

# The Columbus Dispatch

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## SPORTS

# Ohio State has produced more world class sprinters than just Jesse Owens | Rob Oller



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The eponymous Jesse Owens Classic that concludes Saturday at the eponymous Jesse Owens Memorial Stadium appropriately recognizes the most famous track and field athlete ever to pass through Columbus, but the four-time gold medalist wasn't the only record-setting Ohio State sprinter to leave a lasting mark. He wasn't even the first Buckeye Bullet to do so.

Owens set world records while blazing the straightaways, turns and ovals at Ohio State in 1935-36, then went to Berlin and buried Adolf Hitler's claim of Aryan superiority. Owens, a sharecropper's son from Alabama who grew up in Cleveland, became the world's first cross-cultural sports icon. In Berlin, he awoke to find German soldiers shoving autograph books through his bedroom window. When Owens competed, race became an action instead of a color.

As fast as Owens was, his role in Ohio track and field history is more relay race than individual sprint. As fast as he was, Owens neither led things off nor anchored them home.

## More than just Jesse Owens in Ohio State's sprinting history

Here's a look at others who made noise at Ohio Stadium before the track was removed in 1998 and constructed at its current location on Fred Taylor Drive:

- East High School sprinter **George S. Simpson** was dubbed the Buckeye Bullet almost 10 years before Owens earned the nickname. Simpson recovered from a sickly childhood to win city, state and national high school titles in the 100- and 220-yard dashes before graduating in 1926. Moving a few miles northwest to Ohio State, he won his first race for the Buckeyes, and over the next three years became a world-class sprinter whose fame extended overseas.

Simpson became the “world’s fastest human” at the 1929 NCAA track and field championships in Chicago, where Ohio State won the team title. His time of 9.4 seconds in the 100 was recognized as a world record until the Amateur Athletic Union voided the mark because Simpson used starting blocks, which were seen as providing an unfair advantage.

Simpson’s son, Sandy, has a newspaper article showing reaction to the *Bullet*’s 100: “Sporting editors, miles away on the receiving ends, chucked aside cigars, gasped out, ‘9.4! My God, take an eight-column line on this!’”

Simpson also won silver in the 200 meters at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics.

- **Glenn Davis** never won four gold medals in Berlin like Owens, but winning gold in the same event at two different Olympics is something Owens never accomplished.

Like Owens, Davis arrived at Ohio State as a sprinter, long jumper and hurdler, but eventually turned his focus to the hurdles, where he became the first Olympian to twice win the 400-meter hurdles (1956 and 1962). The product of Barberton High School owned two world records — the 400-meter hurdles and 200-meter hurdles — and in 1958 won the James E. Sullivan award as the nation’s top amateur athlete.

- **Stephanie Hightower** sped over every hurdle but one. After finishing her collegiate career at Ohio State, the Kentucky native qualified for the 1980 Moscow Olympics, where she was favored to medal in the 100-meter hurdles, but her dreams were dashed when President Jimmy Carter ordered the boycott of the Games in protest of the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan.

Hightower did not lose a race in the 60-meter dash, 60-meter hurdles or 100-meter hurdles from 1977 to 1980, and was a four-time U.S. 100-meter hurdles champion and five-time U.S. Indoors 60-meter hurdles winner. Her OSU school record of 12.9 in the 100 hurdles lasted 20 years. She was president of USA Track and Field from 2008-2016.

- **Butch Reynolds** turned the “real man’s race” into child’s play when in 1988 the former Ohio State sprinter ran 43.29 to set the 400-meter world record in Zurich, Switzerland.

Reynolds thought the Swiss setting gorgeous, but two years later things got ugly. In 1990, after winning Olympic medals in the 400 (silver) and 1,600 relay (gold), Reynolds finished a race in Monaco and provided a urine sample that tested positive for steroids.

Reynolds argued that officials botched the testing, but the International Association of Athletics Federations suspended the Akron native for two years, through the 1992 Olympics

in Barcelona, effectively ending his career while still in his prime.

These four may be the most distinguished Ohio State sprinters after Owens, but they are not the fastest or best known to hit the track in Columbus. Nine-time Olympic gold medalist Carl Lewis competed in an early Jesse Owens Classic, as did two-time Olympic gold medalist Edwin Moses, who between 1977 and 1987 won 107 consecutive 400-meter hurdles finals and set the world record four times.

As Owens' legacy lives on, Ohio State has and continues to send out speedy athletes, including Nick Gray, Donica Merriman and, most recently, Anavia Battle and Eric Harrison.

You can watch more spikes fly at the Jesse Owens Classic. But don't blink or you might miss something.

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## **Jesse Owens Classic**