

JIM THORPE--MAN OR MYTH?

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"He was the fictional Frank Merriwell come to life,"¹ proclaim John McCallum and Charles H. Pearson of Jim Thorpe, and certainly truer words have never been recorded. Thorpe was indeed Gilbert Patten's protagonist in the flesh--devastatingly strong and impossibly proficient--an awesome athletic figure capable of turning a losing contest into a winning one. His fantastic feats became commonplace; his skill at last-minute heroics, legendary. Merriwell and Thorpe--in the minds of most Americans who have lived in the current century, the two names are interchangeable, their athletic skills likewise.

Yet anything other than surface inspection reveals the pair to be not twin-like, but radically different. Merriwell came from a home of means; Thorpe, from one with virtually nothing. Merriwell performed for prestigious Yale, the nation's third-oldest institution of higher learning; Thorpe, for lowly Carlisle, established by the government in the late nineteenth century out of the rubble of an abandoned Army barracks. Merriwell pursued a rigorous training regimen; Thorpe, an unorthodox one--in fact, a lax one by many standards. Merriwell abhorred tobacco and alcohol; Thorpe enjoyed both. Merriwell possessed the sense of humor of a genteel gentleman; Thorpe, of one who thrived on horseplay and tomfoolery. Merriwell had "a head like Einstein's"²; Thorpe, no special intellectual aptitude. Most important of all, Merriwell was white--a symbol of America's foremost citizens; Thorpe, red³--a symbol of America's forgotten ones.

Thorpe, then, looms as a paradox, a contradiction--a societal as well as an athletic phenomenon. Simultaneously he emerges as both Merriwell and his antithesis. For most Americans of the twentieth century, he represents not only all that is attractive in Patten's storybook hero but also all that stands in opposition to it. For them he stands as an irresistible, charismatic force vital to their psychic balance; a symbol of the hero and the trickster, of the ideal and the real, of the forgetting and the forgotten. In the annals of American sport--perhaps even in the total history of the nation--no other figure so completely embraces and interlaces such Caliban and Ariel extremes and, as a result, indicts as well as reflects the values of modern America.

Thorpe dominated the American sports scene for well over twenty years. During a sizable portion of three decades--first as a college performer, later as a professional--he was athletic excellence personified. In fact, by the close of 1915--when he was but twenty-seven years old--he had already done what every wholesome American boy dreamed of doing; he had been a three-time All-American football player; he had played professional football for the Canton Bulldogs; he had been a virtual one-man college track team; he had represented and won for the United States in the Olympic Games; and he had

performed in major-league baseball for John McGraw's champion New York Giants. All that rosy-cheeked American youth aspired to, all that their well-intentioned parents coveted for them, Thorpe had accomplished--and in Merriwell fashion. He was, certainly, "the highest type of citizen," as President William Howard Taft had publicly proclaimed shortly after the Olympic triumphs.

Yet, ironically, he was no citizen at all by 1915. Thorpe gained that honor in 1916, not before--and then only by special legislative act. In his eyes, it carried no unusual significance, just as eight years later Congress's granting of the same distinction to all Indians born within the territorial limits of the United States brought few cries of ecstasy from the recipients. Symbolically, however, the citizenship that fell to him after his horde of Merriwell-like feats was truly significant: it represented a pang of conscience made manifest; it was public confession that Carlisle's greatest deserved what Yale's greatest had gained at birth. In short, it was tangible evidence that if fiction was to become fact in the minds and hearts of the dominant society, the lone individual with any claims to being Merriwell had, indeed, best not be denied Merriwell's birthright.

In 1923, as Thorpe approached his final years of athletic prowess and America reveled in prosperity and optimism, D.H. Lawrence reminded the nation that a specter walked the land--a red specter. "The unappeased ghosts of the dead Indians act within the unconscious or under-conscious soul of the white American," he wrote. "There has been all the time, in the white American soul, a dual feeling about the Indian," he added. "The desire to extirpate the Indian. And the contradictory desire to glorify him. Both are rampant still, to-day."⁴ In Thorpe, there existed a unique opportunity for appeasing those ghosts, for not reckoning "with the full force of the demon of the continent,"⁵ for glorifying in a single stroke both a supremely gifted athlete and all those peoples with whom he was ethnically identified. The nation seized upon it, and thus there has evolved through the decades an image of a mortal bigger than life itself. The spoken word, amply embellished by the written, has magnified beyond human proportions an uncanny sports talent and thereby created a colossus whose achievements fire the imagination but boggle the mind. An analysis of four happenings key in Thorpe legend and lore, while detracting from neither the man nor his achievements, graphically illustrates how fiction has fused with fact to create a conscience-salving hero of epic dimensions.

West Point: 1912

In the Carlisle-West Point football encounter of November 9, 1912, won by the Indians, 27 to 6, John Steckbeck suggests that Thorpe scored one touchdown.⁶ Guernsey Van Riper, Jr., alleges that he crossed the goal line twice "and kicked the points after touchdown."⁷ L. Edmond Leipold, Gene Schoor, and Wilbur J. Gobrecht disagree with both, arguing that Thorpe registered twenty-two points that afternoon.⁸ And Frank Scully and Norman Sper go a step further with their contention that "Jim was responsible for every point made by his team."⁹ Certainly, while there is no confusion concerning its score or its winner, the game deserves the label imposed by Robert Cantwell: "the

mysterious game."¹⁰ How many points did Carlisle's captain tally on that memorable Saturday, one of his finest gridiron days ever?

Perhaps no one is destined to know; perhaps no source has a right to be deemed "reliable." Yet it would appear that John Kieran comes closest to capturing what actually occurred; written at West Point, his story filed for the New York Times on the day of the game is not merely action-packed but detailed. In it he indicates that, although Thorpe dominated play, he registered but three points, all extra points:

Standing out resplendent in a galaxy of Indian stars was Jim Thorpe, recently crowned the athletic marvel of the age. The big Indian captain added more luster to his already brilliant record, and at times the game itself was almost forgotten while the spectators gazed on Thorpe, the individual, to wonder at his prowess. To recount his notable performances in the complete overthrow of the Cadets would leave little space for other notable points of the conflict. He simply ran wild, while the Cadets tried in vain to stop his progress. It was like trying to clutch a shadow. He did not make any of the four touchdowns credited to his team, simply because the brilliant Arcasa, Thorpe's backfield mate, was chosen to carry the ball on three of the four occasions when a plunge meant a score, and Bergie the other time.¹¹

Ironies figured prominently in Thorpe's roller-coaster life, and one of them relates to the contest Kieran so skillfully outlines: during the 1912 campaign, Thorpe scored 198 points (including 25 touchdowns), a single-season total never surpassed by any other college player, yet in his most superb game of the year--one in which he went through the "line as if it were an open door"¹²--he apparently tallied a paltry three points.

"Ike"

"He limped off the field with a painfully twisted knee which eventually was to cut short his football career."¹³ Thus Gene Schoor describes Dwight David Eisenhower, later a military strategist and President of the United States, after the 1912 Carlisle-West Point football game. "Ike," destined to rank among America's foremost leaders, hurt while futilely attempting to bring victory to the Cadets of West Point, that bastion of military might which over the years had produced hordes of army officers who distinguished themselves in devastating campaigns against outnumbered and ill-equipped native Americans! The symbolic significance of the injury is unmistakable: not content with victory, the Indians led by Thorpe had permanently removed from battle a promising white leader. Thorpe over Eisenhower in a surprising Carlisle win--red had finally triumphed over white; retribution had fallen upon the latter, and justice had been served.

Probably not so! Most assuredly, Carlisle took the contest; yet "Ike" apparently escaped unscathed. Kieran fails to mention the injury, and--more

important--in "General Ike Talks Football," the point is made that the knee was first sprained "in a game against Tufts a week later. . . . And before it was totally healed, he hurt it again while vaulting a horse in the riding hall. That ended Ike Eisenhower's college football career. He was never able to play again."¹⁴

But the myth persists. Even Eisenhower's biographer, Kevin McCann, formerly President of The Defiance College, insists that "he injured his knee in a football game with Carlisle on November 9, 1912."¹⁵ Perhaps he did; the troubled soul of the white American to which Lawrence alludes would have it so.

The One and the Many

One of the best-known Thorpe tales concerns the question allegedly posed by the frenzied track coach of Lafayette College as the big Indian disembarked from a train on a bright spring afternoon in the company of a lone Carlisle classmate. "Where's the rest of your team?" was the query; "I'm the team, he's the manager" was the retort, after which Carlisle proceeded to slaughter the sizable and supposedly invincible Easton, Pennsylvania, squad in a dual track meet.

Hollywood in 1951 added a dimension to the oral. In the much-publicized Jim Thorpe: All-American, Charles Bickford, playing "Pop" Warner, Carlisle's coach, explains to the puzzled Lafayette mentor that his team consists of not one but two performers: Thorpe, played by Burt Lancaster, and Louis Tewanima. Shortly after the chat, the film proceeds to graphically illustrate how two can be enough--indeed, far too much--for any college squad if the pair happen to be Thorpe and Tewanima.

Thorpe himself, however, disagreed with both the popular tale and Warner Brothers. Reflecting on the meet in 1940, he candidly confessed that he had the competent assistance of not one but two Indians who eventually excelled in Olympic competition: Tewanima and Frank Mt. Pleasant. "The three of us defeated Lafayette,"¹⁶ he admitted.

The meet, incidentally, was probably held in the spring of 1908--not 1909, as Schoor suggests;¹⁷ Mt. Pleasant apparently completed his Carlisle track eligibility in 1908.¹⁸ More important, the three gifted Indians were not forced to contend with the monstrously large contingent commonly noted in oral and written versions of the story, some of which identify the opposition as over forty strong.¹⁹ Thorpe confided that Lafayette had only a "20 man team."²⁰

But the story is more potent, and Thorpe more Merriwell-like, if he--and he alone--faces and trounces a squad of forty or fifty: the greater the odds, the more conscience-soothing the tale. Three are few, certainly, but one is best of all.

The Runners-Up

Doubtless the greatest injustice by which Thorpe was plagued during his adult life centered on the awards which he won in the 1912 Olympiad and which six months later he was forced to forfeit because of his participation in North Carolina summer baseball in 1909 and 1910. Legally, of course, there is no question of his guilt. Late in January of 1913, the only man ever to win both the decathlon and the pentathlon in Olympic competition publicly indicated to the press and to Olympic officials that he had played "Class D" ball in Rocky Mount and Fayetteville.²¹ Not for a moment did he attempt to hide his involvement in professional sport.

Morally, however, there is serious question that justice was served. Among the evidence indicating that the punishment far exceeded the crime is the fact that, unlike other college athletes in the Eastern Carolina League at the time, he played under his own name, James Francis Thorpe, an indication, certainly, that he was striving to delude no one. Equally if not more important, during the investigation he conceded that he "was not very wise to the ways of the world and did not realize that this was wrong and it made me a professional in track sports."²² Ignorance is truly an excuse: if one honestly does not know the rules or policies governing a given activity, it seems unfair to mete out punishment if he fails to abide by those rules or policies.

Yet Olympic officials believed otherwise, and today--over sixty years later--the awards are not with the Thorpe heirs or in a place of their choosing, like the Smithsonian Institution. But where are they? Most sports-conscious people are of the conviction that they were declined by the runners-up in the two events, F.R. Bie in the pentathlon and Hugo Wieslander in the decathlon, who, the story goes, would have no part of treasures won by another--and a better--man. Allegedly, each was vociferous in his rejection, Bie proclaiming that "Thorpe won the pentathlon" and that, therefore, the awards belonged to him alone,²³ Wieslander going a step further by refusing even to open the package addressed to him.²⁴

Gallant gentlemen both, it would appear: the Scandinavians refused to contribute to the injustice! Probably not so. Olympic files indicate that in February of 1913, after Thorpe had surrendered his awards, Bie and Wieslander accepted, and thereafter never relinquished, the gold medals originally awarded to him.²⁵ The well-publicized and often-pictured perpetual trophies which Thorpe earned--one a chalice in the shape of a viking ship studded with jewels, the other a bronze bust of the King of Sweden--were never intended for the Carlisle athlete's, or anyone else's, permanent possession. Even if there had been no scandal, he would have been asked to return them within a few years; Olympic officials planned to re-award them to subsequent decathlon and pentathlon champions. Interestingly, those officials later changed their thinking and decided to discontinue any awards other than medals. Consequently, for decades the handsome trophies have been housed in the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland.²⁶

It appears that the person responsible for creating the illusion that Bie and Wieslander had refused Thorpe's awards was Charlie Paddock, an outstanding American sprinter who toured several Scandanavian countries in the 1920s.²⁷ Regardless of its originator, however, the story has circulated so widely and gained such wholesale acceptance down through the years that it is as firmly entrenched in Thorpe legend and lore as the athlete himself is in the affections and fiber of the nation as a whole.

There is no escaping his impact. Every person writing about or discussing his marvelous feats is simultaneously a contributor to and a victim of that curious composite of man and myth that is Jim Thorpe.²⁸ Indeed, "men are ruled by imagination,"²⁹ white Americans, by a troubled soul as well.

NOTES

1. John McCallum and Charles H. Pearson, College Football U.S.A.: 1869-1973 (New York: Hall of Fame Publishing, Inc., 1973), p. 385.
2. Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, eds., Twentieth Century Authors (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1942), pp. 1083-84.
3. By his own admission, Thorpe was not a full-blooded Indian but a "five-eighths Indian." Although he was primarily Sac and Fox and Potawatomie, Irish and French blood also flowed in his veins.
4. D.H. Lawrence, Studies in Classic American Literature (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1923), pp. 44-45.
5. Ibid, p. 44.
6. John Steckbeck, Fabulous Redmen (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: J. Horace McFarland Company, 1951), p. 95.
7. Guernsey Van Riper, Jr., Jim Thorpe: Indian Athlete (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1956), pp. 178-79.
8. L. Edmond Leipold, Famous American Indians (Minneapolis, Minnesota: T.S. Denison and Company, Inc., 1972), p. 21; Gene Schoor, The Jim Thorpe Story (New York: Julian Messner, 1965), p. 99; Wilbur J. Gobrecht, Jim Thorpe--Carlisle Indian (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Cumberland County Historical Society, 1972), p. 5.
9. Frank Scully and Norman Sper, "Jim Thorpe: The Greatest Athlete Alive," American Mercury, August 1943, pp. 210-15.
10. Robert Cantwell, "The Poet, the Bums, and the Legendary Red Men," Sports Illustrated, 15 February 1960, pp. 74-84.

11. John Kieran, "Jim Thorpe Scalps Army," Great Sports Reporting, ed. Allen Kirschner (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1969), pp. 88-91.
12. Ibid.
13. Schoor, p. 5.
14. McCallum and Pearson, p. 141.
15. Kevin McCann, Man From Abilene (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1952), p. 63.
16. Jim Thorpe, quoted in 1972 American Indian Hall of Fame Inductees (Albuquerque, New Mexico: American Indian Hall of Fame, n.d.), p. 12.
17. Schoor, p. 50.
18. 1973 American Indian Hall of Fame Inductees (Albuquerque, New Mexico: American Indian Hall of Fame, n.d.), p. 13. Steckbeck also supports this point, p. 74.
19. See for example, Schoor, pp. 50-54, who indicates that the Lafayette team was composed of forty-six men.
20. Thorpe, p. 12.
21. Details of the "exposé" are available in the New York Times, 25 January to 4 February 1913 issues, as well as in R.W. Reising, Jim Thorpe: Tar Heel (Rocky Mount, North Carolina: Communiqué, Inc., 1974), pp. 28-31.
22. Thorpe, quoted in the New York Times, 28 January 1913, p. 1.
23. See for example, Schoor, p. 112.
24. Gobrecht, p. 9, is among those making this point.
25. C. Robert Paul, Assistant Director of Communications for the United States Olympic Committee, in letters to R.W. Reising, 6 May 1974 and 30 May 1975.
26. Paul, letter of 30 May 1975. It is worth noting, too, that the pentathlon was eventually dropped as an Olympic event.
27. Ibid.
28. The author of this paper does not exclude himself either: see R.W. Reising, Jim Thorpe: The Story of an American Indian (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Dillon Press, Inc., 1974).
29. George Santayana, "Imagination," Great English and American Essays, ed. Douglas S. Mead (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 134.