

## Chapter 3 Excerpt

But 1936 was more than just a time when white males were dominant socially and athletically, when black men were not even allowed to compete against white men. It was also a turning point, for after 1936 America's and the world's perception of the black athlete would be forever changed. In supreme irony, the primary agent of that change would be history's most notorious racist, Adolph Hitler. The 1936 Olympic Games—in some ways the most momentous in history—were held in Berlin and presided over by the German Chancellor. Hitler had hoped that the elaborately staged games would confirm, before the entire world, his insane racial theories.

But all the scientific training and extraordinary preparation of finely tuned German athletes would prove totally inadequate when faced with the inherited physical superiority of the sons of the deadly West African forests, led by Jesse Owens. In one of the greatest Olympic performances of all time, Owens would win four gold medals, frustrate the butcher of Berlin, entertain the German people, delight the American people (black and white alike), and begin the process of imprinting on the world's consciousness the image of the black American as a great athlete.

Jesse Owens was not alone that year in knocking white males off their perch atop the athletic world. Although he would not win the world heavyweight title until the following year, another poor son of the South, Joe Louis, would serve dramatic notice of his arrival on the world stage with a devastating knockout of the former world champion, Max Baer. For black athletes, 1936 was the start of a long, slow, but inevitable rise to the very pinnacle of the athletic world.

That rise would be accompanied almost inevitably, given the racist sentiments of the time, by an enormous wave of white anxiety and an explosion of pseudo-scientific explanations of black athletic dominance. Shaking off slave era theories of black anatomical and physiological inferiority, white commentators strained myth and imagination to concoct new theories to both accommodate the unshakable concept of white superiority and explain the hard reality of black athletic dominance. As extraordinary as it seems from today's perspective, such theories were not regarded at the time by white society as offensive. After all, the most popular radio program of the era, *Amos 'n' Andy*, was based on crude racial stereotypes. But so popular was the program that stores and movie theaters were obliged to broadcast it to prevent patrons from rushing home at airtime. It was so popular that reportedly even President Calvin Coolidge demanded that he not be disturbed during the fifteen minutes the program was aired every weekday at 7:00 p.m.

But America was changing. The world was changing. The year began with the death of George V of England in January and ended with the abdication of his son, Edward VIII, in December. The destruction of Victorian values that the Abdication dramatized was underlined by the burning of the Crystal Palace, that last relic of authentic Victorianism. In between, Germany occupied the Rhineland and started filling the concentration camps, the Spanish Civil War began, and Italy escalated its unchecked and barbarous assault on Ethiopia by deploying poison gas against the lightly armed Africans. In this country, Hitler's murderous excesses helped to sound the death knell of the old eugenics which had once argued in favor of sterilization and racial purification, and gradually relegated public assertions of black biological inferiority to the lunatic fringe of white society.

However, the silencing of the public debate would also leave unresolved the subject matter of this book: the reason or reasons for the unquestionable athletic superiority of black athletes, and the implications of the answer to that question.