

## Interview: Stephan James Portrays Olympian Jesse Owens in ‘Race’

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CHICAGO – In the history of America, there are moments when champions rose above their societal status and circumstance. And so it came to pass that African American Jesse Owens – during one of most difficult times in America for blacks – won medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, representing America and striking a blow against Adolf Hitler, four years before WWII. Owen’s story is told in the new film, “Race,” and he is portrayed by actor Stephan James.

Life in Depression-era America was difficult for all citizens at the time, but never more so than the black population. Emerging from those times was James Cleveland “Jesse” Owens (Stephan James), a track athlete of extraordinary talent. He was called first to represent Ohio University, under the tutelage of Coach Larry Snyder (Jason Sudeikis). The coach molded Owen’s raw talent and soon he broke several world records. The 1936 Olympics in Berlin were a spectacle to highlight the superiority of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi party, to be documented by legendary filmmaker Leni Reifenstahl (Carice Van Houten). Jesse Owens crashed the party and started winning gold medals, much to the dismay of the so-called “master race.”



Stephan James as Jesse Owens at the Chicago red-carpet premiere of “Race”.

*Photo credit: Joe Arce*

This is the first lead role for 22 year-old, Canadian born Stephan James, after starting his acting career in his teens. He previously had supporting roles in the TV movie “The Gabby Douglas Story,” and feature films “When the Game Stands Tall” and last year’s Oscar nominated “Selma,” portraying activist John Lewis. He spoke to HollywoodChicago.com during a promotion tour for “Race.”

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You are portraying Jesse Owens, who lived as a representative of black people in the 1930s, sort of a Jackie Robinson before Jackie Robinson. What did you learn about being a black man in the 1930s when living in Jesse Owen’s skin within your performance in the film?

**Stephan James:** First, Jesse was bigger than a black hero, he was an American hero. For me, I looked at it from that perspective. Through my research, I obviously learned a lot, much of which made me sad, upset, disappointed and even angry, regarding what Jesse had to go through. Not only was he a black man in America during an age of high racial tension and segregation, but he was also living in the middle of the Great Depression – it was very difficult times for him and his family.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What is your athletic background, and how did you have to adjust to the form of Owens to mimic his particular running and jumping style?

**James:** I grew up playing basketball, football and volleyball, so I was not unfamiliar with being athletic and agile. But track and field was a whole new beast for me, and I started from scratch. I had to be in the right shape to sustain myself, not only for the filming, but to be like Jesse – the fastest man on the planet. He had a very unique running style, and my coaches reinforced it into me, so much so that I can’t really run any other way now.

You mentioned the era, so I wasn’t training like they do now, but studying the style of the 1930s track and field technique. The shoes were unusual, you look at them now and you can’t believe he did what he did in those shoes. [laughs] They were flat soled, with 3-inch spikes, and

he ran on dirt.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Jesse Owen's famously said years after his Olympic victories that, 'I have four medals, but I can't eat four gold medals.' What does that say about the nature of his celebrity and fame in the 1930s versus if something like him happened now, in your research of him?

**James:** It was a misfortune that he went to the Olympics, achieved something amazing, became the best-known person alive at that time, but came back to the real truth of America – which wasn't favorable toward him or his race – and he couldn't shake his blackness. It made me sad that he had to bear rejection afterward, despite what he had done.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** How did Jesse Owens family help you in your portrayal. Were you able to speak to them?

**James:** Luckily, yes. They were very important to me, and were around throughout the entire filming process. From the script – 'Daddy wouldn't say that' – to the filming, you couldn't ask for a better group of people to use as a research tool. There was a ton of stuff about his achievement, but less about what type of man he was, the husband he was. His daughters didn't see him as a celebrity, they knew him as Daddy. I was blessed to learn about him through that perspective.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You are living in modern society, through the lens of attitudes toward people of color today. What is your view of the use of the n-word, since you've experienced its use in the 1930s toward Jesse Owens and the 1960s towards John Lewis in 'Selma'? Has it changed anything for you?

**James:** What I've learned about that word is context, where the world is coming from – in the era the film is set, it obviously is used derogatorily. In 'Selma,' it was the same sort of thing. Of course now, in music, it's used in many more ways, including ways that takes the sting out of it. It all depends on where and when it is used, and how you look at it. But again in 'Race,' it is intensely disrespectful.



Stephan James as Jesse Owens in 'Race'

*Photo credit: Focus Features*

**HollywoodChicago.com:** Is attitudes toward racial issues different in Canada, where you grew up?

**James:** The issue of racism happens all over the world. Granted, people – especially Americans – don't know the the Canadian culture. [laughs] But if you look outside this country, it's a problem all around the planet.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** You were famously on the set of 'Selma,' in a key role as John Lewis. What type of atmosphere was there, especially since you were recreating some very dark stuff at the exact same place where it happened?

**James:** The reverence was there, given what we doing, but with such subject matter that is to be expected. Ava DuVernay [director] was serious about the storytelling, and she didn't really play around with it, because she had to paint a picture of what was really going on – and that included people who were dying. But, like any movie work, off set it was looser and fun.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What did you learn the most on this movie set, since it was your first lead role?

**James:** Sacrifice. I'd never been in a position where I was number one on the call sheet, and everything was in my lap. I worked 16 hour days, and I was just not the lead of any film, it was a film about Jesse Owens, one of the greatest heroes of the 20th century. It was a whole



new type of responsibility. It was a big weight, and I wanted to do him justice, especially in reviving him after 80 years.

**HollywoodChicago.com:** What type of roles would you like to do that casting agents don’t necessarily think about for at this point in your career?

**James:** I want to be a superhero, I want to be Spider-Man or Batman. Will you let me know if you have any connections? Let’s make it happen. [laughs]

*“Race” opens everywhere on February 19th. Featuring Stephan James, Jason Sudeikis, Jeremy Irons, William Hurt and Carice Van Houten. Written by Joe Shrapnel and Anna Waterhouse. Directed by Stephen Hopkins. Rated “PG-13”*



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