

# IN THE NEWS

## ED WRIGHT: First Black U.S. College Hockey Coach

By Kurt Wildman  
Contributing Writer

Hockey is evolving. The hyperbolic might call it a revolution in its infancy.

However you characterize the changing demographics of Canada's foremost national game, the bottom line is elite, level, Black players are appearing in record numbers and attracting unprecedented scrutiny. The increased diversity of elite level hockey rosters, a keystone component of the current state of the game, is also a reminder of more primordial times in the arena for Black athletes.

Fortunately, more Canadians know the Herb Carnegie and Willie O'Ree stories, both mid-twentieth century on-ice ancestors to shinnier millennial Black progeny. Carnegie, a standout with the Quebec Aces of the Quebec Senior League and former teammate of legend, Jean Beliveau, was so good he had Conn Smythe dreaming of a day when science could find a cure for excess melanin. O'Ree, the Fredericton, New Brunswick native, acknowledged as having blazing speed by Don Cherry and others, eventually managed to break the colour barrier with the Boston Bruins in 1958, even though he was visually impaired.

Still, many have never heard of the man who envisioned a day when hockey would start to evolve as it has, someone who crossed the racial divide not only as a player but also as a coach.

Three decades ago Ed Wright, a native of Chatham, Ontario, became the first Black man to coach in the thoroughly white environs of U.S. college hockey. Hired in 1970 by the University of Buffalo ("UB") after a successful college playing career at the University of Boston, Wright joined the UB physical education faculty as an instructor and as head coach of the "Bulls", the school's NCAA Division II hockey team.

Along with basketball coach, Leo Richardson, and football coach, Irv Wright (no relation), he became one of the university's first Black varsity coaches.

Wright's journey as the Bulls' guiding mind and bench boss would not end until the early 1980's. However, his sojourn into hockey began in poverty back in 1940's Chatham.

The youngest son in a family of three boys and six girls and a multi-sport athlete, Wright did not take up organized hockey until the age of 10, four years after his mother's death. While a delayed start into competitive hockey was

more common at that time, when manufacturing post-injury puck prodigies had not yet become a tenet of good Canadian parenting, Wright has acknowledged poverty's role as a barrier to entry.

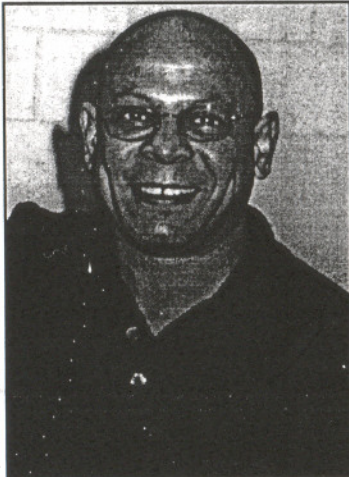
Proving himself through his youth in the Chatham minor hockey system, Wright eventually joined the Chatham Maroons Junior B team and earned the right to go to "war" every time he stepped on the ice.

Small insize (5'3"), Wright was repeatedly targeted because of his build and his Blackness. Accordingly, fighting was a *bona fide* requirement of the job. Fortunately, one of his coaches, George Aiken, similarly small in stature, taught him the tricks and trade of hand-to-hand combat. Skilled in the pugilistic arts, Wright could respond to a rabid opposition fueled by a mix of competitiveness and prejudice.

Wright did not always have to respond to these challenges in solitude. Like other pioneering Blacks in the golden-age of White predominance, Wright benefited from the insular camaraderie that developed in the Junior B trenches among his own teammates, a group which included the imposing Carl Lindros, father of concussion-prone hockey idol, Eric Lindros.

While some of that support was predicated on the tried and true "you're not like those other Blacks" attitude, Wright could count on the genuine friendship of boyhood pal and eventual college teammate, Herb Wakayashi, and Herb's brother Mel.

Still, Wright admits that when it came down to dealing with the particular kind of racist mistreatment he received inside the arena during his Chatham days, he had limited support and had to "deal with it" on his own.



Ed Wright. Photo courtesy of University of Buffalo.

Some like the bellowing Cherry have suggested that historical accounts of racism against Black players may be exaggerated to make for a better story. On a past edition of his *Grapeline* radio show, Cherry advised that his brother, a minor league teammate of Willie O'Ree's, had never observed racism against O'Ree.

They probably never asked Ed Wright about the sleepless nights before games and ulcer surgery he underwent at nineteen years of age because of his trial by ordeal in junior hockey.

Upon graduating from Chatham College Institute, Wright was able to

parlay his combination of academic and hockey skills into an athletic scholarship to Boston University for what he described as "a total education" and an entirely different way to regard the game of hockey.

Other than occasional encounters with an obnoxious fan or a classless opponent, he rarely experienced in U.S. college hockey the racist attacks he had suffered in junior hockey in Ontario.

College hockey, of course, presented its own brand of challenges.

Under then head coach, Jack Kelley, later the general manager of the New England/Hartford Whalers (now the

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