



Jo McCuity

Actor ran with the role

By Aaron Marshall

Just 22 years old, Canadian-born actor Stephan James has already portrayed the likes of Jesse Owens and civil rights icon John Lewis. During a campus visit in February for a screening of “Race,” he took part in a panel discussion with Owens’ daughters, posed for photos on a red carpet that stretched across the Mershon Auditorium lobby and took time to answer these questions:

Jesse Owens’ daughters were on the set with you during filming. How did that inform your work as an actor?

It helped tremendously. I could find out about the runner he was, the athlete he was, the superhuman fastest man on the planet. But where was I going to find information about the type of father he was? The type of man he was? The type of husband he was? Those things are the intangibles. Those are the

things that bring a level of humanity to this character. People see him as this larger-than-life figure. You have to give people a way to connect to a person like that. For me, it was helpful to learn about him as a man and as a humanitarian, little things that people don’t know about Jesse.

Did you pick up any of Owens’ mannerisms from his daughters?

No, that was more so myself, just watching little tapes I could find of him and getting his cadences down and the way he spoke.

You’ve talked about learning to run like Owens and even training with a coach at Georgia Tech. What was your process?

First of all, you are looking at track and field in the 1930s. I couldn’t train the way track and field athletes do today. Jesse Owens [was] running on dirt tracks with leather shoes.

They are these leather shoes that look like ballet slippers [with] very flat soles and 2- or 3-inch spikes on the bottom. I had to learn how to run fast, obviously, him being the fastest man alive. And then the devil was in the details for me in trying to run like him. I had to pay close attention to what he did when he started his race. How did his stride look? How did his facial emotions look when he ran? Was he emphatic when he won his races? That’s what I was really keying into.

How taxing is a role like this?

It’s extremely exhausting. Not only am I leading a film, I’m No. 1 on the call sheet, I have the heaviest workload. I’m working 15- to 16-hour days. There are really so many different layers to that, and I realized during the process I was going to have to be selfless. There were a lot of things that I had to put into this character to make it

Kevin Fitzsimons



Speaking at Mershon Auditorium before the premiere of “Race,” actor Stephan James said he was proud to portray Jesse Owens and work with the athlete’s daughters Gloria Owens Hemphill (left) and Marlene Owens Rankin.

work. For me, it was giving a lot of my time and my body, my mind and my soul. Even if that meant I couldn’t do anything at the end of my day, that’s just what it meant.

When you were filming in Berlin, you were in the very same Olympic stadium where Owens won his gold medals. And you’re roughly the same age he was. What was that like?

I had a real eerie moment the first day we got to Berlin and started filming. I was walking up to the stadium by myself — as I’m sure Jesse did — and I looked into the stadium, and no one was there. But I got chills. I was just looking at this vast, this humongous space. It was like I was walking in his footsteps, literally, and seeing some of the things he saw and feeling some of the things he may have felt, even if it was just a fraction of that. I walked in there, and no one was there. He walked in, and there were 150,000 Nazi Germans. For me, it was definitely a full-circle moment.

But on the other hand, I was able to see how much they love and appreciate Jesse there. The street that the stadium is on is now

called Jesse Owens Allee. There’s a lounge in the stadium called the Jesse Owens Lounge. And his photo is blown up all over the place. That showed me he was so much bigger than an American hero, so much bigger than a black hero. This man was a world hero. So a very important trip for me.

What message do you hope people take from the movie?

I would just hope that people are inspired in the same way that I was inspired — by a man who stared in the face of adversity, not only in America during the Great Depression in the 1930s, but also in Nazi Germany. It took a brave, brave man to go over there and do what he did.

What’s even more incredible is that I don’t think he had any intentions of showing anyone up or proving any sort of point. He was just incredibly talented. He knew who he was, and he knew that he could do it. So I think people can look at this story and say, “If Jesse can do what he did when and where he did it, then really there’s no excuse for me not to do great things as well.” ✨

Filmmakers asked the pros

Several scenes in “Race” depict life at Ohio State in the 1930s, and filmmakers with Focus Features did so pretty accurately, say staff members at University Archives, who played a big role in ensuring that was the case. First contacted in 2013, archivists fielded many questions: What were the track hurdles made of? Do you have the plans for Ohio Stadium? Would black and white students have socialized together in those days? The staff drew from University Libraries’ Jesse Owens Collection and other resources to field the filmmakers’ questions.

➤ **SEE THE COLLECTION**

go.osu.edu/JesseOwensCollection



Photos in high demand

Images of Jesse Owens in University Libraries’ Knowledge Bank were downloaded more than 101,000 times in February, the month “Race” opened in theaters. Individuals in 129 countries obtained the images — with 321 downloads occurring in France, 128 in India, 59 in Hungary, 28 in Nigeria and one in Fiji, just for example.

➤ **ACCESS THE PHOTOS**

go.osu.edu/OwensPhotoArchive