



Willie O'Ree

Willie O'Ree played a total of 45 games in the National Hockey League. So why would any organization care to have Willie O'Ree speak to their employees, or golf in their corporate tournament, or endorse their product or service? That is because Willie broke the colour barrier in the NHL. On January 18, 1958, Willie played for the Boston Bruins against the Montreal Canadiens, marking the first time a Black man played an NHL game. He played one more game that year before being sent to the minors. In the 1960/61 season, Willie played another 43 games scoring 4 goals and 10 assists for a modest 14 points.

Willie is reticent to call himself the “Jackie Robinson of hockey”, yet in effect, that is who he is. The odds were very much against Willie. There had been very talented Black players in hockey before Willie – Herb Carnegie, Ossie Carnegie, and Manny McIntyre of the Quebec Aces immediately come to mind – but in spite of their amazing talents, not one of them was ever called up to the NHL. Additionally, on a more practical note, Willie had been struck in the eye with a puck during the 1955/56 season and he permanently lost 95% of his vision in his right eye. He never told the Bruins without anyone knowing he had ostensibly only one eye in the fast and furious game of hockey.

Willie spent many years in the Western Hockey League after his NHL experience and won the scoring title twice. But he never got the call from the NHL again. He finally hung up his blades after playing one final year at the age of 43. It would take until 1974 before the next Black, Mike Marson, played a game in the NHL.

Today, Willie is the Director of Youth Hockey Development for the NHL/USA Hockey Diversity Task Force. He travels extensively teaching hockey skills and life skills to kids of all ethnicities. Willie was voted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2019.