Excellence Backstory

Jim Thorpe didn’t excel in just one sport, but in many, making a name for himself in track and field, professional basketball and football, as well as major league baseball. In 1999 the Associated Press placed him third on their list of top athletes of the century, behind only Babe Ruth and Michael Jordan.

Though sports came easy for Thorpe, life did not. James Francis Thorpe was born a twin, but lost his brother to pneumonia when he was just nine years old. His mother died of childbirth complications just two years later. His father passed away after a hunting accident when Thorpe was 16 and attending the Carlisle Indian Industrial School.

Thorpe was raised in the Sac and Fox nation in Oklahoma and despite the hardships of his youth lived up to his native name: Wa-Tho-Huk, translated as “Bright Path.” His brilliant athletic career began at the Carlisle School. Though football was his favorite sport—earning him All-American honors in 1911 and 1912—he did not stop there. He competed in baseball, lacrosse, track and field, and even ballroom dancing, winning the 1912 inter-collegiate ballroom dancing championship.

Indeed 1912 was a big year for Thorpe. He became famous overnight with his outstanding performance at the Stockholm Olympics. He won the gold medal for both the decathlon and pentathlon. It is believed that as King Gustav awarded Thorpe his medals he said “You, sir, are the greatest athlete in the world.”

In 1913 Thorpe’s medals were stripped from him when the committee discovered he had played minor league baseball prior to competing in the Olympics, therefore violating the amateur regulations. Many opposed this ruling, however, and in 1983 Thorpe’s medals, and his name, were reinstated in the record books.

Thorpe went on to excel in major league baseball and professional football. He played for various MLB teams and finished his career with a .252 batting average, 91 runs scored, and 82 runs batted in. Likewise Thorpe played for six different NFL teams. He even coached one of his teams, the Canton Bulldogs, while still a player. Thorpe’s talent did not go unnoticed—he was selected to the first All-NFL team in 1923.

The sheer excellence with which Thorpe performed every sport he ever competed in is an inspiration to many. Undoubtedly, Jim Thorpe is one of the greatest athletes this world has ever seen.

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