THE GREATEST ATHLETE IN THE WORLD

OLYMPIAN JIM THORPE WON GAMES AND BROKE RECORDS, BUT WAS DEALT A BLOW FROM WHICH HE NEVER RECOVERED

BY SUE DEPASQUALE

With crowds cheering and flags waving that July afternoon in Stockholm, Sweden, Jim Thorpe basked in the joyful celebration that he would later describe as the proudest moment of his life. "Sir, you are the greatest athlete in the world," King Gustav V said to the muscular young athlete, after he had bestowed upon him Olympic gold medals in the pentathlon and the decathlon. Thorpe, with Panama hat in hand and two laurel wreaths atop his head, replied with characteristic simplicity, "Thanks, King."

The 25-year-old American Indian would leave the 1912 Summer Olympic Games with his two medals—as well as a bronze bust of Gustav and a jewel-encrusted silver chalice from the czar of Russia—and return home to a ticker tape parade in New York City as America's darling. He'd already proven himself a phenom on the collegiate football and baseball fields at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, and his track and field prowess was legendary. Thorpe's performance at the Olympics, where he set a decathlon world record that would stand for 16 years, was the apex of his career.

As the cameras flashed and the confetti flew that summer of 1912, Jim Thorpe could have no inkling of the wrenching change in fortune that lay just around the corner.

WILD CHILD

Born on the Sac and Fox Indian Reservation to parents of mixed heritage, young Jim Thorpe spent most of his childhood roaming the Oklahoma woodlands surrounding the family cabin with his twin brother, Charlie—and running away from school to his parents' dismay. Both Hiram P. Thorpe, a hell-raising bootlegger with Irish American roots, and Charlotte Vieux, of French and American Indian descent, were literate. Thorpe's parents subscribed to the prevailing belief of the time—that "civilizing" their children meant sending them to boarding school to erase their traditional Indian ways.

Jim hated the strict discipline and tedious curriculum of the mission school they first attended, and he lost his brother and best friend at 9, when Charlie died of pneumonia in the wake of an 1897 typhoid epidemic. At 12, the Thorpes packed Jim off to the Haskell Indian School near Lawrence, Kansas. He ran from there, too, this time to the high plains of Texas, where he spent adventure-packed months breaking wild horses. A bigger and stronger Jim came home from Texas to find that his mother had died. With a new stepmother in residence and two baby half-siblings, the house was noisy and crowded.

So the elder Thorpe sent the 15-year-old even farther afield, this time to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania—considered the most prestigious Indian boarding school in the United States. "I want him to go make something of himself, for he cannot do it here," wrote Hiram Thorpe in his application.

The Carlisle school (which operated from 1879 to 1918 and is today the site of the U.S. Army War College) was led by abolitionist Richard Henry Pratt, a progressive whose motto was "Save the man, kill the Indian." He pushed a liberal arts curriculum that included art and music, and encouraged a charismatic young athletic director, known as Glenn "Pop" Warner, to build a tremendously successful sports program that generated a hefty income and put Carlisle on par with the country's best football teams.

Thorpe immediately took to Warner, thanks in no small part to the way the coach indulged his "athletic boys." His Indian players lived in a separate dorm and ate better food, and they received gifts of clothes and pocket money to spend around town.

With his speed, strength and agility, Jim Thorpe took naturally to track and field events (one account had him clearing the 5-foot-9-inch bar of the high jump on a whim, in his street clothes), and before long he was bringing honors to Carlisle in regional meets. Athletic records of the period clock him doing the 100-yard dash in 10 seconds flat—and the mile in an amazing 4:35.

But it was football that he really wanted to play. Warner's football players had made a name for themselves, pioneering the forward pass and showcasing crowd-pleasing tricks like "the hunchback" in a famous game against Harvard in 1903. "They were a very romantic team, the first great trick-play team," notes Sally Jenkins, author of *The Real All Americans: The Team That Changed a Game, a People, a Nation* (2007).

But Warner was not happy to see the 20-year-old Thorpe show up for tryouts in 1907. "Take that uniform off. You're too valuable," he reportedly muttered, when he saw Thorpe standing before him. Hoping to teach him a lesson, Warner served him up as fodder for his tacklers. Run the ball from one end zone to the other, he told Thorpe. And so Thorpe grabbed the

As a running back for the Canton Bulldogs, Thorpe leaps into the fray during a 1915 game against the Columbus Panhandles.

Jim Thorpe throwing the discus during the pentathlon event of the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm. He went on to win the pentathlon and decathlon gold medals.

ball and ran, evading some tacklers, throwing off others, zigging and zagging in a magical 100-yard run through the defense that left Warner agape. Do it again, he ordered. And Thorpe obliged. "Sorry, Pop. Nobody is going to tackle Jim," Thorpe said afterward. Warner would later call those runs "an exhibition of athletic talent that I had never before witnessed, nor was I ever to again see anything similar which might compare to it," according to Bill Crawford in *All American: The Rise and Fall of Jim Thorpe* (2005).

Carlisle won 11 football games that season, many of them thanks to Thorpe's formidable punts made in the clutch. He could kick the ball so high and so far, and run so fast, that he could sprint down the field in time to deliver a punishing tackle the moment the receiver grabbed the ball. Thorpe was named third-team All-American in 1908, and second-team All-American in basketball. When he made his pitching debut for Carlisle that spring, he pitched a no-hitter.

That summer, he signed on to play semipro baseball with the Rocky Mount team of the Eastern Carolina League. At $25 a week, the pay wasn't great, but the league drew many less well-off collegiate players who needed to earn money. While most used different names for their summer play, Thorpe didn't. He played a second summer of semipro baseball (after taking a yearlong break from Carlisle) before heeding Pop Warner's entreaties to return to play for Carlisle's 1911 football team, which the athletic director had hyped as a national powerhouse.

In a closely watched game against Harvard that year, the 24-year-old Thorpe played despite a badly sprained ankle, demonstrating a degree of grit and courage that left even the Harvard fans cheering. The press jumped on the story, and Thorpe made headlines across the country.

RISE AND FALL

The media buzz followed him that summer of 1912, when he boarded the *USS Finland* for the Stockholm Olympics with Pop Warner at his side—as his "guardian." Because American Indians were legally restricted from having U.S. citizenship, Thorpe competed for his country as a "ward." He handily won the pentathlon (which included the running broad jump, javelin, discus throws, 200-meter dash and the 1,500-meter race) and the decathlon (those events plus the 100-meter dash, high jump, 100-meter hurdles, shot put and 400-meter run).

Thorpe returned to an adoring public and offers to play pro football and baseball. But just a few months later, in January 1913, the bottom dropped out of Thorpe's world, when an editor for the Worcester, Mass., *Telegram* broke the story that Thorpe had played two summers of semipro baseball—a violation of the Olympic rules requiring amateur status.

While those who had profited most from Thorpe's athletic success, notably Pop Warner and Carlisle's leaders, had almost certainly known about the summer play, they quickly took steps to disassociate themselves from the controversy. Warner dictated a letter to Thorpe, which Thorpe wrote in his own hand and read at a hearing of the American Athletic Union.

"I hope I will be partly excused by the fact that I was simply an Indian schoolboy and I did not know all about such things. In fact, I did not know I was doing wrong because I was doing what I knew several other college men had done … I have always liked sport and only played or ran races for the fun of things and never to earn money."

The confession was enough to strip Thorpe of the Olympic honors he'd earned just six months earlier. He was forced to return his gold medals, the chalice and the bronze bust—as his name was stricken from the Olympic record books. By all accounts, the change in fortune left Thorpe bewildered … and heartbroken.

"Jim was very proud of the great things he'd done," recalled Chief Meyers, a catcher for the New York Giants who later roomed with Thorpe when they were teammates. "Very late one night Jim came in and woke me up. … 'You know, Chief,' he said, 'the king of Sweden gave me those trophies; he gave them to me. But they took them away from me. They're mine, Chief; I won them fair and square.'"

"It broke his heart," said Meyers.

Scholar Robert Reising has spent three decades researching Jim Thorpe and his life on and off the playing field. Reising's conclusion? "Jim Thorpe wasn't fit for the world that celebrated him—a world where people were self-centered, egotistical and greedy. He was an Indian boy with simple desires. He was the consummate competitor, and he lived in a world that was more sophisticated than he was or ever wanted to be."

Like other modern historians, Reising points to issues of racism that motivated the proceedings. "The mainstream majority never really wanted an American Indian hero," says Reising. "It never really expected that a simple Indian boy from Indian territory would be catapulted to international fame."

Writers Robert Lipsyte and Peter Levine, authors of *Idols of the Game*, point out that the AAU investigation ended quickly once Thorpe made his confession—"before other American athletes could be charged with professionalism and disqualified."

"It was better to scapegoat one Indian schoolboy," they write, "than risk wiping out future Olympic teams."

TEAM OWNER AND ACTOR

Thorpe's story didn't end there. With Pop Warner's help, he signed a lucrative contract to play professional baseball with the New York Giants and later played professional football, and coached with Warner when he moved on to the University of Pittsburgh. Thorpe managed and played on two semipro football teams (the Canton, Ohio, Bulldogs and Jim Thorpe's Oorang Indians) and served a one-year stint as president of the American Professional Football League (precursor to the NFL), before commencing a "run of bad luck" in the form of waning crowds and ticket sales. He officially retired from sports at age 41 in May 1928.

While the press has tended to portray Thorpe as a penniless drifter when he grew older, says son Jack Thorpe, who served as a leader of the Sac and Fox Indian tribe during the 1980s, "that's as far from the truth as there is." After a stint in Hollywood, where he appeared in several films, Jim Thorpe spent his later years as a bar owner, bouncer and sports director for several beach cities in Los Angeles. The movie account of his life starring Burt Lancaster, *Jim Thorpe—All-American*, was a box office hit in 1951. Because Thorpe had sold his rights away years earlier, he received just $1,500.

Jim Thorpe, the man the Associated Press named the Greatest All-Around Male Athlete and Football Player of the Half Century in 1950, died of a heart attack on March 28, 1953, at the age of 65. He left behind seven children and a third wife, Patricia Askew. Intent on preserving the legacy of her sports legend husband, she worked with the Pennsylvania towns of Mauch Chunk and East Mauch Chunk to rename the city in her late husband's honor. Today, the city of Jim Thorpe displays a monument to him in the town square with the inscription, "Sir, you are the greatest athlete in the world," and celebrates his birthday annually on May 21 and 22.

After decades of lobbying on the part of Thorpe supporters, the International Olympic Committee voted in 1982 to restore the competitor's Olympic honors, noting that Olympic rules in 1912 had required that protests be filed within one month of a competitor's victory. (In Thorpe's case, some six months had passed.) On January 13, 1983, IOC officials presented two of his children with reproductions of the gold medals. The original medals had been lost years earlier.

Reising, who travels the country at his own expense to lecture about Thorpe, donating any speaking fees he receives to the student fellowships honoring Thorpe at University of the Cumberlands, passionately believes the "world's greatest athlete" deserves to be remembered—and celebrated.

"Jim Thorpe tugs at the conscience of America," says Reising. "Every right-minded citizen knows he was treated unjustly."