

Jesse Owens Park to open Saturday

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OAKVILLE — The doors to the Jesse Owens museum will officially open Saturday.

Behind those doors, the importance of Owens' accomplishments in the 1936 Berlin Olympics hangs in the air like a strong spiritual presence.

Larger-than-life portraits depicting a larger-than-life athlete stand posed throughout the museum — portraits of an athlete, strong in will, portraits of a humanitarian, caring in nature.

Glass cases hold track uniforms and shoes. Information about Owens' life is provided on every wall. But perhaps the most impressive stands outside the large glass doors at the back of the museum. It is Owens' birthplace.

It is inspirational to look past the large wall-sized photo of Owens enjoying a ticker tape parade held in his honor, past the photos of him working with at-risk youth, past the videos of Owens as he spoke to young people of the importance of teamwork, to the small wooden shack in the distance. It was his beginning, but by no means did it determine his future.

County and community leaders,

"Nobody could keep up with Jess. I was there for moral support."

SYLVESTER OWENS
Jesse Owens' brother

family members and a host of sightseers who hope to learn more about the native gold medalist will be part of the museum's dedication ceremony, which begins at 1 p.m. in the Jesse Owens Memorial Park on Saturday.

Members of the Owens family are expected to cut the ribbon to officially open the museum, then an oak tree planting ceremony will follow.

James Pinion, a member of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park Board, said the tree is significant in that during the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, seedling oaks were awarded to each gold medalist and each gold medalist team member. Because Owens earned four gold medals, he also received four oak seedlings.

In the film "Return To Berlin," which is narrated by Owens and can be seen in the museum, Owens said he planted one at his mother's home in Cleveland, Ohio, one at Rhodes

High School in Cleveland where he used the track to practice, and one on All America Row at his alma mater, Ohio State University. The fourth seedling died before it could be planted.

Pinion said he believes there was a reason for that. He said it was because the fourth belonged in Lawrence County, where Owens was born and spent the first part of his life as the son of sharecroppers.

"The four original oak trees were English oaks," he said. "We knew that an English oak wouldn't survive in the Southern climate so we decided to plant the oak that was next of kin to the English oak, a white oak."

Owens became an American hero when he won individual gold medals in the 100-meter and 200-meter races and the broad jump and was part of the 400-meter relay team. In the 200-meter run and the broad jump, he established Olympic records that would take 25 years to break.

According to information available at the museum, Owens was born the youngest of 10 children. He was small and sickly. His parents strove to keep him alive for many years through bouts with pneumonia and infections.

After moving to Cleveland, when

ATHLETE continued on 2B



This is one of the many exhibits on display at the Jesse Owens Museum in Oakville.

Owens was 9 years old, a coach at his junior high school saw potential in him that would prove to be worth the extra practices and long hours of hard work.

On his first visit back to the birthplace in 1994, Owens' brother, Sylvester, was quoted as saying he remembered well the days when he would try to practice track along with his brother.

"I was a few years older and I would sometimes go out and help during the track meets," he said. "I'd help him warm up by running with him some. I'd try to stay with him, but I couldn't ... Nobody could keep up with Jess. I was there for moral support."

Pinion said something that has astounded him about the Olympian's life was that after he returned from the Olympics in 1936, no sponsors were waiting in line to sign him up for use of his name on their products. He supported his family through nickel-and-dime appearances at state fairs and competitions around the nation. He raced people for show and even raced a race horse. And he always won the race set before him.

He later earned a small fortune, which he used in his humanitarian endeavors for youth programs.

Pinion said the museum built in

Owens' honor has turned out to be something county residents can be proud of. The park includes the replica birth house, the museum, picnic pavilions, an athletic field and Medallion Court where the replica Olympic Torch and Owens' statue is on permanent display. Plans call for the creation of a track where the next generation of aspiring young Olympians can train and compete, he said.

The museum also is equipped with a computer resource center where visitors can pull up the Jesse Owens website.

The site will include newspaper articles from 1933 to present from newspapers across the country. The new site address is www.jesseowensmuseum.com.

On a final wall in the museum, a caption states the words read at Owens' funeral. It describes Owens as "a master of the spirit as well as the mechanics of the sport."

"He was a winner who knew that winning wasn't everything. He shared with others his courage and education to the higher ideals of sportsmanship. His achievements have shown us all the promise of America and his faith in America has inspired countless others to do their best for themselves and their country."