

# Rice retires—Receiver redefined position

DENVER (AP) - The greatest receiver of all time realized he would be no better than the fourth receiver for the Denver Broncos. It was no way for Jerry Rice to end his career, so he called it quits after 20 sensational seasons.



*Jerry Rice, one of the most dominant wide receivers in the NFL, wipes away a tear during a news conference held to announce his retirement in Denver.*

"I never thought I'd ever see this day," Rice said Monday during an emotional news conference at Broncos team headquarters.

And the NFL may never see anyone like Rice again.

The 42-year-old receiver, a first-round draft pick out of tiny Mississippi Valley State in 1985, leaves the field with 38 NFL records, including the most career receptions (1,549), yards receiving (22,895) and touchdowns receiving (197).

But as much as the numbers, it was the way he did things that made the biggest impression — the right way. He was a slave to details, a master of route-running precision, a good guy off the field and a workout junkie both in season and out.

Revered by fans and his peers, Rice told his short-time teammates in Denver that he was retiring during a short meeting held after his public announcement. The Broncos gave him a standing ovation.

"Not many people that own all the records spend that type of commitment and give that type of commitment in the offseason," Broncos coach Mike Shanahan said. "That's why, in my opinion, he's the greatest player to ever play the game."

Next, it's time for that debate, and nobody can accuse Shanahan of overstating it.

Rice led the 49ers to three Super Bowl titles and helped make Joe Montana and Steve Young look great. He mastered the West Coast offense and made a career of turning short catches into long gains. His work ethic and attention to the little things gave an entire generation of receivers someone to look up to.

How detail oriented was he?

Shanahan said Rice insisted the right-handed assistant who threw practice passes to the receivers be replaced with a lefty when the 49ers switched from the right-handed Montana to the left-handed Young.

"... I'd see him upstairs. One time, I said, 'Jerry, what are you doing?'" recalled Shanahan, who spent three years coaching Rice as San

youngsters Charlie Adams and Todd Devoe.

"I think if somebody would give him the opportunity today to be a top-three receiver on a team, he'd still be playing," Young said. "It's still burning in him, that's what he said."

"But Mike is a straight shooter, and this is probably as good of a situation as it could be. This is one of the rational, reasonable ways you would think it would have to come to an end."

Francisco's offensive coordinator. "He said, 'I was looking at film. I'm looking at the top 10 receivers in the AFC and the top 10 receivers in the NFC. I don't want any of these young guys ever to catch me.'"

Inevitably, though, time did catch up with Rice.

After 16 years with the Niners, Rice went to Oakland, where he had three fairly productive seasons. But it became clear the end might be near last season when the Raiders phased him out, prompting a midseason trade to Seattle.

He still averaged 14.3 yards a catch last season and scored three touchdowns, showing traces of the big-play capability he flashed so often earlier in his career.

Last spring, his agent put out a league-wide memo stating that the GOAT — the Greatest Of All Time — was available.

Denver looked like a great fit: a team with a winning tradition, coached by a man with whom Rice was familiar and comfortable. So Rice signed with the Broncos, knowing there was no guarantee of a roster spot.

After some early trouble adjusting to the mile-high altitude, Rice looked in shape and ready for a 21st season. About halfway through training camp, he moved ahead of Darius Watts, to Denver's No. 3 receiver spot.

That move caused a stir, but a closer look showed a receiver who had trouble separating from third- and fourth-string cornerbacks in practice, a receiver who finished with four catches for 24 yards in four preseason games.

When Watts improved, Rice was bumped back down the depth chart in the third preseason game. After the finale, Shanahan told Rice he'd be a No. 4, at best, competing for playing time with

Talk about a generation gap — Adams said he has Rice posters on his wall at home. "He worked hard every day," Adams said. "He didn't take any days off, he didn't take any plays off. That's how he did it. He never took the easy way out."

But he decided it was time to get out.

Shanahan was willing to give Rice a roster spot, but told him the third receiver spot was out and there were no guarantees he'd play ev-

ery week. Rice didn't want to deal with the possible indignity of being declared inactive for games or withering away on the bench when he did suit up.

"He did everything he could possibly do to get that job," Shanahan said of Denver's third receiver spot. "But it's my job to be honest to the team and do the tough job. I had to do the right thing for the organization. Jerry understands that. He understood exactly where I was

coming from." Rice believes his route running was "still pretty good," although he concedes he's not as explosive as he used to be.

"Eventually," he said, "everything is going to catch up with you."

Now that he's acknowledged it's really over, Rice said he was grateful for the last few years of his career, when he took the blinders off and paid attention to the fans who chanted his name.

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