

# Danny Napoleon

## Sprung from Claysburg all the way to the New York Mets

By **NEIL RUDEL**  
*Altoona Mirror*

Claysburg's first inductee into the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame admittedly doesn't have too many vivid memories of Claysburg.

That's because he moved when he was 12 -- nearly 50 years ago.

But the memories Danny Napoleon does have are good ones.

He fondly recalls playing "all kinds of sports," and in a league "up behind the high school."

And he fondly recalls how the town nurtured all of its youth.

"We had a lot of fun out there," he said. "Knowing everybody that lived there, and everybody was your parent. If you did something (wrong) and your mother wasn't around, you'd catch it from anybody. It was a good community, and they took care of each other."

Napoleon's interest in sports began by watching his dad, Daniel, play for a Claysburg baseball team in the early 1950s.

"They would play teams from Altoona and I would go to the games with him," he said.

One of the few local people who knew Napoleon growing up was Don Witherspoon. The two were cousins. In the 1950s, Claysburg had about 30 African-American families who came from South Carolina to work in the brickyard.

The Witherspoons and Napoleons were two of

those families. Napoleon was born in Claysburg, at home, the son of Dan and the former Jennie Townsend.

"Don's mother Mary was like my second mother," Napoleon said. "We lived in a row of houses, and I

could look out my backdoor and see Don's house."

While growing up, Witherspoon was able to identify Dan's athletic prowess early.

"He recognized when we were kids that he was special," Witherspoon said. "Even when he shot marbles, his hand-eye coordination was a lot better than anybody. My brothers and I were pretty good athletes, but Dan could throw a rock 50 yards and knock a bottle over. We played cowboys and indians and he'd catch you by hitting you with a crab apple. It was like he never missed. You could tell he had a special talent -- even at 9-10 years old."

Witherspoon graduated from Claysburg in 1960 as a three-sport letterman. He has wondered just how much better the Bulldogs would

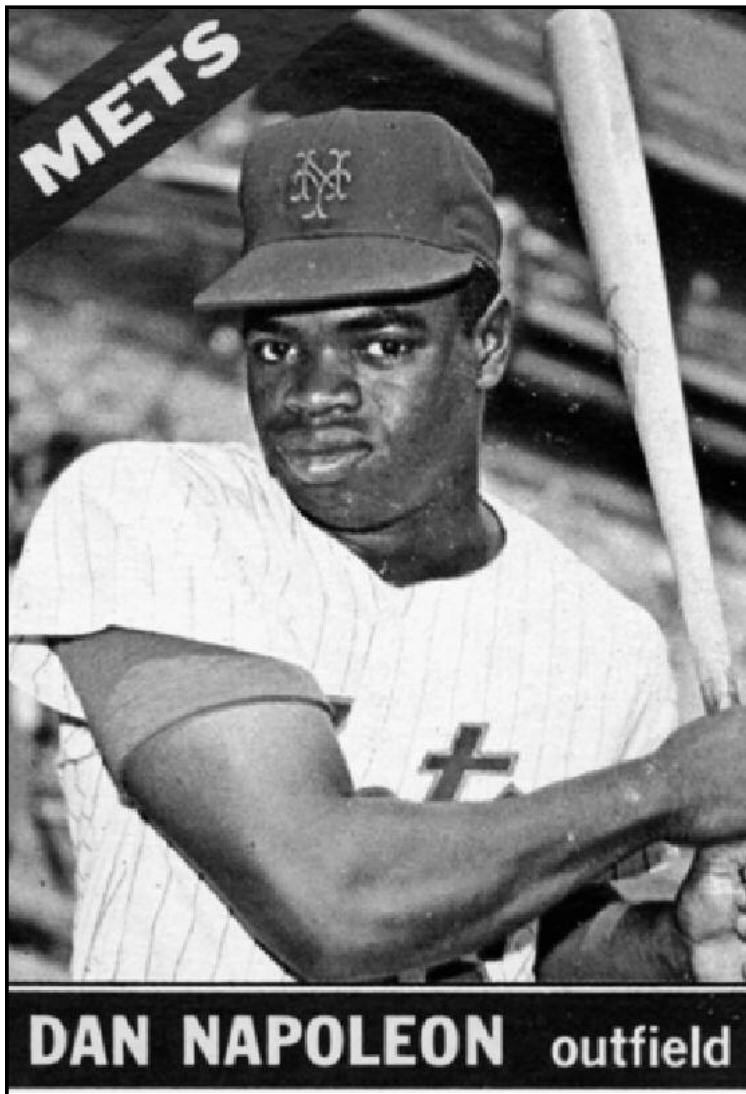
have been had Napoleon not moved with his family to Trenton.

"We probably would have won a couple championships -- in baseball in particular," he said.

Napoleon's baseball career dawned at Morrisville (Pa.) High School, where he graduated in 1959.

"I played all sports -- baseball, football, basketball and track," he said, "but I loved baseball."

He went to Lincoln University in Oxford, Pa., but he



returned home following his dad's premature death at 45 in 1961. From there, he went to Trenton State during the day and worked in the brickyard at night before moving on to Rider University.

He played well enough at Rider to be drafted by the New York Mets in 1963 and he proceeded to tear up the New York Penn League, ripping 36 home runs and driving in 134 in his first season at Auburn, N.Y.

That led to an early call-up by the Mets.

"The way the rules were back then, they either had to protect you and put you on the 40-man roster or lose you," he said. "With the year some of us had as rookies, the Mets protected five of us."

That included Danny, Ron Swoboda and Tug McGraw.

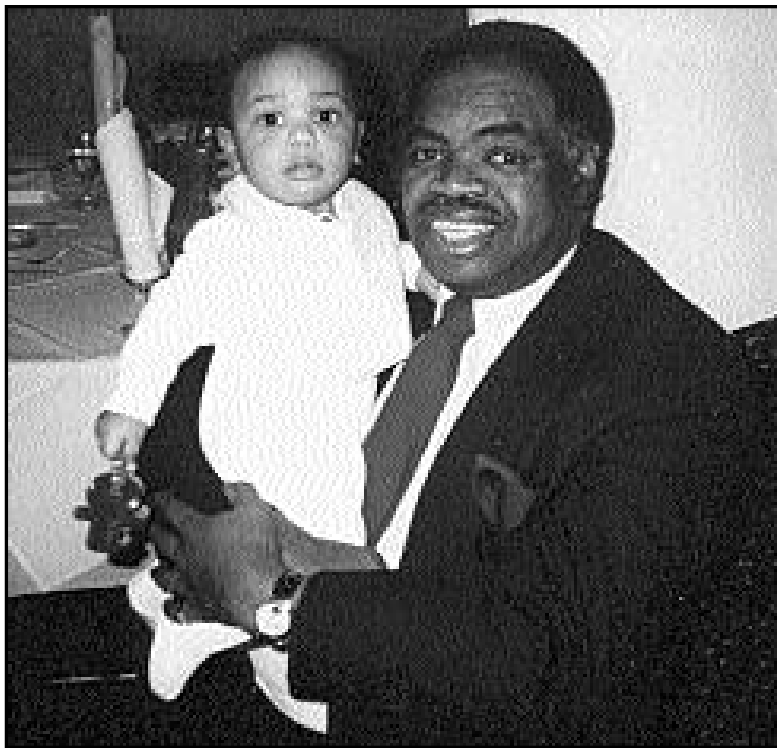
Napoleon appeared in 80 games with the Mets, including 68 games in 1965 and 12 in 1966. He struggled to hit consistently and was used mainly as a utilityman.

Napoleon's career batting average was .162 in 130 at bats.

"I look back on it as it was great to be in the big leagues but the older I got, the more I thought it would have been better if they sent me out to play (into the minors)," he said. "If you sit around and not play most of a year, you lose a lot. The big leagues are great, but maybe it would have been better for my career if I would have gotten sent out."

Danny played in the minor leagues with Tom Seaver and Cleon Jones and joined the likes of Ed Kranepool, Jesse Gonder, Al Jackson, Ron Hunt and Roy McMillan with the Mets.

"The pitching was the biggest adjustment but just the opportunity



Danny's post-baseball life now focuses on his family.

to go out and play every day keeps your competitive edge," he said. "I think I would have had a much longer career in the big leagues because the second year, I was having a real good year in (Triple-A) Jacksonville after I got sent down."

He was going to be recalled but he was derailed by a groin injury. Napoleon retired from baseball and has worked as a car assembler for General Motors in Wilmington, Del., for the past 25 years. He has three children, including son Danny, who will present him into the Hall.

Though many youngsters in Claysburg had never met him, they were inspired by Napoleon's climb to the big leagues.

"I never really heard of him or knew of him until he was actually with the Mets," Claysburg native Terry Lingenfelter said. "People recognize the fact that he was from Claysburg and being from a small town, it gives you inspiration to go out and see if it's a possibility if you could do it someday."

Lingenfelter and his brother, Denny, both played at Penn State. Denny Lingenfelter spent time in the Pittsburgh Pirates' organization and Claysburg product Dave Hoenstine was the Cincinnati Reds' rookie league MVP who earned a short stint on the Reds' big-league roster. Napoleon hasn't been back to Claysburg often. He returned in the early 1990s for a town reunion, including "a lot of the people who had moved away."

He clearly wasn't sitting around waiting for a call from the Blair County Sports Hall of Fame.

"I said 'are you kidding?' At first, I wondered if they were serious. Then it sunk in," he said. "I may see people I haven't seen in years. I have a lot of old memories but good memories."

## Napoleon bio

**Sport:** Baseball.

**Hometown:** Claysburg.

**College:** Rider.

**Hall of Fame achievement:**

Spent the 1965 and part of the 1966 season with the New York Mets.

**Current occupation:**

Assemblyman.

**Current residence:**

Trenton, NJ.