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Educational – Jim Thorpe
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Since we have been involved in the 2012 Olympics for the past two week, I thought I would give a little history about one of Oklahoma's greatest Native American athletes. James Francis Thorpe was born on May 28, 1887 in a one-room cabin near Prague, Oklahoma. Although there is much confusion on Thorpe's date of birth, this is the date according to his estate. He was born to Hiram Thorpe, a farmer, and Mary James, a Pottawatomie Indian and descendant of the last great Sauk and Fox chief Black Hawk, a noted warrior and athlete. Jim was actually born a twin, but his brother Charlie died at the age of nine. His Indian name, Wa-Tho-Huk, translated to "Bright Path", something that Thorpe definitely had ahead of him.

He died of a heart attack on March 28, 1953 in Lomita California and was buried in a private mausoleum in Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania. Thorpe's family wanted to bury him in Oklahoma and build a memorial for him here. Unfortunately, state officials refused permission. Thorpe's widow Patricia heard about a small town in Pennsylvania called Mauch Chunk that was seeking a different name to increase town tourism. She struck a deal with the town and brought Thorpe's remains to the tactfully renamed Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania. There, a monument has been erected in his honor with the sentence, "Sir, you are the greatest athlete in the world," etched in the stone. The town holds an annual birthday celebration for Thorpe every May 21 and 22. The New York Times ran a front page story, remembering the athlete, stating that Thorpe "was a magnificent performer. He had all the strength, speed and coordination of the finest players, plus an incredible stamina. The tragedy of the loss of his Stockholm medals because of thoughtless and unimportant professionalism darkened much of his career and should have been rectified long ago. His memory should be kept for what it deserves--that of the greatest all-round athlete of our time."

In 1904, Thorpe started school at Carlisle Industrial Indian School in Pennsylvania. The establishment offered American Indians the opportunity to gain practical training in over 20 trades, in addition to off-campus employment at local farms, homes or industries. Thorpe began

his athletic career at Carlisle, both playing football and running track. His favorite was track and field, because he stated "it's something I could do by myself, one-on-one, me against everybody else. I have always liked sport and only played or run races for the fun of the thing." He was triumphantly selected as a third-team All-American in 1908, and in 1909 and 1910 he made the first team. Iconic football legend Glenn "Pop" Warner coached Thorpe at Carlisle and was able to see the young phenomenon evolve in his pursuit of excellence with athletics.

At the tender age of 24, Thorpe sailed with the American Olympic team to Stockholm, Sweden for the 1912 Olympic Games. Remarkably, he trained aboard the ship on the journey across sea. He blew away the competition in both the pentathlon and the decathlon and set records that would stand for decades. The Pentathlon was five events to be competed in a single day (the Long Jump, Javelin throw, 200 metres race, a Discus throw, and the 1500 metres race). The Decathlon was 10 events to be competed in a three day period. 1st day-100 metres race, the long jump, and the shot put; 2nd day- the high jump, 400 metres race, discus throw and 110 metre hurdle race; 3rd day-pole vault, javelin throw and the 1500 metres race.

King Gustav V of Sweden presented Thorpe with his gold medals for both accomplishments. Before Thorpe could walk away, the king grabbed his hand and uttered the sentence that was to follow him for the rest of his life. "Sir," he declared, "you are the greatest athlete in the world," Thorpe, never a man to stand on ceremony, answered simple and honestly, "Thanks King".

Thorpe's glorious Olympic wins were jeopardized in 1913 when it came out that he played two semi-professional seasons of baseball. The Olympics Committee had strict rules about Olympians receiving monetary compensation for participating in professional athletics. Thorpe, who stated he played for the love of the game and not the money, was put under the microscope. Ultimately, it was decided that his baseball experience adversely affected his amateur status in the track and field events. His name was removed from the record books and his gold medals were taken away.

1912 Olympic silver medalist Abel Kiviat stated:

"He was the greatest athlete who ever lived. What he had was natural ability. There wasn't anything he couldn't do. All he had to see is someone doin' something and he tried it and he'd do it better."

Thorpe moved on after the Olympic ordeal and signed to play baseball for the New York Giants. He played outfield with New York for three seasons before relocating and playing with the Cincinnati Reds in 1917. He played 77 games with the Reds before finally returning to the Giants for an additional 26 games. In 1919 he played his final season in major league baseball, ending on the Boston Braves team.

Chief Meyers, Thorpe's roommate and catcher for the New York Giants was quoted as saying, "Jim was very proud of the great things he'd done. A very proud man.... Very late one night Jim came in and woke me up. ... He was crying, and tears were rolling down his cheeks. '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 and he never really recovered."

Jim Thorpe played major and minor league baseball for 20 years, starting with the New York Giants in 1913 and later playing a number of other teams, including the Boston Braves and the Cincinnati Reds. Believe it or not, Thorpe once hit 3 home runs into 3 different states in the same game. During a semi-pro baseball game in a ballpark on the Texas-Oklahoma-Arkansas border, he hit his first homer over the leftfield wall with the ball landing in Oklahoma, his second homer over the right field wall into Arkansas and his third homer of the game was an inside-the-park home run in centerfield, which was in Texas!

During much of his baseball years, Thorpe was also immersed in professional football. He played for the Canton (Ohio) Bulldogs from 1915 until 1920 and the Cleveland (Indiana) (Indians) in 1921. In the years following, he organized, coached and played with the Oorang Indians, a professional football team comprised completely of American Indians. Additionally, he was instrumental in forming the American Professional Football Association, and eventually became the president of the group. Through the years, the association evolved into today's NFL. In all, Thorpe

played with six different teams during his career in pro football, ending with a stint with the Chicago Cardinals in 1929. He is one of two men in history who played for the New York Giants in two different sports. In football, he was the New York Giants' running back and in baseball he was the New York Giants' outfielder. At an auction in October 2003, an early 1900s football jersey worn by Jim Thorpe fetched a winning bid of \$210,000.

Life after professional athletics was exciting for Thorpe. He worked as an extra in movies, served as superintendent of recreation in the Chicago Park System and was also quite vocal with matters of Indian affairs. He also had stints as a public speaker/lecturer and even led an all-Indian song and dance troupe entitled "The Jim Thorpe Show." The Merchant Marines even had the honor of Thorpe's presence, as he served in 1945 beginning at age 58.

In 1950, the nation's press selected Jim Thorpe as the most outstanding athlete of the first half of the 20th Century and he was named "the greatest American football player" and the "greatest overall male athlete" by the Associated Press.

In 1996-2001, he was awarded ABC's Wide World of Sports Athlete of the Century. Thorpe's medals were finally restored to him posthumously in 1982. In addition, and most importantly to his family, his name was put back into the record books.

Thorpe had married three times and was blessed with eight children. In 1913, he married Iva Miller. Their first son, James Jr., died at age three from an influenza epidemic during World War I but their three daughters, Gail, Charlotte, and Grace, lived into the 1990s. He married Freeda Kirkpatrick in 1926 and they had four sons, Carl Phillip, William, Richard, and John, called (Jack). Jack Thorpe, the youngest, became principal chief of the Sauk and Fox in the 1980s. At the time of his death, Thorpe had been married to Patricia Askew for almost eight years.