

A long way to jump



Mike Pulaski measures 26 feet, 5½ inches, Jesse Owens' distance in the men's long jump at the 1936 Olympics. *Bob Farley/Post-Herald*

Owens Museum dedication slated

By Bob Johnson

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OAKVILLE — When Jesse Owens won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, he was presented four oak seedlings.

He planted three of the oaks in special places shortly after returning to the United States, but the fourth died.

On Saturday, almost 62 years after Owens' gold medal performances, a white oak will be planted in a rural Lawrence County field as a symbolic replacement for that fourth oak.

The planting will come during dedication ceremonies Saturday for the new Jesse

Owens Museum at Jesse Owens Memorial Park in the southeast Lawrence County town of Oakville, where Owens was born and lived until he was eight years old.

Ruth Owens, the widow of the Olympic star who died in 1980, will be in Oakville along with other family members for a private luncheon Friday and the dedication ceremony at 1 p.m. Saturday.

The museum is the crown jewel of Jesse Owens Memorial Park, an ambitious tribute to Owens cut out a cow pasture and a cotton field just off Alabama 157 about 25 miles northwest of Cullman.

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The idea for the park originated about 10 years ago when some residents of Oakville approached the Lawrence County Commission about building a monument to Owens on the grounds of the county courthouse in Moulton. After the commissioners rejected that idea, Oakville resident Thurman White approached County Agent James Pinion about building a park and memorial in Oakville.

"It was Oct. 8, 1991, when Thurman walked in my office and said he's just acquired this land in Oakville and needed help developing a park," Pinion said.

While building a park is not the kind of activity normally associated with extension agents, Pinion said, the mandate of Auburn University's extension service does include improving life in rural communities.

It has been a long, hard ride for Pinion and White, including fund-raising, contracts, delays and plenty of ups and downs.

"I think we have done the community a service. We have been through three governors getting this done," Pinion said as he and White stood in front of the handsome brick museum, which includes numerous pictures of Owens, films and some artifacts.

"It's been a pain in the rear end getting this done," White said. "Now we have it. This is a Lawrence County Park."

In addition to the museum, there is a large statue of Owens running through the Olympic rings. The statue was created by Branko Medenica of Birmingham.

The park also includes a replica of the two-room wooden house where Owens lived as a child with his nine brothers and sisters. There is also an Olympic flame that was lit during a ceremony in 1996 when the Olympic torch came through Oakville on the way to the XXVI Olympic Games in Atlanta.

At the entrance to the park is a visitors center where retired poultry inspector Lucy Cole asks guests to sign a book.

"We've already had a lot of visitors from everywhere," Cole said.

Visitors then drive toward the back of the park, past a basketball court and a softball field that are used by youngsters from the Oakville area. The museum, the torch, the statue and the home line high ground at the back of the park.

A highlight of the planned park will be a track that Pinion hopes will someday be the site of state track and field events. But so far, ground has not been broken for the track.

"We don't have the money," Pinion said. He said he hoped enough money would be raised to add the track in the next couple of years.

White and other members of the park's board recently purchased an extra 10 acres adjacent to the park that they hope can be used for scout camps and similar activities.

"I think this would be a good place for kids to camp out," White said, pointing to the flat, cleared land.

Pinion said the museum and the park are still works in progress. He said the museum is working to get additional artifacts, many of which are stored at Owens' alma mater, Ohio State University.

"I hope when they see and hear about what we are doing here they will want to help us," Pinion said.

On Wednesday, as workers were putting final touches on the museum, they stretched out a tape measure to 26 feet, 5½ inches, to show Owens' distance in the long jump, one of his gold medal events.

"We may set up something to show visitors just how far this is," Pinion said.