

It's time to truly honor Jesse Owens

On a recent trip through Lawrence County High School, I discovered something that was shocking, to say the least.

While I was waiting to make a picture of the recent selected LCHS cheerleaders, I picked up an Alabama history book and was flipping through the pages.

After looking through the first couple of chapters, I turned to the index to find out what pages Jesse Owens could be found on.

I was surprised to find no written history of Owens. His name was mentioned in the book's "honor roll of noted 20th century Alabamians."

I was also surprised that the book -- "A History of Alabama" -- by W. Stuart Harris, said Owens was from Morgan County.

Specifically, the book said Owens was from Danville.

With disbelief in my mind, I answered the students probably knew Owens was from Lawrence County.

But, the more I thought about it, the more I needed to know for sure. So last Friday, I conducted my own study.

I randomly selected 10 LCHS students from the top four grades and asked them questions about

Jesse Owens.

Each of these students had taken or were currently enrolled in the required Alabama history course.

Again, I was surprised. Only four of the 10 students knew Jesse Owens was born in Lawrence County. In fact, only eight of the students knew he was born in Alabama.

Seven of the students referred to Owens as an Olympic marathon runner. Another student said he won "some medals" at the "recent" Olympics in Los Angeles.

"I think he's from Russellville," said one student.

"Yes, I know all about him," another student said. "Isn't he from Florida?"

The one question that every Lawrence Countian must ask is:

Have we failed to honor the greatest Olympic track star in the history of the United States?

This past Saturday marked the 10th anniversary of the death of Owens.

Last week, President George Bush presented the Congressional Gold Medal to Ruth Owens, widow of the 1936 Olympic star, for her husband's "humanitarian

SPORTS TALK

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contributions in the race of life."

In 1982, Lawrence Countians paid their tribute to Owens with the first annual Jesse Owens Memorial Run.

The run came after months of controversy in which the Lawrence County Commission refused to place a monument on the courthouse lawn to honor Owens.

The decision drew coverage from the national media. A cloud of dust lingered over Moulton and Lawrence County.

A lot of people called the county commission's decision racial. Some called it a clash of personalities.

Whatever the case, the commissioners, who voted not to place Owens' monument on the courthouse lawn, made a terrible decision.

However, it's a decision that can be corrected.

In June of 1987, I became closely associated with the Jesse Owens saga in Lawrence County.

In a 1987 interview with Gina Hemphill, one of Owens' six granddaughters, I was shocked at the feelings that the U.S. Olympic Committee had about Lawrence County.

Miss Hemphill told me the Olympic Committee was appalled when Lawrence County refused to put Owens' monument on the courthouse lawn.

"You know," she continued, "that committee would have done anything for Lawrence County to honor my grandfather."

Hemphill told me Owens was more than just a personality. She said her never talked much about growing up in Alabama.

Hemphill also said she was proud of Owens for winning four gold medals, but the elements he had to overcome and the manner in which he overcame them meant more to her than the medals.

She talked about him being in a country where "being a black man was not a good thing to be."

Hemphill said: "How he

managed to overcome the environment and concentrate on the games I'll never know."

Hemphill said the Owens family was "dejected" about how Lawrence County handled the monument situation.

However, she said the family never said a "bad word" about Lawrence County.

"I guess you can say my opinion is biased," she said sadly. "But now that I'm older, I think my grandfather did more for the human race than any other American to ever participate in the Olympics."

Most Lawrence Countians applauded the fall of Adolf Hitler. But, I'm not sure most Lawrence Countians realize what Owens contributed to his downfall.

Hitler had preached the theme of Aryan supremacy. Owens was the first person to visibly show that the Aryan race was not the supreme race.

Because Owens' four gold medals, many Germans and the world developed doubts about one race being more superior than the other.

Owens' performance in the 1936 Olympics was the first visible proof to most Germans that they were not superior to any other race.

The Jesse Owens Run and Jesse Owens Memorial Park are mere pennies compared to the contributions he made to America and the human race.

The Jesse Owens race committee and attendants of the Jesse Owens Park are proud and work hard to pay tribute to Owens.

However, it's time for Lawrence County to truly pay tribute to the greatest track and Olympic star to ever represent the United States.

The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of Moulton Advertiser Sports Editor Deangelo McDaniel.



This monument is located at the Jesse Owens Memorial Park in Oakville. Owens was born

in Oakville and later moved to Ohio. (Staff photo by Deangelo McDaniel)

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