

Jim Thorpe's Bright Path

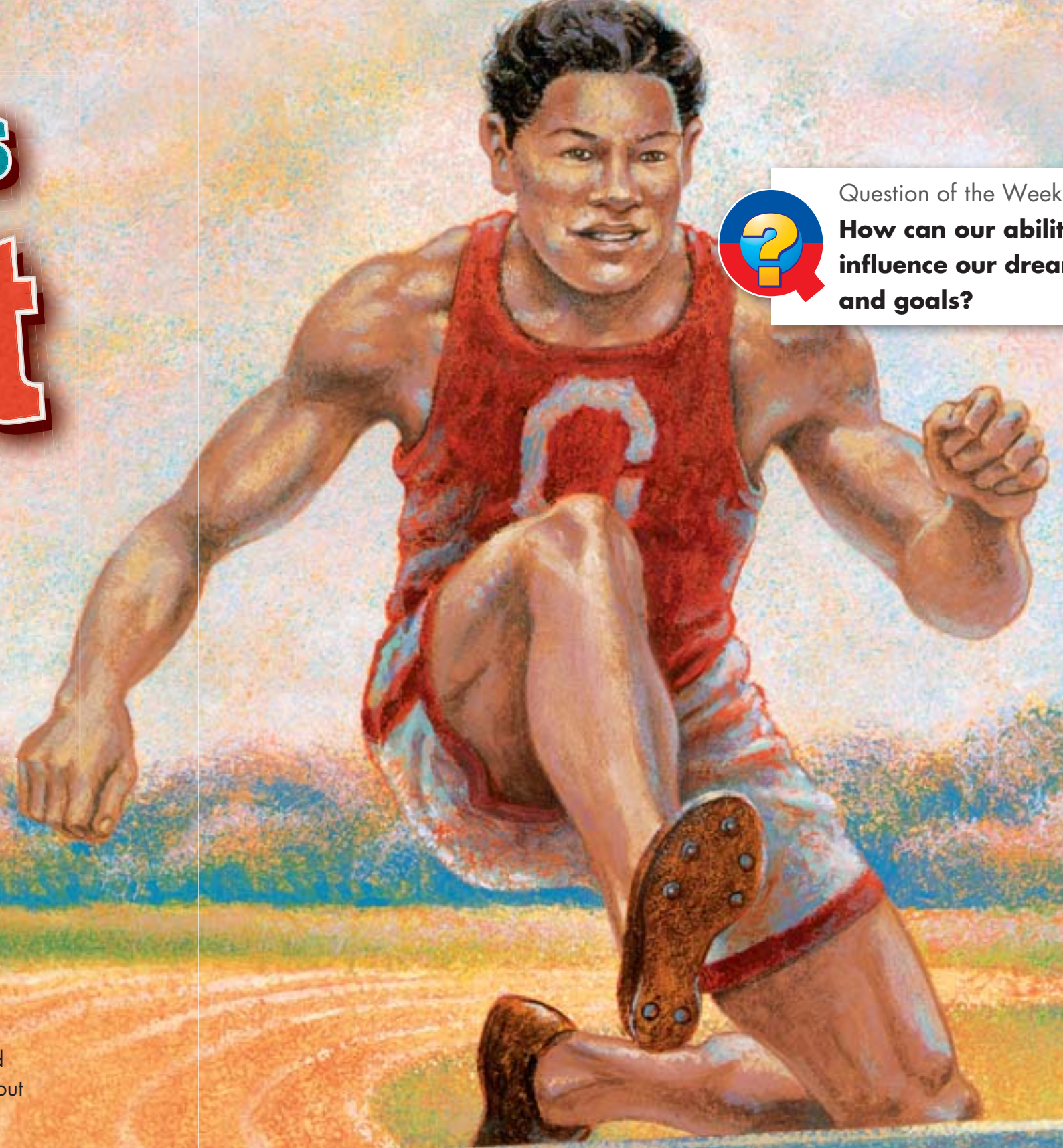
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Genre

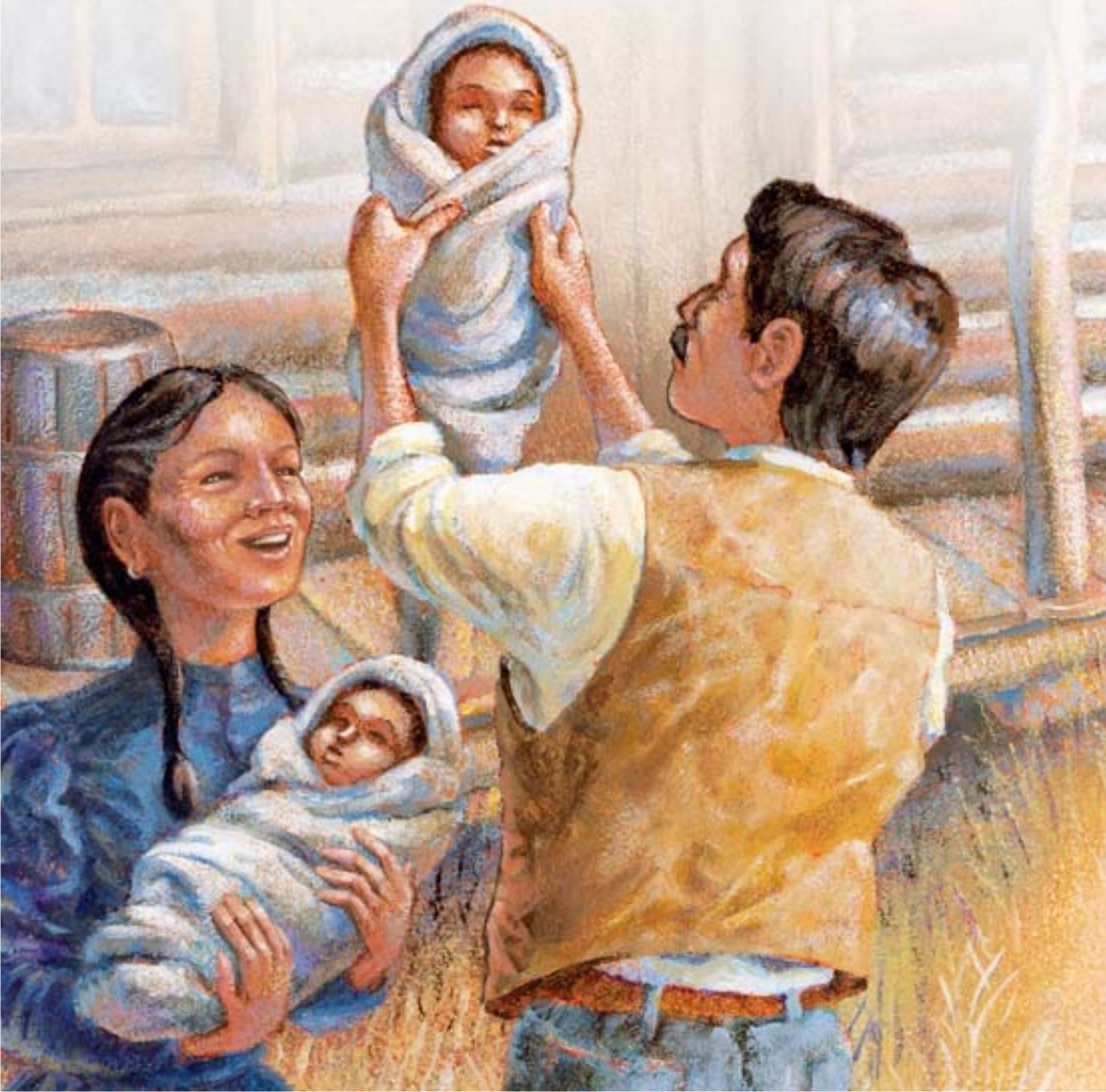
A **biography** is the story of a real person's life as told by someone else. As you read this biography, think about why the author chose to write about this athlete.



Question of the Week
How can our abilities influence our dreams and goals?



They say Jim Thorpe's story began in May of 1887 in a small log cabin on the North Canadian River. There in the Indian Territory that became the state of Oklahoma, Charlotte Vieux Thorpe, a Pottowatomie woman, gave birth to twin boys. Her husband, Hiram, a mixed-blood Indian of the Sac and Fox nation, stood close by on that spring day.



The sun was in Hiram Thorpe's heart as he looked down at the sons he named Charles and James. Jim's mother gave him another name.

"Wa-tho-huck," she said, thinking of how the light shone on the road to their cabin. "Bright Path."

As good as that name was, neither of them knew just how far that path would lead their son.

Like most twins, Jim and Charlie were close, even though they were not exactly the same. Charlie had darker skin and brown hair, while Jim's skin was light and his hair dark black. When they raced or wrestled, Jim was always a little ahead of Charlie, his best friend. Whenever Jim got too far ahead, he would stop and wait.

"Come on, Charlie," he would say with a grin.

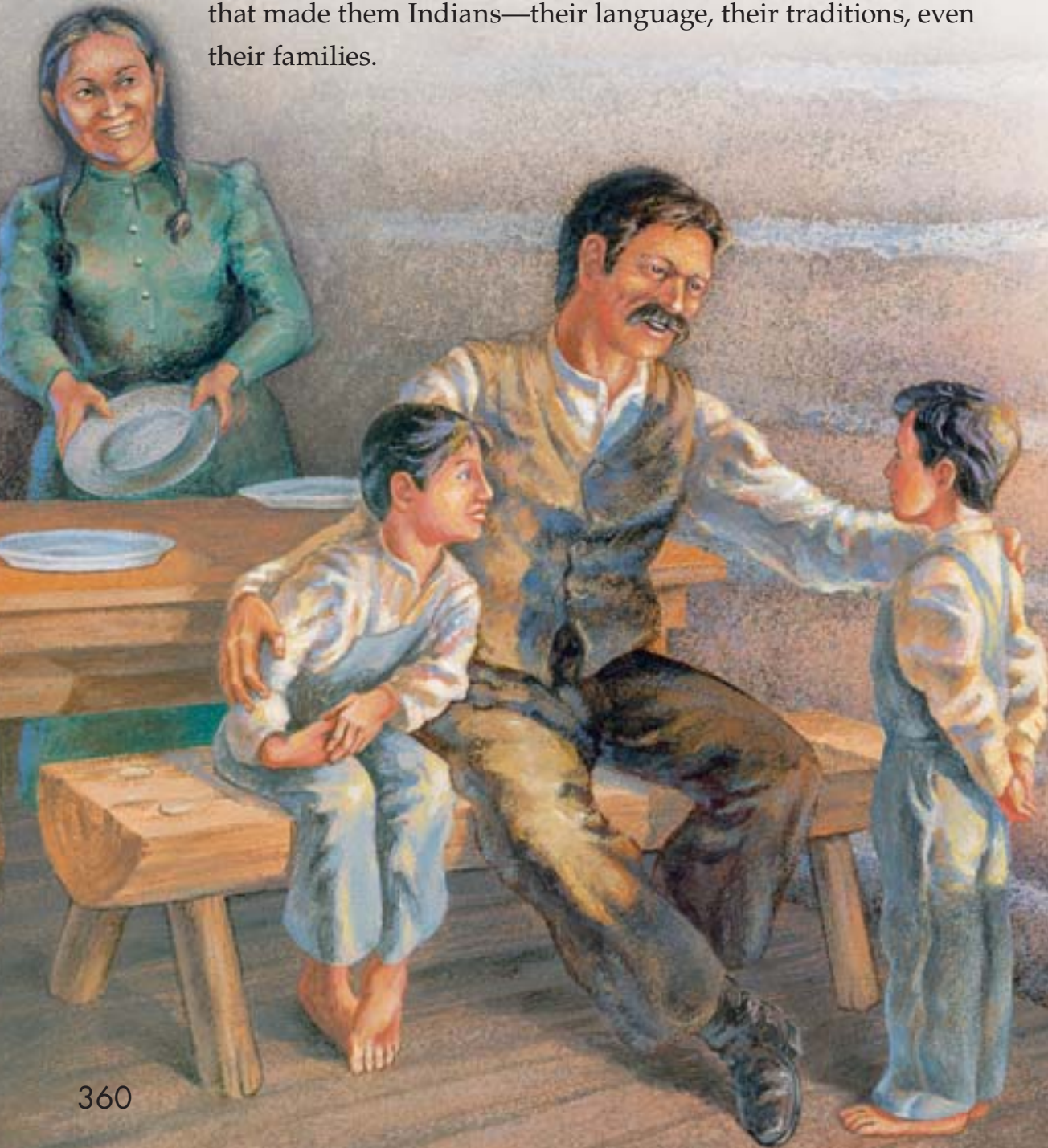
Then, when his brother caught up, they would be off again.

Summer or winter, Jim and Charlie's favorite place was outdoors. They roamed the prairies, swam, and played together. By the time they were three, Pa Thorpe had taught his boys to ride a horse. He showed them how to shoot a bow, set a trap, and hunt. Jim took to it all like a catfish takes to a creek. Although small, he was quick and tough. He was so fast and had so much **endurance**

that he could run down a rabbit on foot. When it came to the old ways, those skills that made the men of the Sac and Fox great providers for their families, Jim was a great learner. By the time the twins were six, Pa Thorpe said Jim knew more about the woods than many men.



Their sixth year also brought a big change for Jim and Charlie. The Indian Agency that oversaw the reservation said that when Sac and Fox children reached age six, they had to go to the Agency Boarding School. Indian boarding schools did not provide the same education offered to whites. In addition the boarding schools were designed to cut them off from everything that made them Indians—their language, their traditions, even their families.

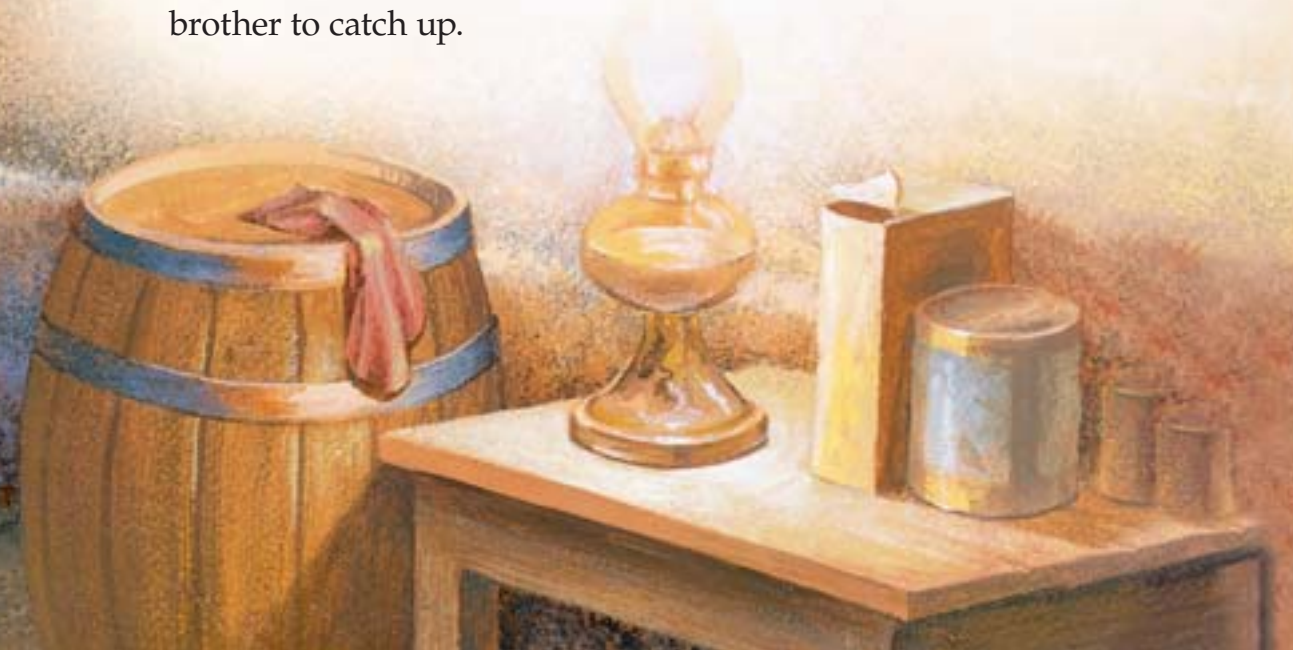


Jim's father had become one of the few Sac and Fox men who could read and write English. He'd seen uneducated Indians cheated out of everything by dishonest men who tricked the Indians into signing papers they could not read.

"My sons," he said to Jim and Charlie, "you need white man's knowledge to survive."

It was no surprise that Jim hated school. He had to wear awful clothes—a heavy wool suit, a felt cap, tight shoes, a shirt and necktie that strangled him. He also got smacked hard across his knuckles with a wooden ruler whenever he spoke a word of Sac. He missed Ma's cooking and Pa's stories about their clan ancestor, Chief Black Hawk, the famous warrior who had fought the whites to defend his people. Worst of all, school kept Jim inside all day and locked him up all night in a cold dormitory away from the forest and prairies. It made him feel like a fox caught in an iron trap. Jim didn't care about what school might do for him or his people. He just wanted to get away from it.

Charlie was better at his studies than Jim. He didn't seem to mind the military discipline or being stuck at a desk. Solving an arithmetic problem was a challenge to Charlie the way winning a race was to Jim. Now it was Charlie who was waiting for his brother to catch up.





“Come on, Jim,” Charlie said. “Don’t give up. You can do it.”

So, Jim tried to master basic arithmetic, reading, and writing. Then, in his third year of school, something happened that broke his heart.

Sickness often struck the crowded, unheated dormitories of the Indian boarding schools. Sanitation was poor, and there were no real doctors to tend the sick. Epidemics of influenza swept through like prairie fires. Even common childhood diseases such as measles and whooping cough could be fatal to the Indian children jammed together in those schools.

Charlie was one of those who became sick. He caught pneumonia and died. Jim felt as if the sunlight had gone from his life. His twin brother had been his best friend.

Jim’s mother tried to comfort her son, but he was inconsolable. He would never hear Charlie’s encouraging voice again. The thought of going back to school without his brother tore at Jim’s heart.

“Let me work around the farm, Pa,” Jim begged.

His father, though, was sure he knew what was best.

“Son,” he said, “you have to get an education. Charlie would have wanted you to keep learning.”

Jim tried to listen to his father, but when he returned to school and saw the empty cot where Charlie had slept, it was too much for him. As soon as the teacher’s back was turned, Jim ran the twenty-three miles back home, straight as an arrow.

Pa Thorpe had no choice but to send his stubborn son even farther away. So young Jim, at age eleven, was sent to Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas, almost three hundred miles away.

Haskell was stricter than the Agency Boarding School. There children from more than eighty tribes were dressed in military uniforms and were awakened before dawn with a bugle call. **Manual** training was mixed with classroom studies to teach them trades useful to white **society**. Hard work was the rule, and the students of Haskell did it all—growing corn, making bread, building wagons, and sewing their own uniforms.

Jim did better at Haskell. He worked in the engineering shop. Learning how things were made was more interesting than being cooped up in a classroom.

Plus Haskell had something the Agency Boarding School didn’t have—football. For the first time in his life, Jim saw a football game. The cheers of the crowd and the athleticism of the players wakened something deep inside Jim, the same emotions that had been stirred by Pa’s stories of Black Hawk and the other warriors who had fought for their people. Jim knew right away that football was something he wanted to play.





But Jim was too small for the sport. He was less than five feet tall and weighed just one hundred pounds. He joined the track team instead and became one of the fastest runners. Meanwhile, he watched every football game he could. Jim also met Chauncy Archiquette, Haskell's best football player, who taught him about the game. Chauncy even helped Jim make a little football out of scrap leather stuffed with rags. With that football Jim organized games with other boys too small for the school team.

Near the end of his second year at Haskell, Jim got word that his father had been shot in a hunting accident and was dying. Jim's only thought was that he had to get home. He ran off and headed south. It took him two weeks to reach their farm. To his surprise, Pa was there, recovered from his wound and waiting.

"We knew you were coming home," his father said, embracing him.

Jim never went back to Haskell. Shortly after he returned home, his mother died of a sudden illness. Jim grieved over the loss of his mother, and Pa Thorpe finally agreed that his son did not have to go back to boarding school.

Jim's father believed his son still needed education, so Jim began attending school nearby in Garden Grove. At Garden Grove, students were learning about a new thing called electricity. Electricity could make it seem as if the sun were still shining, even at night. The thought of that appealed to Jim. Electrical sunlight could be brought to Indian homes too. Pa Thorpe had always told Jim that education would give him the ability to help his people. Maybe becoming an electrician was the bright path he was supposed to follow.

One day a recruiter from the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania came to Garden Grove. Carlisle was always looking for Indian students who were good athletes, and the recruiter had heard of Jim's success as a runner at Haskell.

"Would you like to be a Carlisle man?" the recruiter asked.

"Can I study electricity there?" Jim said.

"Of course," the recruiter replied, even though Carlisle offered no such course.

Something else also attracted Jim to Carlisle—sports. Carlisle was one of the most well-known of the Indian boarding schools. Everyone knew about the school and its amazing record of

winning sports teams. The Carlisle Indians even beat teams from the big, famous colleges. At Carlisle, Jim thought, he could play football.

Pa Thorpe urged Jim to seize the opportunity. Somehow he knew Carlisle would be the first step on a trail that would lead his son to greatness.

"Son," he said, "you are an Indian. I want you to show other races what an Indian can do."

Soon after Jim arrived at Carlisle, he received bad news. His father had been bitten by a snake while working in his fields and had died of blood poisoning. The man who had fought so hard to force his son to get an education was gone.

Already a quiet person, Jim retreated further into silence after his father's death. But he did not desert Carlisle. Perhaps, Jim felt the best way to remember his father was to live the dream Pa Thorpe had for him. It was now up to Jim to push himself.



The Carlisle system of sending new students off campus for work experience helped. Jim ended up at a farm in New Jersey. The farm labor reminded him of the many hours he had spent working by Pa's side in Oklahoma. Jim worked so hard and with such quiet confidence that everyone saw him as a man they could like and trust. To his delight, Jim was made foreman, head of all the workers.

When Jim came back to Carlisle in the fall, he was no longer a boy. He had grown taller, stronger, more self-assured. He was ready to play football, but he knew it would not be easy. Carlisle's famous coach Pop Warner would only allow the best to join his track squad or his football team as one of his "Athletic Boys."

One day Jim's big chance came. He was on his way to play a game of scrub football with some of his friends who were too small for the school team. As Jim crossed the field, he saw a group of varsity athletes practicing the high jump.

Jim asked if he could have a try, even though he was wearing overalls and an old pair of work shoes. The Athletic Boys snickered as they reset the bar for him. They placed it higher than anyone at Carlisle had ever jumped. Even in his work clothes, Jim cleared the bar on his first jump. No one could believe it. People stood around with their mouths wide open, staring. Jim just grinned and walked off to play football with his friends.



The next day Jim was told to report to the office of Coach Warner. Everyone knew Pop Warner was a great coach, but he was also a man with a bad temper. Jim wondered if Pop was going to yell at him for interrupting track practice.

"Do you know what you've done?" Pop Warner growled.

"Nothing bad, I hope," Jim said.

"Bad?" Pop Warner said. His face broke into a smile. "Boy, you've just broken the school record. Go down to the clubhouse and exchange those overalls for a track outfit. You're on my track team now."

Before long Jim Thorpe was Carlisle's best track athlete. He competed in the high jump, hurdles, and dashes, winning or placing in all of them. Still, Jim wanted to play football. Reluctantly Pop Warner told him he could give it a try.

Pop Warner didn't like the idea of his slender high jumper being injured in a football game, so he decided to discourage Jim by beginning his first practice with a tackling drill. Jim, the

newcomer, had to take the ball and try to run from one end to the other, through the whole varsity team.

"Is that all?" Jim said. He looked at the football in his hands. It was the first time he'd ever held a real football, but he believed in himself. Then he took off down the field like a deer. He was past half the team before the players even saw him coming. At the other end Jim looked back. Behind him was the whole Carlisle team, the players holding nothing in their hands but air.

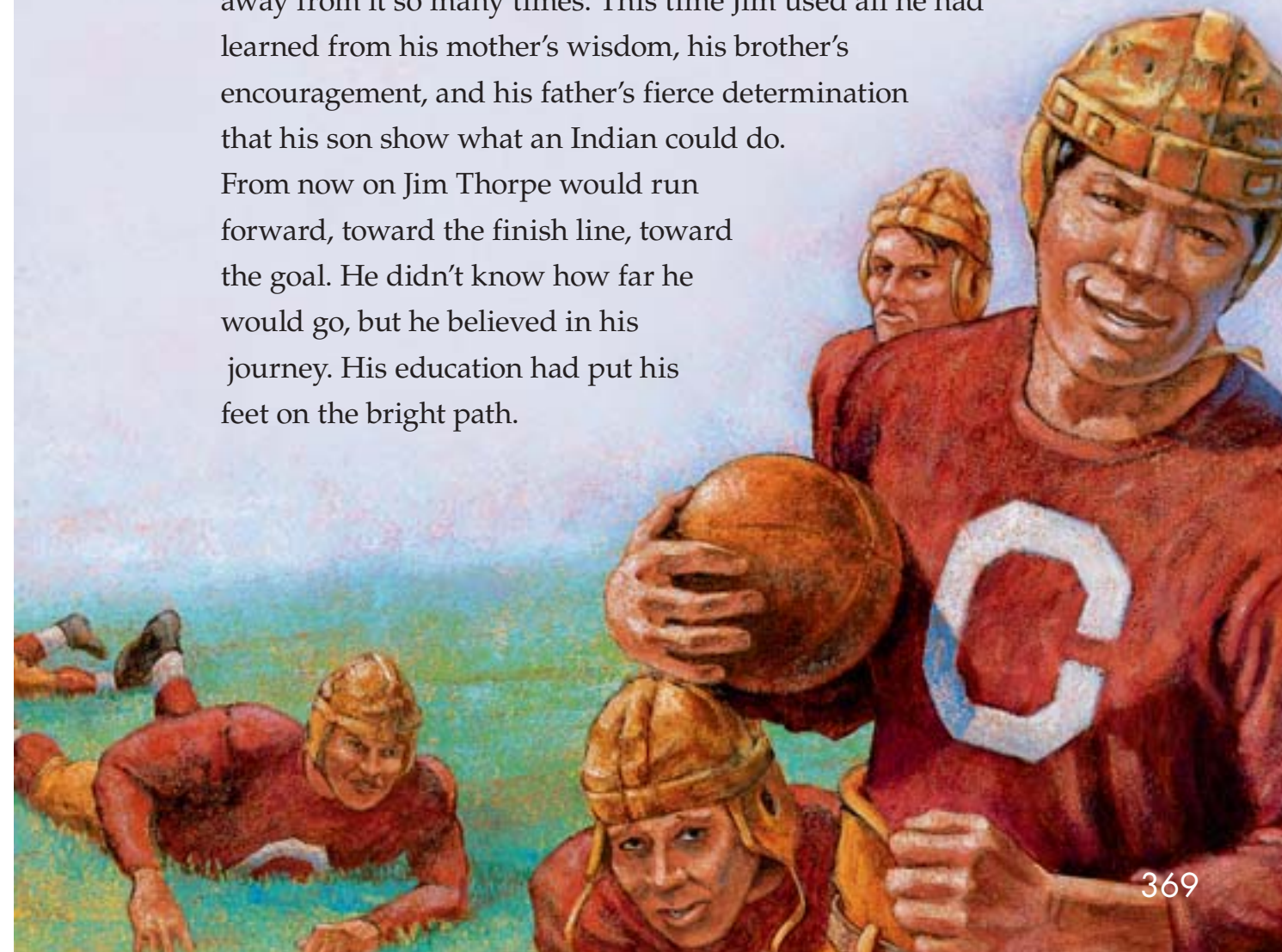


There was a grin on Jim's face when he handed Coach Warner the ball.

"Doggone it," Pop Warner said. "You're supposed to give the first team tackling practice, not run through them." Pop Warner slammed the ball back into Jim's belly. "Do it again."

Jim's jaw was set as he ran the Carlisle gauntlet a second time. He was carrying not just a football, but the hopes and dreams of his family, his people, and all the Indians who had been told they could never compete with the white man. Tacklers bounced off Jim as he lowered his shoulders. No one stopped him. The sun shone around him as he stood in the end zone.

For years Jim had fought against his education. He had run away from it so many times. This time Jim used all he had learned from his mother's wisdom, his brother's encouragement, and his father's fierce determination that his son show what an Indian could do. From now on Jim Thorpe would run forward, toward the finish line, toward the goal. He didn't know how far he would go, but he believed in his journey. His education had put his feet on the bright path.



Important Dates in Jim Thorpe's Life and Legacy

1887* James Francis Thorpe and twin brother, Charles, born on Sac and Fox Indian Reservation along North Canadian River in Oklahoma, May 28



Jim, left, and Charlie, age 3

- 1893** Enters Agency Boarding School with Charlie
- 1896** Charlie dies of pneumonia
- 1898** Arrives at Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas
- 1902*** Charlotte Thorpe (mother) dies; begins attending school in Garden Grove, Oklahoma
- 1904** Enters United States Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania; Hiram Thorpe (father) dies

*Date cited obtained from Thorpe family or most reliable sources

- 1907-1912** Plays college football
- 1909-1910** Plays minor league baseball
- 1911, 1912** Named First Team All American Halfback at Carlisle
- 1912** Wins gold medals in Pentathlon and Decathlon at Summer Olympic Games in Stockholm, Sweden



Original Olympic gold medals

1913 Stripped of Olympic medals and name removed from record books for playing minor league professional baseball



1913-1919 Plays major league baseball

1915-1929 Plays professional football

1917 Becomes a United States citizen

1920 Elected first president of American Professional Football Association (now National Football League)

1922 Forms Oorang Indians, an all-Indian professional football team

1929 Retires from professional football at age forty-two

1953 Dies March 28; buried in Mauch Chunk, Pennsylvania, which is renamed Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania

1963 Inducted into Pro Football Hall of Fame as part of original class



1982 International Olympic Committee restores Thorpe's name to record books

1983 Duplicate Olympic gold medals given to Thorpe family; inducted into U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame

1998 U.S. Postal Service issues Jim Thorpe commemorative stamp as part of its Celebrate the Century program



Thorpe statue in Pro Football Hall of Fame