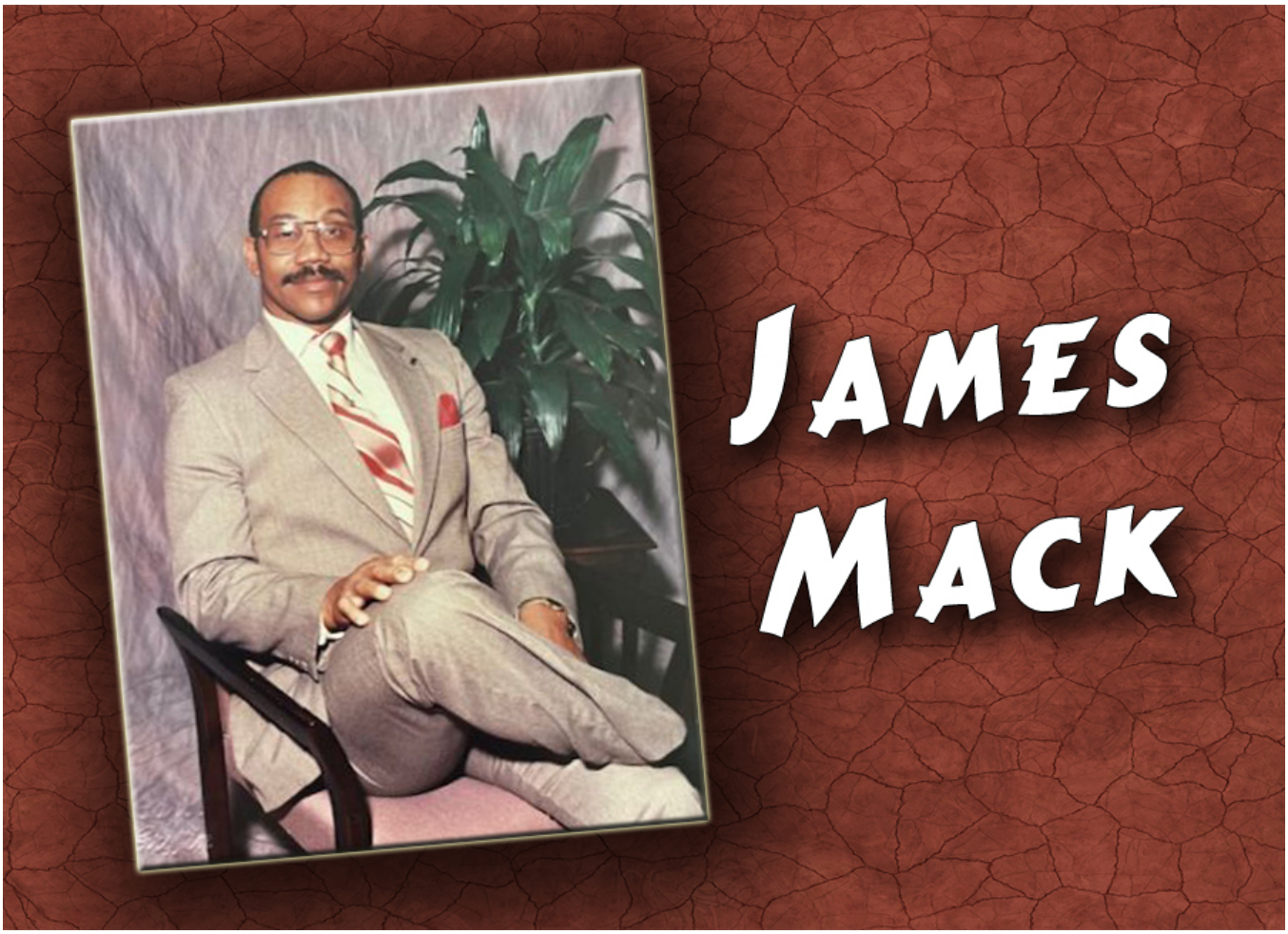

Mack Excelled, Regardless Of Obstacles

Lincoln Herald Staff

MOUNT HOLLY––Local football great James Mack was recently inducted into the Mount Holly Sports Hall of Fame.

Mack, 81, is a veteran of Gaston County football fields in the 1950's, a black athletic stand-out back in the days before desegregation. He played for Reid High School in Belmont, and he was a member of its class of 1961. As he recently explained, black children from Mount Holly, Lowell, Cramerton, McAdenville, Neely's Grove and south Gastonia attended Reid High before it closed in 1966, and its buildings were demolished.

"High school games were a lot different," said Mack. "We practiced on a red clay field, and when it rained, it was just like practicing on cement. We played games at the old Belmont Park, and it was half baseball field and half grass. They marked it off in some kind of way, but there was a lot of infield dirt. It's a lot different now. They got real fields they can play on."

Mack became a three-year starter at Reid High, at defensive back as a sophomore and halfback-defensive back as a junior and senior. He played baseball three years, as a relief pitcher and outfielder. Colleges, including Elizabeth City State Teachers College in Pasquotank County (now Elizabeth City State University), noticed his football ability.

When he was 14, Mack was caddying a golf match in Mount Holly when a ball hit his eye.

"I was caddying for a group of players," he said, "and I was out in front. And one of the guys sliced it. I had an operation, and they patched it. But I went back the day after Thanksgiving, because they missed a spot, and they had to take it out. I had already got hit in that same eye with a rock, so I couldn't see too good out of it."

Mack finished high school with one eye. But he was still able to successfully pursue his athletic endeavours.

“It was a little hard at the beginning,” he said. “I had to learn to judge with one eye, and I was 14 years old at the time. But you learn to live with it. I loved the sport of football.”

In addition to semi-pro football with the Gaston Patriots, he later played seven years of softball with the Skidmore Construction Company and Burlington Industries, playing outfield in their open leagues.

Mack moved to Atlanta for several years and then back to Charlotte in 1995. He enjoyed Falcons games and Panthers games when the NFL newcomers played in Spartanburg, S.C. He worked in textiles and for Frito-Lay and then started his own janitorial business when he moved back to Mecklenburg County. His family returned to Mount Holly in 1997. Mack became the head custodian at Ida Rankin Elementary in Mount Holly.

He and wife Gloria had two sons, André and Lamont, and a daughter, Lashaunda. They lost André in December of 2022, following a heart attack.

“He was a good athlete,” Mr. Mack said, “with scholarships for football and baseball, and he tried out with the Red Sox. They had about 250 guys trying out down in Florida, and he was one of 10 they kept over for an extra day. He played football, too, in high school and had offers in both sports.”

The hall of fame induction, he added, “kind of surprised me. There are some good athletes here in Mount Holly, and it’s good to be selected.”

To today’s athletes, Mack offered solid advice.

“If your heart is in it, you should give it a try,” he said. “If you love a sport, go out, and show them what you can do.”