

Town where Owens was born plans a statue and a museum

Oakville, Ala., wants to put the controversy about its most famous native son behind it. That is why officials in Lawrence County, Ala., where Owens was born Sept. 12, 1913, will unveil a statue of the East Tech and Ohio State track legend next year, defusing a controversy in which town fathers had snubbed Owens' memory.

On Feb. 28, 1996, a statue of Owens gliding down a track will be dedicated in Oakville at the 17½-acre city park that carries Owens' name. His upraised foot, as he strikes a sprinting pose, will rest on the Olympic rings.

Controversy broke out 10 years ago when politicians in Moulton, the county seat of Lawrence County, refused to have an Owens memorial placed on the courthouse lawn. Since then, Gloria Fitzgerald, a relative of Owens by marriage who is now living in Lorraine, has criticized the appearance and upkeep of the Oakville park, as well as the progress that was being made on the Owens statue.

James Pinion, a member of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park Board in Lawrence County, said the county hopes to have a museum commemorating Owens in place by next summer, when the Atlanta Olympics celebrate 100 years of the modern Olympic movement. Plans are also underway to beautify the park and to have the Alabama high school sprint champions hold an exhibition there. Oakville also still hopes to be a stop for next summer's Olympic Torch relay. The torch's itinerary will be revealed in July.

Owens won four gold medals in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, refuting German leader Adolf Hitler's theories of an "Aryan" master race. The sculptor for the Owens statue, Branko Medenica, is a German who works in Birmingham, Ala.

"Funny how things work out, isn't it?" said Pinion.

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