

Wes: Our first story sheds light on the private life on one of professional sports' most public figures. Born and raised on Indian land in Oklahoma, Jim Thorpe soared to athletic stardom.

Narrator: The man of bronze who became the greatest athlete of all time.

Wes: A multiple gold medalist in Olympic track and field, he played seven seasons of big-league baseball and was perhaps the greatest player in football history. Thorpe's sporting legend looms large, but is this ticket evidence of a chapter of his career almost completely forgotten by history... As a professional basketball player? A man in Jamestown, New York, thinks it may be just that.

Anthony: My sister and I attended an auction in Pennsylvania where we bought an old book, "Jesse James and his greatest hauls." And in opening the book and looking at the pages, that's when this big, red ticket fell right into my lap. I started doing research, and the more I researched, the less I found. Jim Thorpe, basketball: did it really happen? Did it exist? Was I the only one with this piece of information to share with the world? That's when I started getting excited.

Wes: I'm Wes Cowan. I'm in Jamestown, New York, to meet Anthony and take a look at his ticket.

Anthony: Come on in. Here's the ticket, Wes.

Wes: Wow, it's like it's not even used, right?

Anthony: Right.

Wes: Let's see, basketball. Clothes shop versus Jim Thorpe and his world famous Indians. Y.M.C.A. Gym. Tuesday, March 1, 1927. But there's no location for the game.

Anthony: No, there's not, but it also indicated two other teams playing a preliminary game. New Process versus Bankers.

Wes: That's weird. It's not exactly the Celtics versus the Lakers, right?

Anthony: That's for sure.

Wes: What do you want me to find out about this ticket?

Anthony: Well, I believe this ticket is evidence that Jim Thorpe played pro basketball, and I'd like to find out if it's true. I've heard of Jim Thorpe playing pro football, pro baseball, but never basketball.

Anthony: And I'd like to know a little more to the story behind it, as well.

Wes: It's a great question. I love this ticket. Um, I'm ready to get started.

Anthony: Well, I can't wait to hear what you find out.

Wes: You know, if this ticket's real, it's a really rare thing. The first thing I do whenever I get a piece like this is assume that it's a fake, and try to prove why it's not a fake. Now, the paper looks entirely typical of card stock from that period. It's definitely printed on a printing press and not some offset technique. A printing press is what we ought to see. This ticket stub is still attached. Boy, if somebody was going to fake this, they wouldn't

do that. It looks like it's a period ticket to me. Now I've got to find out if the basketball game really took place. If Thorpe really did play pro basketball, there's got to be some mention of it in the public record. At age 16, Jim Thorpe was sent by his father to the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, where he led their football team to national prominence. Then in 1912, he burst onto the world stage at the Stockholm Olympics, winning a gold medal in the pentathlon and setting a world record in the decathlon that stood for the next 20 years. There was even a movie of Thorpe's life made in 1951 starring Burt Lancaster.

Narrator: An Oklahoma Indian lad whose untamed spirit gave wings to his feet and carried him to immortality.

Wes: Thorpe was an instant celebrity, proclaimed the best all-around athlete of modern times. Then suddenly, a news story turned his world upside down. Okay, so here it is. The Worcester Telegram January 22, 1913. "Thorpe with professional baseball team says Clancy." The article says that beginning in 1909, Thorpe played two summers of minor league baseball. Olympic officials pounced on the story, declaring that he violated the rules of amateur sport. Thorpe's gold medals were taken away and his name was stricken from the Olympic record book. You know, the truth is, a lot of college guys played in the semi pros or minor leagues, but they did it under assumed names to disguise their identities. Following the scandal, Thorpe turns pro for real, and it seems there's nothing he can't do. From 1913 to 1919 he plays baseball for three big-league teams and football for the Canton Bulldogs, who he leads to three world championships. Jim Thorpe was kind of like Deion Sanders and Bo Jackson, except really far more versatile. I mean, the guy was the best known athlete of his time. I've been through the many books about Thorpe, and there's no mention of him playing basketball. I'm starting to wonder... Did it really happen? You know, maybe there's a clue in the ticket somewhere. Let me try a word search. You know, "Clothes shop" is too generic. "Bankers" is not going to help. I'm going to try new process and see what I come up with. A Google search leads me to Hoover's, a database of business names and histories. I wonder what they might have in here on new process. Okay, here's something called the Blair Corporation. Looks like they sell clothing online. Let's see if there's something about their history. Oh, yeah, our 95th year. Let's just see here. Okay. 1910, it's founded by John Blair. Looks like he had to start selling rubber raincoats to undertakers. "Thus, New Process Rubber Company was born." Okay, where are these guys? "While we're still headquartered in Warren, Pennsylvania." Hmm, looks like I'm heading there. This may be a long shot, but it's the best lead I've got. Driving into downtown Warren, I spot something that tells me I'm definitely on the right track. Looks like I came to the right place. Is this the same New Process mentioned on Anthony's ticket? I'm headed to the Warren Library to find out. If Thorpe came to Warren in 1927, the local paper should have some mention of his visit. Nothing here in these bound copies of the Hunter News. Another local paper, the Warren Evening Times, is archived on microfilm. Okay, here we go. "Warren Evening Times, Tuesday, March 1, 1927." Nothing on Thorpe on the front page. Let's check the sports pages. Hey, what's this? Here's a picture of Jim Thorpe. "Haskell Indians arrive for game. The famous Haskell Indians, who engage the clothes shop team in a game at the Y.M.C.A. tonight." Hey, that's it! That's the information on our ticket. "Jim Thorpe, who has been declared the world's best all-around athlete, was with the party and is to take part in the game tonight." According to this article, the game in Warren wasn't just a one-shot deal. Thorpe and his world-famous Indians were in the middle of a tour of several states. Which got me to thinking... Where else were they playing? I made some calls, and a few hours later a friend of mine at the Marion County Historical Society in Ohio faxed over some newspaper articles. Oh, look at this. "The Marion Star, Saturday, December 24, 1927. Jim Thorpe's world famous Indians to meet. Team led by famous Indian will furnish attraction for local basketball fans." Oh, this is great. Here's a picture of Jim Thorpe wearing a headdress along with another guy named Chief Long Time Sleep. So Anthony's ticket reveals a whole new side of Thorpe's legendary career. These basketball tours take his world-famous Indians through cities and towns all over this part of the country in 1927 and '28. But why? Why is the greatest athlete of his time doing barnstorming tours at age 39? I'm headed to the site of the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, where Thorpe first made a name for himself in athletics. I'm meeting Kate Buford, who spent four years researching Thorpe's life for a biography. She'd never heard of a career as a

basketball player either, but she does tell me Thorpe frequently played on touring football teams made up of his Indian athlete buddies. Tell me about Jim's barnstorming days.

Kate Buford: Thorpe had put together these teams, often from former teammates from his Carlisle-Indian-School days, both to leverage the Indian identity, make a sort of interesting kind of a team that people would want to come see, but also give his friends jobs.

Wes: But these guys were going to these little small towns. There had to have been a better way to make a living.

Kate: It was tough, and for Thorpe, there probably wasn't a better way to make a living. In 1927, we're at the tail end of what's called "the golden age of American sports," which was the 1920s. Radio is invented. Sports writing and sports pages flower. Major athletes start to get major money and have agents and major contracts.

Wes: Radio helps make athletes like Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey rich and famous.

Kate: Jim misses all that, but, as your ticket shows, he kept reinventing himself, adapting, making a living any way he could.

Wes: Kate tells me that to really understand the choices Thorpe made, we have to go back to his school days here at Carlisle. His first triumphs came on the football field, playing for legendary coach Pop Warner. And their relationship was among the most influential and complex in young Jim's life.

Kate: Without a great coach like Pop Warner and the hothouse athletic environment at Carlisle, Thorpe could maybe have just been another fast kid from Oklahoma. But by the same token, Warner needed Thorpe, and made his reputation at the Carlisle school, and largely through Jim Thorpe. His fame was associated with Jim Thorpe.

Wes: The all-Indian team Pop Warner assembled, led by Thorpe in the backfield, steamrolled some of the best football teams in the country. After Warner coached Thorpe to his two gold medals in Stockholm, they seemed like an unbeatable combination. Then, the Olympic scandal hit, and Jim discovered his coach wasn't somebody he could count on.

Kate: Pop Warner and others knew full well that Jim Thorpe was playing minor league baseball for those two summers, but they pretended they didn't... In order to save themselves, save the reputation of the American Olympic team, and they let Jim Thorpe take the fall.

Wes: Pop convinces Jim to write a letter of confession, declaring that he was just an Indian schoolboy who didn't know any better. How did Jim take this sort of betrayal?

Kate: it was a kind of abandonment for him, I think, and a turning point in his life, definitely. He'll never again reach that peak of adulation and fame that he had in 1912 when he was the greatest athlete in the world, on top of the world. Personally, emotionally, I think he saw it as a kind of nightmare that he could never shake.

Wes: Jim's family life is scarred with tragedy, too. Before he turns 17, both of his parents die. Years later, his young son is a victim of the influenza epidemic of 1918. And for the rest of his life, Jim struggles with alcoholism. How did these private struggles shape Thorpe's professional life? It seems this ticket is taking me to a more personal understanding of this public figure. I've been lucky enough to track down Mike Koehler,

Jim Thorpe's grandson. I'm curious to see what he makes of this discovery of his grandfather's pro basketball career.

Mike Koehler: I've seen an awful lot of articles on my grandfather... But I've never seen these. These are very interesting. This kind of thing never ceases to fascinate me. There's always so much associated with him that's brand-new, it seems.

Wes: You must have some great stories about him.

Mike: Well, I've learned an awful lot of great stories about him. Unfortunately, as far as my personal anecdotes are concerned, most of the stories I have are secondhand.

Wes: Really? Why is that?

Mike: I just never knew my grandfather. Early in his career, he was obviously involved in lots of athletic activity. He was doing an awful lot of traveling. I think he was disinclined to be much of a grandfather. So the end result was: we never had an opportunity to get together.

Wes: Well, were these conscious choices that he was making?

Mike: No, I seriously doubt that. You know, I've often had the idea that -- that genius assumes an identity of its own. I think my grandfather's athletic genius took control of him. It imposed itself upon him. He had to find a creative outlet for that genius.

Wes: What do you think he got out of playing on teams like Jim Thorpe and his world famous Indians?

Mike: He enjoyed associating with his Indian cohorts as colleagues, as drinking buddies, as hunting buddies, and teams such as these enabled him to continue associating with the people with whom he was comfortable. But I think there's a little bit more involved than that.

Wes: Well, what do you mean?

Mike: Well...

Wes: Mike's answer finally helps me see what our ticket represents in Jim Thorpe's career. I'm headed back to Jamestown to tell Anthony everything I've discovered. Well, Tony, the first thing I want to tell you is that this ticket is real.

Anthony: That's great.

Wes: But it doesn't represent just one game. It's part of a tour that Thorpe and his all-Indian team were making throughout the east and the Midwest.

Anthony: I did have an idea when I found the ticket that it was something a little bit more special, a very special piece of memorabilia.

Wes: Well, you know, it's more than just a special piece of memorabilia. As I was investigating the ticket and the story behind it, I came to discover that it sort of represents and tells us some deeper truths about Jim Thorpe's life.

Mike: My grandfather established his identity as Jim Thorpe the athlete, uh, which is perfectly understandable. But that didn't leave much room for Jim Thorpe, the father; Jim Thorpe, the husband; Jim Thorpe, the grandfather. The upside of the whole thing as far as he was concerned was that all the athletic teams he got involved with, from Carlisle to the pros to teams such as this one, he was able to find the sense of family that he didn't experience throughout much of his life.

Anthony: What I find really amazing is how just a simple piece of paper, a small clue, can lead to something as significant as this. And having the ability and responsibility of asking the simple question, did it happen, has been such an amazing amount of satisfaction for me.

Wes: Well, you know, the ticket is special, and I'm glad that it's been so satisfying for you. Jim Thorpe died in 1953. In 1982, after years of lobbying by the Thorpe family and his many admirers, the International Olympic Committee voted to have Jim's two gold medals reinstated.

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