

# CHAPTER EIGHT

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## PRO FOOTBALL'S EARLY YEARS

*Then all of a sudden this team was playing to 6,000–8,000 people. I personally think that the Oorang Indians, the Canton Bulldogs, and the Massillon Tigers were three teams that probably introduced people to pro football. — Robert Whitman.*

**Professional football** got its start long after pro baseball, and for many years was largely ignored by the general public. Prior to 1915, when Jim Thorpe signed with the **Canton Bulldogs**, there was little money in the game. The players earned less than was paid, under the table, to some allegedly amateur players on successful college teams.



*Jim Thorpe, 1920s*  
JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION

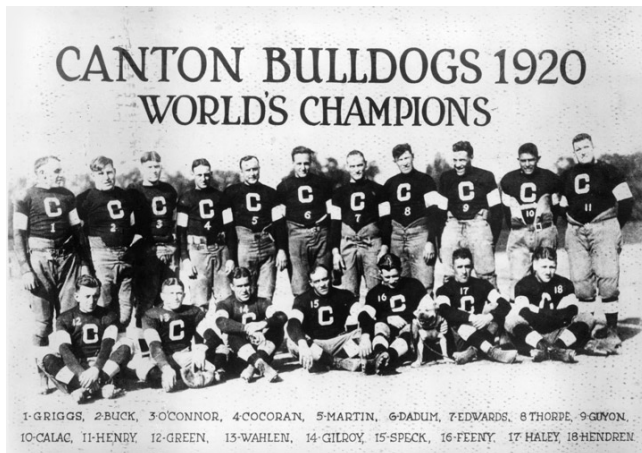
Things changed when Thorpe entered the pro game. Jack Cusack, the manager of the Canton Bulldogs, recalled:

“I hit the jackpot by signing the famous Jim Thorpe ... some of my business ‘advisers’ frankly predicted that I was leading the Bulldogs into bankruptcy by paying Jim the enormous sum of \$250 a game, but the deal paid off even beyond my greatest expectations. Jim was an attraction as well as a player. Whereas our paid attendance averaged about 1,200 before we took him on, we filled the Massillon and Canton parks for the next two games — 6,000 for the first and 8,000 for the second. All the fans wanted to see the big Indian in action. On the field, Jim was a fierce competitor, absolutely fearless. Off the field, he was a lovable fellow, big-hearted and with a good sense of humor.”

Unlike Thorpe’s experience in professional baseball, he was fully utilized on the gridiron as a running back, kicker, and fierce defensive player. In 1916 **Thorpe and the Canton Bulldogs** went 9-0-1. Then, before 10,000 fans, they won the professional football championship, a feat that he and Canton repeated in 1919.

Despite its success, things were poorly organized in the first five years of professional football, when Jim Thorpe was at his peak. There are photos and news

accounts of many games, but no official statistics were kept, so the record of his accomplishments in that early period is incomplete and largely anecdotal.



*Canton Bulldogs World Champions*  
JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION

Then in 1920 pro football took a major step forward. The *American Professional Football League*, later to become the NFL, was formed. The fourteen teams that eventually signed up were the Akron Pros, the Buffalo All-Americans, the Canton Bulldogs, the Chicago Cardinals, the Chicago Tigers, the Cleveland Tigers, the Columbus Panhandles, the Dayton Triangles, the Decatur Staleys (led by George Halas, whose team that would become the Chicago Bears), the Detroit Heralds, the Hammond Pros, the Muncie Flyers, the Rochester Jeffersons, and the Rock Island Independents.

Jim Thorpe was chosen as the president of the league. His position was largely symbolic, but his name was a major selling point for the new endeavor.



*Thorpe (center) and Lingo (right) with Airedales*  
JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION

In 1922 Thorpe took part in forming one of the most unusual franchises in the history of professional sports. For several years, he'd been friends with a dog breeder named Walter Lingo. Like Jim, Lingo loved the outdoors, and the two of them spent hours hunting together. Lingo raised and sold Airedales from his *Oorang Kennels* in the small town of LaRue, Ohio. Lingo publicized his business by placing his Airedales with famous people. Gary Cooper, the movie star, President Warren Harding, and Jim Thorpe were three doting recipients.

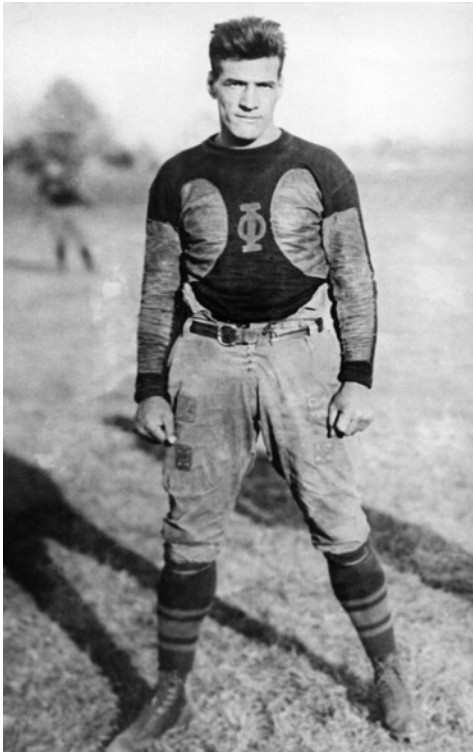


*Gary Cooper and Rusty*  
ROBERT WHITMAN COLLECTION

While Thorpe and Lingo were on a hunting trip, the idea of starting an all-Indian football team sponsored by the kennel came up. Jim agreed to be both a coach and a player. In June of 1922, Lingo paid \$100 to purchase a franchise for a new professional football team that he named the *Oorang Indians*.

Thorpe and Lingo recruited *players* from reservations and Indian boarding schools around the country. Some, like *Joe Guyon*, (the only other American Indian besides Jim Thorpe to be named to the Pro Football hall of Fame), Pete Calac, and Elmer Busch had been part of the great Carlisle teams of the past.

Jack Thorpe, Jim's younger brother, was also part of the first squad of 17 Indian players.



Joe Guyon

ROBERT WHITMAN COLLECTION

Because LaRue, population 750, had no football field, all Oorang games were played on the road. Training was relaxed and unorthodox. It consisted of equal parts football practice and hunting with Lingo's dogs. Nighttime coon hunts or chases after the tame bears kept by Lingo were part of the fun.

The main goals of the Oorang Indians were to publicize the Oorang kennels, to entertain the public, to have fun, and to win football games, more or less in that order.

At half time the team put Lingo's dogs through their paces and enacted a Wild West show, in which the players put on Indian regalia and did war dances. In this way Thorpe and his men were playing, tongue in cheek, with the image of being Native American.

Over the last two centuries American Indians have often found themselves compelled to play the part of being Indian for white audiences in order to be considered authentic or to earn a living. For example, nineteenth-century tribal leaders who normally wore the same clothing as white farmers would dress in more traditional garb when visiting Washington, D.C., on diplomatic missions. And Indians who wished to be employed as entertainers, such as the men who worked in the popular Wild West Shows, were required to look Indian, to wear feathers, and whoop it up.

Most of the men on the Oorang team were well educated, but they seem to have enjoyed getting away with acting like wild Indians, the more outrageous the better. Instead of the everyday names they usually went by, the Oorang players used either versions of their own Indian names, such as Bright Path (Jim Thorpe), Red Fox (Emmett McLemore), Wrinklemeat (Stancil Powell), or such made-up stage names as Red Fang (Xavier Downwind), Dead Eye (Jack Thorpe), Long Time Sleep (Nick Lassa), and Bear Behind.

*Jim Thorpe And His Indians Are Heading This Way To Play Baltimore Football Club Saturday*



Pre-game publicity brought in large crowds - *The Baltimore News*, December 6, 1923.

*Cartoon in the Baltimore News, December 6, 1923*

JIM THORPE ASSOCIATION

The Oorang Indians' first game was against the Dayton Triangles. The results of their laid-back training were evident. They were shut out 36-0. Having fun was one thing, but being embarrassed was another. Thorpe then put the team through some serious workouts to prepare for their second game, played in nearby Marion. The score was a 20-6 victory against the tough Columbus Tigers. However, with no home field, a tight schedule, and an emphasis on showmanship rather than aggressive playing, their final record for that first year, including non-league games, was 4 wins and 7 losses.

On the plus side capacity crowds filled every stadium, and the Oorang Kennels had its most successful year, selling 17,000 dogs.

It seemed fans were there less for the game than for the show, in which they could see real Indians in full regalia dance, work the dogs, throw tomahawks at targets, and put on a re-enactment of Indian scouts in World War I using their "Red Cross Dogs," Oorang Airedales trained to find wounded soldiers and bring them bandages and medicine.



*Indian Dog Trainers at Oorang Kennels*  
PATRICIA GREGG COLLECTION

The Oorang Indians lasted only two years. It was enough for Thorpe and the other players, especially after going 1-10 in their 1923 season. The only win that year was in their final game against Louisville. With Thorpe out with a torn ligament, the Indians shut out the Louisville Brecks 19-0. Despite their record, the

Oorangs provided one of the most colorful shows in the history of pro football and they did a great deal to boost attendance at professional games in general.

That year of 1923 was a tough one for Jim Thorpe. It saw the end of his marriage to Iva, who finally decided she had had enough of her husband's long absences and wayward behavior. In 1925 Jim married again, this time to **Freda Kirkpatrick** of Galion, Illinois. Although the two of them had four children together, Carl Phillip, William, Richard and John, once again Jim spent most of his time on the road.

By the mid-1920s, Thorpe was sustaining injuries, and his once seemingly iron body was beginning to wear down. Injured or not, however, he kept playing professional football, and he continued to show bursts of the speed and power that had made him a legend. His final pro game was for the Chicago Cardinals in 1929, when he was forty-one years old. However, all his skills did not desert him. Years later, even in retirement, a sixty-year-old Jim Thorpe could still drop-kick a football through the goal posts from mid-field.



*Thorpe, Coaching for Horjo's Indians, 1940s*  
CUMBERLAND COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

When the **Pro Football Hall of Fame** was dedicated in Canton, Ohio, in 1963, one of the first players inducted into its ranks was Jim Thorpe. A large statue of Thorpe stands as a symbol of the sport, and a diorama in the museum depicts him sitting on the bench with a red Canton Bulldogs cape over his shoulders, his spirit forever in the game.



# PRO FOOTBALL

## Concepts and Discussion

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students learn about the history of professional football, including the only American Indian professional team, the Oorang Indians.

### TEACHER'S QUICK REFERENCE

#### *Early Years of Pro Football*

- Little public interest in pro football prior to 1915
- Some “amateur” players make more money than professionals.
- Jack Cusack signs Thorpe with Canton Bulldogs, game attendance rises from 1,200 to 8,000.
- Bulldogs win championships with Jim Thorpe in 1916 and 1919.
- 1920 formation of the American Professional Football League
- Jim Thorpe is first president of what would become the NFL.

#### *Oorang Indians*

- Sponsored by Walter Lingo to publicize his Oorang Airedale Kennels
- Thorpe as coach and player
- Thorpe and Lingo recruit Indian players from around the country
- Team franchise purchased for \$100 in 1922
- No home field, based in LaRue, Ohio
- Goals were to publicize kennel, have fun, and entertain.
- Highly popular for their colorful halftime shows
- Team disbanded after second year

#### *Jim Thorpe's Last Years in Football*

- Plays for several more teams in the 1920s
- Last game in 1929 at age 41 for the Chicago Cardinals
- One of the first inducted (posthumously) into Pro Football Hall of Fame

### KEY CONTENT

- Jim Thorpe's entry into pro football
- Foundation of the precursor to the NFL
- The story of the Oorang Indians
- Jim Thorpe's last years in professional football

### CONTENT REVIEW

- Why was Jim Thorpe important for the success of early pro football?
- What team did he first play for and how successful were they?
- What was Thorpe's role in the founding of what would become the NFL?

- Where did the Oorang Indians get their name?
- Who played on the Oorang team?
- What were the main objectives of the Oorang Indians?
- How did they use stereotyped behavior to attract crowds?
- When did Jim Thorpe retire from pro football?
- How did the NFL Hall of Fame honor Jim Thorpe?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Can you think of a modern athlete who has had the sort of major effect on a sport that Jim Thorpe had on professional football? If so, talk about the impact of that player and then compare it with Thorpe's entry into pro football and what it did for the sport.
- Discuss the careers of some of the more popular professional athletes of today and compare them with Jim Thorpe. Consider what things are different now and what things may be similar.
- How did the Oorang team use stereotyped images of Indians to draw audiences to their games? Discuss the use of what may seem to be racial or ethnic stereotypes by members of the very groups to which such stereotypes have been linked.
- Some have said that the most entertaining professional sports team over the past few decades has been the Harlem Globetrotters basketball team. How are the Globetrotters similar to the Oorang Indians? Talk about the approach to their respective sports and the abilities of both teams and the idea of sports as entertainment. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

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