

Jesse Owens Memorial Park has a little bit for everyone

By Jonathan Deal Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, June 24, 2009 12:00 am

Looking for something to do one of these long, hot summer days?

The Jesse Owens Memorial Park provides just the right amount of outdoor fun and historical exploration for curious visitors.

The park is located along County Road 187 in the Oakville community, just a few miles off Ala. 157.

For Oakville residents, the park's grounds provide a place for kids to play throughout the year.

"Most people are amazed that there would be something like this out here," said longtime volunteer and Lawrence County resident Joyce Cole.

"I didn't know Jesse Owens was a Lawrence County native until I was 19. It was never mentioned while I was in school. More people need to know about Lawrence County's history."

Although not fully completed until 1998, the vision to honor Lawrence County's most revered athlete has been in the works for more than 25 years.

Efforts were made in 1983 to place a plaque in the courthouse square honoring Owens, only to be turned down by County Commissioners.

In 1991, Oakville resident Therman White and Lawrence County extension agent coordinator James Pinion began the process to raise money for a park in Owens' memory.

White obtained the land for the park and Pinion, working with Auburn University, raised more than \$2 million for the development and construction of the park.

Since then, Pinion has worked diligently to create the park, even convincing the Olympic Torch committee to reroute the 1996 torch run through the park in route to Atlanta.

"I've been in it from the beginning," said Pinion. "After we secured the funding, we contacted people in Oakville and asked them how they would like to honor Jesse Owens."

Pinion soon turned Oakville residents' wishes into reality with the construction of baseball fields, playground equipment and a basketball court.

An additional 10 acres were added to the original 20 about five years ago, allowing for a second baseball field to be built.

Also added is something unique that has curious youngsters jumping in the sand every time they visit.

A long jump pit with a marker signifying Jesse Owens' 1936 gold medal jump allows brave jumpers an opportunity to see how difficult that jump really was.

"We see a lot of school kids having a good time out there," Pinion said about the long jump. "That is what it's for. We wanted them to visualize how long it was. It is an amazing feat."

Owens set a long jump record of 26 feet, five and five-sixteenth inches that would not be broken for 25 years.

One thing that has not been added is an Olympic track that was originally planned to be built at the entrance of the park.

"We've got everything in place except track," Pinion said. "That is what the park really needs. It is his identity.

"With the track we could host high school, junior college and other track events. Hopefully one day we will have the track. That is still my goal."

Pinion said if a track were built, they could host something called the "Jesse Owens Games" that have been held previously near Phoenix, Ariz. where Owens did a lot of youth work.

The games would allow track and field athletes to compete in the four competitions that Owens won gold medals in at the 1936 Olympics.

Even without the track, Jesse Owens Memorial Park provides plenty of attractions for people of all ages.

In addition to the recreational equipment, the grounds house a welcome center, museum, 1936 Olympics replica torch, a replica home of the Oakville house that Owens grew up in and a magnificent statue of Owens.

From the crowds watching summer baseball games to kids swinging around the playground, it is evident on summer days just how important the park is to Oakville residents.

For more information on the park, log on to www.jesseowensmuseum.org.