

## Jesus Jesse Castaneda

Born: January 24, 1940, Nuevo Casa Grades, Mexico

High School: Menaul School (NM) 1959

College: University of New Mexico – bachelor's in physical education and health 1965

Jaime Balmes University in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico – master's degree  
in Latin American affairs and Mexican history 1970.

If you tell Jesús Jesse Castañeda that he cannot do something, you can be assured that that comment will motivate him to do it. Jesse, paralyzed at the age of eight from an auto accident, the doctors told him he would never walk again. But one doctor took the opposite view and might have been the one to set the notion of determination resonating inside of young Jesse. That doctor told him: "Follow my advice and believe. If you believe you can, you can." Jesse took these words as a challenge, and after six months in a wheelchair, he was walking, and he has never stopped walking ever since. And Jesse Castañeda's life grew from this doctor's words, as his life-long motto has become like that of Cesar Chavez: "Si se puede!"

Even at age one, it was in his blood to be walker. On his father's side he inherited the Tarahumara ability to run forever, and he used this inheritance to walk and run and explore the natural world around the small town of Nuevo Casas Grandes in Chihuahua, Mexico where he spent his first years.

He identified too with another Castañeda namesake, Pedro Castañeda, who travelled with Spanish Conquistadores in the Southwest in the mid-1500s. According to Jesse, he is following in Pedro's footsteps, who "again and again, was offered a horse, but always...refused. He said he would rather walk."

He was not an easy child, and only a year after his accident, he walked or rather ran away from school. His parents put him in a boarding school for troubled kids, but he soon lived out his father's dream of being the first in the family to go to the United States and learn English. He took the bus to Nogales, Arizona to get his student visa and the woman who issued it to him

had been a former homecoming queen from Menaul School in Albuquerque. She convinced him that New Mexico was the place where he should go for his education.

Whether he is putting one foot in front of the other on the La Luz Trail or spreading his message of optimism and encouragement for health and fitness through coaching, writing, or public lectures, you will always hear Jesse Castaneda proclaim his undying message: “If you believe you can, you can! ... Sí se puede! It can be done!”

## **High School**

- Enrolled in Menaul School in 1956, knowing only three words in English—yes, no, and maybe. The principal did not like his given name Jesús and announced at his first student assembly that his name would be Jesse. The name has stuck to this day.
- 1957 Discovered football. His last two years there he was Captain of the team.
- 1957 Albuquerque Tribune All-City Offensive Guard Honorable Mention team
- 1958 Led the Panthers to the district championship and semi-finals in state Class C playoffs.
- 1958 Albuquerque Tribune All-City First Team Offensive Guard. He only weighed 137 pounds.
- 1958 Associated Press Class C All-State Offensive Guard.
- 1958 ran the 880 and mile for the Panthers track team.

## **College**

- 1959 - 1963 Ran on the Cross Country and Track teams for the UNM Lobos.
- 1960-1962 Played football, but his size was a real drawback. “Those guys were big. Tremendous,” he recalled. “I would bounce off them.” He remembers a scrimmage between the varsity and freshman teams when he tackled Don Perkins who then carried him 20 yards. “He churned his legs and dragged me and dragged me. It was like holding on to a locomotive. Finally, I put him down.” When Perkins got up, he turned to Jesse and said, “Son, you’re really persistent.” Perkins would later play for the Dallas Cowboys and be one

of the first inductees into the Albuquerque Sports Hall of Fame in 1974.

## **Professional**

Professional Jesse's self-determination has never quit, and it has gained him two world records for walking and has transformed him into a local force for social good works in New Mexico and Albuquerque that has spanned decades.

- 1964 League president of the University Soccer League. Played a Mexican Secundaria All-Star team from Agua Prieta, Mexico
- 1965 Worked on campus as an instructor at the Peace Corps Training Site.
- In the late 1960s, Castañeda started teaching and coaching at the Albuquerque Academy. Here he found his calling and has continued to teach and coach and motivate others to this day.
- Taught Spanish at the Albuquerque Academy.
- In sports he coached handicapped kids, as well as coaching soccer, gymnastics, cross country, and track and field.
- 1972 Considered the father-founder of youth soccer in New Mexico. He founded New Mexico's first youth soccer program and was the President of the Albuquerque's Youth Soccer League. Starting with only six participants in the summer of 1972, the program grew to include more than 10,000 boys and girls throughout the state. In summers he returned to his hometown in Sonora to run a recreational camp for kids.
- 1972 These too were the years when he set his sights on his personal athletic achievements. He read about the British walker, Richard Crawshaw, who had recently set a world record of 255.8 miles for a nonstop walk. Castañeda, in his normal can-do fashion, knew then he wanted to break this mark.
- 1972 May – Embarked on his dream of setting a record for nonstop walking, but on his first attempt he quit after only seventy-eight miles, having developed twenty-four blisters, and losing sixteen pounds. He was taken to St. Joseph Hospital to recover.
- 1973 March 16th – On his third attempt, he set the world record for nonstop walking logging 302 miles in 102 hours and 59 minutes at the Albuquerque Academy track—a

record that made it into the 1974 edition of the Guinness Book of World Records and stood for the next two years. Castaneda recalled the mental challenges of breaking the record later in a Sports Illustrated article profiling his life: Sometimes your mind gets tired, says, "It's time to quit; why are you doing this?" Then I talk to myself in a loud voice. I say, "Hey! I am going to make it somehow or another. I am going to make it. I have the chispa." That is one of my favorite words; it means spark, like you use to build a fire. I have always had that little chispa in me. I have never quit. I have dropped but never quit.

- 1976 September – Set his second world record. After 16 failed attempts, Castaneda set the world record for the most distance walked in 24 hours. At the Hispanic Village in the New Mexico State Fair Grounds, he covered 142 miles, 440 yards, averaging 6.3 miles per hour. This record was enshrined in the Guinness Book of World Records.
- 1978, Appointed executive director of the Governor's Council on Physical Fitness and Health, honored for his innumerable community contributions promoting health and fitness and for his eternal cry to all to "Keep walking!"
- 1982 Maybe Jesse's greatest personal walking achievement was his Coast-to-Coast walk that began August 9, 1982, in New York City and ended on the shores of the Pacific Ocean on December 11, 1982, at Venice Beach, CA. Jesse Castaneda walked 3,192 miles through thirteen states, averaging thirty-five miles per day. He dedicated his walk to world peace and the Special Olympics. Leaving New York from the United Nations' building with only \$275 in his pocket, his goal was to "encourage people to have a greater appreciation for each other and the country in which they live." He was not out to set any records but more to, as he said, "follow horizon after horizon." And even though the walk was a personal quest, he still tried to take one or two days off each week to promote fitness and health in the cities and towns along his route that covered 13 states—New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Enroute, he visited fourteen hospitals, talked to dozens of YMCAs, Kiwanis, and Optimist clubs, and gave twenty-two soccer demonstrations to schoolchildren. Most often he camped out, but other times people along the route took him in. His greatest obstacle of the entire journey was the relentless wind in Kansas, but it was also his greatest

motivator, his record day was set in Kansas at 58 miles for a single day's travel. He spent time in jail in Colorado but used the time to get the inmates exercising. When he finally reached Venice Beach, he had worn out six pairs of running shoes and discovered he had forty-two blisters—one for each year of his life.

- 1984 Sport Illustrated interview he recalled: “When I got to the beach, I took my shoes off and left my footsteps in the sand. I sat down and watched the tide come up and erase them. It made me feel like my footsteps kept going into the ocean. Then I took my celebration run; I ran and ran and ran.”
- For three days Castaneda stayed and wrote 482 postcards to all the friends. He later commented and this comment tells volumes of Jesse's view about his life's accomplishments: “I made it. I am very happy. Thanks to you. The victory belongs to all of us.”
- 1984 July Continuing his string of athletic firsts, he completed the mountainous Western States 100 mile run in 27 hours from Squaw Valley, CA to Auburn, CA up and over California's Sierra Nevadas. Known as one of the world's most difficult endurance runs at the end, when others were getting oxygen and medical attention, he jogged a victory lap, waving his bandanna.
- 1984 First year as sports coordinator at Youth Development, Inc. in Albuquerque—an organization that he has nurtured and that has nurtured him and all the youth he has coached and mentored to the present day.
- 1994 Not done with setting personal athletic firsts that always—always—had an agenda of public service attached. One such event came in 1994 when, to spread the growing popularity of soccer and to celebrate the 1994 World Cup, he dribbled a soccer ball 1,118 miles from Albuquerque to Los Angeles just in time for the commencement of the first World Cup matches.
- 1996 September Made the Guinness record book again, this time setting a world record by dribbling a basketball eighty-six miles in 24 hours at Chihuahua Mexico.
- 1998 Dribbled again a soccer ball; this time from Costilla, NM to Chihuahua, Mexico to celebrate the 1998 World Cup.

- He also transformed himself into a motivational writer, publishing fourteen motivational booklets promoting health and fitness, authoring two books, *For the Love of El Futbol* and *Steps of Thy Love*, and writing a feature article for *Vista Magazine*, entitled “Follow Your Dreams.” Currently, he is completing a manuscript called *Sole to Soul!* and a book on wellness, entitled *OQUOL* with the well-known soccer coach Klaus Weber.
- Jesse’s newest project is a motivational booklet for all ages called “Destiny: My Theory of Enlightenment, My Letters to Jimmy Ning.” It contains twenty-five letters to the actor Jimmy Ning and a dedication to two remarkable individuals that have influenced his life in several positive ways. He is not revealing their names because he wants to make the booklet a major surprise for them at a special ceremony in late September when it was released. The essence and focus of Jesse’s booklet is a message (with solid and valid documentation) that will inspire many to take full responsibility in transforming their present life styles, to assist others who are in need, and to elevate all our bodies, minds, and spirits to a higher level of human performance beneficial to individuals, families, our communities, our state, our country, and our world. He hopes the booklet will provide an inspirational and motivational message that will help others discover their human potential and elevate their minds and spirits to higher levels of all-around wellness.

## **Honors**

- 1974 One year later, Castaneda was invited by the British National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children to come to England and receive the Topham Cup. This award was given to him for his fundraising for humanitarian causes, always a necessary part of every one of his record marathons walks. He was invited to lunch at the House of Commons, and while there, he met Crawshaw, whose record he had beaten, and Princess Margaret, as well.
- 1977 February Awarded for his personal and civic achievements by being honored Albuquerque’s Athlete of the Year Award.

- 1996 One of 10 New Mexicans chosen to be an Olympic Torchbearer, carrying the Olympic flame part way from Colorado City, Colorado on its way to the lighting of the flame in Atlanta for the 1996 Olympic Games.

## **Community Involvement**

- 1979, then living in Taos, he founded the Taos Youth Soccer League and organized the first Marathon de Taos.
- 1970 – 2015 Using Youth Development, Inc. as his vehicle, he poured his energy, determination, and optimism into the “well-being and the positive development of children through athletic enrichment.” This he pursued through coaching, program development, family and community outreach, and countless public speaking engagements. Cambridge Who’s Who said of Jesse and his community service: Brings 55 years of experience to Youth Development, Inc. He is considered a shining beacon of hope and strength whose tireless dedication to New Mexico youth enrichment has been recognized by countless members of the community. Mr. Castañeda has been described by his peers as creative and innovative, filled with the spirit of adventure, discovery, and positive motivation.
- At the beginning of the new millennium, Jesse transformed himself more into a recreational walker. He would still turn out for the occasional community fundraiser, but his energies went less toward adventure and more toward educating the Albuquerque community on health and fitness awareness.
- 2016-2018 Untiring and dedicated to youth health and fitness, one of Castaneda’s more recent projects was the championing of the Little Ninjas physical fitness/obstacle course at the Menaul School campus in Albuquerque, an effort for younger Head Start children to help promote their motor and physical development.