

The First Boys of Spring

A film by Larry Foley

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Beginning in 1886, baseball spring training was held for the first time in a southern city, not in Florida or Arizona, but in the Arkansas resort town of Hot Springs, and that's where the annual rite caught on. For parts of eight decades, many of the best who ever played the game, came to Hot Springs to shake off the rust from winters of sedentary indulgence to prepare for long seasons ahead, with such teams as the Red Sox, Dodgers, and Pirates—and the Negro League's Monarchs, Crawfords and Grays.

Winner of Mid-America Emmy Awards for Writing and Cultural Documentary, *The First Boys of Spring* is a one-hour documentary by filmmaker Larry Foley, Professor and Chair of Lemke Journalism Department at the University of Arkansas. Narrated by Academy Award winning actor Billy Bob Thornton, the film tells stories of baseball Hall of Famers who worked out, gambled and partied in Hot Springs, including Rube Foster, Cy Young, Satchel Paige, Honus Wagner and baseball's first superstar, Mike "King" Kelly.

The film aired twice in February 2016 on MLB Network, with multiple broadcasts on Fox sports networks in summer 2016. It was screened at two separate venues at National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, NY--11th Baseball Film Festival and 28th Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and American Culture. It was presented at 21st Baseball in Culture and Literature Conference, Ottawa (Kansas) University and at the Black Archives of Mid America in Kansas City. It premiered at the Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival, October 2015. The film received 2016 Best of Competition award from the International Broadcast Association's Festival of Media Arts. It was nominated for 4 Mid-America Emmy Awards in Cultural History, Editing, Musical Score and Writing.

A central figure in the film is a young Babe Ruth, who belted a 573-foot home run into the Arkansas Alligator Farm in March of 1918, while trying to convince Boston Red Sox management to play him every day, even though he was already one of the game's dominant pitchers.

In an era before weight training and performance enhancing drugs, it seems implausible, if not impossible to fathom a ballplayer, from any era, hitting a ball 573 feet. But remember, he was Babe Ruth. And as teammate Joe Dugan once said, "to understand him you had to understand this—he wasn't human!"

Other highlights include:

- The story of the 1886 Chicago White Stockings, the first team to travel to Hot Springs for spring training. The event was chronicled in the inaugural edition of *The Sporting News*, published March 17, 1886. According to team owner Al Spalding, “I have written to a professor down there and he is making arrangements to build a vat in which he can boil the whole nine at once—boil out the alcoholic microbes which may have impregnated the systems of these men during the winter while they have been away from me and (Cap) Anson.”
- John McGraw’s 1901 effort to circumvent the unwritten color barrier by attempting to pass off African-American infielder Charlie Grant as an American Indian named Chief Charlie Tokahoma of the Cherokee Nation. McGraw was in Hot Springs scouting talent for the Baltimore Orioles and Grant was working as a bellman at a local hotel. Charles Comiskey of the White Sox foiled the plan when he learned of McGraw’s scheme.
- Smoky Joe Wood’s frightening beaming of Pirate third baseman Bobby Byrne in March 1913. “Joe Wood had an incredibly fast, fast ball. The only other player he was compared with was Walter Johnson,” said author Gerald Wood. “Wood knew he was fast and he knew he had the potential to hurt people. It was something he carried with him his whole life.”
- Tales of what the players did in Hot Springs during the spring training heyday, including gambling, betting at the Oaklawn Park horse racing track, ostrich races and trips to the alligator farm to watch gators eating chickens.
- Stories about Negro League stars who trained in Arkansas including Cool Papa Bell, Josh Gibson and Oscar Charleston. While major league and Negro League players sometimes barnstormed together in the off-season, baseball remained a segregated game. There is no evidence black and white teams ever played one another on the fields of Hot Springs. “It was a parallel society in many respects,” said Ray Doswell, curator at the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City. “There was great baseball being played all around. There was great baseball being played in the white leagues and there was great baseball being played in the Negro major leagues.”
- Rare 1934 sound film of the Ray Doan baseball school and head instructor Rogers Hornsby. “One of the things that he enjoyed doing was to inculcate in them a love of baseball—a love of playing baseball,” said author Charles Alexander about Hornsby. “He always thought that was the only game. ‘Why would anybody play anything else?’”
- A trip to Cooperstown where two historians, Bill Jenkinson and Tim Reid, marvel at the early day stars enshrined at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and

Museum—names like Tris Speaker, Lefty Grove, “Cool Papa” Bell and Josh Gibson.

- A trip to the Hot Springs Historic Baseball Trail, which honors the legends of the game from an era when ballplayers looked forward to taking the train to Arkansas to practice and soak in the famous therapeutic mineral baths. “The tubs of bathhouse row attracted visitors from around the country. The healing waters brought relief from arthritis, rheumatism, or other discomforts long before drugs had been concocted to do the job,” wrote author Leigh Montville.