

## **RACE – Film at CONCA VERDE on 10.10.16 - Talk by Joel Ormsby**

### **The film**

**Race** is based on the incredible true story of Jesse Owens, the legendary athletic superstar whose quest to become the greatest track and field athlete in history thrusts him onto the world stage of the 1936 Olympics, where he faces off against Adolf Hitler's vision of Aryan supremacy. *Race* is an enthralling film about courage, determination, tolerance, and friendship, and an inspiring drama about one man's fight to become an Olympic legend. The movie is directed by Stephen Hopkins who is more famous for Sci-Fi movies such as *Predator 2* and *Lost in Space*, this is one of his more dramatic films.

### **Critical response**

On Rotten Tomatoes, the film has a rating of 60% based on 126 reviews and an average rating of 6.1/10. The site's critical consensus reads: "*Race* is nowhere near as thrillingly fleet or agile as its subject, but the story – and a winning central performance from Stephan James – are enough to carry it over the finish line". Metacritic reports a score of 56 out of 100 based on 35 reviews, indicating "mixed or average reviews".

### **The cast**

Stephan James is a fairly new Canadian actor and plays Jesse Owens, the lead role.

Jason Sudekis plays Owens coach, Larry Snyder. He has previously acted in "Meet the Millers" and Saturday Night Live.

Carice Van Houten – The actress famous for starring in Game of Thrones as the Red Witch, plays Leni Riefenstahl, the famous German director of "the triumph of the will".

This film also features an appearance by the famous British actor Jeremy Irons who starred in "The Man who knew Infinity", another film that was shown here at the Conca Verde Cinema.

### **The man**

**James Cleveland "Jesse" Owens** (September 12, 1913 – March 31, 1980) was an American track and field athlete and four-time Olympic gold medallist in the 1936 games.

Owens specialized in the sprints and the long jump and was recognized in his lifetime as "perhaps the greatest and most famous athlete in track and field history". His achievement of setting three world records and tying another in less than an hour in Michigan 1935, has been called "the greatest 45 minutes ever in sport" and has never been equalled. At the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin, Germany, Owens won international fame with four gold medals: 100 meters, 200 meters, long jump, and 4 × 100 meter relay. He was the most successful athlete at the games and, as a black man, was credited with "single-handedly crushing Hitler's myth of Aryan supremacy", although he "wasn't invited to the White House to shake hands with the President, either."

Although only 23, Jesse Owens retired from amateur competition shortly after the Berlin Olympics in order to capitalize on his fame. This effectively brought his athletic career to an end. He later engaged in boys'-guidance activities, made goodwill visits to Asia for the US Department of State, and served as secretary of the Illinois State Athletic Commission. He died in 1980.

## The achievement

In 1936, Owens arrived in Berlin to compete for the United States at the Summer Olympics. According to fellow American athlete James LuValle, who won bronze in the 400 meters, Owens arrived in Berlin to a crowd of fans, many of them young girls, yelling. Many of them had come with scissors and had begun cutting Owens' clothing, forcing him to run back onto the train. After that, when Owens left the athletes' village, he usually had to go with some soldiers to protect him. Owens's success at the games represented a threat to Adolf Hitler, who was using the games to show the world a resurgent Nazi Germany. He and other government officials had high hopes that German athletes would dominate the games with victories. Meanwhile, Nazi propaganda promoted concepts of "Aryan racial superiority" and depicted others, including those of African descent, as inferior. Owens countered this by winning four gold medals. The long-jump victory is documented, along with many other 1936 events, in the 1938 film *Olympia* by Leni Riefenstahl.

On the first day of competition, Hitler shook hands with only the German victors and then left the stadium. Olympic committee officials insisted Hitler greet every medallist or none at all. Hitler chose for the latter and skipped all further medal presentations. Historians have noted that Hitler may have left the games at this time due to incoming rain clouds that might have postponed the games. This happened well before Owens was to compete, but has largely come to be believed to be the "snub". On reports that Hitler had deliberately avoided acknowledging his victories, and had refused to shake his hand, Owens said at the time: Hitler had a certain time to come to the stadium and a certain time to leave. It happened he had to leave before the victory ceremony after the 100 meters. But before he left I was on my way to a broadcast and passed near his box. He waved at me and I waved back. I think it was bad taste to criticize the 'man of the hour' in another country. Albert Speer wrote that Hitler "was highly annoyed by the series of triumphs by the marvellous coloured American runner, Jesse Owens. People whose antecedents came from the jungle were primitive, Hitler said with a shrug; their physiques were stronger than those of civilized whites and hence should be excluded from future games.

Owens, who joined the Republican Party after returning from Europe, was paid to campaign for African American votes for the Republican presidential nominee Alf Landon in the 1936 presidential election. Speaking at a Republican rally held in Baltimore on October 9, 1936, Owens said "Some people say Hitler snubbed me. But I tell you, Hitler did not snub me. I am not knocking the President. Remember, I am not a politician, but remember that the President did not send me a message of congratulations because, people said, he was too busy." Later, on October 15, 1936 Owens repeated this allegation when he addressed an audience of African Americans at a Republican rally in Kansas City remarking that "Hitler didn't snub me – it was our president who snubbed me. The president didn't even send me a message."

## Trivia

- Snyder buys Owens new shoes from shoemaker Adi Dassler, who would later found Adidas.
- The film coincides with the 80th anniversary of the 1936 Summer Olympics.
- Jesse Owens was born James Cleveland Owens. The name Jesse comes from his first two initials 'J' and 'C'.
- His achievement of setting three world records and tying another in less than an hour at the 1935 Big Ten track meet in Ann Arbor, Michigan, has been called "the greatest 45 minutes ever in sport".

- The German Zeppelin flying over the Olympiastadion during the beginning of the games is the LZ 129 Hindenburg. One year later, it exploded while docking at Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey, killing 36 people.
- Jesse Owens was the youngest of ten children.
- As shown in the movie, Jesse Owens won an individual record of 4 gold medals. What the movie does not show is that in the overall medal count by country, Germany won most: 89, of which 33 gold, 26 silver and 30 bronze. USA was second with 56 medals, of which 24 gold, 20 silver and 12 bronze. Other nations were far behind: Italy was third in the overall medal count.
- The Jesse Owens Award is USA Track and Field's highest accolade for the year's best track and field athlete.

## Conclusion

This story is the story of triumph over adversity. At the time Blacks in America were no more than slaves so it was a great achievement for Owens to become an Olympic winner. He was advised not to participate in the Nazi-run Olympics but ignored the advice because he had the confidence to be victorious in the face of opposition. A key quote of this film is "In those ten second, there's no black or white, only fast or slow." One of the ideas of this film is the need for a good role model. However, the event became more different than the race, as you will see in the film. This can be illustrated with the quote "I got people lookin' at me for an example." The need for a good black role model was even greater at the time. This film is very relevant now as it seems that racism is still very much a global problem. However, the idea that anyone can be a champion is a universal one that everyone can take inspiration from.

## Controversies

Reich Chancellor Adolf Hitler saw the Games as an opportunity to promote his government and ideals of racial supremacy. The official Nazi party paper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, wrote in the strongest terms that Jews and Black people should not be allowed to participate in the Games.<sup>[2][3]</sup> However, when threatened with a boycott of the Games by other nations, he relented and allowed Black people and Jews to participate, and added one token participant to the German team—a German woman, Helene Mayer, who had a Jewish father. At the same time, the party removed signs stating "Jews not wanted" and similar slogans from the city's main tourist attractions. In an attempt to "clean up" the host city, the German Ministry of the Interior authorized the chief of police to arrest all Romani (Gypsies) and keep them in a "special camp," the Berlin-Marzahn concentration camp.

## Political aspects

The Nazi regime organized the mass displays of Nazi propaganda and nationalist symbols across Germany during the events.

United States Olympic Committee president Avery Brundage became a main supporter of the Games being held in Germany, arguing that "politics has no place in sport", despite having initial doubts. Later Brundage requested that a system be established to examine female athletes for what *Time* magazine called "sex ambiguities" after observing the performance of Czechoslovak runner and jumper Zdenka Koubkova and English shotputter and javelin thrower Mary Edith Louise Weston (both individuals later had sex change surgery and legally changed their names to Zdenek Koubek and Mark Weston).

French Olympians gave a Roman salute at the opening ceremony: known as the *salut de Joinville* per the battalion fr: Bataillon de Joinville, the Olympic salute was part of the Olympic traditions since the

1924 games. However, due to the different context this action was mistaken by the crowd for a support to fascism (the Olympic salute was discarded after 1946).

Although Haiti only attended the opening ceremony, an interesting vexillological fact was noticed: its flag and the flag of Liechtenstein were coincidentally identical, and this was not discovered until then. The following year, a crown was added to Liechtenstein's to distinguish one flag from the other.

American sprinters Sam Stoller and Marty Glickman, the only two Jews on the U.S. Olympic team, were pulled from the 4 × 100 relay team on the day of the competition, leading to speculation that U.S. Olympic committee leader Brundage did not want to add to Hitler's embarrassment by having two Jews win gold medals.

In 1937, Hollywood released the film *Charlie Chan at the Olympics*. The plot concerned members of the Berlin police force helping the Chinese detective apprehend a group of spies (of unnamed nationality) trying to steal a new aerial guidance system. Despite pertaining to the Berlin Olympics, actual Games' footage used by the filmmakers was edited to remove any Nazi symbols.

After the Olympics, Jewish participation in German sports was further limited, and persecution of Jews started to become ever more lethal. The Olympic Games had provided a nine-month period of relative calmness.

### **Antisemitism**

The German Olympic committee, in accordance with Nazi directives, virtually barred Germans who were Jewish or Roma or had such an ancestry from participating in the Games (Helene Mayer was the only German Jew to compete at the Berlin Games). This decision meant exclusion for many of the country's top athletes such as shotputter and discus thrower Lilli Henoch, who was a four-time world record holder and 10-time German national champion, and Gretel Bergmann who was suspended from the German team just days after she set a record of 1.60 meters in the high jump.

Individual Jewish athletes from a number of countries chose to boycott the Berlin Olympics, including South African Sid Kiel, and Americans Milton Green and Norman Cahners. In the United States, the American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Labor Committee supported a boycott.

### **Boycott debate**

Prior to and during the Games, there was considerable debate outside Germany over whether the competition should be allowed or discontinued. Berlin had been selected by the IOC as the host city in 1931, but after Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933, observers in many countries began to question the morality of going ahead with an Olympic Games hosted by the Nazi regime. A number of brief campaigns to boycott or relocate the Games emerged in the United Kingdom, France, Sweden, Czechoslovakia and the Netherlands.<sup>[81]</sup> Exiled German political opponents of Hitler's regime also campaigned against the Berlin Olympics through pro-Communist newspapers such as the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*.

The protests were ultimately unsuccessful; in 1935 the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States voted to compete in the Berlin Games and other countries followed suit. Forty-nine teams from around the world participated in the 1936 Games, the largest number of participating nations of any Olympics to that point. However, in Spain, an alternative was organised in the IOC's second choice for a host city, Barcelona, although it was cancelled owing to supervening events.

## Spain

The Spanish government led by the newly elected left-wing Popular Front boycotted the Games and organized the People's Olympiad as a parallel event in Barcelona. Some 6,000 athletes from 49 countries registered. However, the People's Olympiad was aborted because of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War just one day before the event was due to start, just as thousands of athletes had begun to arrive.

## Soviet Union

The Soviet Union boycotted the 1936 Summer Olympics. Instead, through the auspices of the Red Sport International, it had participated in a left-wing workers' alternative, the Spartakiad, since 1928. The USSR had intended to attend the People's Olympiad in Barcelona until it was cancelled and did attend the 1937 Workers' Summer Olympiad in Antwerp, Belgium (both of which were Spartakiad events).

## Turkey

Halet Çambel and Suat Fetgeri Aani, the first Turkish and Muslim women athletes to participate in the Olympics (fencing), refused an offer by their guide to be formally introduced to Adolf Hitler, saying they would not shake hands with him due to his approach to Jews, as stated by Ms. Çambel in a *Milliyet* newspaper interview in 2000.

## United States

Traditionally the USA sent one of the largest teams to the Olympics, and there was a considerable debate over whether the United States should participate in the 1936 Games.

Those involved in the debate on whether to boycott the Olympics included Ernest Lee Jahncke, Judge Jeremiah Mahoney, and future IOC President Avery Brundage. Some within the United States considered requesting a boycott of the Games, as to participate in the festivity might be considered a sign of support for the Nazi regime and its anti-Semitic policies. However, others such as Brundage (see below) argued that the Olympic Games should not reflect political views, but rather should be strictly a contest of the greatest athletes.

Avery Brundage, then of the United States Olympic Committee, opposed the boycott, stating that Jewish athletes were being treated fairly and that the Games should continue. Brundage asserted that politics played no role in sports, and that they should never be entwined. Brundage also believed that there was a "Jewish-Communist conspiracy" that existed to keep the United States from competing in the Olympic Games.<sup>[70]</sup> On the subject of Jewish discrimination, he stated, "The very foundation of the modern Olympic revival will be undermined if individual countries are allowed to restrict participation by reason of class, creed, or race."

During a fact-finding trip that Brundage went on to Germany in 1934 to ascertain whether German Jews were being treated fairly, Brundage found no discrimination when he interviewed Jews and his Nazi handlers translated for him, and Brundage commiserated with his hosts that he belonged to a sports club in Chicago that did not allow Jews entry, either. Unlike Brundage, Jeremiah Mahoney supported a boycott of the Games. Mahoney, the president of the Amateur Athletic Union, led newspaper editors and anti-Nazi groups to protest against American participation in the Berlin Olympics. He contested that racial discrimination was a violation of Olympic rules and that participation in the Games was tantamount to support for the Third Reich.

Most African-American newspapers supported participation in the Olympics. The Philadelphia *Tribune* and the *Chicago Defender* both agreed that black victories would undermine Nazi views of Aryan supremacy and spark renewed African-American pride. American Jewish organizations, meanwhile, largely opposed the Olympics. The American Jewish Congress and the Jewish Labor Committee staged rallies and supported the boycott of German goods to show their disdain for American participation.<sup>[70]</sup> The JLC organized the World Labor Athletic Carnival, held on August 15 and 16 at New York's Randall's Island, to protest the holding of the 1936 Olympics in Nazi Germany.

Eventually, Brundage won the debate, convincing the Amateur Athletic Union to close a vote in favor of sending an American team to the Berlin Olympics. Mahoney's efforts to incite a boycott of the Olympic games in the United States failed.

US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his administration did not become involved in the debate due to a tradition of allowing the US Olympic Committee to operate independently of government influence. However, several American diplomats including William E. Dodd, the American ambassador to Berlin, and George Messersmith, head of the US legation in Vienna, deplored the US Olympic Committee's decision to participate in the games.

### **The sponsors**

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### **The film show**

**This is the last film in English this year. The next three films will be in Spanish – part of the Festival del Cine Espanol.**

**Enjoy the film!**