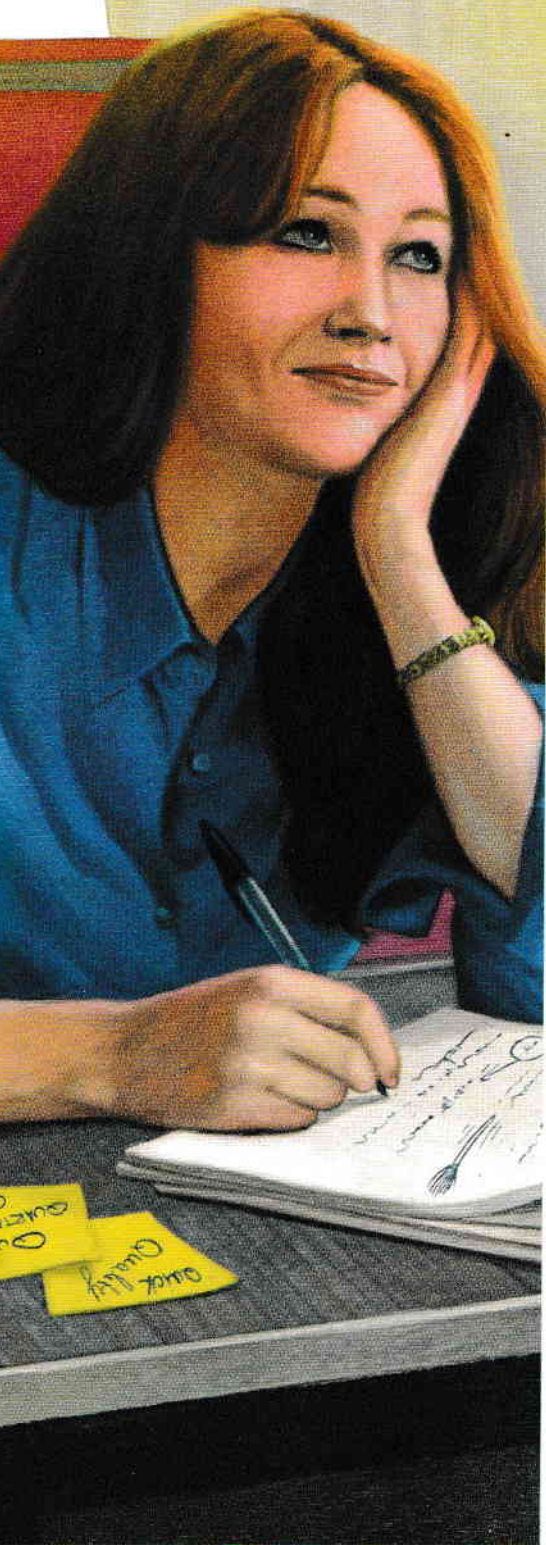


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Jane Cammack

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# Great Lives

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**Outstanding People  
of the  
English-Speaking World**

Illustrated by **Franco Rivoli**



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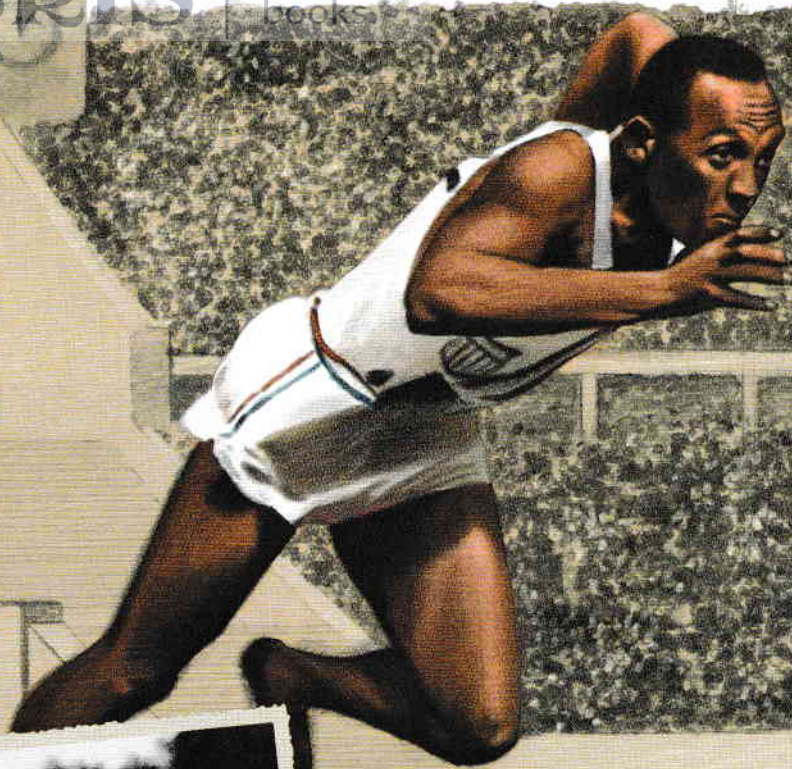
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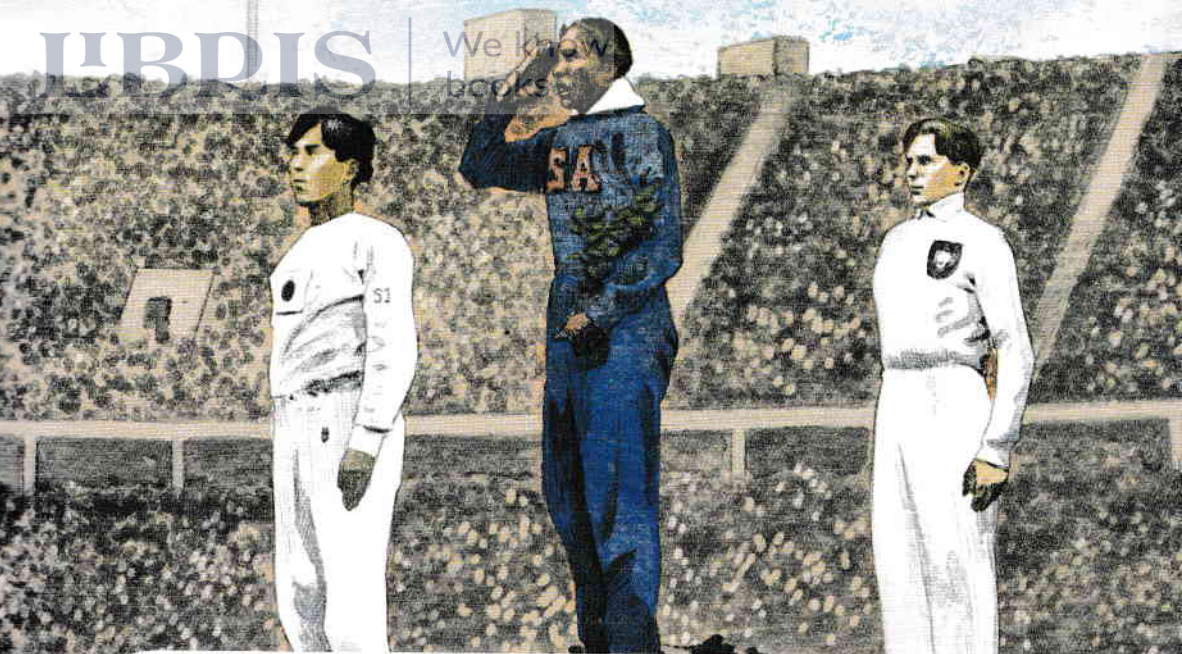
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“  
One chance is all you need.  
”

## Jesse Owens

*One of the greatest athletes  
in the history of Olympic sports*

**I**

It was the summer of 1936 and Hitler was in power with his Nazi party in Germany. On the first day of the Olympic Games in Berlin, the black African-American Jesse Owens won a Gold Medal for the 100 metres, but on the second day things were not going according to plan. Jesse didn't jump well in his first two attempts <sup>1</sup> to qualify for the final of the long jump. He only had one more chance. He was angry with himself. He kicked the ground with his foot. Luz Long, a tall, blonde, blue-eyed German athlete came over to Jesse.



track 03

"What's the matter?" Luz asked. "You can jump this distance easily. You can qualify for the final with your eyes closed."

"I know, I'm angry with myself and an angry athlete makes mistakes."

"Why don't you take off a little early?" Luz said. "Then you can't make a mistake."

Jesse looked at his rival. Could he trust <sup>2</sup> him?

"Thank you" he said.

Jesse Owens took Luz's advice and jumped early. He qualified for

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1. **attempts** : tries.

2. **trust** : believe in.

the final. That evening he went to the Olympic Village to find Luz and thank him. They talked for hours about their sport, about their lives and about what was happening in the world. They became good friends.

The next day in the final of the long jump, Luz broke his own record, but Jesse jumped further. And even though Hitler was watching, Luz shook Jesse's hand and smiled at him.

Hitler expected German athletes to win all the medals at the Olympic Games because he said the German 'Aryan' race (people with blonde hair and blue eyes) were the best. So when Jesse came first in the long jump, Hitler gave him a Nazi salute and left the stadium.

Jesse Owens returned to the US a hero with four gold medals at the Olympic Games. It was an incredible achievement. He humiliated<sup>3</sup> the German Nazi Party and showed that Hitler's theory of a superior 'Aryan'

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3. **humiliate** : embarrass / shame.





race was completely wrong. Jesse hoped that this could bring change. The US constitution and federal law said that everyone was equal, but in the 1930s there was still racial segregation between white and black people. Black people sat separate from white people in churches, hospitals, theatres and schools. They had lower paid jobs and they couldn't enter many public places such as restaurants and hotels.

When Jesse returned from Berlin, he felt hopeful for the future, but he was disappointed when President Roosevelt did not congratulate<sup>4</sup> the eighteen African-American athletes and invited only white Olympians to the White House. Jesse didn't shake hands with Hitler and he also didn't shake hands with the president of the United States.

A true hero stands up for what is right and continues when life is difficult. Jesse Owens knew what he wanted to do and racial discrimination didn't stop him. It was a difficult period in history. Jesse and Luz sent letters to each other until Hitler invaded Poland. Suddenly the letters stopped. Jesse later discovered that Luz was killed in the war.

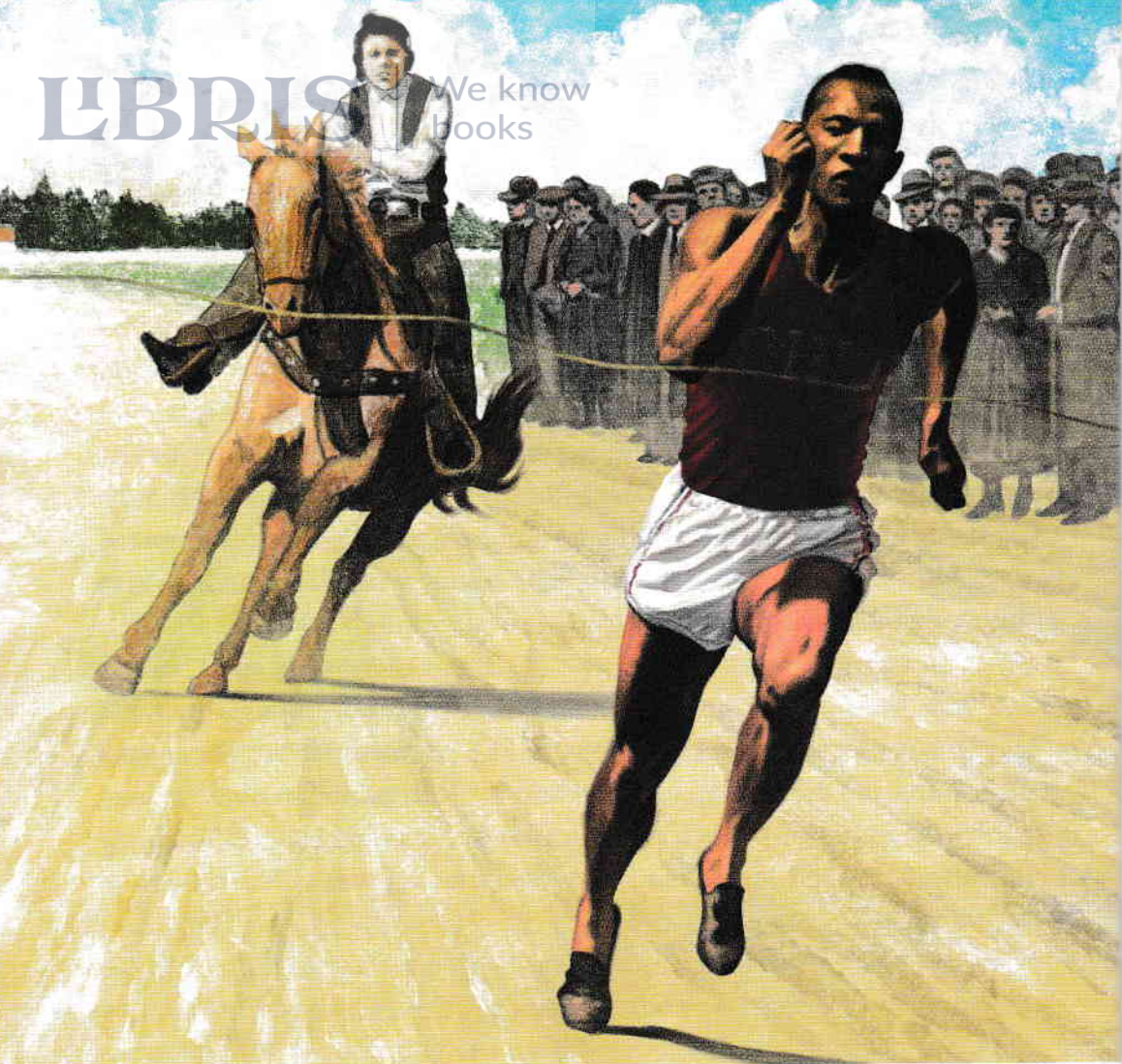
James Cleveland Owens was born on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1913 in Oakville, Alabama. When Jesse was a boy he wasn't a strong child and he watched his family working in the cotton fields. His grandfather was a former slave<sup>5</sup> and his family was very poor. Sometimes there wasn't enough food for Jesse and his nine brothers and sisters. The children worked hard to help their parents and had time to play in the fields. Jesse loved running. He ran everywhere without any shoes.

At the age of nine, Jesse's life changed when his family moved to Cleveland, Ohio. At school, Jesse discovered he could run like the wind. He was faster than all the other children. Charles Riley, a sports coach at the school, could see that Jesse had a real talent for running. He took Jesse under his wing. Jesse went to Charles Riley's home, which was unusual during a time of racial segregation. Charles Riley was a second

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4. **congratulate** : honour / praise.

5. **slave** : a person who belongs to another person.



father to Jesse. He took Jesse to watch racehorses running because he wanted to inspire his student. He taught Jesse to take short fast steps and to run as though the track was on fire. In 1933 Jesse took part in forty-two races and won all of them. Jesse went on to study at Ohio State University and then to the Olympics in 1936.

Jesse returned home after the Olympics a great hero, but life wasn't easy. Athletes in 1936 were not paid much. Jesse didn't have any money, so he took part in races, where he ran against horses. He started 36 metres in front of the horse and he usually won. People said an Olympic athlete shouldn't race against a horse, but Jesse replied, "What should I do? I had four gold medals, but you can't eat gold medals."



Jesse worked with young people from poor families all his life and became a good will ambassador for the US government. He was a great speaker. He often spoke to youth groups at sports dinners, church organisations and in high schools.

In 1976 Jesse finally visited the White House. President Ford gave him the Presidential Medal of Freedom and in 1979 President Carter gave him the Living Legend Award. President Carter said that Jesse Owens fought against poverty and racism. He worked with young athletes and gave them hope to continue with their dreams.

Jesse Owens is a hero, not only because he was an Olympic athlete, but because throughout his life he encouraged children to hold onto their dreams.

“We all have dreams,” he said, “and to make those dreams come true we need a lot of determination, dedication, self-discipline and effort.”

Jesse died on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1980. His three daughters work with the Jesse Owens Foundation. The Foundation gives financial help and support to talented young people.



## THINK!

### Friends and Heroes

**Luz Long and Jesse Owens were competing in the same event, but Luz helped Jesse.**

1. True friendship means helping someone and not being selfish. Do you agree? Why/Why not?
2. A true hero stands up for what is right. Do you agree? Why is Jesse Owens a hero? Can you give any examples of people who put others before themselves?
3. Do you have a sporting hero? Why do you like him/her?

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