

Willie O'Ree Continues to Inspire Youth & Promote Diversity

The Pittsburgh Penguins organization joins the National Hockey League to salute Willie O'Ree and pay tribute to his vast contributions to our sport.

O'Ree became the NHL's first Black player in 1958 and played 45 games for the Boston Bruins over parts of two seasons. This was in the six-team era, when only the very best players made it to the NHL.

O'Ree's trail-blazing career spanned three decades and nine different leagues. He was an outstanding player in the Western Hockey League, skating for 13 seasons as a right winger for the Los Angeles Blades and San Diego Gulls. The native of Fredericton, New Brunswick, won two WHL scoring titles and averaged more than a point a game in 1968-69 with San Diego, recording 38 goals and 79 points in 80 games.

O'Ree retired in 1979, at the age of 43.

On-ice achievements aside, O'Ree's success has given promise to generations of young Black hockey players. Since he broke through hockey's racial barrier, a total of 43 Black players have followed O'Ree's path to play in the NHL – and more are on the way.

What makes O'Ree's journey to the NHL even more remarkable is the fact that he had to overcome the handicap of being blind in his right eye; an injury he sustained in the minors with the Quebec Aces two years before being called up by the Bruins for his first NHL game.

O'Ree has worked as an Ambassador for the NHL's Youth Diversity Program since 1998, enabling him to tell his story and inspire countless youth over the past 20+ years.

"Willie O'Ree has devoted his life to our sport and our young people, to diversity and inclusion," stated NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman in a statement. "His words of encouragement, and the life lessons he has taught, have inspired thousands not only to play hockey; but to incorporate our game's values and ideals into their lives."

O'Ree has been honored with numerous awards for his contributions to the sport. In 2008, O'Ree received the Order of Canada, the highest civilian award for a Canadian citizen. He was honored as a pioneer of hockey and dedicated youth mentor in Canada along with the U.S.

In 2018, he was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame and in 2020, he was again honored by his homeland with his induction into the Canada Sports Hall of Fame; both honors were in the Builder category.

In 2019, a bill in the 116th U.S. Congress authorized the award of the United States Congressional Gold Medal for O'Ree's achievements, in recognition of his contributions and commitment to hockey, inclusion, and recreational opportunity.

In his honor, the NHL created the annual Willie O'Ree Community Hero Award in 2018 to "recognize the individual who has worked to make a positive impact on his or her community, culture or society to make people better through hockey."

This year, O'Ree will be prominently honored by the NHL throughout Black History Month. All NHL players are wearing a commemorative helmet decal honoring O'Ree; and his former team, the Boston Bruins, have announced that they will retire his jersey Number 22 later this month.