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Leadership Paper

J.C To 'The' Jesse Owens

Jesse Owens was not only a cultural icon, but also a leader. During his lifetime, he was considered a second-class citizen in his home country but managed to succeed and win 4 Gold medals and break 2 Olympic records along the way. He gave hope to marginalized groups and won triumph for America during a period where African Americans were unfairly treated and dehumanized. Furthermore, the harsh reality of being African American during the 20th Century strengthened him to become the Authentic and Servant leader people look up to.

Jesse Owens was molded by the tragic events and desperate circumstances of his childhood. He was born in Alabama as the tenth and final child of two sharecroppers and the grandson of slaves. "Jesse Owens was a frail child who was often sick from battles with chronic bronchial congestion and pneumonia" (Editors 2019). Despite his severe condition, at the age of seven, he was still expected to pick up to 100 pounds of cotton a day to help his family put food on the table. On the other hand, sharecropping provided them a place to stay without having to pay, but it also meant that they were unable to develop any equity or appreciation through ownership of land. Although Jesse did not realize this, he still had to mature quickly to take on a bigger role rather than being able to enjoy his childhood. The amount of energy that is exerted and expended for picking cotton several hours each day, one can imagine that a 7-year-old is not built/fit to endure that much manual labor as well. Therefore, Jesse began to develop resiliency and responsibility which is essential to be an effective leader. Jesse Owens and his family worked hard to receive little, but things started to get better when they moved to Ohio.

After moving to Ohio, Jesse Owens excelled in multiple leadership roles within track and field and student government. After being introduced to track and field by an athletic advisor in the fifth grade, this led to the start of Jesse's legacy. By the time he got to "East Technical High School, Owens quickly made a name for himself as a nationally recognized sprinter, setting records in the 100 and 200-yard dashes as well as the long jump" (Case Western Reserve University 2019). By receiving these accolades, Jesse puts on display his determination, discipline, and work ethic. Without consistently putting in the time and effort to work on his craft, his performance level would not be this high. One thing a leader needs to understand is that one cannot instill belief in others without first believing in yourself. His drive insinuates that he is credible enough to be a role model which is why he was the captain of the track team. Not only was he the captain of the track team but he was also the class president. This displays Jesse's organizational leadership because "organizational leadership requires an understanding of the composite worldview of the organization, which consists of the many diverse and sometimes

conflicting worldviews of the individuals within that organization” (“Key Components”, 2019). Being elected as a president means that the cohort thought he was the best candidate to effectively speak for the senior class compared to the others. Furthermore, Jesse’s difficult beginning turned into success.

Although Jesse accumulated success throughout high school, he faced tribulations once he matriculated to Ohio State University. There, he became known as the “Buckeye Bullet” and was the first African American man elected captain of an Ohio State University team. Although this was unprecedented, Jesse did not have time to enjoy it. One can imagine the amount of racism, backlash, and exclusion he received by being African American in the 1930’s. Jesse was also “barred from living in the on-campus dormitory because of the color of his skin” (Klein 2013). Jesse still did not retaliate showing that he controlled his emotions. He understands that a leader needs to maintain composure, even under pressure, as it builds trust and sets a positive tone for the organization. Otherwise his credibility would have been undermined. Jesse could not afford to make bad decisions being the minority, but it strengthened his overall growth as a leader.

Similarly, Jesse faced more adversity when he injured himself during the sophomore track season at Ohio State University. “A severely injured tailbone that prevented him from even bending over to touch his knees.” An injury that one would think would constrict them from running track did not halt Jesse’s career. “At the 1935 Big Ten Championship, tied a world record in the 100-yard dash—and set a long jump record of 26-8 ¼ that would stand for 25 years” (Klein 2013). He demonstrated his perseverance and his growth mindset through this plight. Instead, he wanted to make a statement to himself that he can overcome the odds and to his teammates that do not see him as an equal. Jesse’s positive attitude towards the game and his craft never faltered which paid dividends in the 1936 Berlin Olympic games.

In the 1936 Berlin Olympic games, Owen’s remained focused despite the odds and discrimination he faced in a hostile environment to demonstrate his authenticity unlike Hitler. An authentic leader does not hide their weaknesses and has the courage to be who they really are. They stick to their principles with a positive attitude. Jesse capturing 4 gold medals did just that. “As a stunned Hitler angrily left the stadium, German athletes embraced Owens and the spectators chanted his name” (“Jesse Owens Bio.”). In this instance Hitler was utterly embarrassed as a leader who promoted the domination of Aryan Supremacy. Owen’s accolades contradicted that only one race could be dominant. His consistent behavior allowed him to gain the respect of the Germans who were first against him. Since Jesse represented America, he gave America hope and triumph that no one thought a primitive being could do just by having faith in himself.

Although, Jesse won the hearts of many he still faced discrimination and inequality when he went back to America. For example “Jesse Owens was never invited to the White House nor were honors bestowed upon him by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) or his successor Harry S. Truman during their terms” (Switzer, et al. 2019). Jesse had to sit in the back of the bus as well. Jesse always had to take the extra mile and work harder than the next person just to be noticed. The odds were stacked against him in most situations which mentally prepped and

strengthened him to look past ignorance. Owen's said, "it was FDR who snubbed him" (Switzer, et al. 2019) He did not chastise FDR, instead he just made it known that he cannot catch a break. A president is supposed to be in support of all his constituents, yet Jesse was not one. Jesse always showed leaders and people that he is more than just his skin color through his achievements.

After the Olympics, Jesse soon developed Servant Leadership skills on top of his authenticity. Jesse became an inspirational speaker mainly focusing on enlightening the youth through the Jesse Owens Foundation. "Throughout his life, he worked with youths, sharing of himself and the little material wealth that he had" ("About Jesse Owens"). "A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong" ("What is Servant Leadership", 2016). Jesse taking initiative to embrace his adversities and tribulations meant he had to first be complacent with what he endured. Bestowing his knowledge to underprivileged youth gives them hope where it would be difficult to receive elsewhere. Jesse realizes if you have the means to knowledge, then share it.

Jesse also advocated for social justice topics within the African American community. "Owens refused to support the black power salute by African-American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Summer Olympics. He told them: The black fist is a meaningless symbol. When you open it, you have nothing but fingers – weak, empty fingers. The only time the black fist has significance is when there's money inside. There's where the power lies" (Switzer, et al. 2019). Jesse speaks on what he believes in, no matter the repercussions. Yes, Jesse understands that blacks are institutionally oppressed but his experience of being oppressed lets him know that the black fist is ineffective. To Tommie Smith and John Carlos it may seem as if Jesse Owens is against African Americans, but instead it's just that Jesse stays objective as a leader should. Instead of attacking their viewpoint, he simply tries to educate and enlighten them on how unjust the world truly is.

Lastly, Jesse was finally recognized for his bravery and achievements throughout his life. "In 1976, Jesse was awarded the highest civilian honor in the United States when President Gerald Ford presented him with the Medal of Freedom in front of the members of the U.S. Montreal Olympic team in attendance" ("About Jesse Owens"). This award is awarded by the President of the United States "for especially meritorious contributions to the national interests of the United States, cultural or other significant public or private endeavors." Through all the tribulations and adversity Jesse endured and overcame, his leadership skills stood out, leaving him a strong legacy.

In conclusion, Jesse stood tall against the inequality that was most prominent during the 20th Century. Instead of giving up and becoming a statistic, Jesse channeled each tribulation and turned it into success. Although, no one asks to be racially discriminated against, these situations built his character to shape him into an Authentic and Servant Leader. Thus, Jesse Owens is an effective leader.

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