

# OKLAHOMA'S GREATEST ATHLETE



**JIM THORPE**  
ATHLETE AND  
OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALIST

Commemorative stamp produced in 1998 honoring Jim Thorpe. U.S. Postal Service

**T**he Fifth Olympiad in 1912 drew to a close. Gustav, the King of Sweden, had opened the games and personally presented the gold medals to the winning athletes in the closing ceremonies. He gave them out in numerical order, beginning with the 100-meter dash. When the presentation of the gold medal for the Pentathlon occurred, a young Sac and Fox Indian from Oklahoma stepped forward to claim the prize. There was a roar as the King himself led the cheers. All within the stadium knew that they had witnessed something special, something historic, and they cheered the victor. The King placed the laurel wreath on the young athlete's head and then presented him with the coveted gold medal. The crowd roared again.

Later, the same young Indian stepped forward to claim the gold medal for the Decathlon. Again placing the victor's laurel wreath on the athlete's head and presenting the gold medal and other valuable gifts to him, the King clasped the hand of young Jim Thorpe and exclaimed, "Sir, you are the greatest athlete in the world."

"Thanks, King," responded the grateful athlete.

Seventy years later, when polls were taken to determine the greatest athlete of the twentieth century, Jim Thorpe's name was first on every list. In 1999, he ranked fifth on *Sports Illustrated's* list of the best athletes of the 20th century. Jim Thorpe went far beyond the hills of Oklahoma where he was born. To understand his accomplishments and to understand the things that happened to him, one has to begin at the beginning.

When twin sons were born to Hiram and Charlotte Thorpe, they carried blood lines of the Sac and Fox, Potawatomi, and Kickapoo Indians. They also carried a mixture of French and Irish blood. But their identification was their father's tribe, the Sac and Fox. They also carried a heritage of strength and courage, for they were members of the Black Hawk family and were the sons of a man known to his tribesmen as the greatest athlete among them. Hiram Thorpe had defeated all competitors in contests of strength, speed, coordination, and endurance.

Jim's childhood was much like that of any other rural farm boy in the closing years of the 19th century. He helped his father with the crops but spent much of his time hunting and fishing. Jim was always a competitor, testing his strength and endurance

against his playmates or against the wildlife of the forest of eastern Indian Territory.

After his twin brother Charlie died of pneumonia, Jim and his father grew very close. Hiram taught Jim the lore of the forest and excellent marksmanship. Years later, Jim spoke with profound pride as he recalled his father's athletic ability. "My father was undisputed champion in sprinting, wrestling, swimming, high-jumping, broad-jumping, and horseback riding." He recalled how neighboring families came to the Thorpe farm and brought food for picnics, and the men challenged one another in athletic contests — mile runs, running broad-jumps, high-jumps, and wrestling. Hiram Thorpe was always the triumphant champion.

Saddened by the death of his brother, Jim found that being confined in a schoolroom was a miserable experience for his freedom-loving spirit. While he was enrolled at the Sac and Fox Indian Agency School, near Tecumseh, Jim daydreamed of hunting and fishing. Finally, he lost all interest in school, even in sports. In despair, he left the agency school and returned home to disapproving parents. Hiram hitched the wagon and took Jim back, but Jim ran out the back door of the school, through the woods, and beat his father home.

Next, Jim was sent to the Haskell Indian School in Lawrence, Kansas. Haskell had an enrollment of more than 1,000 Indian students from nearly 100 different Indian tribes. It was at Haskell that Jim Thorpe, who would one day be recognized as the greatest football player in history, began his lifelong love affair with the game.

Just as Jim was adjusting fairly well to the school and beginning to draw attention to himself as an athlete, he learned that his father had been shot in a hunting accident and lay dying. Jim ran to the railway station and hopped a train, but it was northbound instead of southbound. By the time Jim discovered his mistake, he was nearly 300 miles from home. Deeply discouraged, he walked all of the way home, only to find that his father was

much improved.

Instead of returning to Haskell, he attended public school near his home. There, he heard a guest speaker tell about the Carlisle Indian School. Jim began to think more seriously about his education, but he was particularly interested in playing football at Carlisle, where Glenn S. "Pop" Warner coached a bunch of Indian kids who played — and beat — the major colleges of the East. With Hiram's blessings, Jim was soon on his way to the Carlisle Indian School in the Cumberland Valley of Pennsylvania.

Carlisle was Thorpe's first giant step toward fame. With an enrollment of nearly 1,000 Indian students, Carlisle was said to be the best school available for Indian education in the early decades of the 20th century. Students learned academics, the arts, and vocational subjects. They often worked part-time and learned working skills that would assist them in adjusting to society.

This school was founded by a military officer. Students were divided into military-type groups and taught a style of military discipline which gives a sense of order. They became skilled at military precision and took deep pride in their accomplishments.

At Carlisle, students were forbidden to speak their Indian languages. They were required to converse and learn in English. Most now believe this type of restriction was a mistake. It contributed to the loss of many Indian languages.

When Jim Thorpe enrolled at Carlisle, he was a skinny sixteen-year-old, just over five feet five inches tall and weighing only 115 pounds. Three years later, he was nearly five feet ten inches tall and weighed 144 pounds. Jim Thorpe himself often told how he came to the attention of Pop Warner:

"Late one afternoon in the spring of 1907, I was among a group of tenderfoot football players crossing the upper track field on our way to the lower field where we would play a twilight game with one of the scrub teams on campus. I happened to



As a natural running back and kicker for the Carlisle Indians, Jim Thorpe single-handedly decimated Harvard's football team in 1911 with a touchdown and four well-placed field goals. In 1912, Thorpe ran 97 yards for a touchdown. Thorpe received All-American recognition for his athletic prowess in the pre-dawn era of gridiron football. [americanproject.com](http://americanproject.com)

notice that some of the members of the varsity were practicing high-jump.

I stopped to watch them as they went higher and higher. After awhile they had the bar set at five feet nine inches and none of them could jump over it. They were just about ready to call it a day when I asked if I might try it.

I had a pair of overalls on, a hickory stick, and a pair of gymnasium shoes I had picked up in the gym that belonged to someone. I looked like anything but a high-jumper. The track athletes snickered a bit as the bar was set up for me. I cleared the bar on my first try and, laughing at the astonished group of athletes, went on down to the field for the game.

A student named Harry Archenbald, who had seen me take the jump with little or no effort, reported the incident to Coach Warner. Next day, he sent for me. "Do you know what you have done?" Pop asked. "Nothing bad, I hope," was my reply. "Bad," growled the coach. "Boy, you've just broken the school record! That bar was set for five feet nine inches!"

I told Pop I didn't think that was very high, that I thought I could do better in a track suit. Pop told me to

go down to the clubhouse and exchange those overalls for a track outfit. I was on the track team now.

He said, "You might want to coach some day and if you do, you must know something about track." I replied, "I believe coaching would be a good vocation. I'll come out tomorrow."

To improve Thorpe's skills in track and field, Warner matched him against Albert Exendine, who held nearly all of the track records at the school. By the end of the season, Jim had broken all of Exendine's records.

As much as Jim Thorpe loved the track and field contests, he wanted to play football. Pop Warner didn't want to risk his best track athlete in football, but Jim insisted. Pop threw him a football. It was as though he had been born to streak through, over, or around tacklers, leaving them empty-handed in the dust, as Jim raced on to the end zone.

Coach Warner had tried to assign Jim to the kicking team, hoping to avoid physical contact, but Jim didn't want any part of that. Day after day, he insisted Coach Warner let him play. Finally, Warner said, "All right! Give the varsity some tackling practice."

But things didn't work that way. Jim bowled over would-be tacklers or outran them and ran into the end zone.

"You're supposed to give the first team tackling practice, not run through them," Warner yelled. "Nobody is going to tackle Jim," declared the dejected athlete.

"Let's see you do it again," said Warner. Then to the other players, Warner said, "Get mean! Smack him down! Hit him down so hard he doesn't get up! Who does he think he is? This isn't a relay race! This is football! Hit! Hit! Hit!"



Jim Thorpe in Carlisle Indian School track uniform, running at Stockholm in Olympic track practice. Cumberland County Historical Society, Carlisle, Pennsylvania

With bursts of speed and deceptive running, Jim Thorpe raced past tacklers while others bounced off him. Once again, he crossed into the end zone. He turned and looked directly at Pop and repeated, “Nobody is going to tackle Jim!”

Jim Thorpe was on the football team. Although he spent much time on the bench that first year, he would become the greatest of a great football team that Pop Warner called about as perfect a football machine as he ever sent on the field.

That first season, the Carlisle Indians completed a 10-1 season, defeating such powerful teams as Penn State, Syracuse, the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Chicago, coached by the famous Alonzo Stagg. They lost only to Princeton.

Jim Thorpe went on to win All-American honors. George Orton of the University of Pennsylvania wrote in 1911, “Carlisle had, in Thorpe, one of the greatest backs that has ever been seen in the history of the game. He excelled in all points. Defensively, he was a tower of strength. Offensively, he was a great factor running with the ball himself or interfering for a mate. As a drop kicker and kicker of goals from placement, he stood without a peer during the past season. His record of four goals from the field against such a high-class team as Harvard will be remembered for many years.”

The spring track season in 1912 was a training ground for the Fifth Olympiad to be held in Stockholm, Sweden. The games were opened by King Gustav and the competition began. The games would become legendary when Jim Thorpe won both the Pentathlon and the Decathlon, a feat that will probably never be equaled.

By his mid-twenties, Thorpe had proved himself to be one of the most versatile athletes who had ever lived. He was first-team All-American in 1911 and 1912. He was the world champion in track and field. He played varsity college basketball and lacrosse. He was an excellent bowler, swimmer, gymnast, and basketball player. He excelled in rowing, hockey, tennis, handball, and ice-skating. He was still an avid hunter and fisherman. Dwight D. Eisenhower said, “He was able to do everything anyone else could, but he could do it better.”

Then the roar of the crowd ceased. In 1913, Jim Thorpe was stripped of his Olympic medals because, as a young athlete, he had played baseball for a small amount of expense money during one summer season. For that, he lost his amateur status and, at the same time, he lost the Olympic gold medals. His name was stricken from the record books — a loss that was not regained during the great athlete’s lifetime.

Jim Thorpe went on to play professional football and baseball. He lectured and he encouraged young people to participate in athletics.

He died of a heart attack on March 28, 1953. Twenty years later, the Amateur Athletic Union restored his amateur status. The battle began to restore his Olympic medals. Thirty years after his death, his medals were returned to family members. Today Jim Thorpe’s name is revered in his home state of Oklahoma. In the State Capitol Complex, a building has been named in his honor. In a state where the athlete is held in awe and honor, Jim Thorpe’s name heads the list of many great athletes produced by the Sooner State.