

A flame for greatness

Giant torch to stand beside Owens statue

"May this light shine forever, as a symbol for all who run for the freedom of sport, for the spirit of humanity, for the memory of Jesse Owens."

By **CHRISTOPHER BELL**
Times Staff Writer

OAKVILLE — An eternal flame, ignited by the Olympic torch, will burn beside the Jesse Owens statue that will be erected in a park here, where a man synonymous with athletic greatness was born.

Branko Medenica, a Huntsville native who has already created an 8-foot sculpture of Owens breaking through the five Olympic rings, is fashioning a 7-foot torch, a replica of the torch at the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

A friend, Chuck Ghigna of Birmingham, wrote the inscription that will appear on the torch.

Owens, a track-and-field star, won four gold medals and is considered by many as America's greatest athlete of the century.

Today, the Olympic torch was in the Seattle area on its 15,000-mile jaunt from Los Angeles to Atlanta, where the Games began July 19, just 72 days away.

Three weeks earlier, after stops in Fayetteville, Tenn., Huntsville and Decatur, it will be carried by runners through this storeless community, a spot in the road destined to become a landmark.

It was at the Berlin Games six decades ago that the tradition of a torch carried to each sponsoring nation began, said Medenica, who works in his Birmingham shop that doubles as his home.

More than \$80,000 was raised to have Medenica, 45, create a bigger-than-life statue of Owens in full stride. For another \$25,000, he is adding the steel torch.

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Before a June 29 ceremony here, both works will be erected, with the 2,000-pound statue being placed on a 6-foot granite-vener base.

Although Owens appears giant-like up close, Medenica said, once erected in the park, that image shrinks.

"Every day I look at Jesse Owens, and every day I'm more pleased," said Medenica, whose works are throughout the state and South.

The Jesse Owens Memorial Park Committee selected Medenica three years ago to create the Owens tribute.

First, he fashioned a life-size clay model of Owens, and from that a Florida firm made the bronze cast.

There is also color. Owens' hair has a black tint while his shorts and top are a dull white.

The 18-acre park is in the center of a pasture, 12 miles southwest of Decatur in Lawrence County.

James Pinion, park coordinator, said almost \$1.5 million has been raised in grants and donations to build the park. He hopes to have money left over for last-minute details.

The Lawrence County Commission, which blocked an Owens monument on the courthouse lawn at Moulton in 1983, recently voted to pay for a courtyard honoring his gold medals.

Before the statue and torch arrive here, the annual Jesse Owens Memorial Run and the Lawrence County Indian Festival will be held May 17-19 in Moulton, the county seat some 10 miles northwest of Oakville.

The 15th annual race will be May 18 at Lawrence County High School with at least 2,000 runners, including 300 in the 10-kilometer run.

The Indian Festival, which began nine years ago, will be at the H.A. Alexander Park, also in Moulton.

But both the rural Oakville Indian Mounds Park & Museum and the Jesse Owens Park expect crowds that weekend.

The Indian Park, near the Owens Park, features a 20-century-old Woodland Indian mound, a Copena Indian burial mound and a Cherokee Council House with artifacts dated to 10,000 B.C.

At the 1936 Games in Germany, Owens won four gold medals, shattering Adolf Hitler's claim of black inferiority and Arian superiority.

An Owens relative carried the torch into Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum in 1984, and Owens' grandson will carry the torch here as the athlete's widow and relatives look on.



Huntsville native Branko Medenica created this 8-foot sculpture of Jesse Owens breaking through the five Olympic rings.

