

Golden great cast in bronze Owens

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Lee High grad sculpts statue to honor Olympic hero Jesse Owens

By **CHRISTOPHER BELL**
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BIRMINGHAM — For Branko Medenica, sculpting a bigger-than-life statue of Olympic great Jesse Owens has been a labor of love.

The 45-year-old former Huntsville resident was raised less than 40 miles from Owens' birthplace, the rural Lawrence County community of Oakville.

Medenica was born in Germany, the country where the black track star captured four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics, embarrassing Adolf Hitler, who claimed Aryans — whites in northern Europe — were a superior race.

"One German helped Jesse Owens during the Olympics. Another German is helping to immortalize him."

— **Branko Medenica**
Artist

During the weekend, Medenica returned from West Palm Beach, Fla., where the 8-foot tall, 2,000-pound statue is being cast in bronze.

"It is a fine tribute to Jesse Owens," he said. "I'm honored to be part of it."

The statue is to be unveiled June 29 at Oakville, a dozen miles southeast of Decatur, while a runner bearing the Olympic torch passes.

The 82-day torch relay, from Los Angeles to the Olympic games in Atlanta, includes a detour to Owens' birthplace.

Medenica was commissioned by the Jesse Owens Memorial Park Board in April 1993 to make the statue, to be erected in a 17-acre park off Alabama 157.

His workshop is a converted Italian restaurant on Birmingham's south side.

Lawrence County farm agent James Pinion, vice chairman of the 11-member park board, said the board was "impressed by Medenica's works and his imagination."

Those works include a statue of the founder of Cullman and a memorial to slain police officers at the Jefferson County Criminal Justice Center.

Medenica's father, Walter V. Medenica, a NASA engineer who was part of the man-on-the-moon team, settled in Huntsville, where his son spent eight years in public schools. The younger Medenica attended the old Rison Junior High School and later graduated from Lee High.

Branko Medenica later obtained degrees from Bir-

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mingham Southern and the University of Mississippi.

In his statue, Medenica decided to show Owens in mid-stride, with one leg off the ground and intertwined in the five Olympic rings.

But he had to ask Owens' youngest daughter, Marlene O. Rankin of Chicago, to convince the Olympic committee to allow use of the rings.

Before undertaking the project, Medenica went to Owens' alma mater, Ohio State University, to search archives for background on the athlete.

He then went to Chicago to meet with Owens' 80-year-old widow, Ruth, and his three daughters.

Owens, who passed up a visit to

Oakville when he visited Decatur a quarter-century ago, died in 1980 and is buried in Chicago.

Decatur honored Owens when the Spirit of America Festival selected him for its Audie Murphy Patriotism Award in 1979, but Owens didn't attend the event.

Pinion said the statue is financed with a \$75,000 federal Appalachian Regional Commission grant, a \$4,200 Alabama Arts Council grant and some private donations.

Medenica recalled the often-told story of how a German athlete, Lutz Long, willingly gave advice to Owens on how to qualify for the broad jump by marking where the American should start his jump. Owens qualified on that last leap and went on to win the gold medal.

"One German helped Jesse Owens during the Olympics," Medenica said. "Another German is helping to immortalize him."



Branko Medenica shows part of his design for the Jesse Owens Olympic memorial, slated to be unveiled in Oakville on June 29.

Christopher Bell/Huntsville Times

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