



Documentary, Olympics exhibit team up to educate about 1936 Berlin Games

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We've just endured a valuable lesson in history thanks to a pair of cooperating Chicago-area museums.

What you think is a landmark event from which everything subsequently sprung actually had lesser-known back stories that are absolutely crucial to the timeline.

The example here is Jackie Robinson, whose society-changing journey sparked the momentum to integrate and equalize life, not just the venerable institution of baseball. But Robinson likely does not push the chains forward in his era without the precedent of 18 African-American members, including two women and his sprinter brother Mack Robinson, competing with the U.S. Olympic team at the controversial 1936 Berlin Olympics.



Actor Blair Underwood, narrator and executive producer of *Olympic Pride, American Prejudice*, with Deborah Riley Draper, writer-producer, at the film's Chicago debut at the Du Sable Museum of African-American history.

Robinson's story will be told again by an upcoming Ken Burns' documentary. However, another documentary — *Olympic Pride, American Prejudice* — postulates that the integration of major team sports and resulting influence on other issues would have been pushed back perhaps another decade if not for the achievements of the 1936 Olympians.

In its rough-cut form with more editing and several interviews yet to be done, *Olympic Pride, American Prejudice* had four recent full-house showings at both the Du Sable Museum of African-American History on Chicago's South Side and the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center in Skokie. Filmgoers at Du Sable cheered the vintage black and white images of the Olympians sprinting and jumping to glory.

The timing of the documentary with respected actor Blair Underwood as narrator and executive producer was perfect. Originally unrelated to its production was the Holocaust Museum's acquisition of a Berlin Olympics exhibit to coincide with an Olympic year and running through August.

Four years ago, Holocaust Museum curator Arielle Weininger booked the traveling exhibit, originated by the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. in 1996. But she had no idea at the time interest in the '36 Olympics would be further stoked by two movies.

When the Underwood film became available, the Du Sable museum linked up with the Skokie center for a cooperative effort. The last of four showings of *Olympic Pride, American Prejudice* took place at the Holocaust museum exactly a week after a record opening crowd – more than 400 -- viewed the Berlin Olympics exhibit.

Viewing the film or the exhibit or both, history-loving patrons learned some profound facts on the 80th anniversary of the Berlin Olympics. Further stimulating was *Race*, a feature film just released on the market, about incomparable track superstar Jesse Owens' quartet of gold medals in Berlin. The film took nearly 80 years to make.

Period-piece feature films often too costly

Such historical productions are tough to finance and complete, said Underwood, who himself played a black Cuban-American U.S. president in the 2010-11 NBC sci-fi series *The Event*.

"That's why this film had to be made, even though it's a documentary," said Underwood. "It's so difficult to tell any period piece, No. 1. The expense, you're dealing with the racial elements, it's challenging to get financing dealing with period elements. You put the two together, it's even more challenging.

"There are thousands of stories like this one. Not just Jesse, but the other 17 [athletes, including future Chicago congressman Ralph Metcalfe]. It takes time. Better late than never."

The 18 Olympians, triple the number of African Americans who had been named to the 1932 U.S. team in Los Angeles, had opened the door just enough for the concept of integration on a more widespread basis to take hold. A strong U.S. effort to boycott the Olympics due to the mounting German discrimination against Jews might have changed Adolf Hitler's policies if it had succeeded. Finally, the Nazis' elaborately-staged Olympic extravaganza introduced the politicization and national marketing of the international games that is standard today.

Underwood and writer-director Deborah Riley Draper knew Owens dominated the 1936 Games and literally ran Hitler's promotion of a Nazi "master race" clear out of the stadium. Owens' lightning-fast efforts tended to obscure the feats and groundbreaking status of the 17 other Olympians of color. They were truly the first significant integrated U.S. sports institution, the athletes triumphing while representing a racist country and competing in a racist nation which would eventually resort to genocide to fulfill its policies.

The '36 Olympians were able to compete on the 400-member U.S. team because of international Olympic rules barred discrimination on the basis of race and religion. They were largely drawn from northern or West Coast colleges, which had recruited a limited number of African Americans for their athletic programs as the 1930s progressed. The non-discrimination edict covered Olympic trials, in which their talents first stuck out.

They were literally the vanguard of integration. Joe Louis had yet to win his longtime heavyweight boxing title in 1936. Major League Baseball, the country's only significant team sport at the time, had been lily-white for nearly 50 years with African Americans segregated to the Negro League. The NFL, at the time little better than a barnstorming league, had kicked out its nine black players, including a player-co-head coach in Fritz Pollard, after the 1926 season. Pro basketball was small potatoes – and all-white.

Getting the ball rolling for justice

Yet thanks to the achievements of Owens and his teammates, agitation increased by the African-American media, soon spreading to progressive whites, to break sports and societal color barriers. The process took a decade. The momentum was aided by African-Americans' active, and heroic, military participation in World War II and racist Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis' death in 1944. The end results included Robinson's MLB debut in 1947 and the start of the desegregation of public life.



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No more eminent Du Sable Museum patron of *Olympic Pride, American Prejudice* than Bears Hall of Famer Richard Dent, MVP of Super Bowl XX, recognized how much his and other generations of black athletes owe to the 1936 Olympians led by Owens.

"We will forever be in his debt to honor them," Dent said. "What sports does when it comes down to racial lines is reality, where people appreciate one another. When people compete, it's not about a race. It's about how people enjoy each other. That's the appreciation of an athlete to an athlete."

Both the documentary and exhibit detail how African-American Olympic hopefuls' aspirations actually clashed with the Olympic boycott effort. From the first days of

Hitler's mounting discrimination against Jews in 1933, the U.S. boycott effort gained steam, and stood to spread to other countries. The *New York Times* backed the boycott. While NAACP President Walter White supported the boycott, black athletes and the then-influential black press desired the trip to Berlin to demonstrate the Olympians' talents on an even, non-segregated international playing field.

The key player tipping the scales in the end was Avery Brundage, then head of the American Olympic Committee. Brundage initially supported the concept of moving the

Summer Games. But after falling for the Nazis' line of a peaceful country during a tightly-managed trip to Germany in 1934, Brundage outmaneuvered boycott advocates to win a narrow Amateur Athletic Union vote to make the trip. The WASP-y Brundage, no ethnic-rights advocate, would be heard from again in an issue involving Jews, a German Olympics and a shutdown of game participation. In 1972, he was the aging International Olympic Committee chairman who ensured the Munich Summer Games continued even after Palestinian terrorists massacred 11 Israeli Olympians.

Like Brundage, much of the world fell for the Germans' Potemkin's Village — glittery on the outside, rotten behind the façade — spectacle. They took down almost all the anti-Semitic signs and banners around Berlin in advance of the Games. Owens was followed everywhere by adoring fans while other black athletes were treated courteously, even wrangling dinner invitations. A world press that had previously ripped the Nazis actually praised the locals for showing their humanity.

The gullibility continued long past Kristallnacht, the Nazis' opening salvo of large-scale violence against Jews in Nov. 1938. The IOC still voted to return to Germany for the 1940 Winter Games. However, Germany canceled the Games shortly after the outbreak of World War II.

U.S. envoys were not fooled

Two key U.S. diplomats were not fooled by the Nazis' false front. In 1933, George Messersmith, No. 2 man at the Berlin Embassy, had been the proverbial canary in the coal mine. He wrote his State Dept. bosses that many top German officials displayed "psychopathic" behavior and would be treated in mental hospitals if they were not actually running the country. Two years later, as head of the U.S. legation in Vienna, Messersmith penned Secretary of State Cordell Hull this statement after the boycott was averted: "I am of the opinion that the AOC, in taking the stand which it has, has failed in its duty toward the young people of our country."

Meanwhile, as the Games ended, U.S. Ambassador William Dodd knew how the Germans would behave once the tourists and media went home. "Jews awaited with fear and trembling the end of the Olympic truce," Dodd wrote. Finally removed from his post in late 1937 under pressure from State Dept. nay-sayers, Dodd made many public appearances speaking out against Hitler in the remaining years of his life.

In another twist, two Jewish Olympians, Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller, were bumped for the 4 by 100 relay in Berlin in favor of the assured speed of Owens and Ralph Metcalfe, who teamed for the gold medal. Anti-Semitism on the part of Brundage and other U.S. officials in this action was suspected, but never proved.

Seven American Jews participated on the U.S. team. Sam Balter was a member of the gold-medalist basketball team. Herman Goldberg was a catcher on the baseball team.

The triumph of the Games, though, belonged to the black athletes. Other gold-medal winners were Archie Williams in the 400-meter relay and Cornelius Johnson in the high jump. Silver medals were run by trackmen Mack Robinson, John Woodruff and David Albritton, and bantamweight boxer Jackie Wilson. Fritz Pollard, Jr., son of the banned pro football player-coach, gathered a bronze in the 110 meters.

Owens on fringes of broadcasting

The tragedy for the 18 was Owens' inability to cash in on his Olympic fame. Somehow the elite of the black community did not offer him a prominent role. While raising three daughters — who have been prominent in his commemoration this year — in Chicago, he often had to scratch for a living. The most humiliating was having to race against thoroughbreds. Owens had a short sportscasting career in the 1960s, but not on a mainstream station as Wendell Smith enjoyed at WGN. Owens read sports on *A Black's View of the News* on low-budget WCIU-TV (Channel 26) and WAAF-Radio (AM 950), an outlet that often changed format and call letters.

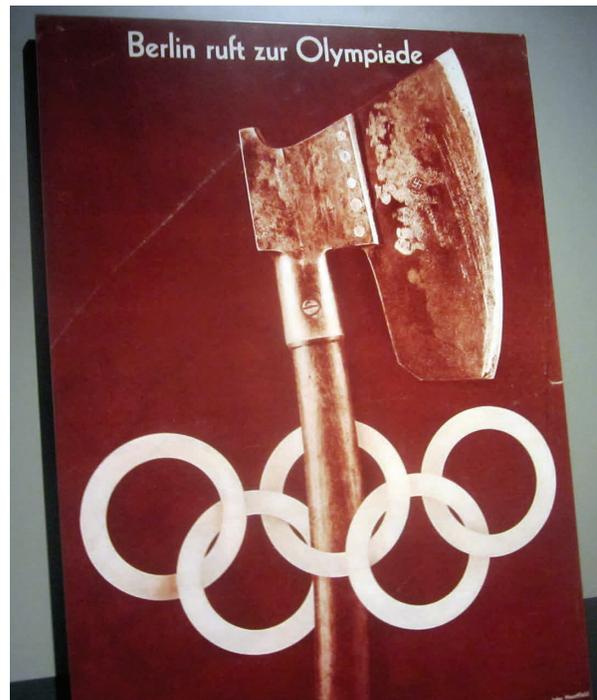
Metcalfé fared much better. Elected to Chicago's City Council in 1955, he succeeded retiring Congressman William Dawson, who ran a political machine-within-the-Cook County Democratic machine, in 1970. While going on to serve four terms, Metcalfé broke with the establishment and ripped Mayor Richard J. Daley over the issue of police brutality in 1972. Some things in Chicago do not change.

Another Chicagoan was Pollard. After serving as a rare black captain-adjutant to a white U.S. Army general in World War II, he settled down as a prominent attorney in the Rogers Park neighborhood.

Williams became a flight instructor for the famed Tuskegee Airmen, molded into an elite fighter-group unit by 1945. Other Berlin Olympics alumni obtained graduate degrees and were prominent in their communities.

The sidelined Glickman quickly cashed in as a New York sportscaster, working Knicks and NFL Giants games for decades and earning induction into the broadcasters' wing of the Basketball Hall of Fame. Stoller was a little less successful, dabbling in show business.

No matter how they fared post-Olympics, those who competed and others who were benched had an impact that has reverberated the better part of a century. The speed and dexterity the Olympians flashed in 1936 garnered medals in the short run and society's appreciation long-term.



This poster of the Olympics symbol intertwined with the German executioner's axe, on display at the Illinois Holocaust Museum, shows that many were not fooled by the Nazis' showmanship in staging the 1936 Olympics.