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# **Run, Jesse, Run!**

*The Story of Jesse Owens,  
America's Greatest Athlete*

By

PETER MANOS

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(RUN, JESSE, RUN!)

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*Run, Jesse, Run!* is dedicated to the memory of Kevin Cronin,  
activist, humanitarian and the greatest of friends,  
who urged me to write about this great American.

Thank you, Kevin, for everything.

# Run, Jesse, Run!

## CHARACTERS

JESSE OWENS

RUTH SOLOMON OWENS: Jesse's wife.

REPORTERS: At least 4 of them.

HENRY OWENS: Jesse's father.

EMMA OWENS: Jesse's mother.

TEACHER

CHARLES RILEY: Jesse's first coach.

RECRUITERS: At least 3 of them.

LARRY SNYDER: Jesse's college coach.

GERMAN CROWD: At least 3 members. German accent.

STARTER: German accent when indicated.

LUZ LONG: Slight german accent.

SHYSTERS: At least 4 of them. Slick salespeople and promoters.

KAI LONG: Slight german accent.

SETTING: The play is designed to be performed on a bare stage. It might be enhanced by images on a screen behind it, especially of Jesse at the 1936 Olympics, but also of his sharecropping past and childhood and post-Olympic life in the Midwest.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

Other than Jesse, who is onstage at all times, the presence of the other characters is up to the director's discretion. For instance, they can be in full view of the audience and step in with minimal costume elements or even just "voice" their part from the periphery of the onstage area. Perhaps a hat rack and small prop table where actors can grab elements as needed can also be on the side or in plain view of the audience as the director sees fit.

The action is designed to be continuous without set changes and could comfortably be performed without an intermission. If there were a need for an intermission, the most logical break point is in between Jesse's marriage and his appearance at the 1936 Olympic games in Germany.

Additional casting notes, including doubling suggestions for a small cast of 4 to 5 performers, can be found in the back of the book.

# Run, Jesse, Run!

*(Lights up on JESSE OWENS. Behind him, or just out of sight are all the other cast members.)*

ALL *(loudly)*. RUN, JESSE, RUN!

JESSE. I'm not sure everybody heard you. Say it again.

ALL *(even more loudly)*. RUN, JESSE, RUN!

JESSE *(to the audience)*. Some help out there. Everybody.

ALL *(loudly)*. RUN, JESSE, RUN!

JESSE. That's about right. Been hearing that all my life. Mostly inside my head. The important thing is, when you say "run" make sure you mean running toward something, not away from it. I'm not saying it always worked that way, though. Lots to run away from in my life. Lots of stumbles there, too.

*(RUTH SOLOMON OWENS enters.)*

RUTH *(as she enters)*. Now, Jesse, don't sell yourself short. *(She holds up four Olympic gold medals.)*

JESSE. Yes, yes, Ruth, I know. *(To the audience.)* That's my wife, Ruth. Don't know what I'd do without her.

RUTH. Without me, you wouldn't tell anybody that you are the greatest athlete the world has ever seen, that's what.

JESSE. You know, she's usually so shy ...

RUTH. It's not bragging on yourself, Jesse Owens, it's the truth! When you run, you are the fastest man in the world! And here's four Olympic gold medals to prove it!

*(She drapes the medals over him, pecks his cheek and exits.)*



JESSE. That's what love sounds like. But OK. Some things I could do athletic-wise. I could run fast. I could jump far.

*(REPORTERS appear, each with a gold medal.)*

REPORTER 1. Jesse Owens! Berlin, 1936, the Olympics. Gold medal in the 100-meter dash. Setting a new world record!

REPORTER 2. Jesse Owens! Berlin, 1936, the Olympics. Gold medal in the 220-meter dash. Setting a new world record!

REPORTER 3. Jesse Owens! Berlin, 1936, the Olympics. Gold medal in the broad jump. Setting a new world record!

REPORTER 4. Jesse Owens! Berlin, 1936, the Olympics. Gold medal in the 400-meter relay. Setting a new world record!

REPORTER 1. Jesse Owens! Four-time Olympic gold medal winner! Setting a new world record!

REPORTERS 1-4. ALL IN FRONT OF ADOLF HITLER AND NAZI GERMANY!

*(REPORTERS step back.)*

JESSE. OK. Yes. In front of the most terrible man the world has ever seen. Adolf Hitler. A man filled with hate, who later would be killing many people he thought were not like him. Jewish people. Non-white people. We fought World War II over that and beat that guy and, I hope, his ideas. But all I did was win some races in front of him.

RUTH *(coming back in)*. Focus, Jesse! Jesse Owens. Fastest man alive. Say it with me people—Jesse Owens—

ALL. FASTEST MAN ALIVE!

RUTH. Again!

ALL. FASTEST MAN ALIVE!

RUTH. That's what I'm talking about. *(She exits.)*

JESSE. Well, until other people broke my records, of course.  
But that was later.

REPORTERS 1-4 *(stepping back up)*. JESSE OWENS!

JESSE. Oh boy. Here we go again.

REPORTER 1. Jesse Owens! The fastest man alive!

JESSE. Yeah. That's what the newspapers like to say.

REPORTER 2. Jesse Owens! The fastest man in college at Ohio State, NCAA champ! Set or tied multiple world records!

REPORTER 3. Jesse Owens! The fastest boy in high school, in junior high! Set or tied multiple world records!

JESSE. OK. OK. Thanks for your support. I appreciate it.  
*(Indicating medals, which he takes off.)* Somebody take these please?

*(REPORTER 1 takes them.)*

JESSE *(cont'd)*. Get along, now. I think Ruth has baked some cookies for you.

*(REPORTERS 1-4 exit, hungrily.)*

JESSE *(cont'd)*. Here's the thing. I wasn't always that great at running. In fact, I was so sickly as a kid I nearly died.

*(HENRY OWENS appears.)*

HENRY *(kneeling on the ground, praying)*. Oh, God. Please spare my little J.C.

JESSE. That's my father, Henry Owens. I was actually called "J.C." as a little kid. James Cleveland Owens. J.C. for short.

HENRY. Oh, Lord Jesus. Please ... please hear me ...

JESSE. When I was five years old, I had a big lump growing near my heart. We were poor sharecroppers in Alabama. No doctors around, even if we could afford them. We were fourteen people living in a little house by a cotton field.

HENRY. She'll die if he dies—and if she dies, Lord, we'll all die—all of us ...

JESSE. He's talking about my mom, Emma Owens.

*(EMMA OWENS appears with a kitchen knife looking grim, worried and determined.)*

JESSE *(cont'd)*. I was the last baby in the family, the miracle child, they said, of twelve children. So when I got this lump and could barely breathe, Momma took a kitchen knife, put it in the fire until it was almost red hot, made me bite down on a leather strap. We didn't have anything to deaden the pain.

EMMA. Bite down hard, baby. Close your eyes.

JESSE. And then she cut that lump out of my chest.

*(EMMA mimes sticking it in. There is the sound of a child's scream all around.)*

EMMA *(in tears and worried still, but successful)*. Oh baby. Got it, baby. Bite down. Bite down. It's gonna be OK.

JESSE. I passed out from the pain, with Momma lying next to me and the bed filling up with my blood.

EMMA. It's gonna be OK, baby. *(She hugs him and falls asleep at his side.)*

JESSE. I woke in the night some days later. That's when I heard Daddy praying. He thought I couldn't hear him. But I did.

HENRY. Oh, Lord Jesus. Please ... please hear me ... save my little J.C.

JESSE (*moving over and kneeling next to HENRY*). And I don't know. Maybe it was a miracle. I got up out of bed and went and prayed next to him.

HENRY (*overwhelmed, tearfully happy*). Oh! J.C.! My J.C. (*Hugs him.*) Emma! Emma! Come see!

EMMA (*waking up, rushing to JESSE's side*). Oh! J.C.! James Cleveland!

*(They all hug together tightly.)*

JESSE. Yow! Ow!

EMMA. Oh J.C.! I am so sorry! Come! Let's get you back to bed!

*(EMMA and HENRY lift up JESSE.)*

JESSE. I think between Mommy's knife and Daddy's prayer, I got better.

*(He kisses EMMA and HENRY on the cheek. They exit.)*

JESSE (*cont'd*). I can tell you, after that, pain was something I could deal with, especially when I was running. (*Starts to run in place.*)

ALL. RUN, J.C., RUN!

JESSE. Whoosh down the dusty road, through the fields, 'round the house, out to the woods ...

ALL. RUN, J.C., RUN!

JESSE. We didn't have much in Alabama. We only had school when there was a teacher, which was only now and then. We had to work in the fields with Daddy. But I could run.

ALL. RUN, J.C., RUN!

JESSE. We only ate meat a few days a year. Like when somebody had a birthday. I went barefoot most of the time.

I ran barefoot too. Only had one pair of shoes. (*Stops running.*) And those were for school, if and when we had it, and for church on Sunday.

HENRY (*entering*). Come on, kids, let's go. Don't want to be late to the Lord's house. Take my hand, J.C.

JESSE (*taking HENRY's hand, walking in place*). We walked nine miles each way to that church. That's when the family got a chance to talk.

HENRY. What you want to be one day, James Cleveland?

JESSE. I heard tell of a place called kollich, Daddy.

HENRY. College.

JESSE. Yes, sir. I heard if you go to college, you can be anything in the world.

HENRY (*laughing*). College is for white folks, J.C. Don't be talking crazy. (*He exits.*)

JESSE. One year, my older sister went up to work in the north in Ohio. She wrote back to tell us to come too. Lots of work for all of us up in Cleveland, Ohio, she wrote.

EMMA (*entering with HENRY*). Now, Henry, we gotta go.

HENRY. No. Never. This my home. This the home of my daddy and granddaddy. Granddaddy was a slave here. We rooted here, Emma. We ain't going. We ain't going! You hear me, woman? I am not budging! Never! We ain't going!

JESSE. And so, of course, we did go. We sold all we had and took a train up to Cleveland, Ohio.

*(The family and others wear hats and carry suitcases.)*

JESSE (*cont'd*). Cleveland, Ohio! I was nine years old then. James Cleveland. That was my name. So I guess Mommy thought it was good luck that we move to a place called Cleveland.

*(People pass by in a rush.)*

JESSE (*cont'd*). Cleveland, Ohio. So many people! So many buildings! Higher than trees! And schools big and wide as five churches put together! And there were white kids and Black kids studying together there in the same class! I never saw that before!

*(TEACHER appears, speaks from the periphery or is a pre-recorded voice.)*

TEACHER. Children, we have a new student. Stand up, young man. (*Kindly.*) What is your name, little boy? Don't be shy, now.

JESSE (*to audience*). Now, fresh out of the deep south, I had an accent you could cut with a knife.

TEACHER (*patiently*). What should we call you?

JESSE (*as a boy, strong southern accent*). Jeeay Cee.

TEACHER. Well, Jesse, welcome to the class. Everybody say "Hi, Jesse."

ALL. Hi, Jesse!

JESSE. Uh— (*He is about to correct the teacher but stops.*) I remembered what my daddy said.

HENRY (*entering*). Now, J.C., it's bad manners to tell grown-ups they are wrong. You hear me, boy?

JESSE. Yes, sir.

*(HENRY exits)*

JESSE (*cont'd*). So, from that time on, I was Jesse. Jesse Owens.

RUTH (*as a child*). Hey, little boy. Want to share my umbrella?

JESSE. I met Ruth Solomon in school. One day it was pouring rain. I walked her home, sharing her umbrella. (*He gets under her umbrella.*) When we got to her home, she lent

me her umbrella. *(She gives him the umbrella and waves to him.)* Next day I brought it back. *(He hands it back to her.)* We started walking together to and from school. We've been walking to and from everywhere ever since. Magical, beautiful girl. Later, I made her my wife.

*(RUTH smiles and blows him a kiss. He blows one back. She exits.)*

JESSE *(cont'd)*. And there was another person I met from school.

*(CHARLES RILEY appears.)*

JESSE *(cont'd)*. That's Coach Charles Riley.

RILEY. Young man, you run well. How would you like to try out for the track team?

JESSE. I'd like that fine, sir. I love to run. What's a tack team?

RILEY. Track team. Come to the gym after school today and find out.

JESSE. Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.

*(RILEY nods and starts to exit.)*

JESSE *(cont'd)*. Oh! Wait! Sir!

*(RILEY stops, looks at JESSE, who is crestfallen.)*

JESSE *(cont'd)*. I can't, sir. I gotta work after school.

RILEY. I see.

JESSE. Sure would like to be a track teen, though, sir.

RILEY. Track—oh never mind. Can you come before school?

JESSE. Yes, sir, I can do that, sir.

RILEY. Good. Be here at seven. Don't be late.

JESSE. Yes, sir. I will, sir. I mean I won't sir. Late, that is.  
Thank you, sir.

*(RILEY nods, exits.)*

JESSE *(cont'd, to the audience)*. Did I tell you I love to run?

RILEY *(re-entering, with stopwatch)*. Go.

JESSE *(running in place)*. Coach said I have good legs for running. Daddy's legs—muscles on muscles, and long. I had my momma's feet. Small. He said that was good too.

RILEY. Don't worry about running fast. Just run right. The speed will come by itself.

JESSE. I got up with the sun—winter, spring and fall, to run and jump and learn from Mr. Charles Riley.

RILEY. Run like you're on a red-hot stove. Lift up those feet fast.

JESSE. But when will I start winning?

RILEY. Be patient, Jesse. Don't train for Friday's race. Train for four years from Friday. Keep your eye on the future. Just work hard to get things right. Here we go. Hundred-yard dash. Stance. Set. *(Takes out a stopwatch, and JESSE crouches.)* Go.

JESSE *(running in place)*. Little, skinny, sickly J.C. is now Jesse. Run, Jesse— *(Stops, breathing hard.)* What was my time, coach?

RILEY. Oh, thirteen or fourteen. I didn't get it exactly.

JESSE. I gotta get faster.

RILEY. It'll come. If you work for it.

JESSE. I could outrun my brothers. I could outrun everybody at school. I was cocky, I guess. I could stare down anybody and beat 'em cold! That's what I thought. But in my first track meets against older boys from other schools, I lost! I lost bad! Coach! Why do I keep losing?



RILEY. You work on Sunday?

JESSE. No, sir.

RILEY. Be ready at seven a.m. I'm going to show you the greatest runners in the world.

JESSE. That Sunday, I could hear Coach's old jalopy shaking and wheezing before it came around the corner. We drove east for hours to this huge place with tons of people. Coach paid for both of us and we went right by the rail overlooking a big wide track.

*(Bugle call, thundering hooves and JESSE and RILEY watch them go by.)*

JESSE (*cont'd*). Horses!

RILEY. Watch 'em run, Jesse. No man in the world can come close to them. Fluid. Graceful. Study 'em carefully. Study everything they do. Every move they make.

*(Bugle call, thundering hooves and JESSE and RILEY watch them go by again.)*

RILEY (*cont'd*). That horse that won. Did you notice the muscles in his neck? Easy. Resting. Even as his legs are making him fly by.

JESSE. Like he's not even trying.

RILEY (*pleased*). Bingo, boyo. Like he's not even trying. But he is trying. What about his face? Did you notice his face?

JESSE. I didn't see anything on his face.

RILEY. Right again. It's all inside. Horses are honest. No animal has ever told a lie. No horse has ever tried to stare down an opponent. That's for actors. Don't act. Keep it all on the inside where it belongs.

JESSE. Next big track meet, the 220-yard dash against all the other high schools in the Cleveland area. Older kids. Keep it inside ...

ALL (*imitating gun*). BAM! RUN, JESSE, RUN!

JESSE (*running in place*). Smooth, like horses. More speed! More! More! Harder! Harder! Don't be tired! Run through tired! Harder—OH NO! (*He stops, huffing and puffing, hiding his face in shame.*)

RILEY (*pleased*). Congratulations, Jesse.

(*JESSE can barely look at him in shame.*)

RILEY (*cont'd*). I know. I know. You think you lost today. But you won. You know who you beat. You beat him a hundred times out there. And if you keep beating him, nothing will beat *you*, boyo! Nothing! But you gotta keep beating *him*! (*Slaps JESSE on the back.*)

JESSE. He didn't say who I beat a hundred times, but I knew. I beat Jesse Owens. And from that point on—push. Harder. More. More than I thought I had. More than my limit. I had to beat myself!

RILEY (*stopwatch in hand*). Here we go. Hundred-yard dash. Stance. Set.

(*JESSE gets into his starter stance. RILEY switches on his watch.*)

RILEY (*cont'd*). GO!

(*JESSE runs in place, then stops. RILEY looks at his watch, astonished.*)

RILEY (*cont'd*). It can't be. My watch must be broken.

JESSE. How fast?

RILEY. Let's do it again. Stance. Set.

*(JESSE gets into his starter stance. RILEY switches on his watch.)*

RILEY *(cont'd)*. GO!

*(JESSE runs in place. Finishes. RILEY looks at his watch in disbelief.)*

JESSE. How'd I do?

RILEY *(removing his glasses as if they have lied to him, looking again at the watch)*. Eleven flat. No eighth grader can run that fast. Well, we'll see if that was a fluke or not, won't we. Keep working. Run. Jump. And when you're not running and jumping, think about running and jumping. It's all about hard work, Jesse.

*(RILEY exits.)*

JESSE. Hard work. Hard work. Run, Jesse, run. Jump, Jesse, jump. *(He runs, leaps, lands.)*

REPORTER 3. An eighth grader, Jesse Owens, has just set the record for his age group in the high jump.

REPORTER 4. Eighth-grader Jesse Owens shatters the broad jump middle-school record.

JESSE *(to RILEY)*. Coach, what am I gonna do without you? I don't think they even have a track coach at East Tech High School.

RILEY. They just got a new guy for track. Don't know if you'll like him, he's got his faults. But if you go over to the high-school track right now, he'll be there to meet you. *(They walk together.)*

JESSE. Will he work me?

RILEY. He'll work you, all right.

JESSE. I mean, does he know what he's doing?

RILEY. Sometimes. Sometimes he just has the right people to work with and that's all it takes.

JESSE. I don't believe that, Coach. *(Stops.)* Isn't this the East Tech track?

RILEY. It is. Cinders. A little dusty. But better than that dirt track at the middle school.

JESSE. So where is the high-school track coach? You said he'd be here.

RILEY. That he is. *(He holds out his arms.)*

JESSE. Coach! *(Jumps up and hugs him.)*

REPORTER 1. All Cleveland high-school track meet, the most important track event in Northeastern Ohio is now underway! And what a collection of talent is here, sports fans!

*(JESSE takes his starter's crouch. RILEY exits.)*

ALL *(imitating gun)*. BAM! RUN, JESSE, RUN!

*(JESSE runs in place, finishes.)*

REPORTER 2. Cleveland student Jesse Owens shatters the record in the 100-yard dash at 10.3 seconds!

JESSE. That record didn't stand. The judges said there was too much of a tailwind. I was still getting beat by runners at the state and national level, but I was studying and getting better.

RUTH *(entering with a baby)*. Wish your daddy good luck, little Gloria Shirley Owens! *(In a baby voice.)* Run, daddy, run.