

Seattle's First African-American Hockey Players

When goalie Doug Bonner took to the ice for the Thunderbirds in 1992, most fans assumed that he was the first African-American to play professional or junior hockey in Seattle. In a sport that is almost exclusively comprised of “white” players at the highest levels, African-American players are somewhat conspicuous, and local fans couldn't recall any others who had skated here in the past. It turns out the fans were wrong – they just couldn't remember back that far, to a time when two African-American players suited up for the Seattle Bombers in the fall of 1953. Their names were Alf Lewsey and Bill Geary.

Owner Frank Dotten was trying to get the Bombers back to respectability. The franchise had success in the late 1940s when it was known as the Ironmen, but the club finished under .500 for the past three consecutive seasons and if he wanted to improve attendance at the Civic Arena he had to put a winner on the ice. Dotten was a hard man, but also fair, and what he really cared about was success. He cast his net far and wide looking for talent to bring to training camp in the fall of 1953 and two of the players he brought in surprised everyone, not because of their talent level but because of the color of their skin.

Not much is known about Bill Geary. He came to camp as a defenseman and likely had played some amateur hockey in western Canada, which was the norm for most rookies appearing at their first pro tryouts in the WHL. Geary was joined by Alf Lewsey, a 23-year-old forward hailing from Winnipeg who had previously spent some time playing amateur senior hockey in Winnipeg, Port Arthur, Vancouver and Penticton. The pair were mentioned in the press and described as the first “colored” skaters ever to play in the league. It was also written that if they made the roster they would be the first of their race ever to play professional hockey, a fact that was definitely not correct.

Their first game with the Bombers was an exhibition on September 28 against the New York Rangers of the NHL. Both players skated, though neither received a mention in the article about the game that appeared in the *Seattle Times*. Lewsey did make the scoring sheet, however, picking up a minor penalty at the 3:40 mark of the first period. A week later on October 4 the Bombers hosted the Spokane Flyers of the Western International Hockey League in their final pre-season game. Once again neither player

received a mention in the paper, but Lewsey again made the scoring sheet with a minor penalty at 10:12 of the first period. A complete roster of the players suited up for the game was not printed, so it is unclear if Geary took the ice against Spokane.

It appears that both players were released prior to the start of the regular season. Geary is mentioned in the newspaper as being on the final roster out of camp, but there is no record of him playing in a regular season game. What happened to Geary after he left the Bombers is also a mystery, as his name doesn't show up in any hockey related databases.

Lewsey, on the other hand, headed to England where he played for the Ayr Raiders of the British National League. He scored 10 goals and 22 points in 40 games for the last place Raiders, and was the runner-up for the BNL Rookie of the Year award. The following season he came back to North America and had a very successful year with the New Haven Blades of the EHL, picking up 20 goals and 57 points with the league champions. Following his hockey career, Lewsey became involved in human rights and race relations issues, serving as a consultant to the Human Rights Council of British Columbia in the 1980s. He is also credited with introducing the word "colourasian" to the lexicon, defined as: "Of, pertaining to, or denoting a distinctive racial grouping with light to dark brown skin pigmentation and genetically descended from African heritage". When asked about the need for the new term, Lewsey explained:

Many people would probably agree that if they are to be identified by a couple of colours in a child's paintbox, they would prefer the descriptive words 'Colourasian' and 'Caucasian' that are much softer, kinder, and gentler than the 'hot button' opposites of 'Black' and 'White'.
(Quoted from www.azhockey.com)

How right he is...

Jeff Obermeyer is a 13-year season ticket holder with the Thunderbirds. His new book, "Hockey in Seattle", chronicles the history of hockey in Seattle from 1915 to the present day. It is available at the souvenir stands or through his website at <http://www.seattlehockey.net>.

