

# CHAPTER SIX

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## THE OLYMPIC GAMES

*At the modern Olympics athletes were amateurs. To be an amateur means that you do not compete for money, but in those days the word “amateur” carried a broader meaning: The London Athletic Club defined an amateur as a “gentleman” and decreed that “No person shall be considered as an amateur. . .who is a mechanic, artisan or laborer, since the average workman has no idea of sport for its own sake.” — Narrator, Jim Thorpe, *The World’s Greatest Athlete**

**The Olympic Games** were the oldest and one of the most important of the many festivals of ancient Greece. Begun around 776 B.C. in Olympia, Greece, they took place every four years until 393 A.D., when they were banned by the Roman Emperor Theodosius. The often warring city-states of Greece observed a truce during each Olympiad and sent their best athletes to compete in athletic competitions such as running, wrestling, and jumping. Each winning athlete was crowned with a laurel wreath. The ancient Olympics encouraged peace, friendly competition, and the ideal of a fit and healthy citizenry.

It was because of a belief in the importance of those same ideals that the Olympic Games were resurrected fifteen centuries later. The modern Olympics were in part the creation of a French aristocrat, **Baron Pierre de Coubertin**. De Coubertin became convinced at an early age that France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 was due to the French soldiers’ lack of vigor. Exercise, he concluded, especially sports, helped to produce a stronger, more vigorous person. In 1890, at the age of 27, he organized and founded the Union des Sociétés Françaises des Sports Athlétiques. Two years later, he proposed the revival of the Olympic Games.

But de Coubertin was not the first to propose the renewal of the Games or even to help stage modern games based on the ancient Olympics. Others, in Greece and England, suggested the revival of the Olympics well before de Coubertin. In 1835, Panagiotis Soutsos, a Greek poet, proposed to the Greek government the idea of a new Olympics to celebrate Greece’s recently won independence from the Ottoman Empire. In 1856, **Evangelis Zappas**, one of the wealthiest men in eastern Europe, not only proposed reviving the games in Athens but agreed to finance them. Zappas’ Olympic Games took place in Athens in 1859, but on a small scale and with poorly trained athletes. In 1865 Zappas died, leaving his entire fortune to Greece for their Olympics. His will stated that part of the money should be used to build an Olympic stadium on the site of the ancient Panathenaic stadium. It also stipulated that Zappas’ body should be buried at his estate in Romania and his head encased in the new Athens stadium. But the next Greek Olympic Games did not take place until 1870.

Meanwhile, an English doctor named **William Penny Brookes**, who admired the ancient games, was following the new Olympic movement. He created an organization that managed to stage a British National Olympic Games in 1866. The

Games took place in the Crystal Palace, London's huge indoor arena. They were attended by 10,000 spectators, as well as competitors from all walks of life.

In spite of the Games' obvious success, many of England's top athletes boycotted them: Brooke's English Olympics had a powerful enemy, the **English Amateur Athletic Club** (AAC). The club, a creation of politically connected men of the upper class, controlled sport in Britain. They disagreed with Brookes, who believed that talent and achievement, not birth, was the measure of who should be allowed to compete. It was the opposite for the AAC.

The Amateur Athletic Club officially boycotted the 1867 and 1868 National Olympics, decreeing that anyone who took part in contests that included "professionals" (meaning all men of the working classes) would themselves be barred from AAC events. It brought an end to Dr. Brookes' National Games.

Brookes did not abandon his dream. He was the first to propose an International Olympic Games as "a generous rivalry with athletes of other nations in the time-consecrated stadium at Athens." In the 1880s the young French aristocrat Pierre de Coubertin corresponded with Brookes and visited him in England. Inspired by the English doctor's ideas and work on a national scale, de Coubertin became an ardent promoter of an international Olympics.

In 1892, de Coubertin brought together delegates from nine countries, who voted unanimously to revive the Games. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) was created. Demetrios Vikelas of Greece was chosen as its first president. Unfortunately, the IOC also chose to follow the AAC's restrictive definition of amateur athletics. Furthermore, Coubertin took full credit for the idea and went so far as to deny ever having had contact with Brookes. As a result, de Coubertin is most often cited as the father of the modern Olympics. Brookes died in the spring of 1896, before he could see his dream come true.

The first modern international Olympics was held in Athens in 1896, three months after Brookes died. It was surprisingly successful. The highlight came in the **marathon**, the final event, which was first introduced that year. It was meant to memorialize the fabled run of the Greek soldier Pheidippides from the Battle of

Marathon to Athens in 490 B.C. Fittingly, that first modern marathon was won by Spyros Louis – the only Greek athlete to take a first place. His victory was celebrated by the whole country.

The next three Olympics, in Paris (1900), St. Louis (1904), and Athens (1906), were hampered by poor organization and political infighting. The 1908 Games in London fared better, but they were far from perfect. The modern Olympic Games might not have survived had it not been for a dramatic reversal of fortune in **Stockholm**, in 1912. Two things restored the Games to the world stage. The first was Sweden's hosting of the Games. The second was Jim Thorpe.

Swedish organization was so effective and efficient that the Games were later described as "the clockwork Olympics" and the "Swedish masterpiece." On July 6, 1912, a crowd of 30,000 watched the opening day parade of 2,407 athletes from twenty-eight countries march into the **new stadium in Stockholm**.

Jim Thorpe, more than any other athlete, took center stage, and no one would ever mention the Swedish Olympics without thinking of him. His exploits in Stockholm made him an instant international sensation, universally acclaimed as "the Greatest Athlete in the World."



*US Olympic Marathon Team, 1912*

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The American Olympic team that included Jim was diverse and colorful. Many of its members did not fit the British elite's definition of a true amateur as a mem-

ber of the upper class (understood to mean exclusively of white and of noble blood). **Howard Drew**, a sprinter, was an African American. The world-class swimmer **Duke Kahanamoku** was a Hawaiian islander.



*Howard Drew*  
LA84 FOUNDATION

Pat McDonald, who would win the shotput, was a traffic cop from New York City. **Abel Kiviat**, then the world record holder in the 1,500 meters, and Jim Thorpe's roommate on the ship that carried the U.S. team to Europe, was a Jew. Andrew Sockalexis, a marathon runner, was a Penobscot Indian and a cousin of Louis Sockalexis, the first American Indian to play major league baseball. Then there was **Louis Tewanima**, the Hopi long-distance runner who had been sent to Carlisle Indian School as a prisoner, and Jim Thorpe, who was so poor that he had to borrow from his better-off teammates.

Although he was representing the United States, Jim was still an American Indian and, like all Indians, legally a ward of the federal government. It was government policy that any money earned from leasing or extracting oil or minerals from Indian land was not paid to Indians directly but held in trust for them by **Indian agents**, men employed by the federal government to manage the affairs of each reservation. Jim had written to his Indian agent to ask for some of the funds paid into his account for the leasing of his lands. But Horace Johnson, the superintendent of the Sac and

Fox Agency, disapproved of Jim "wasting his time" going to the Olympics and denied his request.

"He is 25 years old," Johnson wrote, "and should be perfectly content to make his own living without depending on trust and lease funds which have cost him no effort to obtain. ... I understand that a trip to Sweden might be of considerable benefit to the young man, but I am strongly convinced that instead of being a benefit it will be a deterrent. He has now reached the age when, instead of gallivanting around the country, he should be at work on his allotment."



*Warner, Tewanima and Thorpe  
at the Olympic Homecoming Reception*  
JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION

One of the men on the U.S. team who lived up to the British "amateur" ideal was **Avery Brundage**, who came from a wealthy Midwestern family. Brundage, who was soundly beaten by Thorpe in the events in which he competed against him, became the president of the International Olympic Committee in 1952 and held the post for twenty years. He was so zealous in defending the strict definition of amateurism that he earned the nickname "slavery Avery." Significantly, Brundage refused to consider any of the many petitions that were made to restore Jim Thorpe's Olympic records.

When Jim Thorpe won the pentathlon at the start of the Games, the world press began following the big Indian's every move. By the time he won the **1,500 meter race** of the decathlon, the final event of the competition, he had arguably become the most famous athlete in modern history.



*Thorpe Throws Javelin*  
JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION



*Thorpe Broad Jump, Stockholm 1912*  
JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION



*Thorpe Shot Put, Stockholm 1912*  
CUMBERLAND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



*Thorpe (2<sup>nd</sup> from left) in 1500 Meter Race, Stockholm 1912*

JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION

Although no film of his Olympic competitions exists, there are newsreel shots of Thorpe being crowned by King Gustav of Sweden with a laurel wreath. The king also gave him a gold-and-jewel-encrusted model of a Viking ship and a bust of Gustav himself.

The King's voice reportedly shook with emotion as he took Thorpe's hand and said "Sir, you are the greatest athlete in the world."

The Greatest Athlete in the World. It was a title that would remain with Thorpe throughout his life, despite the scandal over his amateur status. He was officially stripped of his Olympic honors only a few months later.



# THE OLYMPIC GAMES

## Concepts and Discussion

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students learn about the origins of the modern Olympic Games.

### TEACHER'S QUICK REFERENCE

- Olympics in Ancient Greece
- Baron Pierre de Coubertin
- Evangelis Zappas finances the 1859 Games
- Brookes' British National Games, 1866-1888
- English Amateur Athletic Club created 1866.
- International Olympic Committee created 1892
- Rules derived from British concept of amateurism
- First Modern International Games, Athens, 1896
- Failures in Paris and St. Louis, 1900 and 1904
- Swedish Games in 1912
- American Olympic team
- Jim wins pentathlon and decathlon and is named "World's Greatest Athlete" by King Gustav of Sweden

### KEY CONTENT

- Development of Modern Olympics
- The role of Greek, British, and French supporters,
- Zappas, Brookes, and de Coubertin
- The creation of the IOC and rules of amateurism
- The early Games of the twentieth century
- The Swedish success and Jim Thorpe's victories

### CONTENT REVIEW

- What was the purpose of the Olympics in ancient Greece?
- Who were the founders of the modern Olympics?
- What role did Brookes play?
- Who was Baron Pierre de Coubertin?
- What problems did the first four modern Olympiads face?
- Why were the Stockholm Games so successful?
- What was unusual about the American team in 1912?
- Who was Avery Brundage?
- Why was it surprising that Jim Thorpe did so well?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In what ways were the modern Olympics the same or different from the ancient games that inspired them?
- Why were the early modern Olympic Games important to the countries that participated in them?
- Debate and differentiate the contributions of the men who conceived and created the modern Olympics.
- Discuss how the Olympics today might be different if the IOC had not adopted the British rules of amateurism.
- Do you think the Olympics today have the same importance and meaning to countries and athletes as they did 100 years ago? Consider, for example, the 2008 Beijing Olympics. What has changed? What is the same?

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

*All American, The Rise and Fall of Jim Thorpe* by Bill Crawford, John Wiley & Sons, 2005. One of the best-written books about Jim Thorpe's life, its focus is largely on the first three decades of Jim's life and his downfall after the Olympic Games.

*The Best of the Athletic Boys, The White Man's Impact on Jim Thorpe* by Jack Newcombe, Doubleday and Company, 1975. Though it lacks an index and does not cite any of its sources, this book still remains one of the first and best sources for information about the life of Jim Thorpe.

*A Brief History of the Olympic Games* by David C. Young, Blackwell Publishing, 2004. A thorough yet concise book on the history of the creation of the modern Games by one of the foremost experts on the Olympics.

*Jim Thorpe, World's Greatest Athlete* by Robert W. Wheeler, University of Oklahoma Press, 1975. Wheeler's book is crucial for anyone interested in Thorpe's life. It remains the most thorough biography of Jim Thorpe, contains interviews with numerous members of Jim's family and people who knew him, and is also the only book about Jim Thorpe written with access to Jim's extensive personal scrapbooks.

