

SEEDLINGS FOR SYDNEY?

By Kevin Berry

While doing research for my book, *2000 Things You Didn't Know About the Olympic Games*, I was quite taken by the initiative of the Berlin Olympic Organizing Committee to present oak seedlings to all winners at the 1936 Games.

In all, there were 130 seedlings presented to the victors. They were a gift of the German people and given in pots, which carried the inscription, "Grow to the honor of victory! Summon to further achievement!"

As Australia had no gold medallists at these Games, I had not heard of this practice.

Further reading led me to the marvellous story of the Lovelock Oak.

Jack Lovelock, a New Zealander, won the 1500 metres on the track at the Berlin Games. He did not return to New Zealand but asked a teammate to take his prized possession back to his native land. The seedling survived a long boat trip and several seasons of climate change and eventually, in 1941, it was presented to the champion's old high school.

Today the Lovelock oak grows high and strong in the grounds of Timaru Boys' High School. Each year students gather acorns from this tree and now second generation oaks are sprouting all over NZ.

As an Olympic champion, I thought this concept of presenting something that is alive and growing was a wonderful idea. I wished I had been given such a memento from my victory in 1964. I then realized that perhaps the only reason the 'custom' did not continue after Berlin was due to the gap between Games.

At this point it struck me that it might not be such a bad idea to reinstate the concept for the Sydney Games and thus began my quest!

I wrote to our secretary, Tony Bijkerk, to inquire if any of our members had done research on the "1936 seedlings". He informed me that not only had research been done, but that James Constandt from Michigan (ISOH Member), had written a book on the subject. It is called *The 1936 Olympic Oaks Where Are They Now?*. I contacted Jim and he kindly forwarded to me a copy of his book.

Might I recommend this publication to anyone who has an interest in the Berlin Games. Jim's methodology in

endeavouring to track down the 130 seedlings is most thorough. From it he has discovered that 16 oaks are definitely alive; 17 have died from a variety of causes; and the whereabouts of the remaining 97 are unknown.



Jesse Owens holding his seedling in Berlin 1936

Armed with all the information contained in the seedlings book, I decided to float my idea with a number members of the Olympic Family here in Australia. I spoke to both John Coates (President) and Craig McLatchey (Secretary-General) of our National Olympic Committee and they both agreed it was a worthwhile project to pursue. In fact, to a person, my idea has had universal acceptance within the Australian Olympic community

In July I wrote to Mr. Sandy Hollway, Chief Executive of the Sydney Games Organizing Committee and I await his reply.

Recently I have been spurred on by a conversation I had with another ISOH member, Jim Greensfeld from Cincinnati, Ohio. Jim was in Australia to attend an Olympic conference and I had an opportunity to discuss my project with him.

Greensfeld had said that he had managed to track down one of Jesse Owens' trees which was living and growing in the yard of the athlete's deceased mother's home. He took a number of leaves from this tree and presented them to special friends who had a connection to Jesse.

The whole tree saga has a great fascination for me. It has the links to the past - the 1936 Games, which gave us a lot of the mystique and tradition associated with the Olympics and holds the possibility of carrying on a custom into the next Millennium.

It also helps to address ecology issues facing all of us. We are continually being told to plant more trees and if only a few seedlings make it into the ground after an Olympic Games then we will be making a contribution to the greening of our planet.

I hope my project gets up for the Sydney Games and will be continued at future Games and that Olympic trees will 'populate' the world.