



Lesson Plan

Jim Thorpe

Secondary

AIM

How did Jim Thorpe overcome discrimination, personal adversity, and attempts to define his identity—and what can his story teach us about how society judges people today?

GUIDING OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Understand the historical circumstances and discrimination Jim Thorpe faced as a Native person in the United States.
- Explore how Thorpe maintained his identity despite powerful efforts to assimilate Native people into white American society.
- Examine how stereotypes can influence the way people interpret someone's behavior.
- Analyze how the media helped create—and later damage—Jim Thorpe's public image.
- Consider whether the media's tendency to build up and tear down athletes and celebrities still exists today.

KEY VOCABULARY

Assimilation — The process of forcing or encouraging a group to adopt another group's culture, language, values, and way of life, often at the expense of its own identity.

Discrimination — Treating a person or group unfairly because of characteristics such as race, culture, or identity.

Stereotype — An oversimplified and often inaccurate belief about a particular group of people.

Survivance — The active presence, persistence, and continuation of Native peoples, cultures, identities, and communities despite efforts to eliminate or assimilate them.

Perseverance — Continuing to pursue a goal despite difficulty, obstacles, or failure.

Media Bias — The ways in which choices made by journalists or media organizations—such as what they report, how they describe it, and what they leave out—can influence how audiences understand a person or event.

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT AT END

ACTIVITIES

1. WHAT IF? — 4 MINUTES

Ask students: **Imagine that you came home one day and strangers were standing on your property with a government order saying they had the legal right to take your house and/or land.**

You know they are taking something that belongs to you. Your family has lived there for generations. But the government has made the taking legal. **How would you feel? What would you do?** Have students discuss briefly with a partner or in small groups.



2. WATCH THE VIDEO — 5 MINUTES

3. THE WORLD THORPE INHERITED — 5 MINUTES

Briefly review the adversity students just saw in the video.

Explain that Jim Thorpe was born in Oklahoma in 1887/88 and was about four years old when the Sac and Fox reservation was opened to non-Native settlement in the 1891 Land Run. **[Make comparison to Hook question above]** He therefore **lived through the Land Run and its immediate aftermath**, growing up in a community experiencing continuing loss of land and pressure to assimilate. The Library of Congress likewise notes that Thorpe grew up around adults who had been relocated to Oklahoma and that he lived through the 1891 Land Run.

Ask:

- What were some of the major challenges Thorpe faced growing up?
- What was the purpose of the government boarding-school system?
- What did Thorpe experience at boarding schools?
- What forms of discrimination did he face?

Emphasize: **Thorpe's adversity was not simply a series of personal hardships. He grew up at a time when the U.S. government was actively attempting to assimilate Native people and weaken or eliminate Native cultures and identities.**

4. WHO WAS JIM THORPE? — 4 MINUTES

USE HANDOUT IN APPENDIX — SECTION 1.

Briefly introduce the boarding-school philosophy represented by: **"Kill the Indian, and Save the Man."**

Have students look at the primary-source material and photographs in the appendix.

Ask: **What makes someone who they are?**

Then: **What happens when a government, school, or society repeatedly tells you that an important part of your identity is something you should abandon?**

Briefly discuss how Thorpe adapted to the world around him while maintaining his Native identity.

Introduce concept of **survance**.

Ask: **Was Thorpe simply surviving the system—or was becoming an extraordinary athlete while maintaining his Native identity also a form of survance?**



5. WHO WAS THE "LAZY INDIAN"? — 5 MINUTES

USE HANDOUT IN APPENDIX — SECTION 2.

Tell students to imagine they are athletes traveling to an international competition in **1912**, before airplanes.

They are crossing the Atlantic Ocean by ship, a voyage that takes approximately a week. They notice that one of their teammates is not training as nearly as intensely as all of the others. While all the other athletes are vigorously exercising on deck, he is often sitting or lying down.

Ask: **What would you think?**

Give students a minute to discuss with a partner.

Then reveal that the athlete was **Jim Thorpe**, traveling aboard the ship *Finland* with the U.S. Olympic team. The delegation boarded the ship in New York on June 14, 1912.

USE THE PRIMARY-SOURCE EXCHANGE IN THE APPENDIX.

Ask:

- What did the reporter actually observe?
- What did the reporter assume?
- Where does the stereotype enter the story?
- What information was the reporter missing?

Briefly explain that Thorpe was using rest and visualization as part of his preparation. Modern athletes routinely use tapering, recovery and visualization before major competitions. But this was not done at the time so the reporters assumed Thorpe was a “lazy Indian.”

TEACHER NOTE — THE BROADER "LAZY INDIAN" STEREOTYPE

The stereotype was not unique to Jim Thorpe. Native athletes and in fact Native Americans in general had long been portrayed in American media through stereotypes that depicted Native people as being lazy or lacking discipline.

For example, a 1912 Philadelphia newspaper described Native baseball player Louis Sockalexis as a **"fat, smokey, lazy Indian"** who "doesn't work much because he doesn't have to." This shows that the stereotype Thorpe encountered was part of a broader pattern of racialized media coverage of Native athletes. This is important context for understanding Thorpe's experience: **the reporter was not simply making an individual mistake. He was interpreting Thorpe through an existing racial stereotype.**



6. FROM HERO TO SCANDAL — 3 MINUTES

USE HANDOUT IN APPENDIX — SECTION 3.

Briefly show the photographs and headlines documenting the dramatic change in Thorpe's public image from being celebrated as the World's Greatest Athlete to the later newspaper headlines surrounding the amateurism controversy.

Teacher briefly explains: Thorpe won both the pentathlon and decathlon at the 1912 Olympics, setting World records in the process, and was celebrated as one of the world's greatest athletes. Contemporary coverage described enormous crowds welcoming the Olympic champions, and Thorpe was honored at New York City Hall.

Only months later, his Olympic status became a scandal after it was revealed that he had played professional/semi-professional baseball before the Games. The amateur rules of the era prohibited professional athletes, and Thorpe's Olympic titles were stripped in 1913 (even though the deadline for doing so had passed). Contemporary newspapers included headlines such as **"World's Greatest Athlete Is Discredited"** and **"Thorpe, Olympic Hero, Makes Full Confession That He Is a Professional."**

Important context: **The Olympics remained officially restricted to amateurs for decades. Broad acceptance of professional athletes did not come until the 1980s.**

Ask:

What happened to the story about Jim Thorpe?

Then move immediately to the final activity.

7. JIM THORPE AND THE MEDIA TODAY — 12 MINUTES

Ask: **Does this still happen today?**

In pairs or small groups, have students identify a modern athlete or celebrity who has experienced a dramatic change in public perception, from being admired to reviled or at least admonished.

Discuss:

1. How was this person portrayed when they were successful?
2. What changed?
3. How did the media describe the person afterward?
4. Did the person's actual behavior change—or did the story about the person change?
5. If they did do something, was the public reaction to it a reasonable one?
6. Did stereotypes or assumptions influence the coverage?
7. How is today's media environment different from the one Thorpe faced?
8. How is it similar?
9. Why does the media so often attack once popular public figures?



Bring the class together and ask: **Does the media still build people up in order to tear them down?**

And finally: **Has the media changed—or have we simply become much faster at building people up and tearing them down?**

EXIT TICKET — In 2–3 sentences, answer:

What does Jim Thorpe’s story teach us about the way the media can shape how we see a person, either positively or negatively? Give one example from Thorpe’s story.

TIME ESTIMATE

Section	Time
What If?	4 min
Video	5 min
The World Thorpe Inherited	3 min
Who Was Jim Thorpe?	4 min
Who Was the "Lazy Indian"?	5 min
From Hero to Scandal	3 min
Jim Thorpe and the Media Today	12 min
TOTAL	36 min

This gives **4–9 minutes of cushion** for transitions, additional student responses, or a particularly productive discussion. I prefer this to building the lesson to exactly 40 minutes.



NATIONAL / COMMON CORE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1 / RH.11-12.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 / RH.11-12.2

Determine the central ideas or themes of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6 / RH.11-12.6

Compare the point of view of two or more authors or accounts, including how the author's purpose, perspective, or position shapes the content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.7 / RH.11-12.7

Integrate quantitative or visual information with other information in print and digital texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1 / W.11-12.1

Write arguments to support claims using valid reasoning and relevant evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9 / W.11-12.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 / SL.11-12.1

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.2 / SL.11-12.2

Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively.

Social Studies / History

NCSS D2.His.4.9-12

Analyze complex and interacting factors that influenced the perspectives of people during different historical eras.

NCSS D2.His.5.9-12

Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

NCSS D2.His.14.9-12

Analyze multiple and complex causes and effects of events in the past.

NCSS D2.His.16.9-12

Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

NCSS D2.His.10.9-12

Detect possible limitations in various kinds of historical evidence and differing secondary interpretations.



APPENDIX — STUDENT HANDOUT

SECTION 1 — "KILL THE INDIAN, AND SAVE THE MAN"

Richard Henry Pratt

Jim Thorpe attended the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, the most prominent federal boarding school designed to assimilate Native children.

Carlisle founder Richard Henry Pratt expressed the school's philosophy in an 1892 speech, arguing that Native children should be educated away from their Native cultures and pushed into mainstream American society, arguing that if this didn't happen, Native Americans would not survive. He really saw himself as their savior.:

"Kill the Indian in him, and save the man."

VISUAL: BEFORE AND AFTER

Tom Torlino, Navajo student at Carlisle





The Carlisle school itself used before-and-after photographs such as these to demonstrate what it considered the positive "civilizing" effects of its program. The National Park Service identifies these photographs as Tom Torlino in 1882 and 1885 and notes that they were used to promote the school's assimilation program.

QUESTIONS:

What changes do you notice?

What do the photographs tell us?

While a photograph can't tell us about what Torlino thought or felt, what do you think he might have been?

SECTION 2 — THE "LAZY INDIAN"

The Voyage to Stockholm

On **June 14, 1912**, 164 American Olympic athletes boarded the ship the **SS *Finland*** in New York City and sailed for Stockholm. The voyage took approximately a week.

Ask students to imagine themselves on that ship.

Other athletes are regularly exercising vigorously on deck during the journey. Jim Thorpe is mostly sitting or lying down and appears to be resting.

WHAT WOULD YOU THINK?

THE REPORTER AND THORPE

Newspaperman **Francis Albertanti of the *New York Evening Mail*** saw Thorpe relaxing on a deck chair and asked:

"What are you doing, Jim, thinking of your Uncle Sitting Bull?"

Thorpe replied:

"No, I'm practicing the long jump. I've just jumped 23 feet eight inches. I think that will win it."

The exchange is attributed to Albertanti in accounts of Thorpe's 1912 Olympic preparation; the Smithsonian's historical account identifies Albertanti as the *New York Evening Mail* reporter who spoke with Thorpe aboard the *Finland*.

Important source note: The quotation is a contemporary-reported exchange that survives through later historical accounts; it is better described as a **reported primary-source quotation** than as a surviving scan of Albertanti's original article.



DISCUSSION

What did the reporter actually observe?

What did the reporter assume?

Why might he have made these assumptions?

What did Thorpe say he was actually doing?

SECTION 3 — FROM HERO TO SCANDAL

A. THE PUBLIC CELEBRATION





A contemporary New York newspaper headline proclaimed:

"Olympic Victors Welcomed by 1,000,000 — Throngs Cheer Athletes in Parade."

The report described Thorpe riding in a car by himself, with the two trophies presented by the King of Sweden and the Czar of Russia displayed in a car in front of him. Thorpe was also publicly honored at New York City Hall on August 24, 1912, where Mayor William Gaynor and other dignitaries greeted the Olympic athletes.

B. THEN THE STORY CHANGED

The Library of Congress' **Chronicling America** collection preserves contemporary headlines from the controversy:

"Thorpe Is Best Athlete" followed months later by: **"WORLD'S GREATEST ATHLETE IS DISCREDITED"** and **"Thorpe, Olympic Hero, Makes Full Confession That He Is a Professional"**

DISCUSSION

How did the story about Jim Thorpe change?

It was said that dozens of Olympic athletes made small amounts of money in small professional leagues and in exhibitions. Yet the Olympic Committee singled out Thorpe for punishment and the media was very supportive of this action. Why?

Teacher Sources

- **National Park Service:** Carlisle Indian Industrial School and Richard Henry Pratt's assimilation philosophy, including the Torlino photographs.
- **Carlisle Indian School Digital Resource Center / National Archives:** Thorpe with his Olympic trophies and 1912 parade material.
- **Library of Congress:** Thorpe's 1912 City Hall reception photograph.
- **Library of Congress, Chronicling America:** Contemporary newspaper coverage of Thorpe's Olympic triumph and 1913 controversy.
- **Library of Congress, 1912 Olympics:** Documentation of the SS *Finland* voyage and Thorpe's place in the U.S. delegation.