

Olympic torch may light up Owens tribute

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OAKVILLE — Visitors to Jesse Owens Memorial Park must make their way past cows, cornfields and modest homes to get to the site marking the birthplace of the world-famous athlete.

Those turning off Alabama 157 in search of the park are often surprised at what they find in this northwest Alabama hamlet of about 200.

"Most people when they come to see (the memorial park), they're disappointed," said James Pinion, one of those working toward the park's development. "They say, 'Is this all there is to honor him?'"

In a small lot on one side of the road is a display case containing stories and photographs from Owens' career. Two monuments disagree about the year of Owens' birth — one saying "On this site in 1914 was born Jesse Owens, all-time track great," and the other noting his lifespan as 1913-1980, which is correct.

Across the road is a 17-acre tract featuring a basketball court with backboards and rims badly in need of repair.

A variety of people want to turn the park into a more fitting tribute to the hero of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. They envision a 10-foot statue of Owens, a museum, a replica of his childhood home, and a track and related facilities for the running of the four events in which he earned gold medals.

If they build it, they hope the Olympic torch will be brought here on its way to the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta in honor of Owens' memory.

Charlie Battle, managing director of sports and international organizations for the Atlanta Committee for the Olympic Games, said a visit was feasible.

"I think we feel very positive about that as something we would like to do if we can fit it in," Battle said. "In fact, we're talking about ideas of how we can pay tribute to Jesse Owens during the Olympic Games. I think Jesse Owens without question is our most well-known and, to many, our greatest Olympian as far as his achievements in Berlin.

"I think the torch is going through Alabama," he said. "At this point, we're researching and evaluating routes and times and mileage."

Owens was born in Oakville and lived in what Pinion called a "dog-trot house" a few hundred yards from the memorial site. His family moved to Cleveland, Ohio, when he was 9 years old.

Owens' Olympic achievements were even more remarkable in that they were accomplished in Adolf Hitler's Nazi Germany. Owens, a black man, embarrassed Hitler and made a mockery of the dictator's talk of a "master race."

Organizers of the park development effort say they have raised about \$250,000 — in government grants, corporate and private donations — of the more than \$1 million they need.

While fully developing the property in time for the 1996 Olympic Games may be a tall order, they say they will — at the very least — have a bronze statue of Owens, in stride and in front of the Olympic rings, to unveil if the torch does make a stop in Oakville.

The park property has been graded and a road put in. Two sets of Olympic rings decorate the gate leading to the property.

Park architect Kenneth Owens of Birmingham, who never met his famous distant cousin, said no matter what progress is made on the park by the summer of 1996, an Olympic torch visit to Jesse Owens' birthplace would be a fitting tribute.

"I think African-Americans and non-African-Americans who look to freedom, and how evil can be defeated by good, will take pride," he said. "We go to the movies to see the guy in the white hat. Jesse represents that, not only to Americans but to people all over the



NEWS STAFF PHOTO/JEFF ROBERTS

Memorial to Jesse Owens in Oakville.

How to contribute

Those wishing to contribute to the non-profit Jesse Owens Memorial Park Board may do so by mailing their donations to: 13075 Alabama Highway 157, Suite 6, Moulton 35650.

world."

Marlene Rankin, Jesse Owens' daughter and executive director of the Chicago-based Jesse Owens Foundation, said, "That would be very, very significant because the Olympic movement meant so much to him. It would be quite an honor to have it stop there because of what the torch symbolizes."