

Editorials

A great day in 1936

When the 1936 Summer Olympic Games began in Berlin, Adolph Hitler's Nazi regime was entrenched in power in Germany. Europe and much of the free world feared the dictator, who in a few years would drive the world into the bloodiest war mankind has ever suffered.

But even as Hitler's shadow was growing across the world, that summer in 1936 brought a glimmer of hope from the United States. The American Olympic team included an Alabama native who would break records and humiliate the arrogant German leader.

Jesse Owens, a young black man born in Lawrence County who had moved with his family to Cleveland, Ohio, at the age of 7, won four gold medals in the '36 Olympics. He set records in the 200-meter race and the broad jump. He won the 100-meter run and was a member of the world record-setting U.S. 400-meter relay team.

The amazing point about Owens' accomplishments is that they all occurred in one day. Hitler was shocked. Historical accounts report that the German leader refused to shake hands with Owens.

It was a great day for Owens. It was a great day for the United States. Nonetheless, Owens returned home to a country that still subscribed to the separate but equal theory in society, which was a sophisticated term for racism.

Despite the prejudices that prevented Owens from receiving the full recognition he deserved, he remained committed to promoting his country and encouraging young people to take advantage of opportunities.

In the small community of Oakville, where Owens was born, there is a monument in a small park recognizing the athlete's heroic day in 1936. In 1983 the Lawrence County Commission refused to put the memorial at the county courthouse, prompting charges of racism. Commissioners denied that charge but Oakville became the site for the monument.

But the Owens story is far from over. A committee of residents, including the late runner's cousin, Marvin Fitzgerald, is looking for grant money and other financial assistance to develop a 17.5-acre park honoring Owens. Plans include more recreational facilities and a small museum depicting the Alabamian's accomplishments.

With the 1996 Summer Olympics scheduled for Atlanta, the park would be an added attraction in the Southeast. Owens remains the most recognized Olympian in American history. State and federal officials, as well as local officials, should join with the community in making the dream of the Owens park come true.

The 60-year anniversary of Owens' magical day in Berlin would be the perfect opportunity to unveil the park and recall his record-setting performance.

Alabama has produced some great citizens throughout its history.

Owens' moment of glory in 1936 and the honor it brought his country should be memorialized in Alabama with more enthusiasm than was shown in the past.