

Reader's Digest October 1960

My Greatest Olympic Prize

Jesse Owens

It was the summer of 1936. The Olympic Games were being held in Berlin. Because Adolf Hitler childishly insisted that his performers were members of a "master race," nationalistic feelings were at an all-time high.

I wasn't too worried about all this. I'd trained, sweated and disciplined myself for six years, with the Games in mind. While I was going over on the boat, all I could think about was taking home one or two of those gold medals. I had my eye especially on the running broad jump. A year before, as a sophomore at Ohio State University, I'd set the world's record of 26 feet 8-1/4 inches. Everyone kind of expected me to win that Olympic event hands down.

I was in for a surprise. When the time came for the broad-jump trials, I was startled to see a tall boy hitting the pit at almost 26 feet on his practice leaps! He turned out to be a German named Luz Long. I was told that Hitler had kept him under wraps, evidently hoping to win the jump with him.

I guessed that if Long won, it would add some new support to the Nazis' Aryan-superiority theory. After all, I am African American. A little hot under the collar about Hitler's ways, I determined to go out there and really show *Der Fuhrer* and his master race who was superior and who wasn't.

An angry athlete is an athlete who will make mistakes, as any coach will tell you. I was no exception. On the first of my three qualifying jumps, I leaped from several inches beyond the take-off board for a foul. On the second jump, I fouled even worse. "Did I come 3000 miles for this?" I thought bitterly. "To foul out of the trials and make a fool of myself?"

Walking a few yards from the pit, I kicked disgustedly at the dirt. Suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to look into the friendly blue eyes of the tall German broad jumper. He had easily qualified for the finals on his first attempt. He offered me a firm handshake.

"Jesse Owens, I'm Luz Long. I don't think we've met." He spoke English well, though with a German twist to it.

"Glad to meet you," I said. Then, trying to hide my nervousness, I added, "How are you?"

“I’m fine. The question is: How are *you*?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Something must be eating you,” he said—proud the way foreigners are when they’ve mastered a bit of American slang. “You should be able to qualify with your eyes closed.”

“Believe me, I know it,” I told him—and it felt good to say that to someone.

For the next few minutes we talked together. I didn’t tell Long what was “eating” me, but he seemed to understand my anger, and he took pains to reassure me. Although he’d been schooled in the Nazi youth movement, he didn’t believe in the Aryan-supremacy business any more than I did. We laughed over the fact that he really looked the part, though. An inch taller than I, he had a lean, muscular frame, clear blue eyes, blond hair and a strikingly handsome, chiseled face. Finally, seeing that I had calmed down somewhat, he pointed to the take-off board.

“Look,” he said. “Why don’t you draw a line a few inches in back of the board and aim at making your take-off from there? You’ll be sure not to foul, and you certainly ought to jump far enough to qualify. What does it matter if you’re not first in the trials? Tomorrow is what counts.”

Suddenly all the tension seemed to ebb out of my body as the truth of what he said hit me. Confidently, I drew a line a full foot in back of the board and proceeded to jump from there. I qualified with almost a foot to spare.

That night I walked over to Luz Long’s room in the Olympic village to thank him. I knew that if it hadn’t been for him I probably wouldn’t be jumping in the finals the following day. We sat in his quarters and talked for two hours—about track and field, ourselves, the world situation, a dozen other things.

When I finally got up to leave, we both knew that a real friendship had been formed. Luz would go out to the field the next day trying to beat me if he could. But I knew that he wanted me to do my best—even if that meant my winning.

As it turned out, Luz broke his own past record. In doing so, he pushed me on to a peak performance. I remember that at the instant I landed from my final jump—the one which set the Olympic record of 26 feet 5-5/16 inches—he was at my side, congratulating me. Despite the fact that Hitler glared at us from the stands not a hundred yards away, Luz shook my hand hard—and it wasn’t a fake “smile with a broken heart” sort of grip, either.

You can melt down all the gold medals and cups I have, and they couldn’t be a plating on the 24-carat friendship I felt for Luz Long at that moment. I realized then, too, that Luz was the epitome of what Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympic Games, must have had in mind when he said, “The important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part. The essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well.”

