

Grandson might carry the torch in Owens park

By **Lesley Farrey Pacey**

DAILY Staff Writer

OAKVILLE — Jesse Owens' grandson may carry the Olympic torch through his grandfather's memorial park June 29 where a 5-foot replica of the 1936 Olympic torch may burn.

James Pinion is in charge of readying the park for when runners carrying the Olympic torch to Atlanta pass through Oakville. He said the park committee is waiting for the Olympic Committee to allow 29-year-old Stewart Owen Rankin of Boston to run. Money is holding up approval on the torch sculpture.

Pinion said he learned that Owens had a grandson and that he looked "just like" his famous grandfather. Rankin works at Harvard Law School and is the son of Owens' daughter, Marlene O. Rankin, executive director of the Jesse Owens Foundation.

Pinion said Lawrence counties selected by the Olympic Committee would carry the torch to the 17-acre park along

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Alabama 157 and pass it to Rankin, who would run through the park in Oakville — his grandfather's 1913 birthplace.

"We thought it would be real appropriate for him to run and it would be real nice for the television," Pinion said. "I just think it would really add to it."

Owens, who died in 1980, lived in Oakville until the age of 9, when his family moved to Cleveland.

Birmingham sculptor Branko Medenica — who crafted an 8-foot bronze-on-granite likeness of Owens to be unveiled at the park June 29 — has agreed to make the torch sculpture if funds are available.

The 5-foot stainless steel torch would rest on a 1-foot granite base, surrounded by a brick court near the museum, Pinion said. He said the sculpture could be done in six weeks.

"We've thought about it a long time," Pinion said. "We're just trying to get the money to do it."

Pinion said the park committee wanted to have a replica of the torch from the 1936 Olympics when Owens won four gold medals in Berlin, upstaging Adolf Hitler and becoming an international hero. He said Owens' widow, Ruth, would light the eternal flame during the June 29 celebration.

"We felt it would be a good way to recognize the torch," Pinion said. "It will always be a reminder of the torch."

With only five months until the torch comes through Oakville, Pinion remains concerned but optimistic.

"I'm getting nervous about the time," he said. "The time is working against us."

Pinion has about \$500,000, or half of the \$1 million needed to finish the park. But he expects to get the rest from a \$200,000 Housing and Urban Development grant and corporate sponsors.

He has sent proposals to Adidas, the company that made Owens' running shoes; Russell Athletic Co., which made his Olympic uniform; and Mercedes, since the 1936 Olympics were in Germany. He also has made pitches to area industries and expects the Olympic Committee to agree to fund the Olympic track.

Regardless of the time and money crunch, Pinion expects all components of the park to come together for the torch run.

Pinion said work is being done on a replica of Owens' childhood home and a welcome center and construction will begin this month on four picnic pavilions.

"I would think by the middle of March you would see everything going on at once like a huge city was going out there," he said.

Pinion said that's when construction will be under way on the museum, the gold medallion court, the replica house, the walking trails and the road that fronts the park. He said landscaping and tree planting begins in March.

Construction on the running track and baseball fields likely won't begin until late spring or summer.

Pinion said he still needs volunteers to do construction, other manual labor and plant trees. To help, call him at 974-2464.