FOR THE LOVE OF THE GAME

By Marty Kaminsky

Like a general inspecting his troops, Willie O'Ree glides between skaters at a Detroit, Michigan, hockey clinic. "There is no substitute for hard work," he tells the young African American and Hispanic hockey players. "You cannot change the way some people think, but I learned I could gain the respect of most people by always giving my best effort."
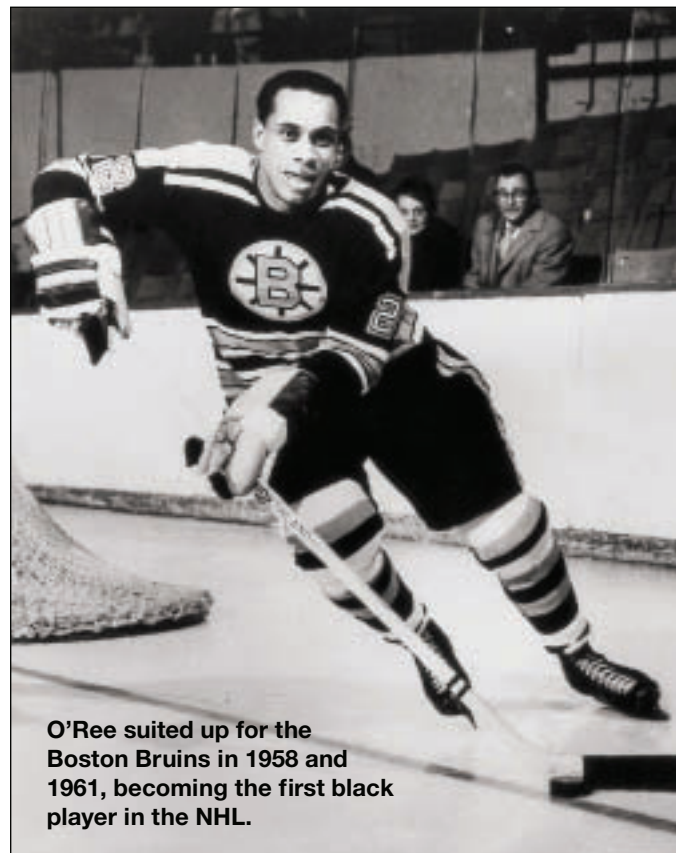
Over the course of a twenty-one-year professional career, O'Ree's best effort helped him overcome a terrible eye injury and the prejudice that prevented black players from competing in professional hockey.

Integrating the NHL

Although talented black skaters played for many semi-professional hockey teams in Canada, before 1958 no black man had been allowed to lace up his skates in the National Hockey League (NHL). On January 18, 1958, Willie O'Ree made hockey history by becoming the first black player in the NHL. "Like most boys growing up in Canada," he explains, "I dreamed of playing in the NHL. No one ever told me I couldn't do it."

When it came to sports, young Willie could do it all. When he was only three years old, his dad used a garden hose to turn the backyard into a pond and taught him to skate by having him push a chair while wearing double-runner blades. Starting at age five, Willie moved up through the hockey leagues, playing in the peewee, bantam, and other youth leagues. "The more I played, the more I loved playing," he remembers. "I would play hockey with anyone, at any time, anywhere."

Braving the Taunts

By the time he reached high school, Willie was also starring in rugby, football, and baseball. The O'Rees were the only black family in Fredericton, New Brunswick, and Willie was the only black player on all his teams. Although his friends and teammates encouraged him, Willie was the target of racial slurs and taunts from opponents and rival fans.

O'Ree suited up for the Boston Bruins in 1958 and 1961, becoming the first black player in the NHL.

Willie O'Ree made hockey history.

"My parents taught me to be proud of who I am, so I always held my head up high," O'Ree says. "I let the taunts go in one ear and out the other. It was obvious that some opponents came after me with high sticks and head shots, but I was determined not to let anyone run me out of the rink or off the field."

His skills in baseball were so good that the Milwaukee Braves brought him to a spring training tryout in 1956, but Willie O'Ree wanted to hit a puck, not a baseball.

To prepare Willie for a future on skates, his older brother practiced with him. "One day Richard drove me hard into the boards," O'Ree recalls. "It brought tears to my eyes, and I said, 'Why did you do that?' He said, 'If you want to be a pro you will be hit much harder than this. You'd better be ready to take it and to stand up for yourself.'"

A Devastating Injury

A short time later, while playing junior hockey, eighteen-year-old Willie was skating down the ice when he was struck in the face by a hard pass. The force of the blow broke his nose and part of his jaw,

This photo shows Willie O'Ree scoring a game-winning goal for the New Haven Night Hawks in 1973.

and severely damaged his right eye. Doctors warned Willie that his retina was so badly injured that he would never see out of that eye again. His family pleaded with him to give up the fast-paced and rough sport.

"I thought, what will I do if I don't play hockey?" he says. "I understood the risks but decided to give it another shot."

After two months of recovery, he signed his first pro contract to play in a league a step below the NHL. Willie learned to compensate for his bad eye so well that few people even knew of his problem.

Making Hockey History

After a few years in the rugged Quebec League, Willie received a call from the NHL's Boston Bruins to be a temporary replacement for an injured player. As an emergency stand-in, he played only two games for the Bruins in 1958 before being returned to the minor-league Quebec Aces. He played in another hockey league until 1961, when the Bruins called again.

On January 1, 1961, Willie scored his first NHL goal. "I broke down the side, skated around two defensemen, and faced the goalie," he remembers fondly. "I faked, shot, and it hit the goal post and went in. It was the winning goal. The fans gave me a two-minute standing ovation."

Although his NHL career lasted only forty-five games, O'Ree played nearly two thousand games in the dimly lit arenas of the minor leagues. The Bruins never explained why he was not kept on after the 1961 season, but hockey historian Stan Fischler explains: "There was a bylaw concerning safety which required that players maintain a certain level of vision. Willie could not see out of one eye so he was not eligible to play."

Willie O'Ree Today

It has been more than forty years since Willie O'Ree broke the NHL color barrier. Today, nearly a dozen black players are on NHL teams. As the director of youth hockey for the NHL's diversity task force, O'Ree often reminds groups of kids that some things never change. "It was true in my day and is just as true today," he says. "The best way to represent yourself is by doing your best. Be proud of who you are, set goals for yourself, and always work hard."