

James “Jim” Thorpe

Bill Thorpe talks about his father, Jim—widely regarded as the Greatest Athlete of the 20th century.

Chapter 01 - 0:56

Introduction

Announcer: The Greatest Athlete in the world was James Francis “Jim” Thorpe who was born in Oklahoma and grew up in the Sac and Fox Nation. He was considered one of the most versatile athletes of modern sports.

Jim Thorpe won Olympic gold medals for the 1912 Olympic Pentathlon and decathlon; he also played professional football, baseball and basketball. Thorpe was the first president of the American Professional Football Association, which would become the National Football League, known as the NFL, in 1922.

In a poll of sports fans conducted by ABC Sports, Thorpe was voted the Greatest Athlete of the Twentieth Century which included athletes like Muhammed Ali, Babe Ruth and Jesse Owens.

Jim Thorpe was 65 when he died March 28, 1953.

Bill Thorpe, son of Jim Thorpe, talks about his father on VoicesofOklahoma.com where we preserve Oklahoma’s history, one voice at a time.

Chapter 02 - 9:30

The Greatest Athlete

John Erling: My name is John Erling, and today’s date is August 3, 2015. Bill, would you state your full name, please?

Bill Thorpe: Yes. My full name is William Thorpe.

JE: Your age?

BT: Age is eighty-six years old.

JE: And what is your birth date?

BT: 8/16/28.

JE: Where were you born?

BT: I was born in Marian, Ohio.

JE: And who is your father?

BT: Jim Thorpe, greatest athlete in the world.

JE: Where are we recording this interview?

BT: This is at the museum in Oklahoma City.

JE: The Oklahoma Sports Hall of Fame.

BT: Right.

JE: The Jim Thorpe Association—

BT: Association.

JE: ...is here. You can see great memorabilia throughout this and particularly of your father.

BT: Right.

JE: Let's start with your father. His full name?

BT: James Francis Thorpe.

JE: It seems like there's kind of a conversation about when he was actually born.

BT: I know, it's hard for me to repeat because I'm not sure just exactly when.

JE: Some say he was born May 22 of 1887.

BT: Yeah.

JE: Then there was some that said he was born May 28, 1888.

BT: Right.

JE: On his mother's allotment. And some say he was born along the banks of the North Fork River.

BT: Right.

JE: Most biographers believe he was born on May 22, 1887, because that's what's listed on his baptismal certificate. And in Belmont, which was a small community.

BT: Small community.

JE: Let's talk about his parents.

BT: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Your grandparents.

BT: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: His grandfather, his name and about him.

BT: As bad as it sounds I really don't know too much about them because Dad never really talked too much about them other than that it was Granddad and Grandma.

JE: Hiram Thorpe?

BT: Hiram, right.

JE: He had an Irish father.

BT: Right.

JE: And an Indian mother.

BT: Mary was his sister, Frank was his brother.

JE: And then his mother, your grandmother—

BT: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...was Charlotte.

BT: Right.

JE: And had a French father and he was raised a Sac and Fox, wasn't he?

BT: Right.

JE: So what would you be?

BT: Sac and Fox, Potawatomi, and Kickapoo.

JE: All right.

BT: Dad really, I mean, that was the coverage that he had blood from the different tribes.

JE: I understand he attended the Sac and Fox Indian Agency School and he had a twin brother. I think a lot of people don't realize that.

BT: Yes. He had a twin brother and I think his twin brother died of pneumonia or something at around ten years old.

JE: His name was?

BT: Charlie.

JE: I understand he went to several schools. His father sent him to the Haskell Institute, which was an Indian boarding school.

BT: Indian boarding school.

JE: His mother died of childbirth complications a couple of years later.

BT: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: When is the first time you are aware of your father? What is your first awareness and how old?

BT: Well, my first awareness of Dad was, I guess, really in California where we were living in the Los Angeles area. I was all of probably seven or eight years old. People went off and talked about him but as a kid your mind is really doing other things than listening to that.

Finally one day, one of the guys was talking to Dad. They mentioned it and mentioned how great his athletic abilities had been and the accomplishments that he had. And I guess at that particular time it really started registering that, "Wow." In fact, I think I was probably playing a little football at the time and I was just young and learning. I knew how hard it was, in various sports, to be any good. And hear these people talk about him and what he accomplished was really amazing.

JE: And, you know, football, baseball, lacrosse. I even read ballroom dancing.

BT: Ballroom dancing, he was a champion, yes.

JE: 1912.

BT: Right.

JE: Intercollegiate ballroom dancing championship.

BT: Right, right, right.

JE: Did you do any ballroom dancing?

BT: I've done some ballroom dancing, yes.

JE: Oh really?

BT: Yeah, I've played baseball, basketball, football, track and field, done a little boxing myself.

Nothing great.

JE: Through high school? Or—

BT: Yeah, through high school.

JE: Well, when you say great now we can't compare—were you always and often compared to your father, I suppose?

BT: Yes, I mean, many times I heard, "How come you're not as good as your dad?"

JE: How did you receive that?

BT: Oh I guess the first couple of times that I heard it I was disappointed. Then, I guess, after getting enough of them I just didn't care anymore. It bothered me to begin with, and, really and truly, I wasn't too bad of an athlete.

JE: Who did you play for? What school?

BT: High school.

JE: And what high school was that?

BT: I went to Sherman Institute in Riverside, California. And that was an Indian school.

Prior to that it was grade school in Hawthorne, California.

JE: But you did play, I mean, you were obviously good enough to play all these sports in high school.

BT: Oh yeah, yeah.

JE: What was your best sport?

BT: Probably football.

JE: In what position?

BT: I played running back and defensive back. I played sixty minute football.

JE: Tell us about your father who could play every position.

BT: Every position, yes. I mean, he was just a natural wherever they wanted him to play. He could kick a football eighty yards in the air and run down and catch it. He was something else. Of course, a football in those days were not like they are today. They were more like closer to a basketball, I think, than a football, because they were same size in length but they weren't as slim, they were rounded. And he could take that football and kick it a mile high.

JE: Well, there's a point where he kicked the ball ninety-five yards.

BT: Yes.

JE: To win a game.

BT: Yes. And he was a great drop-kicker. He drop-kicked many balls fifty yards from the fifty-yard line. And in an exhibition game in San Francisco, when he was fifty years old, or thereabouts, at the 49er's facility, he drop-kicked a fifty yard field goal, turned around and drop-kicked another field goal the opposite direction. And made them both.

JE: Did he attend any of your events and watch you play?

BT: Once, that I recall, and that was when I was going to Sherman Institute, the Indian school in Riverside, California. And he come down to visit and at that particular time I was playing football. And I was a running back. I was taking the kickoffs, and then I was playing the right half. I took a ball, I think it was on the 23- or 4-yard line, got a hole and off I went for touchdown.

He mentioned that, he said, "That was great," he said, "I'm glad to see it."

JE: That had to make you feel so proud that he was there.

BT: Oh yeah, man, I'll tell you what.

JE: I'm sure the stands knew too that Jim Thorpe was there.

BT: Oh yeah. They knew he was there. They were hollering and hooping like crazy, you know.

JE: Do you have children?

BT: I had a son. He passed away when he was forty-four, with cancer.

JE: Did he have any of this athletic prowess?

BT: He had abilities. He started to play high school football in Arlington, Texas, Arlington High. And the coach mentioned to me, he said, "He is going to be a great player." And damn if he didn't end up hurting his knee.

JE: Oh.

BT: And that ended it.

JE: We don't hear much about your father injuring himself. Are there injuries that you know about?

BT: Oh, he had bruises.

JE: Yeah, but—

BT: You know, like everybody else.

JE: But nothing that seemed to—

BT: Nothing that was really serious.

JE: That would keep him from participating—

BT: Right.

JE: ...in an event.

BT: Well, you know, if you stop and think about it, 1907 through 1912, the people, size wise were not big like they are today. In that particular time a lineman, an offensive lineman at 220 maybe, or something like that, was considered a big man. Well, Dad, playing football in those days, at that particular time, was 185 or 190 pounds.

JE: How tall was your father?

BT: Six-one. And the thing was, he was tall, big, and didn't have any fat. From playing as a kid in the Indian Territory and running and wrastling and fighting and doing all the things that they did, he was physically in great condition. When they got out on a field to play, I mean, he was running through people. At 190 or 195 pounds you're biggest lineman at 220 and a lot of the defensive backs were 140 or 150, they weren't stopping him much.

JE: Well, there's a story about Pop Warner.

BT: Yeah.

JE: And he played for Coach Pop Warner.

BT: Right.

JE: I understand he wanted to preserve your father for the track and field team.

BT: Right, he did.

JE: And did not want him to play football.

BT: That's right. He had been running track and field for Pop. One day he would come by the track and field where they were practicing and I guess they had the broad jump, not broad jump—

JE: Would it be high jump?

BT: High jump. These guys were trying to make five-nine, or something like that, none of them were getting over. And in street clothes, he just said, "Let me try." And he rolled over and went over the bar like it wasn't even there.

JE: He eventually could long-jump twenty-three feet, six inches.

BT: Yeah.

JE: And he high-jumped six feet, five inches.

BT: Yeah.

Chapter 03 - 4:10

1912 Olympics

John Erling: He entered the US Olympic trials for both the pentathlon and the decathlon.

Bill Thorpe: And the decathlon. Fifteen events. Ten on a decathlon and five on the pentathlon.

Nowadays the pentathlon is different than what it was back then. All of the events were track and field events. Nowadays the pentathlon is pole-vaulting, things other than doing the hundred yard dash and stuff like that.

JE: By the way, he ran the mile in four minutes and thirty-five seconds.

BT: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: Just think of that.

BT: Um-hmm (affirmative). Right.

JE: And how long it took anybody to break the four-minute mile. And then the hurdles and the low hurdles. His schedule in the Olympics was busy. He won four of the five events, placed third in the javelin. He hadn't competed in that before 1912.

BT: No. I guess 1912 before he went to the Olympics he had the coach show him a little bit about the javelin. That was about it.

JE: Some of this is real remarkable. Someone had stolen his shoes.

BT: Yes. He was going out to participate, started looking for his shoes and couldn't find them. So he started looking around and asking questions. People said, "No, we don't know, we don't know, somebody stole them."

He said, "Well, I've got to have some shoes to wear." And so what he was doing was picking up a shoe here and picking up a shoe there, trying them on, maybe using a little more tape on one, but he had shoes that didn't even belong to him. And he participated in the pentathlon and decathlon in those shoes.

JE: To verify what you just said, not that we needed to—

BT: Yeah.

JE: ...but in the 1912 photo he is shown—

BT: Shown with, yeah.

JE: ...with two different shoes.

BT: You bet. Yep.

JE: As was the custom of the day, the medals were presented to the athletes—

BT: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...during the closing ceremonies. And he received his from the Swedish king, Gustav.

Several sources recount that when awarding the prize—

BT: Um-hmm (affirmative).

JE: ...King Gustav said, "You, sir, are the greatest athlete in the world."

BT: That's what I understand that he said.

JE: To which your father said?

BT: "Thanks, King."

JE: Right. What do you say?

BT: Yeah.

JE: He was being respectful.

BT: I mean, he's an Indian that came from an Indian school and that was just his way of it. And their way.

JE: Obviously America followed this, so he comes back to the United States and he's given a tickertape parade.

BT: When they came in they told Dad that they were going to run a parade for the athletes that participated in the 1912 Olympics. And that they put him, because of what he

accomplished, in a car by himself. He said he just sat back and relaxed and enjoyed it.
Waved a little bit here, waved a little bit there.

JE: This is a quote, he said, "I heard people yelling my name and I couldn't realize how one fellow could have so many friends."

BT: Right. Yeah that's true.

JE: Did he ever talk to you as a child about the 1912 Olympics or anything?

BT: He really didn't say too much to the four of us boys. My older brother, Carl, was fifteen months my senior. My brother Richard was four years younger than myself. And Jack was eight years younger. So when he would talk about stuff like that I don't think Jack and Richard could really remember too much about that. As far as that goes, I couldn't remember too much about it.

Older brother, Carl, was the one that probably picked up on it a little better than I did.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). Well, at any rate, he wasn't at home being braggadocios about anything, was he?

BT: No, not really. People would come into the house to visit, I mean, other athletes and different people, famous people, would come in to visit with Dad and they would sit down and talk. They would talk about some of the events and different things and the accomplishments. I think that's one, I know for myself, that it was probably the first time I really realized what he had accomplished.

Chapter 04 - 2:05

1912 Medals

John Erling: He earned these medals and then there were strict rules regarding amateurism.

Bill Thorpe: Right. 1912 and the rules and regulations that were established in those years would be, I guess, that if you played any sport for money it was considered professional. So Dad, in his love for baseball, played baseball. And basically was receiving room and board for playing.

JE: Very meager pay.

BT: Very meager, meager pay. It was something that they took the heart on that and took his medals away because of it.

JE: But we can also say that a lot of college players regularly spent their summers playing professionally.

BT: Oh yeah, under assumed names.

JE: Unlike your father, who used his name.

BT: Yeah. He just didn't know that much about the rules and regulations. Where your other athletes are in colleges and things like that and everything is talked about. Your Indian schools are different. I mean, it just wasn't talked about.

JE: Your father wrote a letter in which he admitted playing professional baseball.

BT: Right.

JE: I don't expect you to know all these words here but I'll read them.

BT: All right.

JE: "I hope I will be partly excused by the fact that I was simply an Indian schoolboy and did not know all about such things. In fact, I did not know that I was doing wrong because I was doing what I knew several other college men had done, except that they did not use their own names."

BT: Right.

JE: So his medals were taken away, but that's not the end of the story. Is it?

BT: No, they actually in 1950, when they voted him the Greatest Athlete of the Half Century, they were talking about getting his medals returned to him.

JE: So then I understand the medals are in the Oklahoma Historical Center.

BT: Right, right.

JE: Which is right across from the capital. It must make you feel good to walk into the capital, famous people are there, and there is your father.

BT: Yes. Very much so.

JE: Oklahoma has embraced his legacy all these years.

Chapter 05 - 1:45

Films

John Erling: He signed and played baseball for the Giants, Reds, and Braves. As a matter of fact, we can say that he played for the American Professional Football Association, which would then become the National Football League—

Bill Thorpe: Right.

JE: ...two years later.

BT: Right, he played for the Canton Bulldogs.

JE: And he was also president there for a while.

BT: First president.

JE: Probably in name because he was still busy playing. He barnstormed, I understand, didn't he, in baseball?

BT: Yep, played baseball.

JE: After his athletic career what did he do?

BT: He went around, he lectured around the country. He had a tour that he would go on and he would be gone for six to eight months at a time, traveling around the country.

JE: And his lecture would be just telling about?

BT: His life, really, his experiences and what he accomplished.

JE: The town of Shawnee, Oklahoma, was his hometown. They named their football field in his honor.

BT: Yes.

JE: He was in a number of films, he was an actor. Do you remember seeing some of them?

BT: Oh yes. I participated in a few of them myself.

JE: Did you really?

BT: Yeah.

JE: Like what? *Two Minutes Rock*, I don't know if that's one you remember?

BT: Yeah, that was one of the movies, that Rockne movie and stuff that he participated.

JE: And you—

BT: And he come in, they opened the door and he come in and said, "Two minutes, Knute," and then he backed out.

And then, Knute, while he was talking to his team, said, "If we had more people like Jim Thorpe we would have some great teams."

JE: You're talking about Knute Rockne—

BT: Yeah.

JE: ...the one you're saying there.

BT: Yeah, that was part of the movie.

JE: Exactly. And you actually played with your father?

BT: Yeah.

JE: What a thrill that was.

BT: Not in that movie.

JE: Okay.

BT: I played in some of the westerns that he played a chieftain part. And I was one of the Indian boys. My mother was an Indian squaw.

JE: Oh really?

BT: Oh yeah.

JE: You had a good, fun family—

BT: Oh yeah.

JE: ...event for you.

BT: It was fun.

Chapter 06 - 2:00**Thorpe's Funeral**

John Erling: You never did get a chance to watch him play because you were too young, right?

Bill Thorpe: Yeah, no, I never did see him play. I watched him, I guess, he had to be fifty-some years old, kicking a football to us. I mean, I remember those because, I mean, he would boot that ball and that ball would go a mile high. Over our heads most of the time.

JE: You must have felt you were a celebrity because of your dad.

BT: Not really, a little bit later in years, when he passed and then they were wanting people to come and give speeches and stuff like that, I had a few speaking engagements that I've talked about Dad. My older brother and myself, Dick, I think, got in a few of them too, Richard.

JE: Well, a lot of people just honored to be able to talk to the son of.

BT: Yeah.

JE: About his death, he died of heart failure.

BT: Heart failure. He had a few other minor heart attacks prior to that, but that was his major that took his life.

JE: Were you there? Around him when it happened?

BT: At that particular time I wasn't with him.

JE: Did you attend his funeral?

BT: Oh yes.

JE: Highly attended by a lot of people?

BT: Yeah, they had a lot of people from Hollywood, actors and different ones that had participated in the movies with Dad. I mean, he played in a lot of different movies and he met a lot of these people. When he passed, a lot of them came to the funeral.

JE: You were about nineteen and were you serving in the military at the time?

BT: Yeah. I was in Korea.

JE: And then you came home for—

BT: Yes.

JE: ...the funeral.

BT: Yes.

JE: You talk about all the celebrities and so forth, one might think he died a wealthy man.

BT: No.

JE: But I'm not sure that he did.

BT: No, no, he really didn't have much of a savings. He was a free spender. People would come up and talk to him and say, "Boy, I could sure use a couple hundred dollars." And it was easy for him to reach in his pocket, then if he had it, give it to them.

JE: Wow. Did he spend on you or and the family at all?

BT: Oh yeah. Yeah, he spent on the family as well.

Chapter 07 - 2:30

Advice from Thorpe

John Erling: The young people will listen to this. What do you tell them?

Bill Thorpe: One of the things that I think Dad kept preaching, he said, "If you lie and cheat you'll steal." I mean, that was one of the things he used to tell us as a kid. Also, he said, "Be truthful always." He never pushed any of us in sports. He said, "If you want to play football, you want to play baseball, get out and do it. And try to be the best."

JE: A lot of fathers and parents—

BT: You bet.

JE: ...are beating on their kids.

BT: That's right.

JE: "You've got to practice, you've got to practice."

BT: No.

JE: He never did any of that?

BT: No. As far as I'm concerned, he was probably one of the most unusual individuals that you would ever meet, in that the things he accomplished in sports, he didn't do a lot of bragging about stuff like that. But he would tell groups of children to get out and "do the best you can. And work as hard as you can because the harder you work, the better you're going to be."

JE: Do you think he had to work that hard?

BT: No. Not with him. For instance, to give you an idea, I start playing golf. He come out and he was watching me hit. I asked him, I said, "Have you played golf?"

He said, "I've played a couple of times."

I said, "Why don't you hit some?"

Sheesh, I mean, he got up there and teed that ball and three hundred yards is nothing for him. At that time. And it was old clubs. His rhythm and timing was so good and his eyes—

JE: Right.

BT: ...and coordination—

JE: Right.

BT: ...between the eyes and body movement, he'd kill those balls. Three hundred yards was nothing for him.

JE: Isn't that interesting? Not another person has come along to be able to be so dominant in all these sports.

BT: That's right.

JE: Many of them, Jackie Robinson played several sports.

BT: Right.

JE: But they didn't dominate—

BT: Dominate, right.

JE: ...in track and field. One person was born on this earth like your father.

BT: That's right. You bet.

JE: And that makes you feel good, I know.

BT: Yes.

JE: And I want to thank you for visiting with us here.

BT: Thank you.

JE: Representing your father in Oklahoma. You live in Texas, do you?

BT: Texas.

JE: Right now?

BT: Arlington, Texas.

JE: Well, Bill, thanks so much for contributing to *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.

BT: Thank you, I enjoyed it very much.

Chapter 08 - 0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening everyday to these great Oklahoman's share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.

