

# Jesse Owens boyhood home to get statue

## Supporters: Memorial to legend long overdue

By LARRY COPELAND  
Knight-Ridder News Service

OAKVILLE, Ala. — The statue, capturing the great runner Jesse Owens in stride, will grace a hill overlooking a verdant slope with a museum, ball fields and an oval track. When the park is completed and the statue installed, they will make a fine memorial.

For many here, the memorial — which follows years of struggle and news that the Olympic torch will pass through this summer — is long overdue.

It might seem an obvious gesture to honor Owens in Oakville. Into this tiny community of poverty and cotton fields was born a boy who would challenge the wind, who would expose as fool's gold the genetic theories of Adolf Hitler and, in the doing, bring his nation four Olympic gold medals, an unheard-of haul at the time.

But this is the South, where nothing is ever that simple.

Because Owens was black, the mostly white county in North Alabama where he was born virtually ignored his accomplishments for years, even blunting an effort 13 years ago by a group of blacks to erect an Owens statue on the courthouse square in Moulton.

Circumstances change. Atlanta is preparing to stage the Olympics, and torchbearers will run across the country to bring the Olympic flame to Georgia. The path will wind through Oakville to pay homage to Owens.

The idea that the torchbearer is coming has fired the energies of those who have long wanted to honor him.

After their effort to put up a statue was rebuffed, the group that wanted to honor Owens built a small memorial on borrowed land near his birthplace. Situated at a lonesome intersection, it was a starkly humble tribute — a marker and a small stand with faded photographs.

The story of Jesse Owens Memorial Park, and how it came to be, is a story of triumph — of



KRT Photo

**CHASED THE DREAM:** James Pinion, left, and Thurmond White pursued a Jesse Owens memorial.

vision over zealous ghosts, of unity over ancient hatreds.

For the two driving forces behind the project are Thurmond White, 69, a black man, and James Pinion, 53, who is white.

White, an Oakville native retired from the Navy, is a big man with a ready smile and deep voice. The tall, lean Pinion, also a native Alabamian, collects autographed baseballs and loves Auburn University sports.

Together they have chased a dream since 1991. By then, White was president of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park Board, local people — black and white — trying to build a suitable memorial.

When 17½ acres of pasture land near Owens' home became available in 1991, White plunked down \$17,500, including \$2,500 of his own, for the parcel.

Then he and the board turned to Pinion, the county extension agent for this area.

Pinion's office is usually involved with helping the local hog and cotton farmers. "We don't build parks," Pinion says. "but we know how to get the right people together to get the job done."

So Pinion and his staffers, Henry Buchanan and Linda Robinson, used their resources to

develop plans for a park, then had a 4-by-2½-foot model constructed.

They took the little model from Montgomery, where they made the rounds of state politicians, to Chicago, for the approval of Owens' widow, Ruth.

They showed it to just about anyone who might spare a dollar to help realize their vision.

They did that for years, and money trickled in. Still, says Paula Hovater, an Atlanta publicist who formerly represented the park board, donations had dwindled by early last year.

Then park organizers got their second wind: U.S. Olympic Committee President LeRoy Walker announced that the Olympic torch was being rerouted to pass through Oakville on its Los Angeles-to-Atlanta journey. The United Way selected eight torchbearers to carry it through Lawrence County.

"That really got things kick-started," Hovater says.

More than \$750,000 in private and public money came in.

The centerpiece of the park, which will be dedicated June 29, will be Gold Medalion Plaza: the statue plus four courts representing the four medals Owens won in Berlin in 1936.