


7 Getting Back to Boston

After his two games with the Bruins, Willie was sure that they'd call him back. He may not have scored any points, but he'd shown them his best.

Willie's confidence was rewarded when he was invited to attend training camp the next summer. So once again, he and Stan Maxwell headed back to Boston.

It was nice to be among familiar faces, doing familiar drills. Once again, Willie gave it his all. Willie believed he'd make



Getting Back to Boston

the cut this time, but he was wrong. He was disappointed, but he didn't give up.

That season Willie played for the Springfield Indians in the American Hockey League (AHL). The coach and general manager of the team was Eddie Shore, a former Boston Bruins defenceman. He was born of grit, having worked hard on a farm as a young man. He hadn't shown much of an interest in hockey as a boy, and his siblings teased him about it. Determined to prove them wrong, he ended up one of the hardest players in his era. And he was tough. By the end of his time as a player, he had broken his nose 14 times and had 978 stitches.

Shore's toughness carried through in his coaching career. Other coaches would send problem players to him. But to many, Shore seemed unstable. He was renowned for doing off-the-wall things, like making the team practice in the dark to save

Willie O'Ree

electricity. He was unpredictable and hard to work with. Willie didn't like Shore, and Shore didn't like Willie. It wasn't a race issue, but a personality issue. The first five games of the season, Willie sat on the bench. When he was finally put on the ice to replace an injured player, Willie got on to the ice and tripped. Shore sent him back to the Aces. Willie was happy to go, even though he felt that Shore's decision was unfair. After all, Shore hadn't even seen him play in a game.

Willie played for the Quebec Aces for the rest of the 1957–58 season and then the 1958–59 season as well. The season after that, he played for the Kingston Frontenacs. There, he had his best pro season, with 21 goals and 25 assists. Willie was doing what he loved and he was doing it well — all the while with just one good eye.

While in Kingston, Willie met his first

Getting Back to Boston

girlfriend, Lynn Campbell, after a hockey game. But Lynn was white. At this time, mixed couples weren't common. Those who were in these relationships faced hardships and severe racism.

It wasn't just about white people not accepting black people. It also worked the other way around. Many blacks distrusted whites. In fact, Willie's parents weren't happy about him dating Lynn. They were worried about what other people would think. They were worried that the couple would be hurt or, as had happened in the United States, even killed.

Willie figured that it didn't matter who he dated. But he had always been very close to his family. How they felt *did* matter to him.

After his season ended, Willie was home. He decided to pay Lynn a visit in Kingston and invited his mother to come along. But it was obvious that she wasn't

Willie O'Ree

happy about the relationship. Because of this, Willie ended it with Lynn.

Willie played with the Hull-Ottawa Canadiens of the short-lived Eastern Professional Hockey League during the 1960–61 season. Sure, he was hoping to make it back to the NHL one day, but he was happy giving it his all for the Canadiens.

Willie might have had just one good eye, but it wasn't stopping him. He was able to perform as good as, and even better than, many of his fellow players. And he knew that the NHL couldn't find out about his loss of sight. He hadn't taken the League's sight test when he played the two games for Boston. If they found out he couldn't see, it would mean the end of a dream for him. The league required 100 per cent vision.

In December 1960, Willie once again got a call from Boston. He was ecstatic.

Getting Back to Boston

He headed back to Boston and stayed with his cousin just outside the city in Roxbury.

To Willie's surprise, the media didn't make a big deal about him playing. He wished they would pay attention to his achievement. He wanted to inspire black boys who might think it was impossible to make a career of their love of hockey.

Boston defence Doug Mohns recalls, "As a hockey player, he was a fast skater, quick on his feet, and he worked hard at both ends of the ice, which not all players did. How could you help but admire the guy?"

But while staying with his cousin, Willie was at least able to inspire children and others in that neighbourhood. Roxbury was an area where many blacks lived. Willie would hand out tickets to Bruins games when he could. He was the first black man in the NHL. This was monumental

Willie O'Ree

to the community. Neighbourhood kids would head to the games and cheer him on. Sometimes Willie's brother Richard would attend. Willie proudly wore his sweater with 22 on the back and gave them a show.

Being in the NHL was a dream come true for Willie. He loved to travel and he loved playing against the stars of the game. Gordie Howe, known as "Mr. Hockey," was an amazing inspiration. Howe had a powerful shot and was a great physical player. Most of all, Howe was already acting as role model and ambassador for the sport that Willie loved so much.

On January 1, 1961, the Bruins were hosting the Habs at Boston Garden in a tough game. The Habs had won their fifth consecutive Stanley Cup the season before, and looked hard to beat.

Boston was ahead of Montreal with a score of 2-1 midway through the third

Getting Back to Boston



O'Ree on the ice during a game against the Toronto Maple Leafs

period. Willie took a pass from Leo Boivin. He sped by Habs defence Jean-Guy Talbot. A Habs player broke his stick

Willie O'Ree

The Bruins: One of the Original Six

People will talk about an NHL team being part of the "Original Six." The Original Six teams were the Toronto Maple Leafs, Montreal Canadiens, Boston Bruins, Detroit Red Wings, Chicago Black Hawks, and New York Rangers. The nickname is a bit misleading, as the league formed in 1917 with only two of these teams: the Canadiens and the Maple Leafs. Over the years, teams came and went. After the NHL expanded to a total of 12 teams in 1967, the nickname was given to separate the "originals" from the new ones. To this day, these teams are regarded as powerhouses in the NHL, producing some of the best players. Some Bruins legends include Eddie Shore, Phil Esposito, Cam Neely, Ray Bourque, and, most notably, Bobby Orr, who many think is one of the best players to ever take to the ice.

Getting Back to Boston

trying to stop him. Willie flew past them both. In front of goalie Charlie Hodge, he fired a low shot. The red light was on. Willie had just netted his first NHL goal!

The crowd rose to their feet and cheered for a full two minutes. Willie's goal ended up being the winning goal as Boston defeated Montreal 3–2.

“I can still recall the great applause I got from scoring that first goal,” Willie says. He cherishes that puck to this day.

After scoring his first NHL goal, Willie found that Boston fans really did support him. It was a welcome feeling. Especially since not everyone felt that way about him. And it could get tough on the ice.

“In the penalty box, you know, stuff would be thrown . . . they'd spit on me,” he recalled years later.

One such ugly experience sticks with him.

Willie was set to play against Chicago.

Willie O'Ree

The Black Hawks had their share of stars, with players like Stan Mikita and Bobby Hull. As much as Willie was an NHL player, he was still a fan. Willie couldn't wait to see his heroes play.

But it wasn't to be.

Two minutes into the game at Chicago Stadium, Chicago right-wing Eric Nesterenko skated up to Willie and muttered, "Nigger." Willie wasn't one to take abuse, but he knew when to fight and when not to. If he had dropped his gloves every time he heard a racial slur, he would have had no ice time. But Nesterenko carried it further. He butt-ended Willie with his stick, knocking out two of his teeth. Then he tried to high-stick Willie, again calling him "nigger." Willie avoided the stick, but came back up and brought his stick down on Nesterenko's head. This was a fight he was ready to take on.

Players from both benches flooded the



Getting Back to Boston

ice. It was a bench-clearing brawl. Fans, thinking Willie had been the instigator, were enraged. Willie was taken off the ice into the dressing room to be treated for his injuries. And that's where he stayed. Officials said that they were worried for Willie's safety.

“There wasn't any TV . . . I sat alone wondering what was happening out on the ice. So much for seeing Bobby Hull and Stan Mikita and Glenn Hall,” Willie writes. “I was a prisoner in Chicago Stadium.”

In an article in *USA Today* years later, he would recall that he thought about quitting at that moment. But then he reconsidered.

“Right there and then, I made a decision: No, I'm not quitting,” he said. “If I am going to leave this league, it will be because my skills aren't good enough. I'm not going to leave because someone is

Willie O'Ree

trying to drive me out of the league.”

So Willie stayed right where he was.