

CHRISTOPHER HILTON

# HOW HITLER HIJACKED WORLD SPORT

THE WORLD CUP, THE OLYMPICS,  
THE HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP  
AND THE GRAND PRIX



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The  
History  
Press

German sport has only one task: to strengthen the character of the German people, imbuing it with the fighting spirit and steadfast camaraderie necessary in the struggle for its existence.

Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda, 23 April 1933

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# INTRODUCTION

There is an inescapable reason why the Third Reich remains hypnotically fascinating even six and a half decades after it was buried. Nothing remotely like it had happened before, nothing like it has happened since and nothing like is remotely likely to happen again. The odds against the combination of circumstances which spawned it repeating themselves will always be heavily against, starting with a figure like Adolf Hitler.

In his twelve years of power he wreaked terrible havoc on many different fronts and that, by a great paradox, included the world of sport; a paradox because before he came to power he showed very little interest in it – apart from racing cars and what relevance it might have in military terms. Almost from the moment he had power all that changed.

He approached sport as he approached everything else, by being prepared to exploit it in the most shameless ways as long as it served his purpose. It brought an additional paradox because sport was built on exactly the opposite principles to those Hitler and the Nazis held, if indeed you can call what they believed principles.

To say that Hitler had no grasp of any sporting ethos would be an understatement of historic proportions. As one of his generals said, 'I searched constantly for signs of genius and found only the diabolical.'

His chilled, bloodied hand would reach deep into the Olympic movement *and* an Olympic Games, soccer's World Cup, Grand Prix motor racing, the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship, Wimbledon and the tennis circuit, and the Isle of Man TT motorbike races. To humanise this by making a random selection, that hand would reach for – sometimes fatally – a cyclist and several ice hockey players, a decathlete and a fencer, two sharecroppers' sons from Alabama, two tennis players (one an aristocratic homosexual, the other a Jew), an English public schoolboy and a patriotic German high jumper.

The treatment of the high jumper was most shameless of all because she held the national record but was Jewish and, rather than select her for the Olympic team, the Nazis picked a man because, being stronger, he would be sure to win. I will repeat

that. *The Nazis picked a man to contest the women's high jump.* He did compete and, as if sport was exacting its own revenge for such a travesty, he finished fourth. You will see quite why he was able to be selected, and like so much of the Third Reich it does not make for happy reading.

Along the way, Hitler's policies created a furore across the United States, Britain, France and Sweden, who all agonised over boycotting his Olympics – those in 1936 in Berlin. Bitter words were spoken and bitter accusations were made in the United States, drawing in politicians, diplomats, the Jewish community, innocent young athletes and power hunters. A chorus of voices tried to define what a free country really was, and what it should do.

Racism would never be far away, either: not just anti-Semitism but the purest kind of white supremacy, which, in turn, denigrated black people. This was unfortunate because the denigration would involve two of the very greatest athletes, Jesse Owens and Joe Louis, the sharecroppers' sons.

Many individual stories have been told and it is senseless to pretend that they have not been. You can read whole books on the 1936 Olympics – including mine<sup>1</sup> – or what the mighty German racing cars did or the life and times of the homosexual tennis player, but this book is the first, I believe, to bring all the aspects together. In that sense, most of the rich cast of characters are meeting themselves for the first time, if I can put it like that. Here, for example, you will find one of the most politically charged soccer matches ever played, where an Austrian genius publicly taunted thousands of Nazis. Again, you will see.

A word about the structure. I have re-created German sport in great detail because it is the best way to appreciate what was being done to it, and an inevitable by-product of this is that the book also becomes a history of Germany's sports matches and competitions from 1933 to 1939. The first chapter traces Hitler's rise to power across the 1920s with, interwoven, the people and events who will form the backbone of the story. I have included the main political events to give it an authentic context, although I stress that this is a book about how politics manipulated sport rather than a straightforward political book. There is a big difference.

The next seven chapters trace in chronological order what happened to sport and sports people from the moment Hitler took power in 1933. Because the impact of the Nazis was so immediate and wide reaching, the text risked darting from this sport to that all across the profusion of the summers (and winters), so to make it easier to digest I have amalgamated some of the material, breaking the strict chronological order. The seven chapters take the narrative to the moment the war broke out in 1939. As it happened, four of his mighty racing cars would be thundering round the cobbled streets of Belgrade in a Grand Prix on that very day, bringing the era to a close with, aptly, a roaring noise.

Chapter nine has the same framework as the first chapter, but pitched forward to chart what happened to all the people who formed the backbone, while chapter ten speculates about what world sport would have looked like if Hitler had won the war. Some escaped the chilled, bloodied hand. Some didn't.

I offer sincere thanks to Tommy Wahlsten (vice chairman) and Linda Sandgren of the Swedish Olympic Committee; Michaël Guittard, Opérations et événements, Direction de la Communication et du Marketing, Fédération Française de Tennis; Irv Osterer and Patrick Houda of the Society for International Hockey Research; David Hayhoe for raiding his library for relevant books; Mail-Pressestelle team at [info@dfb.de](mailto:info@dfb.de); Gabriella Strauss of BMW; Oliver Richtberg of the DTB press office; Thomas Grömer of the Austrian Tennis Federation; Dr Gunnar Streidt of the Rot-Weiss Tennis Club, Berlin; Scott Bowers, Group Director of Communications, The Jockey Club; Birgit Kubisch-Hillebrand; Eberhard Reuss, author of the definitive *Hitler's Motor Racing Battles* for permission to quote, for his thoughts and for sending photographs; Robert Cellini of *The Copenhagen Post*; Andy Shaw for directing me towards Eric Morse (a foreign and strategic affairs commentator at the Royal Canadian Military Institute in Toronto, who was responsible for international sports relations at Canada's foreign ministry – Department of External Affairs, as it then was – from 1973 to 1986); Jimmy Lindahl for researching Sweden's reaction to the 1938 World Cup when their first-round opponents, Austria, ceased to exist; Søren Elbech of [danskfodbold.com](http://danskfodbold.com) and Andreas Werner for help with two amazing soccer matches; Jim Hendry, MBE, Honorary Archivist, British Cycling; David Oldrey, a member of The Jockey Club and eminent horse-racing historian; Arjen Zegers of the KNVB, the Dutch FA and Timo Bootsma, a historian who found and translated invaluable material on the 1938 Holland–Germany match which never happened; Kay Crooks of the Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Museum.

The chapter titled 'If ...' is about the shape of world sport assuming Hitler had won the war and represents, by definition, speculation. I am indebted to John Woodcock, Ian Cole and Linda Carlson for reading it, offering opinions, and contributing. I also owe a particular debt to James and Nancy Pinion, the co-directors of the Jesse Owens Museum in Oakville, Alabama, for providing a superb selection of photographs (taken by their friend Charlie Siefried) and daughter Marcy who sent them in high resolution. The Pinions are retired and keep the museum going on 'donations, gift shop sales and annual grants from the State of Alabama'. They do it, unpaid, because they believe the Owens legacy should be kept alive. The museum can be accessed on [www.jesseowensmuseum.org](http://www.jesseowensmuseum.org) and reached at [jesseowens@charter.net](mailto:jesseowens@charter.net).

I have used many, many sources and each is acknowledged by chapter endnotes, but I must single out two books, *Hitler's Motor Racing Battles* by Eberhard Reuss and *A Terrible Splendor* by Marshall Jon Fisher (Crown), as treasure troves of basic information. The internet is now such a wealth of information that it would be churlish to pretend that I haven't been using it; I have. The websites are noted and their addresses given. Among them I salute The Golden Era of Grand Prix Racing ([www.kolumbus.fi/leif.snellman/](http://www.kolumbus.fi/leif.snellman/)), which covers the 1930s in extraordinary detail. The Rec. Sport Soccer Statistics Foundation (<http://www.rsssf.com/nerssf.html>) is a mine of priceless information. The *Official Berlin Games Report* covers the 1936 Games in exhaustive detail.

BBC Four broadcast an important documentary in 2003, *Fascism and Football*, which contained a wealth of expert insights as well as provocative opinions and I

have drawn from it. Again, in each case this is clearly accredited through chapter endnotes. *The Journal of Sport History*, vol. 16, no. 1 (spring, 1989) carried a beautifully researched and penetrating feature, 'A Tale of Two Diplomats: George S. Messersmith and Charles H. Sherrill on Proposed American Participation in the 1936 Olympics', by Stephen R. Wenn of the University of Western Ontario. I have drawn from this too, and it is also accredited through chapter endnotes. I am grateful for his generous permission to quote extensively from it. There is a full bibliography at the end which contains full citations to the texts referred to in the chapter endnotes.

Finally, a word for the (sometimes maligned) British Newspaper Library at Colindale, north London, which is a source of almost unlimited scope and importance. I have been using it for twenty-five years and have the deepest gratitude to it, and especially to the staff.

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## Notes

- 1 Hilton, *Hitler's Olympics*.

# THE PLAYERS

Munich was a place of big, solid stone buildings, churches and museums inhabited by big, solid, beer-fed citizens. The politics among its population of 666,000 stood in direct contrast: volatile and, at its sharp edges, revolutionary.

On 1 April 1920, Adolf Hitler left the army to work full time for the National Socialist German Workers' Party, the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*. The pronunciation of *Nationalsozialist* gave it the abbreviation the world would come to know so well and fear so much, *Nazi*. The party was based at a building called the Brown House in Munich and Hitler began to take it over. The local German Army Command was the 'ultimate arbiter of public order' and nothing officially to do with the Nazis, but Hitler had military friends and that allowed him to 'exercise with impunity his methods of incitement, violence and intimidation'.<sup>1</sup> He became party chairman a year later.

He looked like the army corporal he had been in the war and sounded like a raucous rabble-rouser with a wild look in his eyes. You would have predicted a sticky end, possibly very soon, as the volatility consumed him. Instead, across the next thirteen years, he manoeuvred towards power while in the most natural and usual way people who almost certainly had never heard of him were building their careers – mostly far removed from any kind of politics – in Germany, in Europe beyond Germany, in Britain and the United States. When he had power they would feel it.

Oakville can represent that. It was a very small place, lost in gently rolling farmland somewhere along the pencil-thin, pencil-straight roads of northern Alabama. Oakville was also poor and the bigotry of segregation cut wounds through it. Sharecroppers, tenants who worked the land for a percentage of the crop, picked cotton, but, because of the hilly terrain and woodland, corn was grown and molasses made. The black couple in the shanty dwelling – draughty, basic – had nine children and wished for no more but a tenth, a 'gift child', came. He was sickly, suffering from bronchial problems and pneumonia. They christened him James Cleveland Owens.

You would have predicted a back-breaking future picking the cotton, the segregation legally holding him forever from opportunity, as well as poverty and anonymity

if he survived the bronchial problems and pneumonia. One day in 1922, while Hitler was beginning his journey to absolute power, Owens' mother said the family were going on a train. J.C. asked, 'but where we gonna go, Momma?' 'To a better life,' she replied. That was Cleveland, Ohio, and when he got there a school teacher asked him his name. He replied in a strong southern drawl, 'J.C. Owens'. The initials sounded just like the name the world would come to know so well and respect so much: Jesse.<sup>2</sup>

On a cloudy afternoon, with rain hanging in the air, the former corporal and the sharecropper's son would find themselves in the same place and what happened there between them – or rather, what did not happen between them – remains one of the most memorably evocative moments of the whole twentieth century.

You can argue that sport is an international activity, essentially about anybody on the planet exploiting their talent (which, as it happens, is one way of defining the Olympic Games). The competitor's background obviously has an impact in terms of opportunity<sup>3</sup> and by its nature it produces some wonderfully improbable encounters but rarely anything approaching the undercurrents which flowed into the stone-clad stadium that August afternoon when the corporal and the sharecropper's son faced each other.

In 1923 the Nazis staged a Beer Hall Putsch in Munich, starting at a political meeting at the biggest *keller*. Hitler climbed on to a chair and shouted, 'the national revolution has begun'. It hadn't. He fled, although by now the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), the storm troopers who formed the Nazi paramilitary force, numbered some 15,000 and the party itself 20,000.

At between six and seven o'clock on the morning of the *putsch* Adolf Hühnlein, an early party member and an unprepossessing man even though he had won the Iron Cross during the war, was dispatched with others to seize a police station. He failed and was arrested. He had no sense of humour, no mechanical knowledge and at the moment of his arrest seemed destined to be a figurine, not even an historical footnote.

Hitler would, in time, give him charge of all motor sport in Germany, so that he marched the European calendar of Grands Prix in his uniform and swastikas like an emperor. He embodied what Hitler had ordained: that racing would become an instrument of German power and a global demonstration of the superiority of our technology. The failed police station-seizer would have a stage – that stage – for his marching and, if appearances are anything to go by, he would adore it. You could tell by his body language. Hitler would also put Hühnlein in charge of all Germany's motorised transport, training it for war.

Hitler received a five-year prison sentence in April 1924 for the attempted *putsch*, but was eligible for parole in six months. He spent his hours writing a turgid and wild tome, *My Struggle*, the title of which the world would come to know so well in the original, *Mein Kampf*. Hitler was paroled in December. He had spent time in Vienna as a rejected artist and there he learned to hate the Jews.

Manfred von Brauchitsch, handsome but haughty, came from a strong military family and at 18 his father put him into an infantry regiment on Germany's north coast. He had a small inheritance and with it he bought a motorbike. He crashed,



breaking his arm, his leg, four ribs and fracturing his skull. He left the army and recuperated in a cousin's forty-room castle. The cousin owned a powerful Mercedes and taught von Brauchitsch to drive. In time, he would win – and lose – some extraordinary Grands Prix, try to flee to Switzerland when the Second World War began and, after it, flee to communist East Germany. Before any of that, Hitler would make his uncle, Walther, commander-in-chief of the German army.

Max Schmeling, born just north of Berlin, grew up in Hamburg where his father worked for a shipping company. He had a strong, open, almost pug-like face and a thicket of hair cut across his forehead. At 16 he went to the cinema and the show included newsreel coverage of the World Heavyweight Championship between reigning champion Jack Dempsey and Frenchman Georges Carpentier at an outdoor arena in New Jersey. It produced boxing's first million-dollar gate and reached a large audience as one of the first radio broadcasts dedicated to a specific event. Dempsey stormed Carpentier and destroyed him in four rounds.

It also reached Schmeling. He bought second-hand gloves and, when he moved to the Rhineland, joined the local amateur club. He made such progress that by the time Hitler served his jail sentence he was contesting the German light-heavyweight title and fought for the first time as a professional that August, 1924.

In time, Hitler would use Schmeling as a model of Aryan supremacy against an American black sharecropper's son in far, far away Yankee Stadium in the Bronx – just a couple of weeks before the cloudy afternoon when Hitler and that other sharecropper's son found themselves staring at each other in Berlin. It was the same Schmeling who risked his life to save two Jewish children long after Hitler did get absolute power.

In 1925 the Nazis were holding mass meetings and the *Schutzstaffel* was formed to protect Hitler. The world would come to know it so well by its abbreviation: the SS. Heinrich Himmler, one of the most odious men in European history, commanded it.

Hans Stuck's father owned an estate at Freiburg, in the rolling hills and flatlands of south-eastern Germany not far from France and Switzerland (the Stucks were originally Swiss). Stuck served in the artillery in the First World War and when his commanding officer was killed he was sent to give the bad news to the family. The commanding officer's sister was called Ellen and, although five years older, they married. Stuck, tall and good looking, would always attract ladies – and marry twice again – but now he and Ellen 'set up home on a farm south of Munich'<sup>4</sup> and in the early mornings Stuck delivered milk from it to Munich.

He used to park his car at a garage and he became friendly with the man who parked next to him, Julius Schreck. Very soon Stuck would begin a career in motor racing and in time he and Schreck would shoot together on the farm. One day in 1925 Schreck arrived for a shoot and asked if his boss, who was in the car, might join them. Stuck said, 'Of course', and there was Hitler.

Stuck's racing career stalled and Schreck said he should meet Hitler. Stuck thought that mildly absurd when Hitler was working day and night to take over Germany, but Schreck arranged it, explaining that Hitler had not forgotten the day's shooting, and Stuck travelled to the Brown House. Stuck explained that the German companies