

Negotiating Identity: Indian Assimilation and Athletics in the late 19th and early 20th Century

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Abstract

For many Native Americans in the 19th and 20th century, the transition from tribal sovereignty to a United States government dependency was a harsh and dehumanizing road. A pro-assimilation policy founded on bigotry and social Darwinism perpetuated the longstanding battle between indigenous tribes and the "Great White Father" over the definition of their ever-changing identity. Surviving this onslaught of white expansion in both their land and their culture forced many Indians to choose their role in the overwhelming process of assimilation and acculturation. Many chose to succumb to the pressures of white society and attempted to strip away their tribal traditions. Others rejected the prospect of assimilation outright, choosing instead to retreat further and further into their shrinking reservations, until they became a suppressed and impoverished refugee population in their own homeland. Yet between both of these groups, a small percentage of Indians prevailed who merged into white society and at the same time retained some semblance of tribal identity and pride. Amazingly, this demographic between the two extremes; tradition mixed with a dominant white culture, often developed out of the competitive arenas of American sports. Sports enabled Indian athletes like Jim Thorpe, or the Fort Shaw women's basketball team, or baseball player George Howard Johnson, to maintain tribal identity and cultural sovereignty, while working and living within an overwhelming dominant white culture. While the majority of Indian populations faded into depressed reservations, or cut their hair and lost their language, Indian athletes became All-Americans, Olympians, champions, and pioneer integrators while retaining their cultural Indian heritage.

Keywords: Identity, Assimilation, and Cultural Sovereignty

For many Native Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the transition from tribal sovereignty to government dependency was harsh and dehumanizing. A pro-assimilation policy founded on bigotry and social Darwinism perpetuated a longstanding battle between indigenous tribes and the "Great White Father" over the definition of their national identity. Many Indians chose differing roles in the overwhelming process of assimilation and acculturation as a means of surviving the onslaught of White expansion in both their lands and their cultures. Some accepted the pressures of White society and replaced tribal traditions with the "White man's" clothing, religion, professions, and often their names. Others rejected the prospect of assimilation outright, choosing instead to retreat further into their shrinking reservations, becoming a suppressed and impoverished refugee population in their own homeland. Yet evolving beyond the choices of resistance or acquiescence to White culture, another group of American Indians assimilated themselves into White society and preserved tribal identity through the competitive arena of American sports.

The relationship between Indian assimilation and American sports begins at the Indian boarding schools developed by the United States government to assist in the acculturation of indigenous children. Many found themselves at government funded schools through the urgings of their parents, although government coercion often played a key role in the recruitment of resistant students. The institutions modeled themselves after military schools, relying on rigid structure, discipline and the development of an education whose main objective was assimilation.¹

¹ David Wallace Adams, "Beyond Bleakness: The Brighter Side of Indian Boarding Schools, 1870-1940," ed. Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc, *Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2006), pg. 35.

Institutions like the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania believed the ideal place “for lifting Indian children out of the depths of savagism” existed in the “battlefield of the classroom.”² R. H. Pratt, a retired U.S. Army commander and the founder of Carlisle, believed in the importance of military-styled discipline, marching, and dormitory inspections, alongside the “extirpation” of “indigenous languages and cultures” as a means of social education.³ This education wasn’t complete without removing indigenous clothing, cutting long hairstyles, and forbidding the practice of tribal religious customs. When asked to explain the school’s policy in 1879, Pratt said:

It is this nature in our red brother that is better dead than alive, and when we agree with the oft-repeated sentiment that the only good Indian is a dead one, we mean this characteristic of the Indian. Carlisle’s mission is to kill THIS Indian, as we build up the better man... We do not like to keep alive the stories of his past, hence deal more with his present and future.⁴

This quote epitomizes the grotesque paternalism and “mudsill” philosophy that allowed an institution like Carlisle to exist.⁵ And for most of the nineteenth century, paternalistic ideology and a widespread belief in assimilation as the only alternative to extermination for Native Americans, was a driving force in both policy and attitude towards the treatment of Native persons within the United States. Even President Ulysses S. Grant promoted this ideology when in his 1871 State of the Union Address he said, “The policy [of assimilation] pursued toward the Indians has resulted favorably, so far as can be judged... [the Indians] are being cared for in such a way, it is hoped, as to induce those still pursuing their old habits of life to embrace the only opportunity which is left them to avoid extermination.”⁶

This ideology, fostered by both government and self-proclaimed Christian “reformers” like Pratt, maintained that in the best interest of Native persons, restricting freedoms and rights was essential for the fulfillment of assimilation. This is made clear in the reform-driven Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887. Also known as the Dawes Severalty Act, this government legislation replaced the reservation system created by the Indian Appropriations Act in 1851 with a system known as allotment.⁷ This shift in policy (advocated by reformers and politicians anxious to provide more land to White settlers) convinced the government that “the policy of reservations perpetuated an Indian tribal identity that the reformers believed had to be broken” if the Natives “were to be civilised (sic.) and absorbed into the dominant culture.”⁸

In his extensive analysis of paternalism and Indian assimilation, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920*, historian Frederick Hoxie discusses the general American attitude toward the expropriation of Indian land and the fracturing of tribal connections.

² Jeffrey Powers-Beck, *The American Indian Integration of Baseball* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pg. 7.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. This quote was cited by Powers-Beck as coming from *The Indian Helper* March 18, 1898.

⁵ David E. Witte and Paul T. Mero, “Removing Classrooms from the Battlefield: Liberty, Paternalism, and the Redemptive Promise of Educational Choice,” *BYU Law Review* 377 (2008): pg. 382. “Mudsill” is defined as a derogatory term referring to poorer classes, especially people of color, who often lived in homes with mud floors.

⁶ Ulysses S. Grant, “Third Annual Message December 4th, 1871” vol. 7 of *Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1897*, ed. James D. Richardson (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1898), pg. 152.

⁷ Allotment essentially “individualized” Native Americans by giving each head of household an allotment of 160 acres, and 80 acres to individual persons over the age of 18. The U.S. government held the land in trust for 25 years, after which its ownership passed to the Indian owner. Once the U.S. government deemed an Indian suitable to receive an allotment, they then supposedly became U.S. citizens. Most of the allotments given to Native persons consisted of difficult and inhospitable land, making cultivation and hunting virtually impossible. Overall, due to the allotment system, by 1932 Native Americans had lost roughly two-thirds of their 138,000,000 acres of previously owned land (approx. 92 million acres), most of which was sold as “surplus” acreage to White settlers by the government. See: “Dawes General Allotment Act,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/152952/Dawes-General-Allotment-Act> (accessed Mar. 10th, 2011).

⁸ Simon Henderson, *Aspects of American History* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pg. 115.

In the section entitled “The Appeal of Assimilation,” Hoxie writes:

Total assimilation was a goal that combined concern for native suffering with faith in the promise of America. Once the tribes were brought into ‘civilized’ society, there could be no reason for them to ‘usurp’ vast tracts of ‘underdeveloped’ land. And membership in a booming nation would be ample compensation for the dispossession they had suffered.⁹

This mentality, coupled with official government policies like the Dawes Act, ennobled the practices of institutions like Carlisle and touted them as the ideal way to civilize indigenous populations.

Therefore it is no surprise that assimilation and the “battlefield classroom” also expanded to include the didactic experience of athletics. Following the Census in 1890, in which it was declared that the unbroken “American frontier” no longer existed, White America developed “an earnest yearning to find a means to re-create in national life the productive, can-do energy of the pioneer.”¹⁰ They found the “most persuasive expression” of this energy within athletics.¹¹ In her compelling work, *Native American Son: The Life and Sporting Legend of Jim Thorpe*, Kate Buford argues that at the end of the nineteenth century, the role of sports within the national identity of the United States explicitly changed. She writes:

the modern metropolis...gave rise to the idea of sports as a wholesome activity that could amuse, condition, and stabilize a diverse nation....The Progressive political movement maintained that a fit, healthy body was manifest proof of moral man....Sports were not just an antidote, but the means to achieve the ends of individual physical and moral perfection...sports had become the “new safety valve” replacing the frontier.¹²

This new “safety valve” also replaced the violence of the frontier with the “ritualized conflict” and “warlike connection” of competitive sports to the traditional conflicts of America’s westward expansion.¹³ At the heart of this lay the historic battle of White America’s conquest over the Indians, a conflict which often became a convenient plotline for future athletic competitions.

However, many assimilation advocates saw sports as a transformative tool for indigenous students themselves. One such advocate was Dr. Carlos Montezuma, a Yavapai Apache whose unusual upbringing removed from reservations and tribal customs, along with his “White” education, indoctrinated him in the benefits of assimilation.¹⁴ One of the greatest influences on Montezuma’s pro-assimilation ideology was R.H. Pratt, whose correspondence sustained Montezuma throughout his lifetime.¹⁵ And his relationship with Pratt, along with Montezuma’s negative experience at the Bureau of Indian Affairs, helped develop the belief that Native Americans could achieve equality if given the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities within “white, urban America.”¹⁶

He expressed this belief in Carlisle’s school publication *The Red Man*, in January of 1900. In his article, Montezuma promoted competition in “White” sports as a means to equality and racial refinement for young Carlisle students. He wrote, “Carlisle boys would not even to doomsday have made the record they have, had they practiced among themselves exclusively or on a reservation.” He argued that it was competition from “superior [White] teams” that enabled Carlisle Indians to become “gentlemen.”¹⁷

⁹ Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), pg. 15.

¹⁰ Kate Buford, *Native American Son: The Life and Sporting Legend of Jim Thorpe* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), pg. 45.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Olympia Sosangelis, “‘Something More than an Indian’: Carlos Montezuma and Wassaja, the Dual Identity of an Assimilationist and Indian Rights Activist” (master’s thesis, Simmons College, 2008), pg. 7.

¹⁵ Peter Iverson, *Carlos Montezuma and the Changing World of American Indians* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), pg. 9.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ C. Richard King, “Identities, Opportunities, Inequities: An Introduction,” in *Native Athletes in Sport & Society: A Reader*, ed. C. Richard King (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), pg. xx.

This belief in the power of sports to make Indians “abstemious and moral” played a key role in R.H. Pratt’s decision to start the Carlisle baseball program in 1886.¹⁸ The Carlisle Indians competed first against local YMCA teams, but eventually honed their competitive skills against semi-pro teams and collegiate baseball programs like Holy Cross University, a founding Division I member of the NCAA and the University of Pennsylvania, a prestigious and competitive Ivy League university.¹⁹ Football began shortly after in 1890 when Indians first played competitively against Dickinson College, a university also located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.²⁰ After a football accident injured one of the Carlisle players, Pratt suspended the program completely until 1893; emblematic of Pratt’s adherence to the paternalistic ideology so elemental to his work.²¹

Nevertheless, following the re-institution of football, Carlisle emerged as a dominant force in the collegiate football circuit. They garnered the school substantial financial success and national media attention, which reached a climax in 1912 when the Carlisle Indians played Army at West Point. This game stands out in the history of Native American athletics, as the epitome of both collegiate and tribal pride. For the athletes it was not about “racial refinement,” it was an important opportunity to “express and define themselves...and to resist the very regimes Euro-Americans sought to impose upon them.”²²

On November 8, 1912, *The New York Times* published an article about the football match up titled, “Indians to Battle with Soldiers!”²³ As Sally Jenkins’ points out in her analysis of the game, *The Real All-Americans*, “for both sides [Indian and Whites,] football was more than a game. It was war without death.”²⁴ Given the fierce and competitive relationship between Carlisle and West Point, the meeting in November would be only the second time government authorities would allow them to compete against each other on the football field for fear of violence.²⁵ The *New York Times* article went on to say “when Indian outbreaks in the West were frequent, the government officials thought it unwise to have the aborigines and future officers combat in athletics.”²⁶

Amidst this rising drama and tension, Carlisle’s Athletic Director and Football Head Coach, Glenn S. “Pop” Warner, capitalized on the pre-existing history that surrounded the confrontation. Standing in the locker room before the game, Warner looked at his talented, future All-American team and his captain, the already famous Jim Thorpe, a former U.S. Olympian and member of the Sac and Fox. He said, “Your fathers and your grandfathers, are the ones who fought their fathers. These men playing against you today are the soldiers. They are the Long Knives. You are Indians. Tonight, we will know if you are warriors.”²⁷

The Carlisle Football team responded to this statement by crushing Army 27 to 6.²⁸ Warner later recalled: Carlisle had no traditions, but what the Indians did have was a real race pride and fierce determination to show the palefaces what they could do when the odds were even. It was not that they felt any definite bitterness against the conquering white, or against the government for years of unfair treatment. But rather they believed the armed contests between the red man and the white had never been waged on equal terms.²⁹

This statement, along with Warner’s opening speech and the drama surrounding that game, went against the policies Pratt instituted at the industrial school. The game hadn’t fostered forgetting stories of the past, as assimilation advocates wanted.

¹⁸ John Bloom, *To Show What an Indian Can Do: Sports at Native American Boarding Schools* Vol. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pg. 1. Powers-Beck, *Integration of Baseball*, pg. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pg. 8.

²⁰ John S. Steckbeck, *Fabulous Redmen: The Carlisle Indians and Their Famous Football Teams* (Harrisburg, PA: J. Horace McFarland Co., 1951), pg. 11-12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 12.

²² King, *Native Athletes in Sport & Society*, pg. xx.

²³ “Indians to Battle with Soldiers!” *The New York Times*, November 9, 1912.

²⁴ Sally Jenkins, *The Real All Americans: The Team that Changed a Game, a People, a Nation* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), pg. 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ “Indians to Battle with Soldiers!” *The New York Times*.

²⁷ Jenkins, *The Real All Americans*, pg. 7.

²⁸ Steckbeck, *Fabulous Redmen*, pg. 139.

²⁹ Jenkins, *The Real All Americans*, pg. 7.

Instead, Indian heritage, history, and pain focused the minds of Carlisle's athletes. Warner wanted them to remember their identity as Indians; it was elemental to their passion and ultimately their success. It wasn't just two teams battling for victory, but a battle for identity in which race defined how the Indians and the outside world interpreted their triumph. Although Warner's comments came from a racist perspective, his Indian athletes seized the opportunity to define themselves as both superior athletes in a white man's world, and as Indians who never relinquished their identity.

Two of Warner's most talented players, Bemus Pierce and Jim Thorpe, eventually went on to even greater fame and athletic prestige. Pierce, considered perhaps the greatest lineman in Carlisle's sports history, was a three-time team captain, an All-American, and eventually coach of his alma mater. He went on to coach at the University of Buffalo, Kenyon College, and another Indian-boarding school, the Haskell Indian Institute.³⁰ Known for his fierce tribal pride and his refusal to support the belief that Indian success depended on the paternal guidance and influence of White society, a notion established by men like Pratt, Pierce defined an identity devoted to advocating Indian teams coached only by Indians. At one point in his tenure at Carlisle, the superintendent congratulated the football team on their victorious season.

When he suggested "the wins were gained by white coaching and management," Bemus Pierce reportedly rose from his seat and offered a rebuttal, arguing Carlisle sports would be just as successful if coached and staffed by Indians.³¹ This immense pride and belief in the equal abilities of Indians to Whites also played a key role in the life and struggles of Warner's greatest star, Jim Thorpe. He was an All-American, a two-time Olympic gold medal winner, a Hall of Fame football player, a professional baseball and basketball player, and in 1950 was voted the greatest male athlete of the first half of the twentieth century by the Associated Press.³² However, like all Indian athletes, Thorpe struggled to define an identity for himself where he was both an Indian and a respected American athlete.

Born in 1887, the year the Dawes Severalty Act passed through Congress, Jim Thorpe's earliest memories growing up in Oklahoma were of allotment and the dehumanizing elements integral to the policy's fulfillment. It was this backdrop which "not only set the scene for Jim Thorpe's childhood, but also laid out the elements, true and stereotypical, that would form the fractured identity of the boy – and man."³³ Owing much to the complex nature of his family's mixed-race genealogy, Thorpe's father Hiram looked and dressed white, spoke English fluently but raised his family with an Indian life on an Indian reservation. Thorpe was "therefore neither/nor in the eyes of most Indians and whites."³⁴ It was this issue of existing "within overlapping layers of identity" that permeated most of Thorpe's life, including the one in athletics.³⁵

Considered a "difficult student" who struggled with separation from his family and the disconnect from his tribe, Thorpe was always in and out of state boarding schools, spending much of his youth running back to his family's home.³⁶ However, following his fleeing the Haskell Indian Institute in Kansas, Thorpe eventually found himself far removed from his family's allotment, and started his tenure at Carlisle in 1904. At this important period in American history, only a decade after allotment's inception, White America's perception of Indians and assimilation began to change.

³⁰ Gerald R. Gems, "Negotiating a Native American Identity through Sport: Assimilation, Adaptation, and the Role of the Trickster," in *Native Athletes in Sport and Society*, ed. C. Richard King (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), pg. 7.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pgs. 7-11

³² Bloom, *To Show What an Indian Can Do*, pg. xi. Jim Thorpe is a legendary historical figure in regards to both athletics and Native American history. To discuss the entirety of his life in this paper, although connected to the scope of my arguments, would dedicate far too much attention to a single historical figure and would burden the overall cohesion of my writing. For a more in depth analysis of his story see Kate Buford, *Native American Son: The Life and Sporting Legend of Jim Thorpe*.

³³ Buford, *Native American Son*, pg. 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 16.

Allotment had seemingly failed to individualize Indians to the point where they embraced “self-supportive” farming, an issue which perplexed and frustrated the government and reform groups who had so passionately argued for the passage of the Dawes Act. Instead of seeking answers in the failure of allotment as an institution, they sought failure in the nature of the Indians. Many in White society “reverted to the idea of Indians as helpless, shiftless wards of the state,” and “virulent racism resurfaced, swamping idealistic notions of assimilation and equality.”³⁷ Historian Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. has argued that at this time, White society “relegate[d] the Indian to a fixed subordinate position in the economic, political, and intellectual life of the nation.”³⁸ So it was within this climate that Jim Thorpe began his long and difficult career as a fierce and competitive athlete in a sports environment dominated by White society’s culture, rules, and attitudes.

Following his first major athletic successes at Carlisle, Thorpe competed in the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm. Gold medals in both the decathlon and pentathlon instantly transformed him into a celebrity. The U.S. press printed headlines such as “Brilliant Performance of Indian... Prove Him to Be a Marvel” and published photographs of him as a specimen of physical strength, posing entirely nude with the exception of a jock-strap. Upon his return home, Thorpe headed a ticker-tape parade held in New York City and attended celebratory galas in New York and at Carlisle.³⁹ However, his fame and accolades always seemed an uncomfortable irony. His triumphs had shown that a dismissed and “conquered people could still win,” and his feats “upended the assumptions and stereotypes that had accumulated over centuries.”⁴⁰ Yet the world that greeted him with praise and ticker-tape parades remained the same world in which he belonged to a race of people forced into the margins of society. A world in which even Thorpe, was denied control of his allotment due to the agent’s claim that Thorpe was “inclined to indulge his appetite in intoxicating liquor.”⁴¹

When it was discovered that Thorpe briefly worked for a professional baseball team while attending Carlisle, the Amateur Athletic Union (the AAU) stripped Thorpe of his Olympic Medals. Following the breaking news, Thorpe signed his name to a letter written by his coach Glenn Warner, in which he claimed, “I was simply an Indian schoolboy and did not know all about such things.”⁴² Historian and activist Vine Deloria, Jr. later wrote that Thorpe’s famous statement reinforced an enduring stereotype: “[T]he Indian sees himself as an incompetent and childish figure who must have his mistakes forgiven because he is an Indian who does not really understand.”⁴³ A belief evidenced in *The State*, a publication out of Columbia, South Carolina, where they asked whether as an Indian, he should be held to “so high a degree of moral accountability as his white competitors?”⁴⁴

These stereotypes followed Thorpe throughout his professional baseball and football careers. When he was signed with the New York Giants, his baseball manager John McGraw, often credited with the creation of modern baseball, told Thorpe to “avoid alcohol because no Indian knew how to drink.”⁴⁵ And just like the Indian athletes Louis Sockalexis, Charles Albert Bender, and George Howard Johnson, who played alongside him, Thorpe was “subjected to a cauldron of racist abuse” from other players, coaches and fans.⁴⁶

Once Thorpe’s career in sports ended, he struggled to find decent jobs that supported him and his family. He dug ditches, worked construction, and even dabbled in Hollywood, often playing bit roles of caricatured Indian chiefs. In 1950, the Associated Press voted him the greatest male athlete of the first half of the twentieth century, and a year later Michael Curtiz directed Burt Lancaster in *Jim Thorpe – All American* in which Thorpe worked as a consultant. One year later Jim Thorpe died of heart failure, without having money enough to pay for his coffin or funeral.

³⁷ Ibid., pg. 39.

³⁸ Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), pg. 246.

³⁹ Buford, *Native American Son*, pg. 132.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pg. 137.

⁴¹ Ibid., pg. 140.

⁴² Ibid., pg. 161.

⁴³ Ibid., pg. 161.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pg. 165.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pg. 181.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Powers-Beck, “‘Chief’: The American Indian Integration of Baseball, 1897-1945,” *American Indian Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2001): pg. 508.

However, although the end of his life might be tragic, the identity Thorpe forged for himself established his own defined historical legacy. For most historians, Jim Thorpe isn't just a remarkable Indian athlete, he's one of the greatest American athletes of all time; a legacy constructed not through assimilation or acquiescence to White culture, but through the agency of Thorpe's own decisions and personal success. This ability to define the nature of one's own identity...both Indian and American, also played a key role in the achievements of other Indian athletes, particularly those of a tiny athletic team at the Fort Shaw Indian Boarding School in Montana. Unlike Thorpe's alma mater, the Indian school at Fort Shaw developed an athletic legacy not on the gridiron but in the form of female Indian athletes succeeding within the new sport of basketball.⁴⁷

This new sport, which maintained physical fitness during the cold months in Montana, was developed exclusively for young boys and men enrolled in the YMCA programs in 1892.⁴⁸ But over the course of several years the game quickly caught on among female students. Following a victory against Butte High in 1902, Fort Shaw "barnstormed Montana" basketball, suffering few defeats and challenging "prevailing attitudes about their race and athletic potential as girls."⁴⁹ By 1904, Fort Shaw's all-women basketball team represented the most dominant basketball team in Montana, "routinely defeating most of the state's college and high school girls' teams --- and a few boys' teams as well."⁵⁰ Their coach and school superintendent Fred Campbell decided they were ready for a new challenge. He readied his team for along two week train ride and journeyed to the tournament competition of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis. Created by the organizers of the exposition, the tournament was a prominent feature within their "Model Indian School," an anthropological display designed to show man's evolution "from 'savagery' to 'barbarism' to 'civilization.'"⁵¹ The organizers cleverly situated the model school between the "'realistic' huts of the most 'savage' human exhibits and the green fields of the modern athletic complex," clearly placing Native athletes below Whites in the "evolutionary scale" they tirelessly flaunted.⁵² Nevertheless, the talented girls from Fort Shaw quickly eviscerated the exposition's attempted display of White superiority.

Welcoming all competitors from across the United States and the world, the team went undefeated while competing for over 5 months, leading to a championship showdown with an "all-star lineup of St. Louis players."⁵³ As the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* observed, "To the great surprise of several hundred spectators," the Fort Shaw players proved "more active, more accurate and cooler than their opponents," and crushed the St. Louis all-stars 24-2.⁵⁴ Following a re-match which they also won, the Fort Shaw girls carried back to Montana a silver trophy hailing them as "Champions of the World."⁵⁵

A key element of their success relied not just on skill, but also on their Indian identity. To fund their trip to St. Louis, the girls changed from their wool basketball uniforms of bloomers and blouses to the ceremonial garb of the different tribes from which they belonged.⁵⁶ So dressed, they charged fifty cents each for admission to their "post-game program of music, dance, and recitation."⁵⁷

⁴⁷ Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, "World Champions: The 1904 Girls' Basketball Team from Fort Shaw Indian Boarding School," in *Native Athletes in Sport and Society*, ed. C. Richard King (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), pg. 41.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pg. 44.

⁴⁹ Delia Cabe, "World Beaters," *Humanities* 31, no. 6 (2010), accessed at <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/2010-11/WorldBeaters.html>

⁵⁰ Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, "World Champions: The 1904 Girls' Basketball," pg. 40.

⁵¹ Mark Dyreson, "The 'Physical Value' of Races and Nations: Anthropology and Athletics at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition," in *The 1904 Anthropology Days and Olympic Games: Sports, Race, and American Imperialism*, ed. Susan Brownell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), pg. 137.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Pamela Grundy and Susan Shackelford, *Shattering the Glass: The Remarkable History of Women's Basketball* (New York: The New Press, 2005), pg. 25.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, "World Champions: The 1904 Girls' Basketball," pgs. 41-42.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pg. 41.

Often the girls wore buckskin dresses for performances of “The Famine” scene from Longfellow’s *Hiawatha*, and then changed into large angelic white robes to sing the “Song of the Mystic,” symbolizing the mixture of their tribal heritage with white Christian society.⁵⁸

Ultimately, it was this manipulation and utilization of their image as Indians that enabled Fort Shaw basketball’s competition in the exposition’s tournament. Yet at the same time, they achieved the tournaments highest honor through maintenance of an identity devoid of race and based solely on athletic prowess. Just like the Carlisle football team, the girls from Fort Shaw managed to walk a tightrope between assimilation and retention of their Indian identities, even when the balancing act conflicted with the interpretations of White observers. Ironically, the interpretations of White society placed a solemn tone over the victory. The very competition that provided the Fort Shaw girls a silver trophy and exposed their athletic superiority to the world, also represented a celebration of Thomas Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase. The celebration along with their silver trophy ultimately corresponded with the great conquest of White civilization over America’s vast wilderness and the Fort Shaw ancestors who inhabited it.

In 2000 a writer named Turtle Woman, a descendent of Genevieve Healy, one of eleven Fort Shaw players, spoke about the larger implications of the girls’ achievements. “More than a skilled basketball team,” Turtle Woman claimed, “they were a rare gathering of young female warriors who, facing the same... [barriers] that caused many Indian people to become discouraged and defeated, chose a path that made them victors.”⁵⁹ And though the Fort Shaw girls never lost sight of the exposition’s promotion of them as “curiosities” within the evolutionary scale of human progress, their own agency and personal achievements made theirs a story of triumph within the broader history of Indian athletics. Sadly however, not all stories surrounding Indian athletes represent positive narratives of triumph like the Fort Shaw basketball team. Many Native athletes found the balancing act very difficult as they maneuvered between their Indian identity and the pressures of assimilation. This was particularly true for George Howard Johnson, a half-Winnebago and half-Irish pitcher who played professional baseball from 1913 to 1915.⁶⁰

Johnson, a former student of both the Carlisle and the Haskell Indian schools, contended with intense racism from the very beginning of his career. His nickname, “Chief,” represented a racial epithet applied to almost all Indian baseball players from 1897 to 1947.⁶¹ Only those players who cast off all traces of their Indian identity, managed to escape the ubiquitous title.⁶² Yet the racial slurs and harassment did not end with his name. Johnson’s coach, Guy W. Green described the bombardment of bigotry that occurred during Johnson’s time with the Nebraska Indians in the semi-pro Western League. Green is quoted as saying:

He has never yet stepped to the mound to pitch a game anywhere on earth that three things have not happened. Numerous local humorists have started what they imagine to be Indian war cries; others have yelled ‘Back to the reservation,’ and the third variety of town pump jester shrieked ‘Dog soup! Dog Soup!’ If you were at the game on Tuesday you heard this. If you see him pitch in Pueblo or Sitka or Kamchatka you will hear the same thing.⁶³

Unfortunately, the harassment did not end with spectators. When Johnson decided to jump from the Cincinnati Reds in the National League to the Kansas City Packers in the Federal League, reporters went crazy in their utilization of Indian mockery. Reporter Ben Mulford Jr. in a *Sporting Life* article wrote, “Poor Lo will be scalped and kept out of the game.”⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, *Full-Court Quest: The Girls from Fort Shaw Indian School, Basketball Champions of the World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), pgs. 257-258.

⁵⁹ Linda Peavy and Ursula Smith, “World Champions: The 1904 Girls’ Basketball,” pgs. 66-67.

⁶⁰ Baseball Reference and Baseball Stats, “George Howard Johnson, Chief Johnson,” <http://www.baseball-reference.com/players/j/johnsch02.shtml> (accessed May 19, 2009).

⁶¹ Powers-Beck, *The American Indian Integration of Baseball*, pg. 121.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Jeffrey Powers-Beck, “‘Winnebago Is a Great Nation!’ George Howard Johnson’s Life in Baseball,” in *Native Athletes in Sport and Society*, ed. C. Richard King (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), pg. 83.

⁶⁴ Powers-Beck, *The Indian Integration of Baseball*, pg. 133.

Despite often leading his team in pitching stats, and as historian Jeffrey Powers-Beck argues, being respected by both players and coaches who worked alongside him, it was the degrading stereotype which defined Johnson's career in baseball. Joseph Oxendine, another Indian baseball player explained that by labeling Johnson "Chief," White society said, "Hey, you're just an Indian. Therefore that's how I can define you and keep you in your place...."⁶⁵

Yet despite the negative press, stereotypes, and harassment, Johnson refused to strip away his Indian heritage. In 1913, Johnson brought a "Winnebago medicine rite" into Cardinal Park, St. Louis. The medicine rite, a traditional Winnebago method for achieving success against one's enemies, required that Johnson take the mound and chew various herbs and roots before blowing his breath towards the direction of the batter.⁶⁶ More than a symbolic gesture, the use of the medicine rite was a clear example of "syncretism" between Johnson's tribal traditions and the practices of the Euro-American sport of baseball.⁶⁷ While Johnson clearly performed within the accepted rules of the game, he "did so from the spiritual viewpoint of a Winnebago leader, determined to incorporate the game into his own culture."⁶⁸ It was an act of sheer defiance against a world that tirelessly tempted him to betray his past and forget his Indian heritage.

Sadly, the memory of George Howard Johnson's amazing career and the defiant use of his "Indianness" were eclipsed by his tragic death following his retirement from baseball. During a game of dice in Des Moines, Iowa in 1922, Johnson was shot twice at point blank range and killed.⁶⁹ Police reports confirm that he was unarmed at the time, and suspect Edward Gillespie was arrested for the murder after witnesses testified to his guilt, and Johnson's body was found in a "clump of weeds" behind Gillespie's house.⁷⁰ Yet despite the overwhelming testimony against Gillespie, the defense crafted a scenario that fed on the public's racist assumptions of Indian stereotypes. Since the crime scene involved liquor, many members of the jury assumed that Gillespie responded with gunshots as defense against a violent and drunken Indian.⁷¹

This story represents another common narrative in Native American history. One in which alcoholism often left Native athletes vulnerable to demonization by a White society whose trading of goods for alcohol in the early years of Native and European contact, developed a long-lasting system of drug addiction and dependence up through the 21st century.⁷² Yet despite the fact that Johnson lived in an age where no one "demanded justice for a 'Drunk Indian,'" he defiantly struggled to develop his own "distinctive American Indian identity" maintained through Winnebago traditions and an embrace of the dominant White culture ultimately responsible for his death.⁷³

The tragic story of George Howard Johnson, and even the positive stories like the Carlisle football team and the Fort Shaw basketball team, failed to engender a positive future relationship between general White society and the indigenous populations they attempted to assimilate. The sad truth was White society never had any real desire to accept Indians as equals outside the realm of athletics. And the change in mentality towards assimilation at the beginning of the twentieth century, discussed earlier in this paper, only gained more momentum as the decades moved forward. This assimilation policy reflected an essential shift in America's social values in the mid twentieth century.

Hoxie argues that the pro-assimilation ideas of men like R. H. Pratt relied on the notion that "national institutions would dissolve cultural differences and foster equality and cohesion."⁷⁴ But this "optimism" faded with the growing belief among those in power that America was built on a "hierarchical view of society that emphasized the coexistence and interaction of diverse groups."⁷⁵

⁶⁵ Powers-Beck, "Winnebago Is a Great Nation!," pg. 81.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pg. 89.

⁶⁹ Ibid., pg. 98.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid. pg. 98.

⁷² Ibid., pg. 99

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Hoxie, *A Final Promise*, pg. 241.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Hoxie argues that the twentieth century defined racial groups based on their function to society; a method that preserves social order. Hoxie writes, “[The social reformers] organized a campaign to incorporate Indians into American life, and their goal – total assimilation – as a mirror of what they believed was possible” in the late nineteenth century.⁷⁶ However, by the 1920’s this quest for total assimilation ended, and many people in White society “accepted the marginal place that scientists, educators, and politicians had assigned to Native people.”⁷⁷

This new social concept assisted the development of future treatment of indigenous people at the hands of White society and the United States government in the twentieth century. Once again the ongoing power-struggle over Indian identity changed. Indians who sought equality through total assimilation were alienated both by their tribes and White society. And relegated to reservations, Indians who refused assimilation in the beginning suffered poverty and various hazards like alcoholism, abuse, and high mortality rates. But what did this mean to the athletes who sought a life in between assimilation and their inherited Native traditions? For many years, “race” became the defining factor in the way society identified Indian athletes. Jeffrey Powers-Beck makes the point in his fascinating analysis of baseball assimilation, *The Indian Integration of Baseball*, that “the first ballplayers of the twentieth century to hear “Nigger!” from the stands of Major League Stadiums were not African Americans but were Indians.”⁷⁸ Just like Jim Thorpe and Bemus Pierce heard headlines depicting them as the “red man” or “savage.”

However, although race defined perceptions of Indian athletes and although they constantly contended with racial slurs and hyperbolic stereotypes, sports managed to foster progressive race relations without the need for full assimilation or the loss of one’s identity. It was in sports that Jim Thorpe represented both his country and his race in the Olympics twelve years before Indians were granted citizenship. And although athletics are not idealized utopias where race has no impact, they still assisted Native athletes like Thorpe, Johnson, and the women of Fort Shaw, in defining their own identity.

Even today, sports represent one of the greatest sources for hope within Indian communities who are demoralized by epidemic levels of alcoholism, diabetes, domestic violence and mal-nutrition, and whose role with the US government and White society, still represents a struggle for identity. Compared with whites and other minority groups, Indians also have “extremely high teenage suicide rates, are more likely to get into fights at school...and have high rates of substance abuse” according to the Census Bureau.⁷⁹ Yet, athletics once again are providing young Native Americans with the opportunity to define both their identities and their futures.

In North Dakota, a teenage girl named Cheryl Ziegler living on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation became pregnant at 17, was treated for alcohol abuse and was failing almost all of her classes at school. After giving birth, Zeigler began boxing at the tribal gym, where she became connected with Ray Hawk, a trainer and organizer of the Native American Warriors Pro-Boxing Network. Since getting involved in boxing, Zeigler’s success in school has increased, she stopped drinking, and has begun the challenging task of defining who she is and what she wants her future to be. Will it be one that includes high school graduation and possibly community college? Or if Zeigler has her say, a professional boxing career?⁸⁰ Like Thorpe and the generations of Indian athletes that came before her, Zeigler and dozens of other Native Americans turned to athletics to provide a conduit of change in their lives, without forsaking their heritage or succumbing to an impoverished fate on a reservation.

For centuries the definition of what it meant to be a “real Indian” came from a White society who haphazardly manipulated or destroyed tribal customs and beliefs to suit its interests and to codify a defiant and highly complex network of Native individuals and nations into a controllable group of “inferior beings.” Those who refused the definition imposed on them by White society, more often than not, found themselves part of a vanishing culture struggling to survive on the inhospitable land of their reservations.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Powers-Beck, *The Indian Integration of Baseball*, pg. 2.

⁷⁹ Sarah Kershaw, “Crisis of Indian Children Intensifies as Families Fail,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 2005.

⁸⁰ Jeré Longman, “Punching Back Against Despair on the High Plains,” *The New York Times*, February 9, 2009.

Those who submitted to White identity pressures, often sat by and watched themselves be relegated to the margins of a society which used their relinquished “Indianness” to promote racial stereotypes and solidify them as backward children desperate for civilization and protection from extinction. But for Indian athletes like Thorpe and Johnson, or the new generation of athletes like Cheryl Ziegler, the tightrope walk between assimilation and resistance enabled their own definition of what it meant to be a “real Indian.” Their definitions differed with each person, yet all of them shared actions, motivations, and personal agency which defined their identity and as athletes challenged the perceptions of White society and its supposedly “superior” and dominant culture.

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