

Skating On thin Ice:

Racism in Professional Hockey

by Max Wallace

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The Montreal Forum. A Canadiens forward comes streaking down the right side and lets loose a blistering slapshot towards the net, only to be thwarted by the goalie's glove which comes out to snare the puck.

At the same instant, a voice from the stands shouts, "Nice save, nigger."

If Grant Fuhr, known as "Cocoa" by his teammates, hears the taunt, he doesn't even flinch. The Edmonton Oilers superstar is only one of a handful of black hockey players now in the National Hockey League. Although it has been 30 years since the league admitted its first black player, Fuhr is the first to make his mark in a game where the complexion of a player is usually expected to match the ice surface.

"I've never had any real problem because of my colour," says Fuhr after an Oilers practice at the Northland Coliseum. "I'm just an individual like anybody else. Sure there are people out there who can't accept that but I can and that's all that's important."



Since he broke in as an 18-year-old rookie seven years ago, Fuhr has established a solid reputation. His former teammate Wayne Gretzky has called him the "best goaltender in the history of the NHL." Yet he has never really achieved the recognition usually warranted by that sort of praise. Until last year, for example, his salary was well below that of Edmonton's recently traded backup goaltender Andy Moog, whose statistics pale in comparison.

Many eyebrows were raised three years ago when a highly unusual arrangement between Fuhr and Edmonton coach Glen Sather was revealed in which Fuhr paid Sather \$100 a month

to manage his finances. Explaining the arrangement, Sather called Fuhr a "dumb kid."

While Fuhr shrugs off these details, others insist that his treatment cannot be ignored. According to Bobby White, Director of Montreal's West End Sports Association, Fuhr is lucky to be playing at all.

"If Fuhr didn't wear a mask, he may never have been recruited," says White, who has been developing and representing black athletes for the past ten years. "How many people are even aware that he's black?"

Fuhr is the archetypal black athlete who must "grin and bear it" in order to survive the racist domain of the NHL, White says.

Considerable racial progress was made in pro sports during the late 1940s and early 50s. When Jackie Robinson shattered baseball's long-time colour barrier in 1946, it presaged the arrival of a multitude of black athletes

in other mass appeal sports.

It didn't take long, once they had the chance to play, for blacks to prove that they were equally capable. The National Football League always had a small sampling of non-white players but only after 1946 did blacks enter the league in vast numbers. Professional basketball signed its first black player in 1950.

But the National Hockey League was the hardest nut for integrationists to crack.

The name above Bobby Orr in the NHL's all-time player list is Willie O'Ree. Like Orr, O'Ree played for the Boston Bruins and was a major factor in hockey history.

In 1958, O'Ree became the first black to break the colour barrier in the NHL. It seemed the opportunity had arrived for blacks to finally alter the complexion of the game just as they had done in other sports. But, playing in a city with a history of racial conflict, the lily-whiteness

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