

DECEMBER 1980

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CHICAGO BASKETBALL™

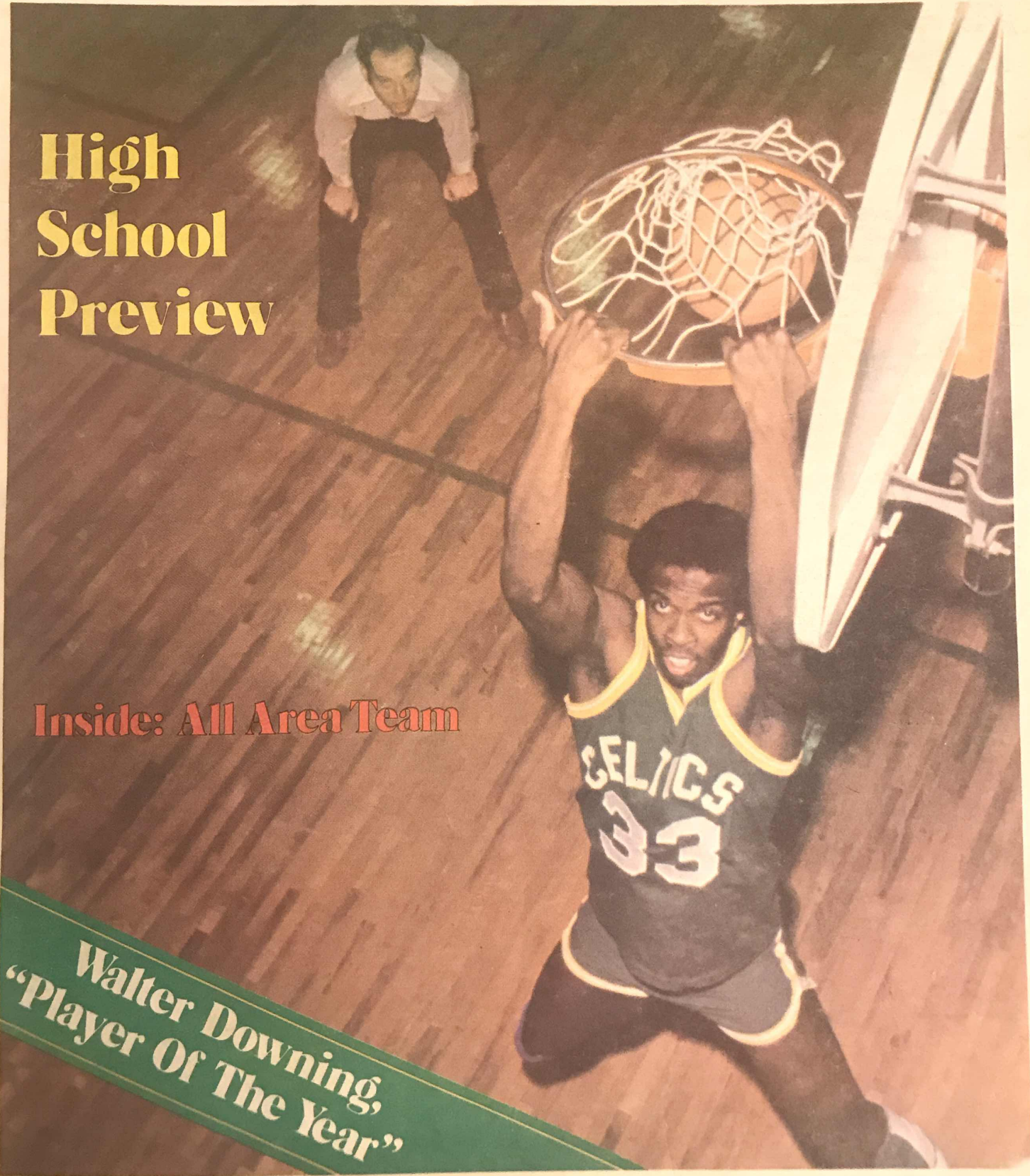
The Top 125
Prep Players

DePaul, Loyola
Northwestern, NIU

Area High School
Conference Previews

Chicago Small
College Outlook

Kankakee JC:
A Class Act

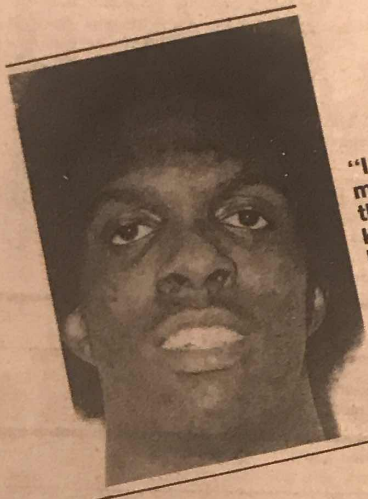


High School Preview

Inside: All Area Team

Walter Downing,
"Player Of The Year"

Walter Downing



"I think I play better with more competition because that's all the game of basketball really is....a challenge."

by Ernie Dunbar
Star Publications

It's only December, yet already Walter Downing is looking ahead. He's thinking about March 15, 1981 at 8:15 p.m.

He hopes he's in Champaign then, jumping center and helping Providence high school win its second Class A basketball championship in three years.

Downing is optimistic that this 1980-81 team has enough talent to repeat the title won his sophomore season.

Things have changed since that time though. Downing is no longer just one of the starting five. He no longer takes a back seat to Barney Mines who ran the show for the Celtics back in 1979.

Downing is the player that makes the Providence team click now. When Walter's hot, Providence will win.

At 6-8½, 205 pounds, Downing is among the best centers in Illinois, regardless of school size. He has his own tough act to follow this year, however, after already being named to the all-state team twice, the all-tournament team in Champ-

aign twice, and is looking for a repeat of the Class A Player of the Year award he took in last season. And now CHICAGO BASKETBALL has named Downing as its pre-season player of the year . . . an honor that goes with being the top vote-getter in a poll of over 30 area coaches.

Those aren't bad credentials when you consider Downing admits he was petrified entering high school basketball.

He started playing in Joliet in the fifth grade and even then coaches were aware of his potential. He was 5-5 at the time and wasn't worried about basketball skills. He just wanted to put the ball in the hoop and have a good time.

Downing played three years at St. Thaddeus grade school in Joliet, then transferred before eighth grade to St. Mary's Sacred Heart. It was there he began developing a sense for the court and started taking the game seriously.

"Things started looking up for me my seventh grade year when I finally realized I could score a lot of points at will," said Downing, a polite high school senior.

"My eighth grade year, that was more like a start for me before I got to high school."

Dan Polley, Downing's coach in eighth grade, scared his top player when he reported that freshman basketball was nothing like the grade school game. Working hard was the only way Downing could expect to play at Providence and Walter took Polley seriously.

"I was kind of awkward in the seventh and eighth grade because I started growing very fast my sixth grade year and I was real thin," Downing recalls. "I thought that was the only reason I was better than the other players because I was a little bit taller than they were."

"Then coach Polley told me he'd seen a lot of freshman games and if I wanted to play on the freshman team, I'd have to be more aggressive and take the ball to the hoop and everything. I was petrified when he told me that," Downing admits, "because I thought I was pretty good in grade school and all my grade school friends would be freshmen. That kind of got me thinking and playing a little harder."

From just getting the ball in the hoop in grade school to four or five hours of practice year round was an adjustment for Downing.

He says he had to accept the fact that his free time would be limited since basketball was constantly in his life all year round, except for two weeks when he simply got away from the game competitively. What sacrifices he did make didn't bother him and his freshman season was going quite well until a Christmas tournament in Richton Park.

"After one game in the Rich South Big Dipper tournament we were getting beat by something like 40 or 50 points. I thought I was pretty good before I went to that game and I thought our whole team was better than everyone else. But after playing in the tournament it just did something to me and made me want to be better so it wouldn't happen again because I was totally embarrassed. I just kept working and playing hard and hopefully nothing like that will happen again."

Providence finished third in the state Downing's freshman year (1978) and set itself up for 1979 when the team finished with a 32-1 record and handed Havana its only loss in 32 games that year with a 46-33 win in the state championship game.

"It was a game that just sticks with you and you never forget. It's a game you want to happen over and over again, but there's only one state championship."

Last season Providence lost a 41-39 overtime decision to Luther South, the eventual Class A champion, although Downing averaged a nifty 18 points, 10 rebounds and 5 blocked shots per game.

This year, Downing is ready for Luther South, 6-7 Mike Williams and DeLaSalle, the Pontiac tournament . . . He wants them all.

"I think I play better with more competition because that's all the game of basketball really is—a challenge. I feel if you're afraid of the challenge you shouldn't be in basketball. I'll be the first to say if somebody is better than I am or plays me a pretty good game."

This season Downing was told by Providence coach Frank Palmasani that he should dominate games, something his coach told Walter he isn't doing yet. Downing is listening though and ready to make an attempt at his coach's instructions.

"One thing I want to improve on this season is being able to go to my right side a lot stronger than

my left because I can go pretty good to my left side now. But my weakest side is my right. I feel if I can play off my right side like I do my left, I feel I'll be pretty well set for college."

Will that change Downing's game any? "I think now I'm more of a finesse player than a power player because more of the people I played against on the inside were bulky and strong and they powered it up pretty strong. I just consider myself a finesse player because I can go around them instead of muscling them. I'm still a finesse player and I've worked with the weights and have the strength to muscle it out, maybe not with the best of them, but the majority of them."

When asked how far he thinks this Providence team can go in post-season play, Downing doesn't hesitate to think of an answer. "I think we're going to go all the way because everybody has the right attitude. The only thing that's going to stop us is if a team is better than us or if we beat ourselves."

Downing is confident, but not totally. He admits Providence has weaknesses like lack of size and limited bench strength. He still thinks positive.

Joining Downing this year is 6-3 Todd Hill, a power forward. Senior Tiger Williams, at 6-1 will be the perimeter forward, with junior Scott Williams playing off guard and 6-1 senior transfer student Byron Gabriel taking over at point guard.

"I don't think we compare talent-wise in any kind of way with the state championship team," Downing says. "Coach feels we have more talent this year, but we just had five pretty good players when I was a sophomore—great players—and we had a strong bench, too. This year we don't have the size we had my sophomore year but we have the quickness. Raw talent-wise I think we had more my sophomore year."

"I think we'll be pretty set on offense but it's defense where we have to work the most and keep other teams from scoring no matter how tall they are."

Downing must watch his physical condition this season since he's been plagued by tendinitis in his right knee as a result of getting hit by a motorcycle during seventh grade.

As he explains it, "My leg was in traction after I broke the left fe-

mur (large bone in upper leg) and the doctors had set it wrong and it grew wrong. As a result the left leg wouldn't grow anymore. The right leg was growing at a steady pace so I had to have an operation on the right leg to stop the growth so it wouldn't go too far past the left leg and I would be crippled. As a result of the operation I got tendinitis and just started having problems with it (the right knee).

"The doctor told me all I had to do was start lifting weights and get the muscle a lot bigger and stronger so it wouldn't be that much pressure on the knee.

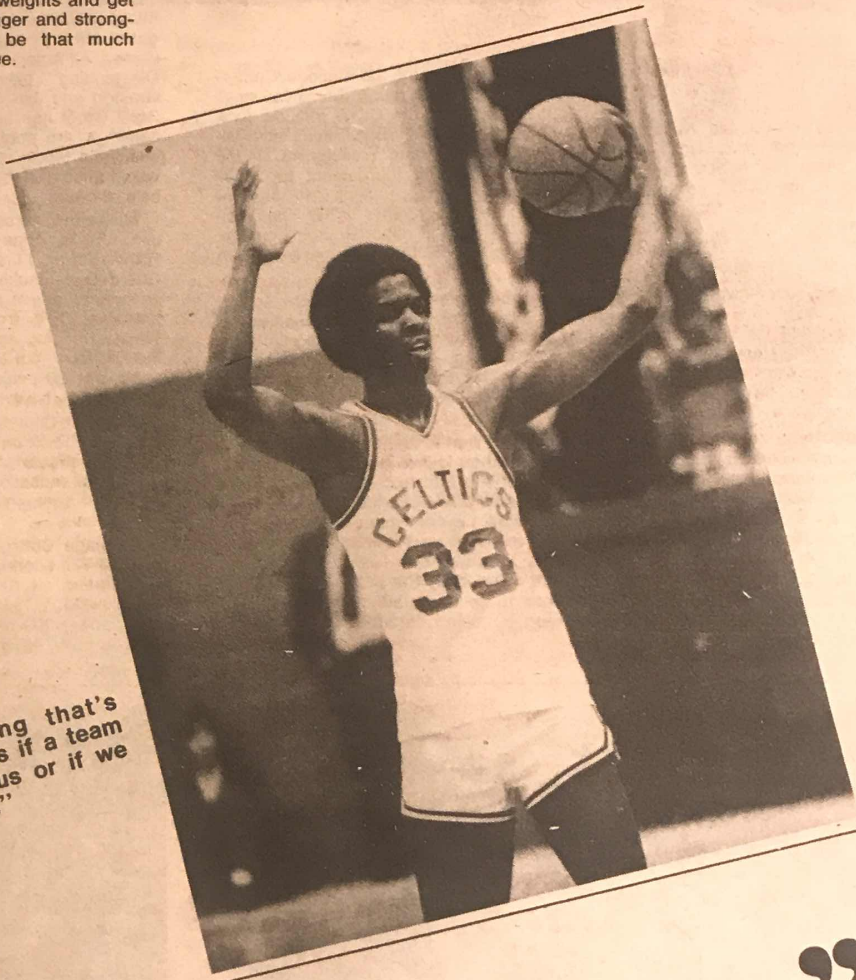
"Coach has taken me to a rehabilitation program where I lifted weights to get my leg strengthened. So far it hasn't given me any problems."

Downing currently is planning on attending Marquette, Iowa, DePaul or Bradley once his senior season is over. He also considered Michigan, Purdue and Tennessee.

He doesn't have a favorite and at this point he says and he will wait until the year is over before making a final decision on one school.

"Now that the preliminary recruiting is over I can relax a little more and start thinking about playing. College right now is the furthest thing on my mind."

Remember, he's thinking about Champaign in March!



"The only thing that's going to stop us if a team is better than us or if we beat ourselves."

"Player Of The Year"