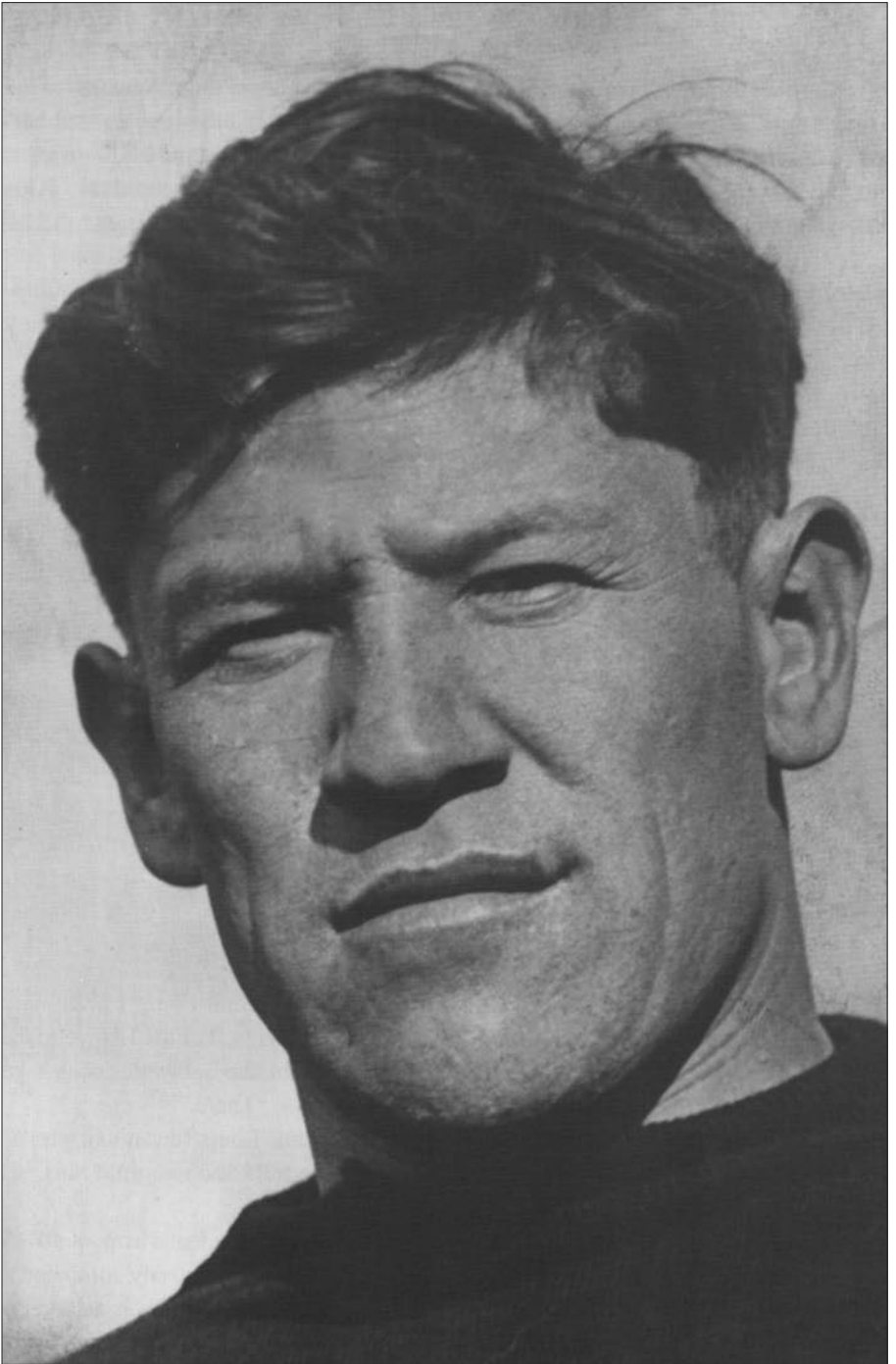


**JIM
THORPE**
ORIGINAL ALL-AMERICAN



Jim Thorpe, 1912

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THORPE**
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JOSEPH BRUCHAC



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*This story is dedicated to
the grandchildren of all those who were sent
to Carlisle and to all those who ran.*

CONTENTS

1. You Can Call Me Jim	1
2. Running Away	7
3. The Finest Game in the World	12
4. Carlisle's Visit	19
5. Back Home	24
6. Garden Grove	28
7. Off to Carlisle	35
8. Follow the Trolley Tracks	39
9. Cadet Thorpe	45
10. The Routine	49
11. Outing	54
12. Clearing the Bar	63
13. Keep a-Goin'	67
14. Ex	73
15. Summer at Carlisle	77
16. Nobody Tackles Jim	81
17. The World of the Football Boys	89
18. Indian Field	95
19. First Touchdown	100
20. The Association	114

21. Doing Well	119
22. Oklahoma Summer	127
23. Warm-Up Games	135
24. The Toughest Season	141
25. The Reluctant Track Star	148
26. Summer Ball	156
27. Being Missed	162
28. Tough Seasons	166
29. A Friend for Life	173
30. So Far, So Good	179
31. Iva	185
32. Harvard	192
33. All-American	198
34. Better Than Ever Before	204
35. Olympic Glory	213
36. All Kinds of Opportunities	224
37. The 1912 Season	230
38. Everything Comes to an End	243
39. Disgrace	247
40. Things Come Around	254
<i>Author's Note</i>	263
<i>Bibliography</i>	274
<i>About the Author</i>	277

The 1911 season has brought into the public eye a young Indian student at the Carlisle School who promises to be the greatest athlete the world has ever seen. James Thorpe, a Sac and Fox from Oklahoma, came to Carlisle in 1908 with no knowledge whatsoever of athletics. The world of college trainers has been astonished by his achievements. He is not only a basketball player, at which game he fills the center post with truly remarkable skill, but he is a baseball player of great talent and covers any of the sacks or outfields with as much credit as a professional. He can put the 16 pound shot 43 feet, runs 100 in 10 seconds, while the 220 hurdles he negotiates in 26 seconds. The high hurdles are pie for him in 15 4/5 seconds, while the 220 hurdles he negotiates in 26 seconds. The youthful redskin hunts, plays lacrosse, tennis, indoor baseball, handball, hockey all with equal skill and can fill almost any position on a football team with superlative credit.

— from the Muskogee Times-Democrat
November 1911

1

YOU CAN CALL ME JIM

You can call me Jim. I've had other names, some good, some bad. Some of them I've accepted and some I have fought against. But Jim, well, that's the one my pa gave when he first looked at me and my twin brother, Charlie.

James Francis Thorpe, he said. That is what we are going to name him.

Thinking back on it, he could have done a whole lot worse. At least he didn't call me after his own pa, my Irish grandfather, like he'd been named. Then I would have been Hiram Thorpe the Third.

James Francis Thorpe wasn't bad at all. Ma had other ideas, though. She had in mind what she had seen when she looked outside our cabin there in Indian Territory that May afternoon in 1887 when I was born. And when an Indian woman has something in mind, she generally gets her way. A lot of

Indians get their name from something their mother saw right after they were born. Like my friend named Two Dogs. Just kidding.

But Ma was not just kidding. That image of the sun lighting up the walkway leading away from the door was strong in her mind.

“His name is Wathohuck,” she said. “Bright Path.”
And that surely is a good name, too.

What were those other names I got called?

My brother. That was one of the very best of them.

“Wait for me, my brother!”

Charlie would call those words out to me when we were running across the plains chasing after jackrabbits or going up our favorite hill, him trying hard to keep up with me. And I always stopped to wait for him to catch up. I don’t think there’s anyone in life who ever comes closer to a person than his twin brother. We were always together. We’re together now. And I hope you understand what I mean when I say that.

Stupid. That was what the teacher called me. And not just one teacher, either.

Stupid. I hated that name. That was one of the worst ones. Not the very worst, but close. It hurt so much because I wondered if it was true. When it came to book learning I was painful slow. I had always been the swift one when it came to outdoors things, the first to learn how to make and shoot a bow, to ride a horse. (When I was on a horse’s back I understood



Jim, age three, with his twin brother, Charles

what some of our old men meant when they said us Sac and Fox could almost forgive the white man for the bad that was done to us seeing as how he also brought us the gift of horses.) Charlie, though, was the one who dashed ahead when we got sent off to the mission school at the age of six.

Just looking at all those strange twisty shapes crawling across the white pages, those letters and

numbers like little black insects—it gave me a headache. The pictures weren't so bad, but there wasn't ever enough of them.

"You can do it, Jim." That is what my brother Charlie would say.

And because he believed in me, I finally did. I learned to read and to write—better than any of those teachers ever thought I could. I even got so I could cipher, though it was hard to make real sense out of all the numbers, which didn't tell stories like words could do.

School, I never loved it, but I would have done anything for Charlie. Maybe, if he had stayed, I would have learned to like it better. But he didn't. When the influenza burned through the school that second winter like a fire out of control in the prairie grass, it took Charlie with it.

And I took to running away from that awful place. Even though I was small back then—I didn't get my growth until real late—they were never able to catch me. Just as long as I had a home to go to, I always got back home.

And Pa always had the same thing to say. Sometimes he was angry when he said it, sometimes he was just resigned.

"You're going back."

Pa had his way about that, just as Ma had hers about my Indian name. Not that she disagreed with him about my needing education. Both of them had seen how Indians were cheated by white men who

knew more about such things as book learning. Being cheated was how we Sac and Fox had ended up way down in Oklahoma, far from the lands where our people used to live near the big freshwater seas. We'd been cheated so often by the whites that finally great chief Black Hawk fought back hard in a war that scared the pants off the United States back in 1832. Black Hawk and his men pushed back across the Mississippi and defeated the army and drove all the way up into Wisconsin before they finally got outnumbered and outgunned and had to surrender.

Pa was always proud of Black Hawk. He made sure that all his kids knew about him and shared that pride. No-ten-o-quah, my father's mother, was from Black Hawk's own Thunder Clan, so our family felt as if we were Black Hawk's family. My mother even used to say that she thought I was Black Hawk come back to life again. I was born to do great things. My destiny was not to be the same kind of warrior Black Hawk was, but I would fight in my own way for Indian people.

Even though he was beat in war, Black Hawk never gave in. Once they'd released him from captivity, he spoke up and told the Indian side of things to reporters. His story even got published in a book, and I think that was one of the reasons Pa wanted all his children to be able to read. That way they could read Black Hawk's story for themselves.

Not that reading was the only way I could learn about Black Hawk. When I was a boy there was plenty

of Sac and Fox men willing to tell the stories of that war to any child ready to listen. And they would tell them in our language and not in that English which was the only thing we was allowed to speak in the mission school. A few of the oldest men were actual veterans of that war, and as for the others, well their fathers and grandfathers had fought by old Black Hawk's side. Being away at school so much meant I never got enough chances to listen to those stories. I still regret that.

Pa's own knowledge of reading and writing had, I must admit, served him in good stead. We had our own place and there was always enough for Pa and Ma to feed my other brothers and sisters. Even in Oklahoma, there were still more than enough dishonest white men who would cheat an Indian out of everything he owned.

"You're going back," Pa would say.

I begged him. And Ma, too. She let her eyes be kinder as she looked at me, but she shook her head. I think it was because she knew that path in her vision had led *away* from our door. I had to make my way out into the world. Even though I was stubborn enough to keep fighting against it.

Stubborn. I have been called that plenty often, too. I'll accept that name.