

SPORTS

NHL To Honor Hockey Trailblazer's Milestone 50 Years Later

By Melody K. Hoffman
JET MAGAZINE

With a robust voice and charismatic body language, Willie O'Ree reflects on his history-making feat on the ice 50 years ago as if it were yesterday.

O'Ree describes the excitement of playing in the pros and becoming the National Hockey League's first Black player in 1958.

"That was my dream when I was 14, to play professional hockey, and one day get into the National Hockey League," explains O'Ree, 72, who will be honored by the Boston Bruins this week at a game to mark 50 years since the milestone.

On Jan. 18, 1958, O'Ree stepped on the ice as a left wing for the Bruins in Montreal to play after being called up from his hockey team in Quebec, Canada. O'Ree helped them win.

"The next day, the big write-up was 'Bruins win shutout.' Nothing mentioned about Willie O'Ree breaking the color barrier."

▶ The Bruins are set to honor Willie O'Ree this week at a game to commemorate the 50th anniversary of his debut as the NHL's first African-American player. The league is also hosting a diversity luncheon during NHL All-Star weekend in Atlanta Jan. 25 in honor of O'Ree's accomplishment.



Willie O'Ree

barrier. When the reporters asked me what do you think, I said I was just so happy to be called up, it didn't make any difference to me if they had mentioned my name or not."

O'Ree, who is from Canada, says news of his breaking the league's color barrier didn't appear until 1981—the year he scored his first goal in the NHL.

O'Ree played 45 games with the Bruins from 1958-1961, with his professional career spanning 21 seasons, mostly in Canada's Western Hockey League.



46

SPORTS

▶ As the director of youth development for the NHL's diversity program for the last 10 years, Willie O'Ree has introduced hockey to thousands of inner-city youths.

His zeal for the sport is the foundation for his longevity. It helped him endure racial slurs and return to the ice after a hockey accident in 1956.

"I'm laying in my hospital bed and it's what this doctor tells me that actually changed my life. 'Mr. O'Ree, I'm sorry to inform you, you'll never play hockey again...the impact of the puck completely shattered the retina in your right eye, you're going to be blind.' I'm 19 and the dreams I had to play in the NHL were gone."

However, his passion for hockey helped him regain his confidence. He returned to the arena weeks later.

"When I came back to play, everybody thought I was back from my injury...no one knew I was blind (in my right eye). I only told two people...my youngest sister Betty...and another Black player, a teammate. I swore them to secrecy, because if anybody finds out, I won't be able to play pro hockey."

O'Ree's humility inspires other players, including some Black NHL players. There are 14 in the league today.

"Willie O'Ree is a great role model to follow when you think about the barriers he broke down," former NHL star Anson Carter says.

The Calgary Flames' Jarome Iginla says, "People ask me if I've faced a lot of challenges or discrimination because of my race. I haven't. O'Ree is like the Jackie Robinson of hockey...When I was younger I really looked up to other Black players."

Fifty years later, O'Ree is still in the game. Since 1998, O'Ree has been the director of youth development for the NHL's diversity program, which has introduced more than 40,000 boys and girls to hockey, most of them inner-city kids.

"I enjoy what I'm doing, to be able to just give back to the sport what the sport has given me over the years. Being able to help these boys and girls as far as setting goals for themselves, and believing in yourself." □



48