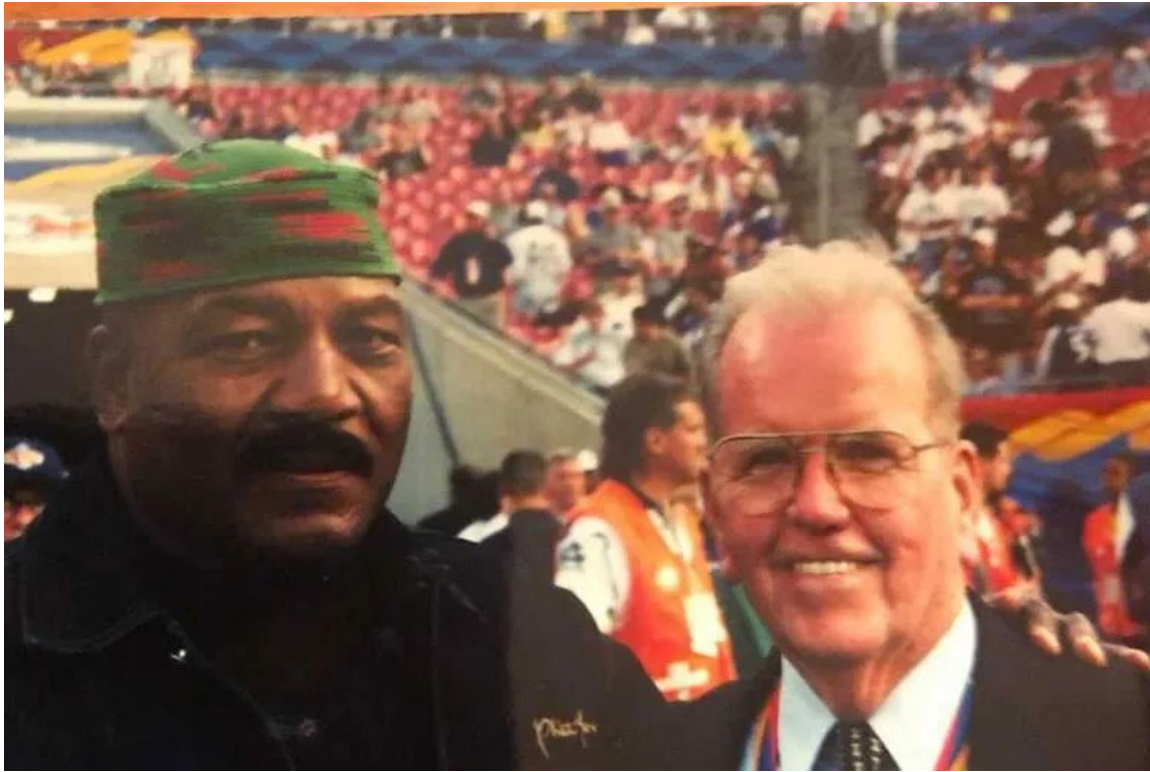


Hall of Famer Art McNally, an official who helped change the NFL game, has died at 97

A native of Philadelphia, McNally became the first official to join the Hall of Fame in August. In 1985, he introduced instant replay for reviewing calls.



Hall of Famer Jim Brown (left) with Art McNally at Super Bowl XXXV in 2001 in Tampa, Fla. Courtesy of the McNally family

by [Matt Breen](#)

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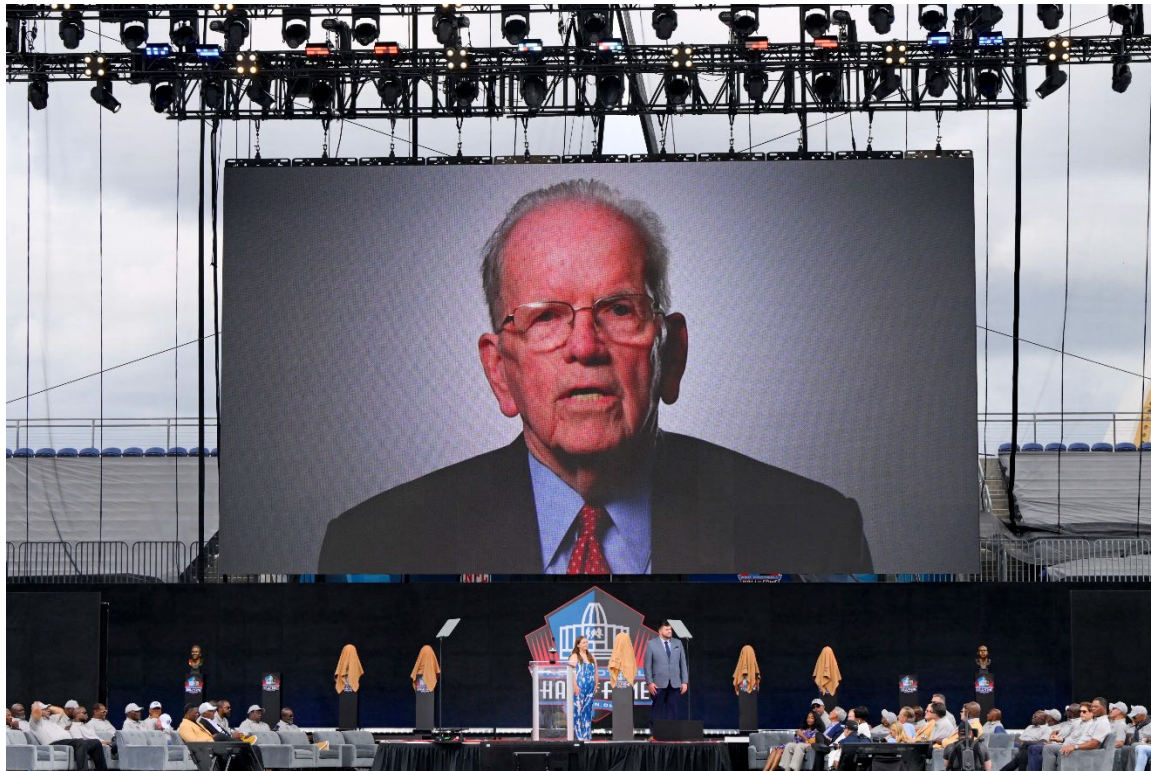
Art McNally, who started his refereeing career on a Hunting Park sandlot before introducing instrumental rule changes to the NFL that earned him the distinction of being the first official to be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame, died Sunday.

He was 97. Mr. McNally died of natural causes at a Newtown hospital, his family said.

Mr. McNally grew up in North Philadelphia, played football at Roman Catholic High School, and got a taste of refereeing while stationed in Japan as a U.S. Marine during World War II. His son, Tom, said the troops needed an honest ref for a football game. So they grabbed his father.

He returned home, enrolled at Temple on the G.I. Bill, and picked up his first paid assignment: \$5 to ref a CYO game between St. Anthony's and the Clymer Athletic Club at American and Luzerne Streets on Oct. 13, 1946. It was the start of a Hall of Fame career.

Mr. McNally, who kept a book in his Yardley home of every game he ever worked, added baseball and basketball games to his officiating duties. He made it to Madison Square Garden as an NBA ref and was planning to move to Florida to become a major-league umpire. But then NFL commissioner Bert Bell called in 1959 to urge him to join the NFL.



A video of NFL official Art McNally is shown during his induction into the Pro Football Hall of Fame on Aug. 6. David Dermer / AP

Mr. McNally refereed a college game on Saturday, an NFL game on Sunday, and taught physical education during the week at Central High while also helping coach the school's football team. He was an alternate referee for Super Bowl I, loved to tell his family about his sideline clashes with former Eagles quarterback and then-Vikings coach Norm Van Brocklin, and received a congratulatory handshake after his last on-field game from Vince Lombardi a week before the Ice Bowl.

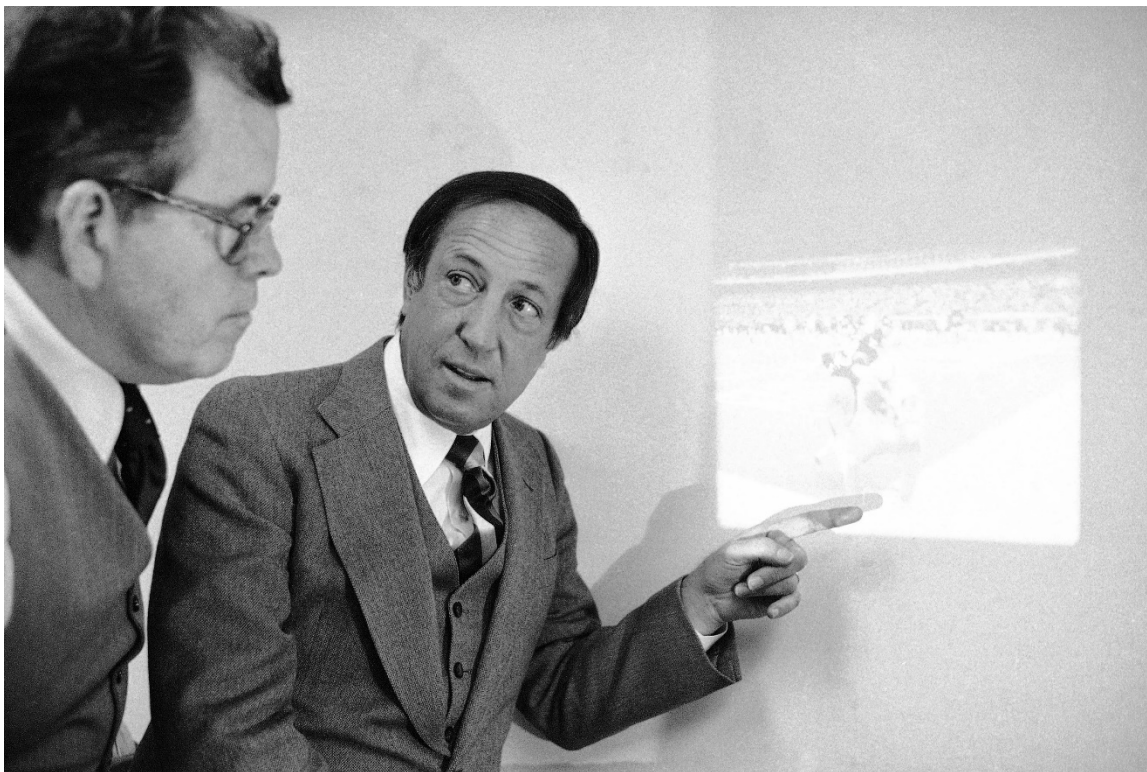
“He’s sitting there taking his shoes off and Vince Lombardi walked up behind him, put his hands on his shoulder, and said, ‘Hey Art. I hear you’re going to the league office. We’re losing a really great one but I know you’ll do a great job there,’” McNally’s son-in-law Brian O’Hara said. “He never wore anybody’s jersey. He was nobody’s fan. Well, he was a Notre Dame fan. A Catholic school kid from Philadelphia, who wasn’t a Notre Dame fan? But he said that made his day, and I think that made him feel good about leaving the field.”

» **READ MORE:** [Art McNally's Pro Football Hall of Fame induction was the dream of his late daughter](#)

He moved to the league office in 1968 to work for commissioner Pete Rozelle as the NFL's supervisor of officials, commuting five days a week to Manhattan from his home in Bucks County.

Mr. McNally was an open book during his 23 years in the position as he took phone calls at home from fans who wanted to complain about calls while also hearing about it from Hall of Fame coaches like Don Shula and Dick Vermeil. He traveled each week to a high-profile game and often found himself correcting John Madden during commercial breaks if the legendary broadcaster was riffing on the refs.

"They were standing in the hallway and Madden said, 'I'd have to see that rule in the book, Art,'" O'Hara said. "Art pointed to his head. 'The rule book is right here, John. I wrote the rule book. I don't need to look at the rule book.' He wrote the rule book every year. When he said he knew the rule book, he did know the rule book because they edited it every single year."



Art McNally (left), supervisor of NFL officials, with commissioner Pete Rozelle on Jan. 7, 1980. David Pickoff / AP

Mr. McNally changed the way referees were evaluated each week by creating a rigorous four-step evaluation system to improve proficiency and consistency. He implemented two rule changes in 1978 — illegal contact for defensive backs after 5 yards and allowing offensive linemen to block with their hands — that generated more offense and modernized the NFL.

In 1985, he introduced instant replay for reviewing calls, which made him known as the “Father of Instant Replay.” At first, the old-school ref was against it before he saw how viewers at home were able to clearly see if a call was wrong. The league’s replay review center in Manhattan is now called Art McNally GameDay Central.

“My philosophy has always been, ‘Get the call right,’” McNally said in 1990. “If it takes a review, fine. Just get it right.”

He was at Three Rivers Stadium in 1972 for the Immaculate Reception, talking from the press box to the officials who decided that Franco Harris made the catch, and was in Foxboro, Mass., 30 years later observing the crew that ruled an incomplete pass and pushed Tom Brady toward his first Super Bowl in the Tuck Rule Game. They were two of the most instrumental games in NFL history and Mr. McNally was working both of them.

“Art McNally was an extraordinary man, the epitome of integrity and class,” said NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, who worked with Mr. McNally in the league office. “Throughout his distinguished officiating career, he earned the eternal respect of the entire football community. Fittingly, he was the first game official enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. But more importantly, he was a Hall of Fame person in absolutely every way.”

» **[READ MORE: Philly’s Art McNally was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. The referee tells stories about the enshrined.](#)**

Mr. McNally’s daughter, Rita, worked with him in the league office and made it her mission to get her father to the Hall of Fame. She wrote a letter every year to the Hall, reminding officials of his credentials and imploring them to keep his name on the ballot. Rita O’Hara, Mr. McNally’s eldest daughter, died in 2019 from melanoma.

Three years later, her wish came true as her father was fitted for a gold jacket last summer and received a bust in Canton, Ohio. Mr. McNally could not travel to the ceremony, so Rita McNally’s children, Connor and Shannon, represented him on stage. A career that started with a \$5 assignment reached the Hall of Fame.

“Art McNally was a quiet, honest man of integrity,” Hall of Fame president Jim Porter said. “To see Art’s decades of service recognized with his enshrinement as part of the Class of 2022 was a special moment for the Hall. His legacy as a strong leader who helped usher in the advanced training of officials and the technology necessary to keep up with a faster and more complicated game will be preserved forever in Canton.”

He is survived by his wife, Sharon, three children — sons Michael and Tom and daughter Marybeth Fairchild — and several grandchildren. Mr. McNally’s first wife, Rita, died in 1980.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

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