

# Owens has his day in the sun

By Lesley Farrey Pacey  
DAILY Staff Writer

OKLAHOMA CITY — A lifelong friend of Jesse Owens told a crowd that a park dedication for the Olympic great Saturday means a new day for racial harmony in Alabama.

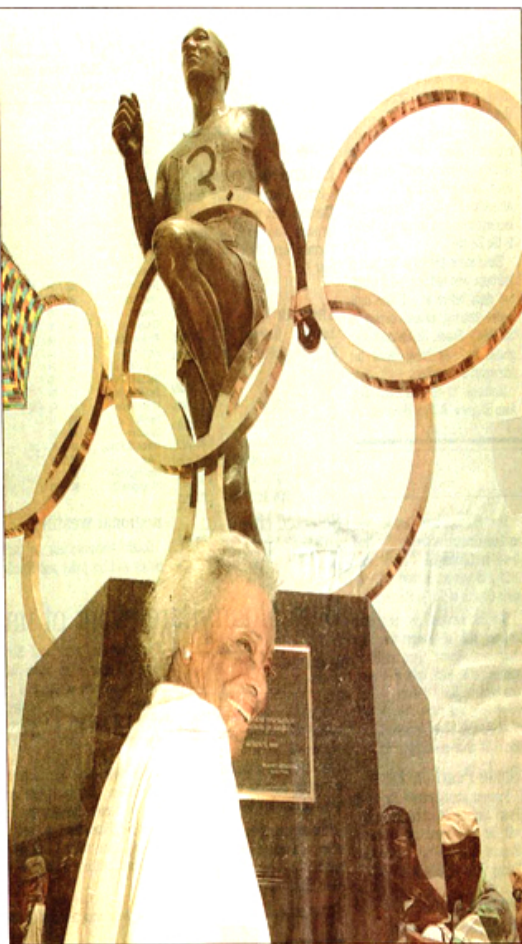
"Today by dedicating this memorial to the memory of the world's most famous track and field Olympic athlete, the people of Alabama are taking that first step in the journey of a thousand miles leading toward the objective of creating a genuine color blind paradise on earth," said Melvin Walker, one of Owens' black teammates at Ohio State University.



The \$15 million park in Owens' hometown comes 60 years after he won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics shattering Adolf Hitler's myth of Aryan supremacy.

But Walker, 81, of Chicago, said the dedication came when the time was right.

Five years ago an interracial park committee began working to build the 17.5-acre park and earlier struggles like an all-white county



DAILY Photo by Gary Coody Jr.

Ruth Owens shows her pleasure when the statue of her late husband Jesse was unveiled at Okaville.

# Owens

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commission's refusal in 1983 to allow a monument on the courthouse lawn were past.

Blacks and whites gathered in the 89 degree heat and celebrated the moment that brought four generations of the Olympic hero's family to the park and put them on the same stage with Gov. Fob James and U.S. Rep. Tom Bevill, D-Jasper. The Ohio State University sent public relations director Reggie Anglin who arrived with memorabilia.

"The fact is Jesse Owens represents

more than a great athlete," Bevill told the crowd estimated at 7,500 people by Chief Deputy Jim Martin. "He represents more than a great black athlete. He represents the triumph of human dignity, courage and valor in the face of cruel oppression."

James declared Jesse Owens Day and said Owens' performance at the 1936 Berlin Olympics will live forever in sports history and human achievement.

"In the midst of German storm troopers and swastikas, a 22-year-old college sophomore did what no other world statesman could do. He sent Adolf Hitler and all of Nazidom into sudden, swift retreat by standing the myth of Aryan superiority squarely on its head."

James introduced a woman who was 12 when she captured Owens on her Brownie Box camera at the

1936 Olympics. Thea Patschek Revolino, whose Czechoslovakian, Jewish family later fled Berlin remembers Owens' "running was so elegant and effortless like a panther, his face and physique so beautiful."

She was at the dedication Saturday to photograph Owens' grandson, Stuart Owen Rankin, who sprinted through the park with the Olympic flame. Rankin's aunt, Gloria Owens Hemphill, jumped up and down, and the crowd joined his family with cheers.

Rankin resembles his famous grandfather and his entry flanked by a blond escort runner, Phillip Price of Russellville, was a flashback to 1936 when Owens and German long-jumper Lutz

Long became friends during the competition.

Smiling, Rankin, 29, of Boston, saluted the sky with his torch. His 81-year-old grandmother, Ruth Owens, aided by a walker, stepped to embrace him.

This was Mrs. Owens first visit to her husband's birthplace and she had looked forward to the day in the park for "beautiful, beautiful memories."

Later the crowd surged around her as she unveiled a 14-foot bronze sculpture of her husband breaking through the Olympic rings sculpted by Branko Medenica of Birmingham. Then she lit a permanent replica of the 1936 torch at the park.

"Thank you for giving us Jesse," Leon Graham, 75, of Florence told her. "He was a great inspiration for all of us in Alabama, the United States and the world."

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“I feel like Princess Di.”  
Ruth Owens  
Jesse Owens' widow  
after signing autographs