



Frank Thomas enjoyed a rapid rise from distinction in youth baseball (left) in Columbus, Ga. to enjoying a champagne bath (right) celebrating the Sox's 1993 American League West title. He would have even more accomplishments ahead on his way to the Hall of Fame. Photos credit Comcast SportsNet Chicago.

## ***Documentary shows how father figures help push Thomas to Hall of Fame***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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If there's one theme that jumps out of "Welcome to Cooperstown: Frank Thomas," it's how father-figures, doubling as coaches, helped push along the Big Hurt's career to its eventual destination at the Hall of Fame's induction ceremonies July 27.

The leadoff man was Thomas' father, Frank Thomas, Sr., who cannily advised his son to take advantage of a football ride to Auburn as a means to an end. Hand in hand with the senior Thomas was Columbus (Ga.) High School coach Bobby Howard, who made Thomas earn his spot as his go-to player. Foremost was Sox hitting coach Walt Hriniak, under whom Thomas thrived in the unparalleled start of his career in the first half of the 1990s.

Historically, there's a correlation between the daily counsel of this troika and Thomas' emergence and focus as the best right-handed hitter of his generation. After Hriniak was fired in the Sox near-panicky post-strike housecleaning of 1995, something was lost with the Big Hurt. He continued to have monster years and actually was robbed of at least one American League Most Valuable Player award, in 2000. But one-too-many off-the-field issues took some attention away from the numbers and aura Thomas was amassing.

Fortunately, his exile after departing the Sox amid acrimony following the 2005 season was relatively short. Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf, who helps open and close “Welcome to Cooperstown” with his thoughts, never departed Thomas’ corner. The Big Hurt has a statue in the outfield at U.S. Cellular Field, nice gigs as a Comcast SportsNet analyst and team assistant, and a revived profile in the city in which he thrived for the better part of 16 Sox seasons.

Credit the award-winning CSN Chicago production team of Ryan McGuffey and Sarah Lauch for bringing “Welcome to Cooperstown” to reality. On the heels of their stellar “5 Outs...” chronicle of the star-crossed 2003 Cubs, the 2014 Chicago



**Walt Hriniak (left) was labeled by Frank Thomas (right) the best coach he ever had. Photos credit of Comcast SportsNet Chicago.**

Baseball Museum Jerome Holtzman Award winners have crafted a profile of Thomas that takes the viewer from his youth-baseball roots in Columbus, Ga., to his Chicago home when he gets the call to the Hall amid the swirling polar vortex of last January.

The hour-long show has its first airing at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, July 17, on CSN Chicago. CSN will also re-air this documentary special later that evening at 10 p.m., as well as at 7 p.m. Saturday, July 26 and 4:30 p.m. Sunday, July 27, right after the Cooperstown ceremonies.

To coincide with the premiere airing of “Welcome to Cooperstown” on July 17, CSN Chicago is urging fans to share their thoughts, memories and comments on social media by utilizing the Twitter hashtag #BigHurtHOF during the documentary special. CSN Chicago’s Twitter handle (@CSNChicago) will be retweeting a number of fan tweets that evening. A select number of fan tweets using the #BigHurtHOF hashtag will have the opportunity to win a CSN prize pack with special autographed items, including a signed Frank Thomas bat.

The Big Hurt himself carries the show in a forthright, candid manner. He is more at ease in his 40s than in the middle of a career when the *Chicago Sun-Times*’ Toni Ginnetti had to pull him aside to remind him he was the face of the Sox and thus had an obligation to talk to media, even when angered by stories. Thomas has indeed matured, but it also helps he was made even more comfortable by the presence of McGuffey, who handled the interviews while Lauch put the finishing production touches on the show.

## McGuffey-Thomas relationship makes for good interviews

“Frank and I have a very good relationship, a personal and working relationship,” said McGuffey. “I showed him a trailer for show. When he saw it, he was very happy. I asked the question, doing an hour-long show, if I had to ask you the three people in your life to tell the Frank Thomas story, who would they be? He responded Walt Hriniak, Bobby Howard and Jim Fannin (Thomas' 'mental coach').”

During the interview process, which began in January and intensified in spring training, McGuffey discovered the male guiding light trend in Thomas' life.

“Frank has just had a lot of father figures,” he said. “His own father was very close. Frank, Sr. meant so much to him. His father got him started, through Auburn. Bobby Howard looked at Frank a little differently. He knew Frank was special and he got the most out of him. Bobby Howard kind of passed that torch to Walk Hriniak. It's the stages of coaches that keep him driven and in a tunnel vision. Frank said Hriniak was the best coach he ever had.”

Thomas never forgot Hriniak, whose top-hand hitting style was not teachable to all players. But with his rare combination of power and patience, Thomas was his star pupil. The Big Hurt did not forget Hriniak even after he left the Sox.



Hawk Harrelson explained in "Welcome To Cooperstown" how he came up with Frank Thomas' "Big Hurt" nickname.

“The thing I never realized about Walt is Frank took him everywhere,” said McGuffey. “He maintained their relationship. Frank brought him to spring training with both Oakland and Toronto (in 2006 and 2007).”

The sometimes-crusty Hriniak waxed eloquently about Thomas when McGuffey taped him. He ended up as the star interview of “Welcome to Cooperstown.”

“Frank Thomas is the best hitter I ever saw all around,” he said. “If I had to pick one guy to start a lineup, Frank would be my guy and I'd hit him third...he'd be the guy. Every day I went out there to work with Frank and every day we took batting practice, he did stuff that amazed me. He would do stuff in batting practice that would just blow you away...and I played with Hank Aaron, I played against Willie Mays, I

played against (Roberto) Clemente...but every day, this guy did things with the bat in his hands that just blew me away. He'd hit a ball down the right field line like a little 'Punch and Judy' and then, the next pitch he'd hit over the centerfield wall, you know, 430 feet, c'mon!"

Thomas accepted the disciplines Hriniak preached.

"There was no free-lancing," he said.

In the end, Hriniak admitted he simply focused a natural at hitting.

"I just helped him help himself," said the retired coach.

No Thomas special would be complete without Hawk Harrelson, originator of so many baseball nicknames, recalling the origin of "Big Hurt," the most famous of them all, during the 1992 season.

### **'Big Hurt' just blurted out**

"I just blurted it out one day," said the Hawk. "I kept saying, 'he hurt it, he hurt it, he hurt it.' He'd kill one into left center, 'he hurt it.' One day he hits a home run...I'm watching him go around first base... and I said, 'The Big Hurt' and it just blurted out and that's how that came about. It turned out to be a pretty good nickname for him."

Thomas did not come up in the 1960s, fortunate for McGuffey and Lauch. So much old baseball tape was never saved in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century with no corresponding newsfilm footage to plug the gap. Every at-bat of Thomas' career was televised. In fact, there was far more material than could be accommodated when the pair repaired to the CSN Chicago editing bay they call "The Bunker."

"I had over an hour of highlights in the Avid (digital editing software)," Lauch said. "And believe me when I say there were probably 1,000 more hours in our library that we did not even touch. But we included the best of the best. It was fun to reminisce."

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century highlights might have been the most fascinating. They included Thomas' high-school baseball and football feats and play at Auburn that landed him first-round draft pick status by the Sox in 1989. Thomas was the less-Big Hurt then,



**The award-winning production team of Ryan McGuffey and Sarah Lauch is once again behind a documentary, in this case "Welcome to Cooperstown."**

more tall and somewhat lanky. Converting these highlights might have been the hardest task for McGuffey and Lauch. They were largely found on 3/4-inch, pre-digital tape.

“Converting old tape was a huge issue,” said Lauch. “We no longer have a tape deck in-house that a lot of his old highlights were on -- including high school. It was a challenge.”

If “Welcome To Cooperstown” has any oversights, the 2000 season and Thomas’ thwarted MVP bid stands out. Leading the Sox to the AL West title with his greatest run production season – 43 homers and 143 RBIs – Thomas evoked chants of “MVP... MVP” from crowds at The Cell down the stretch. But he lost the award to steroid-inflated Jason Giambi of the Athletics, who edged Thomas in most categories except RBIs. Thomas reportedly had a lifetime contract with the Sox in hand if he had been named MVP. He separately told the *Chicago Tribune’s* Paul Sullivan that “I lost more than anybody during that steroids era. I lost probably three MVPs and a lot of money.”

McGuffey had to make a producer’s call in this instance.

“Nothing that came up on 2000 made me stop and think....this *has* to be in the show,” he said. “We had a few bytes, but nothing earth-shattering. It’s well-documented he lost out to a steroid guy, despite the best numbers of his career and leading the team to the playoffs.”

McGuffey made a similar decision on the entire steroid issue, that rehashing Thomas’ opinions on it would break no new ground.

Thomas’ verbal war with Sox GM Kenny Williams when the latter let him walk as a free agent after the 2005 season is only referred to briefly by the Big Hurt. “He said he never wanted to be enemies with certain people in the organization,” McGuffey said. “That’s a blip on a Hall of Fame radar.”

### **Reinsdorf always in Thomas’ corner**

Bottom line, Reinsdorf was his biggest fan with the power to make things right for Thomas’ eventual return. Hours before Thomas’ first game back at The Cell on May 22,



**Richard Roeper, a diehard Sox fan when he's not working as a multi-media pundit, narrated the Frank Thomas documentary. Photo credit Comcast SportsNet Chicago.**

2006 with Oakland, Reinsdorf entered the visitors' clubhouse and made a beeline to the trainer's room to visit Thomas. True to form, Thomas thrilled the nearly 40,000 in the house by slugging a homer off Jon Garland in his first at-bat. He singled off Garland in the third, then homered again in the fifth. Reinsdorf was the least surprised man in the ballpark.

"Frank Thomas was amazing," he said. "He had such tremendous plate discipline. Rarely do you see a combination of power and plate discipline like he had. I mean, Ted Williams had it, but Frank was certainly one of the top two or three right-handed hitters that I'd ever seen."

Just like his hitting style the majority of his career, the Big Hurt's comeback to be honored all-time in both Sox annals and in Cooperstown was textbook. That could be a hint how a two-season Thomas Sox teammate in 1990-91 could repair decade-old damage eight miles north at Wrigley Field.

"I liked how (McGuffey was) able to capture Frank's reconciliation with the Sox," said Dr. David Fletcher, president of the Chicago Baseball Museum. "This should be a road map for Sammy Sosa that humility and letting go can do a lot to foster forgiveness."

Indeed, Thomas said in a recent radio interview that Sosa should meet the Cubs at least halfway to come back in good graces.

That's an angle for another McGuffey-Lauch documentary, likely years in the future. For now, it's simply time to celebrate the top hitter in Sox history getting his just due amid one of the greatest Cooperstown classes ever.