

1991 Marks Chet Hoff's 100th Birthday

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The ex-pitcher is currently baseball's oldest living player and is one of only four ballplayers ever to reach their 100th birthdays.

MAY 8, 1991 WAS A VERY SPECIAL DAY. That was Chet Hoff's 100th birthday. His name may not be as recognizable as that of Babe Ruth or Ty Cobb, but he holds the distinction of currently being baseball's oldest living ex-major leaguer. His birth certificate reads Chester Cornelius Hoff, baseball writers dubbed him "Red," but the ballplayers called him Chet and that is the name he prefers.

This year also marks the eightieth anniversary of the day he first set a spiked foot on a major league mound as a brash, twenty-year old red-headed rookie breaking into the American League straight from semipro ball. His first appearance was in a mop-up role for the New York Highlanders on September 6, 1911. That outing was hardly noteworthy. In fact, his appearance was so brief that his name doesn't even appear in the boxscore. But his second outing was quite different—it made headlines. And it is Chet Hoff's favorite story.

The date was September 17, 1911, and the place was Hilltop Park. With the home team trailing the Detroit Tigers, 9-3, manager Hal Chase sent his rookie lefthander to the mound in the sixth inning in relief of Russ Ford. The scenario is complete. And now Hoff picks up the story:

I went in there for a relief pitcher and who do you suppose was the first batter I faced? And I didn't know who he was? It was Ty Cobb! And I struck him out the first time, and I didn't know who I struck out.

Cobb was a left-hand hitter, and they're weak on left-hand pitchers. Ty Cobb fouled off two—the first two strikes were fastballs. And I had two strikes on him. Then I wasted one and made it one and two. And he didn't see the curveball yet. So the third strike I give him the fast curve. I threw a perfect strike over there and he looked at it. He didn't see it!

But I didn't know who he was no more than the man in the moon until the next morning I picked up the *New York Journal* and the big red headlines in the paper says 'HOFF STRIKES OUT TY COBB.' Was that something? Boy! I couldn't believe it at first. It was the biggest thrill I ever had. I'll never forget that.

Hoff's memory of the game is right on target. *The New York Times* reported "...in the sixth inning Hoff ... fooled Ty with a round-house curve, which crossed the centre of the plate for the third strike." Hoff finished the game with 4 hits, 1 walk, 1 run, and 2 strikeouts in his 4-inning stint. Manager Chase was pleased with his rookie's performance, and rewarded him with a spot on the roster. "I earned my uniform," Hoff agrees. Cobb must have been equally impressed with the chunky young southpaw, later selecting him to pitch for Cobb's postseason barnstorming all-star team.

I always got a job off him. After striking him out, you would think he would be mad at me, but after the season closed, he would come after me in New York and give me a job pitching.

Cobb wasn't the only baseball great to give Hoff a job pitching. Four years later, after the Yankees farmed him out to Rochester, he was brought back to the majors by Branch Rickey, then manager of the St. Louis Browns. Once again the young lefthander had to prove himself on the major league level. This turn of fortune set up a second encounter with The Georgia Peach and is chapter two of Hoff's favorite story.

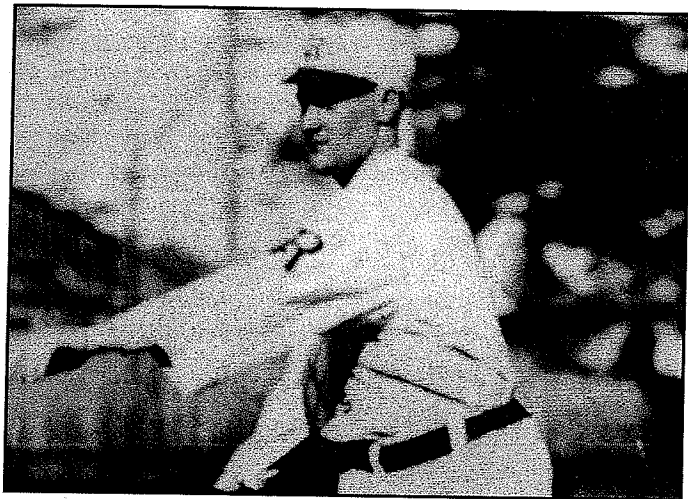
George Sisler and I went to the St. Louis Browns the same day in 1915. George was a left-hand pitcher then, and I was a lefthand pitcher. They had a doubleheader. And he won his first game and I lost mine in a ten-inning game. I was winning in the ninth inning. I was ahead 3-2 and Cobb was on third base. There was one out and the batter hit just a little pop-up infield fly and Cobb tried to score after the catch. You know he was a fighter. There was two outs (then), and he hit that catcher a wallop and knocked the ball out of the catcher's hand. And that tied the score. He was out by a half mile. He went about halfway down between the catcher and third base and the catcher had the ball there waiting. And I said, 'Hold that ball!' Because I knew Ty Cobb was a vicious slider. He would plough right into you and knock you over. And, geez—he knocked the

ball out and I lost my first game. The next inning Detroit got one run and beat us out 4-3. Oh, boy was I mad!

At the time Ty Cobb was considered the greatest ballplayer in the history of baseball, and for a quarter-century he was teamed with Tris Speaker and Babe Ruth to form the all-time greatest outfield. Hoff also played against both of these legendary greats.

Tris Speaker, oh gee! Tris Speaker was the best center fielder I ever seen. He could pretty near come in on second base and play the center field and get them short pop-ups. He was wonderful. And a good hitter. Tris Speaker was an all-around player.

When Hoff was playing, Ruth was just another promising lefthanded pitcher. Hoff's last major league season was Ruth's rookie year and, although they never faced each other in the major leagues, their paths did cross on one occasion.



Chet Hoff

I never played with him in the major leagues. I played against him in Rochester before he went up to New York. In 1914, I was farmed out to Rochester from the Yankees. Babe Ruth come up from Baltimore as a rookie. They were in the Three-A League. And they come up to Rochester to play, and I met Babe Ruth there once. If he was playing today, he would buy the league out.

But just as Ruth's career was getting ready to skyrocket, Hoff's came to a premature end—a victim of the Federal League demise, the escalation of World War I, and a need to support an expanding family. Hoff expected a longer major league career. At the age of twenty-four, he had just finished his most successful season in the majors with a respectable 1.24 ERA and a 2-2 ledger.

I played with the St. Louis Browns in 1915 and I was making good. And I thought I was going to have a good job next year. The winter of 1915, the Federal League sold out to the

National and American leagues, and that scattered a couple of hundred ballplayers all over. When they scattered all over, I was in the group and I went too. I got out. They were keeping those old-timers and let us young fellows slide away. That killed me—right then—dead. It knocked me out of a job in St. Louis.

I stayed in the minors after that. I was farmed out and then I fooled around a few years in the minor leagues. It was during the war. I was at Kansas City in 1918 and I think we were in first place, but there was nothing but soldiers sitting in the stands. And July 1, the ballparks all closed up and so that was my finish. We all had to scatter and get a job.

So I went back home—I was out of work. But I was lucky and I got a good job. I got a (baseball) contract that fall but I couldn't go back. The war was going on. I just retired from league baseball, but I played semipro ball ten years after that. And I learned a job while I was playing ball. I played in Ossining, New York. We had a fast league there and I pitched every Sunday for ten years. I kept playing but I never went back to the leagues anymore. I'm glad I got out of baseball *because baseball was terrible then.*

During those years, a player could make more money working a regular job five days a week and playing semipro baseball on weekends than he could make playing professionally. Consequently, many of the semipro teams around were strong ballclubs, comparing favorably with the high minor league teams. Always a good hitter, when not pitching Hoff played first base and was a leading batter on the team. From his decade as a semipro player, Hoff recalls some exceptional experiences—playing inside Sing Sing Prison, playing against a professional girls team, and playing against some of the great black teams of the era.

We played the Cuban Stars, the Lincoln Giants, and all them teams from New York. We played all them big semipro teams. The Lincoln Giants and the Cuban Stars traveled all over the world. They were as good as major leaguers. Smokey Joe Williams played against us. If he wasn't black, he would have been a good pitcher in the majors. But he couldn't get in. He could throw almost as hard as Walter Johnson. Walter Johnson was fast. This guy was fast, too! But I think Walter Johnson was the fastest in them days. When I was playing baseball, I thought Johnson of the Washington Senators was the best pitcher. Walter Johnson—The Big Train they called him.

Walter Johnson and Smokey Joe Williams—more baseball legends that abound in his memory. They, along with Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Tris Speaker, Branch Rickey, and an endless list of others, were all a part of Chet Hoff's world. His time in the big leagues may have been brief but, although he didn't know it at the time, he had a front row seat to baseball history.

Chet Hoff has seen a lot of baseball in his hundred years. His memory is still remarkably good, his perspective is unique, and his story is vintage Americana.

Happy 100th birthday, Chet!