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# Jim Thorpe's Life

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### Jim Thorpe's Life

Jim Thorpe was an exceptionally versatile athlete and deserves to be recognized for all his accomplishments regardless of his race or background. Jim Thorpe withstood multiple challenges throughout his life that many do not know about, but still managed to become one of the best athletes of all time. Because of the death of his twin brother and parents, Thorpe was largely forced to raise himself. Due to the loss of his family, Thorpe taught himself lifelong skills which others are routinely taught by their parents. Jim Thorpe minimized the negative struggles in his life and excelled in what he loved best, sports. Sports shaped Thorpe. On a variety of playing fields, Thorpe fought to win and help his team. He had a tremendous passion to achieve his goals and dreams. He always sensed that his family was near his side throughout each competition.

James Francis "Jim" Thorpe was born approximately on May 28, 1888, near Prague, Oklahoma. He was a descendant of Sac and Fox and Potawatomi Indian bloodlines, as well as French and Irish roots. He was first given the name Wa-Tho-Huk, meaning "Bright Path" (bio., 2015). Jim grew up with his twin brother Charlie on a farm in Oklahoma. This is where Thorpe learned to hunt, ride a horse, and set traps (bio., 2015). Jim was an outdoor type of kid. He was not tall, but his parents realized he was athletically built, agile, and strong. At age six, Thorpe and his brother attended the local Indian boarding school; however, Jim did not demonstrate a strong interest in school. His brother, on the other hand, happened to enjoy school. Charlie was considered the brains of the family, whereas Jim was viewed as the athlete. At age nine, Charlie contracted

pneumonia and died. (CMG Worldwide, 2010). After his brother's tragic and untimely death, Jim wanted to quit school. Because Jim did not share the same passion for school as Charlie, he decided to run away from school. He ran twenty three miles to see his parents, but they demanded that he get an education and sent him to another school in Lawrence, Kansas. In Lawrence, he excelled in track and wanted to play football, but the school informed him he was too small play on the team.

When Thorpe turned sixteen, he decided to attend the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. This institution offered American Indians the opportunity to acquire training in over 20 trades. In addition to their studies, they would be offered off-campus employment at farms, homes, and industries. Thorpe decided to study electricity because it was the only subject that interested him. He also wanted to join the track team in Pennsylvania, but was not encouraged to participate. One day, some of the track athletes were practicing high jump when Jim approached them and asked if he might be allowed the chance to try one jump. The young men laughed and raised the bar to 5'9". No one had ever successfully jumped over the bar at that height. Jim, wearing only his work clothes, sprinted and jumped over the bar. In disbelief, the athletes watched Jim quietly walk away. The following day, he was called into the office by the famous track Coach, Pop Warner. He stated that Jim had broken the school record for high jump and enthusiastically invited Thorpe to join the track team. Jim proceeded to win multiple events in the high jump, sprints, and the hurdles.

Jim also wanted to play football, but Warner thought he was not big enough. Despite his small stature, Warner nevertheless decided to give Jim the opportunity to exhibit his potential on the gridiron (bio., 2015). Incredibly, on Thorpe's first attempt, he ran through the defense, scored, and later became the star of the team. He played multiple positions on both offense and defense. He dazzled his teammates and opponents alike by demonstrating his undeniable and surprising

talents. Starring as a halfback, place kicker, punter, and defender, Thorpe led his team to numerous victories over many top-ranked teams. During the 1911-12 season, his team achieved a record of 23-2-1. He was named All-American in 1911 and 1912 and also led his team to the national championship (Biography for kids: Jim Thorpe, 2015). Among Thorpe's other athletic accomplishments, he excelled in baseball, hockey, lacrosse, and ballroom dancing.

In *Away From Home*, the book illustrates how sports were used in boarding schools to help erase Native American culture and history from the students. However, this strategy backfired and did not accomplish the goal of inhibiting interest among the Native American students. On the other hand, sports provided an outlet for students to feel pride, pleasure, achievement, and also allowed them to rediscover and recover their cultural and historical identity. I empathize and understand this because sports have helped me to discover who I am as a person. This is where I block everything out and do what I love to do. I love being active, and sports have helped me to become who I am. They have shaped me into the person I am today. I can understand that Native Americans were not consciously going to use sports to erase their past, but, maybe, use it as a way to bring each other closer. It was a way to find out who they really were.

Once Thorpe was given permission, he started playing sports in boarding schools. I believe sports portray how strong one is, and Native Americans are strong human beings. They have suffered injustices over a long period of time, but sports helped them to open one of many paths to freedom and independence. For example, Jim Thorpe, demonstrated how sports could help one succeed and fulfill one's goals by raising one's self-esteem and confidence. By illustrating and modeling his accomplishments, Thorpe effectively demonstrated to others how he excelled in athletics. Later in 1912, at only age 24, Jim tried out for the United States Olympic team. He made the team, and famously participated in the decathlon and pentathlon. The decathlon has ten events

and the pentathlon has five events. Jim won four of the five events in the pentathlon. He finished with a score of 8,412.96 (out of a possible 10,000), beating the runner up by 700 points (bio., 2015). As a result of his dominance in track and field, Thorpe took home gold medals in both the pentathlon and decathlon. Jim Thorpe exemplified athletic ability and artistry at the highest possible level due to the grueling and demanding requirements of each of the events in both the pentathlon and decathlon. King Gustaf V of Sweden declared Jim Thorpe “the greatest athlete in the world.” Thorpe, a reserved man, simply responded, “Thank you King.”

But in January, a newspaper report broke a story that revealed Jim Thorpe had been paid to play minor league baseball in 1909 and 1910. Consequently, in 1913, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) took away his medals charging him with amateur status claiming that he was not playing sports for the love of the game, but for money. He was stripped of his medals and taken off the Olympic board despite his sensational accomplishments (bio., 2015). However, Thorpe tried his best to not let this massive setback affect his future opportunities.

Thorpe had played in the Minor Leagues for the Rocky Mount Railroaders in 1909-1910, where he pitched and played the outfield. After the debacle of the 1912 Olympics, he played professional baseball for the New York Giants as an outfielder and later married his college sweetheart, Iva Miller. He signed to play a seven-year major league contract, playing six seasons with the Giants, the Cincinnati Reds, and playing his final major league baseball season with the Boston Braves in 1919. However, in 1920, Thorpe decided to extend his career, and played Triple A Ball in the three major Triple A Leagues. Thorpe had always had trouble hitting a curveball. Over a six-year career, he batted a .252 average for the Giants, which was not considered a great batting

average compared to other successful batters. He played for the Giants for three seasons, and during his final year, his batting average rose to a respectable .327 average. After, he went to play for the Cincinnati Reds and the Boston Braves.

During his baseball career, Thorpe also played professional football. Thorpe played for the Canton (Ohio) Bulldogs from 1915-1920. In 1921, he changed teams and decided to play for the Cleveland Indians. Jim Thorpe's assistance was instrumental in boosting the American Professional Football Association. Later, Thorpe became the president of the American Professional Football Association. This association was subsequently named the National Football League (NFL). Thorpe played on six different teams during his professional football career, ending with the Chicago Cardinals in 1929. Although Thorpe's playing days were over by this time, he remained an energetic force in football. He then went on to organize, coach, and play with the Oorang Indians, a team which was consisted of American Indian players. They also performed war dances and other rituals to entertain audiences.

Life after his eventful athletic years were both ecstatic and sad for Thorpe. He worked as a superintendent of recreation in the Chicago Park System. He lectured and spoke extensively about matters of Indian affairs as well. In addition, Thorpe spoke to the public and led an all Indian song and dance entitled, "The Jim Thorpe Show." The Marines had the honor of Thorpe's presence, where he began serving at age fifty-eight. In spite of his many successes, Jim Thorpe also had his share of defeats which caused a number of problems throughout his later years. Thorpe had married three times and had eight children. In 1913, he married Iva Miller. They had a boy James, Jr., who died at age three from the influenza epidemic during World War I. They also had three daughters, Gail, Charlotte, and Grace, who all lived into the 1990's. Thorpe later divorced and married a

former baseball employee named Freeda Kirkpatrick in 1926. They both had four sons, Carl Philip, William, Richard, and John (Jack). Jack Thorpe, the youngest, eventually became principal chief of the Sauk and Fox in the 1980's. Thorpe encountered many difficulties after the end of his athletic career. He was able to find work in Hollywood where he appeared in several films. He starred in a few roles that depicted American Indians in stereotypical fashion from 1931 to 1950. Astonishingly, Thorpe appeared in more than sixty different films. Thorpe also took on odd jobs to support his seven children from his two previous marriages. Unfortunately, the accumulation of stresses and setbacks likely caused Thorpe to become an alcoholic. This had led to his second divorce in 1941 (CMG Worldwide, 2010).

Nevertheless, despite the struggles Thorpe went through, he always stood up for and championed his own people. Thorpe formed a casting company in order to encourage Hollywood studios to depict Native Americans in a realistic and positive light. He also sought to obtain the original Sac and Fox land holdings from the federal government. Realizing this was going to be a very difficult objective, Thorpe faced this daunting task like every sport he competed in; he persevered. He spent the little money he had made from public speaking, and married for the third and final time, in 1945, to Patricia Gladys Askew.

Thorpe achieved multiple accomplishments because of his hard work and long hours spent practicing. He proved many people wrong. Jim Thorpe was an all-around talented athlete and deserves to be recognized for all his accomplishments despite his race or background. Thorpe also achieved some public redemption in the final years of his life. Three years before Thorpe passed away, the Associated Press named him "the greatest athlete of the first half of the twentieth century in 1950", and the following year he was portrayed by Burt Lancaster in the film *Jim Thorpe—All American*. He was also inducted in numerous Hall of Fames, including the National Indian Hall of

Fame, Professional Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, the National Track and Field Hall of Fame, and most recently, the Pennsylvania and Oklahoma Halls of Fame. Thorpe also starred in many movies such as, *Yes Sir, That's My Baby* and a movie made about his life: *Jim Thorpe- All American* (Nelson 1340).

However, on March 28th, 1953 Jim Thorpe's life took a sudden turn. He suffered a violent heart attack and died in his trailer home in Lomita, California. He had been married to Patricia Gladys Askew for almost eight years. His body was later moved to an eastern Pennsylvania community where it was renamed to Jim Thorpe in exchange for housing his remains. *The New York Times* ran a front page story on the wonderful Jim Thorpe stating, "He was a magnificent performer. He had all the strength, speed and coordination of the finest players, plus an incredible stamina. The tragedy of the loss of his Stockholm medals because of thoughtless and unimportant professionalism darkened much of his career and should have been rectified long ago. His memory should be kept for what it deserves—that he was one of the greatest all-round athletes of our time." Later in 2000, ABC's *Wide World* named Jim Thorpe the Sports Athlete of the Century, ensuring that his unique legacy would continue to be celebrated and admired throughout America and the rest of the world (Jim Thorpe The World's Greatest Athlete).

Shortly after Thorpe passed away, his family realized that Thorpe deserved to be recognized for all of his great accomplishments. They had fought many long and hard years against the International Olympic Committee. Finally, in 1982, the IOC presented the family with his medals (bio., 2015). At that time, his name was restored to the Olympic record books as a co-winner of the 1912 track events. After years of supporting Thorpe's incredible accomplishments, his family donated the Olympic medals to the Oklahoma Historical Society where they were soon put on

display. This exhibit has allowed the entire nation to witness what one can achieve through perseverance and dedication. This ensures that Jim Thorpe's legacy will never be forgotten. Sports can often bring out the best in people and this can widely be appreciated and seen in Jim Thorpe.

In 2010, Jack Thorpe filed a federal lawsuit in order to bring back his father's remains to Oklahoma (bio. Jim Thorpe). A trial court judge initially sided with the family, but in 2014, a federal appeals court overturned that ruling to maintain Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania, as the legendary athlete's final resting place.

Jim Thorpe was a legendary Sac and Fox athlete. Widely considered to be the greatest all-around athlete who routinely stunned opponents in football, baseball, and in track and field. In all these events, Jim Thorpe personified grit, determination, and excellence. Despite the range of comments and opinions about Thorpe, he continued to excel and defy people's expectations. On page 107 in the book *Away From Home* it states, "Thorpe played semi-pro baseball, lead his football team to multiple successful seasons, was named to the All-American football team two years in a row, was the first athlete to win both the decathlon and pentathlon, and then later was named the Greatest Male Athlete of the First Half of the Twentieth Century. Jim Thorpe was truly a one of a kind figure in our country's history.

Understanding the reputation Thorpe has acquired, demonstrates he was not just an "athlete", he was one of the best Native American athletes around. I chose to write about Jim Thorpe because of my enduring passion for sports. I too, excelled in multiple sports including basketball, volleyball, softball, cheerleading, and archery in high school. I was named Athlete of the Week and had multiple awards as well. Like Thorpe, I was consistently mentioned in the newspaper.

Personally I think one of the better quotes from *Away From Home* is, "No athlete has ever equaled Thorpe's success in all three sports— football, baseball, and track and field— and no

athlete has ever broken his record of winning both the decathlon and pentathlon in the Olympic games.” Race and ethnic background should not determine whether a person chooses to play sports. Each individual plays a specific role and helps the team become the best. Perfection is not a quality simply given, it is achieved through hard work and dedication, as shown by Jim Thorpe. It is difficult in today’s environment to truly appreciate the pioneering efforts of Jim Thorpe. His background, ethnicity, and race could easily have stalled his aspirations and dreams of becoming a world class athlete and representative of a people with so many historical misfortunes.

Describing Jim Thorpe as simply a “great” athlete fails to capture the extraordinary hold he had on the American imagination. This is especially important when one understands how much he identified with his Native American roots. By exceeding expectations time and time again, Thorpe managed to defy and bewilder millions of people. He wanted to be known for his athletic and non-athletic accomplishments. I believe that he succeeded in this endeavor. It is also true that he had his share of misfortunes and failures. Divorces, financial instability, declining health were also key determinants that shaped the course of the later part of his life. Nevertheless, it is impressive how he continued to battle the odds and try to provide for his family and support the rights of Native Americans. His family suffered many hardships and did everything they could to make it possible for him to succeed. Thorpe’s family knew how hard Jim had worked to succeed and so they did not give up their fight until Jim received the recognition he deserved. Thorpe proved he was one of the greatest Native American athletes of all times. Thorpe passed away on March 28th, 1953 from a heart attack, but his accomplishments will never be forgotten.

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