

Jesse Owens museum out of starting blocks

By REGINA WRIGHT
DAILY State Editor

MOULTON — Two corporate giants have changed the park set aside to mark the Oakville birthplace of Jesse Owens.

A new road covers the 17½ acres of farm land where an expansion is taking shape. Scarred earth marks the site where a museum will be built and it is possible to see where a ball field and track will be.

Howard Peek, construction manager for Brown and Root, and Holden Smith, construction manager for Champion Corp., have completed an estimated \$75,000 in donated site preparation that includes engineering.

But can the dream discussed in a small gathering of Lawrence County residents here this week be transformed into mortar and brick? Can this group build a world-class tribute to the black man who raced onto the world stage in the 1936 Olympics and put the lie to Hitler's theory of Aryan superiority? Can they do it by the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, when visitors could detour through the county to remember a man who raced himself into a legend when the sports world was still black and white?

People like James Pinion, who is extension agent coordinator,

and Therman White, who has worked since 1983 to see the track legend honored at his birthplace, say the museum will be ready.

Their optimism got a boost from Samantha Smith, who represented her father, Rep. Sam Letson, at the planning session in the agriculture center. She told them Letson contacted Gene Anderson, head of the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs, on Thursday. Friday a representative was at the site to look at it before writing a grant application.

Letson will attempt to get \$200,000 in Appalachian Regional Commission money working with Anderson and U.S. Rep. Tom Bevill, D-Jasper.

Bevill, who has a reputation for building in his district, plans to visit the site, Ms. Smith said.

Lawrence County Commissioner Larry LouAllen said he has been told that ARC has money it is interested in spending in the Southeast to boost the Olympics. He said another \$50,000 may be forthcoming in a land and water grant through ADECA, which carries a \$50,000 match commitment from county government.

Although those at the meeting said they were unsure how to find corporate sponsors, some committee members said they know people who can tell them how that is done.

Next on the agenda was commissioning a sculpture of Owens breaking out of the starting blocks. Varying cost estimates begin at \$20,000. Committee members wondered if it can be done for that. Pinion said he believes it is important to raise the money locally for the sculpture.

Henry Buchanan said he has written Owens' widow to tell her of plans and to arrange a meeting with several committee members if possible. The group would like her endorsement and help in securing memorabilia.

Pinion said he believes blueprints can be ready by year's end with the museum and picnic pavilion construction taking a year. The plan

calls for ball fields, a track and a nature trail. In this race against the Atlanta Olympics the "window is small," he said.

But suggestions were made about development beyond the Olympic window. Perhaps a play about Jesse Owens in an outdoor amphitheater. Maybe the museum building could be enlarged to house a national field and track hall of fame similar to the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, N.Y.

And why couldn't a planned running track become the premiere site for track meets in the state, certainly in the region?

At this meeting ideas were the collateral of urgency. You have to move fast when you chase Olympic gold.