

Hall of Fame

Punt, pass, and kick

Ray Thorpe led the Knights to a gridiron state title with his unmatched versatility

By JOHN GORALSKI
SPORTS WRITER

There was very little hype when Ray Thorpe showed up in the hallways of Southington High School in the mid-1950s. There were no youth coaches heralding his athleticism, and no group of parents championing his skills. There was nothing to signal Thorpe's arrival in high school sports. His own mother was rooting against him.

"My mother wanted me to be in the band," he said with a laugh almost six decades later, but that didn't shake him. Thorpe tried out for football as a sophomore and made the team. He survived his first couple of seasons, and emerged in his senior season as one of the most versatile players in team history.

Hall of Fame


"I can remember that the equipment wasn't much, and I started out at defensive end," he said. "I can remember getting beaten up pretty good, but I kept coming back for more, and it went from there."

Thorpe was a three-sport athlete at the high school, but he roamed the outfield in general obscurity and battled for rebounds in the winter as one of the basketball team's role players. Then, in his senior season, Thorpe finally got his chance.

"He could throw, and he could run. He'd get the ball from the center, and when he would sprint out to the right you didn't know if he was going to run or throw. He was that dangerous," said Joe Orsene, a former Blue Knight assistant coach. "They used to call them triple threats in those days. He could run, throw, or punt the ball."

It didn't come easy. Thorpe credits his off-season work for his sudden rise. He timed himself in wind sprints between telephone poles. He spent the summer at the beach, running barefoot in the sand and racing through agility drills in the rocks and the surf. He practiced his punts with an old football that his coach lent him for the off-season. When preseason began, Thorpe surprised everyone. "I will never forget it," said former Blue Knight quarterback Andy Meade. "Ray was so-so as a sophomore, but he came back in his junior year and he had been working out all year down at the beach. He was running. He was doing this and that and the other thing. Jay Fontana put him in at tailback, and nobody could stop him. He ran. He passed. He was tremendous."

As good as he was as a junior, it was his senior season that really set him apart. Fontana moaned to the newspapers during the 1954 preseason. Southington was coming off a promising 8-2 season, but they couldn't attract enough players for preseason scrimmages. Still, he had a group of five running



**Southington Sports
Hall of Fame**

Inside the Numbers

Football

- Member of the 1954 Class B state champion team.
- All-American (Sporting News, 1954).
- All-State (1954).
- 4 Varsity letters (1952, 1953, 1954)
- Junior Chamber of Commerce MVP (Thanksgiving, 1954).
- Player of the Week (NH Register, Oct. 16, 1954)

1954 Scoring—Scored 157 points with 24 touchdowns and 13 PATs (11 running TDs, 9 throwing TDs, 3 defensive/special team TDs)

Basketball

- 2 Varsity letters (1952-53, 1953-54).
- Member of the 1952-53 undefeated team.

Baseball

- 3 Varsity letters (1953, 1954, 1955).



He'd get the ball from the center, and when he would sprint out to the right you didn't know if he was going to run or throw. He was that dangerous. They used to call them triple threats in those days. He could run, throw, or punt the ball.



Joe Orsene,
Former SHS football coach

backs to usher in and out of his single-wing offense, and one of those players was Thorpe.

"Don't get me wrong," Fontana said to reporters at the start of September. "The boys we have are good, and I'm not worried about our first team. But I want depth—got to have it. We've got to have it to carry us through a season."

As it turned out, all they needed was Thorpe. The rangy fullback assaulted East Haven in the season opener, threading a pair of touchdown passes and ran in for another. He matched that total against Woodrow Wilson in week two, and he scrambled for 142 yards against Darien in the week that followed.

Thorpe steamrolled through the competition, collecting 24 touchdowns and completing 13 extra-point conversions. He ran for 11 scores. He threw for another nine. He returned three scores on defense and special teams. Even when he wasn't scoring, Thorpe was the go-to person in Southington's attack. He punted

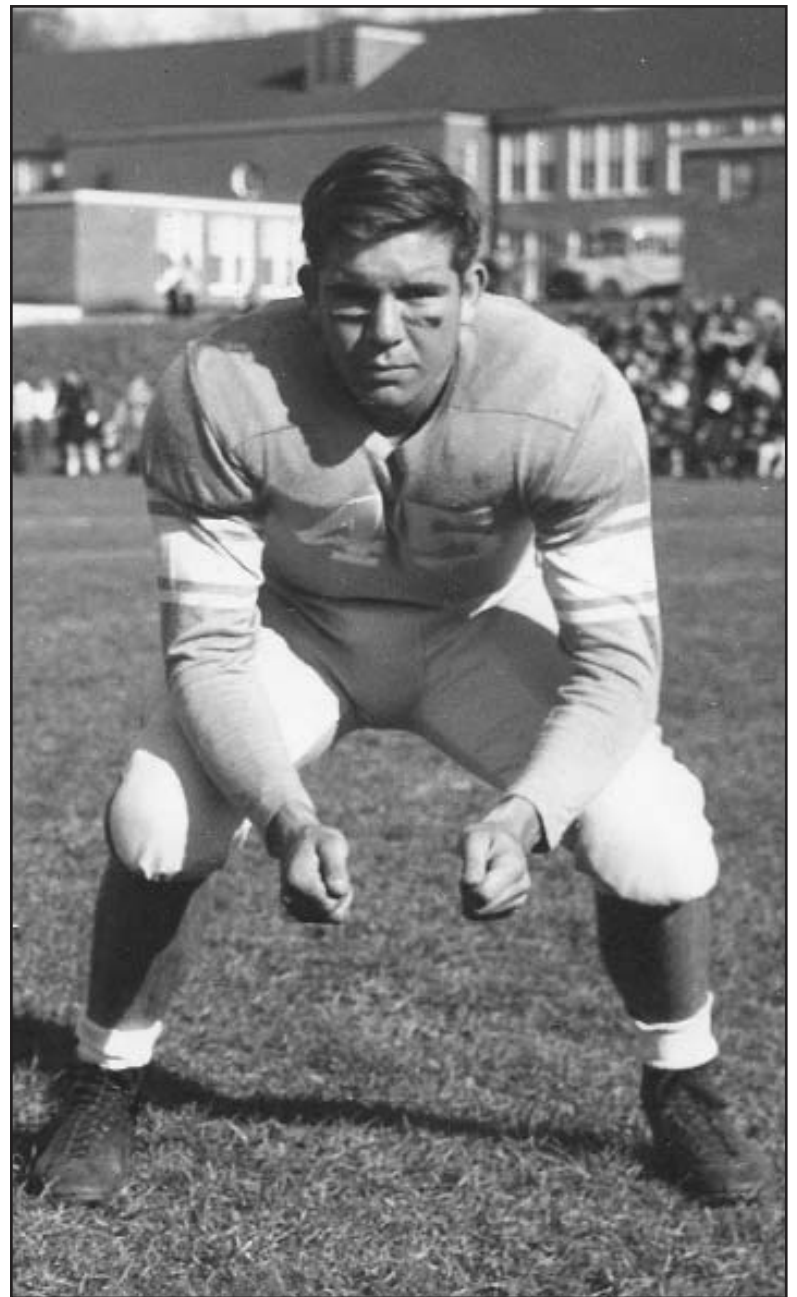
with such accuracy that he pinned opponents deep in their own zone.

Thorpe turned the single wing offense—a running attack—into a kamikaze blitz. He was tagged by Fontana as the team's most improved player, and nobody could stop him. Thorpe became known for his versatility.

"He's just one of those natural athletes," said Meade. "If you took him out on the golf course, he'd probably kick your butt. If you took him on the tennis court, he was just a natural. In those days, we had football, baseball, and basketball, but Ray was just a gifted athlete at everything."

Fontana continued to put the ball in Thorpe's hands, and he continued to deliver. Southington outscored opponents, 329-57, and Thorpe accounted for almost half of the team's scoring.

"I did it all to help the team," he said. "Football is, in my opinion, one of the ultimate team sports. Andy Meade was a blocking quarterback, and if he didn't make some of those blocks or take out



SUBMITTED

Ray Thorpe led the Blue Knights to an 8-0 record and a Class B state title in 1954 with 24 touchdowns and 13 extra point conversions.

that end, I wasn't going anywhere. If Jerry Clements didn't pick up the pass, it wouldn't have mattered."

Still, Thorpe took advantage of every opportunity as the Knights aimed their sights at the town's second undefeated season. During a 60-12 victory over Plainville, the 170-pound back scored twice on the ground and completed a trio of touchdown passes. He converted six extra point kicks and returned an interception 105 yards for a late score.

"What I remember is that Jay let me play a lot more defense than he did in the other previous games," said Thorpe. "I remember [the interception] was a long one, but I just happened to be in the right spot at the right time, I guess. It was just an instinctual thing. I intercepted the ball and ran."

Thorpe wasn't finished, and he saved his best for Thanksgiving Day. He scored on a 20-yard run from scrimmage. He raced into the end zone on a punt return that covered more than 50 yards. He scored on an interception from his own 15-yard line. He scored a fourth time with a pass that allowed receiver Jerry Clements to set a school record for receiving touchdowns. Thorpe kicked three extra points and passed for a fourth.

"The day before, a radio station was interviewing one of their captains, and he said, 'Southington's a very good team, but they're only an M school. They were a big school, and we were a small school,' Orsene said. 'Ray had one of those great days. He did

everything that day, and we won."

With a 46-0 shutout, Southington capped a perfect 8-0 record with a share of the state title. Southington was the only small school to break into the state's top 10. Thorpe was one of three Knights to earn all-state honors, and Sporting News named him to their all-American roster. Michigan State recruiters signed him to play for the Spartans, but he suffered a career-ending injury to his hand that sidelined him for good.

Thorpe credits his teammates for his own personal success. "We just played our game. We practiced, and we worked our butts off," he said. "I never sensed that there was anybody who thought he was any better than anyone else. We had a balanced team with a lot of weapons."

The 1954 team has always been ranked among the best in town history, and Thorpe's contribution didn't escape the notice of the Southington Sports Hall of Fame selection committee. On Wednesday, Nov. 9, he will be inducted into the local hall in a ceremony at the Aqua Turf Club in Plantsville.

"It was kind of a surprise. First, I wasn't aware that something like this existed. Second, it was so long ago that I never thought that anybody would remember," he said. "I want to be remembered as a team player. I tried to contribute, and I gave it my best shot. I knew I was a main contributor. I understand that, but that's only because of the position I held."