The Greatest Of Them All

By Augie Borgi

IT WAS 1912 in Stockholm, Sweden, host to the Olympic games. Jim Thorpe of the Sac and Fox Tribes, descendent of Chief Black Hawk, had amazed the world by winning both the decathlon and the pentathlon. King Gustav V of Sweden was about to present the big Indian a bronze bust in the King's likeness, and was about to make sports history by uttering a phrase that even today every schoolboy knows:

"You, sir, are the greatest athlete in the world," Gustav said emotionally.

And Thorpe, who had celebrated on the native grog, replied, unemotionally, "Thanks, king."

Jim Thope was not a man of many words. He may have sipped more of the native grog and been able to throw a football farther than Joe Namath, but he wasn't about to become a rich man like Broadway Joe.

Thorpe was going to lose his Olympic medals, but he would never lose his fame and no one would ever forget - much to the chagrin of the Amateur Athletic Union - that Jim Thorpe was, in King Gustav's words, the greatest athlete of them all.

Through the courtesy of the Helms Athletic Foundation, Jim Thorpe's Olympic records will be reprinted today. And in the interest of aiding the Carlisle (Pa.) Jaycees and Grace Thorpe, Jim's daughter by the first of his three marriages, the saga of Jim Thorpe will be retold today so that every young schoolboy will know just what he did - Jim Thorpe, greatest athlete of them all, Olympic winner, pro football great, and major leaguer for the New York Giants, Boston Braves, and Cincinnati Reds from 1913 to 1919.

Starting with track - because its the Olympic medals that the Jaycees wish to have restored - the Greatest Athlete of Them All dominated the 1912 Olympics. In the pentathlon, his low score of seven points was more than twice as good as that of his nearest rival's, F. R. Bie of Norway.

Only one thing stopped Jim Thorpe in the 1912 Olympics - a baseball fling a couple of summers before in North Carolina when he played semi-pro baseball for the meager sum of $60 per month expense money, a far cry from the athletic scholarships of today and the endorsements for wearing certain shoes or skis or under-the-table dealings of amateur tennis players.

Jim long-jumped 23 feet, 2 7/10 inches; tossed the javelin 153 feet, 2 19/20 inches; sprinted the 200 meters in 22.9 seconds, sailed the discus 116 feet, 8 1/2 inches; and ran the 1,500 meters in 4:44.8. He was first in every event but the javelin.

In the decathlon, he ran up 8,412.96 points to 7,724 for Hugo Wieslander of Sweden. He won the shot with a 42-foot-5 1/2 put; the high hurdles in 15.6 seconds; the high jump at 6 feet, 1 1/2 inches; and the 1,500 meters in 4:40.1. In the other events he was never worse than
fourth - 100 meters in 11.2; 400 meters in 52.2; 22 feet, 6 3/5 inches for the long jump; 149 feet, 11 1/4 inches for the javelin throw; 121 feet, 3 3/4 inches for discus; and 10 feet, 8 inches for the pole vault.

WHAT CAUSED the late Jim Thorpe to be disqualified?

He played in the East Carolina League during the summer of 1909 as many college boys did. Only Jim used his real name - not a phony like the other college lads of the time. He was proud of his name: James Francis Thorpe, born in Oklahoma to Hiram Thorpe, half Sac-Fox and half Irish, and Gail Thorpe, three-fourths Sac-Fox and one-fourth French. "Guess you'd call me American Airedale," Jim Thorpe told people.

"A couple of Carlisle players named Jesse Young Deer and Joe Libby were going to North Carolina that summer to play ball," he explained. "I didn't want to go home to the farm, so I tagged along just for the trip. Well, Libby and Young Deer were fair outfielders and they caught on with the Rocky Mount club. I got short of money, so when the manager offered me $15 a week to play third base, I took it.

"I played my first game at Raleigh. After a while, the manager asked me if I could pitch. I told him I'd give it a whirl."

The whirl was a 4-0 shutout. Jim won 23 of 25 games before straining his arm and returning to Carlisle. Meanwhile, the fabled Pop Warner had left his coaching duties at Cornell to become coach at Carlisle. Jim's football career was to begin and his sidelines at track were to make him famous and ruined in the 1912 Olympics. Looking into football, one finds that Jim was a combination Glen Davis, Bronco Nagurski, Sammy Baugh, Joe Namath, and Lou Groza rolled into one.

With All-American Isaac Seneca, he helped the Indians of Carlisle beat Penn and the University of California, among others. But when the original swivel-hip back graduated, Warner needed a wingback to sweep the ends, crunch the tackles, bust the middle, and kick a country mile. He found Thorpe one day at tackling practice.

Thorpe caught punts and tacklets bounced off him. He ran for several touchdowns as assistant coaches berated tacklers for missing Jim or bouncing away. When Jim said: "Nobody tackles Jim," Pop Warner knew he had a replacement for Seneca. He really didn't know the signals but he grabbed the ball and didn't worry about following blockers in his first game, racing 65 yards for a touchdown against Penn. The next time the Indians got the ball, he ran to the huddle and said: "Give the ball to Jim again." This time he went 85 yards.

Jim Thorpe would do everything in the years to come for Carlisle, and the Indian school would beat the likes of Harvard with Jim drop-kicking field goals of 23, 43, and 37 yards, running for a 70-yard touchdown, and place-kicking a 50-yard field goal on the final play of the game.

Jim Thorpe could always run, just as he could always hit and pitch. When he was 42 years old Jim Thorpe played pro-football and beat the bushes in the minor leagues of baseball from Akron to Toledo to Portland to Hartford to Worcester to the twilight leagues.
EVEN AFTER 22 years of professional football, Jim thought he could still play baseball until he had an easy liner dribble past him for a triple in a twilight game. The crowd jeered as the manager roared: “You couldn’t have caught that in a bucket. Why don’t you quit, you old woman?”

“Go to hell,” Jim said as he walked off the field and out of baseball. But don’t think Jim wasn’t a great baseball player. He was fantastic, although John McGraw would never admit it. Signed for $4,500 off the Carlisle campus by McGraw for publicity value, Old Jim showed he could play with the likes of Merkle, Doyle, Herzog, Marquard, Snodgrass, Meyers, and Mathewson. He could hit Grover Cleveland Alexander. But in between hitting .300 and antagonizing John J. McGraw by lounging around the dugout, Jim was introduced to the saloons around the Polo Grounds by the pre-Babe Ruth swingers who made up the fabulous Giants.

[[below picture]]
Jim Thorpe at the height of his football career.

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