

Opinion

EDITORIAL

Befitting a legend

THE ISSUE

Member of Jesse Owens park and museum board says park might close unless county provides critical funding.

WE SUGGEST

County, community should work together to provide adequate funding for memorial to one of world's greatest athletes.

Who was Jesse Owens?
A quick scan of the dates and headlines on the "Articles Resourced" page of the Web site

tell part of the story, the part most people know:
■ June 18, 1933: *12 records broken in national track meet*

■ May 25, 1935: *Owens sets 3 world records*

■ Aug. 5, 1936: *Owens victor in 200-meter event, sets world mark*

Further down that long, long list, the visitor to <http://jesseowenmuseum.com> learns that the legendary athlete's later life matched his feats on the track. He worked to help the underprivileged, especially the young people.

"One chance is all you need," he once said.

The cyberspace visitor also learns that when Owens died March 31, 1980, he was mourned around the world as a "hero for the ages," "the sharecropper's son who became the Olympics' most-storied hero" and "the man who raced to history."

Most pertinent to this piece, however, is that Jesse Owens was one of Alabama's own.

Born near Oakville in Lawrence County in 1913, Owens lived on a cotton farm there until he and his family moved up North when he was 9.

It took some 60 years after Owens won four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics, but Lawrence County eventually honored him with a park and museum at his birthplace.

Two more headlines, these from June and July of 1996, say it all:

■ *The man who humbled Hitler gets a park in his hometown*

■ *Salute to Jesse Owens: Healing an old wound*

But now, what is this we hear? That the park and museum that Lawrence County so proudly opened in 1996, just in time for a visit by the Olympic torch on its way to Atlanta, might close because of severe *underfunding*?

James Pinion, a member of the park and museum board, says that if the Lawrence County Commission doesn't increase its allocation to the park, it will close at the end of February.

Commissioners included only \$16,000 for four county-owned parks, including Jesse Owens Memorial Park, and declared that the money be split evenly four ways.

No way can this world-class memorial and museum to a world-class athlete and native son of Alabama operate on \$4,000.

Pinion points out that the utility bill alone for the museum, which draws visitors from all over the world, averages some \$9,000 a year.

This park project came together in the first place because of the hard work, dedication and generosity of business people, corporations, elected officials, churches and other community organizations, not to mention the multitude of volunteers it took to make it happen.

Those same people and organizations need to come together now and establish consistent, adequate funding for the park and museum.

Another quote from the legend himself offers sound advice:

"Find the good. It's all around you. Find it, showcase it, and you'll start believing in it."

Jesse Owens was, is and always will be part of the good that is Alabama.

Lawrence County and the rest of this state should showcase that good by properly showcasing the man.