

The Team That Invented College Football

JUST 22 YEARS AFTER THE BATTLE OF WOUNDED KNEE, THE CARLISLE INDIANS, COACHED BY GLENN (POP) WARNER, TRANSFORMED A PLODDING, BRUTAL AND DULL SPORT INTO THE FAST, INTRICATE AND EXCITING GAME WE KNOW TODAY

Sally Jenkins

THE GAME, LIKE THE COUNTRY IN WHICH IT WAS CREATED, WAS A ROUGH, BASTARDIZED thing that jumped up out of the mud. What was football but barely legalized fighting? On the raw afternoon of Nov. 9, 1912, it was no small reflection of the American character. The coach of the Carlisle Indian School, Glenn Scobey (Pop) Warner, strode up and down the visitors' locker room, a Turkish Trophy cigarette forked between his fingers. Warner, slab-faced and profane, wasn't one for speeches, unless cussing counted. But he was about to make an exception. The 22 members of the Carlisle team sat, tensing, on rows of wooden benches. Some of them laced up ankle-high leather cleats, as thick-soled as jackboots. Others pulled up heavy football pants, which bagged around their thighs like quilts. They shrugged into bulky scarlet sweaters with flannel stuffed in the shoulders for padding. Flap-eared leather helmets sat on the benches next to them, as stiff as picnic baskets.

Often Warner was at a loss to inspire the Indians. He didn't always understand their motives, and he had put his boot in their backsides on more than one occasion. Jim Thorpe could be especially galling. The 25-year-old Oklahoman from the Sauk and Fox tribe had an introverted disposition and a carelessness that baffled Warner. But on this Saturday afternoon Warner knew just how to reach Thorpe—and his teammates. Carlisle, the nation's flagship institution for Native Americans, was to meet the U.S. Military Academy in a showdown between two of the top football teams in the country.

It was an exquisitely apt piece of national theater: a contest between Indians and soldiers. The officers-in-training in the home locker room represented a military legacy that taunted the Indians. The frontier battles between Native Americans and the saber-waving U.S. Army "long knives" were fresh in the players' minds—Warner had been reminding them of the subject all week. "I shouldn't have to prepare you for this game," the coach had told them. "Just go to your rooms and read your history books."

Only 22 years earlier, on Dec. 29, 1890, the U.S. Army had massacred Spotted Elk's band at Wounded Knee in the last major confrontation between the military and American Indians. Feelings between the Army and tribesmen still ran so high that this was just the second time they had been allowed to meet on a sports field.

Under a slate-colored sky, 5,000 people filled the grandstands that ringed Army Field in West Point, N.Y. Among them was silver-mustached Walter Camp, the sport's eminence and the arbiter of All-Americans. Correspondents from *The New York Times*, the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Herald* scribbled bad Indian metaphors in their notebooks.

It was an audience steeped in frontier lore, raised on blood-curdling newspaper accounts of "hostiles," Western dime novels and, of course, on *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*. The rising popularity of football had closely followed the ebbing of the frontier wars. Harvard, Princeton, Yale and Columbia had formed the Intercollegiate Football Association on Nov. 23, 1876—just four months after the annihilation of Gen. George Armstrong Custer's troops at Little Big Horn. By the 1890s Victorian America was intensely preoccupied with the sport as a new male proving ground and a remedy for the neurasthenia of the age. On quadrangles across the country, collegians slammed into one another until the blood and spittle flew, and leviathan stadiums were built to accommodate the growing pastime.

One of the campuses most obsessed with football was West Point. Participation in the game was almost a requirement for the truly ambitious Cadet; the Army locker room on the day of the Carlisle game contained no fewer than *nine* future generals. And the Cadets loved the most bullying form of football. They were a squad of imposing brawn: Army's captain, Leland Devore, stood 6' 6" and weighed 240 pounds. In the backfield was an iron-legged halfback named Dwight David Eisenhower, who was known for punishing opponents. The coach of the 1912 team, a martinet named Ernest (Pot) Graves, had looked at a steamroller parked outside the West Point officers' club and said, "There is my idea of football."

In Carlisle the Cadets met their philosophic and stylistic opposite. The Indians were significantly smaller than Army, but they were renowned for their dazzling sleight of hand and for the breathtaking speed of their star runner, the Olympian Thorpe. Under Warner's creative tutelage the team had mastered an astounding array of trick plays—reverses, end-arounds, flea-flickers—and forward passes. Their talent for deception was born partly of necessity: With a student body of just 1,000, ranging in age from 12 to 25, Carlisle was perpetually

undermanned. But deception also suited the Indians' keen sense of injustice at the hands of whites. "Nothing delighted them more than to outsmart the palefaces," Warner observed. "There was never a time when they wouldn't rather have won by an eyelash with some wily stratagem than by a large score with straight football."

Ironically, it was a soldier who had founded Carlisle. Richard Henry Pratt, a cavalry officer who had commanded the all-black Buffalo Soldiers in the frontier wars, established the school in an old Army barracks in Pennsylvania in 1879 for the purpose of "civilizing" Indian children. It was a harsh social experiment—as Pratt liked to declaim, *Kill the Indian, save the man*. Carlisle students were forbidden to speak their tribal languages, paint their skin or wear braids or blankets. The school clothed them in surplus military uniforms and taught them to march like soldiers.

On Carlisle's athletic green, however, an altogether different experiment took place, this one conducted by the pupils. The record books couldn't convey just how innovative and influential the Carlisle football teams were. Every time a quarterback today feigns a handoff or rears back to throw, he owes a debt to the Indians. Before Carlisle, football was a dull and brutal game, wedges of men pushing one another around in the dirt. The Indians found new ways to win, and they transformed the game into the thrilling high-speed chase it is now.

They didn't change just football. They changed prevailing ideas about Native Americans. To well-meaning missionaries, land-grabbing politicians and *Wild West Show* audiences, Indians were heathen, degraded, mentally inferior or simply assigned by God to be victims. The Carlisle players were different: They were winners.

But against Army, simply winning wasn't good enough. The Indians intended to win in a certain way. Warner had developed an extraordinary new offense: an exercise in exact timing, artfully disguised ball handling and, above all, speed. The Indians had held it under wraps game after game. When Warner asked them against which opponent they wanted to debut the scheme, they had been unanimous: "The soldiers."

As the Indians finished dressing, Warner surveyed the locker room. There was quarterback Gus Welch, the orphaned Chippewa from Wisconsin, slightly built but with a conjurer's quickness of foot and hand. There was tackle Pete Calac, a Mission Indian from Fall Brook, Calif., who had lost two siblings to typhoid and came to Carlisle on the Union Pacific with only a third-grade education. Then there was Thorpe, sleepy-eyed yet with a buried intensity. Warner took a few minutes to review the new game plan. Then, when he was sure each player understood his assignment, he addressed them all. "Your fathers and your grandfathers," Warner began, "fought their fathers. These men playing against you today are soldiers. They are the Long Knives. You are Indians. Tonight, we will know if you are warriors."

ON A SEPTEMBER DAY IN 1899 WARNER STOOD ON the Carlisle practice field, a piece of hardpan that could chip the blade off a shovel. It was an uneven, rock-strewn acre irrigated with the Indians' sweat. The players themselves had dug the field, measured it, graded it and sodded it.

The newly arrived coach scrutinized his football team. His heart dropped to his shoes. The players were "listless and scrawny, many looking as if they had been drawn through a knothole," he would recall later.

Warner was 28 when he was hired by Carlisle on the recommendation of Camp, for whom he had played at Cornell before going on to coach football at Georgia, Iowa State and his alma mater. Warner had a reputation for creativity: At Georgia he had experimented with the screen pass and the tackling dummy. When Pratt approached him to become Carlisle's athletic director, Warner was intrigued. The Indians had begun playing intercollegiate football four years earlier. Cornell had beaten them 23-6 during the '98 season, but, Warner would recall, "the Indian boys appealed to my football imagination." Also, Pratt offered him \$1,200, a salary almost unheard of for a coach.

The first practices went slowly. A number of the players didn't speak English, and when Warner wanted them to do something he had to gesture with his cigarette. Gradually coach and players got better acquainted, and Warner found they had something important in common: audacity. The coach was brimming with fresh theories, and the Indians were open to all of them. Best of all, they were fast learners. "After a week or so of keen-eyed watching," Warner remarked, "these beginners would turn and do the thing as though they had been trained to do it their whole lives."

The Indians lacked size, so Warner developed techniques to exploit their speed and agility. He invented the body block. The standard method of blocking was with the shoulder, but Warner taught the Indians to roll and use the length of their bodies to cut their opponents down at the knees. Quick, low line charges became their hallmark.

Next Warner came up with the crouching start. The normal position for a running back was upright, with his feet apart, hands on knees. But it occurred to Warner that a runner could fire more quickly from a coiled position. He had the Carlisle backs crouch and push off with one or both hands.

The Indians opened the 1899 season with four straight victories. Then, on Oct. 14, they met Pennsylvania, a team that featured three All-Americans. The Quakers had beaten Carlisle by an average of 24 points in their four previous meetings, but they weren't prepared for the speed with which these Warner-coached players jumped off the lines. Carlisle never trailed on its way to a 16-5 victory.

The Indians went on to an 8-2 season, their only losses coming to the Nos. 1 and 2 teams in the country, Princeton and Harvard, respectively. On Thanksgiving Day, Carlisle met Columbia at New York City's Polo Grounds. The Indians put on a virtuoso exhibition of their new techniques and formations, including a baffling line shift: The entire team moved to one side of the center, and on a signal the unbalanced line surged forward, followed by a ballcarrier.

Carlisle's Isaac Seneca vaulted out of his three-point stance to rip off gains of 25 and 30 yards. He scored twice, while Frank Hudson drop-kicked four field goals. The final score was 42-0, and Columbia's players retreated to their dressing room in shame. The Indians were rewarded with a No. 4 national ranking by Camp, who named Seneca a first-team All-America at running back—the only honoree who didn't attend an Ivy League school.

FOOTBALL AND CARLISLE BECAME INDIVISIBLE. Warner created an ambitious junior varsity nicknamed the Hotshots, and the field house and gymnasium were hives of constant training. Nevertheless, the Carlisle varsity was perennially shorthanded. It had to cull an 11 from just a couple of hundred fit male students, most of whom had vastly less experience than their collegiate counterparts.

Physical toughness became their hallmark. "Gameness," Warner said in 1902, "was a marked characteristic of every Carlisle boy." A short but stout Alaskan named Nikifer Shouchuk fashioned himself into a center and held his own against the best in the country. During a game against Harvard, Crimson captain Carl Marshall berated his own center. "A big fellow like you," he said, "weighing twice as much as that little Indian, and letting him carry you around on his back all afternoon!"

By 1902 Carlisle was more deceptive than ever. One piece of razzle-dazzle installed by Warner was the double pass: Quarterback Jimmie Johnson would toss the ball to a halfback sweeping laterally—who then tossed it back. Under the quick-footed Johnson, a future All-America, the shifting Carlisle lines looked like a deck of cards being shuffled.

One afternoon Warner introduced the Indians to a play he had dreamed up when he coached at Cornell. It was called the Hunchback, and it required a sewing machine. Warner had Carlisle's tailor, Mose Blumenthal, sew elastic bands into the waists of a few players' jerseys. Among those was the shirt of Charles Dillon, a Sioux guard who could run 100 yards in 10 seconds. Warner instructed Dillon to wear the jersey untucked, so the opposition would get used to seeing it that way.

The play was designed for a kickoff. As the ball descended into the arms of Johnson, the other players would huddle around him. Hidden from view, Johnson would slip the ball up the back of Dillon's jersey and secure it with the waistband. The huddle would then split apart, leaving the opposing team with no idea where the ball had gone.

The play would punish any team that took Carlisle lightly. One school had a particular tendency to do so: Harvard. Though they'd never beaten the Crimson, the Indians had always given them a game. Carlisle both admired and resented Harvard.

By the time the Indians checked into the Copley Square Hotel in Boston on Oct. 30, 1902, they had a 5-1 record, but the Crimson dwarfed them. Carlisle's heaviest player was the center, Shouchuk, at 165 pounds, while two Harvard linemen weighed in at 215. But Johnson directed the Indians in lightning line charges, and the Crimson defense ripped like paper. Carlisle constantly shifted and realigned, tossing the ball back and forth. Johnson would fake a run to the outside—only to hand the ball to Albert Exendine coming around from the end. After the Indians moved all the way to the Harvard 18-yard line, Johnson kicked a field goal, which in those days was worth five points. The score was still 5-0 as the first half ended. Warner was emboldened. In the locker room he called the play his team had been waiting for all season. On the kickoff, he said, run the Hunchback.

Back on the field Johnson and Dillon dropped back to the five-yard line. Harvard's kicker sent the ball into the air. Johnson gathered it in, and the Indians formed a wall in front of him. Exendine pulled out the back of Dillon's jersey, and Johnson slipped the ball beneath it and yelled, "Go!"

The Indians scattered, each player hugging his stomach as if he held the ball. The Harvard players bore down on them and began slamming Carlisle backs to the turf. Marshall was playing safety, and as Dillon ran toward him, his arms swinging freely, Marshall, thinking he was a blocker, stepped neatly out of the way and let him go by. After 30 yards Dillon was alone. As the Crimson scuttled around, wildly looking for the ball, the crowd of 12,000 noticed the bulge in the back of Dillon's jersey and began to shriek with laughter. Finally Marshall understood what was happening. He wheeled and chased vainly after Dillon for the last several yards.

A celebration erupted on the Carlisle sideline. The Indians had just outwitted and embarrassed the foremost university in the country—Carlisle style—and taken an 11-0 lead. "I don't think any one thing ever gave them greater joy," Warner said later.

The Crimson was incensed, and the game from then on was a mauling. Harvard's superior size and depth began to tell. The Crimson flooded the field with fresh players who exhausted the Indians' starters. Harvard bulled its way over the line for a touchdown. To Warner it seemed that "every Indian was out on his feet." Harvard scored again and held on for a 12-11 victory. "For once, however, there was no mourning after a loss," Warner remembered.

For the first time the Indians were credited with intelligence. The *New York World* ran a series of stories explaining and diagramming the play. The paper's leading sportswriter, Charles Chadwick, a former Yale football star who had often written patronizingly of the Indians, now wrote, "The poor Indian, so often sized up as deficient in headwork, has at last earned the right to be considered as something more than a tireless, clumsy piece of football mechanism. He is now to be regarded as a person of craft. He has added his quota to the history of strategic football."

IN LATE DECEMBER 1905 representatives of 28 major colleges met and formed the National Intercollegiate Football Conference. They charged a seven-member rules committee with developing a safer, cleaner sport. Over heated objections from Camp they instituted a half-dozen rule changes. Mass-momentum plays were forbidden. Teams now had to move 10 yards for a first down instead of five, which took the emphasis off pure strength in the center of the field. Most innovative of all, the forward pass was legalized, though with an inhibitor: A team that threw the ball and failed to complete the pass would be penalized 15 yards.

By 1907 the Indians had become the country's most dynamic college team as they pioneered the elegant, high-speed invention called the passing game. In popular histories the first use of the forward pass on a major collegiate stage tends to be wrongly ascribed to Notre Dame and the tandem of Gus Dorais and Knute Rockne, in 1913. In fact Carlisle was the first team to throw the ball deeply and regularly downfield, in 1907.

The Carlisle squad that gathered on the practice field in September 1907 was the school's most talented ever. The quarterback was Frank Mount Pleasant, a 19-year-old Tuscarora-Iroquois chief's son from just outside Niagara Falls. He wasn't the only member of the team who could throw the ball. So could Pete Hauser, a burly 21-year-old Cheyenne from Oklahoma, who lined up at fullback.

To take advantage of the Indians' versatility Warner drew up a new offense. Camp would dub it the Carlisle formation, but later it would be known as the single wing. It was predicated on one small move: Warner shifted a halfback out wide, to outflank the opposing tackle, forming something that looked like a wing. It opened up a world of possibilities. No one would know whether they were going to run, pass or kick. For added measure Warner taught his quarterbacks to sprint out a few yards to their left or their right, buying more time to throw. The rest of the players flooded downfield and knocked down any opponent who might be able to intercept or bat away the pass.

"How the Indians did take to it!" Warner remembered. "Light on their feet as professional dancers, and every one amazingly skillful with his hands, the redskins pirouetted in and out until the receiver was well down the field, and then they shot the ball like a bullet." Carlisle roared off to a 6-0 start. On Oct. 26 they went to Philadelphia to face unbeaten Penn, ranked fourth in the nation, before a crowd of 22,800. No team all season had crossed the Quakers' goal line. But on just the second play of the game Hauser whipped a 40-yard pass over the middle that William Gardner caught on a dead run to set up a touchdown.

There are a few signal moments in the evolution of football, and this was one of them. Imagine the confusion of the defenders. Suddenly the center snapped the ball three yards deep to a man who was a powerful runner, a deadeye passer and a great kicker. Hauser's pass to Gardner must have felt like an electric charge. "It will be talked of often this year," the Philadelphia *North American* said. "A lordly throw, a hurl that went farther than many a kick." It was the sporting equivalent of the Wright brothers' taking off at Kitty Hawk. From that moment on, Carlisle threw all over the field.

"The forward pass was child's play," the *New York Herald* reported. The Indians "tried it on the first down, on the second down, on the third down—any down and in any emergency—and it was seldom that they did not make something with it."

There was one other significant event that day: Jim Thorpe's debut. In the first half the Indians' veteran starter at halfback, Albert Payne, wrenched his knee. Thorpe, then 19, was so excited that the first time Carlisle called his number he ran away from his blockers and was buried under a pile of tacklers. On the next play he gained 45 yards.

The Indians outgained Penn 402 yards to 76. Carlisle's fakes and feints so confused the Quakers that they "finally reached a point where the players ran in circles emitting wild yawns," Warner remembered. Carlisle won 26-6.

Two weeks later the Indians were in Cambridge for the game that was annually the emotional high point of their season: Harvard. In 10 previous meetings Carlisle had never beaten the Crimson. But this time the Indians were convinced they had the superior team. The game wasn't seven minutes old when Mount Pleasant struck Exendine with a 45-yard pass that the end gathered in at Harvard's three to set up a Carlisle touchdown. From then on the Crimson didn't know where to look. "Only when a redskin shot out of the hopeless maze...could it be told with any degree of certainty just where the attack was directed," the *Boston Herald* reported.

The Indians scored three more times that afternoon. Payne started around end as if to run—but pulled up short and heaved a scoring pass all the way across the field. Then Hauser caught a 31-yard pass from Mount Pleasant. Last but not least, Mount Pleasant wove through the entire Harvard defense on an 80-yard punt return.

The final score was 23-15. From Boston to New York City, Carlisle's victory was front-page news. CRIMSON HOPELESSLY BAFFLED BY BRILLIANT TACTICS OF REDSKINS, one headline announced. But the real story wasn't that a team of Indians had beaten Harvard. It was that they were the masters of a new sport. Carlisle football, mixing the run, pass and kick with elements of surprise, was the game of the future.

THE THEFT OF TRIBAL LANDS WAS A STANDING source of jokes on the Carlisle football team. After a bad call from a referee, the Indians would say, "What's the use of crying about a few inches when the white man has taken the whole country?"

The 1912 Indians were a team of rampant high spirits. The players—including Thorpe, who earlier in the year had won gold medals in the decathlon and pentathlon at the Stockholm Olympics—took pride in the fact that so many disparate characters from so many tribes, regions and circumstances could form such a brilliant whole. They were also well aware that they were "making a record for their race," as Superintendent Pratt put it. In fact, they would literally set a record: Carlisle became the highest-scoring team in the country.

Over the first four games of the season the Indians averaged almost 50 points. Under quarterback Gus Welch their offense kept opponents off-balance and out of breath. Without huddling they would run a series of plays as Welch reeled off audibles or used hand gestures to make adjustments. Some of the gestures were Indian signs.

The team was improved by the addition of two wildly talented running backs who had recently been promoted from the Hotshots, Pete Calac and future All-America Joe Guyon. The Indians experienced just one hitch, in a game against Washington and Jefferson, which they did not take seriously. Thorpe missed three field goals, while Welch indulged in overly flamboyant signals that annoyed Warner. As the coach stalked the sideline in mounting frustration, the Indians fumbled around, and the game ended in a scoreless tie.

Chastened, the Indians blew out Syracuse 33-0, Pitt 45-8 and Georgetown 34-20. They became so cocksure that they taunted Lehigh with their signal-calling in a 34-14 victory. A player in the backfield would yell, "What about going around right end this time?" Then they would race around right end. The Lehigh victory gave the Indians a 10-0-1 record. But that's when the joking stopped. The following week they were going to West Point for the fight of their careers.

Army was in the midst of a four-year stretch during which it went 28-5-1. Cadets tackle Alexander Weyand was a 200-pound sophomore and a tireless one-man wrecking crew. In 1911 he sent two Yale men to the sideline, one with a broken collarbone and one with an injured knee. Leland Devore outweighed Weyand by 40 pounds. In the Cadets' backfield were four future World War II generals: Eisenhower, Geoffrey Keyes, Leland Hobbs and Vernon Prichard. Eisenhower had just average speed and weighed only 175 pounds, but, he said, "I so loved the fierce bodily contact of football that I suppose my enthusiasm made up somewhat for my lack of size."

The Army-Carlisle game had national implications for both teams. The Cadets, who had the best defense in the nation, had lost only once, to Yale 6-0. With a win over Carlisle they had a chance to be No. 1 in the year-end rankings. While the Indians had the best offense in the land, commentators suggested they had run up their extravagant scores against weaker competition. A defeat of gritty Army would end all

argument and establish them as front-runners for the title of best team in the country. Then there was the longer view. For Welch, the game couldn't help but recall "the real war out in the West."

The Indians' opening play from scrimmage made football history: Welch and the Carlisle offense lined up in the first double wing formation, which Warner had designed and the players had reserved expressly for Army. Both halfbacks shifted closer to the line, just outside the defensive tackles. The formation infinitely multiplied the Indians' options for trick plays. Anything could happen: Welch, Thorpe and running back Alex Arcasa might run, fake, reverse, pitch, block, catch passes or throw them. "Football began to have the sweep of a prairie fire," Warner observed.

The scheme played havoc with Army—and electrified the crowd. The Indians sheared off huge chunks of yardage. "The shifting, puzzling, and dazzling attack of the Carlisle Indians had the Cadets bordering on a panic," the *New York Tribune* observed. "None of the Army men seemed to know just where the ball was."

Army scored first, however, when Hobbs broke loose around right end for a touchdown. But Prichard missed the extra point, and the Indians countered immediately with a drive to take the lead. The Cadets tried vainly to defend with a seven-man line, as Eisenhower and his partner at linebacker, Charles Benedict, double-teamed Thorpe. It didn't work. "Starting like a streak, he shot through the line, scattering tacklers to all sides of him," the *Tribune* reported.

On play after play the Indians showed up Devore. Just after the second-half kickoff, the Army captain lost his temper. As Guyon lay on the field, Devore took a running start and stamped on the Carlisle back. The crowd hissed, and Devore was thrown out of the game. The Indians responded with a seven-play scoring drive to take a 14-6 lead, and from then on they totally outplayed the Cadets. Thorpe, in his greatest performance as a college player, ripped off 20-yard gains as if they were nothing. Once, when Eisenhower and Benedict seemed to have him cornered, Thorpe stopped short. The two defenders crashed head on, and Thorpe galloped past them. His runs set up three touchdowns by Arcasa, whose scoring was merely the finishing touch. Thorpe made one last spectacular play, a circus catch of a 40-yard pass while surrounded by defenders. The final score was 27-6.

The Indians, joyous, spent and bruised, boarded a train for the trip home. As they seated themselves, a distinguished looking gentleman with a silver mustache joined them. Walter Camp introduced himself and congratulated the players on their victory.

All the way to New York City the Indians and the arbiter of the game quizzed each other and exchanged thoughts on strategy. Camp said he greatly admired the team, but he didn't understand its lightning style. "Your quarterback calls plays too fast," he said. "He doesn't study the defense."

Thorpe replied that speed was the point. "Mister Camp," he said, "how can he study the defense when there isn't any defense?"

The next day *The New York Times* called the Indians "one of the most spectacular aggregations of football players, especially in the backfield, ever assembled." They had played, the paper concluded, "the most perfect brand of football ever seen in America."

Every member of the Carlisle team considered it the most satisfying game he had ever won. "The rattling of the bones," Welch called it.

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