SportsLetter Interviews

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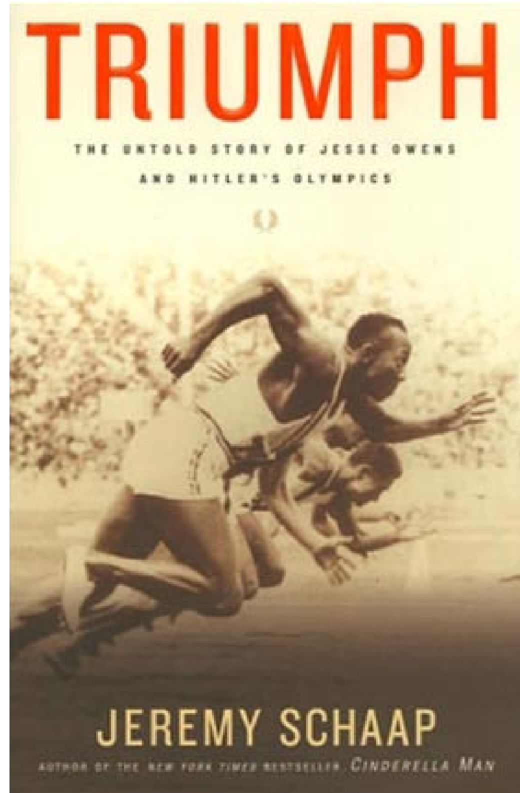
Jeremy Schaap



The 1936 Berlin Olympic Games remain among the most controversial in sports history. Both the summer and winter Olympic Games of 1936 were awarded to Germany in 1931, two years before Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany. By August 1936, as the world descended upon Berlin for the Games, Hitler and the Nazis had consolidated power and had already instituted racist and anti-Jewish measures (including the banning of Jewish athletes on the Olympic team).

Despite some opposition to "Hitler's Games," the United States refused to boycott the Berlin Olympic Games. The Games themselves were a sporting triumph for Germany, which easily won the medal count and offered several extraordinary moments: the marathon winner, Korea's Sohn Kee-chung, was forced to race for Japan; director Leni Riefenstahl used innovative techniques to craft the most arresting film of the Olympic experience; and it marked the debut of television at the Olympic Games.

And yet, even as Hitler and his Nazi propagandists hid from the world their plans for world-wide domination, American sprinter Jesse Owens emerged as the star of the Berlin Games. His four gold medals — and his seemingly effortless running style — gave lie to Hitler's claims of Aryan supremacy.

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Indeed, Hitler was said to have been so upset by Owens' victories that he snubbed the sprinter and refused to shake his hand.

With "Triumph: The Untold Story of Jesse Owens and Hitler's Olympics" (Houghton Mifflin), ESPN reporter and anchor Jeremy Schaap revisits the 1936 Berlin Games. He examines the many myths that have surfaced, including Hitler's "snub" of Owens and Owens' own tale regarding the selection of the 4x100-meter relay team. What is clear, Schaap writes, is that "while the western democracies were perfecting the art of appeasement, while much of the rest of the world kowtowed to the Nazis, Owens stood up to them at their own Olympics, refuting their venomous theories with his awesome deeds."

This is Schaap's second book. Previously, he wrote "Cinderella Man: James J. Braddock, Max Baer and the Greatest Upset in Boxing History" (2005), a New York Times best-seller. SportsLetter spoke with Schaap by phone from New York City.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: Your first book was about heavyweight champ Jim Braddock from the 1930s. This one is about Jesse Owens and the 1936 Olympic Games. What has attracted you to write about the 1930s in sports?

Jeremy Schaap: I love that era in sports because it's the tail end of the golden age, when there's still so much romanticism about sports. It's before the advent of television — it's really the dawn of the radio era — and these figures were larger than life. At the same time, there was so much going on in sports that was situated at the intersection of cultural and political topics. "Cinderella Man" is a story set against the backdrop of the Great Depression. With Owens' story, the Great Depression is still in the backdrop economically, but there are racial politics involved, particularly in Nazi Germany, with the ascendant Third Reich. Coincidentally, these two stories are a year apart, but what they have in common is something beyond athletics.

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SL: What did you think of “Cinderella Man,” the film directed by Ron Howard?

JS: I really enjoyed the film. I thought Russell Crowe was great, and I thought Paul Giamatti was great. For the most part, I thought it was very well done and captured the spirit of the Braddock story. Like a lot of people who know the story, I felt that the Max Baer portrayal didn’t have to be as harsh as it was. He comes off as an ogre, and I don’t think that’s what he was like in real life.

SL: What is the most difficult aspect about writing historical non-fiction for you? Is it the research? Finding the correct tone?

JS: I’ve been fortunate in that these stories kind of tell themselves. They’re just great stories. I think I found the right way to tell “Cinderella Man,” which was basically a dual biography of Braddock and Baer, who contrast with each other as they’re on this collision course with the fight. With Owens, it was harder because the stories involving the 1936 Olympics are more disparate. The boycott story doesn’t really have anything to do with Jesse Owens except in terms of the consequences of the boycott. The same can be said about the preparations in Germany for the staging of the Games of the 11th Olympiad. That’s not about Jesse Owens. So, I had to find a way to weave those three stories together.

The hardest part is, you want to know more and you want to get it right, and the historical record is thin about some of these figures. Not so much about Jesse Owens, but about a guy like Larry Snyder, who coached the greatest athlete ever in Owens and who later became the U.S. Olympic track coach in 1960, which was one of the great track teams ever assembled. There’s been no book written about Larry Snyder. There’s very little about him out there. You have to really dig, which I enjoy. You gotta go through everything you can find, and then rely on your best judgment because nobody who was central to the story is alive.

SL: How do you handle the dual roles of reporting and broadcasting on ESPN and writing books?

JS: In terms of finding the hours, you can always find the hours. That’s

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one thing I learned from my father [broadcaster-reporter Dick Schaap]. He had more fulltime jobs than anyone I know, and yet he was churning out almost a book a year. He wrote something like 33 books in 43 years. I don't think I'm going to be able to maintain that pace, but through his example I could see that if you want to do it, you can do it. You find the time. I spent a lot of time writing the book on airplanes. Sometimes, that's the best way to do it because, when I'm sitting at the computer, I find myself researching as much as possible, going into the archives, avoiding actually writing. When you're on the plane and you don't have access to the Internet and your mountain of clips, you have to focus on the writing.

SL: In the acknowledgements to the book, you note that your father nurtured your "enthusiasm for all things Olympic." How did he do this?

JS: My father always loved the Olympics. He wrote one of the definitive English-language histories of the Olympics — "An Illustrated History of the Olympics" — and I read that voraciously as a kid. From the time I was six-years-old, he was covering the Olympics for ABC: he was at Montreal, he was at Moscow, he was in L.A., he was in Lake Placid, he was at Sarajevo. I loved his stories about going to the Games, and I always watched the Games. I remember watching Bruce Jenner and Nadia Comaneci and Sugar Ray Leonard and the Spinks brothers in 1976, when I was six-years-old. In 1984, I sat at home and, even with the boycott, I think I watched all 145 hours of ABC's programming.

My father wrote other books about the Olympics: he wrote a biography of Bob Beamon [titled "The Perfect Jump"], and he wrote about Tom Waddell, the decathlete [titled "Gay Olympian"]. Then, when I grew older, we attended several Olympics together. We were at Albertville together, we were in Lillehammer together, we were in Barcelona together, we were in Atlanta together. So, I was very fortunate in the sense that this fondness for the Olympics was something that I got to share with my father.

SL: Do you have a favorite memory from those trips?

JS: There were a lot of great moments, but one of our best was in 1992. I had taken time off from my job at Sports Illustrated to work as an assistant for my father in Albertville. This was my first Olympics, and we

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went to do a story about the American curling team, when curling was a demonstration sport. We went to the curling venue in this beautiful Alpine town called Pralognan, and we got run off by the gendarmes as we were shooting practice because we weren't with CBS, the Olympic rights-holder at the time. So, getting run off by the French police was my introduction to the Olympics.

SL: What did your father teach you about writing?

JS: What he taught me more than anything was to write clearly and quickly, to avoid excess verbiage. He was a newspaper columnist. He came from the rat-a-tat-tat school of writing. He hated adjectives. More than anything else, he taught me respect for the subject, respect for history, and respect for the craft. He also always told me that good writing is re-writing. You write something, then you go back and re-write it. You re-write 'til you like it.

SL: What's your favorite book written by your father?

JS: I really love "The Illustrated History of the Olympics," and I love the Beamon book. But it'd be hard not to say "Instant Replay," which he wrote with [Green Bay Packers offensive lineman] Jerry Kramer. He considered that his best book.

SL: In "Triumph," you describe Avery Brundage as the "preeminent American apologist for Nazi Germany." What was Brundage's motivation for fighting the proposed boycott of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games?

JS: I think more than anything else — even more than his general fondness for Germany — is that as the head of the American Olympic Committee, Avery Brundage wanted to see an American team at the Olympics. I think that was his overriding motive. He also did not believe that politics and sports should mix. In his mind, you don't let a political situation in any way influence the question of whether or not to go to the Games. I think he was short-sighted on this because what he didn't recognize was that it was the Nazis who were politicizing the Games by not allowing all of their citizens to compete and by turning the Games into a platform for propaganda. Brundage was blind to that, and he allowed

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himself to be conned.

SL: How do you think the American Olympic Committee should have handled the 1936 Olympic Games?

JS: I don't think the United States should have been at the Olympics in 1936. With hindsight, that's easy to say. But if you did the vote [to boycott the Olympics] in 1946, instead of in 1935, I think the boycott would have won. Avery Brundage would have been the one holdout.

If you're asking me how would I have voted in December of 1935, that's a tougher question. I'd like to think that I would have done the right thing and that I would have been on the same side as the smart people: [Amateur Athletic Union President] Jeremiah Mahoney, [New York City Mayor Fiorello] La Guardia and [NAACP Executive Secretary] Walter White — the people who urged the U.S. to boycott the Games. At the end of the day, we should not have been taking part in anything that could have helped the Third Reich. No one can dispute that the way they carried off the Games of the 11th Olympiad, despite Jesse Owens' performance there, enhanced the prestige of Hitler's Germany and gave him the cover that he needed to formulate his plans and build up the military.

SL: Owens shined in Berlin at a time when Hitler was beginning to preach about the supremacy of the Aryan race. And yet, African-Americans in the U.S. (and, particularly, in the South) faced extreme prejudice and even lynching. How did African-American athletes like Owens reconcile this dichotomy?

JS: What Jesse Owens said — and what [sprinter] Ralph Metcalfe and [high jump gold medalist] Cornelius Johnson and [800-meter gold medalist] John Woodruff and [110-meter hurdler] Fritz Pollard Jr. said — was, "Look, how can you ask us not to go and compete because of the way the Germans treat the Jewish minority when we're getting treated in many ways worse here?" I completely understand and appreciate that rationale. But I think Walter White was correct when he said, "Bigotry anywhere is unacceptable, and we should not in any way condone it." White saw the big picture more clearly than the athletes did.

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How different would the world be today if the United States and Britain and France had not gone to Germany? It's impossible to say. But the people who knew best — people like [U.S. Consul General in Berlin] George Messersmith and [British Ambassador] Sir Eric Phipps, western diplomats who had been in Berlin for years — said, "You guys are crazy. How could you possibly think about showing up here and lending credibility to this enterprise?" And, they were right.

SL: Both Owens and boxer Joe Louis achieved prominence during the 1930s, becoming two of the most influential African-Americans in the country. How would you compare and contrast Owens and Louis in their impact on American society?

JS: I think they're both very important in their own way: Joe Louis because of the length of his career, because he was a professional and could make that his career, which obviously Jesse Owens couldn't do as a track star at that time. Later in life, Jesse Owens is a much more effective public speaker. His story is more inspirational.

Jesse Owens basically has 10 days in which he shows the world how great he is. Joe Louis is heavyweight champion of the world for 12 years. So, there's a big difference there. One of the things that gets lost in the Owens story is how much more important it was for him to compete in Berlin because Louis had just been humiliated weeks earlier by [German heavyweight] Max Schmeling. And now, Schmeling is being held up as a token of Aryan superiority. The loss was particularly devastating to American blacks who thought Joe Louis was the great hope, and the loss definitely put more pressure on Owens. There was more at stake for him.

Owens' victories are very, very important. They mark the beginning of the ascendancy of the black athlete. He became the first great black American sports champion, with the exception of a few jockeys. By 1938, when Louis knocks out Schmeling in the rematch, Louis becomes a bigger hero than Owens because boxing is such a big sport and he's the heavyweight champion of the world and able to defend his title over and over and over.

SL: How were the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games different from previous Games?

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JS: They were bigger. There were more athletes, there was more fanfare, the Olympic Village was more plush, the Opening Ceremony was more coordinated. You've got Richard Strauss composing the Olympic hymn. It's different, though, in that it's the first time that the Games are used for a political purpose. That was tangible everywhere in Berlin. It was a showcase not for the athletes, but for the host country. That's not the case in Amsterdam in 1928 — the Dutch had no universal message they were trying to get out to the world — or with the Belgians in 1920 or even the French in 1924.

SL: Hitler inherited the fact that Germany was selected to host the 1936 Olympics (both summer and winter). How did Hitler view the 1936 Games?

JS: Initially, after he comes to power in the winter of 1933, he's against the Games. Hitler was not a huge sports fan, although they say he liked boxing and gymnastics. But it's his nature to be appalled by any kind of spectacle that puts whites and Asians and blacks and Jews together, competing against each other, swimming in the same pool, handing batons off to each other. The fact that the entire world is going to come to Germany, including the Bolsheviks, disgusts him.

But [Minister for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda] Joseph Goebbels is smart enough to figure out that these Games will be a tremendous propaganda opportunity for the Reich, and Hitler eventually comes to embrace the Olympics. There are moments throughout the three-year process when he questions it. He has second thoughts in 1935, because as the boycott movement builds momentum he recognizes that, without the United States and Britain, there's no point to having this spectacle. That worries him very much. But after December 1935, when it's clear that everybody's going to show up, he decides that he's going to make this a showcase. Ultimately he's the guy who decides to spend the money to complete the airport that all the international visitors are going to enter through, and he's the guy who decides to spend all the money on the athletes' village. He insists that the stadium be more monumental. By the time the Games roll around, he's completely on board.

SL: You write that, for Hitler, the Berlin Olympic Games "were the ultimate

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opportunity not to promote [his] agenda, but to hide [his] agenda under a cloak of hospitality, prosperity, and efficiency." Did Hitler succeed with this agenda?

JS: I don't think that there's any doubt that he succeeded, and he was able to convince everybody: titans of industry, foreign visitors, even diplomats who were there just for the Games. He needed that cover, and I think the Olympics ultimately gave him that. The Games were so well run, Berlin was so sparkling and clean, the city was so much different from the images that people had of it in the 1920s, with the wheelbarrows of cash and the debauchery of Weimar Berlin. The vast majority of visitors walked away from the Games saying, "You know, I don't think this guy's so bad. He just wants Germany to have a place of honor in European politics." He didn't seem like a guy who was going to invade Poland in three years or start a war that's going to cost 30 million lives.

Certainly, there were people who recognized in all of the fanfare and all of the bunting and all of the uniforms something sinister. What Thomas Wolfe wrote about the Games [in the novel "You Can't Go Home Again"] makes that clear, but he wrote that in 1938-39, as it was becoming clear what Hitler was all about. But I couldn't find anybody immediately after the Olympics writing, "This guy is really worse than I thought." It was the opposite.

SL: The story of Owens and the 1936 Berlin Olympics has been told several times previously. In the course of researching and writing this book, what did you discover that previous writers missed about the Berlin Games?

JS: I think that professor William Baker did a great job in his biography, "Jesse Owens: An American Life." But that's the most complete book that's ever been written about Jesse Owens, and Baker deals with the Olympics in about 20 pages. I think there's been a misunderstanding about the amount written about Owens over the years. There have been quite a few books written about the '36 Olympics, but with the exception of Baker's book, there are no real Jesse Owens biographies out there. So, a lot of the details — like, the things he had to deal with, event to event, in Berlin and how the selection of the 4x100 relay team came about — were new to me.

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SL: Perhaps the most famous story involving Owens at the 1936 Olympic Games is that Hitler snubbed him. Did that happen?

JS: It's fair to say that Hitler didn't snub Owens, but it's also clear that Hitler could have found a way to recognize him, to afford him the respect he deserved after the way he performed in those Games. And, Hitler did not do that. But the whole idea of the snub, of Hitler singling out Jesse Owens by not congratulating him, is false. That's simply not what happened. What happened was, Count Henri de Baillet-Latour, the head of the IOC, became outraged at Hitler after the first day of the Games, when Hitler snubbed [high jumper] Cornelius Johnson, a black American who won the gold medal, after he honored the two German gold medalists from that day and the three Finns who finished 1-2-3 in the 10,000 meters. De Baillet-Latour told Hitler, "You can't do this. This is not what the Olympics are all about. You're just the ceremonial host. You don't have an official role in this Games. If you want to congratulate somebody, do it in your private apartment." So, Hitler does that from there on. That's not to say that he didn't congratulate people privately. He congratulated [100-meter gold medalist] Helen Stephens, for instance [in a room, away from photographers, in the Olympic stadium].

At the time, Owens said that he thought Hitler waved at him. If you go back and look at what Owens was saying during the Games of the 11th Olympiad and what he said in the months afterwards, they're completely at odds with what he later said. In 1936, Owens could say — and did say — that it wasn't Hitler who snubbed him, it was FDR. He said, "I don't know why everybody's picking on Hitler. He's Germany's man of the hour, and I thought he was quite a gentleman."

After World War II, his story changed. What he said most of the time was, "Hitler didn't shake my hand, he didn't congratulate me, but that's not why I went to Berlin."

SL: Sam Stoller and Marty Glickman, the two Jewish sprinters on the U.S. team, were removed from the 4x100 relay team at the last minute, opening the way for Owens to win his fourth gold medal. This story remains controversial, with Glickman writing in his memoirs that Owens actually offered to sit out the relay. What happened?

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JS: I knew Marty a little before he passed away, and I have tremendous respect for Marty. But I don't think that Marty got the story right. Look, it was a very emotional time — it was the biggest moment of his life up to that point. But Ralph Metcalfe remembered it differently. Is Ralph a liar? Jesse Owens remembered it differently. Is Jesse Owens a liar? I just think if you look at everything that happened, it doesn't quite add up that Jesse would stand up and say, "Let Marty and Sam run."

In the material that I found, Jesse got up and said, "Let Sam run." Which makes sense, because if he had said, "Let Sam and Marty run," then he's kicking either [Frank] Wykoff or Ralph Metcalfe off the team, too. I don't see him kicking off Metcalfe, who to that point had never won a gold medal in his career. I don't see him kicking off Wykoff, who did have two gold medals already, because everybody always assumed that Wykoff was running in the relay.

I read everything that you could possibly read in the literature about Jesse Owens. The fact is, he wanted to be on the relay team, he lobbied to be on the relay team, and when he was told that he would be on the relay, he said, "Boy, that's great." The story that's been perpetuated for so long is that he only reluctantly accepted the assignment because he felt bad for the Jewish guys. I don't think there's any credible evidence to suggest that's what happened.

SL: Who was responsible for Glickman and Stoller being replaced at the last minute: Owens himself; the U.S. track coaches, Dean Cromwell and Lawson Robertson; or Avery Brundage?

JS: Jesse lobbied [for a spot on the relay team], but I don't think Jesse influenced their decision one way or the other. I don't think they cared what Jesse Owens thought. I think it's a combination of Cromwell and Robertson, probably mostly Cromwell. Ultimately, I think that Cromwell was looking out for his USC guys, Wykoff and [Foy] Draper. They were his guys. Remember, when a track coach dies, they write about how many Olympic medals his runners won. If Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller won gold medals, that doesn't count for anything with Dean Cromwell. With Wykoff and Draper winning, that counts when they tally how many gold medals Dean Cromwell's USC runners won. I'm sure that there was

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some latent anti-Semitism that influenced their decision. I think that they probably would have treated Glickman and Stoller better had they not been Jewish.

Do I think that Avery Brundage was displeased to see Glickman and Stoller removed from the team? No, not at all. Do I think that he actively participated is this decision, as Marty has said? It's possible, but there's no evidence.

What is indisputable is that the rationale that Lawson Robertson offered — first, that the Germans and the Dutch were going to spring a surprise on the U.S. — was ridiculous. His other rationale — that it's his job to put the best team out there — is also debatable. Why didn't he do that in the 4x400 relay, where the U.S. faced serious competition? In the 400 meters, Americans won the gold and the bronze [with Archie Williams and James LuValle], and the Brits finished with the silver and in fourth place [with Arthur Godfrey Brown and William Roberts]. So, you've got two of the four best 400-meter runners in the world on the British team. And yet, Robertson didn't put in the Americans who won the gold and the bronze, Brown and Roberts, on the 4x400 relay team. They happened to be the only two black 400-meter runners, and the U.S. loses by a full two seconds to Britain.

SL: One long-forgotten name that emerged in your book was Eulace Peacock, the Temple University sprinter-long jumper who beat Owens in four consecutive races before the Games, but was injured before Berlin. Do you think Peacock could have beaten Owens at Berlin?

JS: It's one of the great mysteries in the history of sports. If Eulace Peacock is healthy, does he dominate the Games the way that Jesse Owens did? Does Jesse rise to the occasion? You look at their history: Jesse Owens was not successful against Peacock head to head. But against the stopwatch and the tape measure, Jesse was better. His best times were better than Eulace's, his best long jump was better than Eulace's, but whenever they competed against each other, Eulace beat him. It might have ended up being a situation where, say, they both won gold in the relay, and Jesse won the 200 and the long jump and Eulace won the 100. Then, neither is really a superstar. Then, they're Eddie Tolan.

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I think Jesse still wins those three individual events, even if Eulace Peacock is there and competing against him. That's just what I think. But who knows? Just knowing that Peacock was standing next to him in the finals of the 100 meters might have made him more nervous. Jesse Owens was in a state of athletic grace in Berlin. He had this remarkable sense of utter calm, and I think a lot of that was because he knew that he was better than everybody he was racing against. That includes Metcalfe, who was great but Jesse had beaten him and Ralph was older. But if Eulace was there, I don't know what impact psychologically that would have had on Jesse. I don't think that Peacock would have run faster times or jumped farther than 26 feet 5 1⁄2 inches. I mean, Jesse won with the second-longest jump of his career, and Eulace Peacock never jumped within six inches of that distance. And, Eulace Peacock never ran faster than Jesse ran in that 200 or faster than Jesse ran in that 100. But what kind of impact would he have had, standing next to him? I don't know. My gut is that Jesse Owens still would have gone four-for-four, and Eulace would have won one gold medal in the relay and two silver medals in the sprints and a bronze in the long jump behind Luz Long. We'll never know.

SL: Why does Owens' story still resonate today?

JS: I think Owens' story resonates now — and will resonate forever — because I think in many ways it's the greatest sports story ever. Even at its most elemental, it's amazing: a 22-year-old grandson of slaves goes to Hitler's capital and rebukes Hitler's theories with these incredible feats. The pressure he was under, what was at stake, what he was fighting at home while also fighting the Nazis — it's just remarkable to think what he was doing, on that stage with all the pressure, and what it would mean in so many ways politically and socially. And, that's not even taking into account what he did athletically. It's the greatest performance in the history of the Olympics in track and field, including Carl Lewis. In fact, if you had to pick one athletic performance in the history of the Olympics, I think you'd still take Jesse Owens, even over Mark Spitz and Eric Heiden and Nadia Comaneci and Emil Zatopek.

SL: Leni Riefenstahl filmed the 1936 Games for her documentary "Olympia." How does that film influence the way we view the '36 Olympics today? Is it a paean to the Nazis?

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JS: You have to watch to let it influence you. As well-studied as it remains in film schools and as iconic as many of the images are, the percentage of the population that has actually seen "Olympia" is miniscule. But the film is influential in that all sports being shot comes from that film or is inspired by that film. You watch the film of Super Bowl III produced by NFL Films, and it's like Leni Riefenstahl was shooting Joe Namath. I think the film is about the idealization of the Aryan physique and the creation of a mythology of the German people. And then, this guy crashes the party — Jesse Owens — and you come away with a respect for the beauty of his form, the magnificence of his performances. It celebrates Jesse Owens, but it does not celebrate him to the extent that it diminishes the propaganda value for the Germans. You have to remember, the Germans had a great Olympics. They won the medal count. Ultimately, Riefenstahl's film was propaganda, but it is at least somewhat tempered by the magnificence of the images of Jesse Owens.

SL: What's your next book project — and will you stay in the 1930s?

JS: I've gone from 1935 to 1936 with "Cinderella Man" and "Triumph," so now I'm looking for something good from '37. No, seriously, in all likelihood I'm going to get away from heavy, research-intensive sports history and write something about my relationship with my father through the prism of sport. It's a challenge because it's hard to write about yourself, but that's what I want to do.

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