

AL DOWNING OF TRENTON HIGH SCHOOL

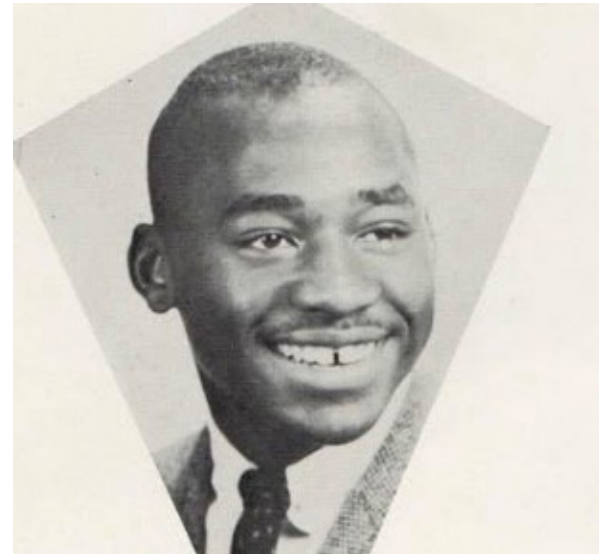
New Jersey has produced many impactful figures in the sport of baseball.

Al Downing is one who ranks very high on that list.

How so? In the spring of 1959, he was a star athlete and also the senior class president at Trenton Central High School.

A mere two years later, on July 19, 1961, he made his major league debut for the New York Yankees. In doing so, he became the first Black pitcher in team history.

While his debut was a historic one, it also launched a major league career that had plenty of staying power.

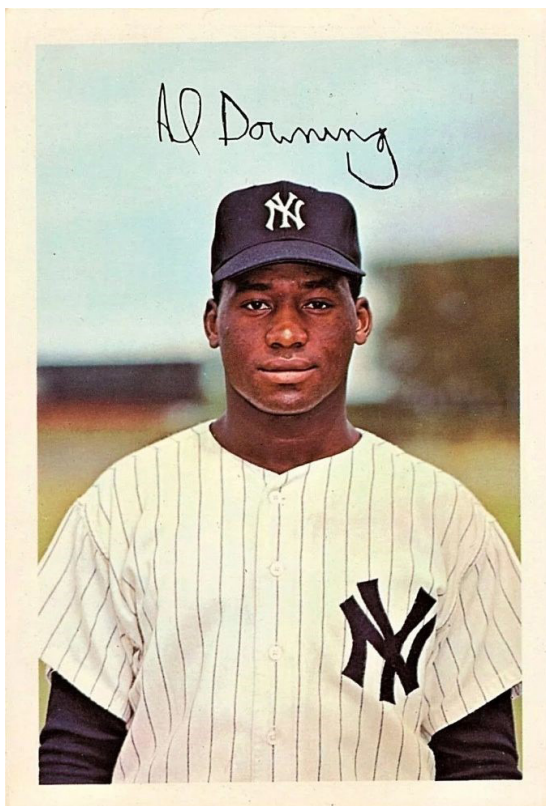


He pitched 16 years in the majors, beginning with that 1961 season in which the Yankees won the World Series. He was 123-107 over the course of his career, with 1,639 strikeouts while throwing 2,268 innings along the way. He was a power pitcher until injuring his arm in late 1960s. He successfully reinvented himself by mixing speeds over the second half of his career.

Downing became a full-time major leaguer in 1963, and went 13-5 for a team that won the American League pennant. He was the starting pitcher for the Yankees in Game 2 of the World Series.

The following year, he was 13-8 with 11 complete games, and led the American League with 217 strikeouts, which was also the most by a Yankees pitcher in 60 years. He once again started a game in the World Series after the Yankees won their fifth straight American League title.

He played for the Yankees through 1969 (making the All-Star team in 1967) and split the 1970 season with the Oakland Athletics and Milwaukee Brewers. He then moved to the Los Angeles Dodgers, from 1971 through the end of his career in 1977. His first year with the Dodgers was a brilliant one - he was 20-9, making him



one of just 15 Black pitchers all-time to ever have a 20-win season. He finished third in the National League Cy Young award voting, and also was named NL Comeback Player of the Year.

It was during his time with the Dodgers that he became a part of history, when on April 8, 1974, he was the pitcher who allowed Hank Aaron's record-setting 715th career home run.

It was a truly memorable career, and it all began in Trenton.

One of eight children in his family, his mother died in a car accident when he was seven. Young Al turned to sports, and particularly baseball, as an outlet. He joined a Police Athletic League program in fifth grade, and quickly stood out for both his arm and bat.

Downing, a left-hander, continued to star locally, complementing an exceptional fastball with a nasty curve and changeup. He was actually his class president all three years in high school. In addition to being both a basketball and baseball standout, he was also vice-president of the Forum Club.

Aside from his stardom in high school, where his starts usually translated into Trenton victories, he broadened his name during his school years by leading his local Babe Ruth League team to a national championship in 1956. He pitched a 1-0 shutout in the final game over a team from Portland, Oregon. The losing pitcher was Mickey Lolich, who himself had a long, distinguished career in the majors.

Downing was an All-State pitcher for Trenton, on a list of honorees his senior year that also included future major leaguer Jeff Torborg (Westfield) at catcher. Al was also chosen to play in a New Jersey North vs. South high school All-Star game at Roosevelt Stadium in Jersey City. It was at the game where he caught the attention of a scout from the Philadelphia Phillies, who came to check out two other players. The scout wound up more impressed with the kid from Trenton Central who struck out the side during



his inning on the mound and also lined a single in his at-bat.

Downing originally attended Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania to play basketball, but helped by the advice of that Phillies' scout, Bill Yancey, he was steered toward attending Rider College the following year.

Yancey was very soon hired by the Yankees as their first African-American scout. Upon joining his new organization, he immediately knew of a player to recommend to his bosses. As a result, Downing was not only signed, he was in the majors within a year, joining one of the most famous Yankee teams of all time, since teammates Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris were both challenging Babe Ruth's single-season home run record. Downing also split time between the minors and majors in 1962, but became a force the following season and in the years to come.

Downing, now 83 and living in California, has never been forgotten by a Trenton and Mercer County community that deeply cherishes its athletic history.