

# American Sports Legends

*A Reading A-Z Level W Leveled Book*  
*Word Count: 1,773*

## Connections

### Writing and Art

Imagine being a newspaper reporter interviewing one of the athletes from the book. Write an article about the interview including both the questions and answers.

### Social Studies

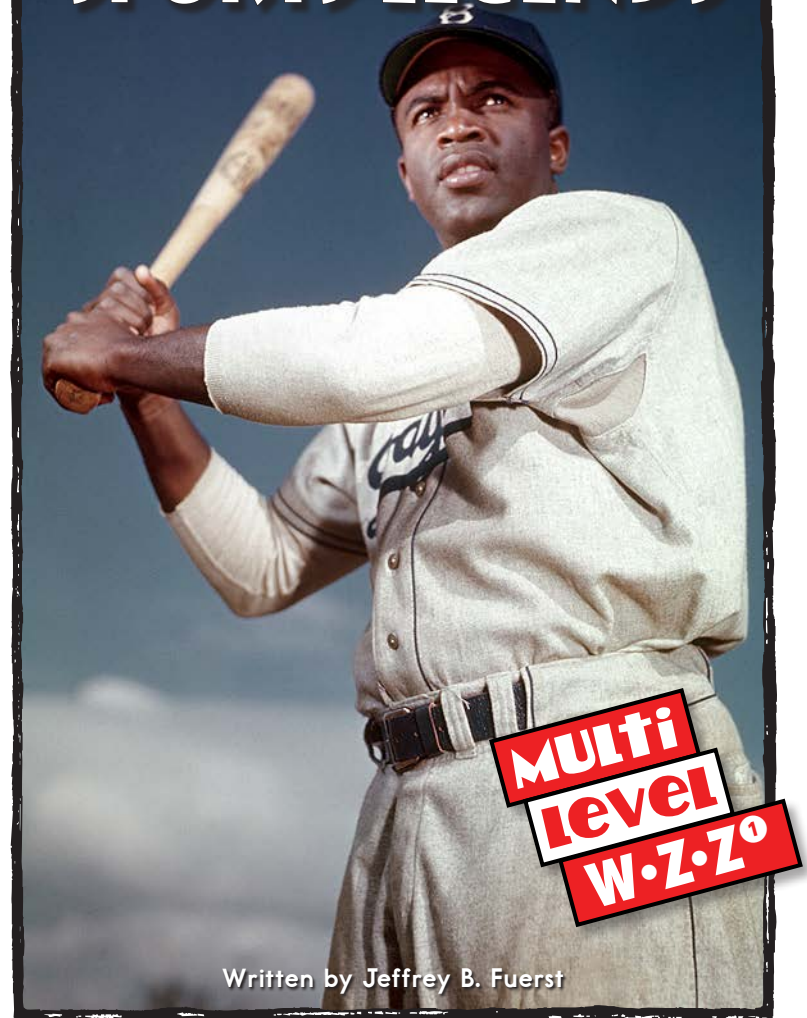
Choose one of the athletes from the book. Create a timeline of that athlete's life. Record at least ten events including his or her birth and death.

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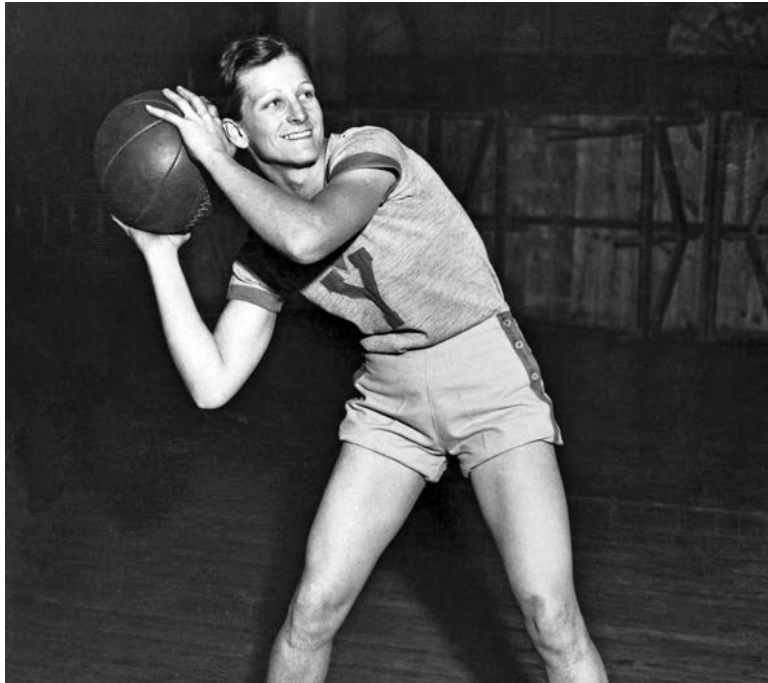
# AMERICAN SPORTS LEGENDS



Written by Jeffrey B. Fuerst

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## Focus Question

Who are some American sports legends, and why do we remember them?

## Words to Know

achieved	grueling
commitment	legacy
controversial	modest
determination	ordeal
discriminated	revolutionized
distinguished	tribute

Front cover: Jackie Robinson

Back cover: Jesse Owens set the long jump record at the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936. His record held for twenty-five years.

Title page: Mildred Didrikson Zaharias

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Level W Leveled Book  
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## Correlation

### LEVEL W

Fountas & Pinnell	S
Reading Recovery	40
DRA	40



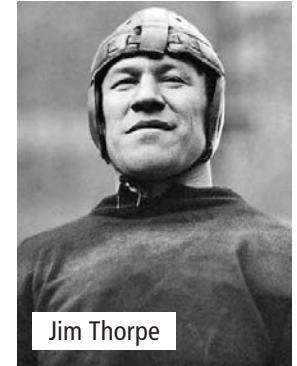
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## The Greatest Athlete of the 20th Century: Jim Thorpe (1887–1953)

Who would you say was the greatest athlete from the last century? Basketball's Michael Jordan? Hockey's Wayne Gretzky?

These record-setting superstars **revolutionized** their sports and deserve to be in the running for that No. 1 spot. But the athlete named the greatest of the great was Jim Thorpe, a Native American born in Oklahoma in 1887. He played professional baseball, was the biggest football star of his day, and won many track-and-field events.



Let's go back to 1912, to Stockholm, Sweden, during the Summer Olympic Games . . .

*The Native American runner crouches at the starting line for the Olympic 200-meter dash. It's the third event of five in the **grueling** pentathlon. "On your mark," calls the starter. "Get set . . ."*

*Jim Thorpe bursts out of the blocks. He has already scored an easy victory in the long jump, but has placed third in the javelin throw. I need this race, he thinks as he runs. At the finish line, Jim Thorpe wins by a hair!*



Before he appeared at the Summer Olympics of 1912, Jim Thorpe was already a well-known college football star. As an All-American halfback from Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, he thrilled crowds with his blinding speed and strength.

Jim Thorpe starred on the school's baseball and basketball teams, too. He played golf, tennis, and many other sports.

At the 1912 Olympics, Jim Thorpe represented the United States in the two toughest track-and-field events: the pentathlon (five events) and the decathlon (ten events).

Over the span of a few days, Jim Thorpe did the unimaginable. He won four of the five events in the pentathlon. Plus, he set a world record for the decathlon and won the gold medal in both events!

When King Gustav V of Sweden called Jim to the awards stand, he said, "You, sir, are the greatest athlete in the world."

Always a man of few words, Jim said, "Thanks, King."



Jim Thorpe in the long jump



### Jim Turns Pro

Then, in 1913, Jim became a professional baseball player with the famous New York Giants. Although he was good at baseball, he preferred football, so in 1915, he joined the Canton (Ohio) Bulldogs. Jim led his team to three championships: in 1916, 1917, and 1919. He also played baseball during the summer months.

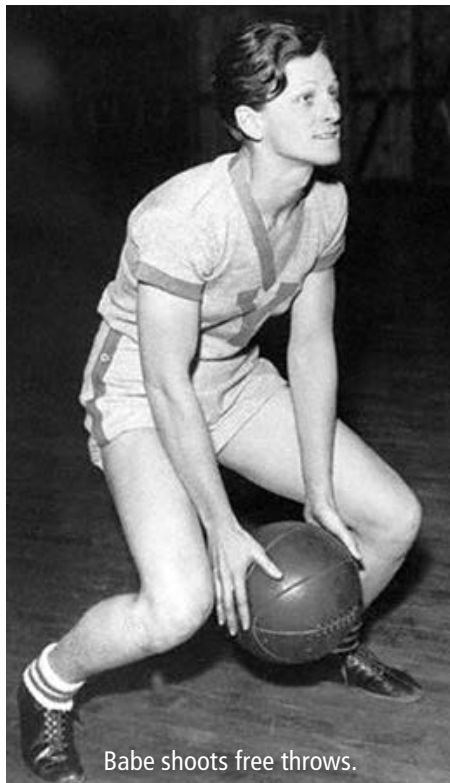
In 1920, Jim became the first president of the American Football Association, which later became the National Football League.

Today, a statue of Jim Thorpe greets visitors to the Football Hall of Fame. It is a **tribute** to the greatest athlete of the 20th century.

## The Other Babe: Mildred Didrikson Zaharias (1911–1956)

Jim Thorpe may have been named the greatest athlete of the 20th century, but sports lovers might also consider another athlete. Mildred “Babe” Didrikson was an all-around athlete who dominated women’s basketball, track and field, and golf in the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s. She was a serious, rough-and-tumble competitor at a time when women were expected to be **modest** and ladylike.

Babe was born in Texas in 1911. In high school, she played volleyball, baseball, tennis, and basketball, the most popular women’s sport at the time. Her high-school team never lost a game. She often scored thirty points by herself when twenty was considered a respectable total—for the whole team!



Babe shoots free throws.



Babe Didrikson, far right, smashed another world record when she sprinted the 80-meter hurdles in 11.7 seconds.

Babe lifted weights, which few women did at that time. Her serious workouts and skills paid off at a national track meet in July 1932. She entered eight events and won five. What’s even more amazing is that she won the meet by herself, competing against teams with twenty members.

A few weeks later at the Summer Olympics, Babe won gold medals and set world records in the 80-meter hurdles, javelin, and high jump. Babe later drew attention to women’s basketball by putting together a team that toured the country playing against men’s teams.

## No Game She Can't Play

Babe's real fame was yet to come, and in a different sport: golf. She didn't pick up a club until age twenty-one. Just a year later, in 1935, she won her first championship.

In the next twenty years, Babe won eighty-two tournaments, including seventeen in a row in 1946 and 1947.

In 1953, Babe was diagnosed with cancer. Her doctors thought she would never play again. Only four months after an operation, she was back on the pro tour.

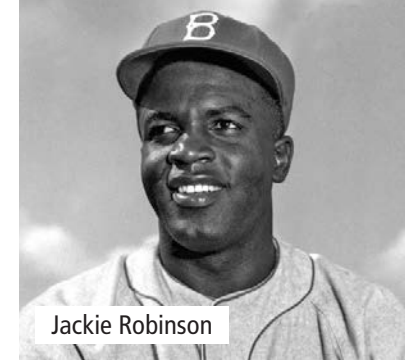
*It is the 18th hole of the Serbin Women's Open Tournament in Miami Beach. Babe Didrikson's booming first shot lies in the center of the fairway. Her next shot sinks the ball. She has won the tournament—just ten months after cancer surgery.*

Her family and fans were devastated when the cancer returned. Babe Didrikson passed away at age forty-five.

Her life of sports achievements gained her a place in two Halls of Fame: golf and track and field. But her real **legacy** is the lasting example of her independent spirit. Babe was brave and blazed a path for women athletes.

## Baseball's Most Daring Player: Jackie Robinson (1919–1972)

What would Major League Baseball be like today without African American and Latino superstars? How might the Hall of Fame look without Hank Aaron, Willie Mays, or Roberto Clemente?



It might be very different were it not for the courage and **determination** of Jackie Robinson. In 1947, he became the first African American to play Major League Baseball.

Black and other non-white people were **discriminated** against in many ways, including in sports. Only white players were allowed to play in the Major Leagues. So baseball-loving black players formed their own Negro Leagues.

The general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Branch Rickey, knew it was wrong to keep good players out of the Major Leagues. It was wrong for the players and wrong for baseball. He wanted to add non-white players to the teams, but he knew it wouldn't be easy. Then he discovered Jackie Robinson.



Jackie Robinson could hit, run, and field as well as anyone. His daring style of running bases excited fans and unnerved opposing players. He could beat opponents with a bunt, a blast, and—most importantly—his brain.

After a year in the minor leagues, Jackie joined the Brooklyn Dodgers. Robinson's rookie season was an **ordeal**. Opposing players yelled insults at him. Pitchers purposely threw at him. Fans booed. Even some of Jackie's teammates treated him badly.

Jackie took it all with quiet dignity—and determination. He never lost his temper and never fought back with his fists. In his rookie year, he hit solidly, led the league in stolen bases, and won the Rookie of the Year Award. In 1949, he won the National League batting title and the Most Valuable Player Award. By 1950, he was the highest-paid Brooklyn Dodger and the team's leader.

*It is the first game of the 1955 World Series between the New York Yankees and Brooklyn Dodgers. The Dodgers have been in seven World Series—and lost every one. “Wait ‘til next year!” had become the fans’ cry.*

*Jackie Robinson leads off third base. He's at the end of his career. But he is still a dangerous base runner and a joy to watch. He takes an extra step toward home plate, then another. He dives back to third, safe.*

*Jackie stares down the pitcher and resumes his big lead. He darts right, then left, then . . . off he goes! The pitch flies to the plate, but not in time—Jackie is safe at home! The fans go wild!*

*Jackie's bold steal of home pumps up his teammates, and they go on to win the World Series. In Brooklyn, “next year” has finally arrived!*

Jackie Robinson showed that skill was what mattered. Soon, other teams began to hire black and Latino players. Today, the national pastime of the United States is made up of players and management of all races and nationalities.

Jackie Robinson will be remembered because he broke baseball's color barrier. His inner strength and **commitment** to equality made it possible for all players to participate equally in professional American sports.

Jackie Robinson and Dodger teammates on his first official day in the Major Leagues, April 15, 1947





Jesse Owens races several strides ahead of everyone at the 1936 Olympics.

### The Fastest Man: Jesse Owens (1913–1980)

Jesse Owens burst onto the sporting scene in junior high school in Cleveland, Ohio. He set world records for his age group in the high jump and long jump.

The high school track coach invited Jesse to join the team. But Jesse had to work after school and couldn't practice. Instead, he got up at 5:00 a.m. to train with his coach.

At a national high school track meet, Jesse tied the world record for the 100-yard dash. He also set a new world record for the long jump.

In 1935, at a college championship meet, Jesse set new world records for the 220-yard dash, long jump, and 220-yard low hurdles. He tied the world record of 9.4 seconds for the 100-yard dash. Never before had a track-and-field athlete **achieved** so much.

### An Olympian for Eternity

In 1936, just before the start of World War II, Jesse traveled to Berlin, Germany, for the Summer Olympic Games. But his participation in the Olympic Games was **controversial**. Nazi leader Adolf Hitler ruled Germany. Nazis believed that Aryans—non-Jewish white people—were better than everyone else. They called black people “primitive.”

Jesse was not frightened by Hitler's attitude or by threats. He firmly believed that individual excellence **distinguished** one person from another. And he proved it on the track in Berlin.

*It is August 1936, the final day of the Olympics. Jesse Owens has already won the gold medal in the 100-meter and 200-meter races. Chancellor Hitler will not shake his hand.*

*Being snubbed does not bother Jesse. He is focused on the long jump. He almost did not qualify because earlier, a German judge claimed he fouled. Now Jesse and Luz Long, a German, have both jumped 25 feet, 10 inches.*

*It is the final round. Jesse sprints down the path. He springs into the air and sails into the landing pit for a record-setting leap of 26 feet, 5½ inches. Another gold medal!*



Jesse set out to do his best at the 1936 Olympics. He earned four gold medals, a first in Olympic history.

Jesse returned from Germany to a ticker-tape parade and cheers, but little else. At that time, black athletes did not get product endorsement or appearance contracts. To earn a living, Jesse participated in promotional stunts.

He went on to be a playground director and a well-known speaker. The government named him America's Ambassador of Sports. Later in life, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Jesse Owens' grandfather had been a slave. Jesse demonstrated that it is not where you come from that determines what you achieve. That is the legacy of Jesse Owens, a man who was always a step ahead.

## Do You Know?

Jesse chose to go to Ohio State University even though it was one of the few colleges that did not offer him a scholarship. He worked as an elevator operator, waiter, and gas station attendant to support himself and his young wife, Ruth.



## Glossary

<b>achieved</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	succeeded in doing or gaining something, usually with effort (p. 13)
<b>commitment</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	dedication; determination (p. 12)
<b>controversial</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	causing much disagreement (p. 14)
<b>determination</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	the commitment or drive to work toward a difficult goal; resolve (p. 10)
<b>discriminated</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	treated a person or group unfairly because of gender, race, age, religion, or other differences (p. 10)
<b>distinguished</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	set apart as special or different in some way (p. 14)
<b>grueling</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	extremely difficult; exhausting (p. 4)
<b>legacy</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	something handed down from the past to the present (p. 9)
<b>modest</b> ( <i>adj.</i> )	humble; not likely to brag or seek attention; simple (p. 7)
<b>ordeal</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	a hard or difficult experience (p. 11)
<b>revolutionized</b> ( <i>v.</i> )	made enormous changes (p. 4)
<b>tribute</b> ( <i>n.</i> )	an act or statement that shows gratitude or respect (p. 6)