

Agriculture leaders play major roles in North Alabama Olympic Torch Relay

Two North Alabama agriculture leaders played major roles in ceremonies welcoming the Olympic torch to North Alabama on June 29. President of AFC's board of directors Larry Bennich, in his capacity as Chairman of the Morgan County Commission, officially welcomed the torch and its bearers to Morgan County. Also on hand were Mayor Julian Price and Councilman Carter Tutwiler of Decatur. Price read a proclamation and dedicated an Olympic flame commemorative monument.

The next step for the Olympic torch was Jesse Owens Memorial Park at Oakville in Lawrence County where Owens was born. Jesse Owens' grandson Stuart Owen Rankin carried the torch into the park where an estimated 7,500 people waited in 89 degree heat. Rankin was ecstatic and his pace faster than most of the torchbearers as he arrived

with the flame. "It was a tremendous honor," he said. "I was very happy to be a part of this whole thing."



Co-chairman of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park Committee Therman White and Lawrence County Agent James Pinion shared honors of carrying the Olympic torch out of the park at the conclusion of ceremonies honoring Owens.

Blacks and whites gathered 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. "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 Adolph 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 cam-

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era at the 1936 Olympics. Thea Petschek Iervolino, 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 cauldron at the park.

At the close of the ceremony a second representative of agriculture participated as Lawrence County Agent James Pinion carried the Olympic torch with Therman White, co-chairman of the Owens Park committee. It was the first time in the 84 day, 15,000 mile trek to Atlanta, that a black man and a white man carried the torch simultaneously as it left the park. White observed, "The event speaks for itself."