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Museum honoring Jesse Owens gets off and running

By Kent Faulk
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OAKVILLE — Memories of a husband, a father, a humanitarian and Olympic champion came flooding back to Ruth Owens and her three daughters on Friday as they got their first glimpse of the museum built in honor of Jesse Owens.

"Oh my goodness, look at this," the 83-year-old widow of Owens exclaimed as she walked into the main part of the museum with the aid of a cane and was faced with 9-foot-tall, wall-length photos of her late husband in track uniforms. "He would be so proud of this."

Owens' family members got a private tour of the museum, at Jesse Owens Memorial Park at Oakville, before it opens to the public with a dedication ceremony at 1 p.m. today.

The annual Jesse Owens Memorial Run is this morning in Moulton and the Jesse Owens Harmony Festival will be until 5 p.m. at the park.

The 3,600-square-foot museum was built to honor the Lawrence County native who won four gold medals in track at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, destroying Adolph Hitler's myth of a master race. Owens died in 1980.

At times during Friday's tour, Mrs. Owens and her three daughters wiped tears from their cheeks as they looked at the displays, including several video displays, of Owens' accomplishments. Owens' 89-year-old brother, Sylvester, also toured the museum.

"It is absolutely wonderful," said Gloria Hemphill, Owens' daughter, who had helped gather information, memorabilia and pictures for the museum. Daughters Marlene Rankin and Beverly Prather agreed.

"He was a very modest man and probably would not have thought his life measured to this much," said Mrs. Rankin, who is director of the Jesse Owens Foundation in Chicago.

Owens' family wanted the museum and park to be an educational as well as living memorial. The museum has an computer center in which visitors can do research on the Internet and the park has picnic tables and a ball field. A track is planned.

Part of the museum is dedicated to Owens' career in advertising, public speaking and working with youth.

Mrs. Owens said she hopes the museum will help inspire young people to become involved in track and field.

"Money was secondary (to Owens)," Mrs. Owens said. "He was interested in seeing young people get ahead to the point that if there was a poor boy he would take money out of his pocket to help them go to school."

Stuart Rankin, one of Owens' sons-in-law, said Owens didn't seem to care about the accolades.

Owens had a lot of golf trophies but didn't display many of his awards and medals, Rankin said. Owens even gave some of his awards away, he said, including lending a museum his gold medals, which he never got back. A German company reproduced the medals, which are now at the archives of Owens' alma mater Ohio State, he said.



NEWS STAFF PHOTO/FRANK K

Ruth Owens walks past a photo of her late husband, Olympic champion Jesse Owens, in a tour of the museum.