

Sportsmanship of Olympian proportions

—by Jim Adams

This summer's Olympic Games, and the record-breaking performances of Baltimore, MD-based swimmer Michael Phelps, have revived memories of another U.S. triumph in another Summer Olympics. They are the memories of Indian Country's greatest athlete, Jim Thorpe, who stunned the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden, with one of the most dominant and versatile performances ever seen. The Sac and Fox tribesman, who claimed descent from the great Chief Black Hawk, went on that year to other, equally historic victories built on a literal team effort by Indians of many tribes.

The national college football champion in that pivotal year was neither Harvard nor Yale, but Thorpe's alma mater, the Carlisle Industrial Indian School in Carlisle, Pa. Taken together, Carlisle football and Thorpe's exploits at the Olympics have significance beyond sports. Coming at a Native low point, they helped forge pan-tribal identity and revive Indian morale.

THE GAME

Thorpe's gold medals in the decathlon and pentathlon at the Stockholm Olympics established him as the greatest athlete in the world, in spite of the Orwellian rewriting of the record book that would soon follow. But this was only one episode in that championship year. Thorpe was already a star of the famous athletic program of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, one of the remarkable successes of that flawed but important social experiment.

Carlisle was founded by Tenth Cavalry Captain Richard H. Pratt. After initially banning football as too brutal, he gave in to lobbying by the students and started a formal program in 1893. Pratt also quickly realized, as many schools have since, that a strong team could compensate for a lack of other resources.

In 1899, Pratt made a major investment, hiring Glenn Scobey "Pop" Warner from Cornell. Warner revolutionized a game then consisting of crushing power plays on the line. With Warner, Carlisle pioneered the forward pass and the spiral throw. Quarterback Frank Mount Pleasant used the newly legal play to devastate Ivy League opponents through the fall of 1907, finally beating arch-rival Harvard.

The team also pioneered coast-to-coast touring. On the way home from an East-West championship game (the first ever), the team gave exhibitions at several Indian schools. At the Haskell Institute in Lawrence,



Jim Thorpe competing in Stockholm [www.nativeamericans.com].

Kan., they caught the imagination of a withdrawn 12-year-old chronic runaway name Jim Thorpe.

THORPE AND CARLISLE FOOTBALL

Thorpe came to Carlisle in 1904, and in 1908 he carried the team to a winning season with his feint-filled running. But in 1909 Thorpe himself "ran," the notation in his record, leaving school for a try at semipro baseball in North Carolina. Warner lured him back in 1911, with a promise to help him train for the 1912 Olympics.

The 1911 season began the peak years of Carlisle football. After eight straight wins, the team faced Harvard in what has been called one of the greatest football games ever played. Carlisle won 18-15 on Thorpe's last-minute field goal, to a standing ovation from Harvard stadium.





Playing baseball on the N.Y. Giants team [www.nativeamericans].com].

The post-Olympic 1912 season culminated in a second classic game, an emotional match with Army. Warner gave his team a not very subtle pep talk invoking the Indian Wars. Carlisle went on to give the cadets a major lesson in strategy. Warner had invented a new formation for this game, the double wing. It gave quarterback Gus Welch innumerable openings for runs, passes, and reverses. "Football," said Warner, "began to have the sweep of a prairie fire." The final score was Carlisle 27 - Army 6, and it shocked the Nation.

COLLAPSE AND RESURRECTION

After this high point, like a classical tragedy, the fall came quickly. Thorpe was a national hero, so it was a national story when the Worcester, Mass, *Telegram* reported that his two seasons of semipro baseball in North Carolina called his amateur status in question. The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) refused his apology and demanded the return of his Olympic medals and trophies. The International Olympics Committee (IOC) awarded the gold medals to the runners-up, who initially declined to accept them.

This decision is now seen as an act of "official infamy," serving a

hypocritical and elitist (and now repudiated) definition of amateurism and violating the procedural rules of its own day. The campaign to restore Thorpe's medals was kept alive for many years by his daughter, Grace, who passed away on April 1, 2008, at the age of 86. The AAU finally restored Thorpe's amateur status in 1973, twenty years after his death at the age of 65. In 1982, the IOC again recognized him as the gold medalist.

In the immediate aftermath of the controversy, Thorpe withdrew from Carlisle, embarking on an influential career in professional baseball, football, and even basketball. His superstardom helped shape the modern sports economy. His influence was most decisive in football, where he served as first president of the American Professional Football League, later the National Football League.

The impact on Carlisle was more damaging. Students blamed Warner and Carlisle administrators for not defending Thorpe, and morale plummeted. Financial scandal and Congressional hostility finally closed the school altogether in 1918. ■

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