

## Chapter 7 Excerpt

**H**e was only 5-foot-7, and today very few Americans would recognize his name, but in some ways Eddie Tolan was a giant. He certainly was the first great black sprinter. Largely unhindered by the organized discrimination that kept them out of baseball, basketball, football, and even boxing, black Americans had competed successfully in the Olympic Games as early as 1904 when George Poage won a bronze medal in the 400-meter hurdles in St. Louis. In the 1924 Paris Games a pair of black Americans, William Dehart Hubbard and Edward Gourdin, took the gold and silver medals in the long jump. Hubbard, a student at the University of Michigan, became the first black athlete to win an Olympic gold medal. Gourdin, who was then the world record holder, became the first black American to sit on the Massachusetts Supreme Court.

But Tolan was the first great black track and field athlete, and he began what would become an extraordinary dominance of international sprinting by black males of West African origin. Like Hubbard, Tolan was a student at the University of Michigan when he was selected to represent his nation in the Olympics. He had dominated U. S. sprinting from 1929 to 1931 but was dethroned by Ralph Metcalfe in 1932. Metcalfe, another of America's great black sprinters, breezed through the 1932 season undefeated and beat Tolan in the 100 and 200 meters at the U. S. Olympic Trials, and went to Los Angeles as the prohibitive favorite. But Tolan recaptured his form at the Olympics and set an Olympic record of 10.4 seconds in the second round; in one of the closest finishes in Olympic history, Tolan edged out Metcalfe by two inches in the final.

Metcalfe and Tolan renewed their rivalry in the 200 meters, with both men breaking the existing Olympic record in the heats. In the final, the little American was at his best, winning by almost six feet and setting a new Olympic record of 21.2 seconds. Metcalfe, who inadvertently dug his starting hole three or four feet behind where it should have been, had to settle for the bronze. Four years later, at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Metcalfe was still one of America's greatest sprinters. But the man who was to finally become a winner, when he was elected to the U. S. Congress thirty-four years later, was destined to once again play second fiddle in the Olympics, this time to one of the greatest track and field athletes of all time. Jesse Owens had announced his arrival on the international track scene on May 25, 1935, with what is even today the greatest single day performance of all time.

While competing at the Big Ten Championships at Ann Arbor, Michigan, Owens broke five world records and equaled a sixth, all in a mere forty-five minutes. He began his epic day at 3:15 p.m. by equaling the world record of 9.4 seconds in the 100-yard dash. Ten minutes later he broke the world record in the long jump by six inches with a leap of 26 feet 8¼ inches. It was his only jump of the day, but the new record was not broken for a quarter of a century. At 3:45, Owens won the 220-yard sprint by ten yards in 20.3 seconds and chipped three-tenths of a second off the existing world record. He was also given credit for lowering the world record in the shorter 200-meter dash. At 4:00, he capped his incredible day by becoming the first man to break 23 seconds in the 220-yard low hurdles with a time of 22.6 seconds. Along the way, Owens also established a world record for the 200-meter hurdles.

The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin was perhaps the most memorable in history. The German Chancellor, Adolph Hitler, had hoped the elaborately staged games would confirm his theories of Aryan superiority. Aryans, he believed, were the Promethean bearers of light. Only they were capable, he claimed, of establishing states and founding cultures. Mingling with subject peoples had caused decline

and downfall, but all that would change in the Third Reich. Hitler's National Socialist revolution was designed to do more than merely create new institutions.

Hitler's goal was also to develop a new type of man, a pure Aryan type that could be recovered by eugenic measures, including special laws regulating marriage and programs of sterilization and euthanasia. While he spoke of the "superiority of the mind over the flesh," Hitler expected his new man to combine Spartan hardiness with "the instinct to annihilate others." The ability of Aryan supermen to dominate others physically, on the athletic field and on the battleground, was an essential part of Hitler's preparation for world conquest.

In Hitler's Germany, blacks were regarded as an inferior species and the United States was taunted for relying on "black auxiliaries." But in stunning performances that presaged their current dominance, black American male athletes, led by Jesse Owens, won gold medals in the 100-meter, 200-meter, 400-meter and 800-meter runs, and the 110-meter hurdles, the long jump, and the high jump. Black men also won silver medals in the 100-meter and 200-meter runs, and the high jump, and competed in the 400-meter relay team, which won the gold medal.

Owens won the 100, 200, and long jump at the U. S. Olympic Trials and arrived in Berlin as the favorite in all three events. The 23-year-old son of sharecroppers and grandson of slaves was unfazed by the heavy glare of the international spotlight. Handling himself with remarkable aplomb, Owens tied the Olympic record of 10.3 seconds in the first round and easily won his semifinal heat in 10.4 seconds, while Metcalfe won the other in 10.5 seconds. In the final, Owens blazed into the lead from the first stride and held-off a fast-finishing Metcalfe to win by a full yard. The final of the 200 meters was run in a light rain, but Owens overwhelmed the field and won by four yards in an Olympic record time of 20.7 seconds to win his third gold medal of the Games. Mark Robinson, the older brother of baseball immortal Jackie Robinson, was a surprise winner of the silver medal.