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Jim McNally

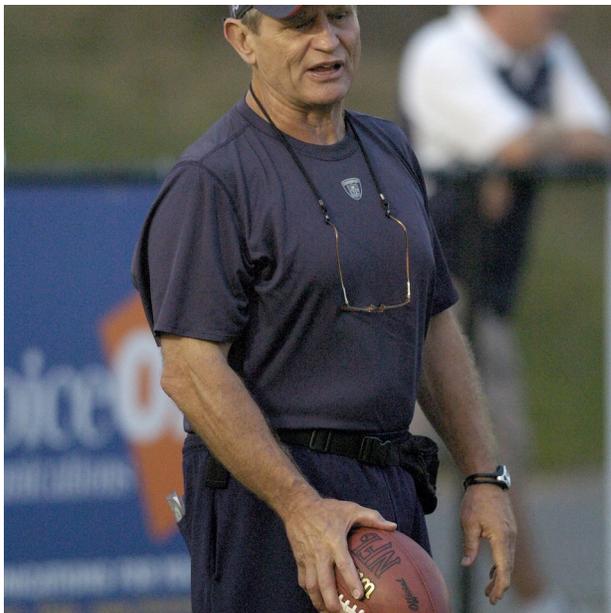
This article is by Budd Bailey.

Jim McNally might be an exception to a rule.

Playing on a pro football team's offensive line is a difficult way to become famous. Most fans of a particular team would be hard-pressed to name all five of the starters in that spot. Imagine, then, how anonymous the coach of that group must be.

But McNally overcame that by coaching almost forever in that job, learning every day along the way. He's helped some great players fulfill their potential, and improved the performance of many others who weren't as gifted. That gave him a reputation as one of the great assistant coaches in NFL history – an expert on all aspect of play by offensive linemen.

McNally was born on December 13, 1943 in Buffalo, New York. He probably had little choice but to participate in athletics. His father, Carl, was a star for Canisius College in the 1920s. The senior McNally scored the only two touchdowns in a big win over Villanova in 1926. Carl also played on the basketball team at Canisius, and went on to graduate from the school in 1928. In 1965, McNally was named to the Golden Griffins' Hall of Fame.





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In addition, Jim's stepbrother, Dick Hutton, was an end on a great Kenmore high school football team in 1946. A highlight of that season came on November 1, when the team defeated North Tonawanda 13-7 before a record crowd of 23,970 in Civic Stadium (later known as War Memorial Stadium). Hutton went on to play football at Canisius College.

As for Jim, he played for Kenmore West High School for head coach Jules Yakapovich, who had that job for 26 years and was inducted into the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame in 2008. McNally was small but tough as a lineman. For example, he was named to the Niagara Frontier League All-Stars as a center as a junior (1959), even though at 170 pounds he was the lightest person on the line to be selected. By 1960, the senior was called "the perfect linebacker" in a short article (accompanied by a good-sized photograph) in *The Buffalo News*.ⁱ McNally was an All-Western New York selection by the *Courier-Express* as a guard as a senior.

Jim made a lot of good friends along the way from his house on Enola Avenue. "There was just something about living in Kenmore," McNally told *The Buffalo News*. "Everyone lived close to the high school, we didn't need a bus, didn't need a car. We would walk to each other's houses. We always had a lot of fun in sports. For whatever reason, the guys I went to high school with didn't move away."ⁱⁱ

McNally's hopes to continue playing football at the next level seemed distant. There weren't many 5-foot-8 guards in college football even back in the 1960s; that small frame had earned him the nickname of "Mouse" while he was growing up. McNally opted to try his luck as a walk-on for the roster of his hometown college team, then called the University of Buffalo.

He beat the odds and was a Bull from 1961 to 1964, earning a scholarship in his final two seasons. Jim only weighed 210 to 220 pounds in those years, but he started on both the offensive and defensive lines.ⁱⁱⁱ The head coach of the Bulls in 1963 was Dick Offenhamer, and the defensive line coach was Buddy Ryan, a future legendary name in defensive coaching in the NFL.

There McNally spent some of his time protecting quarterback Don Gilbert, who happened to be one of his best friends dating back to their childhood days in Kenmore. "Mouse has always had a passion for excellence," said Gilbert, himself a Hall of Famer at UB.

McNally worked as a student assistant for the Bulls in the 1964 season while finishing his degree. After graduation, Jim became a graduate assistant with the team while studying for a Master's degree in education (awarded in 1968). He even taught a few business classes at Depew High School. But McNally quickly discovered along the way that idea



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of worrying about spreadsheets instead of spread formations didn't have much appeal. "I never did make it to working outside of football," McNally said much later to Tim Graham of *The Athletic*.^{iv}

Jim was named the head coach of the freshman team in 1968 as part of a stay that lasted through 1970. Then fate took a couple of swings at changing his life's path. The University of Buffalo decided to drop football after the 1970 season, as students decided not to fund the program through the student fee – which was the team's major source of revenue.

Meanwhile, another position in football coaching was open at that point, and it was connected to a horrific tragedy. On November 14, 1970, a plane crash killed 37 players and five coaches on the Marshall football team in West Virginia. New head coach Jack Lengyel had to rebuild the entire football program from scratch, and he hired McNally to be one of his assistants as the offensive line coach.

A movie was made about Marshall's situation in 2006. It was called "We Are Marshall," and actor Ron Clinton Smith portrayed McNally in the film. McNally saw the movie, even though he didn't need to do so. After all, he lived it. The Thundering Herd sought out players from every corner of the school, even from other sports. Somehow, they were ready for Opening Day.

"Being a part of the rebuilding of Marshall is my most memorable experience," McNally said to Allen Wilson of *The Buffalo News*. "Just meeting some of the families of the players that were killed and some of the wives of the coaches who were killed, it was pretty emotional. It was hard at the time, but when you look back on it 30 years later, you say, 'Boy, what a great time that was.'

"When we went to spring practice after we got hired, all we had was the previous freshmen team and the new freshmen. And when we played the first game, the fans were so happy that they had a team again because they had been in total depression for a long time. It was a great feeling."^v

Lengyel lasted four years, and departed with a 9-33 record. McNally moved on to an assistant coaching spot at Boston College in 1975, and stayed for three seasons. Then Jim moved on to Wake Forest for a two-year stay. There he also supervised the graduate assistants, and affected their lives in surprising ways.

Jim Hofner arrived at the Wake Forest campus to start a job there, and McNally invited him over to his house. Jim conducted a search in his kitchen for some food for the two of them that came up empty. McNally suggested a trip next door, saying the Baxleys had



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three girls. Only one of them was home that night, but it's where Hofner met Cathy. And that's how Jim met his future wife.

"I've gotten a lot of mileage out of it," said Hofner, a future head coach at the University at Buffalo, to Jerry Sullivan of *The Buffalo News*. "Thank God, Cathy was the only one home that day." ^{vi}

McNally's search for knowledge and insight into his job was dedicated and deep. "It was just trial and error," he said to Graham. "I wasn't very good at anything else. I investigated. I wrote letters to different coaches who were a higher caliber. We would go watch spring practices. Every place I went, I learned a little more. Anything that was a little different from the norm kind of excited me. I didn't want to stay static. I was always looking for a better way."

It was at that point that McNally received his big break. Jim arrived at home one day in 1980, and wife Carolyn told him that he had a message to call head coach Forrest Gregg of the Cincinnati Bengals. McNally thought it was a prank. Gregg was a legendary offensive lineman with the Green Bay Packers during the dynasty days of the 1960s. But the call was legitimate, and McNally soon received a job offer to come to the Bengals and work in the NFL.

Even better, McNally had something of a present waiting for him. The Bengals had selected offensive tackle Anthony Munoz with the third pick in the first round of the NFL draft that year. He was considered a bit of a risk because of knee problems while at Southern California. Munoz only played a total of 16 games in his last two seasons. But there was little doubt about his talent. The 6-foot-6 standout was part of a group in which only one of the five starters had more than two years of experience entering the season. Munoz moved into the starting lineup as a rookie, and stayed there for 13 seasons. In his first seasons under Gregg, Munoz received all of his coaching from McNally – even though an all-time great at the position was on the same sideline. "In four years, Forrest Gregg never came over and taught me one minute of offensive-line play," Munoz told Graham. ^{vii} Munoz became a first-team All-Pro selection in his second season.

The tackle is in the argument by experts about the identity of the greatest offensive lineman in history. Munoz was a workout monster during those years and missed three games during his first 12 seasons. McNally once said that Munoz might be the greatest athlete to ever play on the interior line.

"He never fell down," McNally said about Munoz. "He had the most incredible balance I've ever seen. Even against the quickest pass rushers he would never leave his feet. He



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had incredible balance and anticipation. He was a great player to coach and just a tremendous student of the game.”

In the other direction, Munoz was quick to credit McNally for playing a big role in his personal development as a player. “He’s got so much energy and I respect him as a teacher,” Munoz said in the middle of his career. “With him it’s not just a question of getting the job done, but how you are getting the job done.”^{viii} Munoz eventually singled out McNally for his work during the tackle’s Hall of Fame induction speech in Canton. McNally, Munoz and Company went all the way to the Super Bowl in 1982, losing to the San Francisco 49ers. McNally worked with three head coaches in Cincinnati: Gregg, Sam Wyche and David Shula. The Bengals reached two Super Bowls during his time there – 1982 and 1989, losing both.

By that second championship game, McNally was feeling content. “I have no ambitions to be a head coach,” he said to Larry Felser of *The Buffalo News*. “I just want to go off in a corner and teach offensive line play, develop linemen. I don’t even have any hobbies, so I suppose you could say that I get my jollies working with my linemen.”^{ix}

Along the way, McNally’s reputation as a guru of offensive line play grew tremendously. “He knows more about offensive line play than maybe anybody that’s ever lived,” said Brian Kozerski, a ninth-round pick who started 138 games for Cincinnati, to Graham. “Some of these line coaches need the very best players available because they’re not good enough coaches to make the players better. Jimmy took good college players and made them great NFL players. I still wonder sometimes how that happened.”^x

After the 1986 season, the Dallas Cowboys reportedly went after McNally as a replacement for retiring line coach Jim Myers. The Cowboys were one of the glamour franchises in the league at that time, and a job offer from them was difficult to refuse. But

ⁱ “Kenmore West Relies on McNally.” *The Buffalo News*; October 6, 1970.

ⁱⁱ Monnin, Mary Jo. “Mouse will be in the house Wednesday.” *The Buffalo News*; October 26, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Jim McNally.” Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame. <https://www.buffalosportshallfame.com/jim-mcnally/>.

^{iv} Graham, Tim. “Jim McNally, the trailblazing football coach ‘always looking for a better way.’” *The Athletic*; May 1, 2020.

^v Monnin, Mary Jo, and Wilson, Allen. “McNally was part of Marshall’s rebirth.” *The Buffalo News*; December 15, 2006. https://buffalonews.com/news/mcnally-was-part-of-marshalls-rebirth/article_41ed34fa-32b5-5af8-a24b-b990511f7a8c.html

^{vi} Sullivan, Jerry. “Giants assistant McNally: He shapes offensive lines and lives.” *The Buffalo News*; November 30, 2003.

^{vii} Graham, Tim.

^{viii} Northrop, Milt. “Munoz Blooms on Bengals’ Line.” *The Buffalo News*, January 9, 1982.

^{ix} Felser, Larry. “Bengals ‘Mouse’ Likes Them Big, Smart.” *The Buffalo News*; January 19, 1989.

^x Graham, Tim.



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Jim did just that, saying he was happy where he was and optimistic about Cincinnati's future.

Here's how good McNally was with the Bengals: Some thought that the team deliberately didn't draft offensive linemen in the early rounds, because they had such faith that McNally could work magic with lower picks and turn them into serviceable players. Here's the evidence: They only drafted one offensive lineman in the first three rounds during his final 10 years with Cincinnati.

Max Montoya was a Pro Bowler for the Bengals in 1986, 1988 and 1989. The right guard was the only other offensive lineman besides Munoz to be so honored during McNally's time there. Even so, Cincinnati always maintained its reputation for good line play during the assistant coach's stay.

"You're not gonna get another Anthony Munoz," McNally used to say to reporters about his line after his top players retired. "You're not gonna get another Max Montoya. I mean, what are you gonna do? You play with what you have."^{xi}

After four straight poor seasons with the Bengals, including three with 13 losses, McNally opted to try something new. He joined the brand-new Carolina Panthers in 1995. Former Bills general manager Bill Polian was the driving force in that move. Polian had tried to lure McNally to Buffalo in the past, but couldn't reach an agreement. When Polian took over the Panthers, he quickly called McNally again ... and had more luck. McNally was hired even before Polian picked Dom Capers to be the head coach. "I think it was just, after being here 15 years, I think I needed a change," McNally said at the time. "Starting with a new team, starting from scratch, it's kind of a big challenge."

That team reached the conference championship game in its second season, but fell on hard times in 1998 (4-12). About the only highlight of the year for McNally was in August when Munoz was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Jim couldn't make the ceremony in Canton because of the Panthers' training camp, but daughter Jennifer – who was working for the Bengals – represented the family. Otherwise, it was a difficult season. Capers lost his job at its conclusion, and McNally exited with him. Happily, Jim Fassel of the New York Giants needed an offensive line coach, and Jim headed to the football equivalent of Broadway.

If McNally needed a recommendation for the Giants' job, he could have used the words that were spoken by former Cincinnati coaching colleague Wyche. "I had to use the word guru, but he is one of the people in the offensive line business – which is kind of a subculture all its own – that people use as a resource," Wyche said to the Newark Star-

^{xi} Groeschen, Tom. "No help in sight for offensive line this year." *Cincinnati Enquirer*, April 25, 1995.



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Ledger when asked about McNally's hiring by the Giants. "Other coaches, when they have problems, they call Jim McNally, He's one of the people that everyone in the business who's doing what he's doing respect enough to say, 'I'm going to call Jim to see what he thinks.'"^{xii}

The 1999 Giants were mediocre at 7-9, but turned around their fortunes a year later. They went 12-4 to win the NFC East and went on to the Super Bowl. New York had a strong ground game with Tiki Barber (1006 yards) and Ron Dayne (770 yards) doing the heavy lifting. Guard Ron Stone was picked for the Pro Bowl from that roster – the only player on the offensive line so honored. (He repeated that distinction in 2002).

That sort of performance by the Giants only added to McNally's reputation. At that point was already something of a legend, at least in the fraternity of offensive line coaches. Dante Scarnecchia, a line coach of the New England Patriots, sought him out for knowledge whenever he could. "Jim is a guy that, when he came in the league, started doing things a lot different than people were doing them in the past," Scarnecchia said to Graham. "I would tell you that Jim has taught a lot of people, whether he told you how to do it or you watched his tapes and thought, 'Damn, what is *that*? How's he doing that? Why's he doing that?' Jim had a reason for everything."^{xiii}

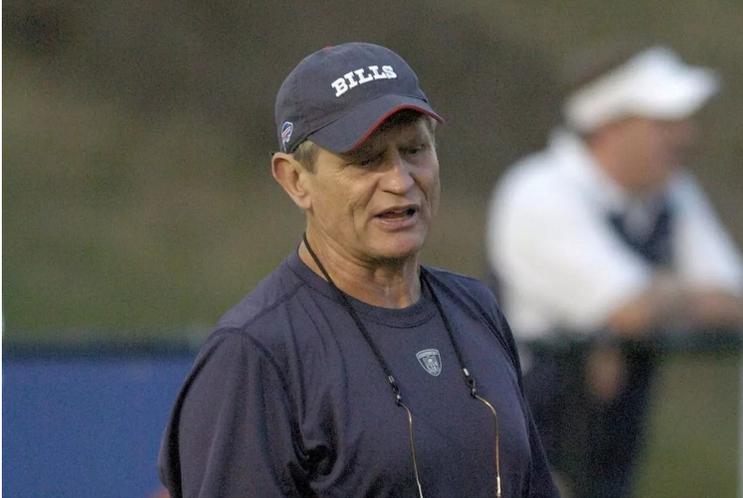
McNally stayed with the Giants through 2003, and he was still as driven to succeed as ever as he approached his 60th birthday. "He loves teaching," Hofner said then. "He loves competing. He has a heart for life that's unbelievable. Players buy into him because he's real, and he's knowledgeable. And after 24 years, he had more credibility than anyone in the business."^{xiv}

The 2003 season was a step backwards in many ways for the Giants. They fell from 10-6 to 4-12, and the whole coaching staff was under siege. That included the offensive line. After that season, Fassel was replaced by Tom Coughlin as the head coach. Jim was available to be hired by other teams, and this time he had a chance to come home to work. The Bills had fired Gregg Williams after three mediocre to poor seasons, and Mike Mularkey was named to replace him. He put together his first staff as a head coach, and McNally was hired.

^{xii} Eisen, Michael. "Giants hire McNally to mold offensive line." *Newark Star Ledger*; January 13, 1999.

^{xiii} Graham, Tim.

^{xiv} Sullivan, Jerry.



“I grew up as a Bills fan and here I am, a coach for the Bills,” McNally said upon his return. “It’s unbelievable. When I walk through the field house and see those huge pictures, the pictures of men like Cookie Gilchrist, Billy Shaw, [Tom] Sestak, [Jack] Kemp and the others, I get very emotional.”^{xv}

The business relationship between McNally and Mularkey lasted two seasons. Buffalo just missed the playoffs in the 2004 season, but fell to 5-11 in 2005. Mularkey lost his job in favor of Dick Jauron, who decided to keep McNally. Some of Jim’s best work came with Jason Peters, an undrafted tight end who was converted to offensive tackle by the Bills in 2005. McNally played a key role in Peters’ development to the point where the lineman probably will be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame someday. Peters went from a rookie tight end in 2004 to a starting left tackle in 2006, and was named to nine Pro Bowl teams including one with McNally in 2007.

“Other than Anthony Munoz, this is the most devastating blocker and pass protector I’ve ever coached,” McNally said to Felser later.^{xvi}

Even after more than a quarter-century of coaching, McNally did not suffer from a drop in enthusiasm. That was quickly noticed by his students in Buffalo – the Bills’ offensive linemen.

“He’s like the Energizer bunny. He doesn’t ever get tired,” center Trey Teague told Mark Gaughan of *The Buffalo News*. “He’s a bit of a fanatic. He definitely teaches through

^{xv} Hirsch, Dick. “Bills coach returns home.” School of Management; March 2008.
<https://management.buffalo.edu/about/alumni-success/filters/grad-year-asc.host.html/content/shared/mgt/students-faculty-alumni/alumni-success/jim-mcnally.detail.html>

^{xvi} Felser, Larry. “Bills need to take big step up at draft time.” *The Buffalo News*; April 26, 2009.



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repetition. But when he speaks, he says everything twice or three or four times depending on how important he thinks it is.”

McNally’s relationship with the Bills lasted four seasons, and he was starting to feel the pressure of coaching in his hometown. That’s when he decided he’d had enough. At 64, it was time to take a step back as he retired early in 2008.

“I have truly enjoyed my coaching career in the NFL, and I just feel that the time is right for me to retire,” McNally said in a statement. “I want to offer a big thank you to all the players I’ve coached. ... I can only hope that I’ve been as instrumental in their lives as they have been in mine.”^{xvii}

Jauron commented, “Jim McNally’s coaching career speaks for itself. His dedication and love of the game of football is unmatched. We thank him for his contributions ... and wish him the very best in retirement.”

Jim landed consulting spots with the Saints, Jets and Bengals over the course of the next decade. The return to the Cincinnati organization was a nice homecoming, since he had spent more than 10 years in that Ohio city. It was welcomed by Cincinnati offensive line coach Paul Alexander. “It’s a fresh set of eyes from afar that can look at our team and other teams and offer valuable insights,” he said. “I’m excited about it. We’re talking about the guy that taught me pro football.”^{xviii}

These days, McNally has worked in camps and clinics for the past several years, and he’s also a volunteer fundraiser for the University at Buffalo. He’s a frequent poster on X.com about offensive line techniques.

McNally was inducted into the UB Athletic Hall of Fame in 1982 and the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame in 2008. About 150 of McNally’s friends and associates turned up at the later event’s ceremony.

“I look at it like I’ve moved 10 times, had eight jobs, been to three Super Bowls,” McNally said shortly before his induction into the Buffalo Hall. “All that about being honored is very nice, but I would rather kind of honor the people from Kenmore and UB – the people who were my friends and took me to where I am.”

^{xvii} Wawrow, John. “Bills offensive line coach McNally calls it a career.” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*; January 9, 2008.

^{xviii} “McNally rejoins Bengals as consultant.” Cincinnati Bengals; February 22, 2012. <https://www.bengals.com/news/mcnally-rejoins-bengals-as-consultant-6963745>



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Yet his biggest honor was to come. It was announced late in 2024 that he was one of the recipients of the Pro Football Hall of Fame's Award of Excellence. He was scheduled to be honored in June 2025 along with former Bills' coach Elijah Pitts and veteran Steelers' assistant Dick Hoak.

The award is designed to salute people who work somewhat behind the scenes in pro football. That includes equipment managers, public relations staffers, trainers, video workers along with assistant coaches.

"It's the highest honor for an assistant coach, because they don't put assistant coaches into the Hall of Fame," McNally said on a podcast with Dave Lapham after hearing about his selection. "It's quite a tribute. I can't think of a higher honor until the man upstairs takes me when I croak."^{xix}

End Notes:

^{xix} Lapham, Dave. "Dave Lapham in the Trenches." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HX4GDxCYdk4>.