

# **JESSE OWENS:**

–Written by Jesse Washington



**TRACK AND FIELD ATHLETE, born 1913 and died 1980**

One of racism’s tragic ironies is that Black athletes once needed to prove themselves athletically equal to white athletes. Heading into the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, before the world fully recognized Adolf Hitler’s racism and genocide, the German dictator’s popular theories claimed that no BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person Of Colour) could compete with the blond-haired, blue-eyed “Aryan master race.” Hitler’s ideas were ‘proven’ when, a few months before the Olympics, Germany’s athlete Max Schmeling knocked out the previously undefeated black heavyweight champion Joe Lewis.

Enter James Cleveland “Jesse” Owens. He almost didn’t make it to Berlin – the United States considered boycotting the Olympics over Hitler’s treatment of Jewish people, though they didn’t know the full truth about concentration camps yet. But many African-Americans opposed a boycott,

yearning to prove that they were equal on a truly level playing field. Owens already owned several world records and was recognized as the fastest man alive at this time. He emerged in Berlin as the unquestioned star of the Olympics, setting or equaling records in the 100-meter dash, the 200-meter sprint, the 400-meter relay and long jump.

German crowds enthusiastically applauded his performances, deepening Hitler's humiliation. It is believed that Hitler directly snubbed Owens by refusing to shake his hand because he was shocked and appalled that a Black man had won over a white German athlete.

Despite his heroism at the Olympics, Owens returned home to the oppression and racism of Jim Crow laws. "I wasn't invited up to shake hands with Hitler," Owens said, "but I wasn't invited to the White House to shake hands with the president, either."

Without a college degree and living in a country where racism was legally enforced, pushed through back doors and to the back of buses, he lived on low-paying jobs such as pumping gas and small public appearances. Later, he established himself as a public speaker.

Owens' victories not only shattered the myth of white athletic superiority, but established a Black man as a hero for Americans during a time when fascism was growing in Europe.

# ***KATHERINE JOHNSON:***

–Written by Kelley L. Carter



**MATHEMATICIAN, PHYSICIST born 1918**

Every American kid — by the time they reach fourth grade — has studied the important history of American space missions. The significance of NASA being able to send John Glenn around the earth three successful times is well-documented, well-reported on and looked at as one of the more important achievements in air and space. The critical information that always was missing was the unseen Black female force that helped him get there.

Thankfully, we now know better. Katherine Johnson, now 98 years old, was a physicist and mathematician who helped launch the first use of digital electronic computers at NASA. Her wisdom with numbers and accuracy was

so highly regarded that her sign-off was paramount for NASA to modernize itself with digital computers.

Be clear, Johnson wasn't alone — many Black women were hired by NASA in the early 1950s to work in the Guidance and Navigation Department. Johnson came on board in 1953 — a year before the civil rights movement kicked into high gear — and she initially worked in a group of Black women who all were performing math calculations. But it was Johnson who was plucked out of the group to work with an all-male flight research team. It was Johnson who helped calculate the orbit for the 1969 Apollo 11 flight to the moon. And it was Johnson who co-authored 26 scientific papers, which NASA still links to via its archives.

Her story — our story — was told in grand Hollywood fashion. Oscar-nominated actor and Golden Globe winner Taraji P. Henson brought her life to the big screen in the critically acclaimed *Hidden Figures*, and Henson boldly helped to tell a story that so many of us never knew existed. Finally!

Johnson is a genius. She was a math prodigy who was 14 years old when she graduated from high school, 18 years old when she earned a double degree in math and French from West Virginia State College. And she helped to desegregate the graduate school at West Virginia University — where she was one of only three black students and the ONLY woman. Yes, she has a story worth telling. In 2015, then-President Barack Obama awarded Johnson the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her pioneering work that led Black women to work in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.