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Fleeting Fame

Belatedly, Grudgingly, Two Black Olympians Are Given Their Due

Decades After Winning Gold, They Win Recognition On Tour and Back Home

A Statue for Jesse Owens

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OAKVILLE, Ala. — For once, the locals are right when they say, "You can't miss it." The birthplace of Jesse Owens, though small and poor, sticks out in the cotton fields like a swatch of polyester.

Two road signs make it impossible to miss. One rises strong and proud above the roadside grass and thistles, directing traffic whizzing down State Route 157 to turn onto County Road 203. "JESSE OWENS MEMORIAL PARK," it shouts.

The other sign sneaks up on drivers heading the opposite direction on 203. It is hand-scrawled across a bridge spanning a parched gully. The fresh green paint, in misspelled block letters, jabs up from the gray pavement like speed bumps: "NIGERVILLE 3 MILES."

Both signs lead to Oakville, all right, but they take you to two entirely different places.

One place is proud to pay homage to one of the South's greatest sons, albeit 60 years after he became a hero to the world by winning four gold medals and infuriating Adolf Hitler at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Here, a glorious 19-acre park is being woven from the cotton fields, complete with sports facilities, a museum and a 14-foot-tall statue of Mr. Owens that will stretch majestically to the sky just a short sprint from the sharecroppers' house in which he was born and lived for the first nine years of his life.

The other place, the one at the end of the pavement scribbling, would have it be many more years before a black man is so honored. In 1983, a proposal to erect a memorial to Mr. Owens on the courthouse lawn in nearby Moulton was shot down by the white county commission and by local bigots. Commissioners claimed that if they put up a statue for Mr. Owens, they would have to commemorate many other citizens. The rationale then was "the courthouse lawn would be full of monuments," remembers Jim Corum, a lifelong county resident who was first elected to the commission two years ago and supports the current project.

Spotlight on the New South

When the ambitious men and women who brought the Olympics to Atlanta came up with the idea of using the Games to showcase the New South, they also thought of towns like Oakville. The Olympics, they calculated, would highlight the region's dreams, its capabilities, its hospitality—and would erase the stained images of segregation and white men in hoods. The dedication of Owens Park would be set for June 29, three weeks before the start of the Olympics, to coincide with the arrival of the torch relay in northern Alabama. But no one figured that in the weeks before the torch's arrival, crews would be working three miles down the road to—literally—scrub away the Old South.

The Olympic spotlight that so brightly illuminated the extraordinary talent of Jesse Owens is returning to the U.S. to once again brighten the triumphs of this, and other, American legends. In so doing, it also targets the dichotomy still stalking his hometown and the nation.

"Sometimes it worries me and sometimes I think it's great," says Ruth Owens, Jesse's widow, of the situation in Oakville. "It's wonderful that they would want to do this for Jesse after so many years. . . . But it's been a long time coming."

Celebrity, Then Obscurity

Several hours south of Oakville, still in Alabama but drifting toward Georgia, another Olympian, now retired in Tuskegee, similarly straddles concern and delight as she ponders her suddenly reversed fortunes: once forgotten, now feted.

"Why me?" Alice Coachman wonders over and over again. "Why now?"

In 1948, at the London Olympics, Ms. Coachman became the first black woman to win an Olympic gold medal, triumphing in the high jump. Upon her return to the U.S., she was the guest of honor at a party thrown by Count Basie. She did an endorsement for Coca-Cola, appearing on billboards with Jesse Owens. She had a street, a school and a subdivision named after her in her hometown of Albany, Ga. She became a teacher and a mother.

Alice Coachman

And then, she was forgotten. Her feat was captured on scratchy black-and-white film in Britain only to be obscured by black-white relations back home. "In those days," she says, "a black woman in the South didn't go about bringing attention to herself."

A textbook she gave her pupils stated that Wilma Rudolph was the first black woman to win a gold medal, in 1960. New generations of track stars raked in endorsement riches, ignorant of her pioneering work with Coca-Cola. The archivist at Tuskegee University, where she trained

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and studied in the 1940s, had little on file when the Madison Avenue types began inquiring about her last year.

Now, as the Atlanta Games draw nigh, Ms. Coachman, 73 years old, flits around the country on corporate expense accounts, bewildered but grateful. She is one of Xerox Corp.'s Golden 100 Olympians. She is featured on some calendars honoring black athletes. She is an Avon lady of sorts, speaking in classrooms on behalf of the cosmetics company. She happily accepts the assignments.

But where, she wonders, were all these people during the past 48 years?

"If the Olympics hadn't come to Georgia, to the South, how long would people have believed I wasn't the first black woman to win a gold medal?" she asks. "I tell you, they never would have known."

They do now. This, too, has been a journey on a road leading to two entirely different places: Promise and Shame.

Everywhere but Home

"We've had people from England and France come by here," Thurman White says. "One man asks, 'Is this all you've got? Jesse Owens is world famous! You should have more!' "

Mr. White, a black man who grew up around here and has lived in Oakville since 1976, tells of the rather pitiful memorial that until now has been the only reminder that a great athlete once ran and jumped over this soil. Mr. White has traveled the world as a Navy man, and he agrees with the foreigners: Jesse Owens is far more famous almost everywhere else than in his own hometown.

"In reality," Mr. White confesses, "I didn't know anything about the man."

The Jesse Owens archives reside at Ohio State University, where he went to college. (His family moved to Cleveland when he was nine.) There, too, are a sculpture, a track and a plaza named after him. Chicago, where he moved after his athletic career and where his widow lives, has the Jesse Owens Foundation, as well as a street, a school and a park. Arizona, which warmed him in retirement, has the Jesse Owens Memorial Medical Center in Phoenix. Berlin, scene of his greatest triumph, has Jesse Owens Allee, a street near the site of the old Olympic stadium. Abidjan, in faraway Ivory Coast, has a Jesse Owens boulevard.

And Oakville, his hometown, has a marker with a wrong birthdate and a display case with yellowing photos.

After the idea of a memorial on the Lawrence County courthouse square was bullied out of town in 1983, those pushing the proposal — a few Alabama congressmen, some local officials and several residents, including Mr. White — settled on a patch of grass and weeds in Oakville. Of Lawrence County's 32,000 residents, 17% are black. But Oakville is a predominantly black town, where about 400 people work in the fields or in nearby textile and chemical factories.

Olympians Alice Coachman and Jesse Owens in a Coca-Cola ad, circa 1952

Here, the Owens boosters planted two granite markers, a window display with pictures from a magazine, a flagpole and a basketball court. The marker that was to have gone in the courthouse square bears these words:

"He inspired a world enslaved in tyranny and brought hope to his fellow man. From the cottonfields of Oakville to the acclaim of the entire world, he made us all proud to be Lawrence Countians."

The other marker proclaims, "On this site in 1914 was born Jesse Owens, all-time track great." Both the site and the date are wrong. Mr. Owens was born a couple of fields over, in 1913.

The Owens group had been given $30,000 from the governor's office—occupied at the time by George Wallace, the onetime segregationist who by then was stumping for black votes — to create the courthouse monument. But they spent only half of it on the little shrine. Mr. White deposited the remaining $15,000 in a bank and waited for the times and the people to change.

"The time wasn't right," he says. "Nobody was interested. Besides, we didn't have any land."

As he mowed the grass and fought off the weeds and raised and lowered the American flag at the memorial, Mr. White nurtured a dream of a real park with a statue and a museum worthy of the man. Finally, in 1991, 17 acres directly across Route 203 from the memorial came up for auction. Mr. White withdrew the $15,000 from the bank and added $2,500 of his own to win the purchase. He then enlisted a man who knew how to get things done in the rural areas, James Pinion, the Lawrence County agent of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

"We were proud, we had a name, we had a pasture, we had a dream," says Mr. Pinion, who is white. And they had a plan. With luck, they would complete the park by the end of the century, in time for the 20th anniversary of Mr. Owens's death. (He died in 1980 at the age of 66.)

When Atlanta, which had earlier won the right to host the 1996 Olympics, decided that the cross-country torch relay would wind through Oakville, the timetable was halved. Mr. Pinion started raising $1.5 million from public sources like the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Alabama Council on the Arts, as well as from individual donors, white and black. Finally, they had the land, they had the money, they had the incentive. And, this time, they have the county's cooperation.

Residue of Resentment

"Most of the whites are with us now," Mr. White says. He emphasizes the word "most."

As does Mr. Pinion. The project has drawn little public opposition, he says, but there has been some private cussing. One woman was asked by the park commission to donate some old barn siding for a replica of the sharecropper's house in which Mr. Owens was born. She said she wouldn't give a thing to a "nigger project." A longtime resident was solicited to contribute historical information. He said he wouldn't dare. "Jesse Owens has never done anything for Oakville," he told Mr. Pinion. "Why are we adding to the national debt?"

At the park, a white construction worker curses his task as he levels the ground for the foundation of the museum. "I've lived here all my life," he tells a reporter, "and nobody's built anything for me."

But the park is being built. Sixty years after Mr. Owens outran and outjumped the "master race" before Hitler's eyes, his widow will light the permanent torch beside the statue and read the inscription: "May this light shine forever as a symbol to all who run for the freedom of sport, for the spirit of humanity, for the memory of Jesse Owens."

Her husband was a sprinter, but this was a marathon. "After all these years," she says wistfully, "it's like somebody just woke up and said, 'We ought to do something for that boy.' "

The Schoolyard Dispute

"I had to stop a fight once," Alice Coachman confides. "One boy in my class told another boy that Wilma Rudolph was the first black woman to win a gold medal. The other boy said, no, it was Miss Coachman."

She stops the story momentarily to note that it was that textbook with the wrong information — that nonsense about Wilma Rudolph being first — that caused the commotion. That said, she continues, warming to the tale:

"Now, you know how junior-high boys are. They were grabbing each others' collars and one was saying, 'Miss Coachman, Miss Coachman, he says you weren't the first black woman to win a gold medal, and I said you were too.'

"I looked at the boys and said, 'I am the one.' I explained that when I came along, there was no TV, no exposure. And I said, 'Whatever you do, don't be going around saying that Miss Coachman is lying to you.' "

The girl from south Georgia was raised by her mother not to make a fuss about herself, and the prevailing times reinforced that. So, mainly, she paid no mind to the slights to her record.

"I knew I won. I didn't need to go around the country correcting other people's mistakes," she says. "It was my championship. I won the records. . . . I don't mean to sound cocky, but I did the job." Only when hard-core doubting Thomases need convincing does she bring her gold medal out of its hiding place.

By the mid-1950s, the Coca-Cola billboards featuring her and Jesse Owens (they didn't pose together; their images were spliced next to each other) had disappeared from roadsides around the country. And her endorsement fee didn't make her rich. "I got a donation," she says, laughing, "but I won't tell you how much. It's nothing like what they get today."

So much for her endorsement career. Instead, she concentrated on being a teacher and coach. "Those were the only things you could make a living at then," she notes. "The salary wasn't good, but it gave you prestige and gave you a chance to give something back to the students. I know I made a difference."

The woman who began her track career so poor that she ran barefoot passed on her champion's determination: "I showed the kids that no matter how difficult or hard life may seem, through guts and determination you can pursue your dreams."

And she passed on the wisdom of Booker T. Washington, who founded Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, the school where she chased her own track dreams. Her favorite is: "I will let no man drag me down so low as to make me hate him."

"That," she says softly, "is what has carried me though life."

'Well, Who Are You?'

Ms. Coachman is sitting in a plush chair in the lobby of the Hyatt hotel in downtown Atlanta, waiting to go out with the people from Xerox. She checks her watch, a bit impatiently. She has been waiting, not just for a few minutes, but for a few decades.

"It's almost 50 years, and now I've . . ." she says, groping for the right word, "I've . . . resurfaced. People who didn't know about me are asking, 'Well, who are you? Why haven't you been out front all the time?'

"But they haven't done their research," she says sternly. "During the segregated days, nobody tried to do research. Who would go back and look through the newsreels and say, 'Who's Alice Coachman? Is she alive or dead?' "

William Moore, a visitor from Cleveland, has been sitting next to Ms. Coachman in the hotel lobby, trying to figure out if she is someone important. Finally, he blurts out, "Who are you?"

"I'm not telling you," Ms. Coachman says coyly.

He studies her—her stately posture, her precise speech — and guesses that she is a judge.

"I'm not saying," she repeats.

Mr. Moore passes over a postcard of Atlanta and requests her autograph. She signs neatly, passes it back and shakes his hand.

"You can tell everyone," she says with great pride, "that you met the first black woman athlete to win an Olympic gold medal. In 1948."