

O'Ree hailed for breaking NHL's color barrier

ATLANTA (AP) - In 1956, two years before breaking the NHL color barrier with the Boston Bruins, Willie O'Ree gave professional baseball a try in Waycross, Ga., more than four hours south of Atlanta.

Spotted by Milwaukee Braves scouts while playing for a semi-pro team in his hometown of Fredericton, New Brunswick, O'Ree's introduction to the pre-integration South began with his first step off the plane in Atlanta.

"I'd never been in the South before, so I fly into Atlanta and step off the plane and went into the terminal, and the first thing I saw was 'White Only' and 'Colored Only' restrooms," O'Ree said.

The second strong hint that things would be different came when O'Ree was pushed to the back of the bus for a long ride to Waycross. O'Ree, who played second base and shortstop, said he began second-guessing his baseball career almost immediately and after only a week was told to go home for more seasoning.

This time there would be no plane ride. He had a five-day bus ride back to Canada.

"I sat on the back of the bus, which I was not accustomed to, being from Canada, where I could sit anywhere on the bus," he said.

"As we're getting farther up north, I start moving up on the bus. By the time I got to Bangor, Maine, I was sitting right on front of the bus. When I got back to my hometown I said, 'Willie, forget about baseball, concentrate on playing hockey.'"

O'Ree's 21 years in professional hockey began soon after his return home when he signed with the Quebec Aces of the Quebec Professional Hockey League.

On Jan. 18, 1958, at the Montreal Forum, he made his NHL debut with the Bruins, becoming the first Black player to appear in a game.

"It was a great thrill for me but it really didn't register," O'Ree said.

O'Ree appeared in only two games in 1958 and did not record a point. He was recalled and played 43 games in 1960-61, when he had four goals and 10 assists.

"It was the media who gave me the nickname 'the Jackie Robinson of hockey,'" he said. "I never considered myself the Jackie Robinson of hockey. When I was recalled they said, 'Oh there's Willie O'Ree, he's the Jackie Robinson of hockey,' so it stuck over the years."

O'Ree says he did not leave racism behind in the South. He faced taunts from fans and repeated physical challenges from opposing players.

"It was tough at the beginning," he said. "I was faced with racial slurs and remarks. I wanted to stay focused on what I wanted to do. I just took it a day at a time."

NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said O'Ree battled more than racism. He played despite being blind in one eye, thanks to having a puck hit his face in youth hockey.

O'Ree said his doctor told him he would never play again.

"For a hockey player to play who has lost half his ability to see, half his peripheral vision, is unbelievable,"

Bettman said. "It is unbelievable he played for 21 years and no one knew it."

At Friday's NHL diversity luncheon, Atlanta City Council president Lisa Borders presented O'Ree with a proclamation "in honor of a living legend."

Among others in a crowd, which greeted O'Ree with two standing ovations, were former mayor Andrew Young and Martin Luther King III.

Current Black players, including Calgary star Jarome Iginla, are now taking advantage of the path cleared by

O'Ree and others. Iginla will be the Western Conference's captain Sunday in the NHL All-Star game.

"When I was growing up and I would say I want to be an NHL player, people would say, 'Well, there's not many Black players in the NHL,'" Iginla said Friday. "It helped me a lot to be able to look up and say yeah there were. It gave me a lot of strength."

"I didn't really learn a lot about Mr. O'Ree until I got to the NHL and realized he was the first. I know that his path was a lot harder. He had

a lot more difficulties. I had it a lot smoother, and he was a big part of that. I'm very thankful for his determination and his courage and perseverance, because I do know that looking up to those guys when I was younger helped a lot."

Twelve Black players have appeared in games this season.

The 72-year-old O'Ree is 10 years into his second career with the NHL's diversity task force. He conducts clinics and visits schools as he helps to introduce hockey to

minority children.

"It has really been great," O'Ree said. "I can't tell you how much fun I have with these boys and girls. We not only teach hockey skills to these boys and girls but we teach life skills."

Equipment and ice time are the major barriers to many minority youth. The NHL is helping by supplying equipment.

"I have not had one boy or girl, once they get on the ice, to come to me and say 'Willie I don't like the sport,'" O'Ree said.

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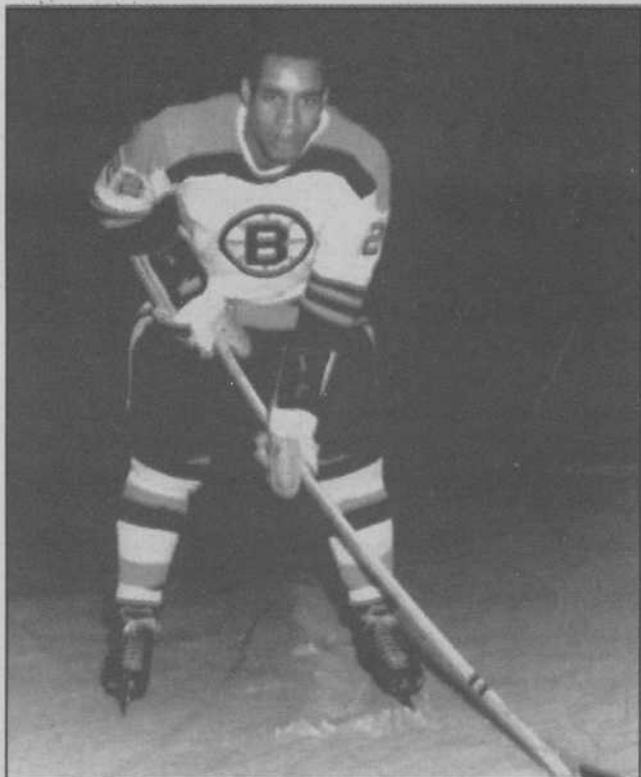
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Hosted by
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Willie O'Ree was the NHL's version of Jackie Robinson.

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