

Say the name Jim Thorpe to many sports' fans and the first person with that name who may spring to mind might be an athlete who became the first Native American to win gold medals for the USA when he won both the Decathlon and the Pentathlon in the 1912 Olympics. He is also remembered because later he was stripped of those when it was discovered that he had been paid for playing American Football.

But if you ask a knowledgeable Sunderland fan who Jim Thorpe was, they'll immediately tell you the tragic story of James Horatio Thorpe.

Jimmy Thorpe was a Jarrow lad and at the age of 22 considered to be one of the best young goalkeepers in the country. He was diabetic and needed to take insulin to regulate his blood/sugar levels but on February 1st 1936 was making his 52nd consecutive appearance for the Black Cats – a game which was to be his 139th and last ever game.



The opponents were Chelsea and the game was later described as one of the most violent that had ever been played. In those days it was still legal for players to try and kick the ball out of the keeper's hands and in trying to protect the ball, Thorpe received several kicks to the head.

There were no substitutes of course in those days and he carried on playing, but was to make some uncharacteristic errors, two of which led to Chelsea goals. The game finished at three all and the visitors with only ten men after their right half Billy Mitchell had been sent off.

Afterwards Thorpe was showing some physical signs of injury but said he felt OK. However four days later he fell into a diabetic coma, which the coroner ruled had been precipitated by the rough treatment he had suffered during the game and which in turn led to serious heart failure. Despite this, in his verdict he made no reference to the physical injuries Thorpe had sustained and while it might be assumed that Chelsea could have been indicted for their rough play, or the referee to be criticised for not taking a firmer control of the game, the only conclusion that the FA came to was that Sunderland had been culpable of fielding a player in poor health. This despite the fact that he had been cleared to play by medical experts and the fact that diabetes on its own does not preclude anyone from taking part in sport, something which was known even back then.



However, Jim Thorpe's death did eventually lead to a rule change which made it illegal for players to use a foot in an attempt to dislodge the ball when in possession of the goalkeeper.

Jimmy Thorpe had already played 26 games in the 1935/36 season which ended with Sunderland as Champions of England. The winners' medal to which he was entitled was presented to his wife and three year old son at the Championship dinner at the end of the season and in 2013, 75 years after he died Sunderland and Chelsea players wore

black armbands in his memory.