

# Owens' Ideal

## *Devotion To Olympics Earns Tribute*

**THERE COULD HARDLY** be a more appropriate and deserved tribute to Jesse Owens than to route the Olympic torch on its way to the 1996 Atlanta international games by the modest North Alabama park which marks his birthplace.

Owens, who was born near Oakville in Lawrence County, moved north with his family when he was 9 and sprinted into history during the 1936 Berlin Olympics. There he easily shattered athletic records and Adolph Hitler's theories of Aryan racial supremacy.

Hitler planned the '36 Olympics as a showcase for his Aryan theories and his Nazi regime. But to Hitler's chagrin, Jesse Owens quietly stole the show.

The son of a cotton farmer and grandson of a slave, Jesse Owens won four Olympic gold medals during those games. He broke two Olympic records and equaled a third. The relay team he anchored broke the world record.

It would be four decades before the last of his 11 track-and-field records were erased from the record books.

Despite his international success, in an era when opportunities for blacks were severely limited, Owens returned to America and raced against cars, trucks, motorcycles and horses. Refusing to be bitter, he said such races were "an honest living."

Eventually, he became a motivational speaker, praising the virtues of patriotism, clean living and fair play.

His devotion to the Olympic ideal never wavered. In 1968 he persuaded other black U.S. athletes not to walk out of the Mexico City games when John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised clenched fists during the Star Spangled Banner.

"I could appreciate their frustrations," he said. "I told them they should fight their war on another battlefield. The Olympics were not the proper place."

He offered solid advice to athletes which sadly is virtually ignored today: "Regardless of his color, a man who becomes a recognized athlete has to learn to walk 10 feet tall. But he must have his dignity off the athletic field."

**THERE IS** only a modest monument and park dedicated to Owens near his birthplace in Oakville. It is an alternative to a white legislator's suggestion for a more prominent memorial at the county courthouse in Moulton, but that suggestion three years after his death was rejected by Lawrence County commissioners.

Owens would have shrugged off such controversy. However, it would be appropriate for Alabama and Olympic organizers to get together to plan honors for Owens in his native state.

Alabama citizens in both the public and private sectors should push to upgrade Owens park and help local supporters raise a planned bronze statue of him there in time for the Olympics.

The Atlanta Committee for the Olympic games is figuring routes and times and mileage for the Olympic torch. It will be a tragedy if the torch is routed through Alabama without going past Owens' park and monument on the 60th anniversary of his tremendous achievement.

As it passes, that torch should be dipped in tribute to this unassuming man who used his athletic talents to severely embarrass Adolph Hitler.