

KING GUSTAV V | 'GREATEST ATHLETE IN THE WORLD'

# Thorpe impressed sports fans, world leaders with athleticism

By **BARRY LEWIS**  
World Sports Writer

When the Associated Press polled sports writers in 1950 to select the greatest male athlete for the first half of the 20th century, many expected Babe Ruth to receive the honor.

Instead, it went to Oklahoma native Jim Thorpe, who was a football All-American, major league baseball player and Olympic track-and-field legend who was admired by world leaders.

After Thorpe won the 1912 Olympic decathlon and pentathlon in Stockholm, Sweden's King Gustav V said, "Sir, you are the greatest athlete in the world."

Later that year while playing football for Carlisle (Pa.) Indian School, Thorpe had an up-close meeting with a future president. Army defensive back Dwight Eisenhower was knocked out while trying to tackle Thorpe.

Thorpe reminisced about that moment with the future president in 1952, just before Eisenhower accepted the Republican nomination.

Eisenhower said in a 1961 speech, "Here and there, there are some people who are supremely endowed. My memory goes back to Jim Thorpe. He never practiced in his life, and he could do anything better than any other football player I ever saw."

Two years later, Thorpe was enshrined in the first class of Pro Football's Hall of Fame.

It is believed Thorpe was born in a one-room cabin in 1887 or 1888 in Indian Territory near Prague. He had an Irish father and a Sac and Fox mother. His Sac and Fox name was Wa-Tho-Huk, which means "Bright Path." As a youngster, Thorpe attended the Sac and Fox Indian School in Stroud.

In 1911-12, Thorpe earned national headlines as an All-American running back, defensive back and kicker at Carlisle,



Courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society

**Jim Thorpe (right) is shown with his teammates at Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. Thorpe was an All-American running back, defensive back and kicker at Carlisle.**

which was a national power.

Six months after his Olympic success at Stockholm, Thorpe had his gold medals taken away when the International Olympic Committee learned he had played minor league baseball in 1909. Those medals were restored in 1982.

Thorpe, an outfielder, received numerous major league baseball

offers in 1913 and signed with the New York Giants.

Although he homered to beat the Detroit Tigers in a 1917 exhibition game in Tulsa and played in the World Series that year, baseball success was often elusive for Thorpe, who spent six seasons in the majors. His best year was his last when he batted .327 in 1919.

In 1920, he was named the president of the American Professional Football Association, which was renamed as the National Football League two years later. He also played in the NFL from 1920-28.

Thorpe struggled after his athletic career ended. In 1932, Thorpe did not have enough money to buy his own ticket to

attend the Olympics in Los Angeles, so he was invited to be a special guest of Vice President Charles Curtis.

Thorpe survived two heart attacks, but his third proved fatal on March 28, 1953, in Lomita, Calif.

Since 1986, the Jim Thorpe Award has been given to college football's best defensive back.

*"He never practiced in his life, and he could do anything better than any other football player I ever saw."*

PRESIDENT DWIGHT EISENHOWER SAID ABOUT JIM THORPE



Associated Press

**Babe Ruth of the New York Yankees hits a home run in this undated photo.**

## TULSA: A SPORTS CITY

# Diamond, gridiron, rink all busy

By **BARRY LEWIS**  
World Sports Writer

The New York Yankees' legend Babe Ruth, arguably the country's most popular athlete during the first half of the 20th century, nearly caused a riot during his 1929 visit to Tulsa.

After a ground-rule double during the Yankees' exhibition game against the Tulsa Oilers, Ruth tossed a baseball into the left-field stands, starting a wild scramble for the ball. Fans came onto the field, and police were called to restore order. Tulsa beat the defending World Series champions, 12-9.

The '20s were a boom time for baseball in Tulsa. McNulty Park, at 10th Street and Elgin Avenue, was the scene of many major league exhibitions that featured many of the era's stars, such as Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Ty Cobb, Rog-

ers Hornsby and George Sisler.

Tulsa's minor league Oilers, an affiliate of the American League's St. Louis Browns, won five Western League titles. McNulty Park, however, was condemned in 1930, leaving Tulsa without a pro team for two years.

College football also prospered in Oklahoma's first 25 years.

The University of Oklahoma's football team, led by coach Bennie Owen, won national headlines for being undefeated in its 1911 season. OU also was undefeated in 1915, 1918 and 1920. That led to the construction of Memorial Stadium. Completed in 1925, it's still the home of the Sooners, who play on Owen Field, which opened in 1923.

Oklahoma State University, then known as Oklahoma A&M, has been playing at its current field since 1914, and the University of Tulsa opened Skelly Stadi-

um in 1930. TU was a regional powerhouse during 1919-22, with a 33-3-2 record.

Oklahoma also had a prominent all-Indian pro football team during the '20s. The Hominy Indians traveled across the country, taking on all comers, and had a 28-game winning streak at one point. Pepper Martin played for the Indians before he became a World Series hero for the St. Louis Cardinals.

In 1927, the Indians beat the barnstorming NFL champion New York Giants 13-6 at Pawhuska.

The Giants' coach, Steve Owen, gained some revenge Dec. 30, 1928, when he led a group of NFL All-Stars to a 27-0 win over Hominy at McNulty Park.

Pro hockey made its debut in Tulsa two days later. The team, also named the Oilers, won titles in 1929 and 1931 in the Ameri-

can Hockey Association, which was considered a major league competitor to the National Hockey League. Tulsa's most valuable player in 1931, Burr Williams of Okemah, became the first Oklahoma native to play in the NHL.

After winning the '31 title, the Oilers challenged the NHL's champion, the Montreal Canadiens, to play for the Stanley Cup. The Canadiens refused.

College basketball in that era was often considered just a way that football players could keep in shape during winter. It was common for the head football coach to also lead the basketball team, as Owen did at OU.

There was no NCAA Tournament then, but TU did reach that era's top team event, the National AAU Tournament, in 1921.

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