

Jim Thorpe

Series: Sports



The United States Postal Service issued this stamp featuring Thorpe in 1998.

Jim Thorpe is a famous figure in sports history. Thorpe was voted an all-American football player in 1911 and 1912. He won two gold medals at the 1912 Olympics and later played professional football and baseball. He also excelled in basketball, lacrosse, boxing, figure skating, and other sports. He was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame, the Pro Football Hall of Fame, and the National Track and Field Hall of Fame. ESPN rated him the seventh-best athlete of the twentieth century. Did you know that Jim Thorpe is also a figure in North Carolina history?

Thorpe was born on an Indian reservation in Oklahoma in 1888. He was a member of the Sac and Fox tribe. He enrolled in the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania in 1907. He left school in 1909 and spent the spring and summer in North Carolina playing minor league baseball for the Rocky Mount Railroaders. The Railroaders were in the Eastern Carolina League, which included teams in Fayetteville, Goldsboro, Raleigh, Wilmington, and Wilson.

Thorpe was a pitcher, infielder, and outfielder for the Rocky Mount Railroaders. He was fast and strong, and the fans loved him. One fan said that Thorpe made many friends as he warmed up before the games. Sometimes he hit or threw balls outside the ballpark intentionally. The kids who chased down the balls and brought them back got into the games free. It's no wonder that Thorpe had lots of young fans!

Jim Thorpe returned to Rocky Mount in 1910 for another summer of baseball. Late in the season he was traded to Fayetteville, where he also became very popular. According to one story, he won a bet by running headfirst through a restaurant window. His stunt delighted Fayetteville residents. But Thorpe did not get along with the team manager, and after the 1910 season he returned to school in Pennsylvania.

In 1912 Thorpe competed in the summer Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden. First he won the pentathlon, a hard event that includes show jumping, shooting, fencing, swimming and cross-country running. Next he tied for fourth place in the high jump and came in seventh in the long jump. Finally came the decathlon, which consisted of ten track-and-field contests. Thorpe won his second gold medal and also set a world record. Many people called him the greatest athlete in the world.

But Thorpe did not keep his medals long. At that time all Olympic athletes had to be amateurs. After the Amateur Athletic Union discovered that Thorpe had earned money playing baseball in North Carolina, it took away his medals.

Thorpe went on to play major league baseball and professional football. During his lifetime he tried unsuccessfully to get his Olympic medals back. He died in 1953. In 1983 the International Olympic Committee restored Thorpe's gold medals to his children.

Jim Thorpe made sports history as an all-American, an Olympian, and a Hall of Famer. Now you know that he also made North Carolina history as a Rocky Mount Railroader!