

That Golden Moment: Jesse Owens and Identity

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can Jesse Owens acceptance of his own identity inspire you in the development of your own identity?
- **Virtue:** Identity
- **Definition** – Identity answers the question, “Who am I?”
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will explore the life Jesse Owens and how it was shaped by his identity. Through his example, students will understand how they can develop their own identity and how this develop will help them advance freedom in their own lives.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will analyze Jesse Owens life and actions and how they were shaped by his identity
 - Students will understand how they can develop their own identity
 - Students will apply this knowledge to focus and refine their personal identity
- **Background**
 - The son of an Alabama sharecropper and grandson of slaves, James Cleveland “Jesse” Owens rose from the humblest of roots to become one of the most admired Americans and greatest athletes of the twentieth century. Owens defined himself by his accomplishments on the racetrack, but others struggled to see beyond his African American heritage. His gold medal victories in the 1936 Berlin Olympics proved the fallibility of the Nazi philosophy of Aryan superiority, and the treatment Owens received on his triumphant return to the United States highlighted the segregationist leanings of many in the country—even among the nation’s highest leaders. Despite these challenges, Owens became an inspiration for many Americans and an example of how even the best Americans could suffer in a society that still struggled with institutionalized racial discrimination.
- **Vocabulary**
 - Sharecropper
 - Fallibility
 - Aryan
 - Triumphant
 - Institutionalized
 - Acclaimed
 - Subhuman
 - Segregation
 - Amateur
 - Enraptured
 - Adversity
- **Introduce Text**
 - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
 - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
 - Who was Jesse Owens?
 - What did Jesse Owens accomplish during the 1936 Olympics?
 - How does Jesse Owens experience in the 1936 Olympics help shape his identity?

- **Discussion Questions**
 - Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
 - “Jesse Owens.” Encyclopedia of Alabama. Web. 29 June 2015.
<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/h-1259>
 - “Jesse Owens Dies of Cancer at 66; Hero of the 1936 Berlin Olympics.” New York Times On the Web Learning Network. Web. 29 June 2015.
<http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0912.html>
 - “Jesse Owens Olympic Legend.” Jesse Owens Trust c/o Luminary Group LLC. Web. 29 June 2015.
<http://www.jesseowens.com/>
 - Schwartz, Larry. “Owens pierced a myth.” ESPN.com. Web. 29 June 2015.
<http://espn.go.com/sportscentury/features/00016393.html>

Handout A: That Golden Moment: Jesse Owens and Identity

Background

The son of an Alabama sharecropper and grandson of slaves, James Cleveland “Jesse” Owens rose from the humblest of roots to become one of the most admired Americans and greatest athletes of the twentieth century. Owens defined himself by his accomplishments on the racetrack, but others struggled to see beyond his African American heritage. His gold medal victories in the 1936 Berlin Olympics proved the fallibility of the Nazi philosophy of Aryan superiority, and the treatment Owens received on his triumphant return to the United States highlighted the segregationist leanings of many in the country—even among the nation’s highest leaders. Despite these challenges, Owens became an inspiration for many Americans and an example of how even the best Americans could suffer in a society that still struggled with institutionalized racial discrimination.

Narrative

Jesse Owens was born in Alabama in 1913, the youngest of ten children. Like many Southern sharecroppers, Jesse’s family had little in the way of wealth or prospects, and he shared in the hard and painful work of picking cotton. At the age of nine, he and his family moved to Cleveland, Ohio where his father and brother assumed better-paying and securer jobs in heavy industry. Young Jesse also had to work to support his family, and he too worked a variety of jobs while attending school.

In middle school, Jesse cultivated a lasting love of track and field events. By the time he had entered high school, Jesse was a nationally acclaimed athlete, tying the record for the 100-yard dash. His accomplishments on the field led him to join Ohio State University’s athletics program.

At Ohio State, Owens continued to smash records. Known as the “Buckeye Bullet,” Owens won eight NCAA championships. Just before one famous match, Owens injured his back and suffered which limited his mobility for several days. His teammates advised him to withdraw from the competition. Undaunted, Owens competed anyway and set three new world records and tied a fourth.

While his athletic accomplishments multiplied, life outside the track field was much harsher. Because he was not offered an athletics scholarship by the university, Owens worked at night to pay for his education and support his wife and child. When the track team traveled for competitions, he was forced to stay in blacks-only accommodations, and to eat his meals in segregated restaurants. Though Ohio was not in the South, Owens was still prohibited from living on campus because of his race.

Just one year later, Owens traveled to Berlin, Germany to represent the United States in the 1936 Olympics. In Germany, Adolf Hitler’s ruling Nazi Party believed in the superiority of the Aryan race. Blacks like Jesse Owens were considered subhuman, inferior and incapable of the intellectual and physical feats performed by their white counterparts. The Nazis expected that Aryan and German athletes would dominate the games and demonstrate the superiority of Aryan-German society.

With Hitler looking on, Owens beat his German competitors and won four gold medals.

While Owens won international acclaim, his reception in the United States was much cooler. He was not invited to meet President Franklin D. Roosevelt as the other Olympic medalists had, nor did he receive any acknowledgement or congratulations from the White House. While in Germany, Owens had been afforded the same rights and privileges as his fellow white athletes. In the United States, however, he was subject to the same segregation laws which denied him his equal rights as before. He could not ride at the front of the bus, enter businesses through the front door, stay at whites-only hotels or live in white neighborhoods. When Owens left international competition to pursue endorsement offers, officials stripped him of his amateur status and barred him from competing in future Olympics events.

For many years Owens struggled to make ends meet. In 1946 he helped found a Negro baseball league, but it quickly folded. He became a sports promoter and even ran races against horses and cars. In time he found a second calling as a motivational speaker, sharing his experiences as an Olympic champion, and telling of his

struggle to overcome racial discrimination in the pursuit of athletic excellence. Owens left audiences enraptured, and he was soon appointed a United States goodwill ambassador, traveling the world to share his story of triumph in the midst of adversity.

He remains a leading example of an individual who never abandoned his African American identity in a society that sought to prevent African American upward mobility. By winning four gold medals in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Owens decisively proved to the world the fallacy of the doctrine of white racial supremacy and brought attention to the need to extend equal rights to all individuals, no matter their origin. Similarly, he never lost his identity as a champion athlete, even after his Olympic career had finished. During times of adversity, he remembered what he had already achieved and could yet accomplish. Looking back on his life, Owens observed, "Time has stood still for me. That golden moment dies hard."