

Wilson “Buster” Charles, Jr. Native American Olympian

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Twenty years after Jim Thorpe electrified followers of Olympic affairs by winning both the pentathlon and decathlon events in Stockholm in 1912 and being declared by King Gustav as “the finest athlete in the world,” another distinguished Indian decathlete appeared at an Olympic festival, dredging up all kinds of nostalgia and performance comparisons. That individual was Wilson “Buster” Charles, a strapping member of the Oneida tribe.

Although physically impaired from the effects of a broken back sustained in a college football game six months before the 1932 Olympic Games were scheduled to be held, Charles’ performance at Los Angeles not only exceeded the world marks established by the legendary Thorpe at Stockholm, but, by comparison to current decathlon scoring tables (adopted in 1985), would have exceeded (by 88 points) the gold medal performance in the 1948 Olympic decathlon of the sensational Bob Mathias.

The fourth native American Indian to compete in the Olympic Games is now 85 years old and lives with his wife, Nola, at Camp Verde, Arizona. He is a member of the American Indian Sports Hall of Fame, and once played football here in Albuquerque for the University of New Mexico. His story deserves being told.