

Honoring Fesse

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will be the centerpiece for new park named for Jesse Owens

By Kent Faulk
News staff writer

For Branko Medenica, sculpting a statue of Alabama native Jesse Owens has a certain irony. The 45-year-old Birmingham sculptor was born in Germany, the country where the black track star won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympic games, embarrassing Adolf Hitler in the process.

"It is sort of ironic, and I feel honored at the same time to be doing it," Medenica said from his studio Sculpture Sight, a converted Italian grocery store on Southside.

Medenica was commissioned by the Jesse Owens Memorial Park Board in April 1993 to make an 8-foot tall statue of the track and field star for the 17.5-acre park in Owens' hometown of Oakville.

The 1,800- to 2,000-pound statue is to be unveiled in a ceremony in June 1996 when the Olympic torch is scheduled to pass through Oakville en route to the Olympic games in Atlanta.

"We're real happy to have Branko doing it," said James Pinion, county agent in Lawrence County who serves as vice chairman of the 11-member Jesse Owens Memorial Park Board. "We were impressed by his past work... I was impressed with his imagination."

Sculpting professionally since 1976, Medenica's works are displayed throughout the world. Locally, he is recognized for his memorial to slain police officers at the Jefferson County Criminal Justice Center, "Sky Dance" located in the Hoover Sportplex and "The Rainbow" at entrance to the Rainbow City Industrial Park.

This is probably the biggest thing I've done to date, both historically as well as because what Jesse Owens stood for," Medenica said of the Jesse Owens statue. "He broke the color barrier on several levels."

Owens, born in Oakville, near Moulton, in 1913, won gold medals in the 16 games in Berlin for the 100- and 200-meter races, the broad jump and for his participation in the United States winning relay team. His performance embarrassed Hitler, who had hoped to prove Aryans — hites in northern Europe — were a superior race.

During his track and field career — his family moved to Cleveland.

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NEWS STAFF PHOTO: JERRY AYRES

Architect Kenneth Owens looks over the plans for Oakville's Jesse Owens Park.



NEWS STAFF PHOTO: BOB BOWEN

Sculptor Branko Medenica works with the clay model for the bronze statue of track and field legend Jesse Owens, which will look like Medenica's concept drawing.

Statue

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Ohio, when he was 7 — Owens set seven world records.

The statue will show Owens in mid-stride with one leg off the ground intertwined in the Olympic rings. Because one leg is off the ground, the Olympic rings provide the remainder of the support for the statue.

But Medenica almost had to sculpt Owens standing with both feet on the ground because he had to dicker with the Olympic committee for the right to use the rings.

"It was after the Jesse Owens Foundation (in Chicago) got behind us that we were able to proceed," he said.

Marlene O. Rankin, executive director of

the foundation and Owens' youngest daughter, said the family is "very excited about the project."

"He (Medenica) does beautiful work," Mrs. Rankin said.

The Oakville community is working together to do something that seemed "hopeless" a few years ago, Mrs. Rankin said, referring to a controversy that erupted in the early 1980s after the Lawrence County Commission blocked efforts to put up an Owens memorial at the courthouse. A memorial erected near Owens' home in 1983 instead has since suffered acts of vandalism.

Medenica spent about two months making a two-foot oil-based clay model that will be

sent soon to Montoya Arts Studios, a foundry in West Palm Beach, Fla., where it will take up to six months to cast the bronze statue, he said.

Besides reading books about Owens as research for the statue, Medenica went through archives at Ohio State University, where Owens attended college, and visited with Owens' 80-year-old wife, Ruth, and his three daughters in Chicago. Owens died in 1980 and is buried in Chicago.

"I went up there to get a feel for Jesse Owens... to get a feel of what the man is about," he said. "They (family members) are behind it 100 percent. They are fabulous. They are really a class family."

Ruth Owens, the three daughters and

Owens' brother Sylvester are scheduled to be at the unveiling.

Medenica also used 1984 Olympic Gold Medalist Willie Smith as a model for the statue, taking pictures of him running to get an idea of muscle definition.

The \$80,000 statue will be financed by a \$75,000 federal Appalachian Regional Commission grant, a \$4,200 Alabama Arts Council grant and a few private donations, Pinion said.

The statue will be put in the middle of a gold medallion court — a square court divided into four sections representing each of the medals Owens won in the Olympic Games.

The court, which Pinion said will cost

about \$14,000 more, is being designed by The Owens and Woods Partnership Architects in Birmingham.

Architect Kenneth Owens is a distant relative of Jesse Owens and for several years has been in on the design of other facilities at the park, including a replica of Jesse Owens' birthplace home and a museum/souvenir shop.

"He is sort of a figure we all look up to," Owens said. "Being a distant relative of his just adds to the excitement."

Tax deductible contributions can be made to the park project through the Jesse Owens Memorial Park Board, 13075 Alabama Highway 157, Suite 6, Moulton, Ala., 35650.