



### **The Way We Were... Before Steroids** **by John Underwood - American Athletic Institute**

I came across a photo of Jesse Owens this week (note the cinders still in the air and he is three meters down the track) and despite knowing the history of both his talent and accomplishments, I still marveled in awe at his absolute dominance of any competition during his career. When we sometimes look at these amazing individuals we say things like "he was ahead of his time" or "he was one in a million."

I once had the opportunity to meet Jesse Owens, long after he had hung up his track spikes. He had been brought in for a fee, to hand out awards at a high school invitational in upstate New York. I had finished second that day in the 880yd run and I still have that faded ribbon in a safe place. Not because I keep such things in value, rather that the story is worth sharing with my own children and grandchildren. To tell the story about whom he was and what he did. To tell the story of a simple, humble, quiet man, who astonished the world, not just with his athletic talents, but a man that was a role model for his race and our nation. He ran times on dirt and cinder tracks that would rival today's prima donnas. Unfortunately history and time prevent the ultimate sport spectacle which would be Jesse versus the arrogant stable of modern day sprinters, on a lightning fast Mondo track, in front of the entire planet. Drugs or no drugs they would surely be wondering and worrying if "the legend" would leave them in the dust.

What have we become in the past fifty years in sport? Sport has become spectacle. Pseudo sport has superseded true sport with ample ammunition for that claim, like the X Games, Fear Factor and even poker on major sport networks as entertainment. It is truly a sad commentary on what we value more than athletes and sport. The average spectator sits and watches, many having never actually been involved in sport. They simply want to be

entertained and see something amazing and they don't care how it happens. To see someone hit 100 home runs or run 100 meters in eight seconds or high jump nine feet is what they want to see and they could care less if it was drug induced or not.

Think of the scandals in the past year, MLB and the steroid soap opera, The Tour de France doping, the drug use and criminal actions of so many top level athletes, officials and coaches. Even more than that, think of the complete lack of leadership that continues to allow sport to be dragged and denigrated farther and farther from where it once led anyone who aspired to be an athlete.

The stakes are too high for today's athlete. Multi-million dollar contracts and "the bling" that entices athletes at all levels have changed sport forever. We deserve what we have accepted.

There was a time when athletes ran for an olive branch. There was a time when all competitors lined up on a track to race under fair conditions and the best athlete won. There was a time that athletes represented their family, their communities and their countries as well as themselves. That was when sport was pure and fair and special.

I never thought much about whom he was, the night Jesse Owens handed me a red ribbon and shook my hand. I was too young and had no idea that I had in some way touched sport immortality, but I remember one thing from that night. It was his demeanor. He was a gentle man, quiet, not self absorbed, dignified and peaceful, almost like he had an aura about him from just being who he was...a champion.

The picture tells the story.