owner in Lawrence County. Besides being indebted to the landowner, the nine-member family struggled with obtaining enough food to feed all the children.

Therefore, the Owens had to buy food at the local store owned by the white store owner. However, the store owner knew the sharecroppers

couldn't read, allowing him to cheat the Owens family every year. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 7)

The fact that Afro-American farmers could not read stems from the restrictions imposed on slaves by the so-called "Code Noir," later modified by the Alabama Slavery Code of 1833. Code noir was a decree issued by Louis XIV and its function was to establish rules for slaves and slave owners in the French colonies. The Alabama Slavery Code later, among other things, prohibited slaves from being a witness in court, leaving their residence building without their master's permission, or carrying a weapon "*offensive or defensive*". Slaves were punished if they were found to possess any book. However, they were punished even more when it was discovered that they could read (alabama.gov).

Similar problems were present throughout the South and later contributed significantly to the event of the "Great Migration". The Owens family itself became part of this migration in the winter of 1920. Before they moved, the family sold all the excess property and returned the rented equipment. The landowner, Clannon, gave them a total of only \$24 for all the things they sold and the equipment they returned. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 11)

Clannon's plan was to give the family as little money as possible and use it as an extortion technique. He believed by providing the family with only 24 dollars, he would make them reconsider the already difficult decision to migrate north. Migrating north was not an easy thing to do. There was no guarantee for the family that their lives will be better up north. The situation in the South however was so hopeless that the extorting had a rather opposite effect.

### 3.4 Racial segregation in the South

The main difference between the South and the North was the institutionalization of racism and the government's support. Racism was present in the North of the United States as well. The apparent evidence of this claim was the Harlem City part of New York.

Harlem was a center of the Afro-American community in New York. White homeowners wouldn't rent the flats to the Afro-American citizens coming to New York. This discrimination, therefore, resulted in the creation of Harlem, which became the center of the Afro-American community. (Kamil and Wakin, 2012)

The prominent examples of institutionalized racism in the South on the other hand are the Jim Crow laws later supported by the precedent set in the case *Plessy v Ferguson*.

#### 3.4.1 Jim Crow laws

The beginnings of the Jim Crow laws date to the year 1877. The term itself is a derogatory term used to describe black people. It stems from the character of Jim Crow, whom Thomas Rice depicted as a simple-minded black man in his acts. (ferris.edu)

Jim Crow laws began forming rapidly after the settlement of the case "*Plessy v Ferguson*" in 1896. Laws that meant to segregate the Afro-Americans in buses, taxis, or trains were continuously enacted throughout the southern states. These laws were meant to prevent any contact between the Afro-Americans and whites. (Guffey, 2012)

#### 3.4.2 *Plessy v Ferguson*

The case of Homer Plessy versus judge John Ferguson dates back to the year 1892. Homer Plessy was a racially mixed man from New Orleans.

Plessy was seven-eighths white and one-eighth black, but the Louisiana law prohibited any black person from boarding the car designed for whites. Homer Plessy, therefore, decided to challenge this law and boarded the car anyways. He was soon after asked to leave the car, and when he refused, he got arrested. Plessy and his lawyers argued that the law of Louisiana segregating the black and white passengers under the "Separate Car Act" was contrary to the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> amendments to the constitution of the United States. Judge Ferguson, however, ruled that the act isn't contrary to the constitution since it requires railway companies to have cars that are "separate but equal." Plessy's lawyers later appealed the decision to the Supreme Court, but the Supreme Court ruled in favor of Judge Ferguson. (oyez.com)

This particular case set an important precedent and served as the opening for creating many laws, which segregated the Afro-Americans and the whites. The Afro-American community that was already facing a lot of racial attacks, lynching, and segregation would be from then on segregated officially. The institutionalized segregation alongside the re-establishing of the Kuk Lux Klan in 1915 later even strengthened the migration phenomenon amongst the Afro-Americans.

## 4 Living in the North

As I previously mentioned the Owens family became a part of the "Great Migration" event in 1920. They decided to move to Cleveland in the state of Ohio.

The fact that the family decided to migrate specifically to Cleveland was based on the experiences of the Owens' daughter, Lilly. Lilly moved to Cleveland before the rest of the family to look for work. Later, when she settled in the city, she began writing letters to her family in which she informed them about what life was like in the north of the USA. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 10)

This was a common phenomenon amongst the migrants from the South. The direction of migration was mostly affected by the development of highway systems and railways easing the migrants' access to the northern cities and the so-called ethnogenic support. (Tolnay, 2003, p. 209-232) The ethnogenic support means the probability of inclusion of the new southern migrants into the society. Southerners migrating north were therefore highly motivated to migrate to a specific city if their family or friends were already living there.

### 4.1 The Great Migration

The event known as the "Great Migration" began at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From 1910 to 1970, around 6 million Afro-Americans emigrated from the heavily segregated and non-industrialized South.

While the racial injustice and violence in the South were undeniable, the main reason for the migration wasn't sociological but economical. As I have mentioned earlier racism was present in the North as well. A good example would be the creation, as mentioned earlier, of Harlem and the racial

unrest occurring in the year 1919, known as the Red Summer. It struck many cities. The most notable one from the North was Chicago. Red summer was a series of violent attacks against the Afro-American community. In Elaine, Arkansas it is estimated that around 100 people were killed in the chaos. (archives.gov)

The hatred towards the migrants from the South grew as the citizens in the North feared the rapid geographical changes. The northerners also blamed the migrants for the increasing crime rate despite these claims being based solely on stereotypes. (Tolnay, 2003, p. 218)

These social conditions made it more difficult for the migrants to find more popular jobs than their northern-born counterparts. However, despite being disadvantaged, the southerners often obtained higher incomes.

## 4.2 Life in Cleveland

Despite the great ambition of migrating north to achieve better lives life for the Owens family wasn't easy. Jesse Owens' older brothers, alongside his father, all worked in the factory, and Jesse was doing a few smaller jobs such as unloading freight trains.

For Owens, an important new experience was the unsegregated school that he attended. Owens had never experienced anything like this in the South. In Alabama, everything from cars to parks has been segregated. Owens also came to his new name at this particular school. Jesse. One day at school, a substitute teacher checked attendance. When she reached young James Cleveland Owens on the list, he pronounced his name as J.C. But his Southern accent was so strong that his teacher misunderstood him and registered his name as Jesse. James Cleveland was officially known as Jesse from then on. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 16)

Owens's talents were discovered at the same school, the Bolton Elementary School, by the P.E. teacher Charles Riley. Riley saw Owens' athletic potential and made him his protégé. Riley didn't only support Owens's talent by training him, but he would also give Owens food and invite him on Sundays to have family dinners with him. As Edmondson states, Owens quoted that Riley was the first white man who had been kind to him. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 17)

From the information we have, we can assess that the economic differences were apparent despite the racial tension being high both in the South and North of the U.S. The other significant difference was the education provided to the young Jesse. While living in the South, his life consisted of either working in the cotton fields or casual running, while the migration of his family to the North allowed him to become educated, which later resulted in him achieving his childhood dream of going to college.

Despite the following economic crisis known as "The Great Depression," Owens continued to study and train at school. His family gave Owens considerable support and allowed him to continue in his studies (Edmondson, 2007, p. 18)

### 4.3 The Great Depression

The Great Depression struck hard down on all sorts of American people. The situation, however, became even more difficult for the Afro-Americans. The Afro-Americans who were already racially targeted and disadvantaged became even more oppressed after the economic crisis.

From the data we have, we learn that after the Great Depression, 25 percent of the white Americans living in the North lost their jobs, but for the Afro-Americans, this number reached over 50 percent. The other big issue

was that despite facing unemployment at a higher rate, the Afro-Americans didn't often receive any support from the supporting programs giving out free soups for the unemployed or creating work programs. (Murphy, 2020)

This situation later resulted in a significant increase in support for the black organizations such as the Urban League or Housewives' League of Detroit. (Murphy, 2020)

#### 4.4 Beginnings of Jesse Owens's career

Under the coaching of Riley, Owens began to gain success. Owens was a considerable addition to his track and field team. He helped win his team many meetings and broke many athletic high school records. The records that he set during the Interscholastic Championship at Chicago stood for 21 years.

This success meant Owens became popular among the reporters who wrote about his achievements. The popularity then resulted in Owens getting many scholarships offers from different universities. Riley, however, advised Owens not to accept any scholarship as this would thwart his chances of competing in amateur competitions, which included the Olympics. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 20)

#### 4.5 Going to College

Owens decided to go to the Ohio State University. His decision was affected by the fact the university had a genuinely capable athletic team and was conveniently located close to his hometown of Cleveland.

The Afro-American community heavily criticized Owens for his decision to attend this university. Owens was already a famous athlete at the time, and the community knew how successful he was. The Ohio State University, however, was a racially segregated school. Afro-Americans felt



that Owens could support any university he would choose. When he, therefore, decided to attend the Ohio State University, the community perceived the act as a betrayal of their efforts to fight racial discrimination.

We can see the racial bias in examples such as coach Schmidt not putting any Afro-American players on his football team or the overall number of Afro-American students studying at school, 100 students of the total 15 thousand. (Edmondson 2007, p. 25)

Owens's idea of fighting racism notably differed from that of his contemporaries. While the Afro-American community thought it necessary to fight vigorously and actively against oppression and racial discrimination, Owens believed in other means of fighting racism. He was certain that his abilities would bring success not only to him but also to the Afro-American community by displaying the blacks' abilities in athletic events. Owens intended to show the society that Afro-Americans and whites could share unsegregated lives and that the Afro-Americans were just as capable as the whites. Jesse proved this by achieving success both academically and athletically. This approach was Owens's fundamental idea of fighting racism, and he continued to push for this attitude later throughout his life.

## 5 1936 Olympics

### 5.1 Preceding events

#### 5.1.1 The big ten finals and track meet in California

Before heading to the 1936 Olympics Owens took part in two important preceding events. The big ten finals in Chicago and NCAA meeting in California. At the first of the mentioned races, Owens managed to put on a great show breaking three world records and equaling one. (IOC, 2022) Owens as a multitalented athlete participated in 4 events, the 100-yard dash, 220-yard dash, 220-yard low hurdles, and the long jump.

What makes these accomplishments even more impressive is the fact that Owens had to compete with his injured back. Just a few days before the meeting Owens fell on stairs and hit his back. His back was so hurt that his friends had to help him get up from the bed. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 30) In spite of all this, when the day of the event came Jesse Owens managed to suppress his pain and perform.

Coming to the California meeting Owens was already regarded as an athletic celebrity. The big ten finals earned him fame amongst many people gaining new supporters, but also amongst the critics and racists. He, however, never got distracted and used his performances to push his ideas of racial equality and equal opportunities. What Owens especially believed in was to lead by example.

#### 5.1.2 The situation in Germany

In Germany, at that time the nazi party already ruled the country. In its head stood the famous Adolf Hitler. The issue however is that Berlin was chosen in the Olympics bid as a hosting city in the year 1931. At that time Germany was still a republic with a presidential governing system.

(bundestag.de). Nobody anticipated the sudden radical changes which happened in 1933 when the nazis took over, when they did however Germany was already chosen as the hosting country of the games.

The nazis saw a great opportunity in sports to push their racist Aryan propaganda. Nazi party whose mythology revolved around flawless Aryan humans got an excellent opportunity to turn this supposed mythology into a reality. Additionally, since the German army had been dissolved due to the Treaty of Versaille the public interest shifted toward sports even more.

The minister of propaganda Josef Goebless himself saw this event through and planned the main aspects of the exhibition of the games. He himself stated *“German sport has only one task: to strengthen the character of the German people, imbuing it with the fighting spirit and steadfast camaraderie necessary in the struggle for its existence.”* (ushmm.org)

### 5.1.3 US view of the Olympics

The US perception of the 1936 Olympic games was divided, to say the least. At the time the general US public was already well aware of the political changes and the rising tension and oppression in Germany. In 1936 Germany’s government was already seized by the NSDAP<sup>1</sup> and messages of racial and anti-semitic attacks were spreading through the world.

US opinion was split on the matter of whether to boycott the Olympics and show Hitler their clear disapproval of his nazi government and anti-semitic laws or to attend the games and prove his racial Aryan theory wrong simply by winning. (Twardy, 2021)

The division amongst the athletes was similar to that of the general US public. A big part of them didn’t want to participate in the games believing

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<sup>1</sup> Nazi party ruled by Hitler

it would only support the German propaganda and would play down the crimes against humanity that were already apparent. The rest of them wanted to go. These athletes knew they had been preparing for months and years even for this event and thought it would be a good thing to use their talent.

Jesse Owens wanted to participate. He even wrote a letter alongside his fellow colleagues R. Metcalfe and E. Peacock to Avery Brundage, who was the head of USOC at that time, pleading to let the athletes compete. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 40)

The situation eventually resulted in an inspection by Avery Brundage himself into the German conditions. Brundage knew that his short visit couldn't possibly provide him with enough information to assess the conditions in Germany, nevertheless he flew to Germany and returned to the US with his assessment. (Marvin, 1982, p. 87) The Jewish arguments were that they were being mistreated and denied the possibility to represent Germany in the Olympics. The opinion of the Olympic officials, however, was that the Jews were complaining too much and using the sports only for their own publicity. (Marvin, 1982, p. 88) Eventually, it was decided that the US Olympic team would attend the games.

## 5.2 The games

### 5.2.1 The preparations

The idea of the modern Olympic games was to bring the athletes and nations together despite their cultural and political differences. The Germans adopted this rhetoric, but the reality was different. They put an effort into making these Olympics their propaganda weapon.

The Nazis built a stadium with a capacity of more than 100 thousand spectators. The streets had to be cleaned of all the anti-semitic posters and

racist banners. The gypsies from Berlin had been dislocated to a camp in the suburbs. (ushmm.com) People were forced to hang out either a Swastika or Olympic flag, and the facades of the houses on the main streets were repainted.

Nonetheless, similar measures of so-called “covering up” have been present even in the recent past. In the case of the Beijing Olympics 2008, it is now known that Chinese officials put in an immense effort to cover up the ever-present smog in the city. In Rio 2016 then again the Brazilians concealed the favelas by creating an untransparent sound barrier. On the road that goes from the airport to the South Zone, they raised a wall, because there is an urban district located in the vicinity called Mare where the poor people live. We can see these practices date as far back as Berlin. These countries' main interests were to gain political prestige and strengthen their propaganda which reports that everything is in order.

### 5.2.2 The course of the games

Berlin was a precursor to the following Olympic games in many things such as carrying the Olympic torch from Greece to the Olympic stadium (History.com Editors, 2019) or having the opening ceremony.

The games were filmed by a well-known director Leni Riefenstahl. Her work is still admired to this day for its unique composition and camera angles. Riefenstahl was tasked by the Nazis to document the Olympic games and they gave her a considerable budget to do so. (Mackenzie, 2003, p. 303). She has been accused of creating nazi propaganda by beautification of the 1936 Olympic games. However, Riefenstahl has always denied these accusations. (Mackenzie, 2003, p. 307) She has always claimed that her work's purpose was merely to celebrate aesthetics and sportsmanship.

### 5.2.3 Jesse Owens and his success

Jesse Owens and his success in the 1936 Berlin Olympics made history. Owens was already coming to the games as a celebrity which he became after his successes in the USA.

What is often thought is that Owens was not well received by the German public at the games, but this is untrue. Germans knew who Owens was and were quite fond of him. Despite being an Afro-American he was popular and had many fans even amongst the Germans. (german-way.com)

His journey to 4 gold medals began with a 100m dash. During the heats, he already equaled the world record of 10.3 seconds. In his quarterfinal race, he even managed to surpass the world record running time of 10.2 seconds. Unfortunately, this record was later rejected due to wind assistance. In his final run, Owens managed to achieve an impressive victory by running 10.3 and equaling the world record once again. Owen's compatriot Metcalfe finished second and German "Aryan superstar" Borchmeyer finished fifth. (olympics.com) This event alone was a foreshadowing of Owens's big success.

The second event where Jesse excelled was the long jump. Coming to this event he was already suspected to be a contender for the win. Nevertheless, Owens struggled in the qualification for the finals. Despite being the favorite he failed his first two jumps. It was at this moment when German athlete Luz Long came and advised Jesse to place a something few inches before the takeoff board and jump from there. Following his advice, Owens managed to qualify for the finals and later won the whole event. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 48)

This was the beginning of an unexpected friendship between an Afro-American sprinter and a German long jumper. Long even posthumously received the Pierre de Coubertin medal for sportsmanship. They remained good friends until Long's death in 1943 when he died during the Second World War German campaign in North Africa. Their friendship is today viewed as an example of the antiracism movement.

Owens later succeeded even in the 200m dash event where he won the race by running 20.7 seconds. The controversial thing however happened during the 4x100m relay. Owens wasn't even supposed to be in this race, but eventually, he and Ralph Metcalfe got on the team under uncertain circumstances. The relay team was originally made by F. Draper, F. Wykoff, M. Glickman, and S. Stoller. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 50) Glickman and Stoller, however, were Jews so A. Brundage the president of the American Olympic Committee decided that in order to not anger Nazi officials the Jewish athletes would be taken off the team. Brundage put big pressure on the team's coaches Robertson and Cromwell who eventually submitted to Brundage's wish and put the two Jewish athletes off the team. Owens this way got a chance to achieve his fourth gold medal and he did. Some claim that Owens and Metcalfe were put on the team simply, because of their performance, but since both the Jewish athletes performed well during the Olympics, it is unlikely that performance was the case.

## 6 Life after the Olympics

Olympic games 1936 is usually where Jesse's story ends, however, what happened after this event is where the important social lessons lay. Owens became a popular man after his great victories in the Olympics. He was expected to get many job offers and live a comfortable life, but the truth was different.

### 6.1 Post-Olympic European tour

When he won his fourth Olympic medal Owens was immediately sent with his teammates on a European athletic tour. The reason behind this tour was that the fee for entering the Olympic games was \$350,000. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 51). The team however didn't obtain sufficient funding, which resulted in a debt of \$30,000. To pay this debt A. Brundage decided to send Owens on a tour around Europe. Brundage knew that Owens gained popularity in the Olympics and he expected the people to come and see the new champion race. Owens and his teammates were, therefore, sent on a European tour, first to Cologne, soon after to Czechoslovakia, and then to Germany again. Soon after the team was sent to London and when he heard they were going to go to Stockholm Owens refused to continue. (McRae, 2000) The reason behind this decision wasn't anything arrogant, but a simple fact Owens was exhausted and was both physically and mentally unable to continue his tour. Not only didn't he get enough rest time between his races, but he didn't even get enough money to buy food on the tour. Besides that Owens knew he had offers waiting for him back in the USA and he would need to answer them as soon as possible.

For his refusal, Owens faced serious repercussions. Brundage who was at the time a member of the International Olympic Committee and a



head of the American Olympic Committee and Amateur Union decided to ruin his career in return. Brundage expelled Owens from the American Athletic Union. This meant that Owens was officially no longer an amateur athlete. For Owens, it was the end of his career since it meant he could no longer compete at any official athletic events, which were at the time all part of amateur competitions including the Olympics.

This shows us that racism was present not only among the general American public but even among the US officials. The fact that Brundage managed to stay president of the US Olympic Committee from 1928 to 1953 only further confirms this point. Brundage was a known racist and anti-Semite and his biased inspection in Germany before the Olympics where he purposefully overlooked all the antisemitism and racism only proves this point. Unfortunately, he never faced any backlash for this during his lifetime. Only recently Brundage's actions posthumously met with some reprisal. During the Black Lives Matter movement, the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco decided to remove his bust from the display and put it in storage. (Zirin, 2020). This was a solidarity action with the movement.

## 6.2 Back in the US

The thing that disappointed Owens the most was the way he was treated when he returned to his homeland. In Germany as an Olympic athlete, he could travel in the same bus as the whites, use the same elevator and eat at the same restaurants, however, when he came back to the US he couldn't do any of these things, despite being in a supposedly democratic country. In addition president, Roosevelt didn't even bother to congratulate him. Owens later himself admitted: "Hitler didn't snub me it was Roosevelt who snubbed me. The president didn't even send me a telegram." (Bracken, no date)

Coming back to US Owens's manager was expecting that he would be able to make around \$100,000 based on the offers he received, however to Owens's dismay none of the offers he received worked out when he returned. Besides that, as was aforementioned Owens lost his chance to compete and with it the possibility to make money, he was therefore forced to look for a regular job.

This is quite concerning and hard to believe even for the 1930s USA. Owens was a celebrity at the time who was known around the world and for him not to lend any business contract is almost unthinkable. In today's standards, it would be comparable to seeing Usain Bolt or Christian Coleman looking for regular 9 to 5 jobs. It shows how much society has progressed since then since even Christian Coleman's net worth who is the world champion in 100m dash of 2019 today is estimated at 35 million dollars. (Tremblay, 2022)

The fact that Owens wasn't able to lend any contract eventually resulted in him dropping out of college. Owens simply couldn't afford to pay the tuition at Ohio State. Later he managed to get some business contracts racing horses and doing promotions for the Negro baseball leagues. Owens himself stated: "People said it was degrading for an Olympic champion to run against a horse. But what was I supposed to do? I had four gold medals – but you can't eat gold medals." (Ashdown, 2011). Owens later started a dry cleaning company, which failed and forced Owens to file for bankruptcy.

Owens eventually managed to gain success later in his life when he started his public relations company and began to travel around the USA to give speeches.

### 6.3 Owens and politics

Owens got into politics alone by achieving success against Nazi racial theories. He himself nevertheless never saw his performances as part of any political disputes. During the second world war, Owens was pressured into saying that he was in Berlin to defeat Hitler and Germany, but he always answered he was there solely to run. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 63)

During WW2 Owens finally got the recognition from president Roosevelt when he invited him to the White House. Roosevelt did so however purposefully not voluntarily. He wanted Owens to promote the hiring of Afro-Americans into Ford Motors in Detroit and also to lead the Afro-American part of the national fitness program. (Edmondson, 2007, p. 62)

This alone shows how hypocritical the head of the country was. In February 1942, the president signed and issued executive order 9066, which gave authorities a legal right to escort more than 120,000 of Japanese descent into internment camps. This made the people most of whom were simply Asian Americans lose their businesses, basically anything besides the things they could carry. The same president at that time asked Owens, whom he previously snubbed, to be a leader of a national fitness program.

Owens later joined politics by supporting the presidential campaign of A. Landon. Landon, unfortunately, lost in a landslide. Owens however got paid for this campaign which was his main motivation anyways. Nonetheless, despite his initial failures Jesse continued to engage himself in politics and eventually succeeded. He managed to become the US ambassador of sports. President Eisenhower appointed him to the function in 1955. Owens even served as the president's personal representative at the

1956 Olympics in Australia. Thanks to his political work he got a chance to travel the world and share the US ideals. He spread his values in the Philippines, India, and Malaysia.

#### 6.4 The civil rights movement

The civil rights movement was a series of protests by the African-American community of the USA. Their main goals were social justice and racial equality. The beginning of the modern civil rights movement is considered the year 1954 and specifically the case *Brown v Board*.

*Brown vs board of education of Topeka* was a case where the daughter of Oliver Brown, Linda wasn't allowed to attend the local school, because of her race. When young Linda tried to go to a local school in Topeka, Kansas she was told that she couldn't and she would instead have to attend a segregated school, which was way farther away. The Brown family supported by the other 12 neighborhood families decided to file a lawsuit against the school board of Topeka. The district court dismissed the lawsuit, but the family later appealed the case to the Supreme Court, which unanimously ruled that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal". (Lightfoot, 2006). This alone meant the beginning of desegregation in US schools.

Soon after a separate protest occurred in Montgomery, Alabama. On 1 December 1955 Afro-American woman Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to move to the back of the bus in order to make space for a white passenger. Soon after the black community of Montgomery started to gather in a local church where they were led by young pastor Martin Luther King Jr. The community decided to put pressure on the local government by boycotting the buses of Montgomery. This whole boycott however wasn't as

spontaneous as it may seem. The whole protest have been planned long ago the arrest of Rosa Parks, nonetheless, this event gave the community a good incentive. Black people did everything they could to avoid buses, from riding taxis to carpools. The whole boycott lasted for more than a year and eventually resulted in the Supreme Court ruling the segregated bus seating unlawful. The boycott ended on 20 December 1956. (stanford.edu) Dr. King himself later said: *“We came to see that, in the long run, it is more honorable to walk in dignity than ride in humiliation”* (stanford.edu)

The movement later continued in a series of protests known as the Birmingham demonstrations. During these demonstrations, people gather in the city of Birmingham, Alabama where they organized marches to the city hall or did economical boycotts. They also protested by doing so-called sit-ins where the Afro-Americans would go to the restaurants and purposefully sit in the places reserved for the whites and refuse to leave. Eventually, these demonstrations got violently suppressed by the local police which was directed by Eugene “Bull” Connor. (stanford.edu) This act outraged the general public and gave the movement even more popularity.

Soon after these demonstrations, the peak of the movement happened when the Afro-Americans and all the supporters of the movement gathered together in one big march. This event became known as The March on Washington. On August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people gathered on the National Mall to protest for equality, freedom, and jobs as the whole name of the event “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom” suggests. Martin Luther King Jr. made his famous “I have a dream” speech which became one of the most known events in US history. Ultimately the event resulted in the Civil Rights Act being passed in 1964. This act outlawed discrimination in places like restaurants or cinemas, racial segregation in schools, and

discrimination of employees based on their race, religion sex, or origin.  
(dol.gov)

## 6.5 Owens and the civil rights movement

Thanks to his political and athletic success Owens had a significant role in the civil rights movement. He wasn't as influential as Malcolm X or Dr. King, but important he was.

Owens was a controversial character in the civil rights movement. On one hand, he liked Dr. King's peaceful way of protesting, but he didn't agree with no violence at all costs. Owens believed that there are moments where violence is necessary to protect yourself and your loved ones. On the other hand, Owens was by some called "Uncle Tom". This was a derogatory term used for black people who were too obedient or servile to white people. (dictionary.com) Despite Owens' idea for necessary violence against the so-called "Hitlers" of the world he never supported the young militant groups of the civil rights movement. He claimed that their actions are not a solution and will only bring more problems.

Owens also condemned the boycott of the 1968 Olympics attempts. He opposed the Olympic Project for Human Rights and its demands and warned the athletes that the politics and Olympics should not intervene. Despite this two athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos who finished first and third decided to do the infamous "black power salute". For this political act, they were expelled from the games by International Olympic Committee. Back home in the USA, they faced hatred, threats, and critics. Owens faced some backlash as well. He gained the nickname "Bootlicking Uncle Tom" from the head of the movement, Dr. Harry Edwards. Owens took the insult quite harshly. To react to these remarks he decided to write Edwards a

personal note which states: *“Harry Edwards,” says Owens in a personal note, “my name never has been Tom. But I am old enough to be your uncle. I know the trouble you’ve seen [Owens gives Edwards a better break than Edwards gave him.] Now I can make you—and everyone—see that it’s nothing, absolutely nothing, next to the trouble you and your blackthink are about to make?”* (Young, 1970). To fight the radicals Owens even decided to write a book *“Blackthink; My Life As Black Man and White Man”* which was published in 1970. Owens later even began to doubt himself whether he didn’t actually sabotage the efforts of the Civil Rights movement, but eventually remained adamant in his idea to fight racism rationally and economically.

## 6.6 End of life and legacy of Jesse Owens

Owens's life was full of struggle but luckily he managed to get the well-deserved praise before it was over. In 1970 Owens got the honor of being inducted into the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame. Then in 1972 Owens received an honorary doctorate of athletic arts from Ohio State University, which meant he finally achieved the university title. The two most prestigious awards Owens received just at the end of his life. In 1976 president Ford awarded Owens with the Medal of Freedom and in 1979 Owens received the title of The Living Legend from President Carter. The last award which is also the most prestigious one Owens, unfortunately, received posthumously from President H.W. Bush. It was the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Today Jesse’s legacy lives on thanks to Jesse Owens Foundation and Jesse Owens Award.

Jesse Owens's foundation was established by his wife and family in 1980. Jesse Owens foundation's main goal is to support young talented people and further develop their skills and potential by giving them the scholarship to study at Ohio State University. (Foundation, 2017)

Jesse Owens Award is given annually to the most successful US track and field athletes. It is the highest honor an athlete can achieve in the USA. Among the awarded athletes are names such as Justin Gatlin, Tyson Gay, Allyson Felix, and Carmelita Jeter. (usatf.org)



## 7 Depiction of racism in Race (2016)

Race is a movie from the year 2016 directed by Stephen Hopkins. Its main protagonist is Jesse Owens. The movie starts with Jesse Owens going to college for the first time. From the beginning, we are shown the racial problems of the US which were present at the time. A good example of this is part of the movie where Jesse and his friend get on the bus and we can hear the racial remarks of two white women sitting in the front row. Jesse and his black friends are later victims of racial discrimination in the locker rooms. When they are about to go to the showers the university football team tells them that they can't go until they shower first. (Race, 2016, 8:01). This wasn't uncommon at the Ohio State University where Jesse Owens used to go. In the movie, even coach Snyder mentions the fact that he could have chosen any university after his successes (Race, 2016, 13:30), but Owens mainly chose the university, because of their strong athletic team which is mentioned in the movie and for the convenience of being close to home. The movie later focuses on the disputes within the AAU regarding the question of whether to attend or not attend the Berlin Olympics. The movie does a surprisingly good job of depicting accurately the historic events. Despite being made for the wider public the movie doesn't overdramatize things such as A. Brundage and his inspection in Germany or Jesse Owens and his days at the university.

The movie later chronologically follows Jesse's life as he gets closer to the Olympics. We see how Jesse Owens injured his back before the Big Ten Championship (Race, 2016, 31:20). The movie however makes the fall a little funnier and more dramatic as it depicts Jesse Owens hurting his back by jumping over a pole when in reality he injured it falling on stairs. Later we see Owens getting popular and his supposed affair with Quincella

Nickerson. Director Hopkins also uses the character of Quincella to ask Jesse for an explanation of how come he is named Jesse when his original name was James Cleveland Owens. Jesse then explains how when he came to his name Jesse Owens.

The movie then moves to Germany where it shows how the nazis have managed to clean the streets of racist and anti-semitic propaganda. It also shows us that during the time of the Olympics there was no segregation, at least not for the athletes. Black athletes, therefore, got the chance to stay in the same dormitories as the others. (Race, 2016, 1:21:20). This is a solid depiction of historically accurate facts. Owens experienced total desegregation during his time at the Olympics, which for him was hitherto unknown. Soon after it shows us the Olympics and Jesse Owens's successes, from winning the 100m dash to the 4x100m relay. We also see why Hitler didn't shake any of the athletes' hands, and later why were the 2 Jewish US sprinters taken off the relay team. (Race, 2016, 1:52:26).

The movie ends with Jesse Owens returning to the US. He then goes with his coach and friend Larry Snyder to a gala evening and Jesse is denied the entrance. This alone indicates how Jesse was treated after his return home despite his achievements in Germany. There are also added remarks with historical facts surrounding the life of Jesse Owens such as "The White House never publicly acknowledged Jesse Owens or his success in the 1936 Olympics. (Race, 2016, 2:03:50)

As previously mentioned the movie despite being a Hollywood movie does a good job of depicting Jesse Owens and his success. It makes his life both interesting and entertaining to watch. Nonetheless, the movie fails to depict the immense struggles of Jesse Owens's young age or after his return to the US. It is understandable that the movie needs to be dynamic and

doesn't have enough time to portray his whole life, however, more pictures should be shown about Jesse's life as a son of a sharecropper or his later struggles as a young Afro-American heavily segregated and racist US. Apart from this the movie accurately depicts Owens's road to the Olympics and his achievements there.

## 8 Conclusion

Jesse Owens and his impact still last very much to this day. His mentality and attitude teach us very important lessons in the matter of racial problems.

The information we learned from this thesis indicates that the racial struggle and its possible resolution are today similar to the civil rights movement of the 1970s. Especially after the death of George Floyd, the polarized protesters were seen throughout the US. Despite the majority of these protesters being peaceful the violent ones caught the media's attention and cast a shadow on the entire movement. The same thing was present during the civil rights movement and we now know its results.

Owens teaches us that violently obtained equality can never persist and that the right way and only way to achieve it is through dedication, hard work, and setting an example. This however doesn't mean the Afro-Americans should take things lightly and not be proactive. Racism still exists in the USA even though it is fading, but equality needs to be still fought for. Owens remains to be a hero to many athletes around the world and through his awards, foundation, and books his ideals are here to stay.

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## Anotace

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<b>Rok obhajoby:</b>	2022

<b>Název práce:</b>	Jesse Owens a jeho role v rasově segregovaném sportu
<b>Název v angličtině:</b>	Jesse Owens and his role in the racially segregated sport
<b>Anotace práce:</b>	<p>Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá rasismem ve sportu ve Spojených Státech, zejména poté z pohledu a zkušeností atleta Jesseho Owense. Cílem práce je zvýšit povědomí o historii rasismu ve Spojených Státech a zejména rasismu ve sportovním odvětví. Práce je rozdělena do 5 částí. První část se zabývá obecnou historií sportu v USA, druhá část se zabývá životem na jihu USA na začátku 19. stol z obecného pohledu i z pohledu Owese, třetí část se zabývá migrační vlnou Afro-Američanů na sever USA a životem v tamním prostředí, čtvrtá část se zabývá průběhem Olympiády 1936 v Berlíně z obecného pohledu i z pohledu Owense a pátá část se zabývá Owensivým životem po Olympiádě.</p>

<b>Klíčová slova:</b>	Rasismus, sport, rasismus ve sportu USA, Jesse Owens, Olympiáda 1936
<b>Anotace v angličtině:</b>	This bachelor thesis examines racism in sport in the United States, particularly then from the perspective and experience of athlete Jesse Owens. The goal of the thesis is to raise awareness of the history of racism in the United States and in particular racism in the sports industry. The thesis is divided into 5 parts. The first part deals with the general history of sport in the US, the second part deals with life in the US South in the early 1900s from a general perspective and from Owens' perspective, the third part deals with the wave of migration of African-Americans to the North and life there, the fourth part deals with the course of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin from a general perspective and from Owens' perspective, and the fifth part deals with Owens' life after the Olympics.
<b>Klíčová slova v angličtině:</b>	Racism, sport, racism in sport USA, Jesse Owens, 1936 Olympics
<b>Přílohy vázané v práci:</b>	
<b>Rozsah práce:</b>	35 s. (58 485 znaků)
<b>Jazyk práce:</b>	Angličtina

## Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá tématem rasismu v americkém sportu. Jejím hlavním tématem je život Jesseho Owense. Jeho životní zkušenosti, neúspěchy a úspěchy slouží k lepšímu pochopení života afroamerického sportovce v USA a Afroameričanů v USA obecně. Práce bude rozdělena do pěti hlavních částí - Historie rasismu v americkém sportu, Dospívání na Jihu, Život na Severu, Olympijské hry 1936 a Život po olympiádě. Hlavním cílem práce je ukázat boj Afroameričanů na počátku a v polovině 20. století z pohledu slavného sportovce. Zkoumá také, zda úspěchy Jesseho Owense přinesly nějaké výhody afroamerické komunitě v USA nebo jemu samotnému.