



Heroes Without a Country: America's Betrayal of Joe Louis and Jesse Owens

Donald McRae

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"Black men look like they rule sport in America today. It was nothing like that in the 1930s. America was white and that was that. It didn't do you no good to dream of making it to the big time. It was impossible. And then, y'know, along came Jesse and along came Joe."

-- Ruth Owens, Jesse's late wife

In the summer of 1935, within weeks of each other, Joe Louis and Jesse Owens emerged as the first black superstars of world sport, and their subsequent political and social impact on America was nothing short of sensational. To fans (and even critics) the world over, they seemed larger than life, and yet in their endeavors they were unfailingly human: as vulnerable as they were courageous; as troubled as they were brilliant; as unsettled in themselves as they are now fixed in history.

Scrupulously researched and written in spare, eloquent prose, *Heroes Without a Country* vividly re-creates some of the most dramatic sporting events of the past century. In August 1936, in front of Hitler and an imposing phalanx of Nazi commanders, Jesse Owens, "the fastest man on earth," won an unprecedented four medals at the Olympic Games in Berlin. Two years later, in "the fight of the century," his great friend Joe Louis crushed Germany's Max Schmeling to signal the end of white supremacy in boxing. Like Jesse, Joe had been born to black sharecropping parents in a country demeaned by racism; together their victories became a rallying point for the disenfranchised black population of America. Idolized across the world, they were two young men at the pinnacle of their careers who overcame prejudice and fear to achieve their goals. Yet for both of them, success brought its own perils. In 1938, two years after winning his gold medals in Berlin, Owens was hounded out of amateur sports by the infamously tyrannical Olympic boss "Slavery Avery" Brundage and, facing financial ruin, he was reduced to running for money against dogs, horses, and even his friend Joe Louis. Later the two would be subjected to FBI investigations, harassed by the IRS, and beleaguered by debt and despair. Jesse watched Joe slip into drug addiction and mental illness.

In *Heroes Without a Country*, award-winning writer Donald McRae captures the uncanny coincidences and intertwined events that bound these men together -- through both triumph and tragedy -- and provides an intimate and thought-provoking dual portrait of two of the most important athletes of the twentieth century.

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