

# Jim Thorpe

World's Greatest Athlete  
(1888-1953)

Jim Thorpe was born in 1888 on the Sac and Fox Indian Reservation. His great-grandfather was Black Hawk, the famous Indian Chief. Life was not easy on the reservation. Jim's family had to face droughts and flies in the summer and bitter cold in the winter. White rustlers would often steal their cattle and hogs. At age six, Jim left the reservation with his twin brother to attend school.

The school was a manual labor boarding school with tight discipline. Jim did not like school and after his twin brother died of pneumonia, he ran away. Jim's father then enrolled him at Haskell Institute, 300 miles from home. While enrolled there his mother died.

In 1904 Jim enrolled at Carlisle, an Indian school in Pennsylvania. A short time later his father died. It was at Carlisle that Jim got a name for himself in sports. He led the small school to national fame in football. He was also a very talented runner, place kicker, and tackler and won all-American honors in 1911 and 1912.

In 1912, Jim went to the Olympics held in Sweden. He became the first athlete to win both the pentathlon and the decathlon. Thorpe had played baseball for a salary prior to the games and so the Amateur Athletic Union ruled that Thorpe was a professional and therefore unable to compete in the Olympics, so he had to return his medals.

From 1913 to 1919, Thorpe played major league baseball and he played professional football from 1920-1926. Thorpe became the first president of the American Professional Football Association (now known as the National Football League). He was one of the first men to be admitted to the National Football Foundation's Hall of Fame in 1951. Later in life, he spoke to many audiences concerning the rights of Indians. His Olympic medals were finally returned to his family in 1982.

"Probably no athlete who ever lived can boast of such all-around excellence in track and field work as well as in many other lines of physical endeavor"(Richards, p. 70).

## Important Dates

- 1904 - Jim enters Carlisle, athletic career begins.
- 1912 - Jim wins the pentathlon and decathlon and is hailed the "greatest athlete in the world" by King Gustav of Sweden.
- 1913 - Jim's Olympic prizes stripped because AAU does not consider him an amateur.
- 1920 - Jim is named first president of the American Professional Football Association.
- 1950 - Jim Thorpe named greatest football player in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- 1958 - Jim Thorpe elected to the National Indian Hall of Fame.
- 1982 - Jim Thorpe's Olympic medals and amateur status are restored.

## References

- "Jim Thorpe." World Book Encyclopedia. 1992 ed.  
Rasmussen, Della Mae, and Phyllis Colonna. The Power of Sportsmanship: Featuring the Story of Jim Thorpe.  
Community Press, Inc. 1981.  
Richards, Gregory. Jim Thorpe, World's Greatest Athlete. Children's Press, Chicago. 1984.