

Decision still pending on Olympic torch route

By Tom Smith
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MOULTON — Officials will find out this summer whether the path of the 1996 Olympic torch will pass through north Alabama on its way to Atlanta for next summer's games.

James Pinion, a member of the committee that is helping to develop a park near the birthplace of Jesse Owens in rural Lawrence County, said he was informed this week that the final route will not be announced for another three months.

PATH continued from 1B

"The U.S. Olympic Committee will make the final decision (on the path of the torch run) and then announce it in July," Pinion said.

Pinion and other members of the Jesse Owens Park committee have been actively trying to bring the torch through north Alabama and the site of Owens' birthplace.

Owens, who was born in the Oakville community just south of Moulton, became the American hero of the 1936 Olympics by capturing four gold medals in track and field.

"We believe it would be a great way to showcase the area, plus be a good way to draw

attention to the Olympics," Pinion said.

Pinion said when he talked with the advance manager of the Torch Relay in Atlanta about the possibility of the run coming through Lawrence, she was well aware of Owens' birthplace.

"She said someone from their committee had already been through here looking at the possible route," he said. "But she would not give me any indication if the torch would come through here. She said we'd know when everyone else did."

Committee members came up with the idea last year and Pinion contacted Dr. Leroy

Walker, president of the U.S. Olympic Committee.

"He was a longtime friend of Jesse Owens and I met with him last October in Birmingham," Pinion said. "He indicated then that it would be appropriate for the torch to come through here."

Pinion said he has since written Walker letter explaining the committee's ideas for the park and what it would mean to have the torch come through Owens' hometown.

The Jesse Owens Memorial Park is o

PATH continued on 2

Lawrence 203, only a few hundred yards from where Owens was born and lived with his family before moving to Cleveland, Ohio at age 7.

For several years, a small shrine consisting of a display case and two monuments were all that honored one of the country's greatest athletes. But through the efforts of the committee, additional land across the road from the shrine is being developed into the park.

A Birmingham sculptor has been commissioned to create a statue of Owens that will be placed in the park along with a replica of his birthplace, a museum, picnic pavilions, recreational fields and a walking trail.

The sculpture will be ready by next February, according to Pinion. He said an \$80,000 grant from the state Land, Water and Conservation

Department will help the committee develop the pavilion and walking trail.

"Everything seems to be coming together," he said. "And the one thing that would really make this park special would be to have the Olympic torch pay it a visit."

The torch run, according to Olympic officials, will begin April 27, 1996 in Los Angeles and then criss-cross the United States before ending in Atlanta on July 19, 1996 for the

opening ceremonies of the 1996 Summer Games.

"What better way to promote the Olympics than by coming through the area where one of the greatest Olympic champions ever was born," Pinion said. "I feel optimistic about our chances, but until the announcement is made, I'll just have to wait and keep my fingers crossed."