

# LOCAL



## DRAWING TO CONCLUSION

ARTIST CHARLIE MCGILL LEAVES AN INDELIBLE LEGACY IN NORTH JERSEY SPORTS

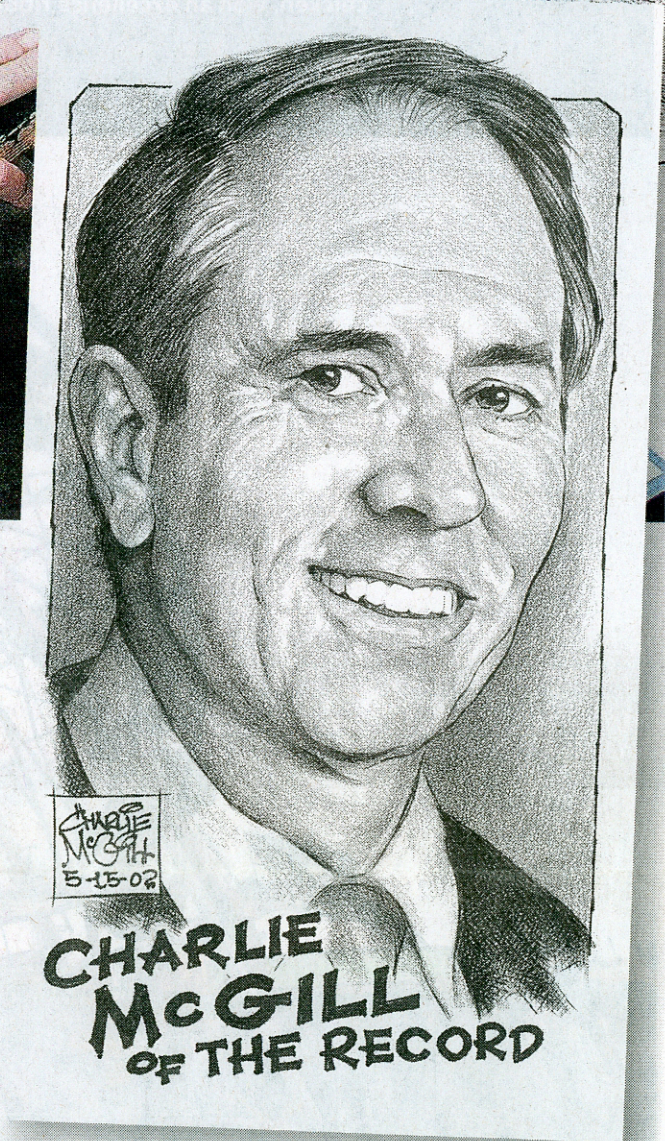


**Mike Kelly**  
Columnist  
USA TODAY NETWORK

We called him “Charlie.”  
Simple.  
Familiar.  
Friendly.  
This was the essence of Charlie McGill, the longtime cartoonist for NorthJersey.com and The Record, who is best known for his pen-and-ink drawings of nearly 4,000 high school Athletes of the Week.  
His first was published on Oct. 20, 1954.  
His last appeared this summer.  
Yep, that’s nearly 70 years.  
This week, McGill will pass his pencil to another artist, Bob Rebach, who will take up the task of drawing portraits of northern New Jersey’s best high school athletes.  
Some people work 20 or 25 years at a particular job and then call it a career, slipping into the ether of retirement or finding another line of

work. McGill, who turns 91 on Christmas Day, has lapped the field and then some.  
When McGill sketched his first star high school athlete – Seymour “Sy” Schwartz, a football running back for Hasbrouck Heights High School who scored five touchdowns in a game against Westwood and whose helmet did not have a protective face mask, Dwight Eisenhower was only midway through his first term in the White House.  
The Korean War had just ended. JFK and his political “Camelot” was still six years away. Donald Trump was just 8 years old. Kamala Harris wasn’t born yet.  
Such is the arc of time that McGill spans across the sports landscape of northern New Jersey.  
More significantly perhaps is how McGill captured a corner of humanity. While the craft of journalism was inevitably and understandably focused on the natural disasters, tragedies, crimes and political screwups that are often categorized as “news,” McGill became a chronicler of joy and success.

See KELLY, Page 3L



“I leaned into cartooning but I leaned into realistic work too. I could always draw heads. I could always catch likenesses. I don’t know why.”

Charlie McGill

Charlie McGill, the longtime cartoonist for NorthJersey.com and The Record, has retired after a career of nearly 70 years. Here he is shown at his Closter home studio in May 2009.  
NORTHJERSEY.COM STAFF FILE

Self-portrait of McGill from 2002, used for an Athlete of the Week award night event program. RECORD FILE PHOTO/NORTHJERSEY.COM



# Kelly

Continued from Page 1L

## Athletic success chronicled across decades

At The Record's headquarters on River Street in Hackensack, his tilted drawing board – about the size of a kitchen table – occupied a corner of what was known as the “art department” in the acre-sized newsroom on the fourth floor. Behind him, light cascaded through a window, illuminating his drawings.

McGill's task was as simple as it was complicated – to draw portraits of stellar high school athletes. But those athletes had to be notable at a particular moment in time.

And so, McGill's drawings captured basketball players who scored a record number of points one game. Or swimmers and track sprinters who set a record at a particular event. Or a baseball pitcher who threw a perfect game.

And so on.

McGill rarely met his subjects. Often, he was simply handed a black-and-white photograph – usually a bland headshot portrait of an athlete – and a short sports story. And then, with the photo propped on his drawing board, McGill studied the eyes, the wave of the hair, the cheekbones – maybe a confident smirk or a hint of a shy smile. Something ordinary in an athlete's face that McGill found to be extraordinary and evocative.

He sharpened a pencil – in a motorized sharpener or sometimes with just a knife – and sketched, usually finding a piece of an athlete's personality in those ordinary facial tweaks that so many of us take for granted.

And he did this on deadline – fast.

“I would start around 8 in the morning,” he told me one day recently when I visited him at his split-level home in Closter, where he drew his portraits for the last 15 years. “I could usually finish by 2:30 in the afternoon.”

His subjects included the actor Ed Harris, a football star at Tenafly High School, and Anne Donovan, the Paramus Catholic High School basketball star who went on to win two Olympic gold medals.

But mostly, McGill's subjects were ordinary folks, sometimes across generations. McGill's career lasted long enough for him to draw the sons, daughters and even grandchildren of some of his subjects who also became top athletes.

And he did this while raising a family that included two sons and two daughters – and amid the sadness of family life. McGill's wife, Mary Ellen, died in 2008 after a long illness.

Officially, McGill's work was classified as a “cartoon.” But it was artistry – a one-of-a-kind peek into humanity. Even if you did not follow high school sports or knew of a particular athlete who was featured, you wanted to spend a few minutes studying McGill's creativity.

In a sense, it was the same artistic magnetism that might cause people to study an Ansel Adams photograph or a Rembrandt portrait. Simply put: Even if you did not care about the sport or the high school, you were attracted by McGill's creativity.

What might surprise many of McGill's fans, however, is that he came to cartoons by accident.

## How did Charlie McGill find his talent?

As a junior at Dwight Morrow High School in Englewood, New Jersey, he was told he needed to take an elective course. His choices: industrial shop or art.

McGill knew the art teacher – Elizabeth Patton. And he feared her. A few years earlier, in junior high, McGill was such a cutup in her art class that she flunked him, making a point of marking his report card in red ink so his parents would notice.

McGill had always drawn sketches, he said – mostly World War II airplanes.

But Patton's high school art class stirred something deeper. And by the end of the semester, McGill remembers his teacher asking him the question that dominates his professional career: “Have you ever considered a career in art?”

Patton promised to write a recommendation if McGill applied to study at an art school. And so, he chose what was known at the time as the Cartoonists and Illustrators School in New York City, now known as the School of Visual Arts.

McGill found his nirvana. The school attracted plenty of would-be painters – what McGill calls “budding Michelangelos.” But McGill loved the world of cartoons, especially the craft of sports cartooning in which an artist would chronicle an athletic achievement with a series of sketches.



A small collection of just some of the work by Charlie McGill, longtime sports cartoonist. ANNE-MARIE CARUSO/NORTHJERSEY.COM



Charlie McGill, the illustrator behind the Athlete of the Week portraits, accepts a lifetime achievement award during the North Jersey High School Sports Awards on June 28. ANNE-MARIE CARUSO/NORTHJERSEY.COM



Artist Charlie McGill, center, with two McGill scholarship winners, Hope Yi of Bergen Tech and Gabe Colucci of New Milford, at the Athlete of the Week dinner in East Rutherford in 2012. NORTHJERSEY.COM STAFF FILE



Charlie McGill working early in his career on one of the “Player of the Week” cartoons. He was a freelancer at the time who was paid \$25 per cartoon. RECORD FILE PHOTO/NORTHJERSEY.COM

And then McGill discovered something else about himself.

“I leaned into cartooning but I leaned into realistic work too,” he said. “I could always draw heads. I could always catch likenesses. I don't know why.”

After three years of study, McGill graduated and looked for a job. And as he applied to magazines and news outlets in New York and New Jersey, he opted for a job with the Bergen County Mosquito Control Commission. His task: to spray anti-bug poison in creeks and other low-lying sections of Bergen County.

It was not exactly an inspiration for cartoons. McGill never chronicled his mosquito spraying in his art.

McGill phoned the legendary sports editor and columnist for four decades at The Record, Al Del Greco. McGill noticed that The Record featured a high school “player of the week” but only with a black-and-white photo.

McGill told Del Greco that he would create a cartoon portrait of each player.

Del Greco liked McGill's portfolio and his idea to draw cartoons of athletes. But with a tight budget, Del Greco only had an opening for a newsroom “office boy.”

McGill took the “office boy” job – but with the additional suggestion from Del Greco that “you can draw anything you want as long as the athlete lives in New Jersey.”

So began a life's work.

On a recent weekday, with light from a golden September sun cascading into his home drawing studio on the winterized porch of his home in Closter, McGill showed me his drawing board.

His last year has been difficult, he said. Doctors found a cancerous tumor in his lungs. But after weeks of chemotherapy, the tumor disappeared.

After that, McGill completed his final series of drawings of star high school athletes.

He keeps another drawing desk in the basement of his home, in a room filled with the kind of random memorabilia that artists tend to collect.

Ten baseball gloves are stacked on a bookcase. A dozen baseball hats sit on a shelf. Pencils are scattered next to his drawing board near that old electric pencil sharpener. And on a nearby bookshelf, McGill keeps a sign to remind him of his life's work.

“If the right side of the brain controls the left side of the body, only lefties are in their right mind,” the sign says.

McGill is left-handed. In case you wondered.

He headed upstairs to his other drawing board on the porch.

He gazed for a moment at the board and the pencils.

“I'm never stopping,” he says. “I'll always draw.”

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## With Charlie McGill retiring, share your Athlete of the Week memories

After nearly 70 years of drawing Athletes of the Week for The Record and NorthJersey.com, Charlie McGill is now retired.

Over the years, Charlie drew portraits of nearly 4,000 athletes from 92 schools.

Athletes of the Week, we want to hear from you: What are your memories of being named Athlete of the Week and seeing your drawing? Where do you keep your drawing now?

Please email your responses to deputy sports editor Zach Miller at [zmiller@northjersey.com](mailto:zmiller@northjersey.com).

We will post all of the memories online next week.

The Athlete of the Week tradition will continue this season with a new artist.