

METRO/STATE



Dana Stover and her nephew, Javaris Stover, sprint by the site of park.

Park honoring Olympian Jesse Owens in plans for his birthplace of Oakville

By Frank Sikora
News staff writer

OAKVILLE — Winding through dun-colored farmland, the blacktop road rolls to a cluster of four monuments sitting at a rural junction.

An American flag pops in the breezy winter sunshine.

This quiet spot in Lawrence County is the salute to one of Alabama's — and America's — greatest sports heroes.

Jesse Owens was born at this humble site in 1914 and went on to become a track legend.

At the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Owens, who died in 1980, shattered the myth that Hitler's Nazi regime was made up of supermen.

At the same time, he became a source of pride among blacks in the rural South. Now, Lawrence County wants to do more to bring attention to the place where Owens was born.

A group of citizens, white as well as black, has formed a group that plans to build a 17.5-acre park in the track star's honor, and hopes to have it done by the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta.

"When you think of the Olympics, you think of Jesse Owens," said James Pinion, a member of the committee. "We have high hopes that we can get it done and that a lot of tourists going to Atlanta will stop by to see this site."

Residents of Oakville, some of them related to Owens, joined together to buy the 17.5-acre tract, located directly across the road from the present park. They then deeded it to the county.

Pinion said the group hopes to obtain grants from foundations to assist in the \$500,000 project.

In fact, some of the work has been done, donated by a Texas construction firm named Brown and Root. That company has graded the land and constructed a gravel road that circles a small knoll.

Residents of Oakville think a new park will help bring jobs to the area.

Elsie Fitzgerald, 62, a cousin to Owens, lives about 50 yards from the small park and helps take care of it.

"And Thurman White, he lives right near here, he goes and cuts the grass in the summertime," she said.

White is the chairman of the park

committee and took the lead in creating a new park to honor Owens.

Pinion said the park will include a museum, track, softball field, tennis courts and walking trail, and there's talk of an outdoor drama about Owens.

Back in the 1980s there was controversy in this county about Owens. State Rep. Roger Dutton led an effort to honor him, but some county officials refused to have a marker placed at the courthouse in Moulton.

It was finally placed in Oakville, and even then vandals tried to overturn it. Pinion said such feelings seem to have faded.

While the plans unfold, the small corner lot at the edge of a field will remain the state's tribute to Owens. The largest marker was placed there in October 1983. The inscription bears the signatures of Gov. George Wallace, Dutton and state Rep. Gary Aldridge.

The marker reads:

He inspired a world enslaved in tyranny and brought hope to his fellow man ... from the cotton-fields of Oakville to the acclaim of the entire world, he made us all proud to be called Lawrence Countians.