

METRO STATE

The Birmingham News

Thursday, May 14, 1998



NEWS STAFF PHOTO/STEVE BARNETTE

Next to the museum is this bronze statue by Birmingham sculptor Branko Medenica of Owens running through the Olympic rings.

Tribute to Jesse Owens

Oakville Olympian's museum opens Saturday as salute to track great who beat Hitler's best

By **Kent Faulk**
News staff writer

OAKVILLE

James Pinion climbed up a ladder and lit a shiny aluminum replica of the 1936 Olympic Torch that stands in front of the new Jesse Owens Museum.

An orange flame roared to life.

Getting the torch ready was one of many last-minute projects Pinion and other workers at the museum finished this week in preparation for Saturday's

public dedication of the 3,600-square-foot museum in this northwest Alabama community.

For Pinion and other Lawrence County residents, the opening of the museum is a "dream come true" after years of work to build a memorial to the black Oakville native who won four gold medals in track and field events during the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, shattering the myth of Adolf Hitler's white master race.

"We're coming to the finish line, and we're all winners," said Pinion, the Extension coordinator who has overseen efforts to build the park and museum.

The museum, built at a cost of about \$500,000, includes displays about Owens' track and field career and his life.

Pinion said he hopes visitors learn that there was more to Owens than a week in Berlin. "It's more than just four gold medals . . . He (Owens) did a lot of humanitarian work."

Among the displays inside the museum — built by Design Display, Inc. in Birmingham — are time lines of Owens' life.

He was born in 1913 at Oakville as the chronically sick son of a sharecropper. The family moved to Ohio when Owens was 9, and he became a high school standout and an All-American in track at Ohio State University. Then, at the 1936

Owens

From Page 1D

Olympics in Berlin, Owens became the first athlete to win four medals in a single Olympiad.

After the Olympics, Owens earned money putting on demonstrations of his speed, worked with children's groups such as the Boy Scouts, formed his own public relations firm, and toured the country making motivational speeches. He died of lung cancer in 1980.

The museum includes artifacts donated by the family, such as programs from the 1936 Olympics and medals he won at Lakeland High School in 1928 and 1931. There also are replicas of uniforms and shoes Owens wore, and the Big 10 Championship Trophy he won by setting three world records and tying a fourth in the span of an hour, despite a back injury.

The museum also has a mini-theater and soon will have an area for visitors to log onto the Internet to learn about Owens, Pinion said. The museum will have its own Web site, he said.

"They (Owens' family) wanted it to be an educational-type museum," Pinion said.

Owens' family, including his wife, Ruth, his only living brother, Sylvester, and his three daughters, will be in Lawrence County on Friday for a private tour of the museum with \$100 contributors, Pinion said. The family also will attend a number of events surrounding the museum's opening on Saturday.

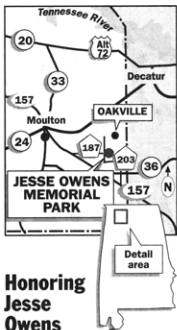
National news coverage is expected, and an ESPN crew plans to film the weekend events, Pinion said.

Development of the memorial did not come without racial controversy.

The Lawrence County Commission in 1983 refused to allow a memorial to perhaps the county's most famous son to be placed at the courthouse. Backers of the memorial claimed it was rejected because Owens was black, although county commissioners said race had nothing to do with their decision.

A group of Lawrence County residents raised money and bought 17.5 acres of land for a park almost eight years ago at the site where Owens' childhood home used to stand. A memorial at the park was a target of vandals several times.

The park includes an old remodeled house that serves as the visitors center, a replica of the small wooden shack where the Owens family lived, a basketball court, picnic tables, a pavilion and a baseball field used by the community.



Honoring Jesse Owens

What: Jesse Owens Museum dedication at Jesse Owens Memorial Park in Oakville

When: Saturday

Events: 8-10 a.m., Jesse Owens Memorial Run, starting from Lawrence County High School in Moulton. It includes a 10K race followed by a 2-mile run and a 1-mile run for children to age 6. Late registration at the high school gym is 6 to 7:30 a.m.

Noon-5 p.m., Jesse Owens Harmony Festival, with more than a half-dozen musical acts; museum and park tours, and food

1 p.m., Ribbon cutting for Jesse Owens Museum with Owens' family.

Admission: Free

Directions: Take Alabama 157; about 4 miles southeast of Moulton, turn east onto Lawrence County Road 187; park is at the intersection with Lawrence County 203.

For information: Call the Lawrence County Extension Office, 1-256-974-2464.

"It's (the park) a living memorial," Pinion said. "That's what the family wanted."

At the top of the knoll next to the museum is a bronze statue by Birmingham sculptor Branko Medenica of Owens running through the Olympic rings. It was unveiled when the Olympic torch made a stop at the park on its way to the games in Atlanta in 1996.