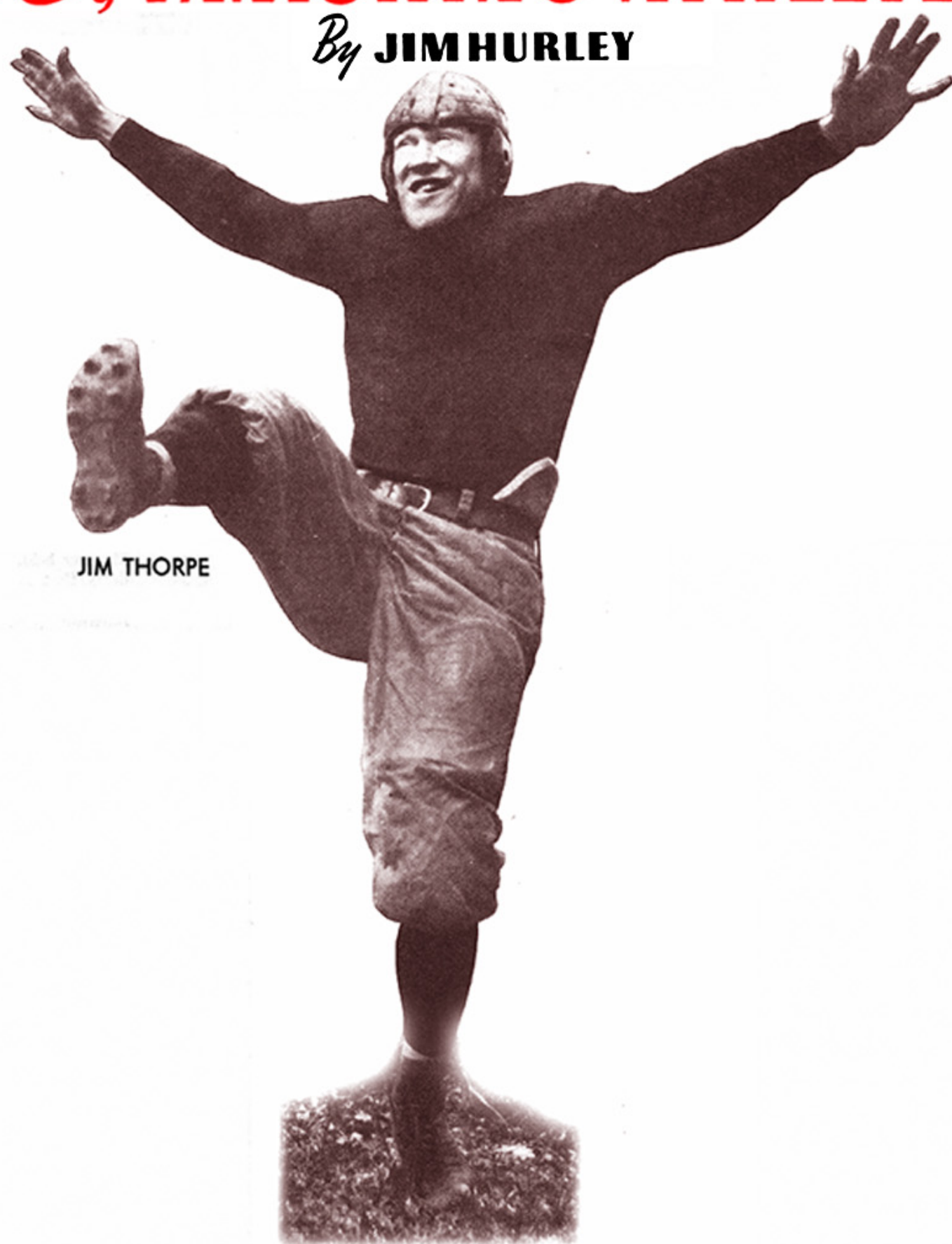


# LO, VANISHING ATHLETE

By **JIM HURLEY**



JIM THORPE

**C**OOGAN'S BLUFF has echoed a varied assortment of noises back to the Polo Grounds below it ever since the New York Giants made their home in its shadows back in 1891, but it is doubtful if any of them were stranger than those that rent the air of uptown Gotham that May afternoon back in 1897.

Cleveland, then in the National League, was opposing the Giants. But things were in good hands—as a matter of fact in the mighty hands of the incomparable Amos Rusie, trusted New York pitcher, and local rooters settled back for the proverbial Giant victory with Rusie in the box. Over in one section of the park sat a gaily bedecked and motley group of Indians. They were Algonquins from Oldtown, Maine, and they were attracting almost as much attention as the great Rusie out there on the mound.

Then up to the plate strode a Cleveland player, a man clear-eyed and dark of visage, a fine, broadshouldered, graceful athlete. He tapped the rubber with his bludgeon, inviting the renowned Rusie to do his worst. The Giant tosser wound up, uncoiled and sent the ball toward the plate. Almost simultaneously there was a sharp report and New York's next glimpse of the great Indian ballplayer, Louis Sockalexis, was just a vision as he skirted the bases for a home run before the ball could be returned to the infield. Then the Redskin contingent among the fans arose en masse and treated the white man's metropolis to a spell of real yelling.

Louis Sockalexis was one of a group of American Indians who wrote brilliant athletic history into the pages of United States sports over a period of two decades,



**JIM HURLEY****LOUIS SOCKALEXIS**

beginning a few years before the turn of the century.

Idolized, publicized, dramatized, picturesque members of a fast diminishing aboriginal race, they were the white man's heroes. But the white man's adulations and his indulgences helped write "finis" prematurely on the records of some of them even as his vices quickened the racial degeneration of their stock.

Sockalexis, Thorpe, Bender, Longboat and Meyers! There were scores of other notable Indian athletes from '93 to 1915, but the names of those five were household words in the early days of the new century. Sockalexis the Algonquin from Maine, whose father once journeyed to Washington to plead with President Cleveland to help keep his son on the reservation rather than allow him to engage in the sport of the white man; Thorpe the Sac and Fox Redskin claimed by many to this day to be the greatest athlete ever born; Bender of the Chippewas, for years a pitching mainstay of the Philadelphia Athletics, Tom Longboat, the Mohawk from Ontario, the greatest natural runner who ever drew on a shoe, and Chief Meyers, who drew almost as many fans to the Polo Grounds



**JIM HURLEY****CHIEF  
BENDER**

as the immortal Matty himself.

Before the War with Spain and for a dozen or more years thereafter Indians were quite a curiosity for the East. Many of our citizens were but recently back from the wars of the plains and tall tales of the depredations of the "savages" were stressed in oral and written story. In lieu of the flesh and blood man of the feathered headdress, cigar stores had likenesses of him carved in wood as attention arresters out front. Circuses had whole whooping troops of them, while the quack medicine man and the itinerant corn doctor had a redskin, usually in war paint, to pull the yokels into position for the shears.

It was little wonder then that there was intense public interest over the Red Man's entry into the White Man's sports 45 years ago. Here were these untutored, half-civilized foemen of only a few years before taking up and often excelling in the games of the pale face.

First of them all to gain national attention and to be a topic for almost constant discussion for the few short years that he was in big time baseball was Louis Sockalexis. After displaying rare baseball ability at Houlton Academy in Maine he first attracted attention at Holy Cross. In his first game there against Springfield of the Eastern League he made three two-baggers off the pitching of Jimmy Callahan, at that time quite



**JIM HURLEY****TOM  
LONGBOAT**

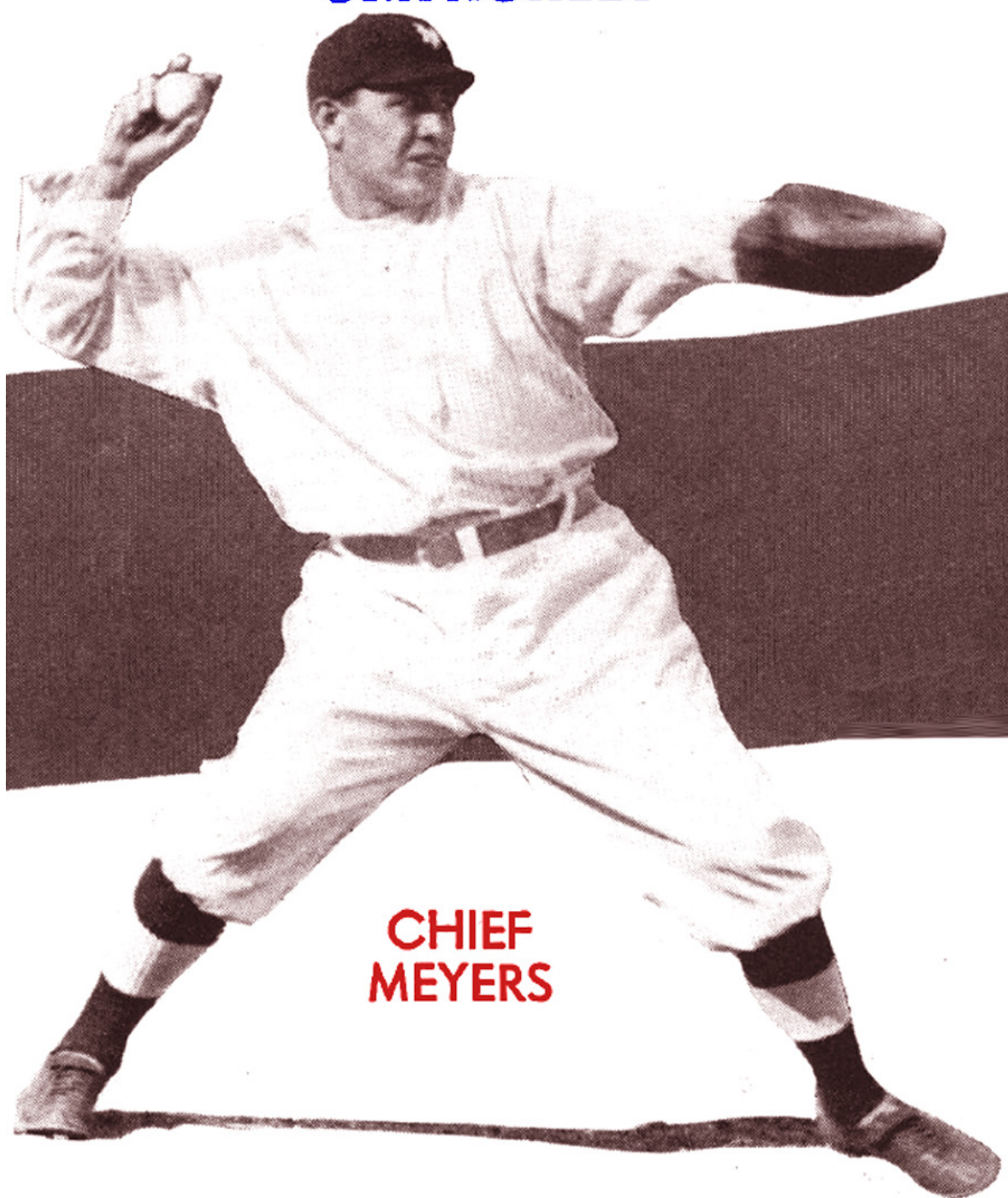
a mound artist and later manager of the White Sox. In a game against Brown, on April 19, 1895, Sockalexis made it a fitting Patriots' Day for the Bay Staters by slashing out two homers and two doubles and stealing six bases. By this time they were calling him the greatest college player of all time.

Nor was his prowess confined to the baseball diamond. Tommy Conneff, the world's champion miler, was then at Holy Cross and he was often hard pressed by Sockalexis. Bernie Wefers, top notch sprinter of those days, declared that he would have been surpassed as a runner by Sockalexis if the Indian had given all his time to track. But baseball was this Maine Indian's first love and he liked it too well to allow other sports to interfere with it.

When in 1897 he followed his friend Doc Powers from Holy Cross to Notre Dame University he was as well known as any of the players in professional baseball. And when he turned pro with Cleveland a few weeks later he was clearly the most talked of athlete in the country with the possible exception of one Robert Fitzsimmons, who had defeated the heavyweight champion Jim Corbett a short while before.

Certainly he was the baseball hero of the hour. Sports writers raved over him in reams of copy. In Cleveland he won a game from the great Rusie on a home run in the tenth inning and the star Giant pitcher alibied that it was only because he wasn't strong enough to work his fast



**JIM HURLEY****CHIEF  
MEYERS**

curve at that late stage in the game. He thereupon started the gossip that Sockalexis, like Thorpe after him, was a sucker for a curve ball.

But the allegation didn't square with Sockalexis' performance. After he captured New York, facing Rusie in his first appearance in the Polo Grounds, the journals of the day waxed poetic about him to the tom-tom meter of an ode by R. K. Munkittrick, some of which went:

This is mighty Sockalexis  
Fielder of the mighty Clevelands

Like the catapult in action  
For the plate he throws the baseball  
Till the rooters, blithely rooting  
Shout until they shake the bleachers

"Sockalexis, Sockalexis,  
Sock it to them, Sockalexis."

Such is merry Sockalexis  
Who can bat and knock the home  
run

Who can scalp the blooming umpire  
Till the rooters in their glory  
Knowing no fit terms of praise, all  
Lift their voices "Sockalexis,  
Sockalexis, Sockalexis!"  
Till the welkin madly splitting  
And the purple cave of echo  
Sends back all the surging chorus  
"Sockalexis, Sockalexis,  
Sock it to them, Sockalexis."

**T**HE United States can take no credit for the remarkable performances of Tom Longboat, Mohawk Indian from Ontario, but the angular runner from the North was the chief reason for sending America Marathon-mad 33 years ago.



## JIM HURLEY

Longboat won every race he set out in in his native Canada before coming to the United States and walked away with honors here with much the same ease. He captured the Patriots' Day marathon in Boston in 1907 to set a record.

Unlike Sockalexis, who was the quintessence of grace, Longboat was downright ungainly. Tall, exceedingly sparse and flatfooted, he cut anything but an attractive picture as he sped along the highways or around a dirt or board track. But he had a mechanical stride that was the essence of running perfection. He would settle into this gait, stay in it, wear down his opponent and still be firm in it as he finished, the victor.

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