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**CONSTITUTING THE IDEAL AMERICAN:
JESSE OWENS AND THE RHETORIC OF ATHLETIC ACHIEVEMENT**

A Thesis in

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that Jesse Owens, Olympic track star and hero of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, has been used as a symbolic figure to rhetorically constitute American ideals through his sporting achievements, and that such a constitution is beneficial in helping various rhetors to accomplish other rhetorical tasks. Beginning with Gerald Ford, who awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Owens, the presidency has consistently and repeatedly upheld Owens as an example of the ideal American in order to reinforce nationalism and to provide citizens with a model for how they ought to live. Through his autobiographies, Owens negotiates the tension between his status as an ideal American and the racial discrimination he experienced by maintaining that he accomplished his athletic feats and overcame hardships through strength of character and by accepting personal responsibility for his success rather than blaming his misfortunes on social conditions. The Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum rhetorically induces a nationalistic argument that Owens's athletic achievements in the 1936 Olympics served as a triumph over the Nazi ideology and as an example of a citizen attaining the American Dream, while ignoring ongoing racial tensions in the United States throughout Owens's lifetime. Owens and his athletic achievements function as a particularly useful symbol because they allow speakers to accomplish a variety of significant rhetorical tasks: to reinforce American nationalism, to help citizens cope with the disparity between promised American ideals and reality, to re-imagine historical attitudes toward race, and to bolster the myth of the American Dream.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Young children often describe professional athletes as their heroes. Perceiving professional athletes to be successful adults, children can recognize admirable qualities in their favorite sporting figures: hard work, determination, passion, talent, the ability to overcome obstacles, sportsmanship, and good character. But athletes are not just praised by children. In a society yearning for positive role models and sources of inspiration, sporting figures are often cited as heroic. Sometimes, these athletes earn their “hero” labels in part from what they have accomplished outside the sporting arena. Lance Armstrong overcame testicular cancer en route to winning the Tour de France an unprecedented seven times. Pat Tillman was admired for walking away from a \$3.6 million dollar contract with the National Football League’s Arizona Cardinals in 2002 to serve in the Iraq War, where he was killed by friendly fire two years later in Afghanistan.¹ Many athletes are commended for their charity work and philanthropy, for instance, Tiger Woods. In addition being recognized as one of the greatest golfers in history and being one of the first minorities to break through in the historically elite sport, Woods is also one of the biggest charity draws in professional sports. The Tiger Woods Foundation reported a net worth of \$37 million in 2007.² Other sporting figures are admired predominantly for their athletic prowess, such as Major League Baseball player Cal Ripken, Jr. and his “iron man” streak of 2,632 consecutive games played over sixteen seasons.³ Another example is National Basketball Association star Michael Jordan, often heralded as the greatest basketball player of all time and credited with popularizing the sport around the world. Still, other athletes are respected for being social pioneers in addition to their physical talents. Jackie Robinson and Hank Aaron are honored for

breaking the color barrier in professional baseball, while Venus and Serena Williams are touted as role models for minority women hoping to excel in tennis, a traditionally white, upper-class sport.

Athletes are admired for many reasons and by many people. Even our nation's political leaders routinely express their admiration for athletic accomplishments by honoring American sporting figures at the White House in public ceremonies. Some athletes have been officially recognized as American heroes through awards and commemorations. For instance, in 1976, Gerald Ford was the first president to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to an athlete by honoring U.S. Olympic track hero Jesse Owens, who won a record four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics in Berlin.⁴ By presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens, Ford needed to explain how Owens's feats of athleticism merited recognition by contributing toward the security or national interests of the United States, world peace, and/or cultural endeavors—the criteria for bestowing the medal. Thus, Ford had to make a rhetorical connection between Owens's athletic achievements and American ideals in order to explain his worthiness of being awarded the Medal of Freedom. To put it more simply, awarding Jesse Owens with the Medal of Freedom meant recognizing Owens as a symbol of what it means to be a good American. Following Ford's lead, subsequent administrations have awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to such notable sports figures as Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, Arthur Ashe, Hank Aaron, Muhammad Ali, Arnold Palmer, and Joe DiMaggio.⁵

Whether it is the President of the United States or an average American who upholds a successful athlete as deserving of admiration by others, explaining their

eneration of the sporting figure requires that rhetorical links be made between athletic accomplishment and widely accepted American ideals. This thesis proposes to study the relationship between sport, athletic achievement, and American ideals—specifically, how are American ideals constituted rhetorically through the celebration of sporting achievement, and for what purposes? To explore this proposition, I will investigate how Jesse Owens, Olympic track and field hero, is repeatedly upheld as an ideal American by different speakers because of his unprecedented athletic accomplishments during the politically charged 1936 Olympics in Berlin.

The idea that Jesse Owens symbolically embodies American ideals through his record-setting performance in the 1936 Olympics is an intriguing one, because as a black man, Owens certainly did not fit the prototype of an ideal American. In *Heroes Without a Country*, Donald McRae points to Jesse Owens and Joe Louis as the two athletes who “changed everything” by becoming the “first black stars in American sports” during a time when America was still deeply segregated.⁶ At the time, Owens’s athletic abilities were accounted for in racial terms by Dean Cromwell, the U.S. team’s sprint coach: “[T]he negro athlete excels because he is closer to the primitive than the white athlete. It was not so long ago that that his ability to sprint and jump was a life-and-death matter to him in the jungle.”⁷ Owens was looked down upon, even derided, as a black man. Yet he was also celebrated as an American hero because of his performance in the Olympics. In such a way, Owens poses a curious paradox. By examining how Owens’s athletic achievements are rhetorically constituted as upholding and reinforcing strong American ideals, we can reveal how such a contradiction is reconciled. Through this project, we might also be able to better understand the persuasive capacity of sport more broadly,

how sport can serve to reinforce dominant American ideals, and how speakers can use sport as a vehicle to accomplish other tasks.

Jesse Owens is an optimum choice for reflection because he has been repeatedly used as the classic example of an athlete using his abilities not just for his own glory or the glory of his race, but to represent his country. Despite his color, Owens has been consistently praised as an inspiration to all Americans, one example being his selection as the first athletic figure honored with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Time and time again, Owens has been acknowledged as one of the most influential athletes in American history because of his triumph in Berlin, and usually without mention of the racism that plagued Owens here in the United States. After Ford awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Owens in 1976, George H.W. Bush posthumously bestowed the Congressional Medal of Honor upon Owens in 1990.⁸ The Congressional Medal of Honor is typically given to an individual serving in the Armed Forces of the United States, and is the “highest award for valor in action against an enemy force.”⁹ In an interview with ESPN’s Dan Patrick in 1999, President Bill Clinton proclaimed Owens to be the most important athlete of the twentieth century because “he won the multiple Olympic gold medals in the face of Nazi Germany and against Hitler's racial theories.”¹⁰ *Time* magazine named Owens one of the top ten most influential athletes of the century, declaring him to be “white America's first black athletic hero” and “a sign of things to come” in terms of racial equality in the United States.¹¹ As part of its 80th anniversary celebration, *Time* magazine included Owens’s Olympic performance in its list of “eighty days that changed the world.”¹² *Sports Illustrated* listed Owens’s world record-shattering performance at the 1935 Big Ten championship track meet as the number-one most

impressive collegiate sporting feats of all time.¹³ *Sports Illustrated* also selected Owens's run to Olympic glory as one of a handful of sporting events that "changed the world."¹⁴

Owens is remembered not only for his astonishing and unprecedented feat of earning four gold medals in the prestigious Olympic track and field competition, but also for where and when he did it—Berlin, 1936, during the rise of Nazi Germany. The "Nazi Olympics" were the most controversial in the modern Olympic era, marked by an international boycott movement questioning the moral implications of holding the Games in Nazi Germany.¹⁵ Hosting the international spectacle was a major coup for Hitler, and he intended to use the 1936 games as a platform to showcase the superiority of Germany, the Nazi party, and the Aryan race. But it was Owens, a young black athlete with an impoverished upbringing in rural Alabama, who stole the spotlight with his dominating performance, earning four gold medals and shattering several world records. Even today, the political significance of the 1936 Olympics is debated: did hosting the Games function as a successful propaganda tactic for the Nazi party, or did Owens and his black teammates "refute Nazi racial doctrines" with their athletic performance?¹⁶

After his startling feat in Berlin, Owens commanded acclaim from all around the world for his remarkable athletic accomplishment, especially in the country he represented. In the United States, where the participation of Owens and the other American black athletes in Hitler's "racist" games was hotly debated, Owens's achievements in the Olympic stadium were touted as a victory for America and a triumph over Hitler and the controversial Nazi ideology. Furthermore, Owens's newfound celebrity was advertised as a significant breakthrough for black America, even though the unequal status of blacks remained unchanged. In 1928, the American Olympic track

team had been exclusively white. When four black athletes were chosen for the 1932 games hosted in Los Angeles, they remained invisible despite any athletic success.¹⁷ When Owens made headlines by winning an unprecedented four gold medals, he was suddenly described as “a credit to his race.”¹⁸ His performance in Berlin was the first occasion on which many Southern papers deigned to cover a black athlete.¹⁹ Perhaps for the first time, Owens made it acceptable for the nation to embrace a black man as a symbol of America. Journalist Thomas Wolfe, who witnessed Owens’s Olympic performance from the stands, likely typified white America’s attitude toward Owens, recalling: “Owens was black as tar, but what the hell. It was our team and I thought he was wonderful. I was proud of him so I yelled.”²⁰ Owens was described as representing a turning point for black America, but in reality, that breakthrough was limited to the sporting world only. Still, Owens’s accomplishments consistently have been viewed as transcending sports; his athletic achievement in Berlin has become more than a purely athletic feat.

Because the idea that Owens became a national hero and overcame racism because of his athletic accomplishments has been established through discourse, rhetorical studies provides a set of particularly useful tools for discussing and illustrating these claims. Critically examining the rhetoric of, about, and by Jesse Owens will reveal clues as to how Owens is able to be depicted as a hero in spite of his second-class status as a black man in America, and how these depictions might work persuasively. Although Owens’s gold medal performance in Berlin was celebrated by Americans in when it happened in 1936, Owens seems to be increasingly drawn as a hero as time has passed. Studying discursive depictions of Owens helps us to answer several questions. Who

discusses and deploys Owens as a symbolic hero, when, and for what purpose? How have depictions of Owens evolved over time? How do various rhetors explain that Owens should be celebrated for his incredible athletic talent that earned him a record four gold medals? And finally, how do Owens's individual feats of athleticism translate into broader achievements for America? In this thesis, I attempt to answer these questions while also discussing more generally whether there is a relationship between sporting accomplishment and American ideals, and how such a relationship might function persuasively for different rhetors. To begin probing such a relationship, I demonstrate how Jesse Owens's athletic achievements are rhetorically connected to American ideals, how such a rhetorical construction of Owens as an ideal American might work to reinforce certain American ideals, and how speakers are able to use Owens and his symbolization of the ideal American to accomplish other rhetorical tasks. Along the way, I also explain why Jesse Owens continues to function as such a strong symbol of the ideal American, even though time continues to elapse between 1936 and present-day America.

Methodology

To demonstrate that Jesse Owens is a particularly salient example of how American ideals can be constituted through athletic achievement, I will first need to consider who deploys Owens in such a capacity and how depictions of Owens and his athletic accomplishments constitute, change, or reinforce American ideals through time. First, I will examine presidential discourse concerning Owens, bearing in mind that after Gerald Ford presented Owens with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, every president thereafter has employed Owens in the same capacity by upholding Owens as an ideal

American. Ford's 1976 speech marked the first occasion upon which an athlete was awarded the nation's highest civilian honor, and Ford's remarks aim to justify Owens's worthiness as a recipient. I will trace instances of presidential discourse from Ford through George W. Bush to demonstrate that Owens's feats in the 1936 Olympics have been constantly reinforced by each subsequent administration as symbolic of American ideals.

Secondly, I investigate how Owens himself constructed a narrative of his accomplishments in his autobiographies. I pay specific attention to Owens's own account of how his unprecedented athletic achievement impacted his identity, particularly his identity as an African-American. While Owens was being praised as an American hero and a symbol of freedom after his triumph in Berlin, his status as a black man in America was certainly not commensurate with the characteristics of an ideal American. Does Owens view his athletic achievements as a representative of American ideals? In particular, did Owens view his athletic feats as a "breakthrough" for African-Americans? If so, then how does Owens reconcile such a striking contradiction between his symbolic status and the reality of his status as a second-class citizen? All three of Owens's autobiographies—each co-authored with Paul Niemark—will be used in order to account for any variances in his narrative over time. In chronological order, these volumes include *Blackthink: My Life as Black Man and White Man* (1970), *Jesse: A Spiritual Autobiography* (1978), and *Jesse: The Man Who Outran Hitler* (1978).²¹

Third, and finally, I probe the public memory of Jesse Owens via the discourse appearing on the website of his official commemoration: the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum (www.jesseowensmuseum.org). Dedicated in 1996 in Oakville, Alabama

(Owens's birthplace), the museum "immortalizes Owens' memory by depicting the moments that made Owens great and portraying the people who shaped him as an athlete and as a man."²² As its primary attractions, the park includes a historical museum, a statue of Owens, a 1936 Olympic torch replica, a replica of Owens's childhood home, extensive photo galleries, and other memorabilia. The website is chosen as a text for study, along the physical museum site, for two reasons. First, the website contains extensive formal descriptions and explanations of each of the museum's artifacts, which better allow for rhetorical inquiry into how Owens is officially and publicly commemorated. Secondly, the website is available to everyone, whereas the physical location of the museum is somewhat inaccessible to visitors by being located in the small rural town of Oakville. Through a close reading of the museum's descriptions of these attractions as well as the symbolic discourse generated by the artifacts, I can decipher an official public narrative of how Owens's achievements are representative of American ideals.

By encompassing all of these texts into a broader study, it is possible to learn how athletic accomplishment can be discursively linked with the attainment of American ideals, how athletic achievement constitutes and reinforces these ideals over time, and how the example of Jesse Owens serves as a particularly useful rhetorical tool in this process. I can then demonstrate how in each case, the rhetor (the state, Owens himself, and the public) constructs Owens's athletic feats as larger accomplishments in order to achieve different goals. Therefore, this thesis will emphasize three central research questions: 1) How are Jesse Owens's athletic accomplishments during the Olympic Games in 1936 Berlin discursively portrayed over time? 2) How is Owens's athletic

triumph constructed as an accomplishment that transcends sport? 3) How might Owens's athletic achievements constitute, change, or reinforce conceptions of American ideals as time passes? By answering these three questions, we may begin to better understand the particular appeal of the Jesse Owens story, and how deploying Owens as an American hero might work persuasively to accomplish other rhetorical tasks.

Jesse Owens: "The Man Who Outran Hitler"

Track and field athlete Jesse Owens will forever be tied to the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, during the reign of Adolf Hitler. The 1936 Olympiad was more politically charged than any other that had come before it, given Hitler's intention to use the Olympic Games as a publicity showcase for the success of Nazi ideology and his theory of Aryan superiority.²³ Particularly controversial was the Nazi Germany policy banning Jewish athletes from taking part in the Games. Owens biographer William Baker recounted that the "(d)iscriminatory laws against German Jews provoked an international crusade to boycott the Games, and in the United States the movement almost succeeded."²⁴ Many activists and news publications urged U.S. athletes to take a stand against fascism by refusing to participate in the Berlin Olympics, while others decried a boycott as hypocritical in light of everyday discrimination against blacks in America.²⁵

Jesse Owens, expected to lead the U.S. track team to Olympic glory, weighed the arguments for and against boycotting the Games. He even received a letter from Walter White, the secretary of the NAACP, asking him not to participate. But in the end, Owens refused to deny himself what he had worked so hard to achieve, and agreed to compete

on the U.S. team.²⁶ The politics behind the boycott did little to dissuade Owens; at the time, the indignities of the German Jews seemed remote compared to those he and his family had endured in America. Ohio State coach Larry Snyder vociferously supported Owens's decision to participate in the Olympic Games. Pointing out that Owens had not been invited to the Sugar Bowl track meet in New Orleans because of his race, Snyder condemned the boycott: "Why should we oppose Germany for doing something that we do right here at home?"²⁷

The son of former slaves, Owens acknowledged that he was largely shaped as an individual by the desperately impoverished circumstances of his childhood in Alabama and then Ohio. As an extreme illustration of these conditions, sportswriter and biographer Jeremy Schaap relays an instance during which Jesse's mother, Emma, removed a fibrous lump from her five-year-old son's chest with a blunt kitchen knife in a makeshift surgery.²⁸ Schaap recounted that "(f)or the Owenses, everything but food, shelter, and the simplest clothes was a luxury that simply could not be afforded—even medical care."²⁹

Considering the great expense he went to in providing state-of-the-art training facilities to the German participants, Hitler surely anticipated "a stirring exhibition of Aryan athletic supremacy" during the 1936 Games.³⁰ However, by many accounts, Hitler was keenly aware that the American Negroes were expected to win medals and be the stars of the prestigious track and field events.³¹ Indeed, it was Jesse Owens, a "brown-skinned young American who carried 165 pounds on a compact but slender 5' 10" frame, on legs beautifully chiseled by nature" who stole the show.³² Owens dominated the track and field competition, winning four gold medals and scoring 40 points for the U.S. team

(nearly two-thirds of the entire German team's total for track and field).³³ He also smashed several world records in the premier events—the 100-meter dash, the long jump, the 200-meter sprint, and the 400-meter relay—with all four records remaining unbroken until at least the 1950s.³⁴

Hitler's widely reported "snubbing" of Owens during the 1936 Olympics is actually a myth. Hitler originally considered staying away from the Olympics altogether, knowing that some visitors were coming for the explicit purpose of protesting National Socialism.³⁵ Even though Hitler ultimately could not stay away, the international uproar over the German team's boycott of Jewish athletes put Hitler on "good behavior" for the duration of the Olympic Games.³⁶ However, the global press kept the Chancellor under watchful eye. After Hitler congratulated German winners of the shot-put competition on the first day of the Olympiad, he went home for the evening. The next morning, newspapers reported that Hitler had snubbed the late-night event winners, including an "American Negro winner" of the long jump event (Cornelius Johnson). The International Olympic Committee (I.O.C.) intervened, advising Hitler that he should either congratulate all winners throughout each day of the competition or stop congratulating any winners in order to avoid such negative press. Hitler opted to cease the practice, and the I.O.C. made sure that he did not break protocol during the remainder of the Olympic fortnight.³⁷ Thus, he never got the chance to snub Owens.

In fact, Owens himself confirmed that he exchanged hand waves with Hitler, who was seated in the stands during one of Owens's medal ceremonies. Owens disputed that the German leader had shown him any disrespect.³⁸ In later years, while campaigning for Alf Landon against Franklin Roosevelt, Owens defiantly proclaimed, "Hitler didn't snub

me—it was our president who snubbed me. The president didn't even send me a telegram."³⁹ Still, the Chancellor was in no way pleased about Owens's role in the limelight, refusing to be photographed with the African-American athlete. Hitler reportedly said to Balder von Schirach, leader of the Nazi Youth, "The Americans ought to be ashamed of themselves for letting their medals be won by Negroes. I myself would never shake hands with one of them."⁴⁰

Even though the Germans excelled in the 1936 games outside of track and field events and outscored the United States in total team points, Jesse Owens became an American idol overnight and a celebrated household name throughout the world—including Germany.⁴¹ German citizens honored Owens as the rightful star of the Olympiad. In fact, some American reporters mistakenly interpreted German support for Owens as a sign that the government's doctrine of discrimination did not reflect the will of its people.⁴² In America, Owens's achievements were touted as a psychological victory over Nazi Germany, as well as a breakthrough for African-American athletes who had still been largely ignored by many southern newspapers.⁴³ Americans seemed to believe that Owens was competing as much for "democratic ideals as...for personal glory" during the tense 1936 Olympic competition.⁴⁴ They considered Owens's records to be "American assets."⁴⁵ The story of Owens's impoverished upbringing as the son of a Southern sharecropper and one of ten children became widely known, demonstrating to many Americans that success was possible despite being born into hardship.⁴⁶

Although Jackie Robinson often is credited with breaking the color barrier in professional sports on behalf of African-American athletes, Jesse Owens, along with boxer Joe Louis, paved the way for the U.S. to embrace the athletic accomplishments of

African-Americans.⁴⁷ As a sophomore at the Ohio State University, Owens commanded national headlines when he set four world records within an hour during the 1935 Big Ten track and field championships.⁴⁸ This astounding and unprecedented feat is still heralded by *Sports Illustrated* as the greatest collegiate athletic accomplishment in U.S. history.⁴⁹ Fans knew that Owens would provide the United States with Olympic glory in the upcoming Olympiad. Looking ahead toward the approaching 1936 Games, the meet announcer encouraged the crowd to “no longer say ‘Owens of Ohio State,’ but ‘Owens of the United States.’”⁵⁰ Writing in the 1930s, celebrated sports writer Grantland Rice on several occasions declared Owens to be the all-time greatest African-American athlete “(f)or the sport he chose and for the way he mastered it.”⁵¹

As the first sports figure to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian award bestowed by the executive office, Jesse Owens is recognized for both his athletic and political accomplishments.⁵² Awarding the medal in 1976, President Gerald Ford asserted that Owens “personally achieved what no statesman, journalist or general achieved at that time—he forced Adolph [sic] Hitler to leave the stadium rather than acknowledge the superb victories of a black American.”⁵³ Ford characterized American participation in the 1936 Olympics as “a sharp rebuke of Hitler's racist rubbish” and insisted that Owens’s achievements have “continued to inspire Americans as they did the whole world in 1936.”⁵⁴ A few years later, in his 1979 “Address to the National Caucus on the Black Aged Remarks at a White House Luncheon Honoring Recipients of the Organization's Living Legacy Awards,” Jimmy Carter recalled Owens’ role in the 1936 Olympics: “(I)f anyone asked me before this day,

‘What do you remember about 1936?’, I would have said that the achievements of a black American athlete inspired the world.”⁵⁵

Despite Owens’s many accolades and his rags-to-riches portrayal, it was many years after the 1936 Games before he achieved a life of stability. Immediately following the Olympics, Owens received dozens of offers to cash in on his newfound fame. But his status as an American black man in the 1930s remained all too real—Owens was unable to find a dignified job with a paycheck big enough to cover his college tuition, let alone support his family.⁵⁶ The promises of easy wealth through his celebrity endorsements were mere publicity stunts designed to land in newspaper columns.⁵⁷ Eventually, Owens was able to earn a living as a speaker at corporate and community gatherings. In the early 1970s, Owens had begun to explore and crusade against black militancy. Along the way, Owens began feeding his audiences what he thought they wanted—the false impression that he had been snubbed by Hitler, and that the German crowds had been hostile to him and his teammates. Jeremy Schaap explains: “Denied by white America the opportunities for wealth that he thought he was owed, he exaggerated his stories to make a good living.”⁵⁸

Rhetoric and Sport

Despite the dominant role of sports in American culture, most Americans tend to classify sports as “just entertainment.” While scholars have explored at length the political, cultural, and ideological implications of sport, the general public here in the United States rarely contemplates sport in such a way. In his book *Sport and Political Ideology*, John M. Hoberman has explained that “(i)deological conflict, after all, has

played a less significant role in American political life than in most of Europe over the past century, one reason being the absence of a politically significant Marxist tradition in the United States.”⁵⁹ Americans tend to think of sport as a leisure activity, entertainment, a pastime, and even a business before thinking of sport as “political,” when in fact many scholars, including Hoberman, have recognized that “American sport carries a very substantial ideological load of ideas about masculinity, femininity, celebrity, patriotism, heroism, narcissism, race, violence, and more.”⁶⁰

The sporting world often provides a window for looking at critical social and political issues that might not otherwise be discussed in the United States. If this seems a dubious proposition, one only needs to consider a few recent examples. The steroids scandal that has plagued professional sports, particularly Major League Baseball, has created a decade-long policy deliberation that has involved Congress on several occasions. In 2003, Kobe Bryant’s sexual assault trial ignited a series of legal and social debates about the portrayal of rape victims. Yet another striking example might be the ardent nationwide discussion about racism and sexism that followed the firing of national radio talk show host Don Imus when he thoughtlessly called the Rutgers University women's basketball team “nappy-headed hos” over the air in 2007.⁶¹ Perhaps the underground world of organized dog fighting would have ever been exposed and debated hotly if the high-profile National Football League player Michael Vick had not been at the center of the scandal.

Sport so infiltrates our national dialogue that Jeffrey O. Seagrave has argued that “the notion that sport itself is a particularly fitting metaphor for life is so common in America and American literature that it has become a part of our conventional

wisdom.”⁶² Seagrave, a scholar of sport and language, has illustrated how sport metaphorically represents the cycle of life and death in American society. According to Seagrave, sport “reflects our efforts to control matters of life and death—in short, to control our fate.”⁶³ In its essence, the language of sport allows us to wrestle with the terms of our own existence as Americans. When we win, we improve our status in life. When we lose, we take lessons with us that help us to win next time. Likewise, discussions of sport reflect, define, and reinforce the rules that govern American life. In this study, I further consider the question of how the rhetoric of sport can be used persuasively to define and reinforce what it means to be American. How does the rhetoric of athletic achievement reflect and support American ideals, and to what ends?

Sport and National Identity

Regardless of who has occupied the Oval Office, sport has increasingly crept into presidential discourse in the twentieth century, particularly the celebration of athletic accomplishment. Michael Hester has argued that the modern, more intimate relationship between sports and presidential rhetoric began with the recent practice in which presidents routinely invite professional sports teams to the White House and honor the athletes for their accomplishments.⁶⁴ Although these ceremonial occasions seem to be a simple exercise in national pride, Hester contends that these ceremonies hold special significance because they “have brought together chief executives and athletic victors together [sic] in a rhetorical moment synthesizing sports and politics.”⁶⁵

But why might honoring athletes serve as a useful rhetorical device for the presidency? Such occasions are not just simple celebrations or mere political

opportunism to boost a president's "plain folks" appeal. Rather, Hester explains that rhetorical moments honoring American athletes "allow presidents to cite the efforts of sports heroes as exemplary characteristics of a national identity."⁶⁶ Richard Lipsky further argues that the use of sports as a communication tool is particularly effective because it is socially accessible to all. In his article on "The Political and Social Dimensions of Sports," Lipsky asserts that "the world of sports has become a major form of national and social communication to the extent that interest in and knowledge of sports make Americans of every region and class 'available' to one another." Thus, sports are a particular salient way in which presidents can "breath(e) life into the otherwise abstract notion of American political community," a necessary task for the presidency, according to rhetorical scholar Vanessa Beasley.⁶⁷

Sport, Identity, and Self-Memorialization

The presidency is not unique in its use of sports to constitute national identity. William J. Morgan affirmed that "(t)he theme of national identity—how nations see and think about themselves—ranks as one of the most complex and elusive issues that comes up in discussions of nationalism."⁶⁸ Individual competitors are often eager to cement their legacy as "ideal Americans." In fact, the sporting world reveals the individual's preoccupation with "self-memorialization." Raymond L Schmitt and Wilbert M. Leonard II have explored the process through which American athlete-citizens attempt to "leave their footprints...on the sands of time" through sporting accomplishment.⁶⁹ Schmitt and Leonard observe the tendency for athletes to "become concerned about how they will look to future audiences" and ponder the mark that they will leave in time."⁷⁰ Athletes

have a propensity to buy into the belief that their accomplishments will help them to attain immortal status.⁷¹ In other words, athletes tend to construct their own identity via their sporting accomplishments.

Sport and Memory

In his introduction to Maurice Halbwachs's seminal work, *On Collective Memory*, Lewis A. Coser invokes sport as a primary element of cultural recollection and belonging. Sport stands apart from other forms of popular culture because its very nature inspires memory. The stability of the sporting world—constant rules and objectives—allows for memory to be shared across generations and passed down through time. Furthermore, a sporting contest by definition is a conflict, marked by winners and losers. For both participants and spectators, winners celebrate heroics while losers can suffer a kind of trauma.

In *Playing on the Periphery: Sport, Identity and Memory* (2006), Tara Brabazon explores the nationalistic themes found in sporting memory by probing the relationship between sport, English identity, and power. As the first to devote a comprehensive volume to the correlation between sporting memory and national history, Brabazon examines an array of English sporting “moments” to illustrate how “sports dip in the well of memory to transcribe stories of class, race, nation and gender.”⁷² Specifically, Brabazon contends that noteworthy sporting moments allow us to trace social history, particularly histories of class and masculinity.⁷³

In articulating a conception of sport as memory, David R. McMahon explicates two themes that run throughout our history of sports. Namely, he argues that “social

circumstances have often allowed or prohibited the participation of an athlete in an event or sport; and the norms of reportage have selectively affected what gets recorded and remembered.”⁷⁴ These themes lend particular consideration to inquiries of sporting memory and race, where, according to McMahon, the athletic achievements of African-Americans are recorded and remembered while their race is forgotten.⁷⁵ The result is the creation of a “distorted memory” that embraces the advancements in race relations while ignoring the negative or unaddressed aspects.⁷⁶ So then how does his public commemoration, the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum, portray Owens and his accomplishments, and how does the museum account for the ongoing racial struggles that Owens endured as a black man throughout his life?

Chapter Outlines

This introductory chapter has articulated the central rhetorical inquiry of how athletic accomplishment can be used constitute and reinforce American ideals, which will be explored through the case study of Jesse Owens. I have also presented historical context and background on Jesse Owens and his groundbreaking achievements in the Berlin Olympics, followed by an explication of the three primary research questions to be addressed by the subsequent chapters: 1) How are Jesse Owens’s athletic accomplishments during the Olympic Games in 1936 Berlin discursively portrayed over time? 2) How is Owens’s athletic triumph constructed as an accomplishment that transcends sport? 3) How might Owens’s athletic achievements constitute and change conceptions of American ideals as time passes? I have explained that through answering these three questions, we will be able to observe how different rhetors use Owens as a

symbol of the ideal American to accomplish other rhetorical goals. Finally, I have introduced foundational theoretical concepts about rhetoric, sport, and American ideals, including: sport and national identity; sport, identity, and self-memorialization; and sport and memory. The next three chapters will proceed to examine different sets of texts, carefully considering how each author depicts Jesse Owens and his athletic triumphs, how these athletic achievements are used to constitute and reinforce conceptions of American ideals over time, and how each author is able to deploy Owens in a persuasive capacity.

Chapter Two: Triumph for Jesse Owens, Triumph for America: The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Athletic Achievement

This chapter will trace the presidential discourse on and about Jesse Owens, beginning with Gerald Ford's speech awarding Owens the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Analysis of multiple speeches will show how presidents consistently have employed Owens as an ideal American and as a representation of freedom by the symbolic head of our government. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have argued that "(t)he identity of the presidents as spokespersons for the institution, fulfilling constitutional roles and exercising their institutional power, gives this discourse a distinctive character."⁷⁷ Most significantly, the president constitutes the people, inviting us to serve our roles as ideal Americans. As Campbell and Jamieson explain, "presidents have the opportunity to persuade us to conceive of ourselves in ways compatible with their views of government and the world. At the same time, presidents invite us to see them, the presidency, and the country's role in specific ways."⁷⁸

The addresses that will be used to demonstrate how the presidency has symbolically deployed Jesse Owens as the ideal American will stretch every presidency from Ford to George W. Bush and will include:

- Gerald R. Ford: “Remarks to Members of the U.S. Olympic Team and Presentation of the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens” (August 5, 1976)
- Jimmy Carter: “National Caucus on the Black Aged Remarks at a White House Luncheon Honoring Recipients of the Organization's Living Legacy Awards” (February 23, 1979)
- Jimmy Carter: “Death of Jesse Owens Statement by the President” (March 31, 1980)
- Ronald Reagan: “Remarks at a United States Olympic Committee Dinner Honoring August A. Busch III in St. Louis, Missouri” (July 22, 1982)
- Ronald Reagan: “Remarks During a Visit to the United States Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado” (May 28, 1984)
- George H. Bush: “Remarks at the Posthumous Presentation of the Congressional Gold Medal to Jesse Owens” (March 28, 1990)
- William J. Clinton: “Remarks to the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia” (March 28, 1995)
- William J. Clinton: “Remarks at a Reception for the United States Winter Olympic and Paralympic Teams” (April 29, 1998)
- William J. Clinton: “Interview With Dan Patrick of ESPN Radio” (November 4, 1999)

- George W. Bush: “Proclamation 7976 - National African American History Month, 2006” (January 27, 2006)
- George W. Bush: “Remarks on Presenting the Preserve America Presidential Awards” (May 1, 2006)

Chapter Three: “The Man Who Outran Hitler”: Athleticism and Character in the Autobiographies of Jesse Owens

This chapter will reflect upon the rhetoric of autobiography to explore how Owens himself narrates his athletic feats and explains his purported status as an American hero, despite his second-class status as a black man and the persistence of racism during the 1930s and beyond.⁷⁹ The texts for this inquiry will include Owens’s three autobiographies: *Blackthink: My Life as Black Man and White Man* (1970), *Jesse: A Spiritual Autobiography* (1978), and *Jesse: The Man Who Outran Hitler* (1978). Analyzing all three autobiographies will account for any discrepancies or changes in Owens’s narrative over time. The autobiography is rhetorically powerful because it is a unique articulation of selfhood. Rhetorician Edwin Black has noted that “(w)e are compelled to believe in the existence of relationships between a man’s deepest motives and his discourses.”⁸⁰ If we accept this premise, then we can inquire as how Owens viewed his athletic accomplishments and how they were tied to his status as an American hero. What did Owens make of the contradiction between his status as an American hero and his status as a black man? We can also compare Owens’s self-portrayal with the way that the presidency constructs him.

Chapter Four: Remembering the American Dream, Ignoring American Racism: The Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum

This chapter will consider how the official public memory of Jesse Owens is established through the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum. Using the museum's website, jesseowensmuseum.org, each of the museum artifacts can be analyzed from the detailed, carefully crafted descriptions. The contents of the website, which can be accessed by any visitor (unlike the physical site), cumulatively create an official public commemoration of Jesse Owens. Clearly, the museum's objective is to induce an argument that Jesse Owens is worthy of honor, commemoration, and memorialization—but what exactly is that argument and how is it made? This chapter will examine how the Jesse Owens Museum creates a narrative of Jesse Owens as an American hero through its website and physical artifacts, and what might be the implications of such an argument.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The summary chapter will review and discuss the findings of each chapter: how Jesse Owens and his athletic triumph is rhetorically linked to American ideals by the office of the presidency, by Owens himself, and by his public commemoration through the Jesse Owens Park and Museum, and how Owens's athletic accomplishments are deployed persuasively. After showing how Owens has been repeatedly used as a symbol of the ideal American by different rhetors, we will be able to compare and contrast how such an argument is made by each speaker and discuss any variances. At this point, it should be possible to better explain not only how athletic accomplishment might be used

to constitute, reinforce, or redefine certain American ideals, but also how these ideals as manifested through sport can function persuasively. In other words, for what purposes do speakers use Owens to symbolize American ideals? What does this help them to accomplish rhetorically? Finally, by the end of the thesis it should become clear as to why Jesse Owens and his athletic triumphs in Berlin serve as a particularly useful example of how athletic heroes can be used to accomplish various rhetorical feats. Ultimately, once we understand how sporting accomplishment is rhetorically linked to certain American ideals, then we can consider the broader implications for both the specific case study of Jesse Owens and more generally whenever sporting achievement is elevated beyond just an individual accomplishment.

Chapter One – Triumph for Jesse Owens, Triumph for America: The Presidency and the Rhetoric of Athletic Achievement

America is full of sports fans. So it is not surprising that U.S. presidents often enjoy sports, too. Modern presidents have participated in and excelled at athletic competition, displayed their fandom, and have even owned professional sports franchises before occupying office. Likewise, sport has increasingly crept into presidential discourse in the twentieth century, particularly the celebration of athletic accomplishment. John M. Hoberman has argued that sport “exercises a deep hold on the human imagination which is virtually universal and which does not seem to vary from society to society,” and that the “sole criterion” for which sport can be used by political leaders is to “serve the greater glory of the state.”⁸¹ What is at stake when the leader of our nation brings his affinity with sports into the executive office and upholds athletic achievement as a reflection of American ideals? Can sport function as an ideological tool, a way for the president to teach citizens how they ought to live?

This chapter examines how the presidency has used sport—specifically the athletic achievements of Jesse Owens—to reinforce dominant American values and to perpetuate nationalism. Perhaps no other individual athlete has been honored more by the office of the presidency than Olympic track star Jesse Owens, beginning in 1976 when Gerald Ford awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens, making Owens the first ever sporting figure to receive the nation’s highest civilian honor. By presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Owens, Ford recast American character

ideals—such as hard work, dedication, and service to one’s country—by explaining that Owens, as a remarkable athlete, was deserving of such a prestigious honor. In his speech awarding the medal, Ford had to make a rhetorical connection between Owens’s athletic triumph in the 1936 Olympic Games and the criteria which merits bestowing the medal. By doing so, Ford reinforced particular American ideals linked with athletic achievement, upholding Owens as a model American. Through the George W. Bush presidency, every subsequent administration has followed Ford’s lead by awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom to at least one athlete. In addition to Owens, presidents have bestowed the medal upon fifteen other notable sports figures, including Jackie Robinson, Joe Louis, Arthur Ashe, Hank Aaron, Muhammad Ali, Arnold Palmer, and Joe DiMaggio.⁸²

Owens serves as an ideal case study to examine how presidents have reinforced American ideals through athletic achievement because each president has done it repeatedly, beginning with Ford’s decision to make Owens the first athlete to be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Presidents play a key part in constituting American ideals for citizens through their discourse. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have argued that “(t)he identity of the presidents as spokespersons for the institution, fulfilling constitutional roles and exercising their institutional power, gives this discourse a distinctive character.”⁸³ Most significantly, the president constitutes the people, inviting us to serve our roles as ideal Americans. As Campbell and Jamieson explain, “presidents have the opportunity to persuade us to conceive of ourselves in ways compatible with their views of government and the world. At the same time, presidents invite us to see them, the presidency, and the country’s role in specific ways.”⁸⁴

Therefore, by analyzing how presidents portray Owens as an ideal American, we can see how presidents attempt to reinforce American values within the citizenry more broadly.

Given the ability of presidents to constitute and reinforce American ideals through their discourse, this chapter traces presidential rhetoric about Jesse Owens, showing how he is repeatedly and consistently used as a symbol of American ideals. I begin with a close reading of Gerald Ford's August 5, 1976 address in which he awards the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens, including some analysis of the speech drafts and memoranda prepared by Ford's speechwriting team.⁸⁵ I demonstrate that Ford was able to use Owens's athletic achievements persuasively to celebrate and reinforce nationalism and core American values. Because Ford is largely successful in using sport for such nationalistic and partisan purposes, I argue that he helps to entrench the ritual of honoring athletes as standard presidential practice. Next, I examine presidential addresses from the five subsequent administrations (Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush) to illustrate how Owens's athletic accomplishments during the Olympic Games in 1936 Berlin are discursively portrayed over time. I argue that the presidency has repeatedly and consistently upheld Jesse Owens as the ideal American by linking Owens's character attributes to his ability to attain athletic success, by touting Owens's unprecedented athletic achievement of earning four gold medals as a triumph for America over Hitler and Nazism, and by constructing Owens as a symbol of hope for African American equality. Beyond successfully linking Owens's athleticism to larger American values, presidents are able to use Owens as a symbol to help us to re-imagine our historical attitudes toward race. In such a

capacity, presidents benefit from linking athletics to American ideals by reinforcing nationalistic and sometimes even partisan sentiments.

Sports and the American Presidency

During the twentieth century, presidents began to publicly indicate and display their interest in sports. Teddy Roosevelt was known to enjoy game hunting and boxing. During World War II, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was vocal about his support for making sure that professional baseball continued to be played while many of the league's players were serving overseas. The Kennedy family engaged in highly publicized football games on the White House lawn. JFK officially incorporated athletics into his presidency through Executive Order 11074, which established the President's Council on Physical Fitness in 1963.⁸⁶ And Gerald Ford, an accomplished collegiate athlete in his own right, tapped into his own ethos when proclaiming the merit of sport and athletic competition. Ford was beloved as a star collegiate athlete when he played center for the University of Michigan football team's offensive line. In the balloting for the 1935 Collegiate All-Star game, Ford was the number-four vote-getter among fans around the nation. Two professional football franchises, the Detroit Lions and Green Bay Packers, even offered Ford a contract. Instead, he accepted a position at Yale University, where he served as assistant line coach for the varsity football team, head coach of the junior varsity team, and head coach of the boxing team.⁸⁷ Ford's personal experience and understanding of the values associated with athletic achievement certainly influenced his ability to incorporate sports into his rhetoric, including his decision to honor Jesse Owens with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Rhetorician Michael Hester argues that the modern, routine usage of sport in presidential rhetoric began with the Carter administration.⁸⁸ Hester concentrates on the specific practice in which presidents routinely invite professional sports teams to the White House and honor the athletes for their accomplishments. He categorizes these rhetorical moments as “presidential sports encomia,” or epideictic White House ceremonies honoring sports champions. At the surface, these ceremonial occasions seem to be little more than simple exercises in national pride. But Hester argues that these ceremonies hold larger significance because they bring “chief executives and athletic victors together in a rhetorical moment synthesizing sports and politics.”⁸⁹ He identifies the first such instance of presidential sports encomia as occurring during the Carter administration, when the President honored the National Basketball Association’s Washington Bullets at the White House.⁹⁰ Every administration since Carter has continued this tradition of celebrating American athletic achievement through formal White House ceremonies. Presidents have honored professional sports teams, individual pro athletes (such as tennis players or golfers), Olympic Teams, and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championship teams.⁹¹

Hester’s analysis of presidential sports encomia reveals that the speeches serve a larger purpose than “merely a commemoration of athletic achievement and political opportunism, where presidents have bolstered their own image and touted the policies of their administration.”⁹² Instead, he claims that these addresses hold greater significance by enabling presidents to “cite the efforts of sports heroes as exemplary characteristics of a national identity and, in so doing, articulate an American civil religion consistent with the institutional role of the presidency in preserving the political and social order.”⁹³

Hester does not consider Ford's 1976 address to the Olympic Team to be an example of presidential sports encomia, but perhaps Ford's emphasis on athletics and the values associated with it had some influence on the development and establishment of presidential sports encomia as a genre. Although Ford never honored a professional sports team, he is the first to pay tribute to the U.S. Olympic team in a formal White House ceremony that resembles Hester's presidential sports encomia. Earlier presidents had recognized the significance of the Olympic Games and had even honored medal winners. For instance, Dwight Eisenhower delivered brief remarks to members of the Olympic Committee in Denver, Colorado.⁹⁴ In 1964, Lyndon Johnson recorded remarks of congratulations to the U.S. Olympic Team and members of the U.S. Olympic Committee, and he also delivered remarks at a White House Luncheon for the 1964 Olympic medal winners.⁹⁵ However, Ford is the first president to honor the Olympic athletes in a formal Rose Garden ceremony, akin to the manner in which professional teams are celebrated in presidential sports encomia. Ford is also the first to honor an individual athlete and recognize him for "exceptional meritorious service"⁹⁶ by awarding the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens.

Hester's analysis provides insight into the reasons why presidents honor sports championships, illuminating the political and cultural significance of the ceremonies and how presidential rhetoric serves these ends.⁹⁷ As an attempt to identify presidential sports encomia as a genre in and of itself, Hester explains that "presidents are injecting athletic accomplishment with a political and social significance that extends far beyond the playing field. In holding up these champions as national heroes, presidential sports encomia serve as a cultural ritual whereby the public is reminded what it means to be an

American—who we are and who we should strive to be.”⁹⁸ Certainly it can be argued that championship athletes evoke the “American spirit,” the hard work and determination requisite to success. Hester clarifies that sports heroes are “ready-made for a president who wants to relate the ingredients necessary for victory in sports to the components required of success in the construction of economic programs, foreign policy, or the maintenance of the nation.”⁹⁹ Moreover, Hester claims that “(w)hen portrayed by presidents as examples of how the enactment of national values leads to success,” athletes are “rhetorically constructed as the ‘ideal’ Americans.”¹⁰⁰

Richard Lipsky further argues that the use of sports as a communication tool is particularly effective because it is socially accessible to all. In his article on “The Political and Social Dimensions of Sports,” Lipsky asserts that “the world of sports has become a major form of national and social communication to the extent that interest in and knowledge of sports make Americans of every region and class ‘available’ to one another.” He describes sport as “the ‘magic elixir’ that feeds personal identity while it nourishes the bonds of communal solidarity.”¹⁰¹ Sport appeals to many citizens’ personal interests while giving them something in common with each other—and with their political leaders. Sports symbolism is especially effective as an ideological tool employed by political leaders because it is flexible; sports can be used as easily by Republicans as by Democrats.¹⁰² This process of using sports as an ideological tool is of particular interest to scholars of rhetoric because the speaker must link athletic achievement to national values by making rhetorical connections. For instance, a speaker must explain why a championship team representing a particular U.S. city should be upheld as a model of national ideals.¹⁰³

Similarly, in honoring Jesse Owens with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, Ford needed to link Owens's athletic achievements with larger American ideals in order to justify Owens famous performance in the 1936 Olympic Games as meriting recognition with the medal. In his address awarding the medal, Ford credited Owens with advancing freedom and democracy through his athletic performance in the 1936 Olympic Games. Ford also elaborated upon the virtues of character associated with athletic achievement, including hard work, personal motivation, and humility. Finally, Ford heralded these character traits as a harbinger to competitive victory as well as attainment of the American Dream, particularly for Jesse Owens, an citizen otherwise constrained from success by racial and class barriers.

The Presidential Medal of Freedom

In order to understand Ford's explanation for awarding Owens with the Medal of Freedom, we should consider the significance of and criteria for the award itself. The Presidential Medal of Freedom is the nation's highest civilian award bestowed by the executive office. Ronald Reagan once explained, "What the Olympic Gold Medal is to athletes, what the Congressional Medal of Honor is to the military, the Presidential Medal of Freedom is to the private United States citizen."¹⁰⁴ Harry Truman established the Medal of Freedom near the end of World War II with the intent that it be used to honor those who aided American interests abroad. But because the medal was awarded quite liberally to more than 20,000 recipients, it quickly lost its cachet.¹⁰⁵

Thus, in 1963, John F. Kennedy renamed and reinvigorated the award as the Presidential Medal of Freedom through Executive Order 11085:

SECTION 1. *Medal established.* The Medal of Freedom is hereby re-established as the Presidential Medal of Freedom, with accompanying ribbons and appurtenances. The Presidential Medal of Freedom, hereinafter referred to as the Medal, shall be in two degrees.

SEC. 2. *Award of the Medal.* (a) The Medal may be awarded by the President as provided in this order to any person who has made an especially meritorious contribution to (1) the security or national interests of the United States, or (2) world peace, or (3) cultural or other significant public or private endeavors.

(b) The President may select for award of the Medal any person nominated by the Board referred to in Section 3(a) of this Order, any person otherwise recommended to the President for award of the Medal, or any person selected by the President upon his own initiative.

(c) The principal announcement of awards of the Medal shall normally be made annually, on or about July 4 of each year; but such awards may be made at other times, as the President may deem appropriate.

(d) Subject to the provisions of this Order, the Medal may be awarded posthumously.¹⁰⁶

In a statement on the order, Kennedy explained that “in a period when the national government must call upon an increasing portion of the talents and energies of its citizens, it is clearly appropriate to provide ways to recognize and reward the work of persons, within and without the Government, who contribute significantly to the quality

of American life.”¹⁰⁷ Recognizing the Medal of Freedom as the highest civil honor conferred by the President for service in peacetime, Kennedy justifies the order as establishing “such a procedure” and as providing “safeguards to ensure that the President will receive considered and prudent advice as to those who should receive such honors.”¹⁰⁸ Since then, medal winners have been selected from a broad range of fields including government and civil service, science, literature, film and television, medicine, law, music, and sports. There are no formal guidelines governing recipient eligibility, so honorees have tended to reflect personal and political preferences of each president.¹⁰⁹ However, the honor is bestowed much more selectively, with Reagan awarding the medal most often during his two terms (85 total recipients, or about ten per year).¹¹⁰ Through 2007, a total of 16 sporting figures—including Owens—have received the medal.¹¹¹

How and when Ford arrived at the decision to award the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens is uncertain, but several clues may provide some insight. The most basic reason may have been that 1976 marked the 40th anniversary of the 1936 Olympics, so Ford wanted to do something special to commemorate those significant Games. Moreover, the 1936 Olympics seemed to carry special significance for Ford, a collegiate athlete himself at the time. He conveyed memories of the 1936 Olympics during a July address, when he recalled his good friend and fellow congressman Ralph Metcalfe competing in the 1936 Olympic track and field competition alongside Jesse Owens.¹¹² A document in the speechwriting file refers to other 1936 Olympic athletes with whom Ford was acquainted, including fellow University of Michigan athletes Dick Degener (springboard diving) and Sam Stoller (track).¹¹³ Perhaps most significantly, Owens was a contemporary of Ford’s; Owens was a student-athlete at Ohio State at the

same time that Ford was a student-athlete at a rival Big Ten school, the University of Michigan. In his remarks to Owens, Ford recalls being on hand, along with more than 10,000 other spectators, when Owens broke three world records and tied a fourth during the 1935 Big Ten track meet in Ann Arbor. Although there is no indication that Ford ever interacted with Owens during the years they shared as fellow Big Ten collegiate athletes, it is easy to imagine the special connection Ford might have felt when Owens competed in the 1936 Olympics. Furthermore, given his own affinity for sport, Ford simply may have been expressing a personal preference in awarding the Medal of Freedom to an athlete for the first time.¹¹⁴

Gerald Ford and the Presentation of the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens

On August 5, 1976, Gerald Ford delivered his “Remarks to Members of the U.S. Olympic Team and Presentation of the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens.”¹¹⁵ The speech, which was delivered in the East Garden, reinforced Ford’s commitment to supporting the U.S. Olympic athletes by increasing Olympic funding. In 1975, Ford made support for the nation’s Olympic athletes a priority when he appointed a special Commission on Olympic Sports in response to some degree of controversy associated with amateur athletics, particularly the issue of how to field the best slate of athletes in international competition while preserving the notion of amateurism. Ford announced this initiative to find funding for amateur athletes in his August 5 address to the 1976 Olympic medal winners returning from Montreal.¹¹⁶ Thus, in addition to

honoring Owens and the 1976 athletes as ideal citizens, Ford also had a partisan agenda to argue for in this address.

Because Ford wanted to be a “president who brought healing” in the wake of the Watergate scandal, it seems plausible to suggest that he would want to celebrate values that represent the strength of the nation during such an address.¹¹⁷ Both the 1976 Olympic Team, which earned 94 medals, and Jesse Owens, hero of the 1936 Olympic Games, could be used symbols of national ideals. To celebrate their accomplishments was also to celebrate America. Ford upheld the Olympics and the athletic achievement of U.S. Olympic athletes as exemplary of the ideal American, contending that “(t)he challenges that all athletes face in common are more important than the boundaries that divide them. That is the true spirit of the Olympic games.”¹¹⁸

After honoring the 1976 medal winners and arguing in support of his initiative to fund amateur athletes, Ford turned his attention completely to Owens. First, Ford recounted Owens’s world record-setting performance at the 1935 Big Ten track and field championship, highlighting his mark of 26 feet, 8 ¼ inches in the broad jump (now known as the long jump), a feat that was unmatched for 25 years.¹¹⁹ Ford also recalled each of the individual events in which Owens won gold in 1936, and then asserted that Owens “personally achieved what no statesman, journalist or general achieved at that time—he forced Adolph [sic] Hitler to leave the stadium rather than acknowledge the superb victories of a black American.”¹²⁰ Hitler’s “snubbing” of Owens during the 1936 Olympics is actually a myth. The German chancellor was not allowed to approach or honor Owens (or any other individual competitor) after the International Olympic

Committee (I.O.C.) advised Hitler to stop congratulating the German winners so that his behavior would not be scrutinized and misconstrued by the press.¹²¹

Yet in his speech, Ford was quick to draw U.S. participation in the 1936 Olympic Games in contrast to Nazism. The drafts of the address reveal that Ford's speechwriters seemed to be sensitive to the issue of distinguishing between Hitler's political exploitation of the Olympics and Ford's support of the Olympic Games as a reflection of democratic politics. Still, in the final version of the speech, Ford seemed to argue that unlike Hitler, the United States would not allow international political tensions to invade the Games when it would act as the host nation:

It is in that spirit that I pledge our efforts to ensure that in 1980, at which time we will be hosting the Olympic Games in Lake Placid, politics be kept out of the arena. We will welcome every team recognized by the International Olympic Committee. Attempts to use the Olympic Games for international power politics will ultimately backfire. Our friend Jesse Owens, here with us today, proved that. While Ford frowned upon using the Games for political purposes, at the same time, he praised the political statement that the United States made in the 1936 Games through Owens's participation and success:

In 1936, when Adolph [sic] Hitler was trying to turn the Games into a spectacle that would glorify racist dogma of the Nazi state, there was a strong movement in the United States against our participation in the games. As it turned out, U.S. participation in those Olympics provided a sharp rebuke of Hitler's racist rubbish. Five black American athletes won eight gold medals in track and field. One

American athlete in particular proved that excellence knows no racial or political limits. That man is Jesse Owens.¹²²

Ford specifically linked athletic achievement to American ideals associated with character by expounding upon the virtues of individual athletic achievement: the hard work, personal motivation, and perseverance required for success. The President admired the common attributes needed for athletic achievement by any athlete, noting that “(w)hatever their nationality, all athletes are working against the same physical and mental constraints of the human body, of gravity and time.”¹²³ In honoring Owens, Ford again acknowledged character as essential to athletic achievement:

Giants like Jesse Owens show us why politics will never defeat the Olympic spirit. His character, his achievements have continued to inspire Americans as they did the whole world in 1936.

He brought his own talents into the service of others. As a speaker, as an author, as a coach, he has inspired many young men and women to achieve their very best for themselves and for America. As an American who rose from poverty to a position of leadership, he has motivated many, many others to make the most of what America has to offer.¹²⁴

During the presentation of the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Owens, Ford repeatedly extolled the virtues of character that contribute to Owens’s accomplishments. First, he praised Owens’s humility as a crucial element of sportsmanship, referring to him as “a modest man,” who “may wonder why I am singing his praises here today.”

Presenting the Medal of Freedom to Owens, Ford accentuated the lasting impact of Owens' athletic achievements in 1936:

Jesse, it is my privilege to present you today with the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor that your country can bestow. And I present you with this medal on behalf of the people of the United States. For them in particular, and especially for the athletes like those here today, your character, your achievements will always be a source of inspiration.

The citation reads as follows: "To Jesse Owens, athlete, humanitarian, speaker, author—a master of the spirit as well as the mechanics of sport. He is a winner who knows that winning is not everything. He has shared with others his courage, his dedication to the highest ideals of sportsmanship. His achievements have shown us all the promise of America and his faith in America has inspired countless others to do their best for themselves and for their country."

Ford upheld Owens as an example of "the American Dream:" an individual who overcame many challenges, including poverty and discrimination, to achieve his goals and lead a rich, well-rounded life. Constructing Owens' athletic achievements in such a way reinforces the notion that any individual can achieve his goals as a matter of personal character.

Ford also linked athletic achievement with freedom and democracy. Referring to the Olympic Games, Ford contended that freedom superseded athletic achievement. He

imparted an anecdote about one of the Olympic medal winners who stated that he “wouldn’t trade any of my personal freedom for all the records in the world.”¹²⁵ Moreover, Ford also credited the Olympic athletes, especially Owens, with preserving the personal freedoms uniquely enjoyed by Americans through their participation in the Olympic Games. To illustrate this, Ford described Owens’s return to the Olympic stadium in Berlin, fifteen years after his record-setting accomplishments. Owens was said to have “received a standing ovation when he urged his audience, and I quote, ‘To stand fast with us for freedom and democracy.’”¹²⁶ By constructing Owens’s participation in the 1936 Olympics as “a sharp rebuke of Hitler’s racist rubbish,” Ford implied that Owens’s victory on the track had far-reaching implications, the effects of which we still experience today. Notwithstanding his earlier claim to separate Olympic accomplishments from international politics, Ford asserted the enduring implications of the 1936 Olympic Games, along with Owens’s role in preserving freedom and democracy around the world.

Ford uses the success of the U.S. Olympic athletes, particularly Jesse Owens, to reinforce and strengthen American ideals during a time when the nation needed healing. He also upheld the character values connected to athletic success in order to argue for his partisan agenda, namely funding for Olympic athletes and calling for the upcoming Olympics hosted by the United States to be freed from international political tensions. Using Owens as a symbol helps Ford to accomplish these goals. By choosing to recognize Owens’s unprecedented feat of capturing four gold medals, Ford stressed the significance of individual athletic accomplishment, reflecting a core American belief that each man is responsible for his own success. Expressing a wish that the Olympic Games

be more concerned with the celebration of athletic achievement than with international politics, Ford pledged to keep the 1980 Lake Placid Olympic Games free from political overtones. At the same time, however, Ford celebrated the achievements of U.S. Olympic athletes as being reflective of American ideology. He invoked the values of character and freedom, as well as the belief that athletic achievement is a product of hard work, dedication, and perseverance. As an illustration of how athletic achievement mirrors democratic ideology, Ford honored Jesse Owens for his accomplishments in the name of freedom during the 1936 Olympics Games.

Ford consistently reinforced the ways in which athletic achievement equates to American ideals, particularly freedom and democracy, in order to reinforce nationalistic sentiment during a time when faith in American government was shaken. Ford's implicit argument that Hitler's political exploitation of sports was much different than his own support of U.S. athletic achievement seems contradictory, but it is likely a persuasive distinction for citizens within a democratic ideology. Particularly in the way that Jesse Owens was romanticized as "providing a sharp rebuke to Hitler's racist rubbish," we can see how sporting achievements can be used to achieve political ends. Hitler's political intentions with the 1936 Olympic Games certainly were different than Ford's potential political gain from honoring the U.S. Olympic athletes and Jesse Owens. However, the exploitation of sports to promote a particular set of ideals exists in both cases.

Following Ford's Lead: Presidential Rhetoric on Jesse Owens

Ford was able to use sport as an ideological tool by honoring Owens's athletic feats in the Berlin Olympics. Owens functioned as such a tool in several capacities.

First, Owens's success reinforced a nationalistic notion of American superiority, particularly the idea that the United States was morally superior to the Nazis in 1936. Similarly, Owens's hero status allows citizens to re-imagine historical ideas about race in America. If Owens, as a black man, could be embraced as an ideal American back in 1936, then we can believe that our nation's attitudes toward racial equality were much more advanced than they actually were. Additionally, in the example of Owens, sport functions as an ideological tool for Ford because it is an instrument of power—a way to persuade citizens to live our lives in certain ways befitting the characteristics of an ideal American. As we will see, each subsequent president uses Owens as an ideological tool in these ways as well.

Jimmy Carter recognized Jesse Owens (who was present) in his 1979 address to the National Caucus on the Black Aged Remarks at a White House Luncheon Honoring Recipients of the Organization's Living Legacy Awards.¹²⁷ Carter recalled Owens's role in the 1936 Olympics as being of historic significance: "(I)f anyone asked me before this day, 'What do you remember about 1936?,' I would have said that the achievements of a black American athlete inspired the world." Although Carter acknowledged the racial inequality within the U.S. in 1936, he reinforced the belief that Owens helped erase the disparity:

Nineteen hundred and thirty-six was the year when Hitler was spouting the philosophy of racial superiority. The Olympics were being held in Germany, and it was a time in our own country when it was difficult for black athletic ability to be adequately recognized . . . professional teams excluded our own citizens. But a

young man who possibly didn't even realize the superb nature of his own capabilities went to the Olympics and performed in a way that I don't believe has ever been equaled since. . . . And since this superb achievement, he has continued in his own dedicated but modest way to inspire others to reach for greatness.¹²⁸

Carter ignored the reality that Owens's triumph in Berlin did little to change his own second-class status as a black man in America, and did nothing to change the conditions of thriving racism in the 1930s. Instead, Carter generated the illusion that Owens achieved racial power and class equality through athletic achievement. By implication, Owens is constructed as a turning point in American history, after which racial inequality began to melt away as symbolized through the integration of professional sports. Carter blatantly makes this assertion later in his term during a statement released in 1980 upon Owens' death.¹²⁹ That Owens's death merited a statement from the president is testament itself to the powerful symbol that Owens has become. In the statement, Carter asserted that "no athlete better symbolized the human struggle against tyranny, poverty, and racial bigotry." Carter did not elaborate upon why an athlete would serve as such a powerful symbol, but instead perhaps allows the mythology surrounding Owens's participation in the 1936 Olympics to speak for itself.

Like Ford, however, Carter eulogized Owens by maintaining that his athletic accomplishments were precipitated by character. Carter declared Owens's "personal triumphs as a world-class athlete and record holder" to be a "prelude to a career devoted to helping others." Owens struggled for many years before being able to support himself and his family. Only near the end of his life could Owens afford to donate his time to

service endeavors. Although by omission, Carter seemed to imply that Owens's Olympic triumph put him in a position to be able to choose a "lifetime of service." Carter portrayed Owens as an enduring symbol of ideal American character, an individual who was dedicated to serving his country without asking anything in return: "His work with youth athletics, as an unofficial ambassador overseas and as a spokesman for freedom, are a rich legacy to his fellow Americans."¹³⁰ For Carter, Owens symbolized the ideal American because of his service and his status as a world-renowned Olympic icon.

Carter's successor, Ronald Reagan, also invoked Owens on several occasions. The first such instance was during his remarks at a U.S. Olympic Committee Dinner in St. Louis, Missouri, where he was commending the Olympic Committee on its "hard work on behalf of American sports" and recognizing several large contributions toward the funding of Olympic athletes. Here was another opportunity for the president to use athletic success to perpetuate American nationalism. Along with Jim Thorpe and the 1980 U.S. hockey team, Reagan cited Owens as one of the great "moments of pride" in the history of the Olympic games, and credited Owens with "repudiating the arrogance of the Nazi cult and Hitlerism." Speaking more broadly, Reagan also used this occasion to explicitly argue that sporting achievement is linked to character:

It is a cliché to say that sports are a character builder, but then, you know what a cliché is. A cliché really is something that is so obviously true that it is spoken and repeated over and over again until we call it a cliché. More than any other people, Americans are sports-minded. And maybe this is what has contributed to what we call the American personality. With all our faults, we're the most generous people in the world. Youngsters in this country grow up influenced by

heroes in the world of sports, and the legends of sports become part of American folklore.¹³¹

Reagan not only claimed that sport reflects character, but he also identified such character as uniquely American. Specifically, he tied sports to the character trait of generosity, but did not elaborate on why sports might cultivate this particular trait. Reagan did make clear his belief that sports and sporting heroes, like Owens, are a significant component of the American fabric.

A second occasion upon which Reagan referred to Owens was during a 1983 luncheon meeting of the U.S. Olympic Committee in Los Angeles in preparation for hosting the Summer Games the following year. To frame the significance of the Olympic Games as more than an athletic competition but also a showcase for the triumph of American ideals, Reagan reminisced about Owens and his fellow 1936 teammate, Ralph Metcalfe, who went on to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives:

He [Metcalfe] and Jesse Owens were very, very special to my generation. I can remember what a great source of pride it was when they won that day in Berlin and Adolf Hitler, with his Aryan supremacy stupidity, had to stand up and swallow that stupidity when the gold medals were placed around the necks of some of our fine black athletes. Ralph Metcalfe and Jesse Owens were much more than great athletes; they were great Americans.¹³²

Here, Reagan overtly depicted Owens's performance in Berlin as a triumph of American ideals over Nazi ideals, suggesting that the two were diametrically opposed. Reagan also implied that the nation rallied behind the black Olympic athletes like Owens and Metcalfe while failing to mention the United States own hostile racial tensions. Perhaps

more quickly than any other president, Reagan did not hesitate to uphold Owens as constitutive of American ideals. He again referred Owens as being “a great American” in a 1984 speech at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado.¹³³ During his two terms, Reagan referenced Jesse Owens’ Olympic accomplishments in at least seven speeches. For Reagan, Owens was a symbol of the superiority of American democracy.

In 1990, George H.W. Bush posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor to Owens and delivered a speech in commemoration of the occasion. The Congressional Medal of Honor is typically given to an individual serving in the Armed Forces of the United States, and is the “highest award for valor in action against an enemy force.”¹³⁴ Bush opened his address by explaining that he was there “to honor a man who really honored his own nation—Olympic hero and an American hero every day of his life.” From the start, Bush clearly constructed Owens as a hero and an ideal American. Like other presidents, Bush provided a narrative of Owens’s rise to fame to emphasize the historical significance of his Olympic feat: “He burst onto the world scene in 1936, and I think every American that studies history remembers this—the 1936 Olympics, Hitler's Olympic games.” Bush’s portrayal again reinforced the idea that Owens’s triumph was a triumph over Hitler and Nazism. He explained that “the Berlin games were to be the showcase of Hitler's theories on the superiority of the master race until this 23-year-old kid named Jesse Owens dashed to victory in the 100-, the 200-, and the 400-meter relay. It was an unrivaled athletic triumph. But more than that, it really was a triumph for all humanity.” When he triumphed over Hitler, Owens not only represented America but also convinced the rest of the world that Hitler was wrong, according to Bush’s narrative. Bush is quick to condemn Hitler’s conception of the

“master race” while ignoring the historical ideas that American citizens had about the superiority of the white race. Bush depicts the United States as morally superior to Germany because Owens was allowed to participate in the Olympics. Yet black athletes joined the American team amidst controversy. Their success in athletic competition ultimately made them valuable members of the team, but they were still not equals to their white counterparts.

Bush also highlighted Owens’s service achievements, although the president painted a rosy picture of Owens’s life immediately following the Olympic Games. Bush declared that Owens “returned to this nation a hero, a household name, billed as the fastest man on Earth.” There was no mention of the struggle that Owens faced to support himself and his family or to finish school. Owens’s household name status did not translate to “the easy life” because he was still a second-class citizen. Because Owens’s success in the Olympics did not propel him to immediate fame or wealth, Bush instead romanticized Owens’s life as being one valiantly dedicated to serving his country. After recounting Owens’s event victories in the Olympic Games, Bush clarified that “it’s what he did after the spectacular performance of the Berlin games that earned him the enduring gratitude of all Americans. Jesse dedicated himself to upholding the Olympic ideal of sportsmanship and the American ideals of fairplay, hard work, and open competition.” Here Bush reinforced the notion that Owens was an embodiment of American ideals as manifested through sport and that character traits can be cultivated through sport. By working hard and exhibiting sportsmanship, Owens serves as a model to demonstrate that anyone can succeed as a matter of character. In fact, Bush declared that Owens’s “example and influence” extended to “all other athletes across the country,” and that

Owens “became a special ambassador for sports—a man who taught the ideals that I just mentioned were the key to success not just on the athletic field but in the game of life.” Bush concluded his address by detailing the various service projects in which Owens took part, and then officially celebrated Owens’s “legacy” by presenting Owens’s widow Ruth with the Congressional Gold Medal “for his humanitarian contributions in the race of life.”¹³⁵ Bush repeated his description of Owens’s achievements as “a victory for humanity” in a speech to the U.S. Olympic Committee later that year.¹³⁶

In an interview with ESPN’s Dan Patrick in 1999, Bill Clinton proclaimed that “the athlete in the 20th century that made the most important contribution was Jesse Owens.” Clinton justified picking Owens “because he won the multiple Olympic gold medals in the face of Nazi Germany and against Hitler's racial theories.” Once again, Clinton did not acknowledge the racial attitudes held by most Americans in 1936, which considered Owens to be an unequal citizen. Even winning four gold medals did not change Owens status as a black man in America. Referencing character, Clinton elaborated on the criteria he used to select Owens: “I think he was both a great athlete who had to show an extraordinary amount of personal courage, and he did something that was of profound significance at the time.”¹³⁷ Clinton’s reference was unclear as to whether Owens used personal courage to compete in Berlin under Hitler’s watchful eye, or whether he needed bravery to withstand the criticism of black athletes and their unequal treatment here in America.

It seems that Owens is invoked every time a president addresses an Olympic Committee. In a 1995 speech to the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games, Clinton employed Owens as a symbol of the spirit of the Olympic games, portraying Owens as

running “his way into the hearts of the world and the history books of the Olympics and the United States” after competing in the 1936 Olympics against Hitler’s wishes. Clinton waxed nostalgic about being a child and watching “those old films of Jesse Owens running in Berlin after Hitler promulgated all of his theories of racial superiority.”¹³⁸ Again, Owens’s Olympic triumph was portrayed as a triumph for America over the Nazis, even though the two nations were not diametrically opposed in their ideologies, and even though the United States had its own theories of racial superiority at the time. Clinton reiterated the same idea in a 1998 speech to the U.S. Winter Olympic and Paralympic Teams, declaring that “(e)verybody now knows about the remarkable triumph of Jesse Owens in the 1936 Berlin games, what it said about prejudice and hatred, what it said about the difference between America and the Nazi regime that then governed in Germany.”¹³⁹

President George W. Bush has referenced Jesse Owens the fewest times of any administration since Ford, perhaps in part because the United States did not host an Olympiad during either of his two terms, nor were any of the Olympic Games that did take particularly politically charged for the United States. Bush, however, did reference Owens on two occasions. First, he credited Owens with bringing “pride and joy to generations of Americans” in a proclamation recognizing “the many contributions of African Americans to our country” in honor of national African American History Month in 2006. Owens was one of eight African Americans who “reinforce our commitment to be a nation of opportunity and hope for every citizen.”¹⁴⁰ Owens is depicted as being able to achieve success because he was an American and an ideal citizen. Therefore, the implication is that by following Owens’s example, any African American can overcome

barriers to success and achieve the American Dream. Later in 2006, Bush cited the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum in Alabama as one of “our country's great historical landmarks” aided by the winners of the Preserve America Presidential Awards. Bush described the Jesse Owens Park as representing “a piece of cultural and regional history” that helps to “celebrate the diversity of America” and “provide educational opportunities for families as they travel across our great land.”¹⁴¹ This last allusion to Owens was subtle, but it served as yet another reminder of how Owens’s legacy is portrayed and preserved by the office of the presidency. (The Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum will be the subject of analysis in chapter four.)

Conclusions

Beginning with Gerald Ford’s awarding of the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens in 1976, the presidency has repeatedly upheld Jesse Owens as an ideal American. Through their rhetoric, presidents have admired Owens for his unprecedented athletic achievement of earning four gold medals, portrayed Owens as triumphing over Hitler and Nazism, argued that Owens was a symbol of hope for African Americans, and praised Owens’s character attributes and service contributions. Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush have all depicted Owens in similar ways, using Owens and his athletic fame to discursively constitute a representation of the ideal American. By establishing Owens as a symbolic hero, presidents are then able to use him for nationalistic purposes. Owens’s athletic triumphs demonstrate the strength of American character and values, and that any individual can achieve his or her goals through hard work and dedication. Most

significantly, presidents need Owens to help us re-imagine our historical attitudes toward race, assuring us of America's moral superiority.

While each administration since 1976 has repeatedly and consistently employed Owens in this way, there is no mention of Owens at all in the public papers of the presidency before Ford's term in office. Even Franklin Roosevelt, who held office during the 1936 Olympics, never acknowledged or recognized Owens.¹⁴² So why does Owens only become such a popular symbol in presidential discourse at the end of his life? Most likely, Owens could not have been used to constitute American ideals much earlier than the 1970s. For many years, the realities of American racism that persisted throughout Owens's lifetime simply did not fully allow him to be celebrated as a legitimately American hero instead of just a black hero. By the 1970s, enough time had passed that cultural attitudes toward race were finally evolving, but history had to be re-conceptualized in order to forget the racism that our nation once perpetuated. The president must play a key role in such a reconstitution of American ideals.

Jesse Owens functions as a particularly useful symbol that the presidency can use to do this. At the most basic level, Owens is a cultural icon because of his historical athletic accomplishment of earning four gold medals in the Berlin Olympics. This fact alone resonates in a culture that values sport as highly as Americans do. But Owens's athletic achievements transcend sports because the Olympic Games in Berlin were so politically charged. We tend to read our contemporary understanding of the Holocaust onto the 1936 Olympics and therefore can view Owens's victory as a triumph over Hitler and Nazism. Because Owens was one of the first black Americans to be recognized as a national celebrity, Owens can be portrayed as a breakthrough or a turning point in the

movement toward equality for African Americans. Finally, the common narrative that portrays Owens as an impoverished youngster who earned his athletic success through hard work, dedication, generosity and a humble character helps to fit Owens into the mold of an ideal American. All of these attributes help Owens to function persuasively as a cultural symbol, even though employing Owens in such a capacity ultimately obscures the racist ideology that still lingers in America. Owens reassures us that American attitudes toward race were much more enlightened than in Nazi Germany, and that racial equality has long been possible.

Chapter Three: “The Man Who Outran Hitler”:

Athleticism and Character in the Autobiographies of Jesse Owens

While Jesse Owens is romanticized as the great hero who battles Hitler and the Nazis, forgotten is how horribly Owens was treated right here in America. In the same year that he smashed four world records at the Big Ten championship track meet in Ann Arbor and qualified for the Olympics, Owens was no hero in the eyes of the average American. He was just another “nigger.” Even when traveling with the track and field team at the Ohio State University, Owens and his black teammates routinely faced discrimination and humiliation. In 1935, just months before Owens smashed several world records en route to qualifying for the Olympics, he and his black teammates, were required to travel in a separate car and were rarely allowed to eat in restaurants with the rest of the team. On one particular occasion, the coach had purchased food to take to Owens and his black teammates who were waiting outside in the car. But when the owner discovered that the food had been purchased for “niggers,” he stormed outside and violently yanked the plates away from the students, forcing them to eat whatever crumbs had spilled on the floor of the car during the struggle if they wanted any nourishment at all.¹⁴³ There was no way for Owens and his teammates to fight back from this kind of treatment.

But soon, Owens became a national sensation, sometimes celebrated by citizens who would have never thought to praise a black man before. A second-class citizen was suddenly an American hero. Presidents have repeatedly and consistently upheld Jesse Owens as an example of the American Dream, largely by ignoring the discrimination

Owens faced in his own country or by simply claiming that he became a hero in part by overcoming racism. After all, if Owens could become an American hero in the 1930s, then citizens can re-imagine our nation's historical attitudes toward race to believe that we had made substantial progress toward racial equality in the 1930s, especially in comparison to the racist doctrines of Nazism. If the presidency discursively constructs Jesse Owens in such a way, then how does Owens portray himself?

This chapter analyzes how Jesse Owens constructs his athletic accomplishments as symbolizing American ideals through his autobiographical narratives. Paying careful attention to how Owens discusses his role in the 1936 Olympics, I will explore how Owens explains that he represents an ideal American despite suffering from prejudice, racism, and poverty throughout most of his life. In addition to depicting his athletic achievements as service to his nation, I argue that Owens uses his sporting feats as a way to cope with the racism and hardship he faced throughout his life. Instead of pointing out the contradictions between American racism and his status as a hero, Owens would rather buy into the idea that he took personal responsibility for attaining his own success in the Olympics and thereafter because of a tremendous strength of character. The language of sport plays a key role in Owens's narrative. According to Jeffrey O. Seagrave, sport functions symbolically because it "reflects our efforts to control matters of life and death—in short, to control our fate."¹⁴⁴ Owens uses sport and athletic competition to wrestle with the terms of his own existence as an American citizen. For Owens, his participation in sport helps him to reflect upon, define, and reinforce the rules that govern American life.

Owens autobiographies provide a stark example of how citizens must negotiate the tensions between American ideals and reality. Citizens must find ways to cope with living in a country and under a government that promises them things that never come true. In Owens's case, he convinces himself that American democracy provided him with the opportunity for success, and that his own willingness to accept personal responsibility and to undertake hard work were the harbingers of his success—instead of his rare, inborn athletic talent. If Owens were to accept that his athletic abilities made him the exception to the rule, then he would have to admit his failure to overcome racial barriers and that he was exploited by his country for nationalistic purposes. So for Owens, it is much easier to believe that he earned his athletic success and overcame his struggles throughout life by using the character traits that are requisite for success under the myth of the American Dream.

Owens's autobiographical narratives are presented in several volumes, each co-written with writer Paul G. Neimark. The first book, published in 1970, is titled *Blackthink: My Life as a Black Man and White Man*.¹⁴⁵ "Blackthink" is Owens's term for describing the philosophies of the black militancy movement, which surged in popularity and notoriety in the 1960s and early 1970s under leaders such as Malcolm X, Harry Edwards, and Stokely Carmichael. Owens wrote the book partly in response to accusations leveled by black radicals that he was an "Uncle Tom."¹⁴⁶ *Blackthink* is Owens's take on the civil rights movement and is essentially an argument against black militancy, bolstered by Owens's own experiences and encounters with race issues throughout his lifetime. In 1978, Owens's second autobiography was released under two different titles. *Jesse: A Spiritual Autobiography* was published by Logan

International,¹⁴⁷ and was likely the original title of the book. One of the strongest themes throughout the book is religion, faith, and spirituality, and the narrative culminates with Owens explaining, “I decided at that moment to write this book, my spiritual autobiography.”¹⁴⁸ *Jesse: The Man Who Outran Hitler*, also published in 1978 by Fawcett Gold Medal,¹⁴⁹ is identical to *Jesse: A Spiritual Autobiography* in every way except the title and front cover. Most likely, the title was changed to offer a stronger commercial appeal to Fawcett Gold Medal readers, who knew of Jesse Owens primarily from his Olympic feats in Berlin. This second autobiography, published simultaneously under the two titles, is a more traditional, straightforward account of Owens’s life from childhood to his last years. Owens died in 1980, just two years after these autobiographies were released.

Why two autobiographies? Both narratives serve very different purposes, although they are fairly consistent in their main messages. *Blackthink* is Owens’s way of wrestling with and accounting for the effects of racism upon his life. He makes sense of his encounters with racism and prejudice by portraying himself as able to overcome them, almost like a test of his personal character. He views the black militancy movement as a failure of the character test for those involved in it, because despite what Owens perceives as improved equality and better opportunities for contemporary 1970 black Americans, they want to use racism and prejudice as an excuse for not taking it upon themselves to weather tough times while striving to attain a better life. In Owens’s view, the black militancy movement reflects weak character, and he uses *Blackthink* to speak out against the movement, arguing that like himself, every individual is capable of and responsible for attaining their own success. He uses his athletic accomplishments as an

example to prove that he could become a success without help from his country, making him stronger in character than the black militants asking for help from the government and American society. Having denied that racism affected his ability to attain the American Dream in *Blackthink*, Owens nearly ignores racial factors altogether in his second autobiography. Instead, he reflects upon his life in a more traditional autobiographical fashion, emphasizing faith and spirituality as having the greatest impact upon his life. But like before, Owens imagines his life as a perpetual character test that he was able to pass because of his strong character virtues and faith.

Rhetoric and Autobiography

Rhetorician Edwin Black has noted that “(w)e are compelled to believe in the existence of relationships between a man’s deepest motives and his discourses.”¹⁵⁰ The autobiography is a rhetorically powerful text because it is a unique, carefully crafted articulation of selfhood. Of course, this does not mean that we can know an author’s thoughts and beliefs simply by reading his or her autobiography. Authors choose what to reveal and what to emphasize by selectively constructing a narrative of themselves and their lives. Presumably, an autobiographer attempts to present him or herself in the most flattering light possible. Consequently, scholarly discussions of autobiography are often bound up with the quest for “truth” or historical accuracy regarding the subject in question. This quest for historiography has even prompted a proliferation of autobiographies being written by academic historians for purpose of “writing the past.”¹⁵¹ In her article “The Author is Dead, Long Live the Author: Autobiography and the Fantasy of the Individual,” Jakki Spicer explained that autobiographical studies “have

been plagued by heated debates regarding their uneasy relation to fiction” and the question of whether “the contents of the book correspond to a life lived, or only to the contents of an author’s imagination.”¹⁵² This creates a dynamic and interactive relationship between the autobiographer and the audience. Often without realizing it, readers must constantly negotiate between several tensions present in autobiographical language, including “the seeming contradictions between truth and accuracy, memory and history, objective and subjective truth, and so on.”¹⁵³

By presenting an account of one’s life, autobiographers hope their readers see and understand narrative events through the author’s perspective. At the same time, autobiographers open themselves up to judgment by the reader. In “Rhetoric and Autobiography: The Case of Malcolm X,” Thomas W. Benson argued that “(o)ne of the greatest rhetorical potentialities of the autobiographical genre lies in its ability to take a reader inside the writer’s experience, and to show how early mistakes led to later enlightenment. But this very advantage also presents a danger, since later actions may be judged as variations on those earlier mistakes.”¹⁵⁴ Although only presented with one perspective, the author’s, readers often recognize contradiction and inconsistency in the autobiographical account. Therefore, readers must engage the autobiography with their own personal experiences to make sense of the narrative accounts. After all, as Amy Shuman puts it, “If personal experience narratives were only personal, they would not reach as they do into discussions of collective memory, public discourse, and the politics of identity.”¹⁵⁵

Rhetoricians need not necessarily be concerned with the truth value of autobiographical works and instead often focus on how the author constitutes the self

through language, as well as how such autobiographical narratives function to construct and perpetuate collective social memory. First, autobiographies allow authors to make sense of their lives by reconstructing past events and accounting for their actions. Glenda R. Balas has described autobiography as a “healing fiction” and as a “therapeutic” endeavor for the author.¹⁵⁶ She has argued that narrative is “uniquely important in describing what happens within oneself” because the process of making sense of one’s life through the retelling of a story allows autobiographers to put their lives in order. Beyond this therapeutic capacity of the autobiography is the potential for influencing, redefining, or reinforcing collective memory of social events and experiences. Balas has reminded us that collective memory is “created, not in solitude, but rather through interaction.”¹⁵⁷ Thus, rhetoricians must consider the relationship between the autobiographer and the audience, who frame and co-create the story.

Autobiographers are often concerned with how they will be remembered in history, and hope that their accounting of themselves will shape their public perception over time. The sporting world is rich with examples that reveal the individual’s preoccupation with such “self-memorialization.” Raymond L Schmitt and Wilbert M. Leonard II have explored the process through which American athlete-citizens attempt to “leave their footprints . . . on the sands of time” through sporting accomplishment.¹⁵⁸ Schmitt and Leonard observe the tendency for athletes to “become concerned about how they will look to future audiences” and “ponder the mark that they will leave in time.”¹⁵⁹ Athletes have a propensity to buy into the belief that their accomplishments will help them to attain immortal status.¹⁶⁰ In other words, athletes tend to construct their own identity via their sporting accomplishments. The primary task of this chapter is to reveal

how Jesse Owens attempts to portray himself and to make sense of his life through his autobiographical narratives. For Owens, his athletic feats in Berlin certainly play a major role in this process of constructing the self.

Blackthink: My Life as a Black Man and a White Man

Blackthink is Owens's first autobiographical attempt to articulate his experiences as a black man in the United States during the twentieth century—a black man who has also been upheld as a national hero after an unprecedented performance in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. To make sense of himself and his life, Owens must make sense of racism in the United States. *Blackthink* is his effort to do just that. Owens constructs himself as a man who suffered from racism and prejudice, but did not let those factors affect his life. He portrays himself as being able to overcome racism and other obstacles through strength of character, and argues that anyone—black or white—should be able to do the same. In turn, he contends that blaming one's problems on racism equates to weakness of character, and therefore, he builds an argument against black militancy throughout the book, ultimately claiming to “drive the first real nail in the coffin of blackthink.”¹⁶¹ His two primary arguments are that racism no longer exists except in reverse form through “Blackthink,” meaning that it is invalid for blacks to claim they get a raw deal from society, and secondly that black militants are morally wrong in their beliefs and tactics. He contends that instead of racism directed toward blacks, “the true catastrophe of today [is] that the Negro is in danger of being maliciously, tragically brainwashed.”¹⁶² He concludes his ruminations by imagining a Martin Luther King, Jr. -

like “colorblind” society in which people would not be labeled either white or black—only as “humans”—hence explaining the subtitle of the book.

The opening sentence of the 215-page volume is a quotation from black militant Harry Edwards, who is now a Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Berkeley: “Jesse Owens is a bootlicking Uncle Tom!”¹⁶³ Owens does not explain the context of the quotation, but he implies that he will be defending himself against the accusation in the first chapter, entitled: “I Know the Trouble They’ve Seen.” He begins his narrative with a lengthy account of an experience he had traveling with the track and field team at the Ohio State University, described in the introduction to this chapter. Through instances like these, Owens claimed to have experienced a humiliation that “hypocrites” like Edwards had never known. Owens proclaimed: “Today, a young Negro like Harry Edwards can climb out of the ghetto and go to a tuition-free university, become an articulate leader, and then use his articulation against those who taught him the words.”¹⁶⁴ In the second chapter, “Henry Owens’ Tortures,” Owens reflects upon his father’s struggles as a southern sharecropper and the son of a slave, underscoring his desperate upbringing and that he understands first-hand the dire poverty and the fear that blacks in American have experienced and endured.

Owens confronts the realities of his unequal status while growing up, but at the same time, Owens maintains that his 1970s contemporaries no longer have to face such concerns because “that torture is over.”¹⁶⁵ In the third chapter, “But Equality Is Here,” he explicitly argues that racial inequality is no longer a problem, that “most black men today start just about equal with the white. We may not begin with as well-off a set of parents, and we may have to fight harder to make that equality work. But we *can* make it work.

Because now we have the one all-important gift of *opportunity*.”¹⁶⁶ Owens reasons that if black Americans are not happy with their lives, it is because they have failed to take advantage of the opportunities available to them. Confounding the problem, in Owens’s estimation, are the teachings of blackthink: “Most whites and Negroes have been brainwashed to believe that the black men and women, with a few exceptions such as athletes, entertainers or postmen, don’t have much chance in America. It’s a lie. If the Negro doesn’t succeed in today’s America, it is because he has chosen to fail.”¹⁶⁷

Recalling that he had received no scholarship to attend Ohio State and compete on the track team, Owens implies that contemporary American blacks have it easy compared to him. “Negroes who want to go to college do so. . . . In fact, not only are Negroes going to college virtually whenever they really want to, but they’re going *where* they want.” Owens seems almost resentful that some modern black students are not more grateful to simply have the opportunity to attend college at all: “Of course, that isn’t nearly enough today for a lot of black students. It isn’t enough for them to attend the finest universities in the world. They want to run them, appoint the teachers, tell the president what courses to have taught. And when they don’t get their way, many of them bomb the campuses or burn the libraries. Why do they do it?”¹⁶⁸ Owens explains that many young blacks believe that they are getting a raw deal from society. But Owens disagrees, citing evidence that blacks in 1970 have it better than ever before.

Are they talking about the more than sixty percent advance in income Negroes have made over the past decade so that the gap between black and white is narrower than ever before? Are they talking about the million new Negro white-collar workers who have sprung up in the last few years? Or the giants of

industry who've instituted national campaigns of training, hiring and housing Negro workers at all levels in formerly all-white communities? I travel 100,000 miles a year for Ford Motor Company alone, and I know that the executives in the big companies across this country today really do want young Negroes, just as I knew that they *didn't* want *me* in 1937.¹⁶⁹

Not only are many young blacks ungrateful for the opportunities they do have, but they are also guilty of “reverse bigotry,” according to Owens, such as demanding that Negro history be taught only by black teachers.¹⁷⁰ By portraying the complaints of blacks in 1970 as selfish, ungrateful gripes, and then comparing them to his struggles as a sharecropper's son in the deep south, Owens constructs himself as strong, humble, and independent. Owens essentially asserts that there is no need for a black militancy movement because blacks now have equal opportunity and “because the Negro is so well off and getting more well off with each new day.”¹⁷¹ Furthermore, in Owens's view, the individual is responsible for seizing that opportunity, regardless of one's lot in life. He even argues that “a staggering number of Negroes who live in the worst slums stay there *because they want to,*” and that “mostly it's a matter of choice” when black Americans wind up mired in poverty, fear, and violence.¹⁷²

Owens repeatedly implies that blaming whites, blaming society, or blaming the government reflects weakness. Paraphrasing Kennedy's inaugural address, he strongly asserts, “Don't ask what the white man can do for you—don't even think of it—until you've first done every damned thing *you* can do for yourself.”¹⁷³ To demonstrate that he can empathize with the struggles that contemporary blacks face, and perhaps to avoid sounding preachy, Owens frequently intersperses his narrative with vignettes and

anecdotes about black acquaintances and their families, and what he has learned from their experiences. One example is “Bill,” a smart, popular, athletic young man who eventually got involved in the black militancy movement when he went to college because of a simmering anger over being socially pressured to refrain from asking a white girl to his prom. Ignoring his studies, Bill planned demonstrations and engaged in rioting, eventually facing a condition of permanent blindness resulting from one particularly violent episode along with lifelong hospitalization.¹⁷⁴ Another example is “undisciplined” Ted, who became a “hanger on” of the black militancy movement simply to avoid doing homework, and as a result has no skills and no future.¹⁷⁵ And then there is aging Harold, who, despite poor living conditions, getting mugged, an alcohol addiction and deteriorating health, simply didn’t want to get out of the ghetto badly enough.¹⁷⁶ Owens explains that in each case, he came to realize that the individual involved should have made better choices, and therefore that the black man’s troubles are always his own fault—and not the tragic effects of a racist society. Owens even blames himself for his own struggles and financial woes after the 1936 Olympics, declaring, “I deserved what happened to me,” “I had been stupid,” “I had forgotten what it took to become the world’s fastest human, the incredible sweat and pain and years,” and that “I started, little by little to believe in the easy way.”¹⁷⁷

Owens directly attacks black militants for character weakness and bankrupt morals, often depicting them as trying to make an easy buck and accusing them of exploitation—particularly of exploiting other blacks. Although he does not cite any study or expert, he asserts that “(e)very responsible individual or organization that has objectively looked into the situation has come to the conclusion that most black

nationalists are a horde of ‘colored con men’”¹⁷⁸ Instead of staying humble and working hard to overcome obstacles in life, Owens portrays black militants as getting involved in black power movements as a way of avoiding personal responsibility. He declares that “(v)iolence, hate and self-pity are easy. Self-control, true assertiveness and long-range planning are the challenges of a different color.”¹⁷⁹ Owens compares black militant philosophy to Hitler’s writings in *Mein Kampf* in that they both result in “suppressing the personal identity of the individual into some group, the end justifying the means, force instead of freedom.”¹⁸⁰ He even accuses black militants of being anti-Semitic and of resenting Jews for overcoming hate and prejudice.¹⁸¹ Owens makes sense of his encounters with racism and prejudice by constructing himself as having been able to overcome them, almost like a lifelong test of his personal character. He concludes that many contemporary blacks, despite living better lives and being offered more opportunities, fail this test because of weakness, and therefore, that “(t)he militants are the *real* Uncle Toms.”¹⁸²

A second theme of *Blackthink* is the connection that Owens makes between strength of character and sports. He depicts himself as being able to excel in the Olympics by representing strong American ideals. Despite his own challenges with racism and prejudice, Owens indicates that he felt he was expected to represent American ideology “because this was the time of the most intense conflict between dictatorship and freedom the world has ever known.”¹⁸³ Even though his own country did not treat him as an equal while competing in the 1936 Games, Owens bought into the idea that he was representing the noble side of a diametrically opposed split between American democracy and Nazism:

Adolf Hitler was arming his country against the entire world, and almost everyone sensed it. It was ironic that these last Olympic Games before World War II was to split the earth were scheduled for Berlin, where he would be the host. From the beginning, Hitler had perverted the games into a test between two forms of government, just as he perverted almost everything else he touched.” (183)

Owens’s main criticism of his treatment during the Olympics was not prejudice against him as a black American, but rather that he was forced to participate in Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) events around Europe after the Olympics instead of being allowed to return home to tend to his wife and his new daughter. He complains bitterly that “they thought of me as their performing monkey, a running machine that never broke down and that would do some p-r work for America while mainly doing a lot more good for the old AAU.”¹⁸⁴

Back in the United States, however, Owens did not seem to resent the celebrations in his honor or his portrayal as a black man who overcame racial and economic barriers to achieve his success in Berlin, nor the suggestion that other blacks can attain the American Dream simply by working as hard as Owens did. In fact, he upholds sports as the ideal venue for blacks to prove their equal status, declaring, “Well, a Negro kid *can* make it there, *especially* there. It’s no accident that there’s a higher percentage of colored major league baseball players than in the population at large. Or that almost half the pro basketball players are black.”¹⁸⁵ At the same time, Owens also dismisses any notion that black athletes are exploited for their abilities, and thus are allowed to participate in the sporting world more equally than in other aspects of society still dominated by whites. He argues that the reason blacks are excelling in sports “isn’t

because that's the only place they'll let us in, either. No one let Einstein into mathematics because he was Jewish. Or white. And it isn't because we've got 'rhythm,' either. It's because we're *making it*.”¹⁸⁶ Owens would much rather believe that he earned his success and his praise as an example of a black man achieving the American Dream solely on his own merit—not because he was “allowed” to excel in track so that he could advance American nationalism during the highest level international competition, the Olympic Games.

Yet Owens constructs himself, as well as Joe Louis, as being the first black Americans to earn equal status through their success in sport. He explains that “Joe and I had been lucky to come along at a time when the imagination of the American public at large was ready to be captured by Negro athletes. Because of this, we had unique roles to play in our culture, and it welded us together as friends.”¹⁸⁷ Owens points to the praise that he and Joe Louis earned from the press as proof that they had attained equal status as American citizens. He points out that Louis was the “first Negro to win the Associated Press Athlete of the Year Award in 1935, and I followed in 1936. Not another Negro won it until Willie Mays in the middle fifties, and, until Jackie Robinson came along in 1947, Joe and I had to carry a major load as far as the Negro image was concerned.”¹⁸⁸ Owens depicts himself and Louis as role models, especially for other black Americans. He never argues or even entertains the notion that he and Louis were exceptions to the rule because of their athletic abilities. Instead, he seems to buy into the idea that sports provide the perfect vehicle for young blacks to succeed, “(b)ecause more than anything else to the kid who starts off poor or underfoot, sports represent the American dream. If a boy can't grow up and make it there, he can't make it anywhere.”¹⁸⁹

Because sports are linked to strong character traits such as hard work and dedication for Owens, he decries any intermingling between sports and the black militancy movement. Particularly upsetting for Owens was a highly publicized incident from the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City, during which two black American runners, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, gave the “black power” salute during the flag ceremony—a symbolic protest that was organized in part by Harry Edwards.¹⁹⁰ The runners were immediately suspended from the U.S. team and were jettisoned from the Olympic Games, setting off a storm of media controversy (most of which was critical toward the athletes for their political gesture). Owens lamented the Smith and Carlos symbolic protest because “the Olympic incidents damaged the image of the Negro athlete in America, and sports are important, so important.”¹⁹¹ Owens connected the protest with the character weakness, the laziness, and the “easy way” that he believed to embody black militancy. He explains that foreign blacks, such as the African competitors in those Olympic Games, showed no sympathy for the black militant cause, that they “didn’t have time for black-power meetings” because they were too busy focusing on their athletic performances.¹⁹² Owens does not seem to consider that Smith and Carlos were trying to convey their individualism—that they had made it to the Olympics because of their own hard work and dedication and despite prejudice against them, and not because of anything handed to them by their country or by society because of their athletic abilities. Owens himself expressed resentment that he was treated as a “performing monkey” by the AAU after Berlin, but does not relate his own feelings to the umbrage that Smith and Carlos must have felt for being asked to perform and excel not for their own glory, but instead for a country that seemed to be trying to suppress their efforts to strive for black equality.

Owens explains that he eventually quit participating in the AAU events around Europe so that he could fulfill his family obligations back in America. The AAU's response was to ban him from ever competing as an amateur athlete in the United States again.¹⁹³ His effort to stand up for himself had failed. Yet at the same time, he condemns Smith and Carlos for a failed protest that also resulted in negative consequences—getting them sent home from the Olympics while also tainting the image of black athletes, in Owens's estimation.

Owens seems to dismiss the potential for discourse or symbolic acts to draw attention to the plight of black Americans, largely because he maintained that it was “merely talk” and not real, concrete action. If blacks are not happy with their lives, he maintained that they have the opportunity and the ability to change their lot in life. Owens views the speeches, protests, and riots associated with the black militancy movement as laziness, a way to avoid going out and doing real work in the world to get ahead. He also suggests that if blacks feel that they are looked down upon as inferior to whites, they can change that not by complaining about it, but by “showcasing the good.” In other words, the best form of protest is not to demand equality, but to go out into the world and prove that black Americans can attain equality. He advocates a plan of action: “Plant next to prejudice another tree that grows so big and high that discrimination has to wither and die. Those aren't just words, either. They're a code of action. One thing they mean is that it's more important for a Negro golfer to play in the Masters than it is for a hundred Negro athletes to give nationwide speeches telling how they'd correct injustice.”¹⁹⁴ Owens encourages action rather than “talk,” but fails to reconcile the fact that he makes his own living as a speaker-for-hire. He defends baseball player Willie

Mays against criticism for not being politically involved because he claims that Mays has showed his involvement simply by playing baseball and serving as a role model to young blacks. Meanwhile, Owens upbraids Arthur Ashe for skipping an exhibition tennis match for inner-city Chicago children in favor of accepting an award for his service efforts and doing a high-profile media interview about society's ills.¹⁹⁵ Yet Owens does not see any contradiction in his present career based on accepting awards and speaking engagements while taking on the broader role as a spokesperson for African-Americans. Perhaps this is because he sees himself as having already fulfilled his obligation to “showcase the good” by proving that he could become a success without help from his country, making him stronger in character than the black militants asking for help from the government and American society without trying to “do” anything to achieve their equality.

***Jesse: A Spiritual Autobiography and
Jesse – The Man Who Outran Hitler***

Eight years after *Blackthink* was published, Owens released his second autobiography, simultaneously published under two different titles. A more straightforward, chronological account of his life, the primary difference between this manuscript and *Blackthink* is the almost total lack of reference to race. In his waning years, suffering from some health concerns, and possible from the normal human anxiety experienced by reflecting upon one's life and wondering whether the right choices were made, Owens could have easily lashed out at society for putting him through such struggle after he represented the nation so proudly in the Berlin Olympics. But Owens stayed true to his previously expressed beliefs, describing his lifelong battles against poverty and destitution as a spiritual struggle—a perpetual test of character from God.

Relying on strength of character and devotion to his faith, Owens constructs his story as an inspirational account of how he surmounted every new twist and turn in his life, each time restoring his spirit. Owens also spends much more time discussing his Olympic experiences, with nearly half of the book detailing his journey to Berlin all the way through the celebration and aftermath of his Olympic feats. Still, through this second autobiography, Owens again emphasizes strength of character by crafting a narrative about overcoming every barrier faced throughout his life to eventually attain the American Dream. Although the 224-page manuscript can be analyzed in many facets, I will explicate the predominate narrative of faith and character as being responsible for allowing Owens to overcome every barrier he faced in order to live a successful American life.

The opening words of the book immediately convey the American Dream myth. The inside cover provides a short overview of the autobiography, and it begins this preview with three descriptive phrases about Owens: “Sharecropper’s child . . . Ghetto youth . . . 1936 Olympic champion,” implying that the book would be a story about how Owens transformed his life so dramatically. The volume is overtly described as “an inspiring story about what can happen when success comes suddenly and too soon—about the failures and ultimate triumph of a great American.”¹⁹⁶ Owens dedicates the work to several people who had a significant impact upon his life—his wife, his parents, German athlete Luz Long (“the Nazi who fought Hitler with me”), and coach Charles Riley—but “most, and most humbly, To The Great Referee.”¹⁹⁷ The first sentence of the book also sets the tone with Owens’s sweeping declaration that “(t)he first prayer I ever made saved my life.”¹⁹⁸ He opens his narration with an early childhood memory of a

having a strange bump on his chest, and recalling that the family was too poor to call a doctor back in Oakville, Alabama. So while Jesse prayed, his mother performed a makeshift surgery with a kitchen knife.¹⁹⁹ Although his parents worried about the health of their youngest son, Owens claims that he recovered quickly because of the “power of prayer.”²⁰⁰ He vividly depicts a scene of dire poverty in which his father, the son of a slave, had to toil as a struggling sharecropper because he had “no skills,” and “didn’t know anything but sharecropping.”²⁰¹ One year, Owens recalls that the family was too poor to have Christmas. But Owens portrays his parents as recognizing that they were responsible for improving their desperate conditions, and thus they decided move the family to Cleveland in 1919 by boarding a train that Owens’s mother proclaimed would “take us to a better life.”²⁰²

In Cleveland, life was not much better for the Owens clan. Each of Owens’s older siblings had to forego school to earn for the family, often getting paid in food like slaves.²⁰³ However, Cleveland was also the place where Owens was given the opportunity to cultivate his athletic abilities. He already knew that he liked to run, explaining, “I loved it because it was something you could do by yourself, all under your own power.”²⁰⁴ As the only Owens left in school, coach Charles Riley asked Jesse to join the track team in the fifth grade, and allowed him to run before school instead of after so that he could keep his jobs delivering groceries and running errands to help support the family.²⁰⁵ Owens’s narrative is clear: the family sacrificed so that its youngest member could take advantage of new opportunities, but Jesse also had to do his part through hard work and dedication; nothing was given to him for free. But as Owens immersed himself in track and field and began to excel while also maintaining his jobs, he expresses some

guilt and regret over neglecting his spiritual life, for not going to church enough and thanking God for his success.²⁰⁶ He even displays shame for taking the name of the Lord in vain when fouling during a high school competition.²⁰⁷ Perhaps to ease his guilt and restore his character, Owens explains that he made a decision to insist upon paying his own way to attend college instead of accepting one of the many scholarship offers available to him for participating in track. Deciding to bring his talents to Ohio State, he asked that his father, who had been unable to hold steady work in Cleveland, be given a permanent job at Ohio State in lieu of a scholarship.²⁰⁸ This meant that nineteen-year-old Owens, who had already fathered a child with his future wife, Ruth, would have to find extra time in the day to support his new family and pay for school. Just as in *Blackthink*, Owens seems to be reinforcing the notion that nothing was handed to him, not even as the result of his athletic prowess; he always paid his own way. He depicts himself as being able to accomplish his goals as a matter of hard work and determination only. Although he did not receive free tuition, Owens does not consider whether any colleges or universities would have wanted him to enroll in the first place if it weren't for his athletic skills. From Owens's perspective, only poverty and not race stood before him as a barrier—and he reasons that money can always be earned slowly but surely through a little hard work and humility.

In one of his few acknowledgements of the racial divide in America, Owens begins his ruminations about the Berlin Olympics by comparing himself to his ancestors: “In the early 1830s, my ancestors were brought on a boat across the Atlantic Ocean from Africa to America as slaves for men who felt they had the right to own other men. In August of 1936, I boarded a boat to go back across the Atlantic to do battle with Adolf

Hitler, a man who thought all other men should be slaves to him and his Aryan armies.”²⁰⁹ This quotation is an accurate reflection of Owens’s general perspective on race—that it was a problem in the past for America, but now America was on the side of freedom and equality, diametrically opposed to the Nazi ideology. It is plausible to imagine that Owens felt this way partly because it was what he had been told to believe, and partly because he wanted to believe that he was competing on the right side of a “good versus evil” battle, and that by mere virtue of participating in the Olympics as a representation of America, he was living proof that his country was capable of allowing equality among all citizens. He almost provides the reader with a sense that he was destined for victory in Berlin because “it was a godless city,”²¹⁰ and by implying that God would be on his side.

From his account of the circumstances surrounding the Berlin Games, Owens seems to reaffirm the nationalistic narrative that portrays his triumph in the track and field competition as a triumph of American democracy over Nazism:

During the 1936 Olympics, Hitler had an even bigger target than the Jews—the United States Olympic team. First, a big part of Hitler’s superiority idea was that his Nazis should rule not just because they were better and smarter, but because they were stronger and healthier. Though Hitler himself was short, dark, and anything but athletic-looking, he constantly talked of his ‘tall, blond, blue-eyed, Aryan supermen.’ Every newspaper was filled with his braggings of how the German Olympic team would prove him correct by ‘vanquishing the inferior Americans.’²¹¹

Owens claims he “wanted no part of politics,” but he sets the stage for his dramatic performance by casting the American competitors as Hitler’s most ferocious enemies during the Olympic Games because “all of us came from pretty much the same background—Southern poor, physical laboring, God fearing. We were everything Hitler hated.”²¹² Owens implies that Hitler’s contempt for the American athletes was part a larger philosophy against American values, although there was no discernable reason why Hitler would hate “physical laboring, God fearing” people, given that Hitler himself might use that description when portraying the German people. If anything, Hitler’s distaste for the American Olympic team stemmed simply from the team’s decision to allow black athletes to compete in his Aryan Olympics, and he was well aware that black Americans were expected to dominate the prestigious track and field events. Hitler was quoted as remarking, “The Americans ought to be ashamed of themselves for letting their medals be won by Negroes. I myself would never shake hands with one of them.”²¹³ Owens, in one of his few acknowledgements of racism, does recognize that “in particular, Hitler hated my skin.”²¹⁴ Yet Owens does not consider, at least not in these pages, that there were many Americans who felt the same way as Hitler did about him and his skin color. But perhaps wanting to believe that he competed on the righteous side of opposing views about racism, Owens reinforces the idea that he proved Hitler’s racist notions wrong, and that America stood on the morally superior high-ground when compared to the Nazis because America allowed him to compete on behalf of the nation. Owens seems satisfied in advocating that even if America wasn’t perfect in its racial attitudes, it was still vastly superior to the “godless” Nazi party in Germany.

Taking even further the implication that God stood on the side of the United States, Owens narrates his relationship with German athlete Luz Long, who, despite being Owens's main rival, befriended him during the track and field competition. Initially admiring Long's affability, Owens expresses surprise at learning that his new friend did not practice any kind of religious faith.²¹⁵ Again, the reader might infer that Owens triumphed over Long in competition because God was on Owens's side. Despite perceiving Long's lack of religious faith as a character flaw, Owens portrays Long, his lifelong friend, as a heroic figure because he did bow to the government pressure to adhere to Nazism, and eventually was exiled from Germany because he spoke out against the party. So to reconcile how a man of such high character could not also be a man of God, Owens came up with an explanation: "Luz Long may not have believed in God. But God had believed in Luz Long. He had made Luz His sacred messenger."²¹⁶ Owens follows up by sharing a letter he received from Long years later while he was in exile in the North African desert in which Long proclaims that his experiences fighting against Nazism had taught him to believe in God.²¹⁷ For Owens, the evidence of Luz Long's impeccable strength of character was now complete. The easy way, for a man of weak character, would have been to stay with his family in Germany and simply remain silent about his opposition to Nazism, but in Owens's eyes, Long took the harder but morally sound path. Owens tries to show that there is always a choice, but that it takes a person of strong character to make the more difficult choice.

Owens uses Long's story as a backdrop for his own difficulties back in America after the Olympics. After initially being rewarded with praise and showered with insincere job offers, Owens faced humiliation and struggle like never before. Owens

never mentions his race, however, as the reason why no one was willing to offer him honest work even though he was an Olympic hero. Instead, he explains his sudden dilemma as a kind of “check” to keep him humble, to prevent him from getting caught up in the vanity of all his publicity and accolades. First, Owens recalls the degrading experience of being paid to race a 100-yard dash against a thoroughbred racehorse.²¹⁸ Next came a business opportunity to open a chain of dry cleaning stores under his name, only to have his partners defraud him and leave him responsible for a debt of \$114,000.²¹⁹ Then, after finally putting together a successful venture with his small public relations agency in Chicago, Owens learned that he was being indicted for income tax evasion after believing that his company’s accountants had filed his personal tax returns on his behalf. Besides the burden of paying back the money, Owens’s primary concern was being portrayed as a cheat. He often admitted to personal faults, including being careless in this situation, but maintained that “I’d never cheated anybody in my life, especially not my country.”²²⁰ Not once, though, does Owens blame his race as a factor in contributing to these repeated struggles to get by, nor does he lash out in resentment that he, an Olympic hero, was being forced to toil and scrape in order to support his family and was now being accused of cheating the very country he represented in the Olympic Games. Instead, Owens presents each new obstacle as another test from God upon his character.

Owens admits that passing these tests was not easy; he even confesses to contemplating suicide for the first time at the thought of being jailed for tax evasion while his wife would be made to resort to working as a maid to support herself and the children.²²¹ Owens’s health began to fail during this time as well. To get through this

final test, Owens explains that he needed to rely on his strength and his faith in God more than ever before: “I was bleeding to death inside, my soul was bleeding to death, and no doctor, no person on earth, could save me. Only God could save me. I had to pray to God to save me. And like the Olympics, I would have to give it all I had.”²²² Owens narrates his decision to make a trip to his birthplace—Oakville, Alabama—as a way to cleanse his spirit by returning to his roots, and by reminding himself of how far he had propelled himself through life. There, Owens describes a kind of physical and spiritual awakening, during which his soul “stopped bleeding.” Owens explains that all of these tests were necessary in order to purify his character, his soul, and his spirit—and that the experiences prompted him to write his “spiritual autobiography.”²²³ He closes by advising readers to “always keep the faith.”²²⁴

To make sense of his lifelong struggles, Owens casts them as a test from God, a test that a person of strong character is eventually able to pass. For Owens, perhaps this viewpoint is preferable to blaming his difficulties—even partly—on race, because a person can exert control over a “test” but cannot control the social circumstances that surround and contribute to the problem of racism. By demonstrating through example that any person can pass the “test” through strength of character, Owens holds himself up as a role model with superior character traits. Under this reasoning, disagreeing with the perspective that racial and economic barriers are merely a test that can be overcome is simply a reflection of weak character, and is certainly not characteristic of an ideal American like Jesse Owens.

Conclusions

Owens makes it very easy for U.S. presidents, beginning with Ford in 1976, to use him as a symbolic example that racial and economic barriers can be overcome in America, the land of opportunity. In their discourse about Owens, presidents completely ignore the struggles that Owens faced when trying to sustain his livelihood after he had worn out his usefulness to the nation in the Olympic Games. Owens does not disregard the repeated difficulties he encountered, but instead of blaming them on race, he uses them to reinforce the argument that every American has the opportunity to overcome social barriers if he or she wants to badly enough. Additionally, Owens absolves the government of any real responsibility to help contemporary African-Americans achieve equality, because he contends that equality has already been achieved; it is simply a matter of individuals taking the initiative to capitalize on the opportunities provided to them. Owens also reinforces a nationalistic narrative that portrays his success in the 1936 Olympics as a triumph for the morally superior United States over “godless” Nazi Germany. Finally, Owens supports the link between sporting excellence and character by emphasizing the hard work, dedication, and sacrifice that contributed to his Olympic success, and by using his athletic achievements as an example of how an individual can achieve any goal, including the American Dream.

How do Jesse Owens’s autobiographies interact with their audience to perpetuate a collective memory of Owens as an American hero? For the typical reader, Owens’s narrative is likely to be persuasive in several capacities. First of all, we all prefer to believe that we have at least some degree of control over our position in life, which is the main message Owens advocates. Because Owens does not emphasize his natural talents

and athletic abilities, he leaves readers with the impression that any goal can be achieved simply as a matter of hard work. Even for a reader living under desperate circumstances, Owens's words provide a voice of hope. Most readers are likely to be persuaded by Owens attribution of faith and spirituality as the foundation of his success, because this is also a core element of the American Dream mentality. Because Owens does not advocate Christianity or any specific religious principles, he leaves the spirituality aspect open for audience interpretation. Even readers who are not religious may hang onto the idea of faith as being equivalent to eternal hope—the promise that their lot in life might eventually be improved.

Secondly, Owens's narrative provides testimony that points to the diminishment (if not the eradication) of racial inequality in the United States. Most readers are likely to believe that the racial divide has been severely narrowed over the course of the twentieth century, even if they recognize that racial tensions still play a significant role in American society. What racism does still linger can be easily conquered by the individual experiencing it. Thus, Owens excuses his readers from taking any responsibility for contributing toward prejudice and racial discrimination, or from taking any action to end it. For readers who strongly believe racism is a major social problem in the United States, Owens presents a difficulty, because if he, a man who has experienced some of the most degrading forms of prejudice and the most desperate circumstances of poverty, does not believe that racism and poverty exist as social barriers, what hope do activists have of convincing someone unaffected by prejudice and poverty? Owens makes it difficult to argue with him about the existence of social barriers because he portrays such a denial as weakness of character. Even a reader who rejects Owens's

perspective on race has to acknowledge Owens's ability to defeat any challenge thrown his way without any help from the government or from society. Ultimately, Owens's story allows citizens to negotiate and cope with the tension between the American ideal of equality promised to us by our government and the stark realities of racial discrimination and other inequalities.

Finally, Owens reinforces the popular myth that his participation and success in the Berlin Olympics served as triumph of American ideals over Nazism. If Owens does not condemn his nation for his unequal status and treatment as a black man, then why should we? American readers want to believe that the United States stood up to the reprehensible philosophies of Nazism by having Owens compete against and dominate the German athletes. Owens's narrative of his experiences in Berlin allows his audience to assume that American democracy was diametrically opposed to Nazism, when in fact the United States was never particularly outspoken against Nazism until our direct involvement in World War II. Owens lets his audience re-imagine that the United States was morally superior to Nazi Germany, especially in terms of racial attitudes, instead of recognizing that the discrimination against Jews in Germany could be compared to the discrimination against blacks in America.

Owens makes sense of his life by rationalizing that he accomplished his athletic triumphs and overcame all obstacles in his life as a matter of character. To admit otherwise would diminish the strength of character that he had constructed in order to exert control and power over the fluctuating circumstances of his life, and worse yet, would amount to admitting that he had let himself be used and exploited by his country. Although his narrative is often rife with contradictions and inconsistencies, audiences are

likely to buy into Owens's claim that "Life is the true Olympics,"²²⁵ because we all want to believe that we are potential gold medalists, too. We want to believe that the American ideals we have been promised can come true, even though our life experiences often tell us otherwise.

Chapter Four: Remembering the American Dream, Ignoring American Racism: The Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum

In his autobiographies, Jesse Owens contributes to the collective public memory that perceives him as having triumphed over Nazism by his unprecedented athletic performance in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, and as a symbolic example of an individual who overcame racial and economic barriers to achieve the American Dream. Owens's autobiographies can be viewed as his attempt to shape his legacy—how he will be remembered in American history. As proof of the significant role that he has played, he discusses the many awards, honors, accolades, and speaking appearances he accepted late in his life and career, including an honorary doctorate of athletic arts from Ohio State University, the Presidential Medal of Freedom bestowed by Gerald Ford, and the Living Legend Award presented by Jimmy Carter. After he died in 1980, Owens continued to be honored posthumously with many awards and accolades, most notably the Congressional Gold Medal that President George H. W. Bush presented to Owens's wife, Ruth, in 1988. But perhaps the greatest honor to Owens's legacy was the establishment of a permanent memorial to recognize Owens's place in American history and culture.

In 1996, sixty years after his triumph in Berlin, Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum was dedicated to the memory of the American track and field star. Located in Oakville, Alabama—Owens' birthplace—the Park includes as its primary attractions a museum, a statue of Owens, a 1936 Olympic torch replica, a replica of Owens's childhood home, extensive photo galleries, and other memorabilia. According to the Jesse Owens Memorial Park official website (www.jesseowensmuseum.org), the museum

“immortalizes Owens’ memory by depicting the moments that made Owens great and portraying the people who shaped him as an athlete and as a man.”²²⁶

This chapter considers how the public memory of Jesse Owens is communicated through his official public commemoration at the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum. I argue that the museum reinforces the popular conception and recollection of Jesse Owens as a man who triumphed over Hitler and the Nazi ideology through his athletic accomplishments. The museum rhetorically induces a nationalistic argument that Owens’ achievements in the 1936 Olympics served to advance American ideals in the United States and around the world. Secondly, the museum reinforces a narrative that describes Owens’s participation and success in the Olympic Games as an advancement toward equality for African-Americans, largely by ignoring the second-class status of black Americans (including Owens himself) during the 1936 Olympics and well thereafter. Finally, the museum also bolsters the myth of the American Dream by portraying Owens as the prototypical example of an individual who built his own success upon hard work and determination. Because racial and class boundaries do not restrict an individual from achievement under this narrative, constructing Owens in such a way makes his memory ideal for use by multiple groups, including the state, sports fans, and Owens himself. Remembering Owens as an American hero also makes his story flexible for use by white and black citizens alike, eliding ongoing racial tensions in the United States.

Situated in rural Lawrence County, in northern Alabama, the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum is authentically located where Owens grew up as a sharecropper’s son. On the other hand, the park’s location is less than ideal for attracting

visitors. The Lawrence County Chamber of Commerce website (lawrencealabama.com) indicates that the countywide population is just over 34,000, according to the 2006 U.S. Census Bureau estimates. The nearest city is Decatur, in neighboring Morgan County, boasting a population of 55,000. While the Memorial Park and Museum typically does welcome visitors daily, it has not collected precise attendance data. The museum offers visiting hours seven days a week, while the park facilities—which include a playground, baseball and softball fields, a basketball court, picnic tables, and pavilions—are always open and presumably are used by the local community regularly. Admission to the museum is generally free, with the exception of groups of ten or more, which are charged a two dollar fee per person. The museum provides guided tours for such larger groups and for student field trips.

Although the museum is somewhat inaccessible for physical visitors, its website features extensive information for online visitors, including pictures and lengthy descriptions of each attraction and exhibit, a biography of Owens, a listing of selected media articles about Owens, a history of the park's development, visitor information, resources, links and more. Because the website, jesseowens.org, is accessible to any visitor with internet access, and because it communicates every aspect of the park and museum in detail, this chapter will rely heavily on the website as a rhetorical text that constructs a narrative of Jesse Owens's memory. Furthermore, one of the purposes of the website is to encourage physical visits to the museum by constructing Owens's public memory as playing a significant role in American history. Therefore, the website functions as a rich site for investigating public memory. At the same time, I also try to convey the experiences of a visitor to the museum and how he or she might engage and

interact with the museum's creation of public memory. Before turning to a detailed analysis of the museum and its website, however, it is prudent to consider the relationship between sport and memory more broadly.

Sport and Memory

In his introduction to Maurice Halbwachs's seminal volume *On Collective Memory*, Lewis A. Coser invoked sport as a primary element of cultural recollection and belonging. Coser attributed the lack of shared sporting memory as a primary barrier to connecting fully with native citizens when he first arrived in America as an immigrant early in the 1940s. Coser recounted that he did not have trouble establishing friendships with peers, but that there was something that “blocked full communication . . . a kind of impassible barrier between us.”²²⁷ Recalling his study of Halbwachs, Coser pinpointed the “mild estrangement” between him and his new American friends as a matter of not sharing enough collective memories, and specifically, that “(t)he memory of major sports events shared by my friends was not part of my memory.”²²⁸ Although Coser certainly understood the social significance of sports, he did not grow up idolizing baseball legends and American football stars. He did not share the memory of their heroics or witness their athletic accomplishments.

Sport stands apart from other forms of popular culture because its very nature inspires memory. Although the participants in sporting events change from year to year and from season to season, the teams and the places in which they play largely remain the same. The format of each sport—the rules, the objectives, the scoring system—also does not typically change over time. This stability of the sporting world allows for memory to

be shared across generations and passed down through time. Furthermore, a sporting contest by definition is a conflict, marked by winners and losers. For both participants and spectators, winners celebrate heroics while losers can suffer a kind of trauma. International sporting events—such as the Olympic Games or the World Cup—have frequently been described as a substitute for war, conjuring and commemorating national pride. Because sporting contests rely on “keeping score,” they are inherently historical events—recorded and preserved and remembered.

In *Playing on the Periphery: Sport, Identity and Memory* (2006), Tara Brabazon explored the nationalistic themes found in sporting memory by probing the relationship between sport, English identity, and power. As the first to devote a comprehensive volume to the correlation between sporting memory and national history, Brabazon examined an array of English sporting “moments” to illustrate how “sports dip in the well of memory to transcribe stories of class, race, nation and gender.”²²⁹ While most studies of sport and society critique underlying tensions of race, class, gender, and sexuality that are mirrored by sport and by athletes, Brabazon argued that sport functions as a teaching tool because “spectators see cultural differences which build into a lived matrix of place and identity.”²³⁰

Brabazon underscored that sport is not merely a form of popular culture, nor an isolated social construct. Brabazon explained that sport places “emphasis on consumerism and not citizenship,” and therefore can be “used by politicians to salve unpopular policies and is implicated in the domination of subjected peoples.”²³¹ Thus, to characterize sport as nothing more than a dominant and globalized form of popular culture is at best misleading and at worst dangerous. Brabazon warned that “to reduce

sport to 'mere' consumption or globalization of popular culture is to dismiss the political negotiations that are possible through language, bodies and behavior."²³² Further, Brabazon contended that significant sporting moments serve as an ideal template to trace social history, particularly histories of class and masculinity. Providing rich narratives to unravel, the sporting world can easily aid in interpreting popular memory. Brabazon accentuated the ability of sport to "jump-cut time and graft strong personal emotions onto an event that is shared by many."²³³ By illustrating how passion and emotion can survive specifically through sport, she concluded that sporting memory is the ideal site to explore personal, collective, and popular memories.

In considering sport as memory, David R. McMahon focused on two themes that run throughout our history of sports: namely, that "social circumstances have often allowed or prohibited the participation of an athlete in an event or sport; and the norms of reportage have selectively affected what gets recorded and remembered."²³⁴ Michael A. Katovich adopted a similar perspective, asserting that the sporting universe "consists of two vital temporal dimensions – uncertainty in the present and careful, meticulous recording of accomplishments in the past."²³⁵ These themes have been key considerations in terms of sporting memory and race, where, according to McMahon, the athletic achievements of African-Americans are recorded and remembered while their race is forgotten.²³⁶ The consequence of this tendency is the creation of a "distorted memory" that embraces the advancements in race relations while ignoring the negative or unaddressed aspects.²³⁷ McMahon has advocated for the use of sporting memory in deconstructing narratives about American race relations:

(A)n examination of the stories that have been told (and not told) about black athletes sheds light on the globalizing nature of sport and how the black athlete has been remembered (and forgotten) over time. By focusing on the image of the black athlete in sports publications we learn how amnesia and memory work together to frame our collective memory of sports...Only by asking questions and by subjecting vestiges of the past...to rigorous analysis in the present can we rescue our sports memory from the sports reportage of the past.²³⁸

Aaron Baker has examined the relationship between memory and sports films, noting that such movies often claim historical status because they frequently draw upon real athletes or real contests. In fact, most sports movies make explicit claims to historical meaning by “portraying the past while looking back in time through the lens of present concerns.”²³⁹ Many sports films typically suggest that the hard work extolled by working class men, such as Knute Rockne or Lou Gehrig, resulted in their athletic accomplishment, and in turn, their attainment of fame and material security.²⁴⁰ As such, Baker argued that “professional sports fit squarely within ‘the traditional American mythology’ that champions the promise of unified identity through individual achievement.”²⁴¹ When an athlete is able to accomplish goals as a matter of sheer will, hard work, and perseverance—rather than money, status, or power—it reinforces the traditional American belief in equality of opportunity. If an underprivileged athlete can make it to the top of his or her game, surely each one of us also has the ability to achieve our own personal goals. As Baker explained, “(s)uch belief in agency supports the

utopian promise of sports: that once the contest begins, success depends primarily on one's own determination and effort."²⁴²

The sporting world is also a rich site to contemplate the individual's preoccupation with "self-memorialization." Raymond L Schmitt and Wilbert M. Leonard II have explored the process through which American athlete-citizens attempt to "leave their footprints...on the sands of time" through sporting accomplishment."²⁴³ Schmitt and Leonard observed the tendency for athletes to "become concerned about how they will look to future audiences."²⁴⁴ This phenomenon is described as the "postself," or the concern of a person with the presentation of his or her self in history. Schmitt and Leonard categorize the postself as "paradoxical" because it "blends the future with the past from the perspective of the individual in the specious present. Individuals ponder the mark that they will leave in time."²⁴⁵ Athletes (and their fans) seem to believe that their accomplishments will accord them immortal status. The sporting world in particular facilitates the postself because it supplies occasions, settings, and processes through which athletes can be celebrated and remembered for setting records and earning awards for their achievements.²⁴⁶ Schmitt and Leonard have stipulated that the sporting world is not unique in furnishing the ability for individuals to "leave their mark" on the world, but that sport seems to be particularly salient in "creating, maintaining, and augmenting concerns about selfhood."²⁴⁷ After all, the competitive nature of sport requires self-evaluation and comparison with others, especially via measurement, records, awards, and other commemorative devices.

Schmitt and Leonard have pointed to collective memory specifically as the locus of the postself, because "although sport acts may become anchored in the athlete's very

emotional being, athletic performances are also etched in the collective memory of sport.”²⁴⁸ Indeed, sport is a social world that encompasses as its participants both athletes and spectators. Schmitt and Leonard identified five crucial features of the sporting world that retain collective memory. First, in sports, our memory of the past is easily preserved through chronicling—directly recording the events or contests and their sequence. Second, physical objects—such as monuments, athletic sites, slogans, bumper stickers, pennants, t-shirts, and trading cards—renew the memory of past sporting events. Third, the collective memory is continued through awards and commemoration (e.g., induction into an athletic hall of fame). Fourth, every sport has a “season,” a basic recurring structural unit of social life. And fifth, collective memories are written and rewritten by social worlds, often with periods of time (such as the anniversary of a significant event) and participants being reassessed over time, for instance, how a particular player might rank in the history of a certain sport. This process can involve the creation of a mythic past for celebrated athletes: for instance, the “regilding” of Jim Thorpe.²⁴⁹ Many of these features of collective memory are manifest in Owens’s autobiographies, as discussed in chapter three. From a public memory perspective, each of the autobiographies, written in the last decade of his life, might function to facilitate Owens’s creation of his own postself.

What happens when sporting memory is preserved and co-opted by the state, as in the case of Jesse Owens—who has been lauded by President Ford, Bush, and Clinton, among others? If athletic achievement can be upheld by the U.S. presidency as an advancement of freedom, then sport must have some inherently political value. John M. Hoberman characterizes sport as “a latently political issue in any society.”²⁵⁰ Although

generally considered to be a leisure activity, pastime, or diversion, Hoberman contended that sport “exercises a deep hold on the human imagination which is virtually universal and which does not seem to vary from society to society.”²⁵¹ This phenomenon is most apparent when citizens celebrate national pride during international competitions such as the Olympic Games or the World Cup. Hoberman further elaborated that sport functions as “an advertisement for any given ideology,” and to the end that sport should “serve the greater glory of the state—any state—is the sole criterion for its appropriation and use.”²⁵²

Hoberman argued that sport is a political tool for any state because it “appeals to all ideological temperaments” and “is a universal aesthetic before it is differentiated into divergent ideological messages.”²⁵³ The modern world of professional sports is filtered through capitalist interests. But at its core, sport can be seen either as a form of labor or a form of leisure, which may carry ideological implications depending upon the perspective. Either way, sport can function symbolically within a given ideology, although it may carry different symbolic meanings. Moreover, any sport has a set of rules or guidelines that govern play, just as any ideology is replete with rules and guidelines. The competitive nature of most sports fits well as a metaphor for many ideologies, at the very least in the sense that one ideology typically believes it is superior to all competitors. In America, however, sport is much less often considered for its potential political or ideological implications when compared with most other parts of the world, particularly Europe. Hoberman explains:

After forty years of Socialist sport in Europe, it may never have occurred to the most politically dogmatic members of American society that sport might be a

matter of ideological interest. . . . Ideological conflict, after all, has played a less significant role in American political life than in most of Europe over the past century, one reason being the absence of a politically significant Marxist tradition in the United States and the ideological tensions that would have resulted from its influence.²⁵⁴

It is prudent to return briefly to rhetorician Michael Hester and his study on the use of sport by the American government by investigating “presidential sports encomia,” the epideictic White House ceremonies honoring sports champions. Through his analysis, Hester claimed that these addresses hold political significance by providing presidents with means “to cite the efforts of sports heroes as exemplary characteristics of a national identity and, in so doing, articulate an American civil religion consistent with the institutional role of the presidency in preserving the political and social order.”²⁵⁵ Providing insight into the reasons why presidents honor sports championships, Hester has illuminated the political and cultural significance of these ceremonies and how such meaning is conveyed rhetorically.²⁵⁶

In formally honoring athletes through ceremonial speeches, Hester has explained that “presidents are injecting athletic accomplishment with a political and social significance that extends far beyond the playing field. In holding up these champions as national heroes, presidential sports encomia serve as a cultural ritual whereby the public is reminded what it means to be an American—who we are and who we should strive to be.”²⁵⁷ Certainly it can be argued that championship athletes evoke the “American spirit,” the hard work and determination requisite to success. Hester clarified that sports heroes are “ready-made for a president who wants to relate the ingredients necessary for

victory in sports to the components required of success in the construction of economic programs, foreign policy, or the maintenance of the nation.”²⁵⁸

In reference to national identity, Hester claimed that “(w)hen portrayed by presidents as examples of how the enactment of national values leads to success, [athletes] are rhetorically constructed as the ‘ideal’ Americans.”²⁵⁹ Richard Lipsky further argued that the use of sports as a communication tool is particularly effective because it is socially accessible to all groups. In his article on “The Political and Social Dimensions of Sports,” Lipsky asserted that “the world of sports has become a major form of national and social communication to the extent that interest in and knowledge of sports make Americans of every region and class ‘available’ to one another.” He describes sport as “the ‘magic elixir’ that feeds personal identity while it nourishes the bonds of communal solidarity.”²⁶⁰ Sports symbolism is especially effective as an ideological tool employed by American political leaders because of its flexibility. Because sports are enjoyed in some form by citizens on both sides of the political spectrum, appeals to sport can and have been used by both Republicans and Democrats.²⁶¹

Remembering Jesse Owens: The Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum

Before Jesse Owens Memorial Park was dedicated in 1996, only a few small markers gave any indication that the town of Oakville, Alabama was the birthplace of the celebrated Olympic champion. In 1983, the Lawrence County Commission considered a proposal to place a plaque honoring Owens in the courthouse square courtyard. But to the dismay of many county residents, the Commission voted against the measure.²⁶² In

1991, Oakville resident Therman White approached and teamed with James Pinion, County Agent Coordinator, to discuss development of a park to honor Owens. White had procured a suitable plot of land but needed Pinion's help to obtain additional funds to build a park. The duo worked through Auburn University to raise more than \$2 million for the park's development and construction. Auburn University Tourism Specialist Dr. Tom Chestnut was also commissioned to design the park's development plan.

The final boost needed to complete Jesse Owens Memorial Park came in 1994 when Pinion decided to petition the Olympic Torch Committee to reroute the Olympic torch through the park en route to the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. When the committee agreed, enough funds poured in to finish the park just a few days before the arrival of the Olympic torch. In October 2005, Hampton Inn Corporation's Save-A-Landmark Program donated volunteer labor and more than \$38,000 to revitalize the park with extensive clean-up and landscaping. The 20-acre park showcases attractions that "honor Owens' life and accomplishments and at the same time engage the community and visitors in an interactive learning experience." Such attractions include a welcome center, a statue of Owens, an interactive museum with a mini-theater and extensive photo galleries and memorabilia collections, a long-jump pit for visitors to test their skills against Owens's world record mark, an Olympic Gold Medal Tree, a 1936 Olympic torch replica, and a replica of the Owens's childhood home.

In remembering and honoring Owens, the Park rhetorically induces two major thematic narratives. First is the nationalistic sentiment that Owens embarrassed Hitler and helped freedom and equality triumph over the Nazi ideology through his groundbreaking athletic performance in Berlin. Second, the Memorial Park and Museum

supports the notion that Owens overcame racial and economic barriers to achieve the American Dream—that purely through strength of character, hard work, and determination, Owens was able to make a prosperous life for himself. Largely ignored by the museum and its celebration of Owens’s life, however, is the lingering racial inequality that endured throughout his lifetime, despite his heralded athletic accomplishments in the name of freedom and equality. Although the two major thematic narratives created by the museum frequently overlap, I shall try to address each of them in turn while also explaining how the museum ignores or forgets the issue of race in Owens’s life by the public memory it constructs.

American Ideals Triumph Over Nazi Ideology

First catching the eye of most visitors to Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum is surely the eight-foot, one-ton bronze statue of Jesse Owens in the Gold Medallion Court, situated just outside the museum entrance.²⁶³ Designed by Birmingham sculptor Branko Medenica, the monument depicts Owens as bursting through the classic grouping of Olympic rings, reflecting his incredible dominance of the Games in Berlin. According to the park’s official description, the statue design represents “all the barriers that Owens broke in becoming an Olympic hero, including racial and economic barriers.” This description reinforces the American Dream myth, which will be discussed later in greater detail. Instead of a simple statue of Owens’s likeness or a depiction of him receiving his gold medals in Berlin, the image of Owens breaking through the Olympic rings is symbolic not only of Owens conquering obstacles in order to represent the United States as a member of the Olympic team, but also his dominant performance over any

international challenger. The description continues: “Owens also broke world records and destroyed Hitler's claim of Aryan supremacy in the 1936 Olympic games.” Thus, the statue is clearly meant to depict the ultimate triumph of American ideology over Nazi ideology. Mounted on a trapezoidal granite slab, the statue’s inscription reads: “Athlete and humanitarian whose inspiration personifies the spirit and promise of America.” Here, Owens is explicitly upheld as a model American who reflects the core values for which our nation stands—the “spirit and promise of America,” again implying the American Dream myth that anyone can find success in the land of opportunity. Furthermore, by emphasizing Owens’s Olympic victories specifically in the statue, through the inclusion of the Olympic rings, the international implications of his accomplishments are immediately brought to the forefront. The image of Owens in stride, breaking through the Olympic rings, suggests a sense of determination and even a slight air of defiance, reminding visitors of Hitler’s presence and involvement in the 1936 Games. Owens achieved many great athletic and personal accomplishments, but the statue clearly argues that his most important feat took place on the international stage for all the world to see.

According to its own account, the museum “immortalizes Owens' memory by depicting the moments that made Owens great and portraying the people who shaped him as an athlete and as a man.” Yet by prominently featuring exhibits and displays centering specifically on the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, the museum predominantly calls attention to the international tensions at play in the collective memory of Jesse Owens. The museum’s major exhibits include glass display cases that showcase rare memorabilia, such as programs from the 1936 Olympics and replicas of track uniforms

and shoes worn by competitors in the 1936 Games. Medals and trophies from Owens's high school days are also displayed, reminding visitors that Owens's road to the Olympics began at an early age. The museum's mini-theater allows visitors to sit and relax while viewing the forty-minute movie "Return to Berlin," in which Owens narrates his experience during the 1936 Olympics, underscoring his perspective as an American participant in an international competition. Owens's childhood and athletic training are represented as leading up to a single, pivotal moment—his triumph in Berlin. Not the Big Ten Championship track meet in 1935 during which he set four world records. Not the humiliating experience of running against horses to earn a few dollars to support his family. Not the crushing debt that he slaved to pay back after his dry cleaning partners bled the business dry. Not his humanitarian efforts or his role in the civil rights movement. The moment of greatest significance in Owens's life is portrayed as his representation of American in Berlin.

In particular, two other Memorial Park attractions accentuate the narrative that upholds Owens as an ideal citizen who competed not for athletic glory but instead for the ideals for which America stands. First is the stainless steel Olympic torch replica, an artifact which is a universal representation and symbol of the international competition. The torch inscription reads: "May this light shine forever as a symbol to all who run for freedom of the sport, for the spirit of humanity, for the memory of Jesse Owens." This message underscores the enduring implications of Owens's athletic achievements in Berlin, implying that his deeds will stand—as an eternal flame—to preserve "freedom" and the "spirit of humanity" throughout time. Once again, the museum makes the argument that Owens's accomplishments in the Olympic track and field competition were

much more than purely athletic feats; they were also symbolic of certain American ideals.

A second memorial on display is the Gold Medal Tree, representing a gift from the German people that each 1936 Olympic gold medalist received in addition to their gold medal and the traditional laurel wreath. Winning four gold medals, Owens was awarded four of these seedling oaks. He planted one at his mother's house in Cleveland, one at the Ohio State University's "All American Row," and one at Rhodes High School in Cleveland where he cultivated his track skills. The fourth tree died before Owens could plant it. Recalling the story of this fourth seedling that was never planted, the park's board members obtained permission from the Owens family to procure and plant an oak tree as a symbol of the lost Olympic Gold Medal Tree. A plaque accompanies the tree, bearing the inscription: "May the tree grow to the honor of Jesse Owens' victories and achievements." Explicitly remembering the Gold Medal Tree as a gift from Germany implies that Hitler and his countrymen had no choice but to acknowledge Owens's dominance in the 1936 Games. Like the burning torch, the sprouting seedling symbolically represents life and growth, reinforcing the conception that Owens's legacy is lasting and that it will continue to grow and flourish over time.

Myth of the American Dream

While the museum focuses on Owens's Olympic experiences, it also purports to honor and celebrate Owens's entire life. Visitors know this because of the references to Owens's childhood and from the park being located in his birthplace, as well as from the recognition of his service work later in life. Additionally, the museum offers an official biography, which is accessible from the museum's web site. The biography begins with

an overview or summary of Owens's life, and then is divided into five different sections that visitors to the website can click on to read more information. The very first line of this biography overview, framed by the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum, distinctly conjures the classic rags-to-riches narrative: "From humble beginnings as a sharecropper's son in Oakville, Alabama to standing atop an Olympic podium wearing gold, Jesse Owens made it look easy, but it was not. Racial and socioeconomic barriers were just a few of the obstacles Owens overcame." The biography goes on to account for exactly how Owens was able to conquer the many obstacles he faced: "Equipped with a hard work ethic that he learned from his parents and feet that could fly, Owens did what no other had done before – he won four gold medals at one Olympiad." Although the biography maintains that it was not easy to overcome the barriers in his life, it also implies that a combination of talent and the values required to cultivate that talent were all that Owens needed for success. Although it will not be easy for others to replicate Owens's accomplishments, the message is that any individual can, in theory, achieve similar success largely as a matter of personal values, character, and hard work. Finally, the biography overview proclaims, "Returning home to a ticker tape parade, Owens' life was changed forever. However, what endeared him to so many were the lives that he then changed forever with his humanitarian work that spanned four decades." This description leads the reader to believe that Owens's life was instantly changed for the better after a triumphant return from Berlin, and that he devoted the rest of his life to service work. There is no detailing of the many struggles that Owens faced upon returning to America; the museum would have visitors believe that Owens overcame racial and socioeconomic barriers once and for all with his Olympic victories. In

depicting Owens as an inspiration and a manifestation of the American spirit, the museum forgets that the American Dream myth didn't apply to Owens as a black man in the late 1930s.

This form of forgetting continues when visitors to the museum are reminded of the opportunities that Owens earned after his Olympic triumph propelled him to fame when they enter the park's Welcome Center. The Welcome Center displays several of Owens's personal items that were donated by his wife, Ruth. The most prominent item is a poster autographed by Owens when he represented Lincoln-Mercury. In the museum, two interactive touch-screen kiosks provide visitors with glimpses into Owens's post-Berlin life, featuring video and audio clips narrated by Owens himself. The first kiosk plays a Wheaties commercial featuring Owens and highlights his relationship with his Ohio State University mentor, Coach Larry Snyder. The second kiosk shows an Adidas commercial featuring Owens and provides visitors with an overview of Owens's service work, including speaking to youth and receiving the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Roosevelt Award. Owens's eventual commercial and service-based opportunities are showcased, but his long struggle to make a living and support his family following his Olympic success is not mentioned. These exhibits give visitors the impression that Owens had his pick of commercial endorsement opportunities and that he was a celebrity in his time just like modern professional athletes, when such options were not made available to Owens until the civil rights movement was well underway and it was almost fashionable to use a black product spokesman. Omitted is the fact that Owens was not offered a single genuine endorsement or job offer upon returning to the United

States, and that Owens was stripped of his amateur athletic status and even had to finance the rest of his college education at Ohio State himself.

The museum's three photo galleries further accentuate Owens's widely accepted attainment of the American Dream through his Olympic feats. First is the "Jesse Owens Story Gallery," which features larger-than-life panel displays that "invite visitors to journey alongside Owens as he grows from a sickly child of Alabama sharecroppers to a track star of international acclaim and then a hero for underprivileged youth across America." This gallery overtly portrays Owens as a rags-to-riches success story. Second is the "Running Gallery," where visitors can view replicas of Owens's jerseys and shoes, authentic medals and trophies from Owens's high school days, and programs from the 1936 Olympics. The museum cues visitors to appreciate how Owens was able to overcome the barrier of poverty through viewing these displays: "Touring the gallery will give you a sense of Owens humble beginnings, the obstacles he overcame to become one of America's greatest athletes of all time and how individual excellence left a mark on not only the 1936 Olympiad but on thousands of lives that were inspired by Owens." Not only was Owens able to achieve the American Dream, but the museum argues that he should be upheld as a role model for other citizens, regardless of their race, socioeconomic status, or any other barriers they may face. Third, the "Humanitarian Gallery" highlights the "lifetime of championing the underprivileged youth of America" undertaken by Owens after the 1936 Olympics. Again, Owens's many years of struggle are not mentioned, as the gallery implies that Owens immediately committed himself to a life of service following his Olympic success. The Museum's description of this third

gallery stresses the significance of Owens's character in terms of motivating him to earn his success:

His ability to elevate himself above his humble beginnings and achieve what no other Olympian had done—win four gold medals at one Olympiad—endeared him to thousands of Americans and made him an instant role model to America's youth. Although Owens' success came from years of hard work, dedication to his sport and depth of character, his fame afforded him the opportunity to impact so many, an opportunity that he never took lightly.

The second attraction that dramatically illustrates Owens's escape from poverty through athletic achievement is the Jesse Owens Home Replica. This exhibit vividly recalls the desolate hardship that Owens experienced as the youngest of ten children sharing a shabby tenement with cracks in the wooden walls and blankets laid out on the floor for beds. An audio clip narrated by Owens's brother Sylvester relays what life was like as the son of a sharecropper. The extreme poverty that Owens endured as a child is perhaps more than most visitors can imagine. Owens is portrayed as rising from the very bottom to achieve the American Dream; if he could do it from the depths of the lower class, so can the millions and millions of Americans who start in the middle class. Because visitors to the park and museum can imagine Owens growing up in the modest, rural town of Oakville makes the museum's location especially effective in reinforcing the American Dream myth.

Conclusions

While the themes of nationalism and the American Dream are repeatedly reinforced throughout the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum and its website, conspicuously missing is the issue of race. The only time the subject of race is raised by the attractions and exhibits or through the website text is the occasional but repeated mention that Owens overcame both racial and socioeconomic barriers to attain his Olympic success, but the museum implies that Owens obtained permanent success and stability once he became an Olympic hero. The socioeconomic factors, however, are overwhelmingly emphasized over the racial barriers through the consistent reinforcement of the argument that Owens achieved the American Dream by being offered glamorous spokesman opportunities and by being able to devote his life after the Berlin Olympics to public service and humanitarian work. But in depicting Owens's attainment of the American Dream, the Memorial Park and Museum's narrative of Owens's life also ignores his lifelong struggle to gain financial stability as a black man in America after his return from Olympic glory in Berlin.

In fact, one clear-cut example of this ignoring can be found in the "Resources" section of the Memorial Park and Museum website. The site provides links to about thirty newspaper and magazine articles about Owens and his accomplishments, listed in chronological order. Yet after four articles about Owens's track and field feats up until and through the Berlin Olympics, the chronology skips from August 5, 1936 (the date Owens earned his fourth and final gold medal) to a 1952 article celebrating Owens (but written by a British magazine). The rest of the articles remaining in the list includes one story from 1960 and 1970 respectively, each discussing Owens's charity and

humanitarian work. The remaining links stem from the proliferation of articles around the time of Owens's death in 1980, revealing that his achievements are reflected upon at the time of his death rather than during his lifetime. Only three articles about Owens are available between 1936 and 1980—and one of them is a retrospective about Owens's pre-Olympic life from a British publication. The rest of those years between Owens's return from Berlin up until the time of his death are completely ignored. The vast majority of articles accessible to visitors are celebratory tributes of Owens that again reinforce the nationalistic argument that Owens represented a triumph of American ideals and that he overcame obstacles—particularly poverty—to achieve the American Dream. This is reflected in the titles of these articles, such as, “Jesse Owens: Hero For the Ages,” “His Supreme Statement Still Inspires,” and “The Man Who Humbled Hitler Gets a Park in His Hometown.” The articles that do mention race again typically center on the idea that Owens overcame racism and helped the nation to overcome racism, without mentioning the decades of hardship that Owens struggled through after the Olympics. The website also supplies a second listing of “miscellaneous” articles that predominantly center on Owens's humanitarian efforts and the awards and honors he received (many of them posthumously), along with a few retrospective editorials on Owens's life, featuring such titles as “Owens' Later Life Matched His Feats” and “Jesse Owens Was an Inspiration.” But once again, his decades of struggle as a black American are ignored.

Another example is the official biography presented by the museum. As previously discussed, after a brief initial overview of Owens's life, the biography is divided into five parts: “Oakville, AL,” “Cleveland, OH,” “Ohio State University,” “1936 Olympics,” and “After Berlin.” By focusing on Owens's life leading up to and during the

Olympics, the museum further entrenches the narrative of Owens as an ideal citizen who relied upon hard work and character to overcome hardship and triumph in the name of American values and ideology—specifically in his Olympic performance. Only one of the five sections, the final section, “After Berlin,” examines the forty-four years of Owens’s life after his Olympic triumph. However, once again, this final biographical section only describes Owens’s successful business and commercial opportunities, beginning in 1949 when Owens started a public relations agency, as well as his service work and numerous commendations late in his life. Only a scant opening paragraph makes any reference to hardship, explaining that Owens once took a \$30 per-week job as a playground instructor for underprivileged youth in Cleveland right after the 1936 Olympics. This job, which Owens was somewhat embarrassed and frustrated to accept at the time, is depicted as a noble act. The description goes on to explain that because Owens “still had school on his mind,” he earned enough money to return to Ohio State University to complete his studies by participating in an exhibition race with a horse. Otherwise, no other mention of financial hardship is discussed, nor is there any reference to race playing a part in Owens’s struggles to earn a living. Owens’s involvement in the civil rights movement and his resistance to the black militancy movement in the 1970s is also never mentioned, although, interestingly, the website lists the publishing of *Blackthink* as one of Owens’s accomplishments. Owens’s second biography, simultaneously published as *Jesse: The Man Who Outran Hitler* and *Jesse: A Spiritual Autobiography*, is not mentioned.

The Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum remembers Owens as a national hero—an ideal American—while at the same time forgetting the very aspect that

prevented Owens from fully being embraced as an ideal American or from fully belonging as a citizen—his race. Yet constructing a narrative of Owens as an athlete who competed on behalf of American values and as an individual who accomplished the American Dream through his own will and effort is what makes the Jesse Owens story appealing to all citizens. The story of Jesse Owens is not a black memory, a rural poverty memory, or a Civil Rights memory. It is a national memory—one that can be used just as easily by the state as by sports fans, by civil rights leaders as by humanitarian groups, and even by Owens and his family in establishing his legacy.

This flexibility is what makes the collective memory of Jesse Owens work so well as a nationalistic one. In his discussion of memory and the politics of identity, James Young speculates that “every group may eventually come to recall its past in light of another group’s historical memory, each coming to know more about their compatriots’ experiences in light of their own remembered past.”²⁶⁴ While the story of Jesse Owens might have otherwise been a black memory, a southern poverty memory, or even just a sporting memory, it has been co-opted into the myth of the American Dream. Such mythologization is effective, according to Jenny Edkins, because it reduces an event to “a set of contained and controlled narratives.”²⁶⁵ Instead of being a sad tale about the injustice of Owens’s treatment as a black athlete in America before his Olympic triumph, or the tragic indignities he suffered trying to make a living even after being heralded as the greatest athlete in the world, the memory of Jesse Owens is tightly controlled within a nationalistic framework.

The collective memory of Jesse Owens also reinforces the link between nationalism and religion, as articulated by Edkins, Benedict Anderson, and Anthony

Smith. To compensate for the decline of religion worldwide under the rise of capitalism, nationalism functions as a “surrogate religion,” helping citizens overcome a sense of futility of purpose and inevitable death.²⁶⁶ Edkins explains that the concept of sacrifice is pivotal in the use of nationalism as religion, particularly in describing the deaths of soldiers fighting for their country.²⁶⁷ In such a way, Owens’s accomplishments on behalf of the United States in the 1936 Olympics are also a product of sacrifice. Because the purpose of sacrifice is to “restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric,”²⁶⁸ the conditions under which Owens was forced to sacrifice in the first place—poverty and racism—can be ignored.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

When Owens shattered four world-records at the 1935 Big Ten Championship track meet, he made front-page news in every major Sunday newspaper, even trumping a story about baseball darling Babe Ruth hitting three home runs in a single game as he neared retirement. In no other way except through athletics would a poor black man have become a household name in 1935. In *Heroes Without a Country: America's Betrayal of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens*, Donald McRae explained how Owens's skin color suddenly did not matter in the wake of Owens's unprecedented athletic feats in Ann Arbor: "Afterward, wherever Jesse turned, people wanted to touch him. It was as if they believed his skin would transfer some of the magic that made him run faster and jump farther than anyone on earth."²⁶⁹ Once Owens became the nation's most revered athletic hero, he was respected and admired *despite* his color—but his color would not be forgotten.

Joe Louis accompanied Jesse Owens in his rise to fame through athletic prowess, but together they made two—and only two—black men who were able to surmount the staunch racial and social barriers that still existed in the 1930s to be celebrated as American heroes. Both Owens's and Louis's athletic feats were bound up in political implications by battling Nazi competitors on the track and in the ring respectively. But Owens has eclipsed Louis as the more popular symbol of the era partly as a matter of character (Owens was the affable, well-spoken family man in contrast to Louis and his portrayal as a quiet, stone-faced brute), and partly because of Owens's outspoken nationalism, including his critique of the black militancy movement.

Part of the aim of this thesis has been to answer the question of why Owens is symbolically employed through discourse so frequently, but the primary objective has been to explore how American values are constituted or reinforced through sporting accomplishment, as vividly illustrated through the case study of Jesse Owens. To answer that proposition, I have considered the question of who discusses and deploys Owens as a symbolic hero, when, and for what purpose. I have also examined how various rhetors have explained that Owens should be celebrated as a heroic figure for his incredible athletic accomplishments, and how depictions of Owens may have evolved as time has passed. Finally, I have tried to demonstrate how Owens's individual feats of athleticism are deployed to accomplish other rhetorical tasks: to reinforce American nationalism, to negotiate tensions between promised American ideals and reality, to re-imagine historical attitudes toward race, and to bolster the myth of the American Dream.

In chapter two, I examined how the U.S. presidency has used Jesse Owens and his athletic achievements to constitute American values and reinforce nationalism. The presidency has honored Owens more than any other individual athlete in American history. During the Cold War, President Eisenhower invited Owens to serve as a special ambassador to non-communist countries around the globe by "teaching youngsters how to run and jump, and about the American way of life."²⁷⁰ But beginning with Gerald Ford in 1976, every president has employed Owens discursively in celebrating American values. Bearing in mind the role that presidents play in constituting American ideals through discourse and in inviting citizens to fulfill our roles as ideal Americans, this chapter traced presidential rhetoric about Jesse Owens from Ford to George W. Bush. I demonstrated the many occasions upon which Owens is employed as a symbol of

American ideals in order to reinforce nationalistic sentiment and to show citizens a model of how they ought to live. I have argued that the presidency has repeatedly and consistently upheld Jesse Owens as the ideal American by linking Owens's character attributes to his ability to attain athletic success, by touting Owens's unprecedented athletic achievement of earning four gold medals as a triumph for America over Hitler and Nazism, and by constructing Owens was a symbol of hope for African American equality. Ultimately, I contend that Owens is able to function persuasively as a symbol of American ideals by helping us to re-imagine our historical attitudes toward race.

Forty years after Owens's triumph in Berlin, Ford awarded Owens the Presidential Medal of Freedom, making him the first sporting figure to receive the nation's highest civilian honor. By presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Owens, Ford had to reconstitute American ideals in order to explain why Owens, a celebrated athlete, was deserving of such an honor. Ford uses the accomplishments of the 1976 U.S. Olympic athletes, as well as the achievements of Jesse Owens, to link sporting achievement to American ideals in his speech entitled "Remarks to Members of the U.S. Olympic Team and Presentation of the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens." In recalling Owens's unprecedented feat of capturing four gold medals, Ford underscored the significance of individual athletic accomplishment, reflecting a core American belief that each person is responsible for attaining his or her own success. Ford also celebrated the achievements of U.S. Olympic athletes as being reflective of American ideals by invoking the values of character, freedom, and the belief that athletic achievement is a product of hard work, dedication, and perseverance. As an illustration of how athletic achievement mirrors democratic principles and can allow citizens to serve as ideal

Americans, Ford honored Jesse Owens for his accomplishments on behalf of his country and in the name of freedom during the 1936 Olympics Games.

In his discourse on Jesse Owens, Jimmy Carter generated the illusion that Owens achieved racial power and class equality through athletic achievement. By implication, Owens is symbolically cast as a turning point in American history, after which racial inequality began to melt away as symbolized through the integration of professional sports. In a statement released after Owens's death in 1980, Carter eulogized Owens by maintaining that his athletic accomplishments were precipitated by character. Similarly, Ronald Reagan not only claimed that sport reflects character, but he also identified such character traits as uniquely American. Referring to Owens as a "great American," he overtly depicted Owens's performance in Berlin as a triumph of American ideals over Nazi ideals, suggesting that the two were diametrically opposed. George H.W. Bush clearly constructed Owens as a hero and an ideal American when he posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor to Owens in 1990. Bush romanticized Owens's life as being one dedicated to serving his country, again upholding Owens as a model citizen of strong character. Bill Clinton hailed Owens as the most influential athlete of the twentieth century because of the significance of his accomplishments, portraying Owens's Olympic performance as a triumph for America over the Nazis. George W. Bush depicted Owens as role model for African-Americans, because Owens was able to overcome racial and social barriers to achieve the American Dream and become an ideal American.

I argue that Owens only became such a popular symbol in presidential discourse at the tail end of his life, as well as posthumously, because Owens could not have been

used to constitute American ideals much earlier than the 1970s—after the pinnacle of the civil rights movement. By the 1970s, enough time had passed that cultural attitudes toward race had finally begun to evolve, but now history had to be re-conceptualized in order to forget the staunch racism that our nation once perpetuated. The president must play a key role in such a reconstitution of American ideals to incorporate African-Americans, and Jesse Owens functions as a particularly useful symbol for presidents to do this. Owens is a cultural icon purely because of his historical athletic accomplishment of earning four gold medals in the Berlin Olympics, which resonates in a culture that places a high value on sports. But presidents are able to argue that Owens's athletic achievements transcend sports because of the political stakes in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. Since Americans tend to read our contemporary understanding of the Holocaust onto the 1936 Olympics, presidents are able to portray Owens's victory as a triumph over Hitler and Nazism. Moreover, since Owens was one of the first black Americans to be recognized as a national celebrity, he can be depicted as a turning point in which African-Americans were able to achieve equal status as citizens. Finally, Owens's life is always portrayed as the story of an impoverished youth who earned his athletic success through hard work, dedication, sacrifice, and humility—and such a narrative works to fit Owens into the mold of an ideal American. However, employing Owens in such a capacity as an American hero ultimately obscures the racist ideology that thrived in American during Owens's lifetime and that still lingers in some forms today. But when used symbolically, Owens's story reassures us that American attitudes toward race were much more enlightened than in Nazi Germany, and that racial equality has long been realized here in the United States.

In chapter three, I examined how Jesse Owens himself constructs his athletic accomplishments as symbolizing American ideals through his autobiographical narratives, each co-written with Paul Neimark. By paying particular attention to how Owens discusses his role in the 1936 Olympics, I investigated how Owens has negotiated the tension between his status as an ideal American despite suffering from prejudice, racism, and poverty throughout most of his life. *Blackthink: My Life as a Black Man and White Man* was Owens first autobiography, published in 1970. In 1978, two years before his death, Owens's second autobiography was released under two different titles: *Jesse: A Spiritual Autobiography* and *Jesse: The Man Who Outran Hitler*. Through my analysis, I demonstrated that while the two narratives serve different purposes, both autobiographies emphasize the same theme—that Owens was able to accomplish his Olympic feats and overcome his struggles following the Games as a matter of character, and that race was not a factor in causing the hardships that Owens faced throughout his lifetime. Because Owens maintains that every individual is responsible for attaining success while at the same time denying that racial inequality should prevent an individual from attaining a better quality of life, his vision of himself as an ideal American is highly compatible with the symbolic way that presidents have portrayed him. Ultimately, I argue that Owens rationalizes that he was able to accomplish his athletic triumphs and overcome all obstacles in his life as a matter of character, because to admit otherwise would mean acknowledging that he had let himself be used and exploited by his country for nationalistic purposes.

In *Blackthink*, Owens reflects upon and accounts for the effects of racism upon his life. He tries to make sense of his own encounters with racism and prejudice by casting

himself as able to overcome them, depicting his struggles as a test of his personal character. Similarly, he constructs black militants as failing this same character test, because despite what Owens claims is an improved quality of life and better opportunities to attain equality for contemporary 1970 black Americans, he maintains that they want to use racism and prejudice as an excuse for not taking personal responsibility for determining their status in society. For Owens, the black militancy movement reflects weak character, and he therefore rejects it by arguing that he is living proof that every individual is capable of and responsible for attaining their own success. In particular, Owens uses his athletic accomplishments as the prime example of how a black man can become a success without help from his country. Ultimately, Owens casts himself as being stronger in character than the black militants who refuse to accept personal responsibility for bettering their lives and instead insist upon demanding help from society.

Similarly, Owens also imagines his life as a perpetual character test that he was able to pass because of his strong character virtues and faith in his second autobiography. Most striking about this second narrative is that Owens nearly ignores race altogether in *Jesse: A Spiritual Autobiography/Jesse: The Man Who Outran Hitler*, after already denying that racism affected his ability to succeed in *Blackthink*. Instead, he reflects upon his life in a more traditional autobiographical fashion, emphasizing faith and spirituality as having the greatest impact upon his life. At this point, Owens had experienced several significant health problems, and surely at least considered that he was nearing the end of his life. But instead of portraying himself as a victim for being forced to endure such hardship after being celebrated as an Olympic hero, Owens

remained consistent in his argument, describing his lifelong battles against poverty and destitution as a spiritual struggle—a perpetual test of character from God. He explains how he relied on strength of character and devotion to his faith to surmount each new obstacle he faced during his life, portraying himself as an inspiration to others.

Unlike the presidents who deploy him symbolically as an ideal American, Owens readily discussed the hardships that he faced growing up as a sharecropper's son and competing on a segregated track team in college. He also chronicles his repeated struggles to sustain his livelihood and even to pay for his schooling after he had fulfilled his duty to represent the nation during the Olympics. While Owens does not disregard the difficulties he encountered, he refuses to blame them on racial prejudice. Instead, he uses his struggles to demonstrate that any barrier can be overcome through hard work, sacrifice, and willpower. Because Owens rejects the notion that he was a victim of racial discrimination, he makes it very easy for the presidency to ignore his struggles throughout life when they use him as a symbol of the ideal American. Owens essentially absolves the government of any real responsibility for racial inequality following the 1930s. Moreover, because Owens insists that racial equality has already been achieved, he affirms that the government continues to hold no accountability for ensuring the equal status of all Americans. Rather, under Owens's narrative, individuals are responsible for taking the initiative to capitalize on the opportunities already provided to them by American democracy. Owens also reaffirms the same nationalistic sentiment that portrays his success in the 1936 Olympics as a triumph for the morally superior United States over "godless" Nazi Germany. Lastly, Owens constitutes himself as an ideal American by extolling character virtues like hard work, dedication, sacrifice and faith—

all of which he claims contributed to his Olympic success. Therefore, by extension, Owens uses his athletic achievements as an example of how an individual can achieve any goal, including the American Dream—just as the presidency has employed Owens’s sporting feats to reaffirm the promise of America to all citizens.

Owens’s narrative is likely to be persuasive to readers who also must negotiate tensions between the promise of America and the reality we experience as citizens, because we want to believe that we have at least some degree of control over our position in life, which is the main message Owens advocates. Owens’s story provides hope to the many Americans otherwise constrained from success by racial, socio-economic, gender, and religious barriers. Secondly, Owens testifies that the racial divide no longer exists in America, and he holds credibility as an individual who has experienced racial discrimination in the past but did not let such strife prevent him from achieving his goals. Similarly, most readers would like to believe that the racial divide has been severely narrowed over the course of the twentieth century, even if they recognize that racial tensions still play a significant role in American society. We would also like to believe that what racism does still linger can be easily conquered through the numerous opportunities available to minorities in present-day society. So again, Owens excuses the American public from any accountability for ongoing racial discrimination. Finally, Owens reinforces the popular myth that his participation and success in the Berlin Olympics served as triumph of American ideals over Nazism. If Owens does not condemn his nation for his unequal status and treatment as a black man, then why should the American public? Citizens want to believe that the United States stood up to the Nazis by allowing Owens and his black teammates compete against and dominate the

German athletes. Owens's accounting of his experiences in Berlin allows the American public to assume that American democracy was diametrically opposed to Nazism, even though we allowed discrimination against blacks to flourish at the same time that the Nazis were persecuting the Jews.

In chapter four, I examined the collective public memory of Jesse Owens as established through his official commemoration: the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum and its accompanying website. Located in his birthplace and featuring such attractions as a museum, a statue of Owens, a 1936 Olympic torch replica, a replica of Owens's childhood home, extensive photo galleries and other memorabilia, the museum purports that it "immortalizes Owens' memory by depicting the moments that made Owens great and portraying the people who shaped him as an athlete and as a man." Through my analysis, I argue that the museum first and foremost reinforces a collective memory of Jesse Owens as having triumphed over Hitler and the Nazi ideology through his athletic accomplishments. The museum rhetorically induces a nationalistic argument that Owens' achievements in the 1936 Olympics served to advance American ideals both here in the United States and around the world. Secondly, the museum strengthens the narrative that describes Owens's participation and success in the Olympic Games as evidence that equality for African-Americans had been attained. The museum creates this argument by largely ignoring the second-class status that Owens held as a black American during the 1936 Olympics and well thereafter. Finally, the museum also bolsters the myth of the American Dream by portraying Owens as the prototypical example of a citizen who built his own success upon hard work and determination. Because racial and class boundaries do not restrict an individual from achievement under

this narrative, constructing Owens in such a way makes his collective memory flexible for use by white and black citizens alike, eliding ongoing racial tensions in the United States.

The first thematic narrative that dominates the museum is the nationalistic perspective that Owens embarrassed Hitler through his astonishing athletic feats in Berlin, thereby helping American democratic ideals triumph over Nazi ideology. The primary way that the museum does this is by emphasizing that Owens's proudest moments were the athletic feats in Olympics, which occurred on an international stage. Most prominently displayed in the museum are exhibits and displays centering specifically on the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, which is how Owens is most well known. Still, the museum makes a deliberate choice to portray the Berlin Olympics as the pivotal, defining moment of Owens's life—not his first victory on the track, not the Big Ten championship meet in 1935 where he broke four world records, not his marriage to Ruth or the birth of his children, and certainly not the humbling experience of having to struggle to make a living after returning from Berlin. The moment of greatest significance in Owens's life is clearly argued to be when he represented his country in Berlin. Multiple attractions reflect this narrative, including the Owens statue, the Olympic torch replica, the Gold Medal Tree, and a plethora of exhibits and displays centering on Owens's Olympic experiences.

The second thematic narrative that is nearly omnipresent throughout the museum is that Owens overcame racial and economic barriers to achieve the American Dream. By mere virtue of its location, the museum reminds visitors of Owens's humble roots in rural Alabama. This is underscored by another of the museum's primary attractions, a

replica of Owens's childhood home. After arguing that his years of dedication and determination paid off in Berlin, the museum portrays Owens as receiving a hero's welcome upon returning to the United States and being showered with multiple commercial and business opportunities. Several exhibits showcase the service work to which Owens devoted himself late in his career, creating the impression that Owens's life was comparable to modern-day sporting celebrities—that lucrative endorsement opportunities accompanied his athletic success and that he could afford to fill his time with humanitarian endeavors after retiring from competition. However, there is no mention of Owens's banishment from amateur athletics, nor the lack of job offers, nor the decades of struggle Owens endured to merely support his family. Instead, Owens is portrayed as rising from the most dire of circumstances to achieve the pinnacle of the American Dream, implying that if Owens could rise from poverty to achieve such a feat, than any average American citizen can do the same.

While the themes of nationalism and the American Dream are repeatedly reinforced throughout the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum and its website, conspicuously absent is any substantive discussion of race. Race is mentioned briefly only as an “obstacle” that Owens overcame. However, the museum overwhelmingly emphasizes the socioeconomic factors that Owens overcame in eventually being offered glamorous spokesman opportunities that helped him earn financial security, allowing him to devote his time to public service and humanitarian work. But in depicting Owens's attainment of the American Dream, the museum ignores Owens's lifelong struggle to support himself and his family after his return from Olympic glory in Berlin. So in remembering Owens as an American hero, the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and Museum

forgets the very aspect of his identity that prevented Owens from fully being embraced as an ideal American or from fully belonging as a citizen—his race. However, constructing a narrative of Owens that portrays him as an athlete who competed on behalf of American values, and as an individual who accomplished the American Dream through his own will and effort, makes the Jesse Owens story appealing to all citizens. The museum is successful in portraying the story of Jesse Owens as a national memory—instead of a black memory, a rural poverty memory, a Civil Rights memory, or a sporting memory. This flexibility is what allows the collective memory of Jesse Owens to be co-opted into the myth of the American Dream, thereby constituting American ideals and reinforcing the promises upon which American democracy rests.

The narratives about Jesse Owens constructed by the presidency, by Owens himself, and by collective public memory are remarkably similar, and they each use Owens symbolically to constitute American ideals in the same way. It is no wonder that presidents have singled out Owens for praise. He makes it very easy by casting himself as an American hero, loyal to the country that did not recognize him as an equal citizen because of his color. Instead of blaming his country, the government, or social conditions, Owens only blames himself for being tempted by “the easy way.” At the same time, Owens condemns those who do lash out at society or at the government for their problems. Owens’s devotion to the idea that American democracy provides every citizen with the opportunity for success makes him a perfect example for presidents to uphold as the ideal American. Furthermore, instead of drawing any parallels between discrimination against blacks here in the United States and the way the German Nazis treated the Jews, Owens bolsters the argument that the United States was morally

superior to Germany because the U.S. allowed him, a black man, to compete on behalf of the nation in Berlin. Finally, Owens purports that his Olympic success was precipitated by character, making him a model example of the qualities that every American should possess in order to be an ideal citizen. The only significant difference between the presidential narrative of Owens and his own is Owens's willingness to discuss his toils and struggles to earn a living and support for years following his Olympic success. However, Owens makes it easy for the presidential narrative to ignore this factor because Owens uses these struggles as further proof that any citizen can overcome the obstacles they face in life without having to ask for help from the government. By the time presidents got around to honoring Owens repeatedly in the 1970s, he had built a successful life for himself and was able to devote even more of himself to humanitarian efforts that ultimately served the country. Yet the overall consistency between the narratives presented by the presidency and by Owens himself have worked to shape and perpetuate the collective memory of Jesse Owens—a memory which makes it acceptable for the American public to re-imagine racial conditions in the 1930s.

Why was Owens able to be constituted as an American hero only so late in his life? He was certainly honored as an Olympic hero upon his return from Berlin, but soon faded into memory as the nation tackled new struggles. Gerald Ford honored Owens with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1976, setting off a chain of accolades that has continued with every subsequent administration. Furthermore, the decision to erect a permanent memorial to Owens was not made until the 1990s. So why was Owens brought back into the public fold forty years after his triumph in Berlin? I have suggested that President Ford paid tribute to Owens as a fellow athlete, to rally support for his

initiative to support U.S. Olympic athletes, and to reinforce strongly held American ideals at a time when the nation needed healing. It is also plausible to suggest that much of the outpouring of praise for Owens that followed Ford's lead was part of the typical romanticizing of a public figure upon their death. But I also argue that the timing of Owens's sudden re-emergence as an American hero was not a coincidence; it also corresponds with the progress of the civil rights movement during the 1960s and 1970s. Owens might have been publicly celebrated for his athletic feats before then, but only after the height of the civil rights movement could Owens be truly embraced as an ideal American. Furthermore, once social conditions began to evolve and racial equality improved, the nation needed ways to recast our past attitudes toward race—a way to excuse the discrimination and inequality that was allowed to perpetuate. Owens provided one way to do this by re-imagining the nation's past as less racially divided than it actually was. By recalling that Owens was celebrated as a black man back in 1936, then the nation appears to have been racially tolerant at the time. Owens's participation in the Olympics can be portrayed as a sign that we were already moving toward racial equality—and certainly that our notions of freedom and equality were more advanced than the views of Nazism. Finally, by the 1970s, Owens had spoken out himself—not against his country for the discrimination and struggle that he faced—but against the black militants who dared to criticize their country. Owens's own rhetoric made it safe for presidents, the media, and other public organizations to honor him without being accused of hypocrisy.

So what are we to make of this capacity to constitute and reinforce American values through Jesse Owens and his athletic achievements? I argue that there are three

primary implications of this rhetorical phenomenon. First, sporting accomplishment can be used to perpetuate and bolster nationalism. The Jesse Owens case study is a fairly obvious illustration of this occurrence, where through his dominating performance in international competition, Owens can be hailed as bringing glory to the United States. Particularly because the Olympic Games carry a political and ideological load, Owens's accomplishments can be cast as showcasing American superiority—even though many political leaders, including Gerald Ford, have criticized Hitler and the Nazi party for trying to use the 1936 Olympics as a political platform for showcasing the superiority of the Aryan race. In early 2008, George W. Bush responded to political pressures calling for a boycott of the forthcoming summer Olympics in China by downplaying the ideological weight of the Games, maintaining that he would attend the Olympics simply “because it’s a sporting event.”²⁷¹ Yet at the same time, political figures do not hesitate to celebrate American sporting success as national accomplishments. This happens most readily in the Olympics and World Cup soccer, but also in other sports dominated by international competition, like tennis and golf. But even within the traditional American sports such as football, baseball, and basketball, there is ample opportunity to appeal to nationalism. Athletic champions are portrayed as achieving their very best through hard work, dedication, sacrifice, sportsmanship, and when appropriate, through teamwork. Championship athletes are upheld as fulfilling their role as ideal American citizens because they reflect the promise of democracy, the idea that any citizen is given an opportunity to achieve their goals and to improve their status in life.

Secondly, using sporting accomplishment to constitute American values masks the racial, socioeconomic, and social barriers that otherwise constrain Americans from

success. A gifted and dedicated athlete is able to excel regardless of his or her social status. In upholding Jesse Owens, the American public is given proof that a black man was capable of being elevated to hero status in the 1930s. As I have already discussed, celebrating Owens's success allows us to forget the discrimination he endured, that the national track and field team for which he competed was segregated, and that racism still thrived in the United States outside of the sporting world. Upholding Owens as a hero allows citizens to re-imagine the conditions of racism in the 1930s, leading us to believe that we were progressing toward equality. We are allowed to forget that racism was still so deeply entrenched in the American south during the 1930s that the black press repeatedly argued that life was worse for southern blacks than for German Jews.²⁷² We can forget that even in the northern states, black families who had migrated expecting to find social and economic freedom instead encountered bitter disappointment, including "severely restricted employment opportunities, exclusion from unions, rigid housing segregation, and machine control of urban politics that limited the impact of the right to vote."²⁷³ During Owens's childhood and young adult years, equality for black citizens was far from the nation's agenda. In the so-called Progressive Era, blacks were excluded from almost every Progressive definition of freedom, while the New Deal era linked freedom to economic security, not the civil rights of African-Americans.²⁷⁴ In 1935, the year when Owens made front-page news with his astonishing performance at the Big Ten track and field championship in Ann Arbor, President Roosevelt gave no support to proposed anti-lynching legislation, nor did he make an effort to incorporate black workers under the framework of social security.²⁷⁵ Owens is not the only athlete whose success helps us re-imagine the issue of race in the United States; Joe Louis, Jackie

Robinson, Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, Arthur Ashe, and Muhammad Ali all serve as examples of racial progress. Many of these same athletes are also upheld as proof that socioeconomic status does not bar citizens from success in America. We often hear of athletes growing up in dire poverty only to have sporting success propel them to a better life. We also see female athletes being celebrated, helping us to forget years of gender inequality and encouraging us to believe that women have achieved equal status as citizens.

Third, it should be obvious by now that sporting accomplishment is used to perpetuate the myth of the American Dream, that all citizens are offered the opportunity to attain success if they are willing to work hard and to sacrifice in order to improve their status. This phenomenon has already been implied by the first two implications, but it deserves some discussion as a separate rhetorical strategy. It is somewhat curious that sporting achievement would be used to illustrate the American Dream, because although athletic ability can be cultivated through training, the vast majority of Americans are not born with the natural talent needed to excel in physical competition. Only a very small percentage of athletes are gifted enough to attain a level of success that can propel them to fame, success, and riches. Yet sports are often depicted as a “way out” of a life mired in poverty and desperation, but very few citizens are actually able to use sporting success to elevate their socioeconomic status. Moreover, sport by its very nature requires winners and losers. It is a competitive endeavor. Most participants are not able to win no matter how hard they train or toil or sacrifice, no matter how much they desire to excel. There must always be a loser in the sporting world. Therefore, sporting accomplishment is not an accurate reflection of the American Dream at all, because each participant

cannot achieve his or her goals simply as a matter of hard work and perseverance; competition requires that there be failure. Yet by upholding the unlikeliest examples of sporting success—athletes who appear to conquer social barriers—the narrative of an athlete achieving his or her dreams through hard work and character traits seems to work successfully to perpetuate the myth of the American Dream.

In spite of these troubling implications, I have illustrated the ways in which sporting achievement is used to rhetorically constitute and reinforce American ideals and have discussed some of purposes that this rhetorical act serves. At the most basic level, political figures celebrate athletic achievement as a “plain folks” strategy, conjuring an image that depicts the political leader as a regular American who enjoys sport as recreation. Michael Hester has also argued that political figures honor athletes to create a “winner-by-association” effect. A second purpose of honoring athletes, as I have discussed in detail, is perpetuating the promise of American democracy. Athletes are upheld as examples of citizens who were able to achieve their dreams through a good old-fashioned American work ethic and character. This can work persuasively for the American public because we all want to believe in the promises of democracy and the American Dream—that we can ultimately achieve our goals and elevate our status in life no matter where we start and no matter what obstacles we face. Recognizing American sporting feats can also serve a more blatantly political purpose, as in the case of Jesse Owens, who has been romanticized as embarrassing Hitler and refuting the Nazi ideology in favor of American ideals. Hitler’s political intentions with the 1936 Olympic Games were different than the way in which U.S. presidents have hoped to gain politically from honoring Olympic athletes like Jesse Owens; Hitler wanted to use sports to promote the

superiority of a certain race, while U.S. leaders have used sports to help us forget racism. But the capacity to exploit sports in order to promote a particular set of ideals exists in both cases. Specifically in cases like Jesse Owens, I have argued that honoring athletic accomplishments helps us to re-create the past by imagining that America has always provided every citizen with the opportunity to success.

Finally, we must recognize that American values must be continuously reconstituted and reinforced through discourse. Using sporting achievements to do this is just another new way of capturing the public's imagination about the promise of America. The sporting world is often credited with providing the American public with heroes, with role models that we should emulate. By examining more closely how sporting heroes like Jesse Owens are discursively explained as American heroes helps us to understand the core values that are prized within the social fabric of American democracy.

Appendix: Presidential Medal of Freedom Recipients (Sport)

John "Buck" O'Neil	2006	Bush
Muhammad Ali	2005	Bush
Jack Nicklaus	2005	Bush
Frank Robinson	2005	Bush
Arnold Palmer	2004	Bush
Roberto Clemente	2003	Bush
John Wooden	2003	Bush
Hank Aaron	2002	Bush
Arthur Ashe	1993	Clinton
Richard Petty	1992	Bush
Ted Williams	1991	Bush
Col. Earl H. (Red) Blaik	1986	Reagan
Jackie Robinson	1984 (Posthumus)	Reagan
Paul "Bear" Bryant	1983 (Posthumus)	Reagan
Joe DiMaggio	1977	Carter
Jesse Owens	1976	Ford

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- ¹⁸ Jeremy Schaap, *Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics*, (NY: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007): 45.
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- ³⁰ Baker, 2.
- ³¹ Schaap, 140.
- ³² Baker, 1.
- ³³ Baker, 106-07.
- ³⁴ Baker, 2.
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- ³⁷ Young, 104-05.
- ³⁸ Schaap, 193.
- ³⁹ Schaap, 211.
- ⁴⁰ Schaap, 195.
- ⁴¹ Baker, 1986, p. 107, 109-10.
- ⁴² Schaap, 217.
- ⁴³ Young, 109.
- ⁴⁴ Young, 83.
- ⁴⁵ Young, 83.
- ⁴⁶ Young, 105.
- ⁴⁷ Young, 98.
- ⁴⁸ At the time, the Big Ten was known as the Western Conference.
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- ⁵⁰ Young, 101.
- ⁵¹ Young, 102.
- ⁵² Owens was also posthumously awarded the Congressional Gold Medal by George Bush on March 28, 1990.
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- ⁵⁷ Schaap, 234.

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- ⁵⁹ John M. Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1984): 20.
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- ⁷¹ Ibid, 1090.
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- ⁷³ Ibid, 195.
- ⁷⁴ David R. McMahon, "Remembering the Black and Gold: African-Americans, Sport Memory, and the University of Iowa," in Stephen C. Wieting (ed.) *Sport and Memory in North America* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers, 2001): 65.

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⁸¹ Hoberman, 7; 1.

⁸² "The Presidential Medal of Freedom," *Americans.net* (2005). <http://www.medaloffreedom.com/>. See the Appendix for a complete listing of athletes who have been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and by whom.

⁸³ Campbell and Jamieson, 4.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 4-5.

⁸⁵ These files include the contents of two folders from box 67 of the Paul Theis and Robert Orben Files from the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum in Ann Arbor, MI. Essentially, this is the case file of the speechwriting staff and includes drafts by speechwriter David Boorstin and some memoranda.

⁸⁶ John F. Kennedy, Executive Order 11074, January 8th, 1963, *John F. Kennedy: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President*. United States Government Printing Office: 1962-1964.

⁸⁷ John Robert Greene, *The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995): 2.

⁸⁸ Hester, 1.

⁸⁹ Hester, 1.

⁹⁰ Hester, 2, 191.

⁹¹ Hester, 1.

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⁹⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Remarks to Members of the Olympic Committee, Denver, Colorado, October 12, 1954," *Dwight D. Eisenhower: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches and Statements of the President*. United States Government Printing Office: 1953-1960.

⁹⁵ Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks at a Luncheon for the U.S. Olympic Medal Winners, December 1st, 1964," *Lyndon B. Johnson: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President*. United States Government Printing Office: 1965-1970.

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⁹⁷ Hester, 2.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 8.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 28.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 29.

¹⁰¹ Richard Lipsky, "The political and social dimensions of sports," in Wiley Lee Umphlett (ed.) *American sport culture* (Toronto: Associated University Press, 1985): 68-69.

¹⁰² Hester, 48; Richard Lipsky, *How We Play the Game: Why Sports Dominate American Life* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1981).

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¹⁰⁴ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on Presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Ambassador Philip C. Habib, September 7th, 1982," *Ronald Reagan: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President*. United States Government Printing Office: 1981-1990.

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- ¹⁰⁸ Kennedy, “Statement by the President Upon Issuing Order Relating to the Medal of Freedom.”
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹¹ See the Appendix for a full listing of these recipients.
- ¹¹² “1936 Olympics,” folder “8/5/76 Olympic Delegation Greeting (1),” Box 67, Theis and Orben Files, Gerald R. Ford Library. Metcalfe, a sprinter, was the 1936 gold medal winner in the 400-yard relay and was second to Owens in both the 100- and 200-meter sprints.
- ¹¹³ “1936 Olympics.”
- ¹¹⁴ Memo, William W. Nicholson to James Cannon, 7/29/76, folder “8/5/76 Olympic Delegation Greeting (1),” Box 67, Theis and Orben Files, Gerald R. Ford Library.
- ¹¹⁵ Gerald R. Ford, “Remarks to Members of the U.S. Olympic Team and Presentation of the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens, August 5th, 1976.” *Gerald R. Ford: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches and Statements of the President*. Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1975-1979. Speechwriter David Boorstin authored the first draft of Ford’s “Remarks to the U.S. Olympic Team and Presentation of the Medal of Freedom to Jesse Owens,” operating under the direction of Bob Orben.
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- ¹¹⁹ Ibid.
- ¹²⁰ Ibid.
- ¹²¹ Young, 104-05.

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¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

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¹⁴² Schaap, 211.

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¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 174.

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¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 199.

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²¹⁷ *Ibid*, 135-136.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 102.

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- ²⁴⁸ Ibid, 1100.
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- ²⁵¹ Ibid, 7.
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