

Grandson of Jesse Owens ready to carry Olympic torch

By Lesley Farrey Pacey
DAILY Staff Writer

Jesse Owens' grandson expects to carry the Olympic torch through his grandfather's memorial park in Lawrence County, but first he's waiting for an invitation.

"I haven't heard anything," Stuart Owen Rankin said in a telephone interview Wednesday from Boston.

Jesse Owens Park Project Coordinator James Pinion said Olympic Torch Relay officials confirmed Tuesday they want Rankin — Owens' only grandson — to carry the torch through the 17.5-acre Oakville park June 29.

Pinion said those officials, however, haven't contacted the 29-year-old Harvard Law School employee

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because they have been busy coordinating torch relay events in other states.

Pinion said Susan Silhavy, regional advance manager for the Olympic Torch Relay, said Rankin's leg of the run will open a 30-minute lunchtime ceremony where a sculpture of the 1936 Olympic hero will be unveiled and Owens' widow, Ruth, will light a 5-foot stainless steel replica of the 1936 Olympic torch.

Eight Lawrence Countians, all of whom are white, were selected in February to carry the torch. The torch relay, which ends at the Olympics in Atlanta, marks the opening of an elaborate \$1.4 million park for Owens. The son of a black sharecropper won four gold medals in Berlin, upstaging Adolf Hitler and becoming an international hero.

"It is going to be real appropriate and a proper tribute to his granddaddy that his only grandson carry the torch," Pinion said. "He will bring it through the park, up a hill and park the flame (in the park) where it will burn for about 30 minutes."

Rankin, the son of Owens' daughter Marlene O. Rankin, said he is excited and honored to be included in the event. He said Pinion telephoned him to tell him that he may be asked to carry the torch.

Because his mother is the executive director of the Jesse Owens Foundation, Rankin said he has been involved in many Owens events as a member of the family. But this event is different from the rest because of the individual attention he will get.

"For me, this is sort of the first time doing anything like this," said Rankin, clearing-house manager with Harvard's conflict-resolution department and grade and high school teacher.

"I'm going into it pretty naively," he said. "I just look forward to it. I'm sure it will be exciting and fun. It may be somewhat nerve-racking depending on how many eyes are upon me. I have to make sure I can go the distance."

But going the distance, at least literally, shouldn't be a problem for Rankin — a former high school tennis and swim team member, who plays football, basketball and lacrosse.

"I run in the sports I play," he said. "I'd like to think I am in pretty good shape."

And Rankin, who Pinion said looks "just like" his famous grandfather, confirmed that claim. "The older I get, the more I look like him."

Rankin, a Chicago native who graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, said he has never been to Alabama but he is looking forward to visiting his grandfather's 1913 birthplace.

The park, surrounded by cow pastures and cotton crops, will include a bronze sculpture of Owens, a museum displaying Owens mem-

orabilia and a ramshackle tenant house resembling Owens' childhood home. Owens, who died in 1980, lived in Oakville until the age of 9, when his family moved to Ohio.

Also, the park, which is under construction, will include a baseball field, an eight-lane Olympic running track, picnic pavilions and other monuments to Owens.

"I'm intrigued to see where my grandfather was from, his roots and what helped cultivate him to become the person he became," he said.

Ms. Rankin said the event will have special meaning for her son because he was 13 years old when his grandfather died "so he remembers him well."

"He's really quite excited," she said.

Ms. Rankin said having her son carry the torch makes the June 29 event even more special. She said the Owens family — including Owens' four granddaughters and possibly, his two great-grandchildren — will attend.

"We are very excited about it because we think that the park is a wonderful tribute in his hometown and to have his grandson carry the torch through the park, it's very exciting."