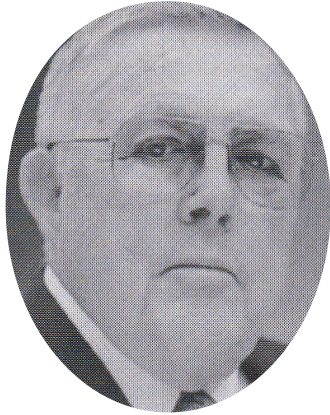


Tom O'Connor



Whether it was as an athlete, a teacher, or later as mayor, **Tom O'Connor** certainly left his mark on the city of Norwalk in more ways than one.

But long before he got into education or politics, O'Connor made a name for himself in local sports playing football. He was a junior center on the 1943 Norwalk High School football team where he played for coaches Ike Kern, Mike Wilson, and Bob Hunt, and was a teammate of such players as Denny Callahan, Al Palumbo, George Holomokoff, and the Santo brothers.

O'Connor was looking forward to an even bigger senior year, but a severe ruptured appendix sidelined him for the entire season. His love for the game couldn't keep him away, however, and he stayed a part of the team as an assistant manager.

Following graduation, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy during World War II, and although he played softball for his base, it was during this time that O'Connor discovered he excelled in another sport — swimming. "We had a house on the beach and I always swam as a youngster, not competitively but just because I enjoyed it," O'Connor explained. "When you joined the Navy they made everyone jump in the pool and swim. So I did it and one of the commanding officers saw me and said, 'Come here. Where did you learn to swim like that?' Then he asked me if I wanted to be on the swim team and I said sure."

As a result, O'Connor became a key member of the U.S. Navy swim team in Newport, Rhode Island from 1945-'47. Following the war, O'Connor attended Fairfield University from 1947-'51, and resumed his football career as a center on the Spring Hill Tigers from 1948-'49, helping the Tigers win the last of their many city championships in '49. He also played for the Norwalk Tigers during 1950-'51 seasons, and played softball for the Knights of Columbus in the City League from 1948-'50.

O'Connor rejoined the Navy during the Korean War from 1951-'54 and became a swim instructor. This helped launch a new career when he returned home as he became a water safety instructor from 1955-'70, teaching hundreds of local children to swim at Kiwanis Park in New Canaan and Longshore and Compo Beach in Westport. His love for water also made him an avid fisherman over the years.

Even when his football days were over, O'Connor didn't leave the gridiron altogether. He became a certified Connecticut football official, and every weekend from 1960 to 1980, O'Connor could be found at an FCIAC game in the area.

"If someone wants to remain close to the game, this is a good way to do so," he says. "It was a wonderful experience."

Displaying the same type of work ethic that made him a standout football player, O'Connor enjoyed a 35-year career in the Norwalk school system as a history and English teacher before retiring in 1991.

But it was also during this time that yet another career was born. Upset with some of the drastic changes going on in the field of education in the mid '60s, O'Connor began speaking out and voicing his opinion more and more. As a result, he got into politics and served as councilman, then a Norwalk state representative, and eventually was elected as the Mayor of Norwalk from 1981-'83. Even today he remains active in local politics as a member of the Norwalk Town Committee.

O'Connor left quite a legacy behind him, too, as many of the projects he helped initiate during his term in office are still a big part of the city and pointed to with pride by many local residents. He was the founder of the Norwalk Heritage Wall, which now boasts plaques recognizing 17 different ethnic groups in the city. O'Connor also founded the Shea-McGrath Memorial at Calf Pasture Beach, and he was responsible for the Veterans Memorial Roll of Honor located at the entrance of City Hall.

A lifetime Norwalk resident, O'Connor and his wife, the former Jeanne Vadas, recently celebrated their 45th anniversary and have two children and three grandchildren. And O'Connor, who turned 71 last month, is still a loyal sports fan, especially of his alma mater, attending almost every Norwalk High football, basketball, and baseball game as well as most of the practice sessions.

Thomas C. O'Connor answered to many names over the past six decades. Whether you knew him as Mr. O'Connor in the classroom, or Mayor O'Connor in the political arena, or just Tommy O'Connor as most of his former teammates and longtime friends still know, there's no doubt he left a lasting impression on the city of Norwalk.