

# I

## American Airedale



A late-summer Allegheny sun warmed the maples, elms, and pines surrounding the green turfed playing field as Jim Thorpe approached the varsity football tryouts for the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. His knee-length moleskin football pants were cinched like a padded flour sack around his waist. His narrow chest did not quite fill his oversized cotton practice jersey. His socks bunched inside the battered pair of leather and metal cleats the trainer had let him borrow. At five feet, ten inches and 148 pounds, twenty-year-old Thorpe was not as big as many of the other Indian athletes. Still, as he loped onto the field, he was confident that he could kick farther and run better than any of them.

In a faded gray sweatshirt and knickers, a Turkish Trophy cigarette burning in his hand, the beefy-jawed Coach Glenn “Pop” Warner paced up and down the sidelines, evaluating the prospects for his 1907 football squad with canny intensity. At a trim six feet, two inches and two hundred pounds, the thirty-five-year-old Warner wore his curly brown hair in the current long cut of a football player and still had the toughness to match any player on the field, slug for slug.

“What do you think you’re doing out here?” Pop barked at Thorpe when he noticed him on the gridiron. Thorpe was one of Warner’s top prospects for the Carlisle track team, an all-around performer who could run, jump, and throw.

Thorpe turned to his coach, his chin raised. "I want to play football."

Warner shook his head. "I'm only going to tell you once, Jim," he ordered. "Go back to the locker room and take that uniform off! You're my most valuable track man, and I don't want you to get hurt playing football."

Thorpe stood his ground. "I want to play football."

"All right, if that's the way you want it." Just to humor the boy, Pop relented and sent Jim over to take a few kicks.

Thorpe studied the other players practicing their punts, as he had for many years. He had played football before, pickup games with his friends back home on the Sac and Fox Reservation, and with his classmates at the Haskell Institute, an all-Indian boarding school in Lawrence, Kansas. Thorpe had even scrimmaged with the "tailoring team" in the Carlisle subvarsity league. But when a player finally threw him a varsity football, he held it gingerly. It was one of the first times he had actually touched a real football, made of leather, slightly wider than today's ball, but the same length, between 11 and 11¼ inches. Thorpe held the ball out at arm's length, took a step with his right leg, a step with his left leg, swung his right leg, and connected. His knee almost grazed his forehead with the straight-legged follow-through.

The ball sailed high and arced down the field. Standing on the sidelines, Warner nodded. Not bad. Thorpe seemed to have a knack for sports. When Warner had first come to Carlisle in 1899, Captain Richard Henry Pratt, the school's founder and superintendent, had told him that Indians were natural athletes. Warner had found it to be true. From a talent pool of only 250 male students who were old enough to play athletics, Warner had managed to build a nationally recognized athletic program that generated substantial income as well as the publicity needed to maintain congressional and private support for the Carlisle Indian school. Now, in the fall of 1907, Warner was more determined than ever to build a winning football squad.

Thorpe soon tired of kicking practice. He went up to Warner and asked for a chance to run with the ball. Warner refused. Thorpe persisted. Warner still refused. He did not want his track man hurt by his hard-hitting football players. When Thorpe still refused to take no for an answer, Warner decided to teach him a lesson.

"All right!" Warner said. "If this is what you want, go out there and

give my varsity boys a little tackling practice. And believe me, kid, that's all you'll be to them."

The entire varsity squad and "the hot shots," as the second team was called, lined up on the gridiron, spaced out over the field at five-yard intervals. The forty or so players stood at ease, smiling and joking, waiting to get a crack at the skinny ball carrier. Thorpe stood behind the goal line, cradling the ball in his arms. This was his chance. He was ready.

Thorpe took off, running up the field. He kept his head up and cut left and right, avoiding the first few tacklers with tremendous acceleration and deceptive speed. When a tackler managed to grab him, his hard-pumping legs nonetheless drove him forward. Others who came close to him were knocked over by his high-jutting knees, or sheered off by the force of his steel-spring stiff-arm. From the sidelines, Warner watched what he described as Thorpe's "magical run through the Carlisle defense." Thorpe ran one hundred yards, crossed the goal line, and touched the ball down.

The triumphant Thorpe trotted over to the sidelines with a big grin. "I gave them some good practice? Right, Pop?"

Warner was not smiling. He had just seen the humiliation of his entire football squad. According to different versions of the story, either Warner or one of his assistants lectured Thorpe, "You're supposed to let them tackle you, Jim. You're not supposed to run through them."

Frustrated by the response from the coaching staff, Thorpe fumed, "Nobody is going to tackle Jim!"

"By now my face was flush[ed] with anger at being shown up by this young Indian and his display of cockiness," Warner later recalled. "I took the football and slapped it into his midsection and told him, 'Well, let's see if you can do it again, kid!'"

As Jim took his place on the goal line, Warner shouted to his players, "This isn't a track meet. Who does this kid think he is? Get mean! Smack him down! Hit him down so hard he doesn't get up and try it again!"

Once again, Jim took off. Once again, he sliced through Carlisle's entire team before gracefully striding across the goal line. Smiling, Thorpe circled back to Warner, tossed his coach the ball, and proudly said, "Sorry, Pop. Nobody is going to tackle Jim!"

Warner cursed Thorpe for his insolence and his team for their

incompetence. Then he turned to his trainer, Wallace Denny, and observed, "He certainly is a wild Indian, isn't he?"

According to Warner, Denny answered, "Yeah, untamed, and one of a kind."

"Now, after a lifetime of football coaching," Pop Warner later wrote, "I must admit that Jim's performance at practice that afternoon on the Carlisle varsity playing field was an exhibition of athletic talent that I had never before witnessed, nor was I ever to again see anything similar which might compare to it."

Jim Thorpe had been running through interference of one sort or another for his whole life. According to baptismal records at Sacred Heart Church near the town of Konawa in Pottawatomie County, Oklahoma, James Francis Thorpe and his twin brother, Charles, were born on May 22, 1887. Charlotte Vieux Thorpe, their sturdy, full-faced mother, was a devout Catholic of mixed French, Potawatomi, Menominee, and Kickapoo blood. Her ancestors included successful French Canadian businessmen who built trading posts on the site of present-day Green Bay and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and were later forced by the U.S. government to move from the Great Lakes region to reservation land in Iowa, and then to Kansas.

Charlotte Thorpe's grandfather, Louis Vieux, built a successful ranch, mill, and ferry service on the banks of the Vermilion River in Kansas and catered to travelers along the Oregon Trail. When American authorities announced that they were going to remove the tribe to the Indian Territory, Louis Vieux successfully petitioned the government for citizenship and a patent on his lands within the new reservation. More than a thousand others followed Vieux's example, and the group that moved south became known as the Citizen Potawatomi Band.

Charlotte was about four years old in 1867 when her parents, Jacob Vieux and Elizabeth Goeslin (also spelled Gosselin, Goselin, or Gosland), settled with others of the Citizen Potawatomi Band in the Indian Territory. Within a short time of their move, Charlotte's family donated land, money, and labor to the Order of St. Benedict, a French Catholic denomination. With the support of Charlotte's tribe, the Benedictines established the Sacred Heart Mission, which included a church and a school to serve the Citizen Potawatomi Band and other residents of the Indian Territory.

Charlotte Vieux met her future husband, Hiram P. Thorpe, in about 1880, probably at a powwow, one of the Indian gatherings for dancing, gift giving, and trading that are still a central part of life in Oklahoma, the former Indian Territory. Hiram was hard to miss, even in a crowd. At six feet, two inches tall, and weighing more than two hundred pounds, Hiram wore rough leather boots; a tall, broad-brimmed black hat; and a white man's business suit. With a handlebar mustache; a strong jaw; and an aggressive, almost haughty glance, Hiram was known as one of the toughest men in the Indian Territory.

Born in 1852, Hiram was seventeen when he moved to the Indian Territory along with his family and other members of the Sac and Fox tribe. His father was Hiram G. Thorpe. Or Thorp. The final *e* appears and disappears from Jim Thorpe's family name in government documents over the decades. Jim Thorpe's grandfather, Hiram G. Thorpe, was a man of Irish or perhaps English descent. He was born in Connecticut and may or may not have abandoned a family when he moved west. He settled in Iowa on a reservation inhabited by the Sac and Fox tribe. The Sac and Fox was actually a combination of two closely allied tribes from the Great Lakes region who came to be treated as one.

Jim Thorpe's grandfather took a wife, Notenoquah, Wind before a Rain or Storm, a full-blooded member of the Sac tribe. Notenoquah belonged to the Thunder Clan, the same clan as Black Hawk, the famous warrior whose opposition to white encroachment on his people's lands led to the tragic slaughter known as the Black Hawk War. Hiram G. secured a position on the federal payroll as the tribal blacksmith, moved with the tribe when they were resettled to Kansas, and raised a family with Notenoquah.

In 1869, the Thorpes were among the 387 members of the Sac and Fox tribe who settled on a new reservation—a seventeen-mile-wide, thirty-mile-long rectangle of thickly wooded rolling hills that stretched from the Cimarron River in the north to the North Canadian River in the south. The Sac and Fox reservation was just north of the Potawatomi reservation and near the reservations of the Kickapoo, the Shawnee, and other tribes originally from the Great Lakes region. These tribes, who had been in close contact for centuries, inhabited the patchwork of reservations known as the Indian Territory that would eventually become the state of Oklahoma.

According to Jim Thorpe's daughter Grace Thorpe, "Grandpa was

a horse breeder, a wife-beater and the strongest guy in the county. He was a polygamist and had two wives. My understanding was he kicked them out when he met Charlotte, my grandmother.”

At the time he met Charlotte Vieux, Hiram Thorpe did indeed have two wives, Mary James and Sarah LaBlanche, and three children. According to family legend as recounted by Jim’s son, Jack Thorpe, “Hiram walked in the front door with Charlotte, pointed to each of the women and said, ‘You can stay. You can go. You can stay. You can go. You can stay. You can go. I don’t give a damn, I’m going to bed.’”

In later probate court testimony, a witness named Alexander Connelly recalled the day in 1880 when Charlotte Vieux moved in with Hiram. “I was with Hiram the night he brought Charlotte back to live with him, and then the other two women he was living with picked up and left him,” Connelly testified. “I drove them to Okmulgee myself.”

Some say that Hiram Thorpe and Charlotte Vieux were actually married in a Catholic ceremony at the Sacred Heart Mission, but no record of such a marriage exists. Charlotte moved into her husband’s home, a cedar log cabin, near the North Canadian River. The cabin was about sixteen feet long and ten feet wide, with two small glass windows on one wall, doors at either end, and an upstairs sleeping loft for the children. Serving as a kitchen, a workroom, and a bedroom, the one-room dirt-floor cabin was crowded, hot, and noisy.

Children soon came to Charlotte and Hiram. George was born in 1882. Rosetta, born late that same year, lived only to see her seventh birthday. In the winter of 1883, Charlotte gave birth to twin daughters, Mary and Margaret. Mary died in the summer of 1884, and Margaret died fewer than three years later. In 1887 Charlotte gave birth to twin sons, James Francis and Charles. Mary was born in 1891. A son, Jesse, was born later that same year, but died just before his first birthday. In about 1893, Charlotte and Hiram separated for a time. Hiram fathered a son, William Lasley, by a woman named Fannie Groinhorn (or McClellan), before rejoining Charlotte in about 1894. Adaline Thorpe was born to Hiram and Charlotte in 1895, and Edward in 1898. Hiram and Charlotte’s last child, Henry, was born in November 1901 and died a few days later. Shortly after Charlotte’s death, Hiram married Julia Mixon, a white woman, and fathered two sons by her,

Ernest, who died in infancy, and Roscoe, born July 5, 1904. By the time of his death at age fifty-two, Hiram P. Thorpe had fathered at least eleven surviving children by at least five different women.

Throughout his life, Jim Thorpe shrugged off discussions of his ancestry with typical offhand humor. "My father, Hiram Thorpe, was half Sac and Fox and half Irish. My mother was three-fourths Sac and Fox and one-fourth French," he explained to an inquisitive reporter. "That makes me five-eighths Indian, one-fourth Irish, and one-eighth French. Guess you'd call me American Airedale."

