
ATHLETE ARTICLES

Chief Thunderbird / Jean Baptiste Paul

**“All the world knew him as Chief Thunderbird,
greatly skilled in athletic games and world champion wrestler.”**

Born in 1896 in Saanich B.C., Jean Baptiste Paul was a hereditary chief of the Tsartlip. “My people wanted to make a medicine man out of me”, Jean Baptiste recalls, “They kept putting me in cold water as part of the ritual. Finally I ran away, I wanted to become an athlete more than anything else.” He graduated from the University of Tacoma, lettering in a record eight sports: boxing, wrestling, baseball, basketball, track and field, football, soccer and lacrosse. He raced in the West Saanich 11 man war canoe. He boxed professionally, winning 27 of his 32 pro fights before breaking both his hands.

His wrestling career started as the result of a dare. At a Washington State carnival he challenged the wrestling champ in a side-show and won. It was the start of a professional career that lasted 265 matches and almost 25 years. He fought all comers including the formidable Ed ‘Strangler’ Lewis, immy ‘The Golden Greek’ Londos, and the Masked Marvel. An impressive figure with his huge 51 inch chest and deep rumbling voice, Jean Baptiste Paul took on the name Chief Thunderbird. When he stepped into the ring, to the pounding of drums, he wore a full headdress made of eagle feathers. He developed and employed a much-feared hold known as the ‘Saanich Snap’ similar to the ‘Indian Deathlock.’

He became known worldwide, traveling and fighting in every major city in North America. He wrestled on tours to England (twice), Scotland, Australia, New Zealand Hawaii, the Philippines and India. In Manila, when he stepped off the plane in war paint and feathered headdress, the startled locals who called the Pan American plane ‘The Thunderbird’, thought he was some sort of deity.

“I was a pretty important fellow there,” Chief Thunderbird said with a laugh. But ring injuries dogged his career. He suffered a cauliflower ear, he broke both his legs, several ribs, collar-bone and one arm. He had an ugly scar where an opponent bit him. He was finally forced into retirement when, in a bout with a U.S. marine judo instructor at the age of 59, he broke his left leg again in two places.

He died in November 1966 at the age of 71. A totem was erected in his honour and the inscription reads:
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CHIEF THUNDERBIRD

TSARTLIP / SAANICH



Indigenous Sports Gallery, BC Sports Hall of Fame