

HBO special looks at baseball's 'Golden Age'

Collector's-item footage is featured

By Steve Paschal

Once there was a time when baseball was a game.

Before the days when multimillion-dollar player contracts and massive exposure were made possible by the emergence of television as a social phenomenon, the game of baseball and the men who played it captured the American imagination. While America stumbled through a major Depression and into the second global war in two decades, players like Dizzy Dean, Lou Gehrig and Ted Williams kept the American spirit alive simply by chasing a ball between two chalk lines. That time has come to be called "The Golden Age of Baseball."

Thanks to the discovery of more than 40 hours of film footage, including never-before-seen color footage of Babe Ruth and Jackie Robinson as well as Gehrig and Williams, HBO and Black Canyon productions have recaptured that time in "When It Was a Game," debuting Monday, July 8, on HBO.

The documentary takes fans back to the days when the Braves were in Boston, the A's were in Philadelphia and most games were played during the day on grass fields. It visits now-legendary ballparks like Ebbets Field, the Polo Grounds and Comiskey Park, and offers highlights of the 1938 World Series between the New York Yankees and Chicago Cubs, played before the ivy-covered walls of Wrigley Field.

More than 40 Hall of Famers are represented in this look at our national pastime. Producers found the footage in the basements, attics and trunks of fans, former players, coaches and equipment managers. In addition, actors James Earl Jones, Jason Robards and Roy Scheider contribute readings from historic baseball lore.

The show offers a historical perspective on the game, beginning with the hard-nosed, Depression-era play of the St. Louis Cardinals' Gas House Gang, led by Dizzy Dean,

Pepper Martin and Leo Durocher. It recalls the days when President Franklin Roosevelt declared baseball so important to American morale that "they shouldn't quit playing just because there's a war on," and goes through the post-War battles between the New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox.

However, the documentary spends far too little time chronicling the most important event in the history of American sports: integration. There is some footage of Robinson, Roy Campanella, Willie Mays and Satchel Paige, but

there is no film of the old Negro Leagues and only passing reference to the fact that the bold, although long overdue, move by Branch Rickey and the Brooklyn Dodgers in bringing Robinson into the Major Leagues was very unpopular with most players and owners. In fact, the 1951 dismissal of then-baseball commissioner A.B. "Happy" Chandler was prompted at least in part by his decision to override the owners' 15-1 vote against letting Robinson into the game. These memories, too, belong to the "Golden Age."

Jackie Robinson (far left) and other members of the Brooklyn Dodgers are spotlighted in the nostalgic documentary "When It Was a Game," debuting Monday on HBO.

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Immigrants like Sophom Loeung (pictured) and her family face many new challenges in "The Meaning of Freedom," the latest episode of *American Pie*, Wednesday on PBS.

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