

Saskatoon

Sasakamoose remembered as pioneer who paved the way for Indigenous hockey players

Indigenous hockey pioneer died Tuesday from COVID-19 complications

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Former Chicago Blackhawk and Indigenous pro hockey pioneer Fred Sasakamoose (centre), seen here being honoured at an Edmonton Oilers game in 2017, died on Tuesday. (Jason Franson/The Canadian Press)

Tributes are pouring in for Fred Sasakamoose, who died Tuesday at age 86 after being hospitalized with COVID-19.

Sasakamoose was one of the first Indigenous athletes to play in the National Hockey League.

“We are at a loss today. Fred Sasakamoose was a legend with humble beginnings. He will be dearly missed,” the Federation of Saskatchewan Indigenous Nations tweeted.

“We are deeply saddened to learn of the passing of Fred Sasakamoose. Fred holds a special place in the history of our great game,” tweeted Hockey Canada’s Tom Renney.

Brigitte Lacquette, the first First Nations woman to play for the Canadian women’s Olympic hockey team, said Sasakamoose paved the way for Indigenous players across the continent.

“His story is just simply amazing and to have that perseverance and determination to get to where he [did] ... it’s pretty crazy to think what he has overcome,” said Lacquette, who grew up in Dauphin and whose mother is from the **Cote First Nation** in Saskatchewan.

“He’s a very humble man, soft spoken, and could really make you feel like you’ve known him your whole life. [He] was just an amazing person and someone that I’m very glad that I crossed paths with.”

Sasakamoose’s son, Neil Sasakamoose, said in a video on Facebook that his father died Tuesday afternoon, five days after he was admitted to the hospital.

“The COVID virus did so much damage into his lungs, he just couldn’t keep responding,” Neil said. “He just couldn’t keep up.”

Sasakamoose played 11 games with Chicago in 1953-54.

Later Sasakamoose founded the Chief Thunderstick national hockey championship for young Indigenous players.



Fred Sasakamoose, left, and Reggie Leach are seen in a photo posted by Leach to Facebook, with the caption ‘Buddies having a few laughs and sharing a few stories.’ (Reggie Leach/Facebook)

Former Philadelphia Flyer and Stanley Cup champion Reggie Leach said Sasakamoose inspired generations of young players.

“A lot of people say he only played 11 games. But those 11 games were everything to our First Nations people,” Leach said.

Leach said Sasakamoose was passionate about helping kids get on the right path.

“[He was] the kindest man that you’d ever meet. And so down to earth,” Leach said.

“He treated everybody the same. There was no colour barriers or anything. He just treated everybody the same. And I wish the world would do that also.”

Sasakamoose also served as a band councillor and chief of Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation.

He was inducted into the Saskatchewan Sports Hall of Fame in 2007 and became a member of the Order of Canada in 2018.

With Files from CBC’s Cory Funk and Information Radio

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