

Jesse is coming home

Oakville next stop
for statue of Owens

By Lesley Farrey Pacey
DAILY Staff Writer

BIRMINGHAM — Jesse Owens rode to Alabama on his back, wrapped in blankets and strapped in the back of an open-air trailer.

The 8-foot sculpture of Owens breaking through the Olympic rings is almost ready to be placed at the Jesse Owens Memorial Park in Oakville, which is Owens' 1913 birthplace. It will be unveiled June 29, when the Olympic torch is carried through Lawrence County.

Sixty years after Owens won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics shattering Adolf Hitler's dream of Aryan supremacy, the runner has been immortalized in bronze. The \$80,000 sculpture will be moved to the park a few days before the ceremony that Owens' wife and children will attend.

Until then, the sculpture's home is an old brick building in downtown Birmingham. That's where sculptor Branko Medenica will add supports, two remaining Olympic rings and a 6-foot granite veneer base to the late hero's likeness.

The 45-year-old sculptor transported the sculpture by rental truck earlier this month to Birmingham from West Palm Beach, Fla., where it was cast in bronze.

"I'm well pleased," said Medenica, using a crane to lift the nearly one-ton Owens likeness to an upright position.

Owens is huge when you are standing next to him. He is about



Sculptor Branko Medenica with his sculpture of Jesse Owens that will be placed in Jesse Owens Park in Lawrence County.

DAILY Photo by Scott Trigg

Jesse

Continued from page A1

two times the size of a normal-sized man. Dwarfed by his work, Medenica points out that "Jesse will shrink" once lifted onto the granite base and set in the park.

Medenica molded the sculpture with great detail — from the spikes on Owens' cleats to his running uniform bearing Olympic insignia and stripes. Bronze safety pins fasten the No. 3 paper to his tank top. Owens' face is haunting with its hollow eyes.

Medenica, who was hired nearly three years ago by the Jesse Owens Memorial Park Committee to create the sculpture, said crafting Owens' face was the most painstaking part of the work. While he was in West

Palms Beach making finishing touches on a full-size clay model of the runner, he had to get approval from the Owens' family for every change.

"I'd get it to a certain point and I would send the family a photo and they would call me back and say, 'The nose is a little too thick' or 'The lips are a little too wide.'"

Once the clay model was just right, molds were made and the sculpture was cast at Luis Montoya Studios in West Palm Beach.

The sculpture was ready earlier this month, but Medenica had to wait a day to travel to Florida because of icy roads. He rented a truck to bring Jesse back to Alabama. But before he could return, Medenica would spend four days working "around the clock" welding three of five Olympic rings to the

sculpture and applying patina, a chemical applied with heat that creates different colors in bronze.

"One type of patina was used to make Jesse's hair black and another was used to make his shorts and top white," Medenica said.

Medenica and his assistant, Birmingham Southern graduate Greg Bland, attracted passersby as they worked outdoors on the sculpture. "It was in an industrial neighborhood in West Palm Beach and occasionally people would stop and ask us what we were doing," he said.

Medenica said he didn't have any problems during the 13-hour ride, except he had to stop once to readjust the straps holding the Olympic hero.

"While we were stopped on the highway, a state trooper stopped and asked us what we were doing. I said, 'We are making sure Jesse Owens is in place' and he asked us if he could see it. We had to say no because it would have taken too long to get all the blankets off."

Medenica said the sculpture likely will ride to Oakville the same way. The son of a Lawrence County sharecropper, Owens lived in Oakville until he was 9.

take any chances with Jesse.

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