

## Q&A

**Black Ice: Authors George & Darril Fosty**

[Blacksportsnetwork.com](http://Blacksportsnetwork.com)

April 9, 2007

By Kimberley A. Martin

Before Willie O'Ree was declared the first Black man to break into the NHL with the Boston Bruins in 1958, historians George and Darril Fosty say there was James "Cut" Brown, George Tolliver and Henry Sylvester Williams. Almost 30 years before Bernard "Boom Boom" Geoffrion—the man the National Hockey League credits as the inventor of the slap shot—was born, the Fostys believe Eddie Martin, a former baseball-turned-hockey-player, might have been the first player to unleash the classic power move.

In their 2004 book, *Black Ice*, the Fosty brothers claim that these ancestors of runaway slaves, and participants of the Colored Hockey League of the Maritimes, have all but been forgotten by mainstream hockey.

The Fostys took some time from their latest book and film projects to talk about the cultural significance of hockey's Black and American roots and the future of Black interest in hockey:

**BSN:** Why did you guys feel it was necessary to write "Black Ice"?

**George Fosty:** Initially we were like everyone else. We didn't understand the significance of the story and it wasn't until a year and half into the research that Darril said, 'You know, we need to write a book because this is a lot more important than we originally thought. It was a learning process for us as well.

**BSN:** So basically you guys are debunking the myth that hockey is a "white sport"?

**George Fosty:** Yeah, because we always assume it's a white sport. In our first book, *Splendid in the Sun*, we talked about the migration of the stick and ball sport and how that sport eventually became ice hockey. And we talk about the 48 different cultures that played hockey over the centuries—and three-quarters of them were non-white. Most sports books don't even talk about the role of minorities in the early evolution of sports.

**BSN:** But it's the year 2007. Why are we only now hearing that hockey's roots are in fact Black and American?

**George Fosty:** It's always been assumed that hockey began on March 3, 1875 in Montreal and nobody had bothered to really question that until recently. Now you have historians like us who have gone out and done additional research where we haven't accepted that theory.

**BSN:** So before the Negro Leagues and before the National Hockey League, there was the Colored Hockey League in Nova Scotia?

**George Fosty:** Yes. The Colored Hockey League was initially a Baptist church league. It came about in 1885 in an attempt to promote religion and bring young people into the churches. They thought that by having hockey games after the church services that these young people would be more apt to come to the churches in the wintertime and be more willing to bring family members, particularly the older people. And Nova Scotia in the winter is a tough environment, so it was hard for people to get to church in the winter. Once the league started, it became more of a Black pride movement, an effort to preserve a unique heritage, an effort to create a separate but equal sports league that would be accepted by the mainstream whites. They were accepted by the lower classes to a certain degree, but they were never accepted to the point where they were allowed to flourish. By 1906, efforts were well underway in the white circles to lessen that league's influence and deny them ice time and to limit their playing.

**BSN:** Do you think the contributions made by those pioneers were purposely ignored, and perhaps stolen, by white teams and hockey officials?

**George Fosty:** We know they were purposely ignored. You can look at the history books and see that they were. We also know that they had an influence way beyond their initial league and they were never recognized for their role. We say in our book that their influence, some of the things they brought to hockey—the slap shot, the style of play, the modern goal tending—were credited to whites. When you look at this league, you have to understand that it was a traveling league, it was a complex league, it was well structured, it had a tremendous draw in the areas where it played, it was receiving two-and-a-half times the attendance as white leagues at the time, so it had an incredible impact on the game. And the fact that they were never recognized for any accomplishment, any aspect of this game, is an indication of the level of racism that was allowed to manipulate the history.

**BSN:** But how did those hockey ties die within the Black community?

**George Fosty:** What brought down the Colored Hockey League wasn't just racism. You had a number of different events that basically helped to eliminate much of that history. By 1906 you had the league being denied ice time, by 1911 it was struggling to exist, WWI came and the guys went off to war, you had the Halifax explosion in 1917 and then in the 1920s you had recession in that area. Families migrated from the region and people died off. When you start to add it all up, you can see why, within three and four generations, most Nova Scotians had forgotten about the league's history because there was no long-term legacy by the 1930s. Whatever existed of the league was a faded memory. So by the 1960s, people would have heard about it from their grandfathers, but they would not have understood the ramifications of what their grandfathers would have been telling them because they would have just assumed it was a typical story or some type of exaggerated truth. Also, there was an attempt after 1926 to totally ignore this league. You don't find any articles written on this league from 1926 all the way up to 1990. The main media totally ignored any recognition of this league in terms of what it accomplished and what it brought to the game so that made it's easy to forget when you've got 60 years of absolutely no articles being written.

**BSN:** What has been the NHL's reaction to your findings?

**George Fosty:** They've invited us to speak on a couple of occasions, and we continue to have discussions. We have a growing awareness in the hockey community that something has to be done, but to this point we haven't seen any official recognition in terms of the Hall of Fame. But the NHL is talking to us, they are curious, they're interested in the research, and they think that there is a role for some of this history in their diversity programs. So we'll see. We're still in the early discussion stages with them and we'll know more in the next few months.

**BSN:** Why do you think there's been so much resistance to giving credit where credit is due?

**George Fosty:** A number of reasons. When you've got certain historians over the years who've stood up and claimed, 'I'm the expert on hockey and this is how it happened,' and as counter-research comes to light, for one thing, they're embarrassed by the fact that they didn't do sufficient research. Secondly, they claim to be experts but you have to question whether they are because they may not have done any research. And thirdly, if they suddenly stand up now and say, 'Hey, we made a mistake,' they look stupid. So it's a personal self-interest of these individuals not to recognize because they have put their reputation on false research and it's unfortunate. The thing is, history is constantly evolving. Every 20 years or so we seem to always find new information and we end up rewriting our books. But for 100 years, hockey's history has never changed. It's the only sport and the only history, that I'm aware of, where we have resistance against recognizing newfound information. Every other history is comfortable with the idea that as we learn more of the history, we have to change our perception of the history. Hockey, for some reason, is very resistant to the idea that our history books have to be readdressed or rewritten over time as more information comes to light.

**Darril Fosty:** Even amongst the Nova Scotian Black community, the league was mysterious and nobody really knew a lot anymore because it was really wasn't talked about inside their own culture. I think it isn't that there's a lot of resistance, I think people are more eager to find out the story first, but they view it with a skeptical eye right now. I think credit will come, and it is coming. Even though the book's been out since the end of 2004, it's still a new history and people still don't know the story. Because it was such a difficult story to uncover, people just dismissed it as not being relevant. And because other researchers didn't want to invest in that kind of time, it was easier to just to dismiss it as a nothing league. And I think you find that in all history books, when there's

new history revealed, people who have made a name for themselves, will view any new material skeptically. I think that's human nature.

**BSN:** What has been the reaction from African Americans?

**George Fosty:** Initially they don't believe it. And when we went to Nova Scotia and tried to track down the original families of the Colored Hockey League, they didn't know anything about the history. It's shock, then excitement, and in some cases, a lot of pride because as families learn more about their grandfathers and their great-grandfathers, they're quite proud of the fact that these guys accomplished something in their day. It's a sense of self-discovery for a lot of African Americans. At the same time we've received criticism from certain Black extremists who are uncomfortable with the fact that Darril and I are white and we've had white extremists who don't like us because we're writing Black history. I've actually had some Blacks say to me that they love the fact that we're white because it's harder for the critics to dismiss us. They also say it's unfortunate that we have to have white historians, but that is the case.

We have nothing to gain here—in fact we have a lot more to lose. We've been attacked verbally, we've been criticized, our name is mud sometimes because we've actually gone against the status quo and that makes a lot of people uncomfortable. And it's easier to attack two historians than it is to change a universal history. But there are more and more historians backing us today than there were two years ago, when we came out with the book. When we came into this project nine years ago, we were military historians. We crossed into sports for personal interests and when we started researching we didn't have any preconceived notions of what hockey was. We just let the research tell us what it was. Whereas most hockey history historians up to that point had already determined what the history was and regardless of what the research was, they would write conclusions based on previous personal perception.

**BSN:** What do you think the long-term effects of your research will be? Will the NHL recognize the CHL one day?

**George Fosty:** Within the next decade what you're going to have is a mainstream acceptance of this information because too much information is coming to light. We have identified almost 400 Black athletes who played hockey on competitive teams prior to 1940. When we started this research there were only six individuals that were even known to exist and we didn't even have full names—we only had sir names. Now we're at a point, where we've basically created hockey's equivalent to a Negro Baseball League history. And if you look at the Negro League baseball histories, they're now being accepted as mainstream and they're being given their rightful due. And in recent years you're starting to see Negro League players being inducted into the baseball Hall of Fame and what you're going to see in the next decade is the same thing with Black hockey leagues. We set up the Black Ice Hockey and Sports Hall of Fame conference in Nova Scotia and we've started to induct people into this conference which will eventually be a Hall of Fame. But at the same time, mainstream hockey's going to eventually have to accept them because there's just too much information now. You can't ignore it. With every month, something new is being discovered—new photos, new information, new research is coming to light—to the point where you can't put that genie back in its bottle. And as more and more people turn their information to it it's the most exciting

**Darril Fosty:** The NHL may not draw all the same conclusions that we draw, but in large part, you're going to see by this time next year—when the NHL's All-star game is in Atlanta—you'll see the NHL come out and will probably make some type of official recognition of the league, and you'll see that change happen sooner rather than later. I think the NHL is sincere. They have a way now to bridge that cultural gap with something that is real. There's a tradition there that goes longer than basketball. You can at least find some interesting history about Black culture and free Black society and hopefully that interest will lead to more and more Black kids showing up in hockey. It's going to take a lot of effort to diversify the game and this is just one piece of the puzzle.

**BSN:** Will we start to see a shift in Black interest in hockey?

**Darril Fosty:** I think it can. It's exposure. I think the more exposure it gets. You won't see a sudden jump in the amount of Black hockey players in the league, but in the sense that Black people can take ownership in the history of the game, bodes well for their future interest in that game. I think it will have some type of impact. It's

already had some type of impact. We've got young Black hockey players that are happy that this history came out because maybe they don't feel like they're some type of sideshow act anymore.

**BSN:** So does this means I should run out and get some skates and practice my T-stops and crossovers?

**Darril Fosty:** You're better off getting some season tickets or watching a game on TV first. That would be a good start.