

'Native Sport' celebrates Native Americans in athletics

The Josephy Center exhibit is open through May 12

By Katy Nesbitt
Go! Magazine

JOSEPHY — Native American excellence in athletics is celebrated through art at the Josephy Center for Arts and Culture in a special exhibit open through May 12.

Rich Wandschneider, library director at Josephy, said the Northwest tribes were introduced to horses in the 1600s and raised large herds. By the late 1800s tribal members were showing off their trick roping and riding at Wild West shows and entering rodeos.

The fabled saddle bronc rider Jackson Sundown is a household name in North-eastern Oregon. After a few attempts, he was the saddle bronc 1916 Pendleton Roundup champion at 53 years old — one of the oldest cowboys to ever win the prize.

Jackson was a 14-year-old refugee of



Josephy Center/Contributed image

The "Native Sport" exhibit at the Josephy Center celebrates Native American athletics, such as Phillip Malatare from the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana, where he played high school ball for the Arlee Warriors. The Warriors won the state small school championship in 2017.

the Nez Perce War in 1877.

"Sundown escaped to Canada at the end of the war and first competed in saddle bronc while living on the Flathead Reservation," Wandschneider said.

Levi McCormack was a three-sport star at Washington State University. After college he chose to play baseball professionally in Lewiston, Spokane and Seattle.

His career was interrupted while he served in the Navy during World War II, but he returned to the Northwest to play baseball.

"When they rebuilt the baseball stadium in Spokane, Levi was recognized in the 'Rim of Honor,'" Wandschneider said.

McCormack is one of four permanent members of the Spokane Indians' "Rim of Honor," according to the team's website.

Wandschneider said about half of the exhibit is from Tamastlikt Cultural Institute and the other half is new. Wanting to highlight a sport with which Wallowa County residents and visitors are familiar, he added powwow competitive dancing, a highlight of the annual Tamkaliks Celebration in Wallowa.

Another sport with a local audience in the exhibit is wild horse racing, which was included the last several years in the Mountain High Broncs and Bulls Rodeo.

The exhibit's opening panel is dedicated to arguably the Inland Northwest tribes' favorite sport — basketball. Wandschneider said the Lapwai High School boys and girls are state champions several times

over and Nixya'awii Community School from Mission is considered a fierce competitor with Wallowa County schools.

"Basketball is the reservation game," Wandschneider said.

Sports like baseball, football and basketball were taught to Native Americans living in U.S. government boarding schools. Jim Thorpe, featured in the exhibit, is one of the most famous athletes to come out of the boarding schools.

A member of the Sac and Fox Nation in Oklahoma, as a youth Thorpe attended Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where he was a two-time All-American for the school's football team under coach Pop Warner. He also won two Olympic gold medals in the 1912 Summer Olympics in classic pentathlon and the decathlon, and played American football in college and professionally, as well as professional baseball and basketball.

The Josephy Center, 403 N. Main St., is open Monday through Saturday, 9 a.m.-4 p.m. For more information, visit josephy.org.

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