

Greensboro knuckleballer 'Skinny' Brown lived Hall of Fame life

By Jeff Mills jeff.mills@greensboro.com | Posted: Friday, December 18, 2015 8:37 pm

GREENSBORO — He played baseball when all the grass was real, pitching 14 seasons in the big leagues, a teammate of Hall of Famers Ted Williams, Brooks Robinson, Hoyt Wilhelm, Mickey Mantle and others.

The game never made Hal “Skinny” Brown rich. But the businessman, soldier and pitcher from Greensboro lived a rich, rich life.

Brown, a member of the Guilford County Sports Hall of Fame, died Thursday at Moses Cone Hospital. He was 91.

“I just talked to him last Friday night,” said Gary Strickland, who is president of a construction company in Winston-Salem and whose mother was Brown’s cousin.

“It was his birthday, and he was joking with me. He was great guy.”

Brown was a 6-foot-2, 180-pound right-hander during his playing days, featuring a fastball, a slider and a knuckleball.

He went 85-92 with a 3.81 ERA in 358 major league games from 1951-64 with the Orioles, Red Sox, White Sox, Yankees and Houston Colt .45s.

And despite the fluttering knuckler, Brown had pinpoint control, twice leading the American League with the fewest walks per 9 innings — 1.8 in 1959, 1.2 in ‘60.

“His career record is tainted because of his last two seasons in Houston,” Strickland said. “He pitched great for a bad team. But then again, without the Colt .45s he might not have pitched at all those years. He pitched until he was 39 years old.”

In two seasons in Houston, Brown was 8-26 — dropping his career record below .500 — with a 3.62 ERA, 34 walks and 121 strikeouts.



skinny brown 121915 baseball card

A Hal ‘Skinny’ Brown baseball card.

“I remember as a kid, maybe 10 years old, we didn’t have TV,” Strickland said. “I would sit by the radio and try to hear his pitches through the static. I listened to him pitch a one-hitter against the Yankees. He gave up a home run to Mickey Mantle in the first inning and that was it.”

In his career, Brown gave up seven home runs to Mantle, but only one with a man on base. Yogi Berra was Brown’s nemesis.

“Everybody talked that Yogi was a bad-ball hitter,” Brown told the News & Record in 2006, “but I said, ‘Yeah, you ought to see what he does with a good ball.’”

Brown graduated from Greensboro Senior High School, and the Boston Red Sox paid for him to attend UNC. He left Chapel Hill in 1943 to fight in World War II, joining the Army Air Corps.

A gunner on a medium bomber, he flew combat missions with the 8th Air Force, including air support over Omaha Beach on D-Day. His plane was shot down once after a raid on submarine pens around La Havre, France.

“We got hit and didn’t make it back to England,” Brown said. “We had to bail out. They picked us up after a few hours in the (English) Channel.”

After the war, he signed his first pro contract in 1946 for a bonus of \$1,750.

“It was a whole lot of money,” Brown said. “In fact, I gave it to my daddy and we had a bathroom put in our house for the first time instead of water from the well and an outhouse.”

Brown never made more than \$32,000 in a season during his big league career. After his playing days, he was a partner in McBane-Brown Heating and Air Conditioning, with an office on Spring Garden Street.

A funeral service will be held at 2 p.m. Sunday at the Forbis & Dick Chapel, 1118 N. Elm St., Greensboro.