

Olympic torch coming to Oakville

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"As long as athletes compete in sports, or people strive for excellence in any undertaking, the life and accomplishments of Jesse Owens will remain an enduring inspiration."

They gathered under a shade tree in the Jesse Owens Memorial Park and shined with the laughter of children in a playground.

They joked of swearing in Therman White as the first mayor of Oakville.

Just a few yards away amidst the 17.5-acre landscape of the park, they pointed to the place where Owens' birth home once stood.

But most of all, they talked about what will be one of the biggest events in the history of Lawrence County.

Months of hardwork by the Jesse Owens Memorial Park Committee is finally paying dividends.

On Monday morning, park officials learned that the torch which will ultimately signify the start of the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta is coming through Oakville.

White, the park committee's chairman, James Pinion, Circuit Judge Philip Reich and Henry Buchanan glowed with happiness as they shared the news in the park.

Pinion said he learned about the decision while watching the



Four of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park Committee members who worked to bring the torch to Oakville are: from left, Henry

Buchanan, James Pinion, Therman White and Philip Reich (Staff photo by Deangelo McDaniel)

morning news.

"It doesn't matter how we found out," he said with joy. "The torch is coming and this will be a big thing for Lawrence County."

Shortly after it was announced that Atlanta was going to be the host city for the '96 Olympics, park officials met with Paula Hovater to discuss the possibility of bringing the torch through Owens' birthplace.

Committee members said Hovater initiated the idea.

The torch is temporarily scheduled to come through Oakville on June 28, 1996. Pinion shared the news with Owens' widow, Ruth Owens, on Monday morning.

He said the wife of the olympic great seemed to be more happy that the torch was coming through Oakville than any other place.

Mrs. Owens, a Georgia native, has never visited Alabama. Park officials said she will be in Oakville when the torch passes through.

A statue of Jesse Owens, which is planned to be erected in the park, will be unveiled by Mrs. Owens.

Park committee members met last October in Birmingham with Dr. Leroy Walker, who is president of the U.S. Olympic Committee.

Pinion said Dr. Walker promised to do everything in his might to see if it could be arranged to bring the torch through Oakville.

The olympic president, who grew-up with Owens, said he knew the track star was born in Alabama, according to Pinion.

"But he told us he wasn't sure where his birthplace was," he said.

Pinion and other park committee members said the only reason the torch is coming through Alabama is because Oakville is the birthplace of Jesse Owens.

After a series of meetings with Mrs. Owens and representatives of the Jesse Owens Foundation in Chicago, the olympic star's family pledged their support for the development of the park in Oakville.

Owens' daughters, Marlene Rankin, Beverly Prather and Gloria Owens Hemphre, met with Pinion and Buchanan in Chicago.

Buchanan is the executive director of the Owens Foundation. Mrs. Owens is the foundation's chairman.

Owens was born the 10th and last child of a dirt poor Southern sharecropper. When he was young his family moved to Ohio.

He first became famous for his track exploits at Ohio State.

Then in 1936, he delivered a blow to the belly of Adolf Hitler's theme of Aryan supremacy by winning four gold medals in the 100-meter dash, 200-meter run, long jump, and as a member of the 400-meter relay team.

In 1990, president George Bush presented him with his fifth gold medal, the Congressional Medal of honor, for humanitarian contributions to the race of life. Mrs. Owens accepted the medal in her husband's honor.

In 1950, the Associated Press

recognized Owens as the greatest track man of the century. He was inducted in the Alabama Sports Hall of Fame in 1970.

During an emotional ceremony in 1976, president Gerald Ford bestowed upon Owens the "Medal of Freedom," the nation's highest civilian honor.

On December 12, 1979, Owens learned that he had lung cancer. The cancer, probably caused by long years of cigarette smoking, had spread throughout his left lung.

On March 21, 1980, doctors announced that he had taken a turn for the worse and was in critical condition.

On Saturday night, March 29, he slipped into a coma. In the early morning of March 31, 1980, his struggle ceased.

Despite the ravages with cancer and chemotherapy, Owens attended to Olympic matters to the end.



Replica of Jesse Owens' birthplace which was built in 1950 or 1951.