

JIM THORPE, THE WORLD'S GREATEST ATHLETE

Synopsis

At the beginning of the 20th century there were just 250,000 Native Americans remaining in the United States. Most had died of disease transmitted by whites or had been annihilated in a series of Indian wars. The great Indian leaders of the 19th century, who had resisted the European conquest, were all dead or in prison. Indians were thought of as a vanishing race and it was believed that within one hundred years they would be gone. A number of tribes scratched out a meager existence in Indian Territory (present day Oklahoma) where they had been forcibly settled. In 1907, Hiram Thorpe, of the Sac and Fox tribe, sent his son Jim off to the government's Carlisle Indian School, hoping the experience would tame the boy's wild ways. At the time Hiram said to his son: "I want you to prove to the other races what an Indian can do." Hiram died shortly afterwards, leaving his son an orphan but at school Jim embarked on a career in sports that would lead to his becoming the best known athlete in American history, amply fulfilling his father's wish.

Carlisle, the school where Thorpe was sent, was founded by Richard Pratt, an Army man who had been entrusted with famous American Indian prisoners of war. He became convinced that education, not conflict, was the key to solving "the Indian problem." It was also cheaper than the cost of military campaigns against the remaining tribes. Pratt's idea was to use military discipline to transform Indians into citizens. At Carlisle students were forbidden to speak their own language. Their hair was cut, they wore military style uniforms, and infractions of the rules prohibiting "Indian" behavior were severely punished. Vocational skills were stressed. A basic assumption was that civilizing Indians meant turning them into compliant servants and laborers. For many native youth Carlisle was devastating. More ran away than graduated; the school's aggressive deracination undermined young peoples' sense of themselves. The unofficial motto of the Carlisle School was: "To save the man you must kill the Indian."

Thorpe had a love/hate relationship with Carlisle. He was a poor student but it's also where he first gained recognition as an athlete. Glenn Scobey ("Pop") Warner was his football coach and mentor. Pop discovered Jim, showed him a way to excel and take pride in himself and made him a star player. Carlisle's football team, the Carlisle Indians, had a national reputation. It wasn't long before Jim and his teammates were winning games against Harvard and Yale.

Jim was a multi-talented athlete. In the summer of 1912 he won two gold medals, for the pentathlon and decathlon events, at the Stockholm Olympics. The King of Sweden gave him a special award. Overnight he became an American hero and when he returned from Stockholm he was given a ticker tape parade on Broadway. Of that day he later recalled: "I heard people yelling my name and I couldn't realize how one fellow could have so many friends."

Jim's Olympic victories held a tremendous significance for Native Americans. When he returned home to Oklahoma he was honored in much the same way that a great warrior would have been honored in earlier times, with blessings and gifts of eagle feathers and tobacco.

Indians never lost faith in Jim but it was a different story with the media and the sports establishment. Jim, like many of his teammates at Carlisle, took "summer jobs," playing semi-pro baseball to earn some money to help support his extended family in Oklahoma. But strict Olympic rules barred the participation of non-amateur athletes. When it was discovered that Jim had played baseball for money a huge scandal resulted and he was stripped of his gold medals. He had had no idea that he had done wrong (the distinction of amateur versus professional makes little sense in an Indian world view) and though he defended himself he was vilified in the press as a "cheating Indian." Jim himself felt betrayed by the very system that had capitalized on his rise to athletic glory.

Though Jim was stripped of his amateur status and his Olympic gold medals this was by no means the end of his sport career. He went on to play professional baseball for National League teams in New York, Cincinnati and Boston, through 1919. From 1919 to 1926 he was one of the early stars of American Professional football. He was the first president of the American Professional Football Association (later known as the NFL).

In his later life Jim was a tireless advocate of Indian rights and self-sufficiently, using his status as a sports hero, to speak out against the paternalistic policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and to encourage Native Americans to take their destiny in the 20th century into their own hands. He was a strong and gentle man who never lost his sense of who he was and where he came from, and who is justly revered by Native Americans and sports enthusiasts alike.