

Jim Thorpe



*"He was the
greatest athlete
who ever lived."*

–Abel Kiviat, 1912 Olympic
silver medalist¹



Pre-Reading Question

What do you know about the Olympic Games?

Reading Preview

Jim Thorpe was one of the world's greatest athletes. He starred in football and track. He won gold medals in two of the hardest events in the Olympics.

Jim Thorpe

Jim Thorpe was an American Indian. He became one of the greatest U.S. athletes.

Beginning on a Reservation

Jim Thorpe was born in Oklahoma in 1888. His ancestors were American Indian and European. His family lived on a reservation. They raised him as an Indian.

At first, Thorpe went to a school on the reservation. But in 1903, his parents sent him to Carlisle Indian School. It was in Pennsylvania.

Football Star

Carlisle was a small school. It had just 250 students. Thorpe joined the football team. By 1908, he was a star. He was named an All-American. That was a great honor, especially for an American Indian from a tiny school.

Thorpe competed in track, too. He ran races, threw the javelin, and made long jumps. These events were new to Thorpe. But he was a natural athlete. And he set records.

\$25 a Week

Thorpe left Carlisle in 1909. He played for some professional baseball teams. Thorpe earned about \$25 a week. That is about the same as \$500 a week now.

In 1911, Thorpe went back to Carlisle. He played football again. Soon, little Carlisle was beating much larger schools. They beat the University of Pittsburgh, and Penn State. They beat Harvard and Princeton.

1912 Olympics

In 1912, Thorpe joined the U.S. Olympic team. The Olympics are held every four years. Athletes from many countries compete.

Thorpe competed in the pentathlon and the decathlon. These are difficult events. The athlete has to run, jump, and throw. Thorpe set records in both events. He got gold medals. People around the world heard about him.

Did you know?

In 1951, a movie was made about Thorpe's life. It is called *Jim Thorpe: All American*. Burt Lancaster played Thorpe. The movie was a hit. Thorpe was paid \$1,500.

Trouble

After the Olympics, Thorpe went back to Carlisle. He played football again. Then people learned that he played baseball for money. At the time, professional athletes could not compete in the Olympics or in school sports.

Thorpe earned only \$25 a week in baseball. It was just enough to live on. And in the Olympics, he competed in track, not baseball. He thought that should be OK.

But the officials didn't agree with him. They took away his records and his gold medals. Thorpe was disappointed. But he couldn't do anything.

Professional Sports

Thorpe decided to play professional sports. He played baseball with the New York Giants and other teams until 1919. But he wasn't a great player.

Then Thorpe turned to football. He played in the National Football League. He was older. But he was still one of the best players.

After Sports

Thorpe quit football in 1929. He was 41 years old. Life became hard for him. He lost his money. He tried to go back into sports, but he was too old. He acted in movies. He even worked for farmers.

In his last years, Thorpe lived in California. He died in 1953. He was 64 years old.

The Greatest Athlete

In 1950, sportswriters chose the greatest athlete from 1900 to 1950. They said that it was Jim Thorpe. In 1963, Thorpe was chosen for the National Football Hall of Fame.

Thorpe's family and friends tried to get his Olympic medals back. At last, the medals were returned to his family in 1982.

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Jim Thorpe Notes and References

Notes

1. Abel Kiviat, quoted in *Contemporary Heroes and Heroines*, book 2, p. 482.
2. Oren Lyons, quoted in *Idols of the Game*, p. 75.

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