

NATIVE AMERICAN EDUCATION FOR ALL RESOURCES

Partnership of IllumiNative and the National Indian Education Association



ILLUMINATIVE



Grade Level

6-8

Subject

Social Studies

Lesson Title

(PART 2) The Power in (Re)Telling History: A Look at Jim Thorpe's Life

Activity Description: One tool used by dominant culture, is to write and rewrite history, particularly Native American history. Many consider Jim Thorpe (1887-1953) to be the greatest athlete to ever exist, but he also experienced traumatic events due to historical racism toward Native Americans. However, history does not always tell that side of his story. Part 2 of this activity set shares Jim Thorpe's athletic accomplishments as well as the tragedies he experienced due to discrimination toward Native Americans in society during the late 1800s to early 1900s. This is an activity that families can do together for rich discussions about discrimination and the "truth" of history.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Wifi (recommended)
- Pencil & paper (optional)
- Print or digital access to [Chapter 1 of The Life of Jim Thorpe](#) film guide
- Print or digital access to "[A Fight for Jim Thorpe's body](#)" from the National Public Radio

STEPS

James Frances Thorpe, commonly known as Jim, is remembered by many as the greatest athlete that ever lived. A member of the Sac and Fox tribe, Thorpe was born at a time when Native Americans were being pushed off their lands and forced into assimilation. This activity is the second of two parts about Thorpe. This activity will focus on the athletic career and adult life of Jim Thorpe. While many times he is portrayed as a sports hero and voted the greatest athlete that ever lived, the tragedies and trauma in his life are often overlooked. Piece together the different "histories" to discover the truth of Jim Thorpe and gain more understanding of how boarding school left a painful mark on Thorpe's life.

Activity Steps:

1. Watch this video of [Thorpe from NFL's Top 100](#) that shows the amazing athletic abilities of Thorpe.
 - a. While it is so important to honor Thorpe, how does this video still show that history tends to remember the great details but leave out the ugly truths of discrimination and trauma?
2. Now, read [Chapter 1 of The Life of Jim Thorpe](#). This chapter gives a more detailed story of his life and how his legacy has lived on. As you read, take notes on what seem like triumphs and what would be considered tragedies in his life.
 - a. How does this chapter show that Jim Thorpe was taken advantage of despite his desire to always help others?
 - b. How did the same people who helped him become a great athlete also hurt his career?
 - c. What significant events caused more trauma in Thorpe's life?
 - d. You can also answer the questions on page 12 of Chapter 1.
3. Another tragedy not typically mentioned is the Thorpe family's battle to have his remains returned to Oklahoma where he was raised with his tribe. Finish your information gathering by reading or listening to the broadcast "[A Fight for Jim Thorpe's body](#)" from the National Public Radio.
 - a. The US Supreme Court denied the Thorpe family request in 2015. How does this demonstrate the lack of understanding or respect for Native traditions and values?

Re-tell History:

1. Reflect on these questions: Was Jim Thorpe's life a tragedy? What elements in his life were tragic and what parts were triumphant?
2. Now that you have gained more knowledge, re-tell the story of Jim Thorpe to your family or an elder. Share as much of the "truth" as you have been able to learn from your reading.

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HELPFUL TIPS

Parents and caregivers: Because this activity may raise questions about the discrimination of Native Americans and the traumatic experiences in boarding school, we recommend that parents/caregivers/elders support young people while doing this activity. Here are suggestions to help with this activity:

- This is a critical topic to share with your child but it can also stir feelings of pain, confusion, and anger. If you or your family have been directly impacted by the boarding school era, reach out for support through an organization such as [The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition](#)
- If you or your child are interested in further truths and a retelling of the historical narrative for Native Americans, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz published a indigenous history book for adults and had an adaptation published for youth. Consider her book *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States for Young People (ReVisioning History for Young People)*. This book can be purchased on many sites such as [here on Amazon](#) or found at a local library.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

Families and educators: It is important to teach not only the resilience and accomplishments of Jim Thorpe but also to address the trauma he experienced. For support in teaching lessons like this one, visit "[Addressing Race and Trauma in the Classroom](#)" by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Below are more resources:

- In 2009, Moira Productions produced a printable [curriculum with a teacher guide and full-text resources](#) for students about Jim Thorpe and related topics such as American Football, Sac and Fox tribes, American Indian Hollywood portrayals.
- Jim Thorpe's death still stirs controversy as his body has not been returned to his homeland. Here are two articles that can be used in the classroom for more information about this controversy:
 - [Jim Thorpe: A Sad End for an Amazing Athlete](#): This includes the transcript of a two part newspaper series on the achievements and losses for Thorpe.
 - ["A battle to keep Jim Thorpe in Jim Thorpe, Pa.":](#) This article from Newsela.com will require a free teacher subscription.

Activity Resources:

- "#37: NFL Top 100-The NFL's Greatest Players NFL (2010)" posted on YouTube by NFL Films <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66XiZN55dtA>
- *The Life of Jim Thorpe* film guide by Moira Productions <https://www.jimthorpefilm.com/guide/guide01.pdf>
- "A Fight for Jim Thorpe's body" by Hansi Lo Wang on National Public Radio <https://www.npr.org/2011/08/03/138524619/a-fight-for-jim-thorpes-body>

Additional Resources:

- "Addressing Race and Trauma in the Classroom" by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/asca/media/PDFs/FINAL-Race-and-Trauma-in-the-Classroom-Factsheet.pdf>
- Jim Thorpe: A Sad End for an Amazing Athlete by Genealogybank <https://blog.genealogybank.com/jim-thorpe-sad-end-for-an-amazing-athlete.html>
- "A battle to keep Jim Thorpe in Jim Thorpe, Pa." article adapted by Newsela.com https://newsela.com/read/jimthorpe-body/id/1576/?search_id=