

Glimpse of Greatness (2013)

Houston Hodges, for Writer's Corner on WLRH, Huntsville, AL USA

I met Jim Thorpe once, called "the greatest athlete of all time." It was 1945, and I was on the high school football team in Clovis, New Mexico. One tepid fall afternoon our coach called us together, and introduced a somewhat disheveled gentleman, obviously of native American extraction, quite ordinary in appearance, and very quiet. He told us of Jim Thorpe of the Carlisle Indians, product of an ordinary boyhood on a reservation, invited to the football team at an undistinguished school targeting Native American young men and introducing them to the world of the hundred yard battleground for gridiron prowess.

Who could tell that Thorpe would get it, and conquer it and become one of the greatest at it. Game after game he excelled, succeeded, surpassed the others. The climax was two famous confrontations Carlisle Indians versus Harvard, Carlisle versus Army! Carlisle won both. In 1909 and 1910 he was First Team All-American; he starred in the 1912 Olympics, winning both the pentathlon and decathlon, but after he was deemed a professional his medals were removed; thereafter he starred in both professional baseball for the New York Giants and pro football for the Cleveland Indians. The Olympic medals were later restored.

But in 1945 things were different; he was down on his luck and broke, deep in alcohol addiction, and was supporting himself going around the country meeting high school football coaches, then making a talk to his team for a meal, a night's lodging, and a few dollars.

I really remember little of what he said; I've wished a thousand times I could. What lasted was that first impression: a puffy-faced, bleary-eyed Native American. I'd had no experience with the effects of alcoholism symptoms at that time... but I knew he was a ruin. When he met King Gustav of Sweden to receive the Olympic medals, the king grasped his hand and said, "Sir, you are the greatest athlete in the world." Jim Thorpe, never a man to stand on ceremony, looked back at him and said, "Thanks, king." I wish I could have met him then.