

# Owens Park dedicated

By Deangelo McDaniel  
Managing Editor

Jesse Owens' widow fought back tears as her grandson brought the Olympic flame through the Jesse Owens Memorial Park in Oakville Saturday.

"Jesse would be proud," Ruth Owens said. "This is so special. I've been to five Olympics and I have never seen anything like this. The people of Lawrence County are wonderful."

As Stuart Owen Rankin walked

through the park's paved drive on his way to the torch relay stage, thousands of onlookers exploded with emotion.

"The torch is here," one spectator said. "It's time to light up the Olympic flame in Lawrence County and honor the great Jesse Owens."

As emotions built, Rankin raced through the crowd to his grandmother with the torch in his outstretched right arm. They embraced in front of the stage.

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"This is so special," said Gloria Owens Hemphill, Jesse's oldest daughter. "Daddy would love this. I wish he could be here."

Hemphill's daughter, Gina Hemphill Tillman, carried the torch during the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. She works for NBC and will be in Atlanta to help with coverage of this year's Olympics.

Rankin, a 29-year-old employee of the Harvard Law School, said his famous grandfather, who won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics in Germany, was more than just an athlete.

"He was a humanitarian and that's what I remember most about him," Rankin said. "He was just granddadd to me. He didn't talk much about himself. He talked about others, and was always giving to his family and others."

Mrs. Owens, who was visiting her husband's birthplace for the first time, unveiled a 14-foot statue of Jesse running through the Olympic rings.

"I've been to a lot of things to honor my husband, but this is the most special," she said. "I've seen a lot of statues of Jesse but this one is the best. It looks just like him."

Moments later, Mrs. Owens lit a replica of the torch used during the 1936 Olympics. The flame, according to park officials, will burn forever.

Amidst a crowd of more than 7,000, Mrs. Owens signed a few autographs and posed for pictures in the blistering heat.

"I feel like Princess Di," she said with a smile. "This is wonderful.



Jesse Owens is captured in time in this bronze statue. He seems to be breaking through the plastic covering as his wife Ruth unveils the statue. (Staff photo by Tiffani Hill-Patterson)

Jesse would love it."

Marlene Owens Rankin, who is president of the Jesse Owens Foundation in Chicago and Owens' middle daughter, remembers the Olympic star as a great father.

"He was a father," she said, "a very productive father. He was always there when we needed him. I think he would be flattered and thankful that the people in this county would remember him this way."

Beverly Owens Prather, the youngest of Jesse's three daughters, said her father never forgot his humble beginning and would be "floored" at the park and the cele-

bration.

"Daddy stood for America and represented the hope that everyone could accomplish what they wanted to if they tried," she said. "Above anything else, he was a husband and daddy first."

Alabama Gov. Fob James was among the dignitaries on hand for the festivities. He embraced the Owens family and read a proclamation announcing June 29 as Jesse Owens Day.

"Jesse's performance at the 1936 Berlin Olympiad will live forever in the annals of sports history," the governor said. "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 Adolph Hitler and all of Nazidom into a sudden, swift retreat by standing the myth of Aryan superiority squarely on its head."

James was joined on the stage by Thea Petschek Iervolino. She witnessed Owens' performance in the 1936 Olympics.

Iervolino, 12 at the time, was born in Czechoslovakia. She attended the Games with an old Browning box camera and made pictures of Owens.

"He was so elegant and effortless, like a panther, his face and physique was so beautiful," Iervolino recalled.

She said she made just a few pictures and most of them were of Owens.

The Olympic star died of lung cancer at the age of 66 in 1980.