HISTORY This Week EP 341: Jim Thorpe’s Lost Gold (w/ Sports History This Week)
EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: History This Week.

Kaelen Jones: And Sports History This Week!

Sally Helm: October 13th


Sally Helm: I'm Sally Helm.

Kaelen Jones: And I'm Kaelen Jones.

Sally Helm: Kaelen Jones, hello, how are you doing?

Kaelen Jones: I'm doing pretty good Sally, how are you doing?

Sally Helm: I’m doing good it’s great to have you here.

Kaelen Jones: I’m happy to be here!

Sally Helm: For anyone listening in to this friendly chat who does not know, Kaelen, you are the host of SPORTS History This Week. Which is I would say a sibling of this podcast.

Kaelen Jones: Yeah, that’s a good way to describe it, right? Definitely have older sister-younger brother vibes looking up to you so, it’s a pleasure to be here

Sally Helm: Well, you guys, our sports history colleagues have actually brought us the story we’re going to do today so, Kaelen tell us, what is this story about?

Kaelen Jones: It’s about a man who some say was the greatest athlete in American history. And who, soon after his crowning achievement … was cheated of his glory.

Sally Helm: Woah
Kaelen Jones: In October 1982, the International Olympic Committee in Switzerland—the IOC—fires off a press release. It comes after years of lobbying on behalf of the figure at the center of this story—lobbying by everyone from his family to some of the highest-ranking officials in the United States government.

Sally Helm: OK, who are we talking about?

Kaelen Jones: Sally, we’re talking about Jim Thorpe.

Jim Thorpe won two gold medals at the Olympics in 1912. In the pentathlon and decathlon.

Sally Helm: OK, pentathlon, decathlon—we’re talking fives, tens. These are the events where like you basically do everything. You run, you jump, you swim, you bike—I don’t know.

Kaelen Jones: No, you’re on the right track Sally. They are all out tests of athletic skill.

Sally Helm: And Thorpe won them both?

Kaelen Jones: He won them *easily*. He was immediately hailed as "the world's greatest athlete"! Native Americans especially revered him as one of their own—he was a member of the Sac and Fox tribe who’d just walked onto an international stage and seized the spotlight. Simply put, Jim Thorpe was a hero. And yet, less than a year later … it was all stripped away.

Sally Helm: Yeah, why did that happen?

Kaelen Jones: It’s complicated. The reasons have to do with bigotry and greed … as well as a very strange and hypocritical legal distinction from that time. A distinction about the difference between “amateur” and “professional” sports.

Sally Helm: OK so complex web of factors back in 1912 when he wins his medals, but Kaelen, why are we starting in 1982 – decades after Jim Thorpe won his medals at the Olympics?

Kaelen Jones: Because that’s when the decades-long fight to reinstate his victories and restore his unfairly tarnished name reach their climax. But before we get there, we’re gonna get into the wildly improbable story of Jim Thorpe. How he went from a flat, dusty patch of what was then called Indian Territory to Olympic gold and global fame. Trust me. It’s like a movie.

Sally Helm: Okay Kaelen I’m in, tell me what happened today!

Kaelen Jones: Today, the rise, fall, and legacy of Jim Thorpe. How did this fantastically gifted Native American athlete transform himself from a child of poverty on the plains of Oklahoma to the toast of kings and queens. And how did he fight back against the handful of men who tried to rob him of what he’d earned by plunging him into scandal?
Sally Helm: Alright so today we’re talking about Jim Thorpe with Kaelen Jones, who again hosts our sibling podcast SPORTS History This Week. Kaelen, where does the Jim Thorpe story begin?

Kaelen Jones: I can’t believe I’m going to say this… Sally… It is literally a dark and stormy night.

David Maraniss: The night that he and Charlie were born, there was a thunderstorm and lightning was illuminating the river and the path outside their cabin.

Kaelen Jones: That's David Maraniss, an associate editor at the Washington Post and author of several sports’ history books, one just recently published about the life of Jim Thorpe. He told us that that thunderstorm in 1887, the one during which Jim Thorpe and his twin brother Charlie were born, actually gave Jim his tribal name - Wathohuck - which translates to “bright path” - or "path lit by lightning."

David Maraniss: And as soon as I saw that, I thought that's the title of my book. It just sort of, you know, it, it illuminates everything.

Kaelen Jones: Thorpe was born into the Sac and Fox nation, on a reservation in what would soon be called Oklahoma territory.

Sally Helm: What did that mean to him?

Kaelen Jones: It meant... everything.

Sunnie Clahchischiligi: when it came his identity, the Sac and Fox nation was always perhaps, the proudest part about him.

Kaelen Jones: Sunnie Clahchischiligi was a sports reporter on the Navajo nation for 10 years and is now a PhD student studying indigenous writing at the University of New Mexico.

Sunnie Clahchischiligi: Put every accolade aside, put every medal aside, everything that everyone knows about him from the outside. The one thing that he had always said that he was most proud of was to be indigenous.

Kaelen Jones: The Sac and Fox nation sets him on the right path in a lot of ways, one being—sports.
David Maraniss: He played a lot of Sac and Fox games, which were mostly running and jumping and swinging into the river and swimming and hunting and fishing with his father.

Kaelen Jones: But the Sac and Fox aren't exactly left to live in peace. The Dawes Act, passed in 1887, the same year Thorpe was born, allows and encourages white settlers to move onto their lands, displacing indigenous people. Within five years, 75% of native Oklahoma territory is given away to these settlers. And Jim Thorpe is watching this all play out... as a child.

Sunnie Clahchischiligi: There was no secret about these tensions. It was really very out in the open of what was happening. He understood what that turmoil was. He understood the traumatic experiences because he lived it.

Kaelen Jones: The federal government also encourages indigenous children to go to boarding schools, often far away from where they’re raised.

David Maraniss: He was sent to boarding schools at a fairly early age first to the Second Fox boarding school in Stroud, Oklahoma, then to the Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas, he often ran away from both of those places. Probably for good reasons when you really learn more about Indian boarding schools

Sally Helm: Yeah, I’ve heard that these boarding schools could be really rough places. Where does Thorpe end up going to school?

Kaelen Jones: After running away from these other two schools, he ends up at a place called the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

David Maraniss: The founder, and first superintendent of Carlisle, Richard Henry Pratt, was a US army officer who thought he was doing the Indians, a good service. His motto was kill the Indian, save the man. In other words, after the pure genocide of the middle of the 19th century, he thought the only way for, for native Americans for indigenous people to survive was to fully acculturate and assimilate them into white society

Sunnie Clahchischiligi: You’re being pulled away and into a space and environment that is foreign to you, treated like, are untrustworthy essentially that everything that you’ve ever known is incorrect stripped of their language, stripped of their culture, having to get rid of their hair, having to put on clothes that didn’t belong to them. just really just kind of erasing anything about a person.

Kaelen Jones: Jim Thorpe, at 16 years old, has already had a difficult life. Both his mother and twin brother had died by this point, and he’s already run away from those two other boarding schools. His father is also in poor health...
David Maraniss: But, um, his father's latest wife wanted nothing to do with Jim Thorpe. So, they tried to get him as far away as possible and sent him off to, to Pennsylvania.

So that's how he got there. He didn't necessarily want to go

Sally Helm: So, against his will, Thorpe is now at Carlisle, halfway across the country from where he's from. A place that, from the sound of it, wants to basically strip him of the things that make him who he is.

Kaelen Jones: Just to give you an idea, two days into his time there, the school celebrates "Dawes Day" - celebrating the Dawes Act.

Sally Helm: Wow, the law that basically kicked indigenous people out of their homes?

Kaelen Jones: Exactly.

Sally Helm: Wow

Kaelen Jones: The day-to-day is difficult, too. It's a military-style institution, Thorpe's shoes are even checked for their shininess. Reveille plays at six AM, breakfast at 7. Class lasts for four hours in the morning, and for four hours in the afternoon, students are sent either to the industrial shop or to local farms as cheap labor. It’s not a place where individual choices are encouraged, but while working on one of these farms, Thorpe does make a choice.

David Maraniss: The sort of Eureka moment came when he was at Carlisle, working on the farm at the school, walked by the track, saw the high jump bar at about six feet. None of the jumpers could clear it.

Kaelen Jones: Jim Thorpe thinks to himself, I can do that.

David Maraniss: And Jim Thorpe in his overalls cleared the bar.

Sally Helm: And he's not a student athlete, right?

Kaelen Jones: Nope, just someone who thinks - I guess knows - he can pull it off. And the next day, Thorpe gets called into the office of Pop Warner. He coaches track and football at Carlisle. Today, he’s associated with youth football. Basically, what Little League is to baseball, Pop Warner is to football.

And when he’s called into the office, Thorpe really has no idea why he's there.
David Maraniss: He thought he was in trouble. He'd never met Warner before, so what's up, you know?

Warner said, “you gotta get a track uniform cause you're on my team.”

Kaelen Jones: So, in a matter of 24 hours, Thorpe is on the Carlisle track team. And he clearly has natural talent.

David Maraniss: He could put the shot, he could run the hurdles, he could high jump and broad jump.

Kaelen Jones: Soon, he’s on Warner’s football team, too.

Sally Helm: And this is when? What year are we in?

Kaelen Jones: This is 1907, Thorpe is 20 years old.

Sally Helm: Yeah, so I'd have to think football is pretty different then than it is now.

Kaelen Jones: That's definitely true, in a lot of ways. And maybe no one represents that more than the coach, Pop Warner.

David Maraniss: You know, in that era, it's funny, you could devise these crazy plays. He had one play where he would have a pocket sewn into, the Jersey of one of his players and hide the football in it. He had another play where, one of his ends could literally go around the bench of the opposition and come out onto the field on the other side and catch a pass. There were no rules against those types of plays.

Kaelen Jones: This all sounds fun, but football is also an incredibly dangerous game. In the 1907 season alone, 11 college football players DIE from injuries on the field.

Sally Helm: Wow, so Thorpe is definitely putting his body on the line by playing. But, how does he do?

Kaelen Jones: Sally I mean... he's incredible.

David Maraniss: He ran like a horse, going downhill, but he also was deft and agile. Fearless. He rarely got hurt. And when he did get hurt, he still played. He had an electricity to him that you see in great athletes. That's a little hard to describe, but when you see it, you just go, wow.
**Kaelen Jones:** Jim Thorpe is *clearly* this emerging star. And Pop Warner wants to get him out there playing against all the top college football teams.

**Sally Helm:** The top college teams? But I mean, isn’t that a little strange? The Carlisle school is not a college, right?

**Kaelen Jones:** Yeah, good catch, it’s not a college. Some of the students are young teenagers…but some are actually in their early to mid-twenties. So, college aged. And like a lot of things, this move by Pop Warner really comes down to money.

**David Maraniss:** Carlisle played most of its games on the road. They were a great attraction, because of their exoticness, they were Native Americans, they were Indians, and they were good.

Wherever they played, you know, Penn, Princeton, Yale west point or Harvard, they drew huge audiences, which were good, both for the home team and for Carlisle.

**Kaelen Jones:** But as he explained this business, David Maraniss also pointed out how ironic this all was.

**David Maraniss:** This is a school that was trying to pound their culture out of them, and yet they were being an attraction because of that very thing that they were Indians, you know, so there there's a dichotomy and contradiction in it.

**Kaelen Jones:** Surrounded by all of this, Thorpe is able to establish himself as not just the best football player on his team, but arguably in the whole country. He plays on both offense and defense. He even kicks punts and field goals. He typically plays all 60 minutes of the game, the whole thing. And Carlisle is beating top college programs left and right.

**Sally Helm:** Okay so I have to think he's starting to get some attention at this point.

**Kaelen Jones:** He definitely is, and you can also see the start of this sort of strange, contradictory mythology that forms around him in the media.

**Sunnie Clahchischiligi:** A lot of the headlines, a lot of the coverage, it's always just this. How in the world is he able to do this? Because it was just impossible to believe that someone like him, with his background and his identity was capable of everything that he was able to do. You know, even to the point of in indicating or saying, there's gotta be something wrong with him.

**Kaelen Jones:** He’s just too good. So…they chalk it up to, “Jim Thorpe is some mystical being who doesn’t even need to practice.” Which plays into stereotypes about athletes of color. And just isn’t true.
David Maraniss: Well, that's baloney. He, he did practice hard. To develop his skills. And he also was ahead of his time in sort of, mentally preparing himself for competition. One of his teammates Able Kiviat said that one of Jim Thorpe's amazing talents was to watch someone else do something and then perform it better than that person.

Kaelen Jones: And soon, that talent is going to be used on another sport.

Kaelen Jones: Not only he plays football, we've talked about him doing track. He does baseball too, right? I mean, how does he get involved that

David Maraniss: Yeah, that, I mean, that's the trifecta, that's what makes him unparalleled,

Kaelen Jones: The summer of 1909, Jim Thorpe heads south.

David Maraniss: Carlisle Indian athletes had been playing summer baseball for years before that, um, in the Eastern Carolina league, it was common to have college athletes. But most of them played under aliases.

Sally Helm: Why do they need to do that, play under different names?

Kaelen Jones: One word: amateurism. Amateurs are athletes who don't get paid to play, at least not out in the open. And back then, it was a big deal to get paid to play sports. Many saw it as somehow impure, that sports should be reserved for those who could afford to NOT get paid.

Sally Helm: So, wealthy people?

Kaelen Jones: Right, but baseball is one of those sports where getting paid is a little more acceptable at this time.

Sally Helm: So, Thorpe is getting paid?

Kaelen Jones: Yeah, but not life changing money. About $2 a game, which comes out to roughly $30 a month.

David Maraniss: He and two of his teammates went down to play in the Eastern Carolina League for the Rocky Mount railroaders.

But Jim Thorpe, Jim Thorpe played under the name, Jim Thorpe. He never tried to hide it.
Kaelen Jones: His performance on the diamond is recorded in the local papers over two summers. And after that, in 1910, Pop Warner convinces him to come back to Carlisle.

David Maraniss: Warner persuaded him to come back largely because his teams weren't winning anymore. He needed his best player.

Kaelen Jones: The two men strike a deal.

David Maraniss: Pop Warner himself told Thorpe that if he came back, he could train for the 1912 Olympics and become famous and make some money.

Kaelen: So, Thorpe comes back to Carlisle and leads the football team to greatness once again. But that’s not all he does.

Each morning, he wakes up at sunrise and walks 20 miles, toward the Blue Ridge Mountains and back, then… spends the rest of the day honing his skills at track and field.

Sally Helm: Okay so casual, he’s just relaxing.

Kaelen Jones: not doing too much right?

Sally Helm: Right? No, I mean, that sounds extremely intense.

Kaelen Jones: Very. But it works. He passes the Olympic trials and makes it onto the US Olympic team. In the summer of 1912, he heads to Stockholm, Sweden, with Pop Warner tagging along. Thorpe is there to compete in two events.

David Maraniss: First came the pentathlon.

Kaelen Jones: The pentathlon is actually five separate events: long jump, javelin throw, 200-meter run, discus throw, and 1500-meter run.

David Maraniss: He won that going away. I wasn't even close.

Kaelen Jones: He wins his first gold medal easily.

Sally Helm: Wow.

Kaelen Jones: And then comes the decathlon.

David Maraniss: 10 events in only three days. You know, running, jumping, and throwing, everything that the Olympic motto talks about, faster, stronger, higher.
Kaelen Jones: Thorpe wraps up the first day in first place. Day 2... not as easy...

David Maraniss: On the second day, he couldn't find his shoes.

Sally Helm: His shoes?

Kaelen Jones: His shoes!

David Maraniss: You know whether they were stolen or not is a question that's unanswerable, but he might have misplaced them. And he, anyway, he was about to compete and didn't have any shoes. So, he and pop Warner found some mismatched shoes, different sizes. And Jim wore two pairs of socks on one foot, to compete,

Sally Helm: Kaelen, if Jim Thorpe wins with two mismatched shoes...

Kaelen Jones: He does.

Sally Helm: Come on.

Kaelen Jones: I know! It's hard to believe. But he holds onto first place for the rest of the decathlon and wins his second gold medal.

David Maraniss: It's really hard to compare any athletes from different eras, but Jim Thorpe won that decathlon by a larger margin than anybody before or almost since.

Kaelen Jones: Then comes the medal ceremony. He's given a huge bronze bust for winning the pentathlon and a replica silver Viking ship for winning the decathlon. King Gustav V of Sweden hands out the gold medals personally. The exchange between these two men has become a defining and controversial scene in Thorpe's life. The way the stories later told, the king tells him:

David Maraniss: He said, you sir are the most wonderful athlete in the world

Kaelen Jones: And what was Thorpe's response to that?

David Maraniss: well, the myth is, he said, thanks, King.

Kaelen Jones: “Thanks, King.”

David Maraniss: You know, which is funny, but it's also like, you know, of course that's what an Indian who didn't care, anything would say, Jim Thorpe himself said, he said,
thank you. And I believe that more. I mean, sports writers were always putting words into Jim Thorpe's mouth.

Sally Helm: So, the Olympics are over, he's won two gold medals, I'd have to think he's pretty popular by the time he gets back home.

Kaelen Jones: Sally, he's a sensation. First, he returns to Carlisle, where the whole town shuts down for the day to celebrate him. Officials make speeches. A letter is read out from President Taft. Pop Warner also gives a speech. And then Jim Thorpe himself speaks to the crowd. It’s not some big victory speech. He says just twelve words: "All I can say is that you showed me a good time."

Sally Helm: OK so, Jim Thorpe is now the "greatest athlete in the world". He has two gold medals! But he has to do something next. What does he do?

Kaelen Jones: Pop Warner convinces him to come back and play football for Carlisle. He's 25, older than most of the competition, but he still dominates. There's one legendary game that season, in November, when Carlisle goes to West Point.

Sally Helm: So, this is essentially the U.S. Army versus a team of Native Americans. Two groups who had been at war on and off since the 1700s.

Kaelen Jones: Yeah, the symbolism isn't lost on anyone going into this game. And there's one West Point player who would talk about this matchup for the rest of his life.

David Maraniss: One of the players on the opposing team at the army was Dwight Eisenhower, the future president. Eisenhower played linebacker on defense and before the game, he and one of his, teammates had plotted on how they were bound and determined to knock Jim Thorpe out of the game.

There were a couple of collisions and at one point, Thorpe was knocked woozy, but he got up and kept playing and certainly thereafter he knocked Eisenhower out of the game.

Sally Helm: Wait so the future president Eisenhower is like passed out on the field??

Kaelen Jones: Clean. Out. Where’s the time-traveling Secret Service when you need ‘em, right? But apparently, there were no hard feelings.

David Maraniss: Eisenhower and everyone else who watched it said it was the single best performance on a football field they'd ever seen. Eisenhower would later joke, you know, I tackled Jim Thorpe once. And what he meant was yeah. Once in the game.
Kaelen Jones: As the season winds down, Thorpe has countless opportunities. He might play professional baseball, or professional hockey. Maybe star in a Vaudeville show. One article from the time said he was getting 30 letters a day from women who wanted to marry him!

Sally Helm: Sounds like he has it made.

Kaelen Jones: He does, until…Roland Friday. An editor at the Worcester Telegram, tells a colleague he's heard a rumor. It comes from a baseball manager who was in town, one who had worked in the Eastern Carolina League around 1908. He said...

David Maraniss: That Jim Thorpe played for him professionally.

Sally Helm: Why was that important?

Kaelen Jones: Well, if Jim Thorpe was a professional athlete, if he made money from playing sports, that would mean he wasn't an amateur. And only amateurs can compete in the Olympics.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: OK so, the story breaks - Jim Thorpe got paid to play baseball, and if that's true, he shouldn't have been allowed to compete in the Olympics?

Kaelen Jones: That's the question the public starts asking. Thorpe stays silent at first. But the people close to him in his life... start to talk.

Pop Warner denies Thorpe ever played professionally. But David Maraniss says… Warner knew the truth.

David Maraniss: Pop Warner knew all about it. Had been sending players to baseball for years, met with Thorpe at least twice during the period when he was gone, once they were on a hunting trip together. And it stretches the imagination to think that, that he didn't wanna know, where his best player was.

Kaelen Jones: Thorpe decides to publicly admit to his time in pro ball, after a visit from Pop Warner. He writes a letter. Or at least, he puts his name on a letter. According to Maraniss...

David Maraniss: Pop Warner, feigned ignorance, and actually wrote the letter of confession for Thorpe

Sally Helm: How does Maraniss know that?

Kaelen Jones: Well, first, you can just look at who this letter benefits.
David Maraniss: It exonerates Pop Warner and it exonerates all of the Olympic committee, people who should have known better and did know, it exonerates everyone except Jim Thorpe.

Kaelen Jones: There's one line from the letter that many argue gives it away: "I was simply an Indian school boy and did not know all about such things."

David Maraniss: To make it sound like, well, Jim was just a, a dumb Indian and didn't know any better.

Sally Helm: Does anyone support Jim Thorpe during this time?

Kaelen Jones: Oh, yeah. Most of the American public, and people around the world, don’t want to see this to happen. Even the competitors who came in second and third to him say he won fair and square.

Sally Helm: Okay, he won fair and square in terms of the athletics, that's clear. but did he break the rules? i mean, was it clear that if you played professional athletics, you couldn't win an Olympic medal?"

Kaelen Jones: Yeah, that is a rule…but there’s also another rule. A rule about the rule.

David Maraniss: A rule that said that to challenge someone's amateurism, a complaint had to be filed within 30 days of the end of the Olympics. And that story in the Worcester telegram didn't appear for six months.

Kaelen Jones: And David Maraniss also said…Thorpe wasn’t the only one who got paid to play...

David Maraniss: Was George S. Patton who was also on that team in amateur when he was being paid by the US Army to train for his events. Whereas Thorpe was paid to play baseball, which had nothing to do with his events? Were the Swedish athletes, amateurs, because Sweden had given them all leave from their jobs six months before the Olympic started. So, they could train at full pay? Is that an amateur? Were all of the college players who were being paid under the table amateur or not?

Kaelen Jones: Do you think a white athlete would've been subjected to, you know, that type of scrutiny and do you think race played a factor in that.

David Maraniss: Definitely, I think he was a fall guy. I don't think he can say that it was entirely because of race, but I think it was a lot easier to blame him that, to open up the whole wound of, the phoniness of amateurism all around. And so, he was an easy, person to throw under the bus basically.
Sunnie Clahchischiligi: It was just so unbelievable for people that, a way was found to make it believable.

Kaelen Jones: Sunnie Clahchischiligi again.

Sunnie Clahchischiligi: And the way to do that was to say that this person essentially cheated, the stripping of those medals really speaks to really how I think indigenous people as a whole were looked at it was an act of erasure.

Sally Helm: How does Thorpe react? I mean, this must have been devastating.

Kaelen Jones: Well maybe not too surprisingly, he finds a way to carry on.

David Maraniss: Doesn't talk about it much. He said it's part of the ups and downs of being a Native American.

Kaelen Jones: His athletic career continues too. The next summer, he does join up with a pro baseball team, the New York Giants. And Pop Warner is the one who helps him work out the contract.

Sally Helm: Wait, after all of this, Pop Warner is still in his life?

Kaelen Jones: It's... one of the most confusing parts of the story. Thorpe comes to believe, in a way, that he needs Warner to succeed.

David Maraniss: They had a certain codependence. They rose together Jim Thorpe and Pop Warner. I don't think that Thorpe focused so much on how Pop Warner had been duplicitous, during the time when the medals were taken away, Jim took it upon himself, that, that he had done that. He acknowledged what he had done playing baseball and he didn't really focus on, who else was part of that or, or lying about it.

Kaelen Jones: So, he carries on. He's actually a fairly average baseball player, and when his time with that sport ends, he returns to... football. Professional football is just being born, and Thorpe, even well after his time playing football for Carlisle, is still the biggest name in the sport.

David Maraniss: Thorpe coming to the league gave it a status that it didn't have before. And that built over the years. So that by 1920 when the incipient national football league was being formed, it was called the American Professional Football Association. But it would become the NFL. Thorpe was named its first president.

Kaelen Jones: He helps shepherd the league through its first year, giving it legitimacy. But soon, he’s out of sports completely, and struggles to get by.
David Maraniss: His post athletic life was difficult. He struggled with you know, he had so many different jobs. He lived in 20 different states. at one point was digging ditches in Los Angeles.

Sunnie Clahchischiligi: The guy just went and picked up a shovel because he has to, that was and active resisting in the sense that, you know, I'm not going to let all of this get me down. I might not have all of these things, but I'm gonna make it work. I'm gonna make it. He hustled. I mean, that's the fact of the matter.

David Maraniss: He acted in 70 movies in Hollywood, mostly as an extra. He owned taverns in Southern California and Nevada. He worked in Chicago with the youth athletic commission. It was a constant struggle for him

Kaelen Jones: After a few decades, Thorpe does come back into the spotlight.

David Maraniss: In 1951, when Jim Thorpe was in his sixties, Hollywood finally, produced a movie called Jim Thorpe, all American.

Jim Thorpe Movie Trailer: An Oklahoma Indian lad whose untamed spirit gave wings to his feet and carried him to immortality

David Maraniss: Thorpe was played by Burt Lancaster, you know, the great movie star who was white, of course not Native American

Kaelen Jones: And the movie is told through from the perspective of Pop Warner, played by Charles Bickford.

Jim Thorpe Movie Trailer: and behind the glory and glamor colorful days at Carlisle University, where he first met Pop Warner. The famous coach who molded Jim's athletic career

David Maraniss: He makes it sound as though if only Jim Thorpe had listened to him and successfully assimilated himself fully into white society. He wouldn't have had many of the problems that he had later in life

Kaelen Jones: For Thorpe himself, the film was a tradeoff.

David Maraniss: It certainly pushed him back into the public limelight. It was a very successful movie, but he was called a consultant on it. He didn't get to consult much, and he wasn't paid very much. He maybe made a maximum of $20,000 from that movie.

Kaelen Jones: But the film does start a conversation... that maybe…Thorpe should get his medals back.
David Maraniss: He was never boasting about himself. He felt that he deserved to get those medals and records back, but he didn't go around saying I'm the greatest, even though he was.

Kaelen Jones: Thorpe dies in 1953, a year and a half after the film debuts. But the momentum to restore his medals continues to build. His surviving wife, his children, sportswriters, politicians, all take up the fight. Presidents Nixon and Ford each make their own push.

Sally Helm: And what finally pushes things over the edge?

Kaelen Jones: A few things - there's turnover within IOC leadership. Thorpe's first biographer brings that 30-day amateur Olympic rule back into the conversation. And the Olympics are coming back to America. The timing just feels right.

David Maraniss: Pressure had been mounting for a long time,

Kaelen Jones: So, the IOC makes that announcement, in October of 1982, that Thorpe’s gold medals will be restored. The January after, the IOC puts on a ceremony in Los Angeles.

David Maraniss: Invited all of Jim Thorpe's children and gave them replica medals. So, in the one sense they thought they were doing right and, and, restoring a wrong. And the other sense, it was really a halfhearted thing because his records were still not in the record books and he was considered sort of tied for first place with the second-place winners. So, they didn't really do him justice.

Kaelen Jones: Until 2022. A century later. This past July, the IOC voted to not just restore Thorpe's gold medals, but to also reinstate him as the SOLE winner of his two events.

Sally Helm: So finally putting things back fully the way they were.

Kaelen Jones: Exactly.

Sunnie Clahchischiligi: To be able to have Jim Thorpe win and have what is rightfully his is a win for all of us. And so, I think that we all go through trials and tribulations and at times feel robbed, at times feel cheated, um, in one way or another, but I think that something like this just kind of shows us like what the good fight does.

Kaelen Jones: And on top of righting a wrong, maybe the way we tell Jim Thorpe's story can start to evolve.

Sunnie Clahchischiligi: This controversy, should just. That little speckle that people talk about and instead, focus on this incredible person. Not just incredible athlete, incredible person, incredible indigenous person.
Sally Helm: Kaelen, thank you so much for bringing us this story.

Kaelen Jones: Thank you for letting me share it, Sally.

CREDITS:

Sally Helm: Listeners, if you want to hear more sports history stories like these, subscribe to Sports History This Week—you gotta do it!

Kaelen Jones: Thanks for the plug, Sally! Episodes drop every Wednesday, so be sure to add us wherever you get your podcasts. And for more moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what’s on the History Channel today.

Sally Helm: If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

Kaelen Jones: Thanks to our guests, David Maraniss, associate editor at the Washington Post, pulitzer-prize-winning journalist and author of “Path Lit by Lightning: The Life of Jim Thorpe”; and Sunnie Clahchischiligi, journalist and PhD candidate focusing on Cultural, Indigenous, and Navajo Rhetoric at the University of New Mexico.

Sally Helm: This episode was produced by Ben Dickstein—our senior producer—with support from Morgan Givens. It was story edited by Jim O’Grady and sound designed by Dan Rosato. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Julia Press, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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