

BY C.L. LANEY

WILLIE O'REE

HOCKEY TRAILBLAZER





TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	
Who Is Willie O'Ree?	5
CHAPTER 2	
A Long History	11
CHAPTER 3	
Early Life	17
CHAPTER 4	
Finding His Purpose	23
CHAPTER 5	
Changing the World	31
CHAPTER 6	
A Lasting Impact	37
GLOSSARY	44



In 1958 at the age of 22, Willie O'Ree became the first Black player in the National Hockey League.

CHAPTER 1

Who Is Willie O'Ree?

Skates glide across the ice. Players chase a puck. One **checks** his **opponent** into the boards. A stick slaps the puck. The shot goes over the goalie's shoulder and into the net. Score!

Hockey is a fast-moving sport. Skaters can be **aggressive**. Sometimes fights break out. The action draws fans to the game.

The first organized hockey game was played about 150 years ago. For much of the time since then, only white people could play. One man changed that. His name is Willie O'Ree.

O'Ree grew up in Canada. Like many kids there, he started playing hockey when he was very young. Still, he was competitive. He wanted to be the best. Playing in the National Hockey League (NHL) was his goal.

It was 1958. O'Ree reached his goal. He became the first Black player in the NHL. But O'Ree had struggles. Not everyone welcomed Black players. Fans said cruel things. Some players did too. O'Ree even got death threats.

Yet he stayed focused. Playing pro hockey was his dream. He would show others it could be their dream too.



Celebrating 200 Years of Black Achievement in Hockey

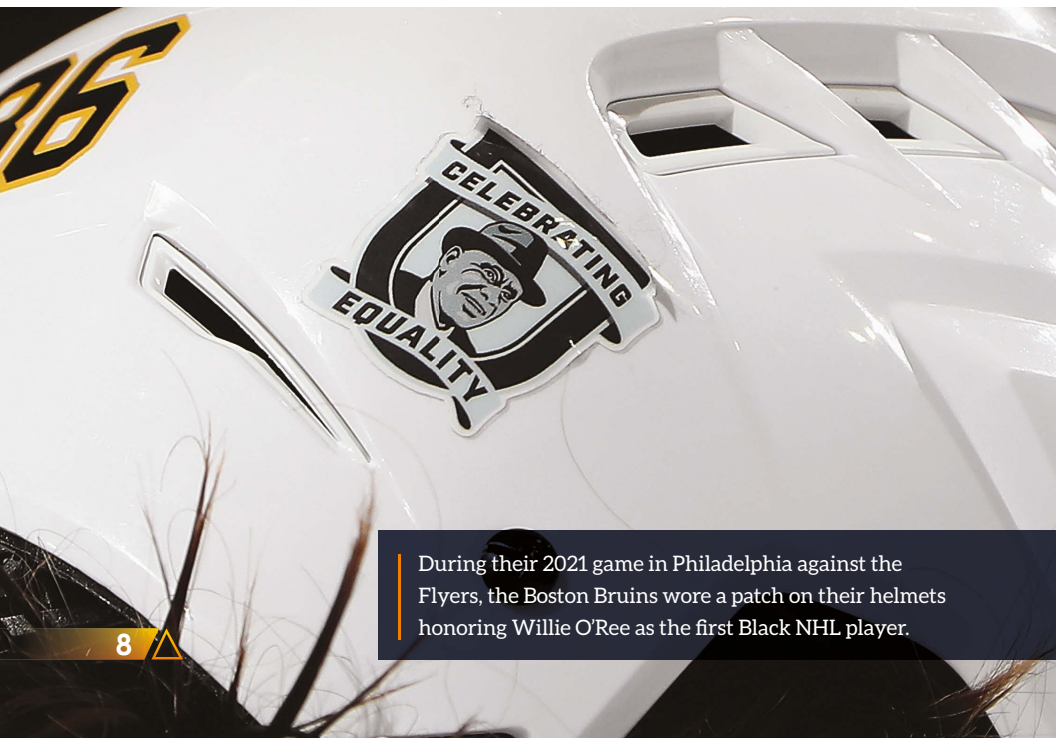
Willie O'Ree

NHL Diversity Ambassador Willie O'Ree pointed to his jersey in 2019. He was inside the American Legacy Black Hockey History Tour mobile museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.





Willie O'Ree spoke at a press conference at the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto, Ontario, Canada in 2018.



During their 2021 game in Philadelphia against the Flyers, the Boston Bruins wore a patch on their helmets honoring Willie O'Ree as the first Black NHL player.

His impact on the sport was huge. Young people watched him play. They saw that hockey was for everyone. O'Ree retired in 1979. But his impact didn't end there.

Willie O'Ree became an **ambassador** for the sport. Improving **diversity** was his goal. Most young hockey players were white. Some came from wealthy families. O'Ree reached out to more kids. They often came from **disadvantaged** backgrounds. The veteran player showed them the sport. "Hockey is for everyone." That is his motto.

In 2018, O'Ree was **inducted** into the Hockey Hall of Fame. He continues to pave paths for all who want to play.



| Part of the New York Rangers NHL team in 1951



WILLIE O'REE

When Willie O'Ree was young, only white people played in the NHL. That didn't stop him from dreaming of becoming a pro hockey player. A life-changing injury didn't either. By following his passion, O'Ree made his dream a reality and paved the way for others to follow. He continues to break barriers, giving every child the opportunity to play.

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