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Louis Zamperini was born to Italian-immigrant parents - living in Olean, New York - on the 26th of January, 1917. He had an older brother (Pete) and two younger sisters (Sylvia and Virginia).

When the boys were still toddlers, they developed pneumonia. The family doctor recommended a move to California, so the Zamperinis - who still spoke Italian in their home - moved to Long Beach. Not long after, they settled in Torrance.

Often in trouble, Louie's focus changed when he was 15 years old. His brother suggested that athletics might be good for him, and Louie agreed.

Still in high school, he decided to run - as fast as he could - everywhere he could:

I had made up my mind to run everywhere. Instead of hitchhiking to the beach four miles, I ran to the beach. I'd run from Redondo to Hermosa and back, and then run home at night. All summer long, that's what I did. So I piled up a lot of miles. But I had no idea how fast I could run. I had no idea what I was doing to my body.

Unwittingly, Zamperini was preparing himself for a great career as a top-notch athlete:

Then fall came around, and I was put in a two-mile cross-country run at UCLA. There were 101 runners out there from all over the state, and my first thought was: "I just hope I don't get last." When the race was over, I looked back and I had won it by a quarter of a mile. I thought I must have cut some corners, but they assured me that I ran the full course. I had no idea I was in such good shape because I had never timed myself. I just ran, ran, ran, and it paid off. So then I realized that I could be a runner - really a runner.

The former "Terror of Torrance" had new plans for himself and began to set aggressive goals:

I wanted to break the world's high school mile record in my senior year. Then I wanted to go to USC and break the NCAA mile record, and then make the 1940 Olympics in Tokyo. I got my high school world's record a year before, as a junior, which was a good thing for me, because my grades were not up to going to college...I had to make up my grades, so I went to summer school, became student body president, had to study even harder, and finally got my grades up to par. (Quoted passages from Louis Zamperini's Oral History.)

Unexpectedly, Louie had a chance to participate in the 1936 Summer Olympics which were scheduled for Berlin. One significant event had propelled him into the limelight. In May of 1934, he'd set a new record for the national interscholastic mile. His time - 4.21 and two-tenths - stood, unbroken, for eighteen years.

Arriving in Berlin, during the summer of 1936, Olympic athletes like Zamperini saw swastikas flying everywhere. The "Juden Verboten" signs - forbidding entry to Jewish people - were temporarily out of sight.

As head of state, Hitler opened the Games. Whenever he entered the stadium, to watch events, the crowds cheered for him. Once the audience even spelled out this greeting: *Wir gehoeren Dir*. Translated into English,

that phrase means: "We belong to you."

Pleased with the performance of German athletes, and with the games in general, Hitler was nonetheless distressed by the numerous victories of Jesse Owens, a talented African-American who dominated his events. Winning four medals, Owens did not win-over a prejudiced Hitler who - according to Albert Speer - was upset about Owens' accomplishments:

Each of the German victories, and there were a surprising number of these, made [Adolf Hitler] happy, but he was highly annoyed by the series of triumphs by the marvelous colored American runner, Jesse Owens. (Albert Speer, Inside the Third Reich.)

Louie did not compete against Jesse Owens. Instead, he ran the 5,000 meters - a long race that was not his forte - against a group of Finns who'd been winning the race for years.

Biding his time, he initially misjudged how fast his competitors would run. When he realized he needed to move more quickly, he kicked into high gear, finishing in 14:46.8 - the fastest 5,000-meter time for an American in 1936. He finished his last lap in 56 seconds.

Later, when he met Hitler, Louie was surprised that the German leader remembered him. "Ah," he said. "You're the boy with the fast finish."

Louie never thought he'd medal in the '36 Olympics. He believed the Tokyo games - set for 1940 - would be his path to an Olympic championship.

The Japanese government, however, had other plans. Invading China, and causing worldwide consternation with their warring ways, the government canceled the Olympics.

Louie, and other athletes hoping to compete, had a brief reprieve when the games were moved to Helsinki. Then ... Finland was caught-up in World War II - like other European nations - and the 1940 games were canceled altogether.

Disappointed that he could not actualize his potential in the Olympic arena, Zamp (as Louie was known by his friends) had a different job to do. After the Japanese empire bombed Pearl Harbor, America was drawn into World War II. Young men like Louie were joining the U.S. military.

In a twist of fate - although he hated to fly - Zamp would end up with a tough assignment. He would serve his country as a B-24 bombardier.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/ZAMPERINI-and-the-1936-OLYMPICS-Unbroken-Louis-Zamperini-Story>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/ZAMPERINI-and-the-1936-OLYMPICS-Unbroken-Louis-Zamperini-Story>

Questions 2 Ponder

Can Athletics Help to Transform Behavior?

Once known as the "Terror of Torrance," for his bad behavior, Louis Zamperini changed his life when his brother recommended that he should take-up athletics.

Zamp, as he was known to his friends, began to run all over town. Never timing himself, he had no idea how fast he really was - until he started winning races.

While he was still the "Terror of Torrance," Louie's grades had slipped. Not high-enough to get into college, he had make-up work to do:

I had to make up my grades, so I went to summer school, became student body president, had to study even harder, and finally got my grades up to par.

With a new purpose in his life, Zamp improved his running time. By May of 1934, he set a new record for the national interscholastic mile. His time - 4.21 and two-tenths - stood, unbroken, for eighteen years.

How did athletics help to transform Zamperini's behavior?

If athletics could help Zamp to change his life, can athletics help others to change their lives, too? How would

that work?

How Do We Find, Then Actualize, Our Potential?

As a teenager, Louis Zamperini was constantly in trouble until he realized he had the potential to become a great athlete. His chosen sport was running.

As he changed his focus from being in trouble to being the best runner he could be, he realized that he had great potential. He had so much potential, in fact, that he became an Olympic athlete.

How did focusing on athletics help Zamperini to find, then actualize, his potential?

If we aren't athletically inclined, we can still find our potential to become the best we can be at what we love to do. How do we go about finding what we love to do?

How do we actualize our potential to become highly skilled and effective in our chosen fields?

Why Does Encouragement Help Us to Succeed?

As a teenager who was constantly in trouble, Louis Zamperini changed his focus in life after his brother encouraged him to become an athlete.

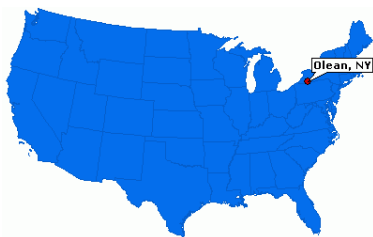
When he took-up running, Zamperini realized how good he was becoming. His brother, and then others, encouraged him to "keep up the good work!"

Zamp got better and better and better at his chosen sport. Soon he was winning his races and setting records.

Encouragement helped Zamperini to succeed. How does encouragement make such a difference in a person's life?

Have you succeeded at something because someone encouraged you? Describe how encouragement mattered to you.

Media Stream



Olean, New York - Locator Map

Map locator online, courtesy Epodunk.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Olean-New-York-Locator-Map>



Long Beach, California - In the 1920s

Image of Signal Hill oil field, online courtesy the Los Angeles Public Library's Photo Collection. Original collection: Hollywood Citizen-News, Aerograph Co.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Long-Beach-California-In-the-1920s>



Louis Zamperini - Family Home in Torrance

Image of Zamperini home, in Torrance, online courtesy Save Historic Old Torrance.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Louis-Zamperini-Family-Home-in-Torrance>



Louis Zamperini - As a Boy in Torrance

Image of Louis Zamperini at home, in Torrance, online courtesy *The Wall Street Journal*.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Louis-Zamperini-As-a-Boy-in-Torrance>



Louie Zamperini - Runner

Photo of Louie Zamperini running, online courtesy the [National Italian American Hall of Fame](#).

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Louie-Zamperini-Runner>



Pete and Louis Zamperini

Photo of Pete and Louie Zamperini, online courtesy Louis Zamperini.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Pete-and-Louis-Zamperini>



Louis Zamperini - Running in 1938

Louis Zamperini, running for USC, photo online courtesy Louis Zamperini.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Louis-Zamperini-Running-in-1938>

Courtesy of Lou Zamperini

Zamperini was a standout miler for USC, breaking the NCAA record in 1938.



Berlin Olympics - Summer of 1936

Berlin street scene, August of 1936, by DIZ Muenchen GMBH, Sueddeutscher Verlag Bilderdienst. Online, courtesy USHMM (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Berlin-Olympics-Summer-of-1936>



Berlin Olympics - Swastikas Welcome Athletes

Photo of Berlin, in 1936, online courtesy NARA (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration).

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Berlin-Olympics-Swastikas-Welcome-Athletes>



Hitler at the 1936 Olympics

Photo of Hitler, at the 1936 Olympic Games - in Berlin - online, courtesy *Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie* (The Netherlands Institute for War Documentation).

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Hitler-at-the-1936-Olympics>



Berlin Crowd to Hitler - We Belong to You

Photo online, courtesy U.S. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Berlin-Crowd-to-Hitler-We-Belong-to-You>



Jesse Owens - 1936 Olympics

Photo online, courtesy *International Olympics Committee* (IOC) - image IOC - RAACL059.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Jesse-Owens-1936-Olympics>



Berlin Olympic Stadium - 1936 Games

Photo of 1936 Olympic Stadium, in Berlin, Bundesarchiv, Bild 183 (Government Archives, Photo 183). Online, via Wikimedia Commons.

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ZAMPERINI and the 1936 OLYMPICS

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