



TOM SMITH/STAFF

The Olympic symbol hangs from fence at park near Moulton.

Olympic tribute

Torch may pass by hero's birthplace

By Tom Smith
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OAKVILLE — It appears Jesse Owens will once again be responsible for a magnificent run that will make Alabamians hearts swell with pride.

Owens, who was born in the Oakville community just south of Moulton, became the United States hero of the 1936 Olympics by capturing four gold medals.

As the United States prepares to host the 1996 Olympic Summer Games in Atlanta, plans are under way to have the Olympic torch bearer pass through Lawrence County and pay a visit to Owens' birthplace.

James Pinion, a member of the committee that is helping develop a park near the site of Owens' birth, said he talked with Olympic organizers last week and believes the chance of having the torch bearer come to the Jesse Owens Memorial Park is better than average.

"We came up with this idea and contacted officials with the Olympics about (bringing the torch through Oakville)," Pinion said. "They loved it. They thought it was a great idea, and right now they're doing all they can to change the route so it will come through here."

"The park is a tribute to Jesse Owens and to his memory. Most people remember him for what he accomplished in the Olympics, and I can't think of a better way to symbolize that than by having the Olympic torch make a visit to the park."

OWENS continued on B2

The Jesse Owens Memorial Park is on Lawrence 203 only a few hundred yards from where Owens was born and lived with his family until they moved to Cleveland, Ohio, when he was 9 years old.

For several years, a small shrine consisting of a display case and two monuments were all that honored one of the county's greatest natives.

However, that has changed.

Now, across the street a sign hangs in front of a 17½-acre tract of land that identifies the site as the Jesse Owens Memorial Park.

"We started the park about two years ago," said Therman White, chairman of the park committee. "We've got a lot of plans for it and we've been able to do a few things, but we've still got a lot to finish."

The park now includes volleyball courts, a softball/baseball field and basketball court. Within the near future, committee members hope to have a walking trail, six picnic pavilions scattered throughout the park, concession stand, restroom facilities, track, parking area and playground equipment.

"That's just for the recreational part of it," said Pinion.

On a rise overlooking the recreational area, a museum, a replica of Owens' "dogtrot" birthplace and a statue of Owens will be built.

Also, the shrine now across the street from the park, will be moved into the park.

Sculptor hired for statue

Pinion said the museum, the house and statue should be in place by the time the Olympic torch comes through.



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Memorial in rural Lawrence County community honors Olympic gold medal winner Jesse Owens, who was born near Moulton in 1913.

"We've already commissioned a Birmingham sculptor to build the statue," Pinion said. "That will begin in October and should be finished by 1996."

Funding for the park has been one reason for the slow progress. Total cost for the project is estimated at more than \$600,000.

Pinion said a lot of the funding has come through grants and private donations. He said he has applied for other grants to complete the project.

"Getting the statue, museum and house in place is the biggest urgency right now," Pinion said. "That's the next-biggest project."

"(The park) isn't a lot to look at right now, but we're getting ready to do a lot. Within the next few months, we're going to start on a large pavilion, concession area and restroom facility."

"There's going to be a lot of work going on around here over the next couple of years."

White, who lives near the site of the park, said the park and the memorial to Owens have been a "dream of a lot of people."

"There's been a lot of time and effort by a lot of different people gone into making this project a reality," White said. "There's still a lot of work left and we're going to be busy over the next couple of years, but I know we can get everything done and in place by the time the (Olympic) torch comes through here."

"This park has the potential to be one of the county's biggest tourist attraction," he said. "It's great to finally see it all coming together and being recognized for what it is and what it can mean to the county and this entire area."