

Walker: Owens was humble, a great person

By Deangelo McDaniel
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Mel Walker said those who knew Jesse Owens remember him for what he was as a person and not for winning four gold medals.

Owens, he said, was humble, unassuming.

Walker knows more about Owens than most people. They were childhood friends, rivals in high school and teammates at Ohio State University.

The 82-year-old Walker journeyed with the Owens family to Lawrence County to celebrate the coming of the Olympic torch and dedication of Jesse Owens Memorial Park in Oakville.

Family members were treated with a sit-down country meal at the Shelton House when they arrived. Walker took some time to talk with The Advertiser about Owens.

"Let me tell you something young man, Jesse Owens was the most humble person you'd ever meet," he said. "He was the same when he was famous."

Walker called Owens a star.

"He tried to keep from attracting attention," he said. "He was unusual. If he met you today, he'd remember you ten years later. His memory was phenomenal. Jesse never met a stranger. This man loved people."

Walker was one of the first people Owens met when he returned from the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany after winning four gold medals.

"Jesse never talked about (Adolf) Hitler," he said, "it didn't matter that he was shunned. He never complained



Mel Walker

about being mistreated. In those days, it was difficult for a black male not to be mistreated. Jesse was Jesse. He was focused."

Walker, Owens and David Albritton developed one of the most formidable running trios in the history of college track and field.

Walker was born in Cleveland. Owens and Albritton moved there from Alabama. Albritton is from Ramsey.

Walker first met Owens when he was in the ninth grade. He moved to Toledo and his alma mater (Libby High School) became rivals with East Tech, the school attended by Owens and Albritton.

Walker said Albritton had the toughest journey of the trio. He said his former teammate at OSU didn't have a mother and father and he grew up on the streets as a gang leader.

"David found the gym and became interested in the high jump," Walker recalled. "He won the high school track championship and I finished second. He got the opportunity to go to Ohio State and that saved his life. David died last year."

Long before his death, however, Walker said Albritton left the same legacy as Owens.

"If you try hard enough and do the right thing, good things will happen," he said.

Albritton returned to Alabama and was the head-track coach at Alabama State University in Montgomery.

As a prep coach, he won several state championships at Dunbar High School. Albritton was hired by the U.S.

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From left are Ohio State track members Jesse Owens, David Albritton and Mel Walker.