

'The guy was a champion'

Owens' family enjoys tribute to Olympic star

By Gina Reynolds
Sports Writer

OAKVILLE — The spirit of Jesse Owens was alive Saturday afternoon.

His widow, Ruth Owens, could feel it. And on this hot, humid Alabama summer day, it was Owens' spirit that was forever preserved as family, friends and thousands of celebrants shared in the dedication of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park.

"I can't tell you how special this is," said Mrs. Owens, while the festivities went on around her. "I've been to five Olympic Games and I have never seen anything like this."

Thirteen years of dreaming and work came to fruition Saturday when the \$1.5 million park was dedicated. And 60 years after Owens won four gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the people of this town honored their hometown hero.

Owens' grandson, Stuart Owen Rankin, carried the torch through the gates of the park and up a winding road to a hilltop where the park's centerpiece — a 14-foot-high bronze statue of Owens striding through the Olympic rings — stands. Mrs. Owens unveiled the statue and also lit a replica of the 1936 Olympic torch, which will burn eternally at the park, making it one of the happiest days of her life.

"I had no idea it would be as elaborate as it is," she said of the festivities. "This is an original."

It's amazing

The \$1.5 million park also includes an as-yet unfinished museum, an eternal flame, picnic areas, a baseball field, a basketball court, space for a running track and a visitor center, all just a couple hundred yards from the cotton fields where

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Fellow Lawrence County natives James Pinion, left, and Therman White carry the Olympic torch out of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park together.



James Pinion, left, lights the Olympic torch for the first runner outside the park.



Alabama Gov. Fob James meets members of Jesse Owens' family, from left, Gloria Owens Hemphill, daughter, Sylvester Owens, brother, and Ruth Owens, wife, before the Olympic torch run stopped at the Jesse Owens Memorial Park in Owens' home community of Oakville.

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Owens family enjoys tribute

Owens grew up.

And the park is something Owens' family, most of whom were visiting from Chicago, are proud of.

"You can't even explain," said Owens' granddaughter, Dawn Prather-Hawk. "It's amazing and it makes you feel proud, just to see what he came from."

And while Prather-Hawk now recognizes her late grandfather as a great Olympian, growing up, "He was just our grandfather," she said. "He was my grandfather. He was there to teach you values. Now when you some and see the things he has done, the older you get the more you appreciate it. This is special. It's something that will stay in our memories forever."

'He is with us today'

Owens' three daughters were also on hand for Saturday's festivities. And they, too, were appreciative of the tribute to their father.

"He was a father," said Marlene Owens Rankin, "a very protective father. He was always there when we needed him. I miss his presence. I think he would just be very flattered and thankful that the people in this county would remember him in this way."

And it was particularly special, since her son Stuart Owen Rankin was carrying the Olympic torch.

"To do it, particularly in this park, is extremely special," Marlene Owens Rankin said. "He really wanted to do this. He's been up for it for a while."

"He was very much a family man," Stuart Rankin said. "His involvement in my life was not as Jesse Owens the runner, but as my granddaddy. When everyone crowded around and started waving the flags on my way in, it kind of got to me but it also helped me make it through, it also was a humanitarian."

"He was good with us kids. We had a large family and he was in charge of it. He was responsible for keeping us so close."

Gloria Owens Hemphill, whose daughter carried the torch in 1984 and was again involved in the 1996 torch run, was excited by the tribute to her father.

"I think it shows what a community can do," she said. "They have certainly set an example."

What would her father have thought?
"He would be overwhelmed, actually," she said.

And while Owens died in 1980 at the age of 66, Mrs. Owens was certain her late husband's presence could be felt Saturday.

"I just can't imagine how he would feel," she said with a smile. "He is with us today."