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Hockey and the Black Experience

Bob Dawson

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“Hockey and The Black Experience”

Bob Dawson, Ottawa, ON

“I am the Black Hockey Player. I played through the cheap shots and chipped teeth. Stick slash and broke knee. I’m a throwback to guys like Carnegie and Willie O’Ree, Marson, McKegney, or Fuhr with the Fury. Even on blades, I blind you with the speed of an Anson Carter or Mike Greer, with the resilience built over 400 years. You could club me like Brashear, but still I persevere, after all I am the Black Hockey Player. “

- Anthony Bansfield (a.k.a. Nth Digri) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HL-TyEeVoJA>

Some say hockey is a game. And then there are others that say it’s more than just a game. According to Canadian writer **Roch Carrier**, “Hockey is the history of Canadians. The game reflects the reality of Canadians in its... ambitions, character, tensions and partnerships.”

For me, however, hockey provides an important lens for examining and interpreting the wider experience of blacks in the sport, which, by the way, they helped revolutionize through the pioneering innovations of the **Colored Hockey League of the Maritimes** with the “butterfly style of goaltending” and “slap shot” that predate the NHL. For more see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxoiIndlXHU&feature=youtu.be> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2QZm8llvig>.

For the purpose of my presentation, I’ve decided to focus my comments on the NHL.

Historical Context - The Early Years (1917-1961)

To put hockey and the black experience in the NHL into perspective, one has to look back at the turn of the 19th century when “doctrines on racial superiority” espoused by Charles Darwin, Francis Galton and other scientific thinkers were widely accepted and embraced in the United States as well as Canada. These doctrines shaped the course of race relations in all aspects of life including sports. In hockey and even the NHL, they fuelled the beliefs that blacks had ankles too weak to skate effectively, possessed weak knees and lacked both the intelligence and skills to play the game.

On the founding of the NHL in 1917, Frank Calder became its first President. It’s said that he was adamant that minorities would not be restricted in the NHL. During the 1927-1928 season, on hearing of the “Boston Black Panthers”, one of the first all-black teams in the US that happened to be made up of descendants of the **Colored Hockey League of the Maritimes**, Calder stated: “Professional hockey has no ruling against the colored man, nor is it likely to ever draw the line.” His comment was directed to the segregation in professional baseball at the time.

Contrary to Calder's declaration, no blacks played in the NHL during his time in office even though Frank Selke, who would later become Conn Smythe's assistant general manager with the Maple Leafs, called Fred "Bud" Kelly in 1916-1917 the best Negro hockey player he ever saw. While playing with Peterborough's senior team in the Ontario Hockey Association, Bruce Redpath, manager of the NHL's Toronto St. Pats (later the Maple Leafs), regularly scouted Kelly but never invited him to a tryout for the team.

After the death of Calder in 1943, Clarence Campbell eventually served as league President until 1977. In 1950, he was interviewed by Ebony, the black American magazine, and asked the question "Can Negroes Crack Big League Hockey?" Taken aback by the question, Campbell replied "The National Hockey League only has one policy: to get the best hockey players. There is no tacit or otherwise, which would restrict anyone because of color or race."

Eight years later, Fredericton native Willie O'Ree, while playing with the Quebec Aces at the time, was called up to the Boston Bruins and made his NHL debut on January 18, 1958, thus, breaking the league's black color barrier. He appeared in 2 games that year before returning to the Aces. O'Ree rejoined the Bruins in 1960-1961 and played in 43 games. He was later traded to Montreal where he never played a game and ended his brief NHL career. O'Ree went on to play 13 years in the Western Hockey League with the Los Angeles Blades and San Diego Gulls where he won 2 league scoring titles. Despite his scoring production over those years, he never received another shot at the NHL.

It's important to point out that between 1940 and 1958 there were other outstanding and highly talented black players playing professional hockey in Canada. In the 1940s, Herb and Ossie Carnegie of Toronto teamed up with Manny McIntyre from Ormocto, New Brunswick to form the "first all-black line" in professional hockey. Best known as the "Black Aces" they thrilled spectators with their on-ice scoring exploits and dominated opponents.

Besides these players, there was Art Dorrington of Truro, Nova Scotia, who was a fine skater and top scorer in the New York Rangers' farm system and the Eastern Hockey League lead the Atlantic City Sea Gulls to the league championship in 1951.

Sadly, these players, who came before Willie O'Ree, were denied the opportunity to play in the NHL while white players with lesser talent went on to play in the top league.

Exclusion of Blacks in the NHL (1961-1974)

After Willie O'Ree's brief stay in the NHL one has to ask, why the 13- year hiatus from 1961 to 1974 before another black plays in the league? Was it a matter of "protectionism" on the part of the NHL establishment to keep the jobs for white players? Was it fear and the prospect of change? Or was it blatant racism?

Interestingly, some apologists contended that Canada's black population at the time was too small to produce a sufficient number of players from which the NHL teams could recruit. Others like Jean Beliveau claimed that there were only 6 teams and about 100 hockey- playing jobs available in the league. Still others resorted to "bizarre racist theories" as to why blacks couldn't play hockey in the NHL.

Contrary to popular opinion, I feel that racism was the key factor in keeping the NHL an "all-white" league between 1961 and 1974. During the NHL's expansion in 1967, 1970 and 1972 there were, in fact, a number of highly talented black players particularly from Nova Scotia like Clobie Collins, Frank "Danky" Dorrington, Stan "Chook" Maxwell, John Mentis and Alton White showcasing their skills in professional hockey leagues in both Canada and the United States.

These players were grinders, smooth skating-playmakers, and goal-scorers. Yet, they were systematically denied the opportunity to play in the so-called "open and racist-free" NHL. It was as if there was an "unofficial policy of exclusion" against black players.

Re-integration of Blacks in the NHL (1974 – present)

Not surprisingly, the re-integration of blacks in the NHL occurred slowly on the heels of the league's expansion in 1974 with the signing of a junior hockey star by the name of Mike Marson with the Washington Capitals. Marson and the black players that followed like Bill Riley, Tony McKegey, Ray Neufeld, Bernie Saunders and others finally realized their dreams of playing in the NHL.

The NHL, however, has not always responded well to diversity, social change or racist behavior. Some narrow-minded hockey officials in the NHL had a hard time dealing with the changing face of the game. In 1989, Joe Bucchino, then the assistant general manager of the New York Rangers, told a sports writer "black players medically don't have strong enough legs to play professional hockey".

As you might expect, the re-integration of blacks in the NHL was not without its serious challenges and issues like racism. Sadly, the black players had to wage a personal battle for acceptance and respect in a predominantly white league. Some eventually received it while others never did. To a man, however, they were determined to make their way in the NHL. In doing so, they were subjected to racial slurs and physical abuse by opposing players because of their colour.

In the wake of the racial incidents involving black hockey players, rather than adopting an "anti-racism strategy", it appears the NHL in 1994-1995 chose a more liberal approach that focused on "diversity", all the while failing to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth of racism in hockey. League Commissioner Gary Bettman on the approach said "I think it's great for the game...I think diversity is a strength."

At first, it appears that the NHL didn't see the need to panic about racial incidents encountered by black players. Arthur Pincus, Vice-President of Public Relations for the NHL at the time, strongly believed the incidents were merely "isolated cases" when he claimed, "It's not as if we're burying our heads. We want to make sure everybody in hockey knows there are issues and sensitivities and ways of acting that are right. We think they know that... If these turn out to be isolated incidents, maybe more has to be done. We have to let people know what may have been acceptable is not acceptable."

As a result of the increasing number of black players in the league and racial incidents in the 1990s, Colin Campbell, the NHL's Senior Vice-President and Director of Hockey Operations conceded, "There are problems in the workplace, and like any other workplace, we're educating people and dealing with those problems. We're feeling our way. ... It's just not what people have seen in the headlines that has prompted this, although that's been part of it."

Looking back, you may remember:

1999 – The NHL suspended Bryan Marchment of the San Jose Sharks for one game for calling Vancouver Canucks' Donald Brashear "a big monkey".

1998 – Florida Panthers' Peter Worrell accused Chris Gratton of the Philadelphia Flyers of calling him an "ape". While a reporter who covered the game confirmed the offensive comment, the NHL didn't take any action against Gratton.

1997 - Washington Capitals' Chris Simon was suspended for 3 games for uttering the "N" word at the Edmonton Oilers' Mike Grier.

To its credit, the NHL eventually introduced its diversity training initiative in 2000 to educate the players about the diversity in the league as well as the importance of respecting and appreciating those diversities. The NHL also instituted the requirement for players to attend sensitivity sessions if they made racial slurs.

Furthermore, around 2005, penalties for "racial taunts or slurs" were added in the NHL rulebook to address the changing times and issues. Respect and tolerance for the differences of others playing the game was seen as something that the league had to uphold.

At the outset, if racial incidents by players "on the ice" weren't enough, hockey fans/spectators and even TV hockey analysts and commentators got into the act of disparaging black hockey players during the 2000s. **You may recall...**

2018 – During the Chicago Blackhawks-Washington Capitals game Devante Smith-Pelly of the Capitals, who is black, was sitting in the penalty box when 4 Blackhawk fans began provoking him with chants of "basketball, basketball, basketball". It clearly inferred

Smith-Pelly was playing the wrong sport because of his color. While playing junior hockey, he also heard the same comments.

2014 – During the season, particularly in the Eastern Conference playoffs against the Boston Bruins, P. K. Subban of the Montreal Canadiens was the target of hockey analyst Don Cherry’s constant criticism about his style of play.

2012 – Washington Capital’s Joel Ward scored the overtime goal that ended the Boston Bruins’ Eastern Conference playoff hopes. Angered by this, dozens of Bruins’ fans took to the social media (Twitter) unleashing racial indignities.

The Changing Face of Racism

Interestingly, it appears that acts of direct (overt) racism by players, coaches, hockey analysts/color commentators and the media have waned somewhat in the NHL in recent years. That is not to say that racism no longer exists. On the contrary, to many current black players, “it is alive and well just like in the broader society.” Players like Dustin Byfuglien, Wayne Simmonds and Joel Ward say that it’s far more subtle.

Instead, “coded terms” like arrogant, brash, cocky, egoistic, flamboyant, immature, reckless, risky, selfish or showboat to name a few are thrown about now a days to unduly characterize black players like Josh Hosanh, Evander Kane and P. K. Subban. What’s more, they are portrayed as being undisciplined and not coachable as well as lacking character and humility.

Debunking the Stereotypes

It’s worth noting that since Willie O’Ree broke into the NHL 60 years ago about 90 blacks have played in the league to date. Throughout that time, they have brought different attributes to the game and fulfilled many roles. They weren’t only athletic goaltenders (e.g. Grant Fuhr, Kevin Weekes), tough defensemen (e.g., Dustin Byfuglien, Jean-Luc Grand-Pierre), rugged corner men (e.g., Devante Smith-Pelly, Jamal Mayers) and hard-fisted enforcers (e.g., Georges Laraque, Donald Brashear), but also goal-scorers and smooth skating-playmakers (e.g., Jarome Iginla, Tony McKegney) who helped dispel the racist myths and beliefs about black hockey players.

One might even say that the racism encountered by the black players made the NHL sensitive to its insensitivities.

NHL’s Black History Makers

Taking into account Willie O’Ree’s brief career in the NHL and the league’s apparent exclusion of blacks from 1961 to 1974, black players and others associated with the game, despite, the challenges they faced, have left their mark on the league and the hockey

landscape. **Take for example:**

- **Mike Marson** of Toronto, Ontario: First **black player to be drafted** and play in the NHL (1974, Washington Capitals)
- **Dirk Graham** of Regina, Saskatchewan: First **black team captain** in the NHL (1988-1989, Chicago Blackhawks)
- **Bryant McBride**, an American by birth who was raised in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario: First black executive to work for the NHL (1994, **Vice- President of Business Development**)
- **Dirk Graham** of Regina, Saskatchewan: First **black head coach** in the NHL (1998-1999, Chicago Blackhawks)
- **Jarome Iginla** of Edmonton, Alberta: First black player to win both the **Art Ross and Maurice Richard Trophies** as the NHL's leading point getter and goal scorer (2001-02, Calgary Flames)
- **Jay Sharrers** originally from Jamaica, West Indies: First **black referee** to officiate an NHL game (2001, Philadelphia Flyers vs. Florida Panthers)
- **Grant Fuhr** of Spruce Grove, Alberta: First black player **elected into the Hockey Hall of Fame** (2003)
- **P. K. Subban** of Toronto, Ontario: First black player to win the **James Norris Memorial Trophy** as the NHL's Top Defensemen (2013, Montreal Canadiens)

Closing Comments

Notwithstanding the NHL's progress to date in a number of areas, the issue of racism in all its forms still exists and it isn't going to go away anytime soon. That said, the league must do more to create and foster a more inclusive, respectful and welcoming hockey environment through proactive measures.

The NHL, in my view, is well positioned to play a leadership role and be an important "agent of change" in the area of racism not only in hockey, but the broader society. First, the league must acknowledge the problem and then tackle it head on in a collaborative and strategic manner in partnership with all stakeholders. In doing so, hopefully, the effects would ripple through other levels of hockey where problems exist and other areas of society.

In closing, I'm reminded of Nelson Mandela, who said; "Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than government in breaking down racial barriers."

Related Articles

[**The NHL's Reckoning on Racism and Embracing the Need for Change**](#)

[**Bridging The Gap: A Policy Paper on Anti-Racism in Canadian Hockey**](#)

[**Racism in Hockey: A Cause for Concern and Action**](#)

[**100 Years of the NHL and The Black Experience \(Part 1 of a Special 2- Part Article\)**](#)

[**100 Years of the NHL and The Black Experience \(Part 2 of a Special 2- Part Article\)**](#)