

The day Jessie Owens visited Southwood

It was the spring of 1976 when physical education head Cam Allan answered a knock at his door on the north corridor at Southwood.

"We were in Room 107," recalled Allan nearly 35 years later, and I was teaching a Human Development course."

Cambridge was playing host to the Ontario Games for the Physically Disabled and Southwood was one of the main venues.

Track and field events, as well as some other sports, were at Southwood.

It was in the early afternoon of June 22, just days before the school year would end, when the knock came. Such disruptions weren't entirely unusual, though they were not commonplace during the school day.

In his more than decade-long career to that point, he had answered many such knocks. When he opened the door, he stood face to face with an African American gentleman in dress slacks and a summer shirt.

There was something familiar about this stranger, though in the fleeting seconds that defined their momentary encounter, Allan couldn't quite put a handle on it.

"Excuse me," said the earnest gentleman. "I'm looking for the Games for the Physically Disabled. Can you tell me how to get to the track?"

"It's easy," said Allan, now stepping into the corridor and pointing westward. "Go to the end of the hall, take the stairs down, and then go outside and you'll see the track at the back of the school."

"Thank you very much," said the stranger.

"You're welcome," said Allan.

The stranger strode off in quest of the track, and Allan returned to his class.

It was only later that Allan heard the rumor that the famed Jesse Owens had been at the school that day to visit the Games. His first thought was incredulity; what were the chances that one of the greatest Olympic athletes would come unannounced to Southwood? If only he'd known...

Then immediately he recalled that knock on the door. The man asking for directions. Could it be? Now, after the fact, there was no doubt: he had actually met Jesse Owens!

Most people have moments during the course of their lifetimes that they wish they could play over. This was one such time. At the very least he may have asked Owens to greet his students. It was a missed opportunity.

That pristine day in late June had begun innocuously enough, though the excitement of hosting a national competition involving each province of Canada meant every day was special. Among



Canadian National Exhibition

Jesse Owens, sports star of Cleveland, won the 100-yard dash at the meet of the Canadian National Exhibition. In the excellent time of 9.7 seconds, Owens won over Bill Christie, white Toronto champion. Phil Edwards, coloured, also ran in the exhibition.

Dr. David Ridsdale, left, was chairman of the Ontario Games for the Physically Disabled in 1976. He met Jesse Owens during the Games. Retired teacher Cam Allan, above right, also met Owens the same day, when the famous athlete knocked on classroom door 107. Above, a little-known fact: Owens, a student at Ohio State University, competed in, and won, a 100-yard dash at the CNE in October, 1933.

the volunteers at the Games, which included many students, there was a sense of pride in a job well done. Nothing of this scale had ever been attempted by the fledgling Southern Ontario community of 45,000.

For Games chairman Dr. Dave Ridsdale, it was a busy, and often hectic time. The local dentist had been in practice since 1967 on Grand Avenue and had taken a vacation in order to devote his full attention to the Games.

Southwood had a new track, thanks in large part to the Can-Am Games, an Olympic-like sports competition which had initially involved Galt and Saginaw Township, Michigan, begun in 1972.

The track, its jumping pits, along with the stands that had been built by students at the school just a few years earlier, were elemental parts of the bid that had secured the Games for the city of Cambridge, a city that only three years earlier had been formed when the old communities of Galt, Preston and Hespeler had amalgamated.

A newly-emergent city, modern track and field facilities, and a core of committee members and volunteers who were ready to take on the world, was at the core of the Games.

Toronto's Gordon Sinclair was the Honourary Games chairman, and although he wrote and spoke about the Games, the committee, as indeed the community, was disappointed that he didn't attend the Games.

But Sinclair's celebrity was eclipsed by that of Owens. Owens, who had been an Ohio State student when the 1936 Berlin Olympics took place, is generally regarded as one of the most outstanding athletes in modern history. Just three years before the start of WWII, Owens

won four gold medals at the '36 Games, the same Games in which Preston's Scotty Rankine, Canada's athlete of the year, competed.

Despite countless obstacles, not the least being a nation still permeated by racism, Owens retained a lifelong spirit of respect for his fellow man, and a down-to-earth demeanor that in every way lived up to the Olympic ideals.

That early summer day of 1976 when he came to the school, had been a chance occurrence. Owens was in Waterloo County to give a speech in Kitchener.

He heard of the Canada Games for the Physically Disabled in nearby Cambridge, and of his own volition, came to town to cheer the athletes on.

Ridsdale got a call to go over to Glenview, that Jesse Owens had shown up. He was stunned, but made his way to Glenview as quickly as possible.

Meanwhile, Glenview physical education head Don Rope, seized on a golden opportunity to have Owens speak to some of his athletes.

Rope, as a kid in Winnipeg, had seen Owens race a horse in the 1930s. He admired Owens and called his students off the gym floor to meet him. But couple of students paid no heed, and continued to play basketball.

Rope, who was known to be strict, called them in again, but Owens whispered in his ear, saying "Don't mind them, they just want to play. I can relate to that."

Ridsdale's time with Owens was limited, he says. "I got a chance to say hello and stand with him, but then Don Thompson said, 'We've got to get him over to Southwood,' so they mentioned to the 1936 gold medalist that the track and field events were at Southwood,

across town.

"In the short time I had to meet him he appeared very down to earth, and so glad to meet us."

Owens marvelled at the athletes and seeing what they could do.

After interacting with the athletes, Owens then made his way to the west side. He walked into Southwood and shortly afterwards knocked on Room 107.

Today Allan muses about his missed opportunity.

"Had I realized it was Jesse Owens, I probably would have excused myself from class for a while," he chuckles "and per-

sonally shown him where the track was."

Ironically, the story of Jesse Owens was a big part of Allan's popular Grade 13 sport history class. Allan recalls how he would talk to his students about Owens' feat of setting four world records in a little over an hour one day in 1935 at the University of Michigan track in Ann Arbor, and his subsequent feat of winning four gold medals at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.

Once the closing ceremonies were over at the end of that week, the committee athered at Ridsdale's house. "Everyone was exhausted, but it had gone

so well.

"We felt really good about."

Mayor Robert Kerr sent Ridsdale a letter thanking him for the successful running of the Games and even said he would support his entering politics.

But Ridsdale declined. The Game were a huge success, but he had his dentistry practice to return to.

Owens sought neither fanfare nor platitudes for supporting the Games for the Physically Disabled. He had come on his own, unannounced, and after lifting the spirits of all he came into contact with, departed as quietly as he had come.



American athlete Jesse Owens, above, won four gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. It was one of the greatest performances in Olympic history.