

# Jim Thorpe Plays in the PCL

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In 1922, a famous face appeared in Portland, ready to make his Pacific Coast league debut. He was the legendary Jim Thorpe.<sup>1</sup>

The world-famous athlete had experienced an uneven baseball career that included six seasons in the major leagues with the Giants, Reds and Braves. Thorpe made a good living off his name each winter by playing professional football and also had a touring basketball team at one point. But Thorpe's best days as an athlete were behind him.

Even Ed Maier, famous for signing veterans as reclamation projects, had turned down the opportunity to add Thorpe to the Vernon Tigers roster the previous spring. But the thirty-six-year-old outfielder was still in demand after a good season in the American Association, able to

command a reported five thousand dollars for his acquisition and a salary of one thousand dollars per month.<sup>2</sup>

One could see Thorpe's football instincts when he ran, head down, around the bases. As Harry Williams described it, "When he made the turn at first and second it was with the calculating, almost hesitating stride, not of the sprinter, but the backfield man about to shift with his feet or make a sudden shift with his body and elude an impending tackler or shake off one which had already struck."<sup>3</sup> But Thorpe would not last the season, his salary outweighing his value to the team as a drawing card. He was hampered by a shoulder problem that dated to spring training, but his old problems with alcohol did not help. Unable to dispel the notion about his inability to hit a curveball, or to stay away from strong drink, Thorpe was released in June, despite hitting .308 in thirty-five games.

The Salt Lake City Bees offered Thorpe a contract but refused to add a signing bonus, so he joined Hartford of the Eastern League instead. Thorpe started off brilliantly for Hartford, collecting five hits in six at bats in his first game, and the Eastern League team went on a long winning streak. Hailed as a hero, Thorpe agreed to endorse automobiles for a local Buick dealer and he and his wife accepted an offer from a local taxicab company to chauffeur them anywhere around town for free. However, Thorpe's relationship with fans soured. He was obviously inebriated during a doubleheader at New Haven in mid-July, taken out of the second game by manager Jack Coffey after dropping a fly ball, mishandling a grounder, refusing to chase after a couple of other fly balls, and coming to plate batting left-handed for his third at bat of the game. After changing into his street clothes, Thorpe jumped into the stands and started a fight with fans who had been heckling him. He was fined fifty dollars and suspended.

A month later, Thorpe was drunk when he reported for a game at Springfield. Hartford decided to wash its hands of the legendary athlete, literally giving him away to league rival Worcester, which only had to assume the ballplayer's contract. Thorpe's professional career ended after the season even though he batted .344 and hit nine home runs in ninety-six games.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Oregonian*, February 10, 1922.

<sup>2</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1922.

<sup>3</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 1922.

<sup>4</sup> *Hartford Courant*, June 6, June 14, June 15, June 18, June 20, July 11, July 12, August 11, August 12 and August 15, 1922; *The Sporting News*, June 8, 1922.)