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Black Bases/Black Ice: The Multi-Sport Careers of Canadian Black Athletes and the Struggle for Social Justice

Colin Howell

The history of sport and race in North America has often been presented as a story of advancement from segregation to inclusion, part of a broader and unfolding process of modernization. This liberal narrative, conforming to a belief in social progress, celebrates the gradual vanquishing of intolerance over the course of the 20th century. The careers of black baseball and hockey players in the first half of the century, however, suggest a more complicated and ambiguous history, where race relations are continuously framed and reframed in ways that secure (white) hegemonic influence and demand a continuing struggle for social justice and equality for people of colour and others suffering various forms of dispossession.

The years 1895-6 and 1945-6 provide convenient bookends for this story. On one end there is the development of the Nova Scotian Coloured Hockey League (1895) and of Booker T. Washington's influential Atlanta address the following year. On the other, the Second World War closed in 1945 with hopes of a new world order and the vanquishing of Hitler's "master race" ideology. 1946 witnessed the initial assault on baseball's colour bar with the entrance of Jackie Robinson and Canada's Manny McIntyre into the ranks of "Organized

Baseball”. Both players played in Quebec that year, Robinson with the Montreal Royals and McIntyre with Sherbrooke of the Class-C Border league. Despite hopes for meaningful change, however, this period remained one of continuing disillusionment, institutional segregation, residential schooling for First Nations peoples, the aftermath of wartime Japanese internment, segregation of some restaurants, movie houses, golf clubs, sporting clubs like the Halifax Waegwoltic Club that excluded Jews, and widespread discriminatory practices involving housing and employment.

In November, 1946 businesswoman Viola Desmond attended a movie at the Roseland Theatre in New Glasgow. After purchasing a balcony-only ticket, she took a seat in the “whites-only” lower parquette, was arrested, fined twenty dollars and kept in jail overnight. Convicted of defrauding the government of one cent in tax revenue, she later appealed her conviction. Court Justice William Lorimer Hall, although sympathetic to Desmond, threw out the appeal on narrow legalist grounds, yet asked if the theatre manager “was so zealous because of a bona fide belief that there had been an attempt to defraud the province of the sum of one cent, or was it a surreptitious endeavor to enforce a Jim Crow rule by a misuse of a public statute.”

The Desmond incident was a high-profile instance of racial discrimination in postwar New Glasgow but hardly an isolated one. In 1947 a student engineer employed with the NS Department of Highways and on a work assignment in town, was denied a meal by a restaurant on what the black newspaper *The Clarion* called a “flimsy pretext”. In response editor Carrie Best wrote an editorial under the banner headline “Canada or Dixie.” “New Glasgow is fast becoming a town that the Bilbo’s and Huey Long can be

proud of,"she wrote. A year later *The Clarion* reported a cross burning in the wee hours of the morning at a house owned by a Chinese restaurant proprietor Joe Mong. Police investigating the incident refused to describe it as a Ku Klux Klan activity although the perpetrators wore white hoods while gathered around the burning seven foot cross.

In bringing these incidents to light *The Clarion* was an important voice for postwar black Nova Scotians. Associated with the Second Baptist Church in New Glasgow, the newspaper promoted education and Christian character-building, attacked discrimination and emphasized the careers of successful black men and women in various walks of life. Associate Editor Calbert 'Cal' Best gave considerable attention to the important role of black athletes in the struggle for social justice. In his column "Here and There Around Sports," Best celebrated American athletes such as Robinson, Joe Louis, Roy Campanella, Satchel Paige, and Larry Doby, but extolled Canadian multi-sport athletes such as Cape Breton's Oscar Seale, boxers Percy Paris and Crossley Irvine, hockey and baseball players Doug and Art Dorrington, and footballer Willie Stroud in equal measure. He had special praise for Windsor, Ontario native Freddie Thomas, who broke the Eastern League colour bar in baseball in 1948. Tremendously gifted, Thomas was a star basketball player at Assumption College and courted by a number of teams in the Canadian football league. In addition to his brief professional baseball career Thomas played semipro baseball in the Maritimes, Quebec and Ontario throughout the forties and fifties.

The Clarion, like other postwar black newspapers, churches and sporting clubs, adhered to what historian David Wiggins has called "muscular assimilationism", an ideology that regarded black sporting accomplishment as

an expression of human equality and a prerequisite for an inclusive future. Muscular assimilationism differed from turn-of-the-century notions of “Muscular Christianity” in white mainstream churches by explicitly rejecting Anglo-Saxonism and Darwinian presumptions that black physicality implied mental and intellectual inferiority. In turn, athletic excellence in sports such as baseball and hockey became an important part of the emerging civil rights movement in the fifties and sixties.

The connection of baseball and hockey to the struggle for social justice goes back to the late 19th century when black leaders in the United States preached a doctrine of “self help”. This was the theme of Booker T. Washington’s 1895 “Atlanta Address”. The following year the U.S. Supreme Court *Plessy vs Ferguson* decision provided a legal framework for segregation in “separate but equal” facilities. Within a system of sporting apartheid black hockey and baseball teams flourished. The Nova Scotia Coloured Hockey League which operated from 1895-1924 is an important example. Garth Vaughan who paid considerable attention to black hockey in his book *The Puck Starts Here*, Sheldon Gillis whose Saint Mary’s University Master’s thesis provided the first detailed description of the league, and George and Darrell Fosty who recognized the special importance of black families and churches in the League’s operation in their book *Black Ice*, deserve special acknowledgement. Their research has fostered a strong sense of community awareness and pride among family descendants of the league

While black hockey flourished in the 1890s so did baseball. In fact, a decade or more before the Coloured Hockey League came into being, black baseball was already well entrenched in the Maritimes. All-black baseball teams such as the Eureka’s, the Victorias, the

Independent Stars, and the North-Ends of Halifax, the Royals and Ralph Waldo Emersons of Saint John, the Dartmouth Stanleys, Truro Victorias, Amherst Royals, Woodstock Wanderers, and Fredericton Celestials helped to promote solidarity and black self-esteem. By 1895 an annual Maritime black baseball championship was already firmly in place, receiving prominent coverage in local newspapers. Similar black ball clubs were likely prevalent elsewhere in the country. As of yet, however, little research has emerged around this topic.

Black sporting clubs were part of a network of social-political institutions including the church and other mutual-improvement societies that promoted the community's potential for creativity and self-improvement. In turn-of-the-century Africville, the Seaside's sporting club fielded baseball and hockey teams and maintained a close association with the local African Baptist Church. So did the Eureka's, whose baseball and hockey roster included Eddie Martin, whom the Fosty's believe to be the first player to use the slap shot. Black churches supported baseball and hockey teams in Yarmouth, Truro, New Glasgow, Amherst and Saint John as well.

After World War One black baseball continued in Halifax, Saint John, Moncton, Amherst, New Glasgow, Truro and elsewhere, as activists pressed local religious leaders to admit black teams as regular members of community leagues. Throughout the 1920s Truro's Zion Baptist team competed against white teams in a local church league. In New Glasgow the Colored Wonders were admitted to the town league in the 1920s. In Amherst, the African Episcopal church organized the Blue Granites baseball club which regularly played against white teams. The Blue Granites were a major force in the Amherst church league from 1932-35. Similarly, in the Yarmouth

town league a black team played a regular schedule in between the wars.

While black teams played more frequently against white clubs after the War, only very rarely did black players join whites on representative community teams. This was hardly because of a lack of talent. The Halifax Coloured Diamonds, who won the provincial “coloured” championship in 1921, for example, played a hotly contested two game series the following year against a white all-star team. Although the Diamonds lost both games, over 6000 spectators attended the two matches suggesting that the Diamonds were highly skilled and competitive. In addition, the Truro Sheiks and the New Glasgow Colored Wonders would emerge as the equal of any local baseball or hockey club in those towns during the interwar years.

Besides local players, American teams from the old Negro Leagues such as Burlin White’s Boston Royal Giants and Bill Jackman’s Philadelphia Stars toured the Maritimes virtually every year. At times they would schedule games against black teams on a chance that there was a prospect waiting to be discovered. After a game in 1935 between the Royal Giants and a Truro team, for example, White was particularly impressed by the talent of young center fielder Bob Mentis. Provincial high school champion in the 60 and 100 yd. dashes in 1931 and a star hockey player, Mentis subsequently went on tour of the province with the Royal Giants. Another discovery was Morton Berry, pitcher and center fielder from Yarmouth who toured with the Royal Giants in 1937. The following year eighteen year old Manny McIntyre led Devon, New Brunswick to the provincial junior championship. During the war McIntyre, Charley Pyle and Oscar Seale would compete in local defense leagues and on military clubs

overseas. Seale who starred in the Cape Breton Colliery Baseball League in the late 1940s also came to the attention of legendary softball hall of famer Eddie Feigner who invited him to travel as a member of his four-man squad “The King and his Court.”

The 1940s and 50s saw the weakening— but by no means the eradication— of the colour barrier in baseball and hockey. Although Jackie Robinson’s breaking of baseball’s apartheid facilitated the entrance of black players into Organized Baseball, significant barriers remained for many black players whose major league hopes were blocked by whites of lesser accomplishment. They remained in “colour bar limbo.” Not only were they denied the opportunity to advance, but then — in a particular cruel irony — their failure to make the NHL or MLB was used as evidence that they were “not good enough”. This attitude has not completely died away. It is perhaps the reason that Herb Carnegie remains passed over by selectors in Canada’s Hockey Hall of Fame and explains the lack of attention given to the other great black hockey players of the day.

Willie O’Ree was the first to get a chance to demonstrate his NHL ability with Boston in 1958. O’Ree’s NHL career was shorter than it might have been, however, and despite his playing forty games or so integration proceeded at a glacial pace. It would be another dozen years before Mike Marson and Bill Riley would follow in O’Ree’s footsteps. Willie’s recent induction into the Canadian Hockey Hall of Fame in the builder category is welcome and long overdue, of course. But what if circumstances had been different? Might he have qualified as a Hall of Fame player as well? We will never know. Willie was also a fine baseball player who had received a month long tryout with the Milwaukee Braves at spring training in 1956.

When it comes to Halls of Fame I remain conflicted. They do fine work in recognizing the contributions of elite athletes, yet decisions are largely determined by statistically based analysis of performance at the major league or Olympic levels. Selection committees have great difficulty in dealing with athletes who failed to get a chance to demonstrate their worth at these levels. Allen Guttman, a path-breaking scholar in sport studies, has argued that modern sports involved the following characteristics: rationalization, bureaucratization, equality, specialization, record keeping, and secularism. My experience with Halls of Fame, is that bureaucratization and record-keeping trump concerns about equality, while increasing specialization obscures the excellence of the multi-sport athlete.

I want to conclude, therefore, with a personal Hall of Fame acknowledgement to multi-sport athletes of colour who experienced the lingering effects of the “colour bar limbo”. In this I am following the suggestion of historian Vicky Parashak that Canadian sport analysts create a different Hall of Fame, one that asks different questions about sport in Canada, tells different stories, and is more sensitive to issues of gender, race/ethnicity, to Aboriginal peoples, sexual orientation, geographic location, age and physical ability. Obviously a collective approach drawing upon the insights of sport scholars (and others interested in a counter-narrative) would be an important exercise, and a way to acknowledge important contributions to aboriginal sport, to women in sport, to Arctic games and sports in non-metropolitan regions. The work of Miriam Wright and her associates relating to Boomer Harding and the Chatham Coloured All-Stars embodies this broader objective while elucidating how black ballplayers experienced colour bar limbo. In a similar spirit I offer my personal

“Colour Bar Limbo” All-Stars”

FIRST TEAM: Willie O’Ree. Herb Carnegie. Ossie Carnegie. Manny McIntyre, and Fred Thomas were Canada’s leading black male athletes of the 1940s and 50. O’Ree’s accomplishments have already been discussed. The Carnegies and McIntyre comprised the first all-black line in professional hockey and Manny and Ossie played semi-pro baseball together in Quebec. Fred Thomas was unquestionably the most versatile black athlete in the country in the 40s and 50s.

SECOND TEAM: Stan Chook Maxwell. Johnny Mentis. Art Dorrington. Boomer Harding. Earl Flat Chase. Maxwell, Mentis and Dorrington Truro, N.S. all had professional abilities in both baseball and hockey. Harding and Chase were the leaders of the Chatham All-Stars. Chase had major league talent in baseball and Harding broke the colour bar in the International Hockey League. Dorrington was the first black player to sign a professional contract, Mentis was the first black player to play for Canada against the Soviet Union and a star for over fifteen years in semi-pro baseball in Quebec. At one point Chook Maxwell and Willie O`Ree were the only two black players in professional hockey. Maxwell was also offered a chance to play for the Milwaukee Braves but turned it down.

THIRD TEAM: Frank “Danky” Dorrington. Denny Clyde, Bob Dawson, John Paris Jr., Bobby Mentis Sr. Dorrington had a lengthy career in professional hockey, played semi-pro baseball and softball and became a legend in Newfoundland. Bob Dawson was a member of the first all-black line in intercollegiate hockey. John Paris Jr. was the first black coach in professional hockey. Bobby Mentis Sr. and Denny Clyde were stars on both the ice and ball fields.

The absence here of black women is notable, of course, and speaks to the fact that in addition to the colour bar there was a gender bar in effect as well. In searching through newspapers, even black newspapers like *The Clarion*, there are few if any references to black women in baseball and hockey in the first half of the century. Here and there comments arise concerning women's softball teams participating at the community level and in local church leagues, but individual names are missing. Other sporting activity, particularly track and field, may offer a more fruitful area of inquiry for researchers interested in women athlete. Still it would be interesting to identify and track down early black women in hockey and baseball and tell their stories. This, of course is the stuff of another project!