

CHAPTER SEVEN

BASEBALL AND JIM THORPE

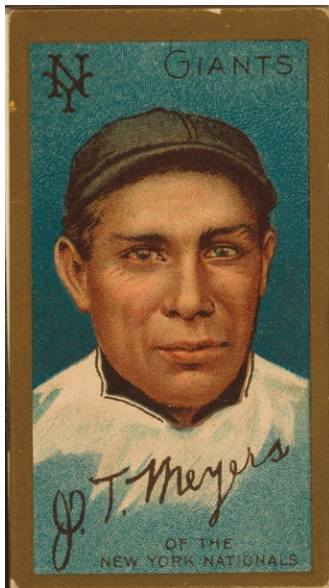
*As soon as he was disqualified as an amateur, offers of big money came in. In 1913 football only enjoyed wide popularity as a college game. Baseball was all the rage. Several major league teams wanted Jim. He chose the best offer, signing with the New York Giants for \$6,000 a year and a \$500 bonus, a generous contract for an untried prospect. — Narrator, Jim Thorpe, *The World's Greatest Athlete**

AMERICA'S GAME

The poet Walt Whitman said of baseball: *“It’s our game ... America’s game.”* In the early decades of the twentieth century, no sport in the United States could rival baseball. It truly was a national sport, and also the only one where a man could earn a good living as an athlete. When Jim Thorpe signed with the New York Giants in 1913, baseball had been a professional sport for almost 50 years. *The Cincinnati Red Stockings* became the first openly salaried team in 1869. The *National League* was formed in 1876.

AMERICAN INDIANS IN BASEBALL

Besides Thorpe, there was one other American Indian on the New York Giants team. He was *John Meyers*, a Cahuilla Indian from California. He played catcher for the Giants from 1909 to 1915 and earned the nickname of “the Ironman of the League” for catching in most of their games from 1910 on. He was also known as “Chief Meyers.” Even though Meyers was not in fact a chief, it was the persistent habit of sports writers and promoters to refer to any Indian player as “Chief.”



John Tortes (a.k.a. “Chief”) Meyers Baseball Card

Thorpe and Meyers were not the first American Indians in baseball. The first to become famous was *Louis “Sock” Sockalexis*, a Penobscot from Maine. As a star college player at Holy Cross, he pitched no-hitters, and his two-year batting average was an incredible .440. Sock broke into the major leagues in 1897 with the Cleveland Spiders. Playing as an outfielder, he batted .331 in sixty-six games. But he only played as a pro for three years, his career tragically shortened by alcohol. In 1915 the Cleveland team (which had become the Cleveland Naps) was renamed the “Cleveland Indians” by a panel of local sports writers. Although there are several theories as to the source of that name, many believe it was chosen as a tribute to Sock’s popularity.

Charles Bender, a Chippewa, was one of Jim's idols. As soon as Bender graduated from Carlisle Indian School in 1902, he began his professional baseball career in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. His best years as a pro were from 1903 to 1914 with the Philadelphia Athletics. He appeared in five World Series and was widely regarded as one of the two or three best pitchers in the American League in 1910. He was later chosen for the Baseball Hall of Fame.

THORPE AND BASEBALL AT CARLISLE SCHOOL

When Thorpe was a student at Carlisle, baseball was already one of his favorite games. He had the potential to become a star player at the school, but the athletic director, **Glenn "Pop" Warner**, had other plans for him. Early on Warner observed Thorpe's natural ability in track sports and conceived the long-range plan of grooming him for the Olympics. Because the track and baseball seasons coincided, Thorpe did not play baseball for Carlisle on a regular basis. But Warner did allow him to join the Carlisle baseball team at the end of the 1908 track season, where he reportedly pitched a 1-0 shutout against a professional team from Hagerstown.

SUMMER BALL AND AMATEUR ATHLETIC RULES

Although it was against the rules governing amateur athletics, it was common practice for college students to play "summer ball," for semi-pro baseball teams. (A semi-pro athlete is one who engages in a sport for pay but not as a full-time profession.) Athletes could earn a little money (often playing under an assumed name) and then return to their schools in the fall, where they competed as amateur athletes on the gridiron.

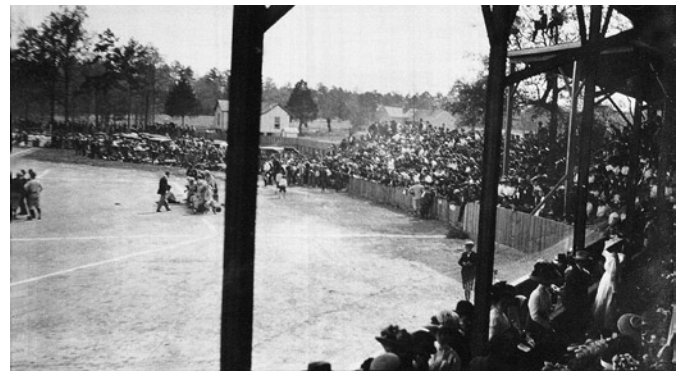
Pop Warner appears to have had a network of semi-pro contacts to which he would not just recommend but send his "boys," so that they would stay in shape over the summer. In fact, he often called attention to the letters praising his athletes that he received from the managers and coaches of the pro team for which they had played summer ball.

After the scandal over Jim Thorpe's "pro ball career" broke in 1913, both Pop Warner and Carlisle Superintendent Moses Friedman swore that they had as-

sumed Jim Thorpe had gone home to Oklahoma when he left Carlisle in 1908. But documents from Carlisle tell another story. Thorpe's official school record states plainly that he was "granted a summer leave to play baseball in the South."

Furthermore, Jim had made no secret about his desire to play the one sport where he could earn a living. At one point, coming home from a track meet by train, Warner recalled Jim saying, "Shucks, Pop, I'm through with track. It's me for baseball."

Jim left Carlisle in June 1908 and went south to North Carolina with two friends, Jesse Youngdeer and Joe Libby. That summer Jim played forty-four games as a pitcher and infielder in the loosely organized **Class D Eastern Carolina League**, for the Rocky Mountain Railroaders. His hitting was average, but his speed and fielding was admired, and he was regularly mentioned in the local papers. At the end of that summer he went back home to Oklahoma. It appeared that he had no intention of returning to Carlisle.



Cone Ballpark, Greensboro NC, around 1910
GREENSBORO HISTORICAL MUSEUM

Pop Warner tried to lure him back after a dismal 1909 football season, but Jim only showed up in the stands, as a spectator at a Carlisle game against St. Louis University.

In 1910, Jim returned to the Carolina leagues for another season. That same year, exasperated because baseball was drawing away so many of his athletes, Warner dropped baseball as a sport at Carlisle "because of summer professionalism."

Just as in 1909, Jim Thorpe earned about \$60 a month for the 1910 season in North Carolina. He was a favorite with the Fayetteville Highlanders. Charley

Clancy, the team manager, kept a photo on his wall showing Jim with other Fayetteville players on a hunting trip. After a minor injury in his last game, Jim went back again to Oklahoma, where he remained through the summer of 1911.

THORPE ASKED BACK TO CARLISLE

It was there on a street in Anadarko, Oklahoma, that Thorpe encountered his old Carlisle teammate and mentor, Albert Exendine. Exendine would write to Pop Warner that Jim seemed “as big as a mountain.” They had a long talk, and Exendine convinced Thorpe to return to football at Carlisle to play football. It is quite probable that this meeting was no accident and that Pop had dispatched Exendine to bring back their wayward star.



Albert Exendine

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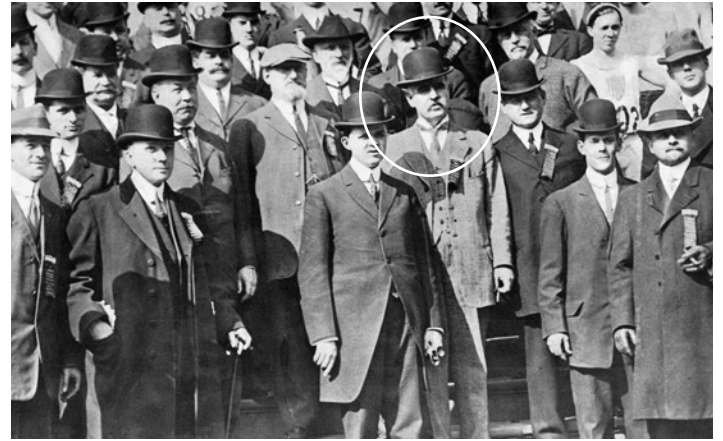
After his Olympic victories in 1912, Thorpe received numerous offers from professional baseball teams, but Pop urged him to return to Carlisle. There, in 1912, he played his greatest season of football. He led Carlisle in its deeply symbolic victory over the U.S. Army team

at West Point and earned a spot on the All-American team for a second year.

“THORPE NO AMATEUR”

Jim intended to go on to a final year of track at Carlisle, but in January of 1913, the public revelation of his previous involvement in baseball changed everything. A newspaper story quoted Charley Clancy, the manager of the Fayetteville Highlanders, on Jim’s tenure as a paid player. The headline “Thorpe No Amateur” quickly went around the world.

Pop Warner at first denied it and attempted to shield Thorpe from the press. Carlisle Superintendent Friedman and James Sullivan of the Amateur Athletic Union (which had sponsored the U.S. Olympic team) also denied the account, even though Jim had never made a secret about playing summer ball.



James Sullivan with Marathon Race Officials in New York
US ARMY MILITARY HISTORY INSTITUTE,
CARLISLE BARRACKS COLLECTION

THE BETRAYAL

When the evidence mounted, including the hunting photo on Clancy’s wall and newspaper accounts from North Carolina, Pop Warner changed his tune. Warner, Friedman, and Sullivan could be ruined if it was discovered they had knowingly sponsored a professional athlete at the Stockholm Olympics. There was only one way out. Warner and Friedman wrote a letter in which Jim “confessed” to deceiving his coach and everyone else because he was “simply an Indian school boy” and did not know he was doing wrong. Other members of the Carlisle team urged Thorpe not to go

along with it, but he remained loyal to Coach Warner and did as he was told.

Although the International Olympic Committee did not ask for the return of Thorpe's medals, **Sullivan** insisted. The AAU stripped Thorpe of his amateur status. Pop Warner packed up Thorpe's Olympic trophies, which he had "in safekeeping" for Jim, and returned them to the International Olympic Committee.

THE NEW YORK GIANTS

Warner's involvement with Thorpe did not end there. He subsequently acted as his agent, negotiating a lucrative contract with the Giants for \$6,500, a huge sum at that time. As Thorpe's manager, Pop Warner pocketed a fee of \$2,500.



Thorpe Signs Giants Contract, 1913

JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION

One of the questions about Thorpe's career in professional baseball is why he was not more successful. Some have speculated that he was not given time to mature as a pro player with experience in the minor leagues. Although his fielding average as an outfielder was well above .900 in five of the six years he was in the majors, it was said he just couldn't hit a curve ball.

There is another explanation. When Thorpe was signed by the Giants, it was not for his ability as a player, but for his fame. In 1912 baseball attendance at baseball games was falling off. Bringing in the famous Jim Thorpe was a way to get fans to come to games just to see him, whether he played or not.

To Giants manager **John J. McGraw**, Thorpe was just an attraction, not a valued team member. He was never a star because he was never given the chance to shine. He was kept visible, but more often on the bench than on the field.

Another reason for Thorpe's relative lack of success in baseball was the prejudice against Native Americans that prevailed at the time. If it was hard for a new white player to make it in the pro game, it was twice as hard for an Indian, who had to deal with racial taunts from hostile crowds and racial stereotyping in the press.

Finally there was the hot-tempered Giants manager. John McGraw had a penchant for harsh language and was ejected from the game more than 100 times for his outbursts. McGraw and Thorpe did not get along. Jim resented having to ride the bench "like a sittin' hen." The tension between the two men reached a head when McGraw called Jim a "dumb Indian." **Al Schacht** was Jim's roommate during his years with the Giants. According to Schacht, who gained a reputation as a baseball clown, entertaining fans with his antics after his effective playing days were past, "that kind of abuse was the only thing that Jim would not tolerate. Jim took off after McGraw and chased him all over the Polo Grounds. It took half the team to stop him." Soon after that, Thorpe left the Giants.



Al Schacht, Clown Prince of Baseball

NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME

BASEBALL CAREER CONTINUES

Part way through the 1919 season, Thorpe was sold by the Giants to the Boston Braves. There he finished off the season, playing as an outfielder in 60 games

with a fielding average of .926. He batted an impressive .327. Clearly, he must have been hitting a few curve balls then.

In 1920 Thorpe became increasingly involved with professional football and left major league baseball. However, he continued to play baseball with Triple A (Minor League) teams in the spring and summer. At Akron in 1920 he batted .360. In Toledo in 1921 his average was .358. Jim Thorpe played his last minor league baseball game in 1928 at the age of 40.



Thorpe in Toledo Mudhens Uniform, 1921
CUMBERLAND COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY



BASEBALL

Concepts and Discussion

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students learn about American Indians in baseball and the role the sport played in Jim Thorpe's athletic career.

TEACHER'S QUICK REFERENCE

- The Cincinnati Red Stockings become the first professional baseball team in 1869.
- Baseball was the only broadly popular professional team sport in the United States in the nineteenth century.
- Besides Jim Thorpe, famous American Indian ball players include Louis Sockalexis, Charles Bender, and John Meyers.
- Thorpe is singled out for track at Carlisle Indian School but plays a few games with the Carlisle baseball team.
- Contrary to the rules of amateur athletics, "summer ball" is tolerated and even encouraged by coach Pop Warner.
- Jim plays semi-pro baseball in North Carolina for two years.
- After two years' absence, Thorpe is lured back to the Carlisle School to reverse the losing streak of the football team.
- A newspaper article breaks the news about Thorpe's pro-baseball career.
- Warner, Sullivan, and Friedman first deny that Thorpe played for money and then force his "confession." Thorpe loses his Olympic medals.
- Thorpe signs with the New York Giants Baseball Team.
- His Olympic fame is a drawing card for the Giants, but he is kept on the bench most of the time.
- Prejudice and disagreement with Giants manager John McGraw force Thorpe's departure from the team.
- Jim Thorpe continues playing for Triple A teams until age 40.

KEY CONTENT

- Baseball as early national sport
- American Indians in the sport
- Amateur athletics and "summer ball"
- Loss of Jim Thorpe's Olympic medals
- Jim Thorpe in professional baseball

CONTENT REVIEW

- Who were some of the successful Indians in early baseball?
- Why was Jim Thorpe so interested in playing baseball?

- What was summer ball, and how did it involve Thorpe?
- Why did Pop Warner send his players to the summer leagues?
- Why did Pop Warner and Carlisle try to deny knowledge of Thorpe's summer ball?
- How and why was Thorpe's semi-pro career revealed?
- Why did Jim Thorpe not get much playing time on the Giants team?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Consider the difficulties that Jim Thorpe and other American athletes faced in professional baseball from racism and stereotyping. Discuss how this may have been similar to or different from the problems faced by Black athletes such as Jackie Robinson.
- Why did Jim Thorpe remain loyal to Coach Warner during the scandal and afterwards? Consider in your discussion the roles that coaches play in the lives of athletes in your discussion. Then speculate on what might have happened had Jim Thorpe not written that letter of confession.

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