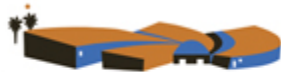


What's the Score? American Indians in Sports

Abstract:

Sports played a prominent role in the traditional life of most Indian communities. Games such as shinny, lacrosse, footracing, archery, swimming, hoop and pole, and various types of football all reinforced survival skills and community values. This exhibition presents a look at Native American sports through the years, including traditional, boarding school, reservation, and professional sports. Notable Indian athletes, local reservation teams, and heroes such as Cahuilla baseball player, John Tortes Meyers – catcher for the New York Giants – are spotlighted.



AGUA CALIENTE CULTURAL MUSEUM

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Introduction

Native Americans have a long tradition of sporting activities from trivial games to major sporting events. These games and events played an important role in teaching and reinforcing community values and had a strong connection to social, spiritual, and economic aspects of Indian life.

The popularity of non-Indian sports grew on and off Indian reservations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Native Americans quickly adapted to these sports, but also continued to play traditional sports like lacrosse. In southern California, reservation softball and baseball teams were intensely competitive,

drawing their respective communities to games for social interaction and entertainment. Many of these ball players have received recognition for their achievements on the field.

Cahuilla athletes such as John Meyers excelled in his position as catcher for both the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers. But, baseball was not the only sport in which local Indians played. Cahuilla people have distinguished themselves in both amateur and professional sports from golf to boxing.



William "Billy" Mills (Oglala Lakota) is the second Native American ever to be awarded an Olympic gold medal by winning the 10,000 meter race at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

Photo by Fred G. Braitsch, Jr. Used with permission from Stars and Stripes. © 1964, 2011 Stars and Stripes

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Traditional Significance of Sports

Native Americans have a long tradition of sporting activities from casual games to major events. Indian sports activities emphasized fair play. It was as important to perform with grace and integrity as it was to win. Betting on contests of skill was a deeply ingrained tradition for both participants and spectators.

Ritual significance was placed on traditional sports and their outcomes. Athletes prepared for major competitions through training, dietary practices, and spiritual preparation. Victory in a game could cause good weather or avert bad storms, bring good health or healing to the community, or perhaps fertility in human reproduction or abundant harvests. Usually ceremonial performances preceded the major games.

Traditional sports involved strong kinship ties and promoted total community support, thus many of the sports played were team games rather than individual games.

Sports were also an important part in the training of Indian children. The physical demands, strategies, and moral strengths required, were viewed as important virtues that would transfer to other life situations. Consequently, the lessons of sports were carefully taught.

Gambling on athletic competitions was a regular and universal practice for this continent's Natives. Betting, and the goods that were transferred, was a type of "reciprocal economics" in which the winnings were dispersed among the community and contributed to the greater good.



Sioux Ball Player, by George Catlin
Courtesy of the McCune Collection and photographer Ken Innes
www.mccunecollection.org

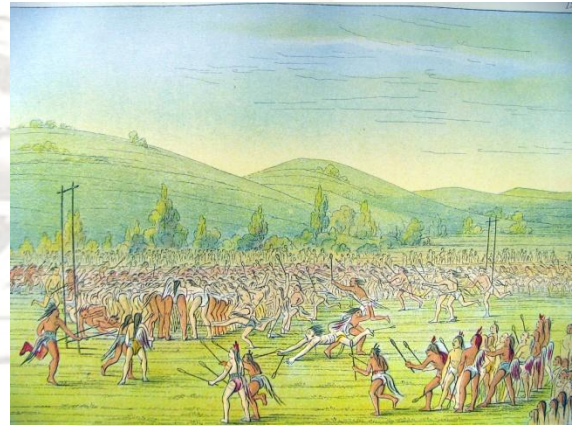
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Traditional Sports

Traditional sports played were shinny, lacrosse, footracing, archery, swimming, hoop and pole, and various types of football. Footraces have been among the most universal and popular of all Indian sports, and extraordinary running exploits have become legendary. Tribes throughout the continent placed importance on running for both enjoyment and utilitarian values such as war, trade, pursuit of game animals, and the delivery of messages. In traditional times running activities ranged from the informal play of children to the highly organized and ceremonial races of adults (both men and women), often involving the whole community. The Cahuilla played Shinny with two-man teams, kicking wooden balls for several miles and then back again.



*Stickball Game, by George Catlin
Courtesy of the McCune Collection and
photographer Ken Innes
www.mccunecollection.org*

From the times of the earliest contact with outsiders, Indians have continually astonished observers with their extraordinary running feats, especially in long-distance performances; this long standing tradition of running excellence still serves as a source of motivation and pride to Indian youth. Most Indians concentrated on and excelled in distance running rather than short races. Author J. Adair reported in 1775 that he and other non-Indians could compete favorably with the Indians in short races. In long races, however, he stated that “without any seeming toil, they would stretch on, leave us out of sight, and out-wind any horse.”

Some games were played in winter, some in summer, some at night, some by day. In one tribe, women might play a game exclusively, while for their neighbors it might be a men’s game.

Indians in traditional times used a variety of objects in different shapes and forms to play sports, including carved pieces of wood, stones, sticks, bones, and animal bladders. Ball games came in many forms and varieties for both men and women. The ball was usually propelled by being kicked, batted, or thrown with a racket or stick. Players were prevented from using their hands in some games.

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Trade and Traditional Sports

Trade not only facilitated the cultural exchange of religion, language, and material goods between tribes, it also made possible the exchange of games and sports. Once a new game or sport was acquired, a tribe would make adjustments in order to make the games their own. For instance, depending on supply, local materials were often used in place of “authentic” materials; or depending on which numbers were significant to a particular tribe, the number of participants who played, or the number of game pieces used may have changed.



Staves pieces. Staves is played with 2-8 players, 6 staves pieces, and 10-12 counting sticks. The object of the game is to get all the counting sticks. Players take turns tossing the staves pieces on the floor, and win counting sticks depending on how the pieces land.

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Colonialism – the Cultural Exchange of Sports

European colonists in the east eagerly adopted lacrosse, archery, shinney, canoeing, and several other Native games, while Indians welcomed card and table games. Throughout the southwest and the west coast, the spread and adoption of games and sports increased with the arrival of the Spanish. In California, one of the European card games embraced was called Monte. Card games became easily integrated into tribal culture due to their tradition of gaming.



Group of southern Utes playing Monte, circa 1900, by Frederic Remington
Courtesy of Frederic Remington Art Museum
(Public Library Collection)
www.fredericremington.org

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Boarding Schools

During the later half of the 19th century, Indian children were brought into public and boarding school systems to “civilize” or acculturate them. These schools were sponsored by the federal or state

government, missionary groups, tribal, and other organizations. Most were established in order to assimilate Indians into the dominant society and erase all aspects of Indian traditional life, including language, religion, appearance, and even games.

Athletic programs were viewed as an integral part of their adaption into the dominant culture. For most Indian children, school provided their first exposure to baseball, basketball, and football.

Most Indian school’s physical activities were limited to formal exercise well into the 20th century. However, two Indian schools attained early acclaim in the area of athletics. These were the Indian Training School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and the Haskell Institute (now the Haskell Indian Junior College) in Lawrence, Kansas. Athletes were actively recruited to Carlisle and Haskell in the belief that a prominent sport program would reflect well on the institution and would also attract talented students in other areas. Student athletes were recruited from as far away as the Sherman Institute for Indians in Riverside, California. Students were taught baseball, soccer, football, and formal track events. Indian youth proved to be enthusiastic participants.



Students of the Sherman Institute, a Native American boarding school in Riverside, CA, pose for a picture on this 1919 postcard
Courtesy Agua Caliente Cultural Museum



Postcard verse reads:
“I taught this group of Indians at Sherman Institute in Riverside, Calif. 1/20/19 – 2/20/19. Ezra Neff”
Courtesy of Agua Caliente Cultural Museum

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Boarding School Sports

Carlisle School

The first formal football competition at Carlisle School began in 1893. In 1897 Carlisle had six wins and four losses, and in 1898 had five wins and four losses. This unexpected success against the nation's best football teams led to a great deal of national recognition for the Carlisle School.

The School's most famous alumnus is Jim Thorpe (Sac-Fox), who was considered one of the most versatile athletes in modern sports.



Carlisle students exercising in the school gym, 1879

Courtesy Smithsonian Institute National Anthropological Archives. Photographic Lot 81-12 06843300

Haskell Institute

Haskell teams played nearly every famous team in the nation and won a majority of the games. The 1944 football team won all its games and the 1946 team won all but one. Boxing emerged as a prominent sport at Haskell and many championships were won in amateur competition; among these was the National Championship in Golden Gloves, won by Chester Ellis in 1939. Famous alumni from Haskell Institute include Olympic gold medalist Billy Mills and New York Yankee John Levi.

The coming together of Indian youth from different tribes at boarding schools marked a new phase in Indian relations. Indian groups had lived separately before the schools were established and had competed against each other in games or in social strife. But now combined Indian teams competed against non-Indians on a regular basis and led to the success of the boarding school teams. The spirit of the Indian community was lifted by these successes.

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Reservation Sports

There were and still are teams on almost all Indian Reservations throughout the country. California tribal teams can boast a strong number of players that have gone on to play on professional teams.

One such Cahuilla player was “Chief” Meyers (Santa Rosa, Cahuilla), who played on reservation teams before joining

the major leagues. John Joseph Andreas (Agua Caliente,

Cahuilla), a contemporary of Meyers, probably competed against him in those same Indian leagues. Andreas was patriarch of three generations of Indian ballplayers. His son Anthony Andreas starred as shortstop and pitcher for the Morongo Reservation all-Indian team which traveled around inland southern California and Arizona, playing in the desert heat while wearing the heavy wool uniforms of their time.

John Joseph’s grandsons, John Damon Andreas and Anthony Andreas, Jr., both played on reservation teams. John got his start in a boys’ summer league sponsored by the Agua Caliente Reservation. Scouted by the Chicago White Sox and Los Angeles Dodgers while in high school, John never made it to the major leagues but taught baseball fundamentals to youngsters in and around the Banning area.

In southern California today, baseball and softball reservation tournaments take place all year round. Reservations such as Pala, Pauma, Soboba, Morongo, and Torres Martinez often host weekend competitions which bring together extended family and old friends. It is a time for food, fun, and shared cultural identity.



Warner’s Ranch baseball team. San Diego County, early 1900’s

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Race Issues and Sports

Half a decade before Jackie Robinson stepped onto a Major League field, Louis Sockalexis (Penobscot) and a few other Native Americans played for Major League teams and endured racism and harassment from fans, the media, and opposing players. Author, Native American (Lumbee), and former professional baseball player Joseph B. Oxendine, Ph.D. stated that “the entry of Indians into Major League Baseball initiated the race/sport issue. Despite performing with distinction while being recognized and treated as minorities, Indian players have received scant recognition” neither for breaking racial barriers nor for helping to desegregate baseball.



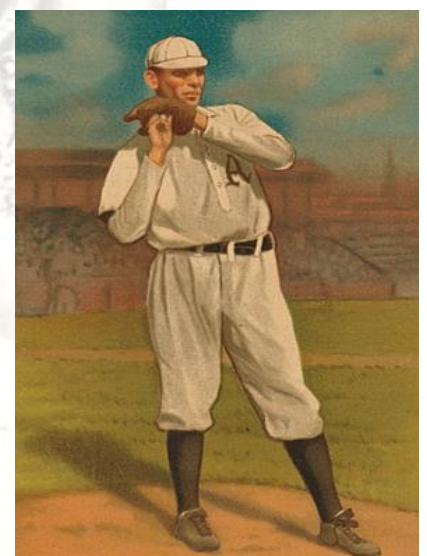
Louis Sockalexis (Penobscot)

In the first half of the 20th century, Native American players were accosted with racial slurs bestowed on Indians at that time, and those Indians with darker skin tones were subjected to racial slurs used against African Americans as well. Because of this, many American Indian professional baseball players downplayed their Native identity in order to avoid this abuse. Often times Native American players, such as Charles A. “Chief” Bender (Chippewa), cut their careers short because of the emotional anguish they had to endure due to constant harassment.

While racist comments and harassment of black players subsided around the time of the Civil Rights movement, stereotypes of Indians were viewed as neither mean nor negative by the general public. By the later-20th century, the general public’s attitude toward Native Americans as individuals began to change, but as a group, team mascots, logos, and names depicted a negative representation of Native Americans as either silly or warlike, or as people who were both foreign and somehow removed from our present day society.

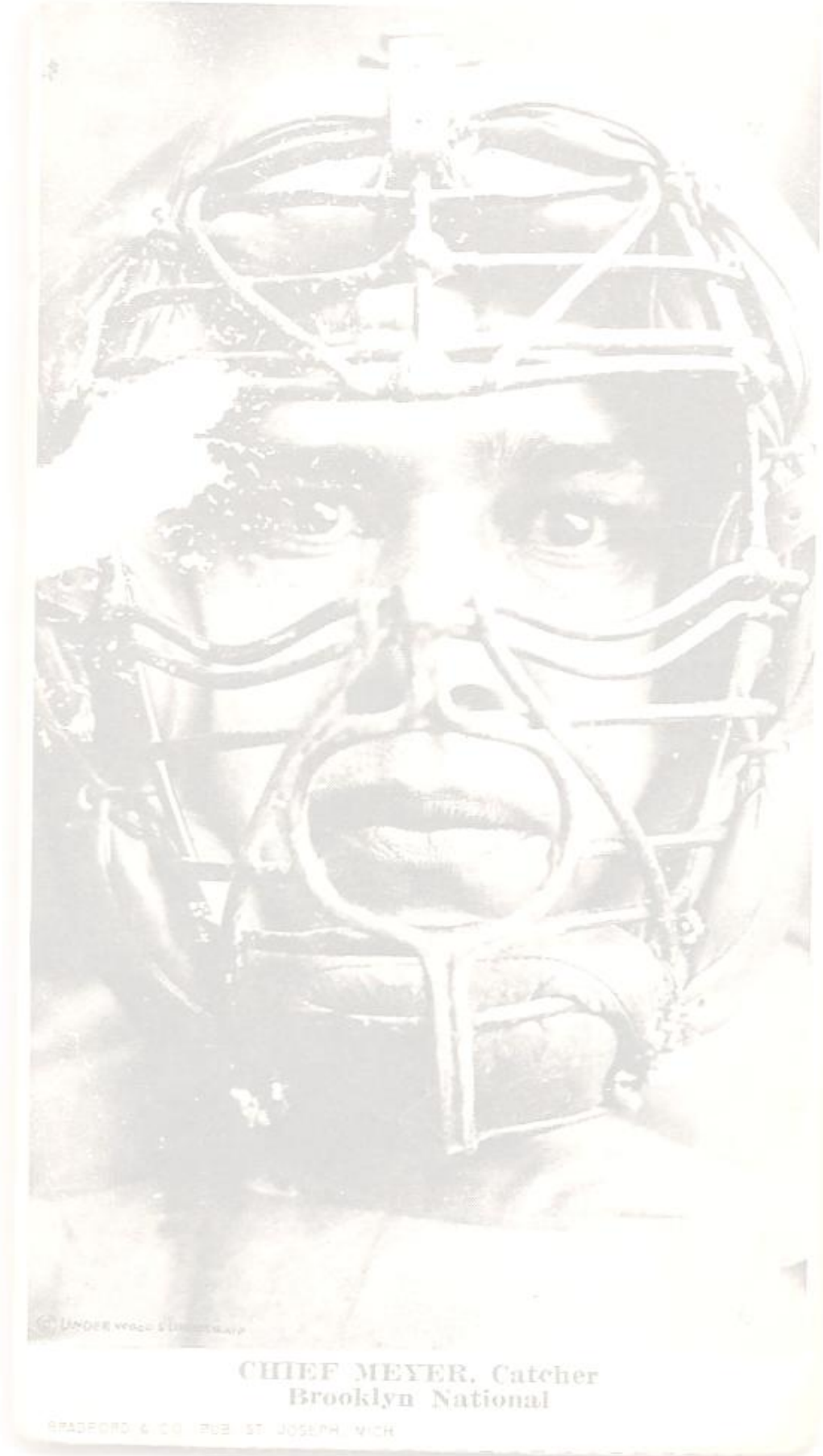
In recent decades, many colleges and public schools have become aware of the impact of stereotyping and have taken measures to correct it.

Locally, Palm Springs High School (Palm Springs Indians) has gained Tribal



Charles A. “Chief” Bender (Chippewa) on a 1911 baseball card
Courtesy Library of Congress

approval for their Indian mascot to remain.



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Famous Cahuilla Athletes

From the earliest times to the present day, athletic endeavors have remained an important part of Native American identity. Agua Caliente tribal members have received recognition in sports such as track and field, golf, bowling, basketball, softball, volleyball, baseball, and football. In the late 19th century, Lee Arenas (Agua Caliente) was known as a star track athlete. He is said to have once outrun a horse-drawn buckboard in an eight-mile race through the desert from the train station to Palm Springs. Philip Welmas (Cupa/Pala Reservation) played football at Carlisle Industrial Indian School in Pennsylvania with Jim Thorpe. He played four games with the Oorang Indians for the 1923 season in the early National Football League. The Cahuilla have produced three professional baseball players: Leroy Alvarez, Mickey Mallory, and, the most famous Cahuilla Athlete – John Meyers.



Philip Welmas (Cupa/Pala Reservation) in football uniform at Carlisle Indian Industrial School, circa 1910
Courtesy of Renona Pennington

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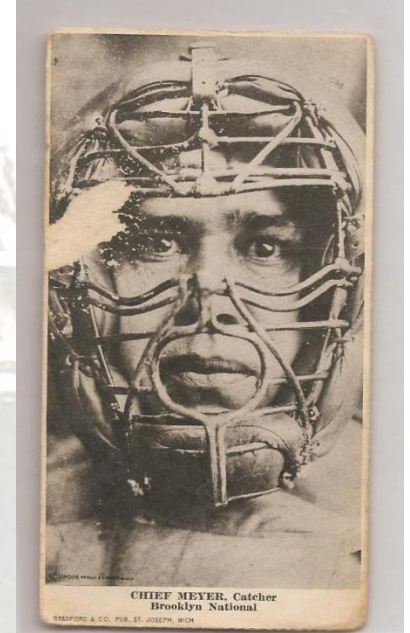
“Chief” John Tortes Meyers

The most famous Cahuilla baseball player “Chief” John Tortes Meyers, commonly known as “Jack”, was born July 29, 1880. His family moved from the Santa Rosa Reservation to Riverside when he was about 12 years old. Prior to the 1890s, practically all Indian participation in non-Indian sports was restricted to boarding schools. By the late 1890s, Meyers’ talent stood out when playing baseball for Riverside High School. After high school, he caught for various semi-pro teams, playing on reservation, town, and company teams around southern California and the Southwest. In 1909 he was the first Cahuilla accepted at Dartmouth College where his athletic abilities caught the attention of major league teams.

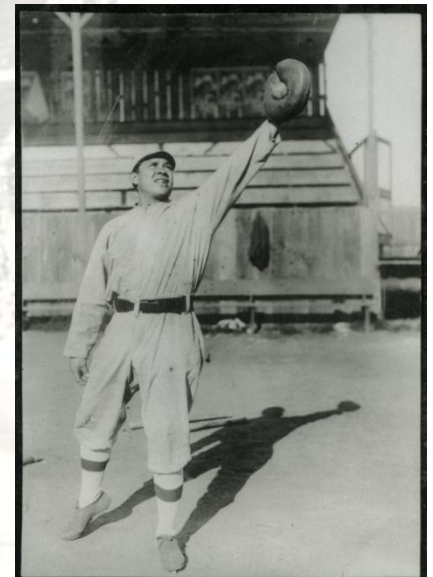
Meyers earned the starting catcher position for the New York Giants and was pitcher Christy Mathewson’s regular batterymate from 1910 through 1915. In 1910, baseball became the “official” national pastime when President William H. Taft participated in a new American ritual: the head of state throwing out the first pitch to open the season. Meyers batted .332 in 1911, .358 in 1912, and .312 in 1913. The Giants won the National League pennant in each of those years.

“Chief” Meyers became known by teammates and opponents alike as best all-around catcher in the major leagues. Meyers and Babe Ruth were friends, even trading bats on one occasion. When Meyers was Olympian Jim Thorpe’s roommate in New York, another Native American by the name of “Chief” Charles Albert Bender (Chippewa) was pitching brilliantly for the Philadelphia Athletics. Fans applauded “Chief” George Howard Johnson (Winnebago), another Indian pitcher, who worked in both the National and Federal leagues.

Meyers still holds the major league record for most assists (12) in a six-game World Series in 1911. His overall batting average was .291, he earned three “Iron Man” titles, and was placed on Albert Spaulding’s Grand National All-American Baseball Team. He was traded to Brooklyn in 1916 and promptly wound up behind the plate in a fourth World Series,



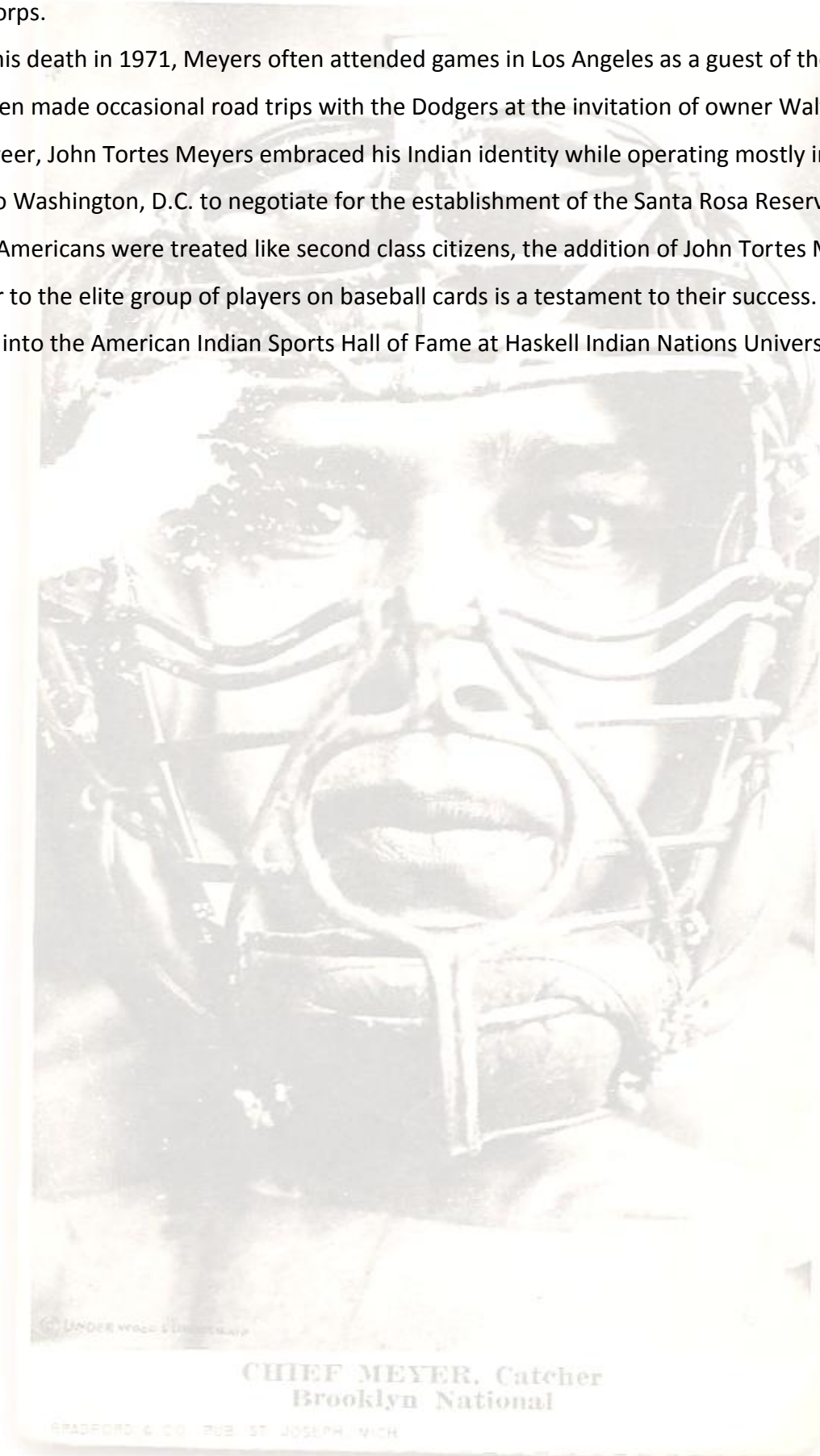
John “Chief” Meyers (Santa Rosa Cahuilla) baseball card



John Meyers
Courtesy of Shanna Meyers

catching for the Dodgers. His career ended when the United States entered World War I and Meyers joined the Marine Corps.

Until his death in 1971, Meyers often attended games in Los Angeles as a guest of the Dodgers and the Angels. He even made occasional road trips with the Dodgers at the invitation of owner Walter O'Malley. During his career, John Tortes Meyers embraced his Indian identity while operating mostly in a white world. He traveled to Washington, D.C. to negotiate for the establishment of the Santa Rosa Reservation. At a time when Native Americans were treated like second class citizens, the addition of John Tortes Meyers and Charles Albert Bender to the elite group of players on baseball cards is a testament to their success. In 1972 Meyers was inducted into the American Indian Sports Hall of Fame at Haskell Indian Nations University in Kansas.



Jim Thorpe

Jacob "Jim" Francis Thorpe (Sac-Fox) is considered one of the most versatile athletes in modern sports. He began playing football for the Indian Training School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania in 1907. This team earned a record of ten wins and only one loss, beating such teams as Harvard, Syracuse, Villanova, and the Universities of Chicago, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania. From 1906 to 1913 Carlisle Indian School ranked no less than fifth in the national rankings.

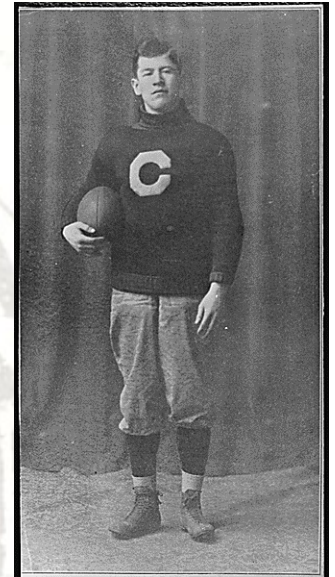
Jim Thorpe achieved First Team All-American status both in 1911 and 1912. In one often reported incident during the 1912 season against the Army Team at West Point, he returned a kickoff the full length of the field for a touchdown only to have the play nullified because of a rule infraction. Army was again forced to kick off and once again Thorpe received the ball and ran the full length of the field for a touchdown, which counted. Dwight Eisenhower, the future president, played for the Army team.

Thorpe earned varsity letters in eleven different sports at Carlisle. His letters were earned in boxing, wrestling, lacrosse, gymnastics, swimming, hockey, handball, and basketball. He also excelled in golf, bowling, rowing, and billiards.

Although the football team at Carlisle received much greater public attention, the track and field team was no less impressive. During the years 1910-1912, Jim Thorpe often won five events, Louis Tewanema usually won the two long distance events, and Joe Guyon won one or two sprints. The track program received little attention prior to Thorpe and Tewanema's success at the 1912 Olympic Games.

At the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm, Sweden, Jim Thorpe won the Pentathlon. The five events held in one day were the 200 meter dash, the 1500 meter run, the broad jump, the discus throw, and the javelin. A perfect score would have been 5 – Thorpe scored 7. Second place came in with a score of 21! Thorpe also won the Decathlon. His total score was nearly 700 points more than the second place finisher. His score was not surpassed until 1932.

Thorpe's Olympic Gold Medals were revoked the following year because he had played minor league baseball in North Carolina prior to the Olympic Games, which according to the *Worcester Telegram* voided his amateur standing. In 1983, after his death, replicas of his medals were given to his family.



Jim Thorpe (Sac-Fox) in his Carlisle football uniform, later went on to be the first president of the National Football League in 1920

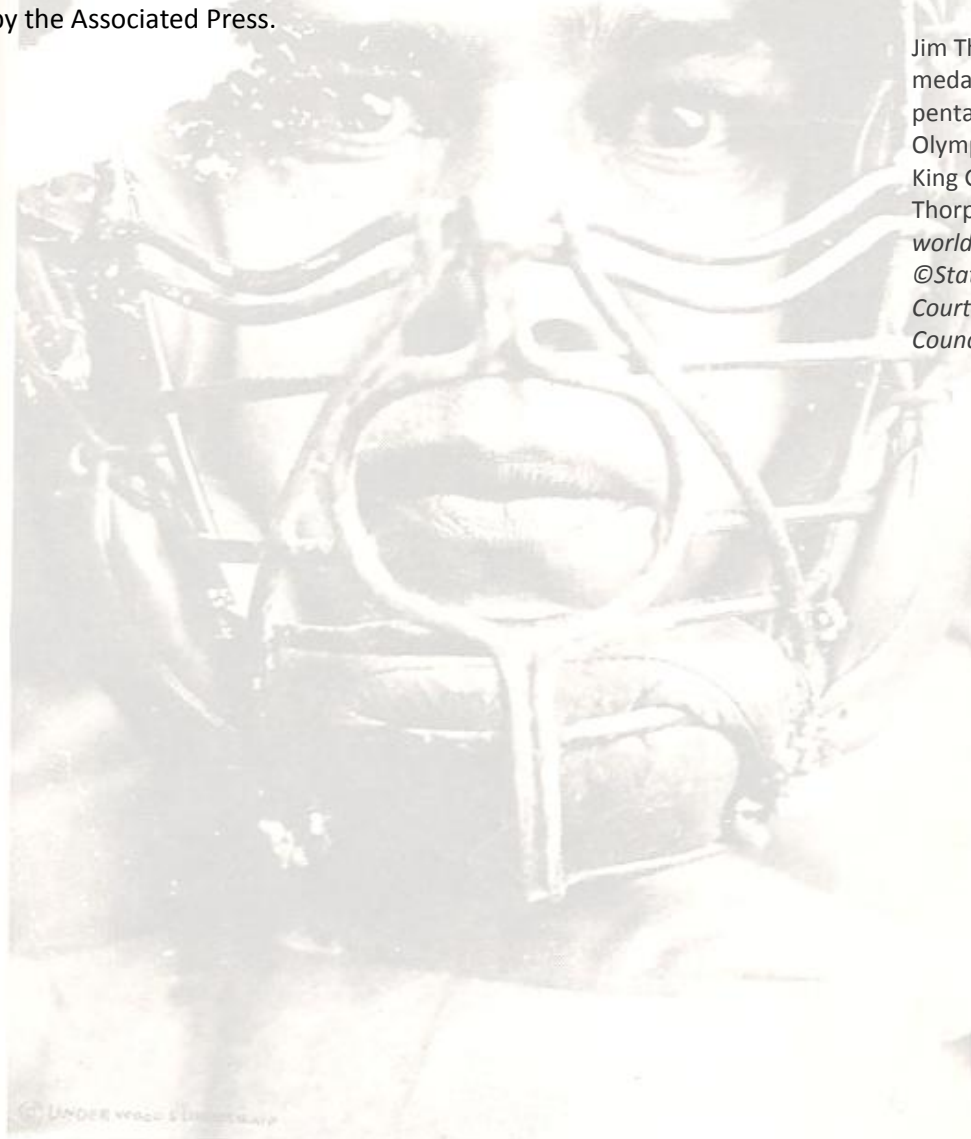
Jim Thorpe later went on to become the first president of the National Football League in 1920. He also became an advocate of American Indian's rights, advocating the return of Indian lands, equal pay for Indians, and access to oil revenues.

"Thorpe was a proud man. Not conceited, he was never that. But proud. I remember very late one night Jim came in and woke me up. I remember it like it was only last night. He was crying and tears were rolling down his cheeks. 'You know, Chief,' he said, 'the King of Sweden gave me those trophies, he gave them to me. But they took them away from me... They're mine, Chief, I won them fair and square.' It broke his heart and he never really recovered" (John Meyers, 1966).

In 1950, Jim Thorpe was given the title of the *Greatest Athlete in the First Half of the 20th Century* by the Associated Press.



Jim Thorpe (Sac-Fox) won gold medals in the decathlon and pentathlon in the 1912 Olympic Games in Sweden. King Gustav V of Sweden told Thorpe, "You, sir, are the world's greatest athlete" ©State of Oklahoma, Photo Courtesy of the Oklahoma Arts Council



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Revitalizing Traditional Sports

There is a movement amongst many tribal peoples in the United States to revitalize their culture; they are recovering their language, songs, stories, land management, among others. Traditional games and sports are part of this cultural revival. Hoop-and-pole, peon, kayaking, and several other games and sports are beginning to be reintroduced, especially to the younger generations.



Children playing staves at a *Kids Explore!* class at the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum

