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Manny McIntyre: Black, Canadian Baseball and Hockey Pioneer 1930s – 1950s

John Lutz and Bill Young

I am honoured to participate in this Symposium – Telling the Stories of Race and Sports in Canada. Baseball historian Bill Young and I collaborated closely in preparing this presentation about baseball and hockey pioneer Vincent Churchill “Manny” McIntyre.

I saw him play hockey when I was 11 and 12. I was born with my hearing loss, felt different and sought difference. When I saw Manny play, I was awestruck by this powerful skater and talented player; he was black, he was different and became an instant hero to me, along with Babe Ruth, Willie Mays, Gordie Howe and Terry Sawchuk. I met Manny as an adult and we became friends. Bill also an admirer of Manny McIntyre – saw him play hockey for Sherbrooke and it was that commonality which drew us together. Today, we hope the story of Manny comes to mean as much to you as it does to us.

Manny McIntyre was a gifted man, a natural athlete who worked hard and became one of this country’s great athletes. His story is unique in Canadian Sports history. A black athlete from Fredericton, New Brunswick, he excelled in both hockey and baseball well into his later years. He was a journeyman and played for whatever team would have him in the Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario and even in France.

He was however, victim of a society that did not provide black people including athletes the same rights and opportunities as others of his era. In spite of that, he had a zest for life and lived it to the fullest. His magnetic personality drew folks to him; any one who knew him would tell you, he was friendly, outgoing and respectful, one who regarded all men and women equally and bowed to none; he was a proud man — proud of his New Brunswick roots, his family and just as proud of his various roles as a Dorval Airport and CNR Porter and a McGill University Parking Lot Manager as he was as an athlete.

To many, Manny is best known as a line mate with Herb and Ossie Carnegie in the Northern Ontario and Quebec Hockey Senior Leagues in the 1940s. They formed the first and only all-coloured line in semi-professional hockey. “Les Noirs” or “The Black Aces” as they were known, were very good and drew big crowds wherever they played.

Red Storey, former senior hockey and NHL referee once said – “The coloured line could have played on any team, anytime, anywhere.” Of all his many accomplishments, perhaps the one that still resonates today occurred in 1946 when, he stood tall as one of the first six black players, and the only Canadian, to penetrate baseball’s coloured barrier, forever.

Manny’s stellar baseball career spanned 14 years from 1938 to 1952. His talents on the baseball diamond quickly revealed him as one of the finest all-round ballplayers wherever he played. Baseball historian Dr. Colin Howell, in his book *Northern Sandlots* said: “Of all the black players in the Maritimes during the thirties, there was none any better than Vincent “Manny” McIntyre.”

When Manny was inducted into the New Brunswick Sports Hall of Fame in 1997, it was said, “McIntyre was

considered good enough to have played in both the NHL and major league baseball if not for the colour barrier which existed at the time.” Further, a major league scout of the day added: “He was a surefire to make the majors.”

Although Manny was a big man at 6’2” and 190 lbs., on the diamond, he played shortstop or second base and occasionally first base. He and even pitched a one-hitter against a senior team from Fredericton in the 1940s. He was a contact hitter and considered an excellent fielder over the years.

Over his lengthy baseball career, Manny McIntyre was, with few exceptions, the first man of colour on every team he played for over the years. He was often the only black player in the league and always the first black Canadian wherever he played. Manny even joined in briefly for the New York Cubans in the Negro National League.

Manny went where no other had managed to go; he was truly a pioneer in Canadian baseball. He was a patriot and, in 1942, he enlisted and played on Army teams. However, he was later given a medical discharge resulting from a mining accident hand injury he incurred in Timmins.

His best ball was with the Halifax Shipyards, 1943 Halifax District Senior Baseball League champions. His regular season batting average was .385 with a career high of .488 in the playoffs. The next year, he was named the League MVP, a first team all-star, and voted by the players, most of whom were white, the most popular player in the league.

Although we have yet to solve the mystery as to where Manny played in 1951. We do know that he finished his baseball career the next year in Levis in the Quebec Senior League with a lifetime batting average above .300. He later managed to play on two provincial championship teams in Fredericton and Waterloo.

As already noted above, Manny's one entry into Organized Baseball occurred in 1946, when he signed with the Sherbrooke Canadians of the newly formed Border League, a Class-C Loop. It has been suggested in several quarters that the Canadians were possibly a farm club of the St. Louis Cardinals, or possibly Cincinnati Reds, but the facts seem to point elsewhere indicating that Sherbrooke had no affiliation with a major league team. Given that neither Bill nor I have concrete evidence of his having been signed by either Major League Club; we contend that Manny signed directly with Sherbrooke. Still, the conundrum remains!

The year 1946 has often been regarded as a watershed year in baseball. The major leagues were back in full operation, established minor leagues were up and running and in Brooklyn, the Dodgers Branch Rickey was about to launch his "Noble Experiment"—integrating baseball and removing the colour barrier once and for all. He signed Jackie Robinson to a Montreal Royals International League contract and the die was cast. Baseball would never be the same again.

Five other players of colour also figured in Rickey's plan – four other Americans and Manny McIntyre. He figures as the first break through baseball's infamous "lily-white" colour barrier in any significant way since the late nineteenth-century. With that signing, Manny confirmed his place in the pantheon of true Canadian sports heroes. Manny's experience with Sherbrooke Canadians in the Border League proved to be difficult. As the only black man in the league, racism was a reality he had to confront every day. His teammates and opponents were all white, mostly American Southerners, and while they praised his play, most tended to leave him isolated off the field.

Toward the end of June, while in Odgenburg, New York

and with an old hockey injury affecting his throwing arm and the hockey season looming, he bought a bus ticket to Toronto and told his manager: "In Canada I could play ball and be treated like a player and a man, I just couldn't take it anymore, so I left."

Thus ended his foray into Organized Baseball, with 30 games under his belt. His numbers read: .310 batting average, 5 stolen bases, 17 RBIs and 1 home run. In part because of his nagging hockey injury, his fielding performance fell below par, accumulating thirty errors, or an average of one per match.

And how good a ball player was Manny? In a recent conversation with the legendary baseball pitcher Skit Ferguson, a fellow Maritimes and 1947 Drummondville teammate in Quebec, he indicated that they spent a lot of time together and were close. He also said that: "Manny could play any position. He could field, run, hit and he was smart. He had it all: size, athletic ability, and athletic intelligence. Manny was my mentor, he was a gentleman, but when he put his uniform on, he was all business, extremely competitive." When asked if he thought Manny could have played in the major leagues, Skit said: "Yes, I think that he would have."

As for hockey, Manny played for 17 years from 1938 to 1955 working his way from high school to semi-professional levels. He retired at age 37 when he was Captain and Assistant Captain for two teams in small Quebec communities, where he was not just the only black player, but, as we believe, the only Anglophone as well.

Manny's career began in the Maritimes before joining the Carnegies in Timmins with the Ankerite Mines Bisons in 1941. Herb Carnegie in his book *A Fly in a Pale of Milk* reported that Manny was a promoter before the days of player agents. He was aware of the possibilities of an

all-black line and wrote to the team Manager offering his services.

Once he arrived in Timmins, he impressed everyone with his skating, and Herb wrote: “it wasn’t long before our style of play brought praise for its uniqueness, not only in colour, but also in talent.” And this was after working eight-hour shifts in the mines; they played their hockey at night and on weekends.

Manny remained there one year before returning to the Maritimes. He once again reunited the line in 1944 and convinced the coach of the Shawinigan Falls Cataracts of the Quebec Provincial League of the financial possibilities that an all-black line might generate. They dominated league scoring that year with 84 goals and 98 assists in only 40 games; 4.6 points per game – totally unheard of at the time!

Manny then arranged the trio’s move to the Sherbrooke Rand, later called St. Francois or Saints of the Quebec Senior Hockey League and negotiated a weekly salary of \$150. They remained there until 1946-47 when Ossie and Manny left for France to play with the Running Club de Paris, a team owned by hotel magnate Charles Ritz. Made up of semi-professionals, the Club had its own plane and played 60 games all over Europe, winning 56, losing 2 and tying 2.

Turning down further contract offers in France, the duo reunited with Herb in Sherbrooke. The following season, Manny returned to the Maritimes for two years and wound up his career in Quebec.

Certainly the highlight of Manny’s hockey career was playing with the Carnegies. Herb the centre was a scorer and playmaker, Ossie on right wing was a positional player with a wicket shot and Manny on the left took no guff from

anyone. He was tough and battled for the puck in the corner getting it over to one of the brothers most of the time.

Herb Carnegie said that if Manny had a flaw, it was his eagerness to fight; on the other hand, he said without Manny, "Neither Ossie nor I would have enjoyed the degree of success that we did without the extra room afforded us."

Manny was quick to react, either to opposing players or fans. There was the time in Hamilton; he decked a fan in a game in the Allan Cup semi-finals. Manny said "I warned this guy about his god-damned name calling and, when he insisted on calling me nigger, rastas and coon, I gave him a couple of good ones."

Manny shared stories of fights, fan harassment, being escorted by police or fellow players from rinks in Nova Scotia and even the time when the team walked out of a restaurant in Saint John that refused to serve him.

It is astonishing that he played baseball and hockey at an elite level for so many years all the while enduring racism throughout the region. But he was not alone. Consider Viola Desmond: a successful businesswoman and a human rights advocate,. She is the Nova Scotia black woman chosen to appear on the upcoming ten-dollar bill, she too was a victim of racism in her hometown of New Glasgow.

In 1946, the same year Manny was facing racism in the Border League, Viola Desmond was arrested and jailed for refusing to move to the balcony of the local movie theatre, the lower level being reserved for whites. So offensive was this action, that not long ago, the Government of Nova Scotia granted a posthumous pardon, the first of its kind in Canada. Her experience is reflective of the degree of racism directed towards Negro people of the day across all platforms, sports included.

Herb Carnegie recalled that crowds tended to be more hostile and racism ran much deeper in Nova Scotia than what he had experienced in Ontario. The same could be said of fans in Quebec. However, Herb also made it clear that “Manny was not a goon, but an accomplished professional who skated beautifully and scored his share of goals.”

Herb and Ossie were among the top ten scorers wherever they played. Manny always had fewer points, which came with his role as tough guy and set-up man. He consistently had more assists than goals with one exception – 1949-50 when he played 59 games for the Moncton Hawks as a centre. He achieved a career-high 71 points, 36 goals and 35 assists. In that position, he too was a marksman! Excluding his year in Paris, he played 469 games and scored 468 points, 1 per game.

How good was The Line?

Ivan Mclelland, Goal tender, Penticton Vees, Allan Cup Champions 1954 and World Champions 1955 : “To an aspiring goal tender, watching the coloured line play in the Porcupine Mines League was nothing short of magical.”

Larry Zeidel, NHL Player: “They would have been good enough to star in the National League today.” (January 1978 Hockey News.)

Dick Wilson, Sherbrooke Writer in Action Sport Hockey 1972, year of the Canada-Soviet Hockey Summit, affirmed that: “As a line, Herbie Carnegie, Ossie Carnegie and Manny McIntyre could have made a respectable contribution to any NHL team at the time. Today, they’d be ranked with the top lines in the league with two of them in the top ten in scoring. They were that good!”

Note that The Black Aces led the Sherbrooke Saints to a 4-2 victory over the champion Montreal Canadian in a pre-season n exhibition game. The Canadians line-up included

The Punch Line — Maurice Richard, Toe Blake and Elmer Lach

And how good was Manny? Here is what Scottie Bowman, former NHL coach once said about him: “I did see Manny play for Sherbrooke in 48-49 along with the Carnegie Brothers. They were NHL calibre players playing in the Quebec Senior League. Later on I saw Manny many times at Dorval Airport where he worked in the 70’s and he always wanted to talk hockey as I was coaching the Montreal Canadiens and he always had a smile on his face. A Great Man who should have played in the NHL.”

The last time I met Manny occurred in 2009, and, among other things, we talked about racism in hockey and baseball. In spite of the racism he experienced in both sports, he always kept a positive outlook. This is best illustrated by his comments about not having an opportunity to play in the NHL. He said to me: “John, I am not bitter about not making the NHL — I know that I was good enough and that is good enough for me.”

Manny passed away in 2011. I was honoured to deliver the eulogy at his funeral.

His memory was honoured two years later in Saint John, New Brunswick at a sit-down dinner attended by 250 people from several provinces and the United States. Guests included New Brunswick’s Lieutenant Governor, several prominent politicians, labour leaders, multicultural representatives, family members, friends and Bernice Carnegie, daughter of Herb Carnegie. It was a fitting tribute to Manny McIntyre, the tall, rangy New Brunswick native with the quick eye and fast hands, who was equally skilled on the ice and across the diamond.

Manny has been inducted into the Fredericton and Oromocto Walls of Fame, New Brunswick Baseball and Sports Halls of Fame, Canada Sports Hall of Fame,

Legends Class, Timmins Heritage Sports Hall of Fame and the Black Ice Society Hall of Fame.

In future, we will consider how to honour Manny as we approach the 75th anniversary of his signing with Sherbrooke Canadians and 80th anniversary of the formation of The Black Aces.

In closing, I want to pay personal tribute to Manny through a Japanese Haiku poem. It has only 3 lines, 5, 7, 5 syllables. The ancient Samurai Warriors wrote haiku of their exploits in battle and in life. My poem seeks to capture the essence of the man; it is one verse only and bilingual respecting his wife Rita, a Francophone from Montreal.

Here is how I remember Vincent Churchill McIntyre
Manny
Honourable soul.
L'athlète d'excellence suprême!
Man of character.

I leave the last word to Manny with his famous line that best defines the man — “If you can't go first class, don't go at all.”

Thank you! Merci!
John Lutz with Bill Young