

NATIVE AMERICAN WORLD SERIES

Article and photos by Mike Stotts

A century after Jim Thorpe first participated in competitive games, sports aficionados from around the world continue to celebrate his accomplishments. Thorpe's athletic prowess is timeless; his accomplishments are lauded as major milestones in sports history. His influence can still be seen in billboards dotting the landscape of many of our highways that have only his photograph and the word "Excellence" underneath.

Thorpe's spirit also lives on, burning intensely and indelibly in the mind and actions of Bobby Letterman, who is the owner and manager of the National Indian Sports Association (NISA).

"Jim Thorpe is our hero. We really do what we do to honor the spirit and character of Jim Thorpe," says Letterman, who is part Cherokee. And it is that spirit that has guided not only Letterman's 30-plus year sports career, but also his unwavering commitment to the Indian community at large.

Despite our nation having more than 550 federally recognized tribes and the Native American population skyrocketing to over 2.5 million people, Native American athletes are arguably in the minority when it comes to sports recognition. Yet Native Americans represent some of the best athletes around. This is where NISA-sponsored softball and basketball programs try to bridge the gap between school yard pick-up games and national acknowledgement.

One of the most well-known Native American athletes was the versatile Jacobus Franciscus "Jim" Thorpe. Thorpe was of mixed Native American and European ancestry, raised as part of the Sac and Fox nation, and named "Wa-Tho-Huk," roughly translated as "Bright Path." While at Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, he earned varsity letters in several sports including boxing, wrestling, lacrosse, gymnastics, swimming, hockey, handball, and basketball.

In 1912, Thorpe won gold medals in the pentathlon and decathlon at the Olympic Games held in Stockholm, Sweden. He went on to play American football both collegiately and professionally and in 1920, was the first president of what was to become the National Football League.

Thorpe died in 1953 at the age of 65, but his dedication to professional sports continued to earn him recognition. From 1996 through 2001, ABC's

The NISA World Series is a multigenerational softball experience. Hopi Indian dad and softball player Terry Jones hoists his two-year-old daughter, Takoah, on his shoulders so she can better see the game action. Maybe one day Takoah will be playing in the same tournament.





Shellie Willie, a full blooded Navajo, performs the colorful Jingle Dance at the NISA World Series opening ceremony.

Wide World of Sports selected Thorpe for their Athlete of the Century Award. And it is Jim Thorpe who inspires Bobby Letterman today.

In the 1980s, Letterman was very active playing and officiating both softball and basketball games, winning MVP awards. For a time he played for the Provo Blazers, an All-Indian basketball team, and in 1982 organized the Provo Indian Athletic Association, which later became known as the Indian Basketball Association. Letterman's involvement with the IBA lead him to an interest in softball, and eventually he worked for nearly every major softball organization in the country, including the ASA, USSSA, AFA, and ISA.

In 1995 Letterman became the NSA state softball director in Kentucky. While attending the NSA national convention that year, Letterman realized that nearly every type of specialty world series for softball was well represented, including Hispanic, African American, and military, but there was not one world series for Native Americans. So in 1995, he decided to form NISA (Native Indian Sports Association) and held their first Native American Softball World Series. Only four teams competed that inaugural year, but the seed was firmly planted and there was amazing growth to come.

Fast forward 18 years. On September 27, 28, and 29, 2012, the NISA Native American World Series drew 78 highly skilled softball teams to the Centennial and Valley Regional parks in Salt Lake City, Utah. The



An intricate and athletic Men's Fancy Dance is performed by Patrick Willie, a full-blooded Navajo at the NISA World Series opening ceremony.

34 Co-ed, 16 Women's, and 28 Men's teams played games nearly continuously in the three-game guarantee series.

The NISA tournament has now arguably become the largest Native American World Series in the nation.

Despite a stifling national recession and a sluggish economy, the NISA World Series continues to attract large numbers of Native American players and teams. More than 1,100 players in the 20-50 year age bracket competed in this year's World Series, in addition to participating in four smaller Native American tournaments prior to the September event.

Tribal teams competing in this year's tournament were comprised of one or more tribes and equally dispersed from all over the nation and Canada. The most distant teams came from Florida, Connecticut, South Carolina, and North Dakota.

"Players come year after year, developing very strong friendships and bonds," says Bobby. "Since this tournament has been going on nearly two decades, it's become a multi-generational softball experience - grandparents, parents, and now their children have played in tournament."

"We commonly receive Native American team rosters with 10 to 15 players," adds Tami Letterman, tournament director and wife of Bobby. "Indian rosters are allowed two non-Native

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American players (Co-ed is one female and one male)."

Tournament games were played in accordance to NISA sanctioned rules. Each game was 7 innings long or 75 minutes, whichever came first. Unlike most other tournaments, each NISA coach has a voice regarding the rules that will be followed each year. They do not leave these decisions up to a central governing body. This year, for example, NISA eliminated the "halo rule" (hitting the ball in the vicinity of the pitcher was not an out).

"Every Indian reservation has excellent, talented athletes, but seldom do they receive the recognition they deserve," says Tami. "The NISA provides that opportunity."

Tami has been organizing the tournament since its inception, and thoroughly enjoys conducting the tournament each year. "(The NISA World Series) is what softball used to be," says Tami. "Native Americans come out for the great competition and fun of it all. Whether a team wins or loses, there is always excellent sportsmanship shown and a sense of pride. Players play for the honor of their tribes."

Respect for elders and family runs deep in Native American culture and that trait also holds true for softball tournaments. Tami recounted an incident from last year where a player on the field was disrespectful of another player. An esteemed elder sitting in the stands saw the incident, stood up, but didn't say a word. He only looked



Emotions well up as Tami Letterman, NISA World Series tournament director, posthumously honors Curtis Walker during the NISA Hall of Fame presentation at the opening ceremonies on September 28, 2012, in Salt Lake City, Utah. Walker, who died earlier this year, was from the Omaha Tribe, and organized the first NISA World Series drum group and subsequently performed at each series tournament.



The NISA World Series is all about building Indian family values and culture. Ryesha Running Horse, left, from the Shoshone-Bannock tribe in Idaho, helps her sister, Starlynn, get a drink from the fountain and fill up their misting bottles, as their parents wait to compete in the tournament.



No NISA tournament is complete without tasting the fine Indian cultural food offered for sale, including frybread. Frybread serves as the wrap for steak, pork and even traditional hot dogs.



The National Anthem is sung by Becky Lucas from Lumberton, North Carolina, a member of the Lumbee Tribe, during the NISA World Series opening ceremony.



Feasting on a gigantic Navajo taco is a gastronomic nirvana - a complete dinner nestled on frybread, with beef, beans, lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, and onions.

at the offending player. That player immediately apologized to all present.

Competition among Native American softball players at the tournament is of a very high caliber and always intensely fierce. But the Native American World Series makes a giant leap beyond gamesmanship, imparting the principles of fair play and encouraging strong community values. Building kinship to one another and to family groups is the overriding result and, satisfyingly, is not tied to any game score.

Where many non-Native American softball tournaments bring together teams that know little, if anything, about the other team players they compete against, especially in the personal sense, it is quite different in a Native American tournament. It is more like attending a huge family reunion that does not end. Player handshakes at the end of a game are not mere obligatory sportsmanship gestures, but rather an opening prelude for continuing social interaction among competing players. In fact, it's not uncommon to see players stay and watch competing games to the very end of the tournament versus heading home when their game is over.

While waiting for each game to begin, family and friends were able to enjoy the fine Native American food offered for sale around the venues. A particular favorite was the frybread wrapped varieties of steak, pork steak, and even traditional hot dogs. Long lines of guests waited for the Navajo taco - a complete dinner nestled on frybread including beef, beans, lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, and onions that could serve as a complete breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Other onsite tournament venues offered a variety of fine handmade authentic Native American jewelry, dreamcatchers, handbags, and other crafts. Traditional softball gear and action and team photography was also available to further commemorate the experience.

The opening ceremonies of the 2013 NISA Native American World Series began with the presentation of the flags by the NISA umpires followed by the National Anthem, sung by Becky Lucas from Lumberton, North Carolina, a member of the Lumbee Tribe. Becky was accompanied by the Host Drum - musicians who perform traditional drum music and songs of the Great Spirit. (Host Drum was comprised of Buffalo Nation tribal members from Utah Valley, featuring Alvin Watchman - Navajo, and Craig Watchman - Sioux, Al Groves - Ute & Hope, Justin FishingHawk - Cheyenne, Emerson Curtis - Navajo, Elroy Lewis - Navajo, and Cody Lewis - Navajo.)

An intricate and athletic Men's Fancy Dance was then performed by Patrick Willie, while his sister, Shellie Willie, performed the colorful Jingle Dance. Both are full-blooded Navajo attending the University of Utah.

The evening's festivities concluded with the NISA Hall of Fame award, an emotional moment to posthumously honor Curtis Walker, who died earlier this year. Walker, from the Omaha Tribe, organized the first NISA World Series drum group in 1995 and performed at each subsequent series.

In the Men's division, the well-balanced and hard-hitting Nations team, representing Indian tribes from around the nation, and



The moon rises during the colorful and festive opening night NISA World Series ceremony.

Daisey Harvey, a full-blooded Navajo, sells authentic Indian jewelry and dreamcatchers that she and her daughter make all during the year.



Host Drum musicians perform traditional drum music and songs of the Great Spirit during the NISA World Series opening ceremony on September 28, 2012, in Salt Lake City, Utah. Buffalo Nation tribal members were from Utah Valley, featuring Alvin Watchman - Navajo, and Craig Watchman - Sioux, Al Groves - Ute & Hope, Justin FishingHawk - Cheyenne, Emerson Curtis - Navajo, Elroy Lewis - Navajo, and Cody Lewis - Navajo.



Nothing beats attending the NISA World Series AND shopping for special people and occasions at the same place. Onsite tournament venues offered a variety of fine handmade authentic dreamcatchers, Indian jewelry, handbags, and other crafts. Traditional softball gear and action and team photography was also available to further commemorate the experience.

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having won the NISA World Series a few times in the past, went undefeated this year, finishing the series with a 5-0 record. But their win was not a cake walk. In the championship game they went up against Tulalip Renegades, representing the Tulalip tribe from Washington. The Tulalip's were ahead until the fourth inning, when suddenly Nations exploded with a 12-run inning. Nations went on to win with a final game score of 25-20. The Tulalip's finished in second place with an admirable 5-2 tournament record.

Fry Bread, also a Washington-based tribe, played their hearts out in every Men's game, while handing the Tulalip Renegades their first tournament loss. Despite both teams coming from the same state, it was the first time the teams met in this series. Fry Bread came in third place (5-1).

War Meat played with gusto, too, finishing in fourth place (4-1) in the Men's division, with their only loss coming at the hands of the Tulalip Renegades.

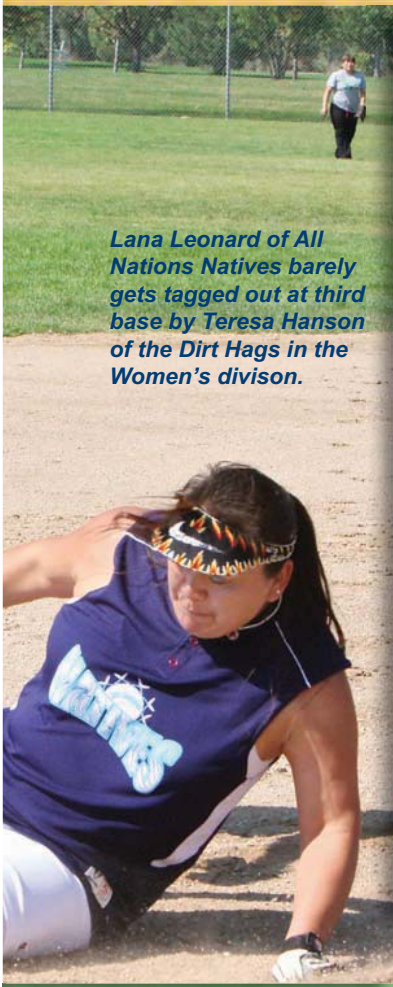
Meanwhile, in the Co-ed division, it was an unbelievable battle for first place in the championship game. Dirt Kids, a young and very strong Arizona team representing numerous tribes, barely won over PMS, 29-28, in the final game. Dirt Kids finished the series with an unblemished 5-0 record. PMS, representing tribes in Utah and Nevada, finished in second place (5-2).

Ken Krew, a Nevada team representing multiple tribes and named in honor of coach Michael Keats, son Ken Keats, who died unexpectedly, took home third place Co-ed honors (4-2), while Young Blood from Washington gamely recovered from an earlier tournament loss, finishing in fourth place (5-2).

The Women's division witnessed a major series upset. The Dirt Hags, representing



Mike Wazzie, right, of Nations scores against J.C. Brawford of the Native Sons in the Men's division.



Lana Leonard of All Nations Natives barely gets tagged out at third base by Teresa Hanson of the Dirt Hags in the Women's division.



Sharon Jones of All Nations Natives prepares to slam a double in their game against the Dirt Hags in the Women's Division.



Nations Darrell Roberts, left, slides into second base past the tag of Native Sons' Stu Sweeny in the Men's division.

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Shirelle Adams, right, of All Nations Natives gets swarmed by her teammates after blasting a grand slam home run against the Dirt Hags in the Women's division.



Fleet-footed All Nations Natives Dora Brings Yellow is safe at home plate under the tag by Dirt Hags catcher Sopus Schuarz in the Women's Division.



Jesse Schulenberg of Ken Crew blasts a double off the centerfield wall in their game against Center Tail in the Co-ed division.



multiple tribes, overcame their second-place finish from last year to win the division this year over the powerful All Nations Natives. An earlier series loss to the All Nations Natives meant the Dirt Hags had to play a deciding "if" game. The Dirt Hags exploded both offensively and defensively, winning the game, 19-3, garnering them the first-place honor (6-1). The All Nations Natives team has played in every NISA World Series since 1996, winning the division in three prior years. They finished this tournament in second place with a 4-2 record. Also in the Women's division, The Playmakers from the Shoshone-Bannock tribe in Pocatello, Idaho, finished fourth (4-2).

MVP series awards were earned by Mike Gibbons from the Nations team in the Men's division; Bridgette Jones from the Dirt Hags team in the Women's division; and Mike Yazzie from the Dirt Kids team in the Co-ed division.

NISA World Series awards were given to the first four finishers in each division and for the first and second places in the drop down category. First-place winners received colorful NISA embroidered and lined jackets. Other finishers received brightly emblazoned NISA series shirts.

The economic impact of this tournament to the local Salt Lake City economy was enormous. Ten hotels were sold out, bursting at the seams not only with players, but housing their multi-genera-

ational families and guests. Coordinating the lodging and transportation to two softball complexes a distance apart proved a daily logistics challenge, says Tami.

Evidence of the popularity of the Native American World Series can be found in the number of locations courting NISA to host future events.

With sizeable city and multiple venue revenues at stake, annual city bids for hosting the NISA World Series are growing - not only in the sheer number of interested cities, but their coastal diversity as well.

The NISA World Series has been held numerous times in Salt Lake City, St. George, Utah, and in Mesquite, Nevada. Now not only have those traditional cities expressed interest, but many other cities have voiced their desire, including Rock Hill and Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. Bobby and Tami have a difficult decision on their hands as they need to provide for geographically dispersed player needs while offering an economically viable tournament package. They plan to make their hosting decision for the 2013 event in November.

The NISA World Series is more than just a series of softball games, it helps promote, cultivate and preserve the Indian culture for generations to come.

As Jim Thorpe once said, "There's nothing wrong with giving."

The NISA World Series is always held the last weekend in September. For more information on any of their tournaments or to sign up, please visit www.NationalIndianSports.com or email nisasports@aol.com.



Kevin Gwinn of Ken Crew almost gets caught in a rundown between second and third in their game against Center Tail in the Co-ed division.