

'Jesse comes back' again

Summer Games mark time to honor Owens

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Ruth Owens was prone to say that "Jesse comes back to life every four years."

It's that "every four years" now, with the 2008 Olympics opening Friday in Beijing. Jesse Owens' widow was right.

For all the Jenners, Rettons and Spitzes who have come along since, Owens remains one of the true Olympic icons, 72 years after an Olympiad marked by politics, racism and historic athletic achievement.

Owens — "the tan thunderbolt from Ohio State," as reported by The Associated Press in less politically correct times — won an unprecedented four gold medals in Berlin.

That he won the 100, the 200, the long jump and on the 4x100 relay in the arena of Hitler's master race plan and the growing Third Reich earned his performance an indelible spot in history.

"Hitler had it all built up where he was going to showcase his white athletes," said James Pinion, a director of the Jesse Owens Memorial Park in his birthplace of Oakville. "Jesse destroyed that."

Considerable achievement for a sharecropper's kid from north Alabama who battled illness as a child but who, according to memories shared with Pinion, "every time (people would) see him, he'd be running, just like a deer."

James Cleveland Owens was born in Oakville on Sept. 12, 1913, one of 12 children born to Henry and Mary Emma Owens. The memorial, opened in 1996, sits on the land where the Owens family picked cotton.



The Associated Press

Jesse Owens and California sprinter Frank Wykoff, right, are shown working out in the Olympic village in Berlin in 1936.

When the family moved to Cleveland, his elementary school teacher misunderstood Owens when he told her his name. Instead of J.C., which is what his family called him, it became Jesse. It stuck.

Owens was discovered by his school's track coach who helped cultivate his natural ability, eventually earning him an Ohio State "scholarship." He was paid to run an elevator in the state office building to cover his tuition.

By the 1936 Olympics, Owens was a household name in the United States, with track and field still enjoying a promi-

nent position on the landscape.

He was one of 19 black athletes on the U.S. Olympic team. He was, not, however "snubbed" by Hitler, as legend has it. "The yarn was a fabrication that originally had nothing whatsoever to do with Owens," wrote William J. Baker in his book, "Jesse Owens: An American Life."

Hitler had welcomed at his private box two German athletes who won gold medals. As U.S. high jumper Cornelius Johnson was winning his event, it began to rain. Hitler and his group left before "The Star-Spangled Banner" was played.

"Did they make a hasty exit so Hitler would not have to shake hands with the black Johnson?" Baker wrote. "Maybe they did. ... It is difficult to imagine Der Fuhrer publicly congratulating a black man.... But if he snubbed any black American athlete, it was Cornelius Johnson rather than Jesse Owens."

After the Olympics, Owens was snubbed by the U.S. president. Franklin Roosevelt did not invite him to the White House.

Owens ran exhibition races to make ends meet after the Olympics, but eventually was able to parlay his medals — and

the lore of Berlin — into a successful career as a speaker and representative of the Olympic movement.

"The people I've met that talked to him or have personal experiences with him said he was one of the nicest men you would ever want to meet," Pinion said.

Owens lived much of his adult life in Chicago, making a famous return trip to Columbus, Ohio, to see daughter Marlene crowned Ohio State homecoming queen in 1960.

A pack-a-day smoker much of his life, Owens moved with Ruth to Arizona for health reasons in the 1970s, but died in Tucson March 31, 1980, of lung cancer.

"I still believe, and I tell everybody I that I know, if he was alive today and participating, he'd beat all of them," Pinion said.

He noted the track hindrances of Owens' day — capricious cinder tracks, no starting blocks, heavy cotton racing uniforms. "If he competed against the people today, he'd win. That's my personal, maybe prejudiced, opinion. What he accomplished under the circumstances," Pinion said, "he'd still be the fastest one out there on the track today."