

117TH CONGRESS
1ST SESSION

S. 452

To award a Congressional Gold Medal to Willie O’Ree, in recognition of his extraordinary contributions and commitment to hockey, inclusion, and recreational opportunity.

IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES

FEBRUARY 25, 2021

Ms. STABENOW (for herself and Mr. SCOTT of South Carolina) introduced the following bill; which was read twice and referred to the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs

A BILL

To award a Congressional Gold Medal to Willie O’Ree, in recognition of his extraordinary contributions and commitment to hockey, inclusion, and recreational opportunity.

1 *Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representa-*
2 *tives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

3 **SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.**

4 This Act may be cited as the “Willie O’Ree Congres-
5 sional Gold Medal Act”.

6 **SEC. 2. FINDINGS.**

7 Congress finds the following:

1 (1) Willie O’Ree was the first Black player to
2 compete in the National Hockey League (NHL), ap-
3 pearing for the Boston Bruins on January 18, 1958,
4 in the throes of the civil rights movement in the
5 United States helping to end racial segregation in
6 the premier professional ice hockey league; he is
7 widely referred to as the “Jackie Robinson of Hock-
8 ey”.

9 (2) Willie O’Ree was born October 15, 1935, in
10 Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada; he is the
11 youngest of 13 children and a descendant of Paris
12 O’Ree, whose name appears in the famous historical
13 document “The Book of Negroes”.

14 (3) Willie O’Ree was raised by his parents in
15 Fredericton, a predominantly White town where
16 hockey was deeply rooted within the culture. O’Ree
17 was a standout athlete on the ice and the baseball
18 diamond.

19 (4) At age 21, O’Ree was being scouted by pro-
20 fessional baseball teams and seriously considered
21 baseball as a career. Upon experiencing the seg-
22 regated South for the first time while appearing for
23 a minor league tryout, his dream changed and his
24 attention turned solely to ice hockey.

1 (5) While playing amateur hockey, Willie was
2 struck in his right eye with a puck and lost his eye-
3 sight. He was told by doctors to abandon his hockey
4 career; instead, never disclosing the extent of his in-
5 jury, he pursued his dream of playing professional
6 hockey.

7 (6) At the age of 22, O'Ree was called up from
8 the Quebec Aces of the Quebec Hockey League
9 (QHL) to play for the NHL's Boston Bruins at a
10 time when only 6 teams existed in the league. O'Ree
11 was unaware he had broken the color barrier at the
12 top level of the sport until he read it in the news-
13 paper the following day.

14 (7) Blind in 1 eye and a victim of racism at
15 times throughout his career, O'Ree persevered and
16 played professional hockey for 22 years, tallying over
17 1,000 points.

18 (8) In 1996, 17 years after O'Ree retired from
19 professional hockey, the National Hockey League
20 hired O'Ree as the first-ever Diversity Ambassador.
21 Having already changed the game forever through
22 his courage and convictions, O'Ree gives new defini-
23 tion to what it means to be a trailblazer.

24 (9) In this role as Diversity Ambassador with
25 the NHL, O'Ree set out to grow the sport by pro-

1 viding access, opportunity, and motivation for chil-
2 dren of all races, ethnicities, origins, and abilities.
3 With O’Ree providing a vivid example of what is
4 possible and serving as a relentless supporter of chil-
5 dren pursuing their dreams, more than 30 nonprofit
6 youth organizations, dubbed Hockey is for Everyone
7 programs, were developed across North America,
8 each committed to offering minority and under-
9 served children an opportunity to play hockey,
10 leveraging the sport to build character, foster posi-
11 tive values, and develop important life skills.

12 (10) Through Hockey is for Everyone pro-
13 grams, more than 120,000 boys and girls have been
14 positively impacted. O’Ree has devoted nearly 2,500
15 days on the ground with the youth participants, vis-
16 iting more than 500 schools, community centers, and
17 rinks to speak to hockey’s core values and beliefs:
18 stay in school; set goals for yourself; remain com-
19 mitted and disciplined; and always respect your
20 teammates, coaches, and parents.

21 (11) Hockey is for Everyone programs have
22 provided important opportunities for youth to par-
23 take in physical fitness. Today in the United States,
24 fewer than half of the children ages 6–11 engage in
25 the recommended amount of physical activity, and

1 that number is lower for low-income families. O’Ree
2 has stood as a champion of youth athletic participa-
3 tion and its health benefits for decades.

4 (12) Hockey is for Everyone programs provide
5 numerous off-ice services to youth: SAT and aca-
6 demic tutoring, mentoring, nutrition education, col-
7 lege counseling, community service opportunities,
8 and more. The program has excelled at using hockey
9 as a vehicle to improve the social and emotional
10 wellness of youth and improve students’ academic
11 performances both in primary school and beyond.

12 (13) O’Ree was also named a Member of the
13 Order of Canada in 2008 and, in 2018, the City of
14 Boston released an official Proclamation recognizing
15 January 18, the anniversary of the day he broke
16 into the game, as “Willie O’Ree Day”.

17 (14) In November 2018, 60 years after O’Ree
18 entered the NHL, he was inducted into the Hockey
19 Hall of Fame in the “builder” category in recogni-
20 tion of his efforts to grow the game, using his posi-
21 tion and the platform of hockey to improve the lives
22 of children throughout North America.

23 **SEC. 3. CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL.**

24 (a) AWARD AUTHORIZED.—The Speaker of the
25 House of Representatives and the President pro tempore

1 of the Senate shall make appropriate arrangements for the
2 award, on behalf of the Congress, of a single gold medal
3 of appropriate design to Willie O'Ree, or if unavailable,
4 to a member of his family, in recognition of his extraor-
5 dinary contributions and commitment to hockey, inclusion,
6 and recreational opportunity.

7 (b) DESIGN AND STRIKING.—For the purposes of the
8 award referred to in subsection (a), the Secretary of the
9 Treasury (hereafter in this Act referred to as the “Sec-
10 retary”) shall strike the gold medal with suitable emblems,
11 devices, and inscriptions, to be determined by the Sec-
12 retary. The design shall bear an image of, and an inscrip-
13 tion of the name of, Willie O'Ree.

14 **SEC. 4. DUPLICATE MEDALS.**

15 Under such regulations as the Secretary may pre-
16 scribe, the Secretary may strike and sell duplicates in
17 bronze of the gold medal struck under section 3, at a price
18 sufficient to cover the costs of the medals, including labor,
19 materials, dies, use of machinery, and overhead expenses.

20 **SEC. 5. STATUS OF MEDALS.**

21 Medals struck pursuant to this Act are national med-
22 als for purposes of chapter 51 of title 31, United States
23 Code.

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