

BILL MCGOWAN HALL OF FAME UMPIRE

Umpire Bill McGowan made his most famous call on April 26, 1931, after Lou Gehrig hit a ball into the stands. Baserunner Lyn Lary, unsure whether the ball was out of the park, slowed down, and Gehrig passed him on the basepaths. Quite properly, McGowan called Gehrig out. The lost home run left Gehrig in a tie for the league home run crown at the end of the season. It is ironic that McGowan, who was renowned for never shrinking from a tough call, making hundreds of them during his career, should be remembered for the simple enforcement of a well-known rule.

McGowan was born in Wilmington, Delaware on January 18, 1896. He spent the 1912 season playing semi-pro ball as a second baseman, an experience that convinced him to take up umpiring. At age 19, he became a professional umpire in a Class C league. In 1917, James Vincent Jamison, Jr., President of the Class D, Blue Ridge League, signed McGowan to umpire, where he learned the ropes with future Major Leaguers, Lu Blue, Clyde Barnhart, and Jimmy Dykes. By 1925, after toiling 10 years of hard work in the Minor Leagues, he joined the American League, serving as a Major League umpire for the next 29 seasons.

McGowan was vigorous, aggressive, sharp-tongued, and unusually demonstrative in his gestures. Early in his career he was disdainfully nicknamed "Big Shot," but as appreciation for his ability grew, he was called "No. 1" and ranked by players and managers as the best in conducting a game. A Sporting News poll of players in 1935 named him the AL's Outstanding Umpire.



Bill McGowan
Hall of Fame Umpire

He was chosen as one of the arbiters for the first All-Star Game, in 1933, and during his career umpired four All-Star Games and eight World Series. In 1948 he was also selected as umpire-in-chief for the first playoff in AL history. McGowan is often credited with umpiring 2,541 consecutive games, but he apparently missed two games in 1931 because of his diabetes. His resume also included umpiring in eight different World Series.

McGowan rarely ejected players for arguing, but he didn't duck a rhubarb. One observer accurately noted, "He never ran away but knew when to walk." His occasionally short temper twice led to brief suspensions. Some of his supporters believe his run-ins with members of the press long delayed his election to the Baseball Hall of Fame, a tribute finally awarded him in 1992. He is one of eight former umpires enshrined in Cooperstown.

McGowan opened the country's second school for umpires in 1939 and stayed active as an AL umpire until diabetes forced his retirement in 1954. In recognition of his superior status, the league doubled his pension. He died later that year, December 9, 1954 in Silver Springs, Maryland. McGowan's wife, Magdaline (born 1896), died in 1981. They are buried at Cathedral Cemetery, in McGowan's hometown of Wilmington, DE.

Sources – Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown, New York; www.baseball-almanac.com; <http://www.ensl.net/basebol/history/people/umpires/mcgob101/mcgob101.html>

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Class D, Blue Ridge League
1917