

Soul On Ice

Carolina Thunderbird right wing Brian Johnson is a dominant figure in the Atlantic Coast Hockey League. At left, the former Detroit Red Wing sizes up the opposition. At right, after a line change, Johnson, a native of Montreal, discusses strategy with a teammate (photo by James Parker).

Sports Profile

T-Birds' Johnson happily back in hockey

By DAVID BULLA
Chronicle Sports Editor

Brian Johnson played a handful of games in vivacious Joe Louis Arena for the National Hockey League's Detroit Red Wings in the 1983-84 season.

Now he's toiling in the relative obscurity of the Atlantic Coast Hockey League, in cold, dimly lit buildings like Winston-Salem's Memorial Coliseum. His memories of the Detroit arena are fond ones.

"Joe Louis Arena is one of the most astounding buildings you will ever going to see in the NHL," said the gregarious Johnson, who was added to the Carolina Thunderbirds' roster last month. "The crowds were incredible. Detroit's a great sports city and the crowds were very enthusiastic. The thing about it that I really enjoyed is that they got you up for every game."

"The hard part about it was they were losers. They used to have a winning tradition, but the team has faded. Still, to play in that building was an honor to me. To dress in the Detroit Red Wings' dressing room was an honor for me."

Johnson, the first black player in T-Bird history, is happy to be back in the game after sitting out last season. The right wing had become disillusioned with professional hockey and returned to his native Montreal to promote concerts and work in construction.

"There were many aspects of the Detroit organization that didn't sit well with me," he said. "Hockey is first and foremost a business. When you're young and naive, you tend not to pay attention to this."

Yet, he discovered he missed the game more than he disdained its cut-and-dry business aspects. His friends and family helped to ease the tension of walking away from his first love, reminding him that he had enough talent to play in the NHL.

Before this season, Johnson went to training camp with the Indianapolis Checkers of the International Hockey League, but was released at the end of camp.

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-- Brian Johnson

Through T-Bird left wing Mark Huglen, a former Checker, he heard about Carolina.

"It's been entertaining to play in the ACHL," he said. "It's not bad because we're winning (the T-Birds are in first place). We've got a bunch of great guys here. They don't treat me out of the ordinary. They don't treat me any better or worse. The treat me as just one of the guys and that's how I like it because it makes for a more relaxed situation, which is conducive to winning."

"The level of talent in this league has surprised me. It's not that far away from the IHL. I know for a fact players on this team can play further up the ladder. A lot of guys get bad breaks."

Hockey has been in Johnson's life for most of his 25 years. He began skating when he was 4. Because of his size and athletic ability (he also was a baseball prospect), the Quebecois has long been considered a top-rated hockey talent. After being groomed in the prestigious Quebec Major Junior League (he scored more than 30 goals twice at that level), he was ready for a pro hockey career. Indeed, by the time he was 18, Johnson was ranked one of the top 21 players in Canada.

"There were players who were quicker," the 6-foot-3, 220-pound Johnson said. "But I was more physical than most of them and there was no stopping me because I'm so stubborn, just like hockey itself."

One of his pet peeves is that big-league hockey is not very interested in developing talent. He would like to see hockey adopt a minor-league system similar to that of baseball.

"A lot of kids want to play professionally when they're 18 or 19," he said. "They don't want to go to college. They're definitely talented, but they're not mentally strong enough for the NHL. But they give them these unbelievable contracts and then they can't play up to the expectation because the NHL is so much more physical."

"Hockey could use a more structured minor-league system. Unfortunately, hockey hasn't changed much in 25 years."

Johnson has been around pioneer blood his entire life. One of his uncles was the first black millionaire in Canadian history and the other was the first black taxi driver in Montreal history.

Although Johnson has been the first black player for several teams he's played on, racism has not been a frequent problem.

"I don't think I can count on one hand how many guys who have made racial slurs to me," he said. "Still, there are ignorant people all over, whether it's football, baseball, basketball or hockey. Some people will just try to get you going."

Johnson would like to return to the NHL, where there are three blacks (Edmonton's Grant Fuhr, Minnesota's Tony McKegney and Winnipeg's Ray Neufeld) this season.

"But we have to be realistic about things too," he said. "I'm 25 and I'm not getting any younger. I think as a hockey player I've gotten better. I'm just using this year as a stepping stone. I want to have fun, win and get in great shape. Exactly where I want to go, well, I have a couple of options I want to look into. There's a couple of teams that need help. You never

know."

Johnson, whose physical style of play has made him a crowd favorite at the Coliseum, is most excited about the prospect of catching on in the European professional league.

"I never played there and some of the guys here played there," he said. "In that respect, I'm still young. If I could get over there, it would be nice. If not, I might be in Asheville next season."

Eventually, he wants to give coaching a try. The bilingual hockey player also has considered a broadcast career.

As Johnson says, you never know.

Sports In Focus

Hayes to stay put at WSSU

By DAVID BULLA
Chronicle Sports Editor

Bill Hayes is still the football coach at Winston-Salem State and he's likely to remain there.

"I have the best situation in black college football," a content Hayes said Monday. "You know it's really a no-lose situation."

Hayes applied for the Florida A&M and North Carolina State openings last week. He was a


finalist for the FAMU job, which had been held by Rudy Hubbard for 12 seasons. But the Rattlers, who interviewed Hayes last Wednesday, were expected to hire Ken Riley, a FAMU alumnus and Green Bay Packer defensive secondary coach.

N.C. State has not conducted any formal interviews yet, although Furman Coach Dick Sheridan is considered the fron-

trunner for that job. Sheridan just completed the 1985 season by guiding the Paladins to a second-place finish in the NCAA Division I-AA championship playoffs.

"Florida A&M told me I had a far superior record to anyone they interviewed," said Hayes, who has an impressive 10-year mark of 73-33-2 at WSSU. "But Please see page B8

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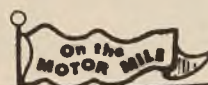
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