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Joe Durham, first African-American player to homer for Orioles, dies at 84



Joe Durham with his 1962 Silver Glove Award in 1995. Durham, the first African-American player to homer for the Orioles, died Thursday, April 28, 2016, at age 84. (Kenneth K. Lam / Baltimore Sun)



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The Baltimore Sun

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It was an everyday clout, as home runs go — a solo shot to left field in a meaningless late-season game between two teams tied for last place in the **American League**. Except that the man who hit it, Joe Durham, was African-American and the first of his race to homer for the **Orioles** in 1954.

Joseph Vann Durham died Thursday of natural causes at **Northwest Hospital** Hospice Center. A

Randallstown resident, Durham was 84. The Orioles paid tribute to the former outfielder Thursday night with a moment of silence prior to their game against the [Chicago White Sox](#) at Camden Yards.

The second African-American player to suit up for the modern-day Orioles — pitcher Jehosie Heard was the first — Durham joined the team on Sept. 7, 1954, having been called up from the minors. Five days later, in the second game of a doubleheader against the Philadelphia [Athletics](#), he made history. Leading off the sixth inning, Durham hit an Al Sima pitch into the left-field seats before an announced 12,981 at [Memorial Stadium](#).

Durham also singled in a run, but the Orioles lost, 5-4 and fell to 48-96 on the season.

He batted .225 down the stretch, then entered the military for a two-year Army hitch. On his return in 1957, he started the season with Double-A San Antonio and was hitting .397 when recalled on June 11. That night, he started in center field for an injured Tito Francona and made two spectacular catches in Detroit to help pitcher Connie Johnson, also African-American, beat the [Tigers](#), 4-1.

His play drew raves from manager Paul Richards.

"I knew [Durham] could go get 'em," the Orioles skipper told reporters. "He really showed them some foot out there, didn't he?"

In truth, he and Richards didn't get along, Durham said years later.

"He thought Richards should have called him up before the middle of June," said Bob Luke, who interviewed Durham in 2012 for his book, "Integrating The Orioles: Baseball and Race in Baltimore." "He thought Paul was a racist and said that even when they sat side by side in the dugout, if Richards had something to say to Joe, he would pass the word to one of the coaches and have him tell him."

Durham played in 77 games in 1957, batting .185. He played in the minors in 1958 and, briefly, with the [St. Louis Cardinals](#) the following year before returning to the minors and retiring in 1964.

A native of Newport News, Va., he settled in Baltimore where he officiated high school baseball and basketball games, and for years threw batting practice for the Orioles. In 1987, the club named Durham its community coordinator for baseball operations, a job for which he seemed well-suited.

"I want to be a guy that a player anywhere in the organization can come to if he can't go to his manager," Durham said. "I've been through all this before in baseball; I think I can help."

Durham is survived by his wife of 58 years, Sallie Durham, three children and four grandchildren. Services are incomplete.

"Joe lived, ate and dreamed baseball," Sallie Durham said. "When we left the hospice center Wednesday night, my daughter put the Orioles game on TV for him. Joe couldn't open his eyes, but the nurses said he could still hear."

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