

Seals

A VISUAL HISTORY

Written & Designed By
Krista Miller





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*San Francisco Seals players Gilles
Meloche and Carol Vadnais.*

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*San Francisco Seals player (and
later coach) Charlie Burns.*



Chapter 1

San Francisco Seals

Before the NHL

“We had great support in San Francisco... We were drawing eight, nine, ten thousand. There was sort of a carry-over from the year before, from the championship win there, so people, when the playoffs came around, especially the [1964] finals against Los Angeles, people really got involved, the media was involved, and the fans, so it was a great atmosphere.”

- Former Seal Larry Lund

To find the origin point of professional hockey in California, its roots trace back to small exhibition series of games in 1917. The Golden State was not known for its ice-based sports, making a name for itself in the early 20th century through baseball and football. Despite this, a three-game exhibition series was planned between the Montreal Canadiens and the Seattle Metropolitans, setting the stage for ice hockey in San Francisco.

Despite this, it was a slow process for the sport to really take off in California. The California Hockey League (CHL) was founded in 1927 as the first organized league in the state, but folded soon in 1933. The CHL teams in the Bay area included the San Francisco Blackhawks, San Francisco Tigers, and the

San Francisco Rangers. Following CHL's closure, the San Francisco Shamrocks would be created as a part of the Pacific Coast Hockey League (1944-50). All of the teams playing at this time used the same rink, the Winterland Arena. The founding of the Western Hockey League (WHL) in 1952 would lead to a hallmark change in San Francisco; a professional ice hockey team.

Mel Smith, owner of the Spokane Comets in Washington, announced that his team would be moving locations following their elimination from the 1960-61 WHL playoffs. Smith said that the team would either move to San Francisco or Los Angeles, but, at the same time, Bill Nicholas (Los Angeles Sports Arena general manager) told the National Hockey League (NHL)

In game photo from the San Francisco Seal's second Championship (1961-63).





San Francisco Seals versus the Portland Buckaroos.

that he would work with the WHL if not awarded an expansion by summer 1961. In order to pick the best location for a new team, the then president of the WHL Al Leader traveled to both cities and visited the prospective arenas. In San Francisco, there was the Cow Palace in Daly City, an indoor arena that hosted the San Francisco Warriors (1962-64, 1966-71).

In the following months post the visit, Leader decided

to award the WHL expansion team to San Francisco. The team was given to Coleman (Coley) Hall, the former owner of the Vancouver Canucks, with the only stipulation being he must install his own ice surface for the Cow Palace Arena. In addition to San Francisco, the WHL simultaneously signed off on the Victoria Cougars team to move from British Columbia to Los Angeles, taking on the new name of the Los Angeles Blades. Later into the franchises of these respective teams, the Seals would beat the Blades for the Coliseum Cup 3 out of 4 times during their time in the WHL.

The Seals, named to honor the legacy of the city's former minor league baseball team, officially were founded as a club in 1961. Their debut was an away game against the Seattle Totems on October 13, 1961 under the direction of coach Max McNab. This first contest did not end in a victory, with the score being an 8-3 road loss. Upon returning back to San Francisco, the Seals debuted in their home arena of Cow Palace on November 17, 1961 against the Edmonton Flyers; the result was a home loss of 5-3.

Despite the rocky start, the Seals had landed themselves dedicated fans within San Francisco. In the first season, the Seals had managed to attract a total of 194,530 fans (average of 5,558 per game) to Cow Palace. A record all-time high of attendance was hit during the final game of the Lester Patrick Cup in 1964, with a roaring crowd of 12,404 fans seeing the Seals take home the trophy. Players during this time attributed the arena itself to part of the team's success; defenceman Tom Thurlby said the size of the building was enough to intimidate



San Francisco Seal's logo evolution [From Left to Right: 1962-63, 1964-65, 1966-67].

other teams. Thurlby's comment on Cow Palace was "... Just because of the size of it compared to some of the other rinks. And it was a small ice surface there too, and we had a big team; we had a lot of big guys on that team, and I think we just dominated at home. Teams coming in there were kind of shocked, I guess, at the amount of people that [were] there the first time they played there, and we always played well at home."

As the fan base took root in San Francisco, fan efforts were made to promote the professional hockey club more and more. The founding of the Seals Booster Club took place in 1962. Through the club, fans made commemorative items for the San Francisco Seals and later the California Golden Seals, including stickers, pins, patches, and mugs.

The Seals saw a solid start for their first season, finishing off with 29-39-2 and making it to the playoffs where they would be eliminated by Spokane 2-0. By the end of this year, coach McNab stepped down to take over the Vancouver Canucks. In search of a replacement, Seals management was able to attract and hire Norman "Bud" Poile from the Edmonton Flyers, the defending champions at the time. Poile had a solid record behind him as a coach, with three championships over the course of eight seasons leading Edmonton, experience that would bring the Seals to two of their own victories.

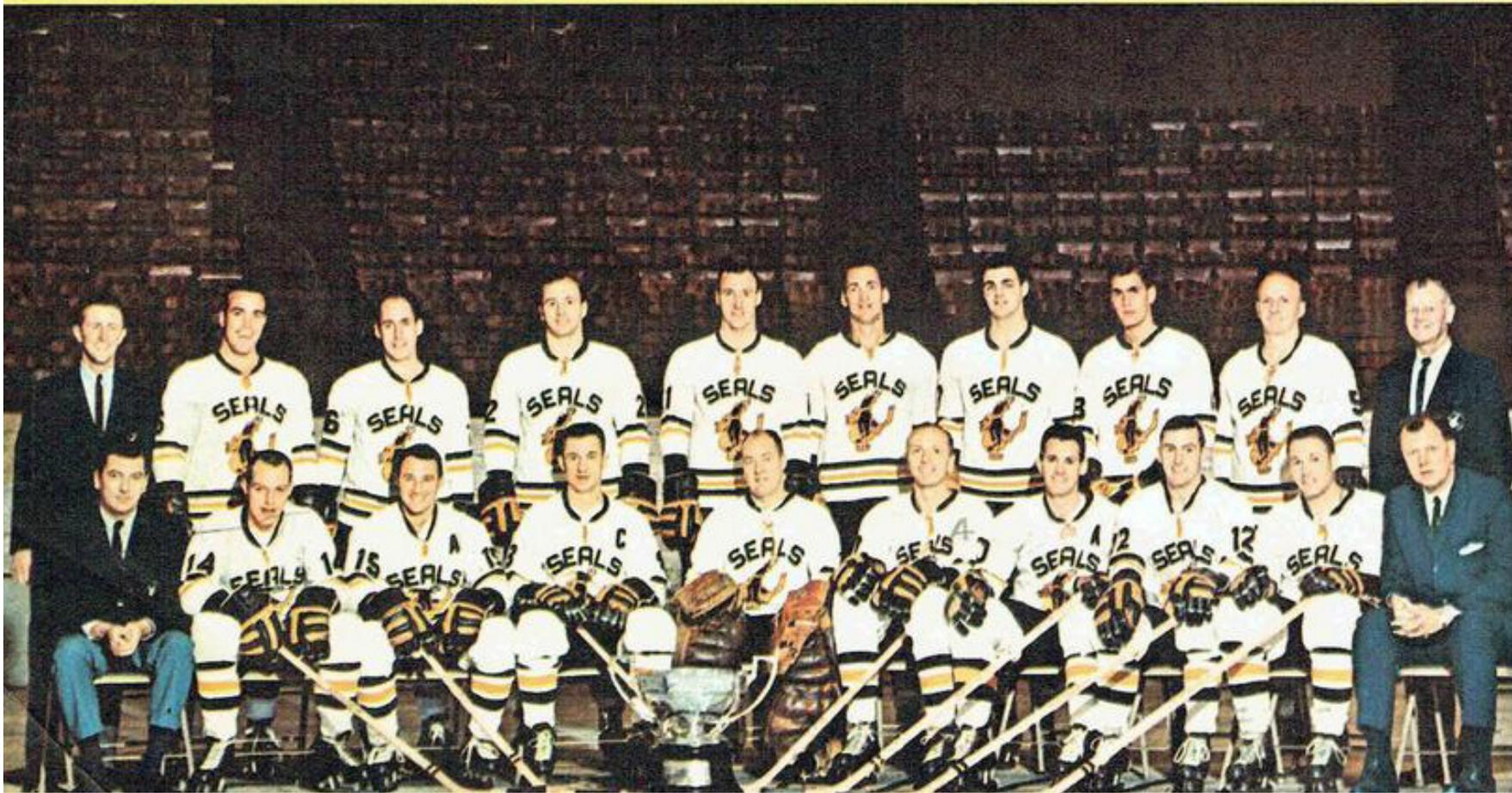
Under Poile, newcomers to the ice lead the show, including Orland Kurtenbach, Ed Panagabko, Nick Mickoski, Charlie Burns, and goaltender Jim McLeod.

SAN FRANCISCO SEALS

WESTERN HOCKEY LEAGUE CHAMPIONS 1963-64

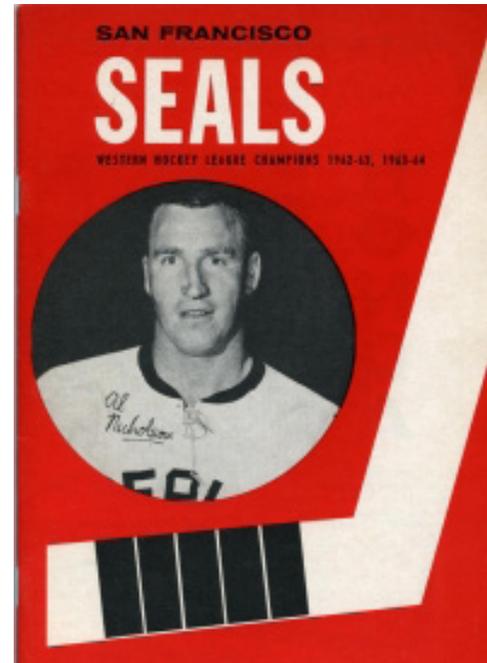
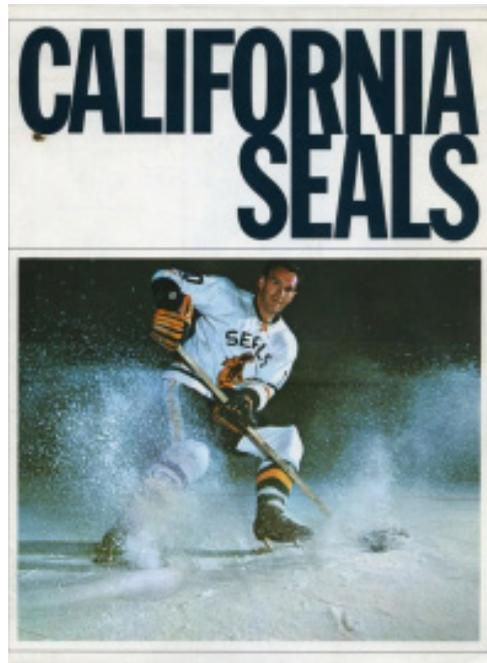
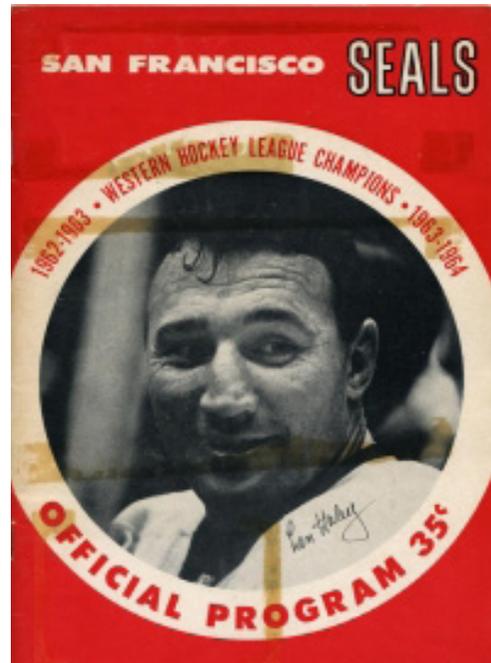
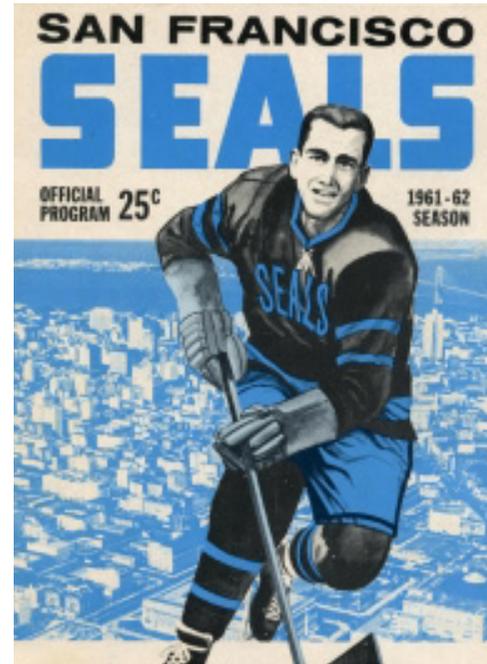
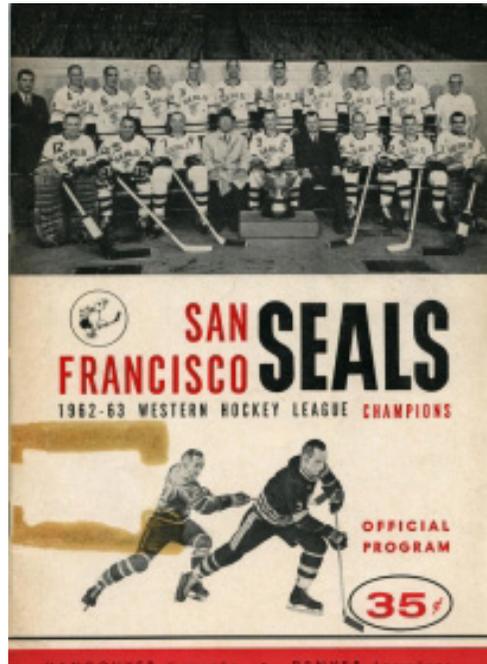
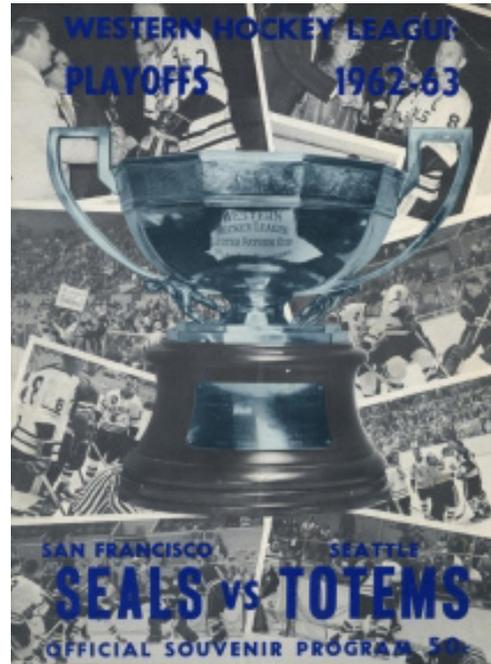
STANDING, left to right: Kurt Rayer (Assistant Trainer), Jean Marc Picard, Ray Cyr, Larry McNabb, Al Nicholson, Maurice Mantha, Paul Jackson, Larry Lund, Gerry Odrowski, Bill Gray (Trainer).

SEATED, left to right: Max Hall (Administrative Assistant), Gerry Brisson, Len Haley, Ed Panagabko (Captain), Bob Perreault, Nick Mickoski (Playing Coach), Charlie Burns, Wayne Connelly, Tom Thurlby, Bud Poile (General Manager).



“...We had a lot of big guys on that team, and I think we just dominated at home. Teams coming in there were kind of shocked, I guess, at the amount of people that [were] there the first time they played there, and we always played well at home.”

- Tom Thurlby (San Francisco Seal's Defenceman)



This team, later nicknamed “Adversity on Ice”, would take second place during their 1962-63 season. As their on ice skills became known, rivalries began to form. The Seals found a fierce competition with the Portland Buckaroos, another rising WHL playoff contender. With the intensity of the two teams, their contests became some of the most attended by fans, attracting 8,000 or more attendees. Their sibling team of California, the Blades, were also considered rivals, with fans taking great pride in hating defenceman “Big Burly Bill Burega” of Los Angeles.

During the 1962-63 season, the Seals played by Poile’s strategy of leading in penalty minutes. This proved to be beneficial; the Seals finished the season at 44-25-1 in the regular season, going on post season to eliminate Los Angeles over three games in round one and playing the Buckaroos over seven semifinal contests. Finally, at an away game in Portland, the Seals beat the Buckaroos 3-1 and headed to the Lester Patrick Cup finals.

At the final contest, the Seals were faced with the Seattle Totems, the same team they launched their on ice careers against. All seven of the contests were held within Cow Palace (due to scheduling conflicts in Seattle), with the Seals trailing 3-1. However, San Francisco turned it around in the second half, winning the last three games (one in regulation, two in overtime), with

[PREVIOUS PAGE] San Francisco Seals team photo 1963-64.

[LEFT, TOP LEFT TO BOTTOM RIGHT] Collection of Seals Game programs (1961-62, 1962-63, 1963-64, 1964-65, 1965-66, 1966-67).

the winning goal being shot by Kurtenbach for a 4-3 victory. With these victories came both the Seal’s and San Francisco’s first professional hockey championship.

Going into the 1963-64 season saw some struggles for hockey on the West coast. The WHL was facing struggles by losing two of its contracted teams, the Edmonton Flyers and Calgary Stampeders to a leave of absence. This season saw a less than stellar finish for the Seals, finishing in fourth behind the Denver Invaders (a new franchise from relocated Spokane). However, the team saw a turn around during the post season with the help of all star players Al Nicholson and Bob Perreault. The forward and goaltender duo propelled the Seals back into the competition, winning three of their first-round playoff contests against Portland. From there, the energy didn’t slow and carried them all the way to defeating the Blades and winning the Lester Patrick Cup for a second time (the first WHL team to earn back to back titles).

Despite the incredible success at this time, owner Coleman Hall decided to sell the Seals to real estate developer and heir to the Fairmont Hotel chain Mel Swig in 1965. The hockey market was considerably volatile at this time, with the announcement of the NHL planning to expand its reach across six new team. This announcement from the NHL came from the pressure of a new television contract to reach greater markets and as a defensive measure against the WHL and American Hockey League (AHL) (rumors began circulating of a merger happening). These two leagues matched up their playing schedules for the 1965-66 season as an

effort to oppose this, but lost this battle with the NHL.

Following the expansion announcement, the NHL planted roots in six new locations: Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Minneapolis-St. Paul, St. Louis, and San Francisco-Oakland. Behind the scenes moves were taking place, including millionaire Barry Van Gerbig buying the team from Mel Swig's group, done to not have to build a brand new hockey club. Gerbig's purchase led him to becoming the new owner and potential governor for the team (a role that would lead the team into officially being part of the NHL). Coach Poile had left the team during the 1966-67 season, placing the position on Charlie Burns, who acted as both the Seals coach and a player.



This season for the Seals was the only one where the team was heading toward missing playoffs, having gone every year since their inception. Barely getting in post the regular season, the 1966 playoff run was short, with the Seals losing the last two first-round games against the Victoria Maple Leafs 4-3.

With the Seals out, the NHL transition process began in earnest. Gerbig moved the team from Cow Palace in Daly City to the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum, located across the bay in Oakland. This move would prove to be an early sign of the shaky foundation the Seals had entering the NHL; much of the teams existing fan base was unhappy with the move, unwilling to travel across the bay to see the team play. As well, the start of the Seals identity crisis began here, starting with the name change to the California Seals.

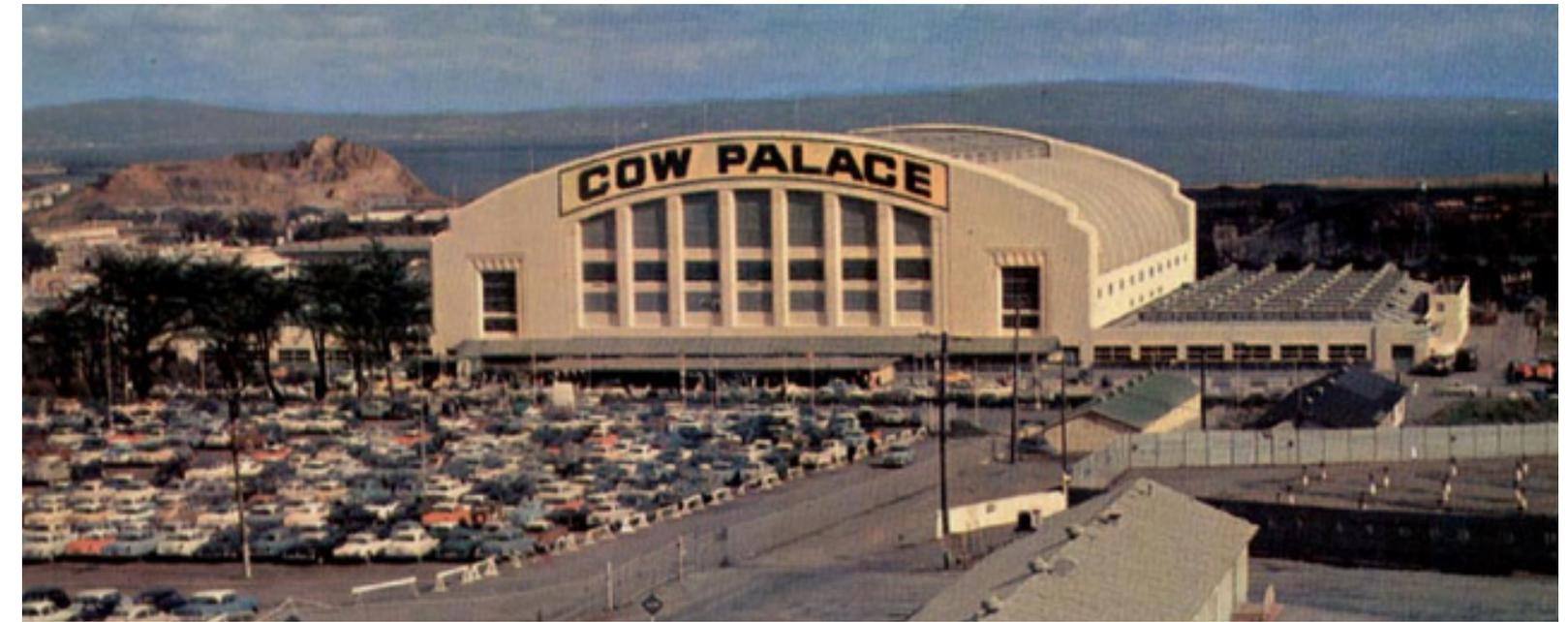
Coaching also experienced a transition here, with Rudy Pilous (former Chicago Black Hawks coach) splitting the role with Burns. This period of coaching gave way to the second highest winning record in the Seals history, coming to a final tally of 32-30-10. The end of the Seals six year tenure in the WHL was marked with the elimination from the first-round of playoffs against the Seattle Totems, with the last score of the team being a 4-1 loss on April 15, 1967.

[LEFT] 1961-62 Championship game against the Los Angeles Blades.



[UPPER RIGHT]
1961-62 to 1962-63
San Francisco Seals #2
championship jersey.

[LOWER RIGHT] Cow
Palace in Daly City.



*Goaltender Gilles Meloche and
left-winger Len Frig.*



Chapter 2

California Golden Seals

Not So Golden

“I remember seeing the white skates and thinking, ‘Boy, if I play in the NHL, I hope I don’t have to wear white skates,’”

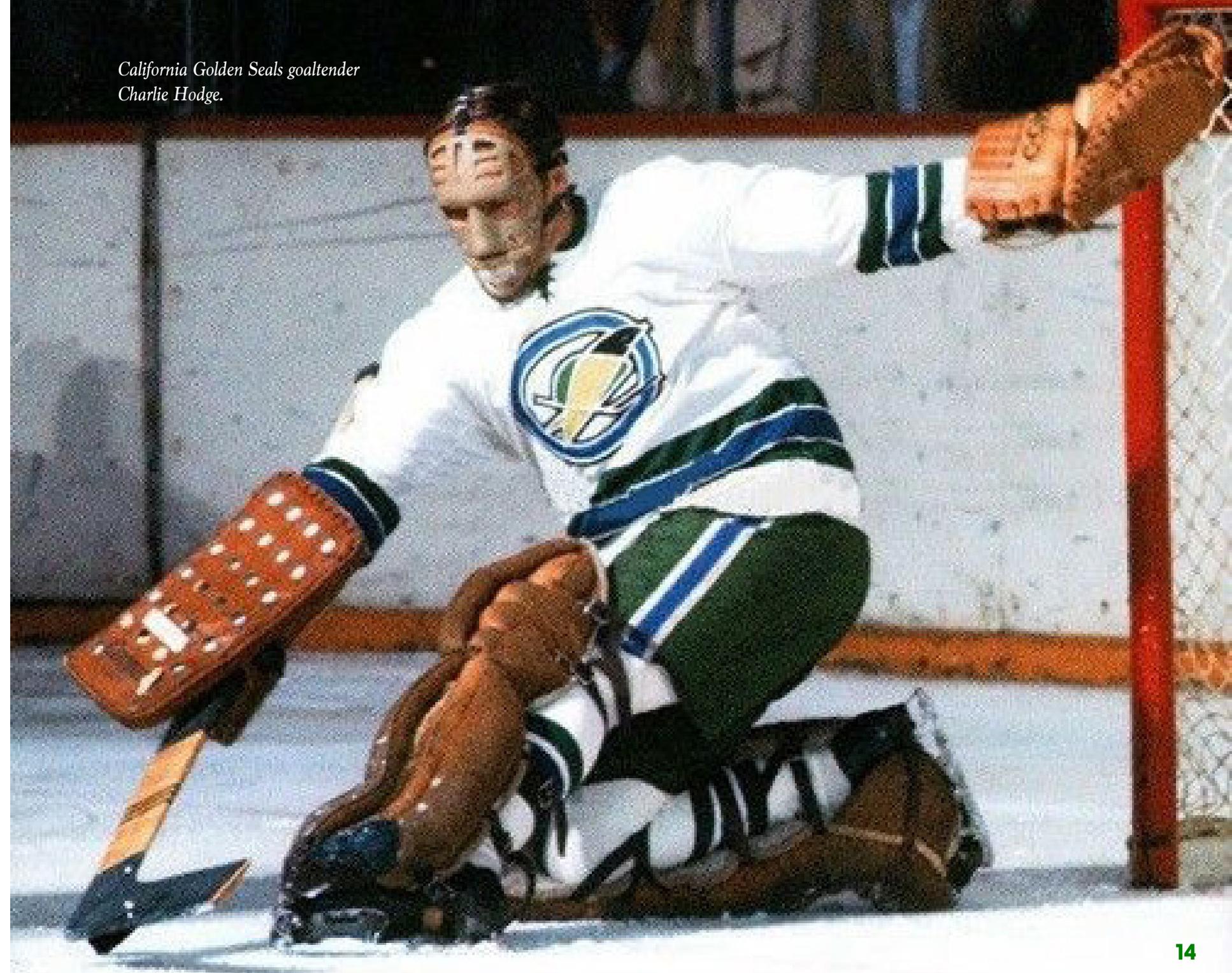
- Wayne Gretzky

Entering into the NHL proved to be a rather rocky start for this new addition. Following Barry Van Gerbig’s purchase of the Seals club and moving them to Oakland, he was intending on the team to have a new arena to play in. These plans fell through however, causing the Seals to use the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum Arena as their new home. With the move came the first name change for the Seals: the California Seals. The start of the renaming efforts came from the hope the move wouldn’t drive away fans from San Francisco and to push back about criticism that Oakland wasn’t a major enough city for an NHL team.

1967 marked the start of the Seals in the NHL and problems arose early on with the players. Being part

of the six team expansion draft of 1967 came with a hearty list of rules for the newcomers, including a policy that the Original Six could protect key players. The Original Six (the Chicago Black Hawks, Boston Bruins, Detroit Red Wings, Montreal Canadiens, New York Rangers, and Toronto Maple Leafs) had a one side advantage due to this; while they kept key players, these new teams would only be able to claim duds, unknown minor league players, and veterans past peak playing potential. Faced with this disadvantage, Gerbig decided to retain some of the existing team, including Charlie Burns, George Swarbrick, Gerry Odrowski, Tom Thurlby, and Ron Harris. Besides trying to have a well established base of players, Gerbig pushed to retain key names to keep familiarity and

*California Golden Seals goaltender
Charlie Hodge.*





[ABOVE LEFT] Seals captain Ted Hampson.



[ABOVE RIGHT] Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum Arena.

[FACING PAGE] Team photo of the Oakland Seals during the 1968-69 season.

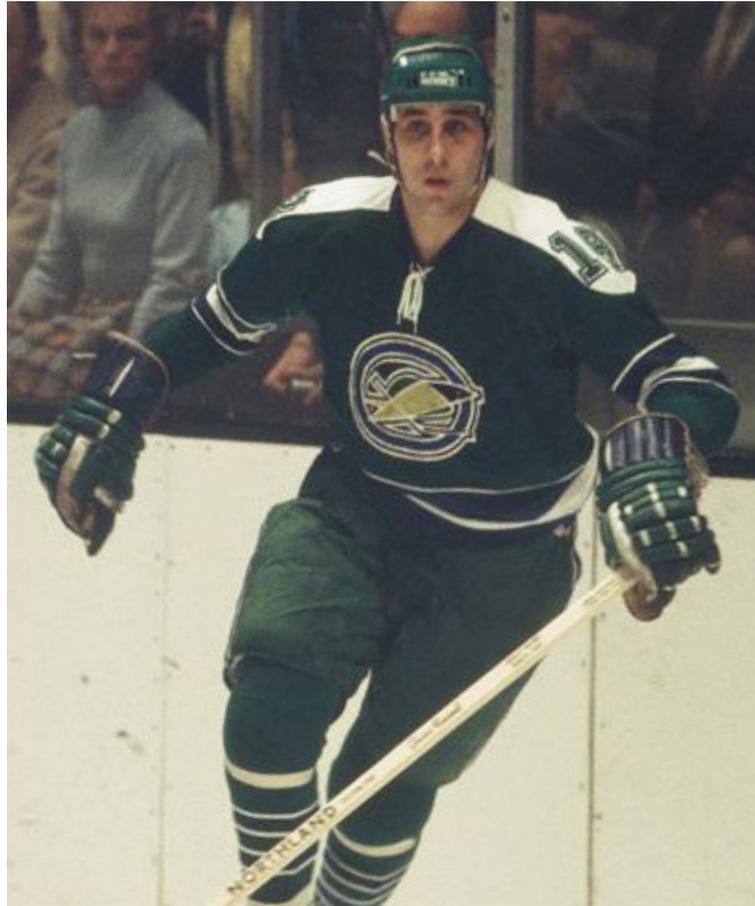
interest high with the original San Francisco fan base.

Despite best efforts, the Bay Area quickly proved to be a lackluster market for ice hockey. Attendance was low consistently, as fans refused to cross over the bridge into Oakland and the Seals new home had no existing roots in hockey. As well, the name change in the first



NHL season did nothing to help; the Seals ended off the 1967-68 season with the lowest attendance out of all of the teams. Hope seemingly blossomed with a new television contract with CBS; the network wanted two teams to be in California and, besides the Kings, no other team had the same caliber as the Seals in the state.

The beginning of the official season was a poor one; even with established players on the roster and new additions holding Stanley Cup titles and Vezina trophy winner Charlie Hode, the team was lackluster. For the first few games, the Seals came out on top, with two wins against Philadelphia and Minnesota but it was



Tony Featherstone playing for the Oakland Seals.

short lived. By the end of the first season, the Seals game had scored a meager 153 times, averaging out to about two goals per game. Seals would finish out their first official NHL season sixth in the Western conference and not reaching the play offs with 15-42-17.

In addition to the poor scoring, the Seals reputation was

not turning out to be a particularly good one. With the firing of Rudy Pilous shortly after the expansion, Bert Olmstead was the new coach for the 1967-68 season. Olmstead was reported to have clashed violently with players, subjecting them to intense practices that did little to help them out on the ice. Using a punishment system, the coach would have players skate many laps when they lost and/or were on a losing streak, pushing them to the point players would be vomiting on the ice. Olmstead detested being a coach and, after leading the Seals to their worst season in franchise history, quit and promoted Gordie Fashoway to his position.

Name change number two would happen on November 6, 1967. Realizing that 'California Seals' was having no impact on game attendance, Gerbig changed the name to the Oakland Seals in hopes of drawing a more local presence. Even still, little impact was made to draw more fans in, to the point Gerbig was heavily considering moving the team to somewhere else. Backing him up, coach and then general manager Bert Olmstead pushed for the team to move to Vancouver and secured a deal with Toronto-based brewery Labatt's to finance the move to Canada. As well, buyers from Buffalo, New York were interested in taking over (Buffalo, like Vancouver, lost their bid in the 1967 expansion).

When word of the potential move was caught on by the NHL, the organization quickly acted to stop the process. After gaining the television contract in California with CBS, the league did not want to risk the deal and rejected both offers. Instead, the Buffalo-based Seymour and

Northrup Knox brothers bought a minority share of the Seals in 1969. Their purchase only lasted a year though, as in 1970 the NHL decided to expand again, this time offering Buffalo a team; the Knox brother's shares were then sold to finance the founding of the Buffalo Sabres.

After being rejected by the NHL, the Seals organization decided to retaliate. Claiming the league was in violation of the Sherman Act (an antitrust law that protects free competition of organizations taking place in commerce and prevents attempts at monopolization). The Seals saw the rejection as a way of illegally regulating the

California Seals versus the Toronto Maple Leafs.



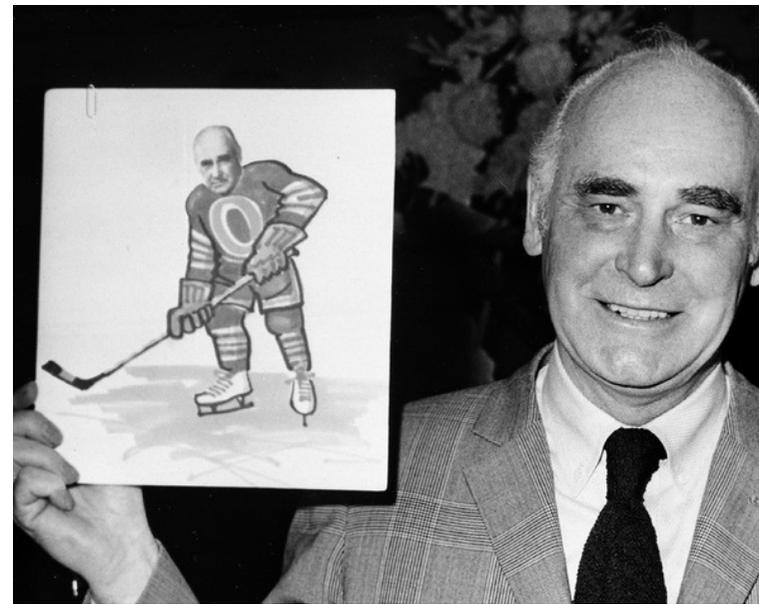
teams and an attempt to keep the club in the Bay Area to prevent rival organizations from forming. This legal attack didn't do much to help the Seals. Courts ruled that the NHL functioned as a single entity, with its teams not falling in the jurisdiction of an independent entity, therefore not causing a restriction on commerce.

Frantic to make an impact with the Seals, the club organization made drastic moves to enhance ticket sales. This included revamping the roster of the team; following the first season only seven players remained, with the rest of the bench filled with new names. These new faces made the team slightly more successful on ice and with fans. The new roster would account of the only two seasons the Seals ever made it to the playoffs.

The new build of the Seals included trading away veterans of the team to bring in new names such as Ted Hampson, Bill Hicke, Norm Gerguson, and goaltender Gary Smith. As well, new general manager Frank Selke Jr hired AHL coach Fred Glover to lead the Seals but to lackluster results. Players felt frustration at his coaching style and didn't gain much from it, as he pushed for nothing but scrimmages. Soon enough the Seals players realized Glover took the role to show he was still worthy of playing in the NHL, so they would let him score (which would result in practice ending right afterwards). Glover brought the Seals to the 1969-70 playoffs and they made their way through seven contests with the Los Angeles Kings before being eliminated. This season would mark the very subtle high note of the franchise's history and the decline began.

At his wits end, Gerbig decided to sell the team and part ways. He sold the club to Trans-National Communications in 1969-70, but soon after the company folded and returned the Seals back (who promptly went back up for sale). The next owners of the team would be one of the most infamous figures of the California Golden Seals history: Charles O. Finley.

Better known as Charlie Finley or Charlie O, the new owner of the Seals was well known in the Oakland area by owning the Major League Baseball (MLB) team the Oakland Athletics (also known as the Oakland A's). He had come to the Bay Area in 1968 after buying the baseball franchise in Kansas City, Missouri and relocating them to Oakland. Finley was in a bidding competition for the



Charlie Finley holding up a photo of himself as a hockey player.



team with Jerry Seltzer, a local roller derby owner, and came out top. Seltzer had come up with a better and more detailed plan for a Seals revival, but was pushed back against the NHL who ultimately voted for Finley's bid.

This purchase is one that, to this day, most people don't understand. Finley made it very clear he had no understanding or any interest in ice hockey, even going as far to announce "I wanna be the first to tell you I know nothing about the game of hockey," to an audience. Rarely did Finley take the time to visit the Seals in their arena and paid even less attention to how they were being coached.

Finley's beginning with the Seals was cause for major alarm. Halfway through the 1970-71 season, general manager Bill Torrey quit due to clashes with Finley. The next round of renaming began, with "Bay Area Seals" but the name was quickly dropped after two games. On October 16, 1970, the team name was changed to "California Golden Seals". The changes did not stop here, however, as Finley's wild marketing tactics came into full swing.

To match the new name, new hockey sweaters were made for the players. This included a palette change; originally kelly green, royal blue, and white, the California Golden Seals would wear jerseys of kelly green, California gold and snow white. The palette swap was taken from Finley's Oakland A's, as he wanted his two sporting teams to have matching, garish colors. Kelly green became a main feature of the Seals on and off ice looks.

California Golden Seals new home jersey.



[STARTING FROM TOP LEFT TO BOTTOM RIGHT]

Oakland Seals 1967-1968, 1969-70 jerseys [green for home, white for away].

California Seals 1968-70 jerseys [green for home, white for away].

California Golden Seals 1970-73 jerseys [yellow for home, green for away].

California Golden Seals 1973-74 jerseys [yellow for home, green for away].

California Golden Seals 1974-76 jerseys [white for home, teal for away].
Pacific teal was introduced following the purchase of the team by the NHL.



[FROM LEFT TO RIGHT]

Oakland Seals logo used 1967-1968, 1969-70.

California Seals logo used 1967-68.

Unused California Golden Seals logo used 1970-71, 1973-74.

California Golden Seals type logo used 1970-71-76 (after the purchase by the NHL, the green in the wordmark was switched to Pacific teal).

As part of the club rules, Finley would force the players to wear green blazers and travel with matching green suit cases (now appraised to be worth around \$1,000). Seals players were not fond of the road uniform, with Ernie Hicke saying the players ‘felt like a traveling circus’.

In addition to all of the name changes, the Seals logo underwent many variations in a short amount of time. While the San Francisco Seals maintained a consistent logo during their existence, the Seals would go through four total logos. Starting out was the Oakland Seals logo: bold and heavy, a yellow seal with green flippers and a black head holding a hockey stick was overlaid on

a royal blue O. Both elements were outlined in white and then had a second outline in black, resulting in a very complex and visually heavy design. The change to California Seals brought in the next logo; using similar visual language, the seal remained almost the exact same (albeit slightly happier looking now) and was jumping from the negative space of a royal blue C. The line weight was balanced out much better here, making for more visual clarity on both the letter and seal. The final pictorial logo was during Finley’s time; using his Oakland A’s colors, the palette was reduced down to kelly green, California gold, white, and black. Very few outlines remained, with a golden C having it’s negative

space filled with green; the now yellow and green seal was leaping from the green holding a white hockey stick. Fourth, and finally, the seal itself was completely lost in favor of a typographic word mark spelling ‘Seals’ in a heavy sans serif, green and outlined in gold.

Not all of the sweater changes were negative; the California Golden Seals were the first hockey club to put the players last names on the back of jerseys. Initially there was push back toward this, so much so that the Seals had to carry a second set of jerseys in case the opposing team owners got too fussy about it. Despite it, Finley’s choice was one that would

later take effect across all modern hockey teams.

The palette, jersey, and logo switches would not be the most famous part of Finley’s visual rebrand of the Seals, however. To keep with the theme of modeling the Seals after the Oakland A’s, Finley wanted the players skates to match their cleats in the color of “polar bear white”. Immediately, players pushed back against the idea. In Canada, white skates were connected to figure skaters and knew that coming out against an opposing team in them would lead to ridicule. Intent on having his way, Finley pushed and got it, having all the players wear white skates during the 1971-72 season.



California Golden Seals versus the Montreal Canadiens.

“...Finley has a one-page memo about what he wants to do. And so at the meeting the NHL decides to go with Finley because the feeling was that roller derby was a low rent sport at the same level as professional wrestling. If they had gone with Seltzer it might have been a whole different story for hockey in the Bay Area.”

- Mark Greczmiel (Seals documentary film maker)



The infamous white skates – complete with layers of white paint.

White skates, besides being an easy target for chirping, had quite a few disadvantages. The largest being how they appeared on TV; as the Seals were playing during a time of black and white television, the cameras could not pick up the details in the broadcasts. This led to the players looking as if they were skating around on stumps on the ice. In addition to this, Finley was fixated on keeping the skates as white as possible. Paint would become scuffed from tape, pucks, and hitting the boards, so he required every player



California Golden Seals kelly green travel case; use of this was required by Finley for all away games.

to have their skates repainted between each period. Layers and layers of paint accumulated over time, putting almost double the initial weight on the players' feet and making it incredibly difficult to skate with.

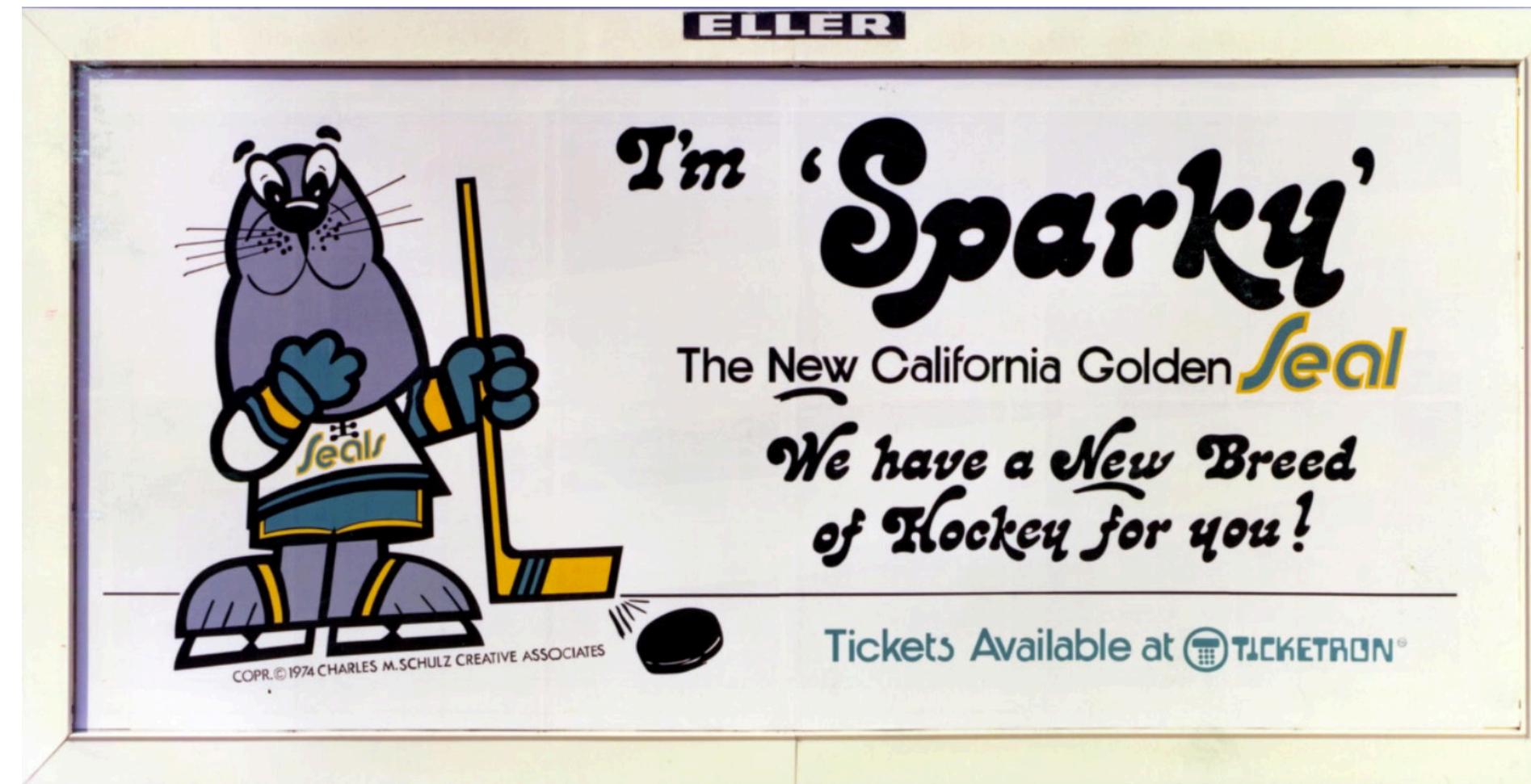
Besides their impracticality and connotations, white skates were a core memory for one Wayne Gretzky. His first NHL game he attended was at Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens with his grandmother, where the Leafs faced off against the Seals. This memory

has left him with a soft spot for the club but he has been quoted about the skates as: "I remember seeing the white skates and thinking, 'Boy, if I play in the NHL, I hope I don't have to wear white skates.'"

For marketing, Finley became well known for his less

Sparky the Seal – a short lived mascot designed by local Santa Rosa resident Charles M. Schulz (the creator of The Peanuts). Schulz was an avid fan of the California Golden Seals.

than ordinary approaches to attracting fans to Seals games. With an extremely small budget of \$5,000 for the entire season, Finley and the Seals organization had to get creative. One of the first efforts he employed was bringing out a live seal to center ice (who promptly fell asleep in front of the entire arena). Another was paying the stick boy's girlfriend to come skating out completely nude, with the word 'seals' painted across her body. He also hosted a barber night, where he invited local hair dressers in the Oakland area to come for free to the game

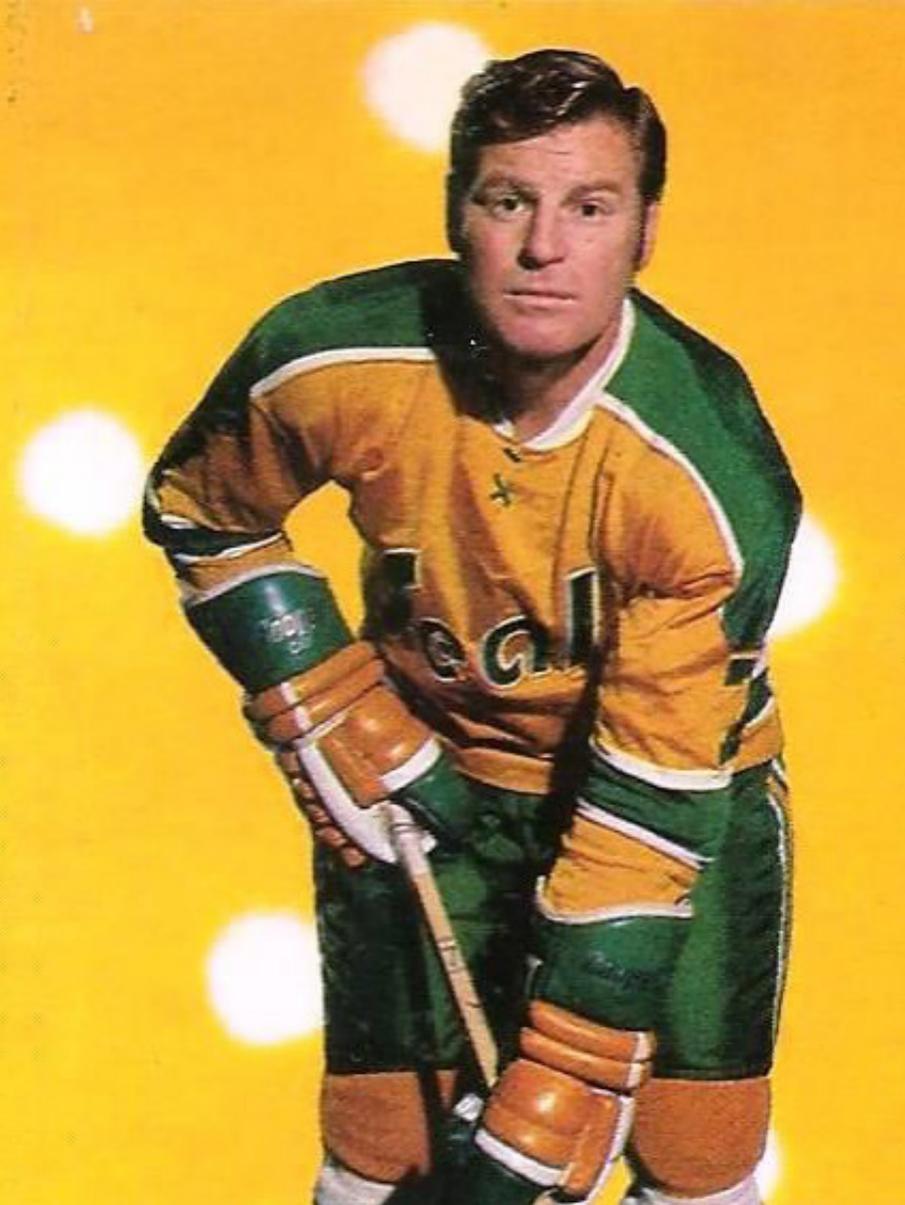


and spread the good word of hockey around (they did not).

One of the more interesting developments from the Seals marketing came in the form of George Henderson. Henderson at the time was a high school teacher in Oakland that decided to take his class to a Seals game as a field trip. Getting so into the spirit, the Seals organization thought his antics were highly amusing and hired him to be a cheerleader during home games. Using instruments such as a drum and tambourine, “Krazy George” would make an effort to rile up the opposing team. His efforts became so successful once that Bruin’s player Terry O’Reilly got up from the bench and assaulted him. Krazy George would be scouted as a professional cheerleader for several other teams and later credited as the creator of “The Wave”, first performing it in 1979 Oakland A’s game.

All of these ostentatious efforts were for naught. Finley’s leadership style was causing intense friction within the club, leading leadership and player distaste towards him. Then Seals captain Ted Hampson said of Finley, “He was a lot of talk, like a used car salesman...He was full of ballyhoo, whatever you call it. And we felt like the used cars.” His intense micromanaging style caused general manager Frank Selke Jr to quit soon after he bought the team and replacement Bill Torrey would be quick to follow. This lead to Fred Glover acting as both a coach and executive vice president at this time.

Team performance was suffering at the expense of all the antics, finishing the 1970-71 season with an



[LEFT] California Golden Seals media guide for the 1972-73 season.

[ABOVE] Center Earl Ingarfield (left) and right-winger Reggie Leach (right).



*California Golden Seals goaltender
Gilles Meloche.*

“I remember thinking it wasn’t a very good team... but maybe for a two or three-year span the best player in hockey was their goaltender, Gilles Meloche...how dominant he was, how many saves he made, how miraculous he was every night.”

- Wayne Gretzky



abysmal 20-53-5. With the Seals at the lowest end of the rankings, they were a shoe in for first round picks in the upcoming draft. Anticipating this, though, was one Sam Pollock. Pollock, the general manager for the Montreal Canadiens, expected the Seals to get first round picks due to their on ice performance and stuck up a deal: by trading defenceman Francois Lacombe to the Habs in 1970 the Habs would get the Seals first round pick. Pollock orchestrated a string of trades to

make the Los Angeles Kings stronger in order to beat the Seals. By the Seals losing, this would make the club have to do good on their deal. This pick would turn out to be Guy Lafleur, a future NHL hall of fame member; to date, this is considered one of the most one-sided trade deals the league has ever seen.

During the 1971-72 season, the Seals appeared to have a decent start, hitting 17-25-10 after 52 games played. They

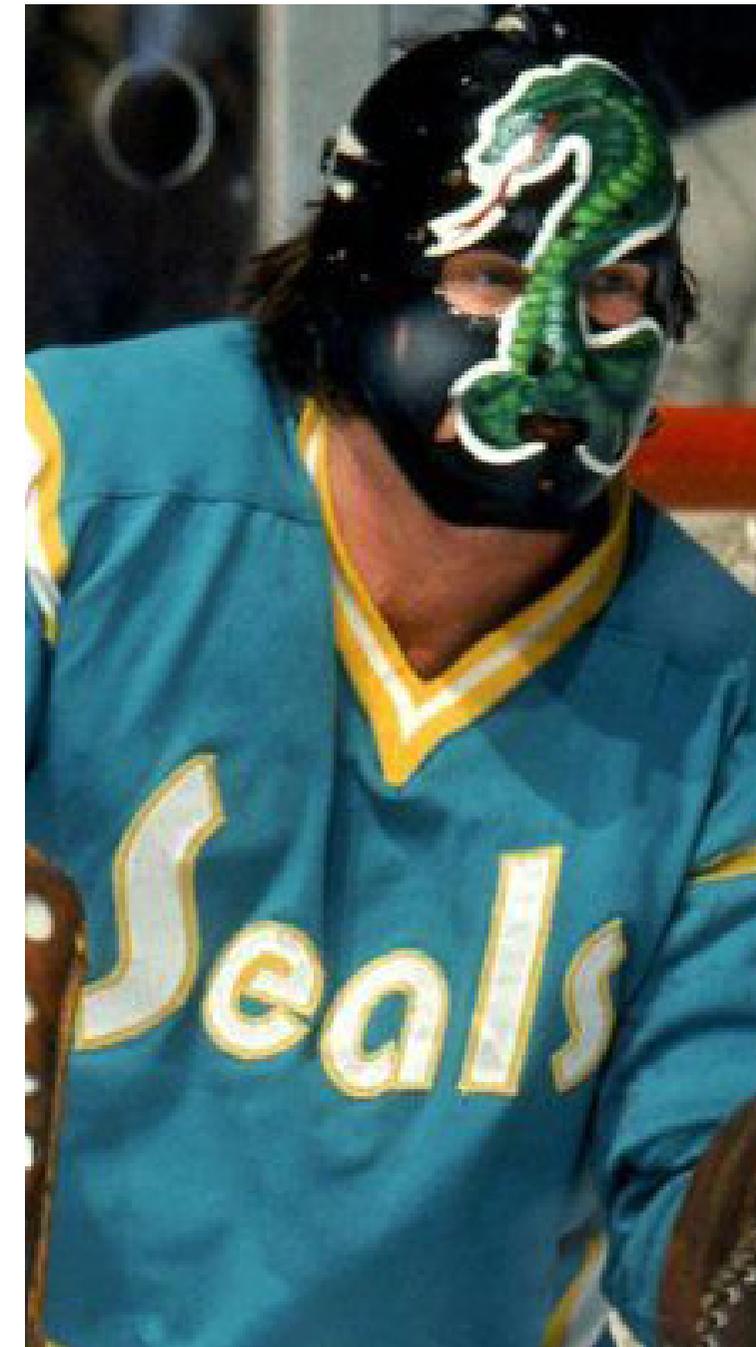


[LEFT] California Golden Seals versus the Los Angeles Kings.

[ABOVE] California Golden Seals versus the St. Louis Blues.

[RIGHT] California Golden Seals goaltender Gary "The Cobra" Simmons. This striking goaltender mask is now in the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto, Canada.

ended up slipping in the ranks soon after, tail-spinning with 4-14-8 in the following games. As well, major players in the NHL's history were rising quickly, including one Bobby Orr, defenceman of the Boston Bruins. Orr would sweep the Seals in their contests, causing the Oakland team to be winless in the last eight games of the season. Following the Bruins sweep, the Seals were out of the playoffs, missing the minimum by six points.



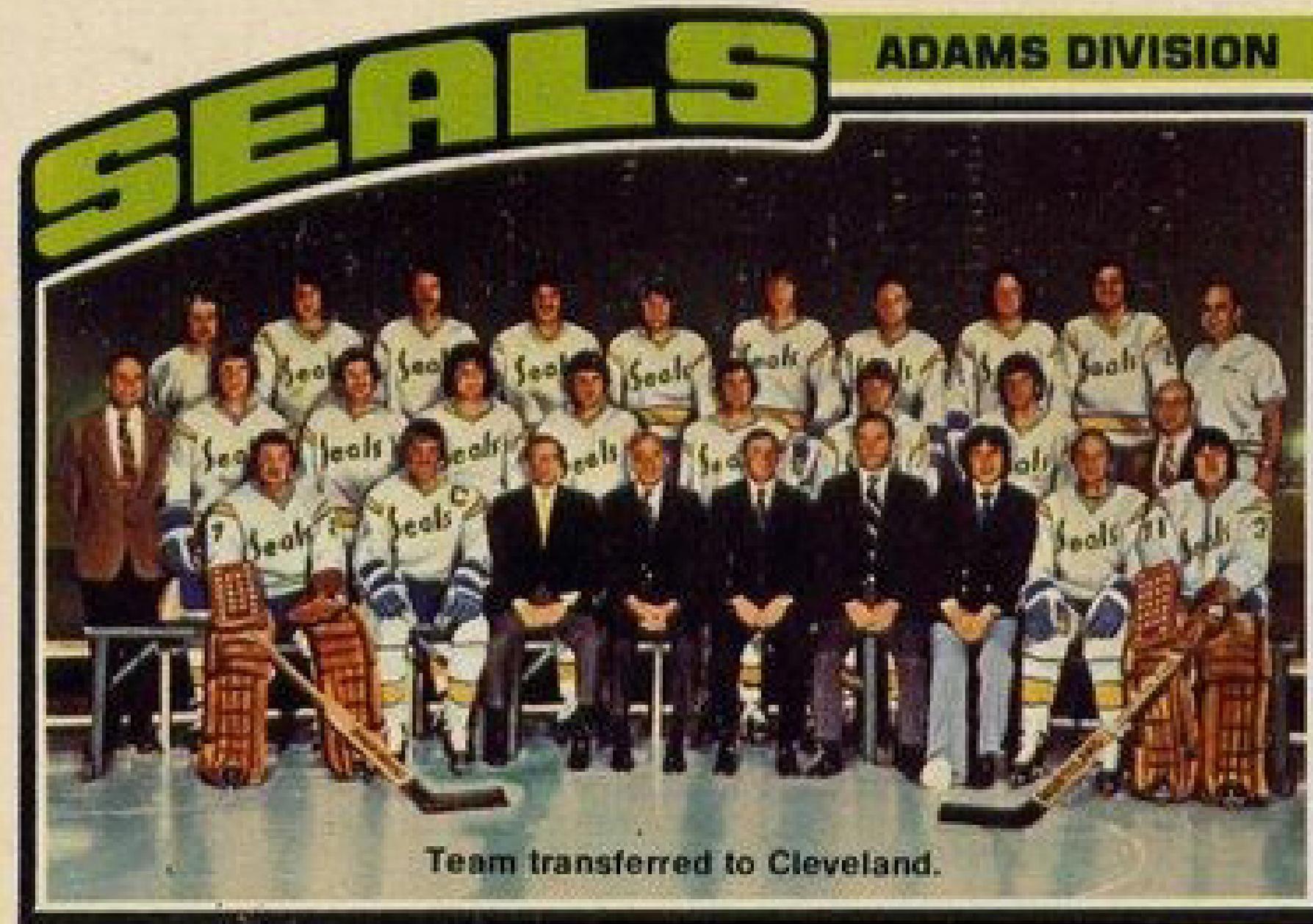
The 1971-72 season saw the rise of a new rival in professional ice hockey; in 1972, the World Hockey Association (WHA) was officially the competitor to the NHL. The WHA snatched up a great deal of the Seals team, cleaning them out of almost all talent the bench had to offer. Finley's stubbornness was a direct cause of this as he refused to match the WHA's contract offers and, notorious for paying the players incredibly low wages, much of the team took off. Only one name of note stayed around, goaltender Gilles Meloche, but it was not enough and the Seals would sink to last place for the remainder of the team's history.

A rebuild of divisions occurred during the 1974-75 season, meaning that three teams per divisions made the playoffs. This shuffled the Seals to the Adams Division (during 1974-93, the teams were broken into four divisions named Adams, Norris, Patrick, and Smythe), a change that only hampered them more. Their new rivals were exceptionally strong and included the Boston Bruins, Buffalo Sabres, and the Toronto Maple Leafs.

This heavily skewed competition lead to a sharp decline in fan interest in the Seals. Attendance had consistently dropped, so much so that Finley cut the price of tickets to half. Finley was incredibly frustrated with the Seals, as their constant failure was in sharp contrast to the Oakland A's, who had recently become the World Series champions. Fed up with the club, Finley began the process of selling the Seals and was met with very little interest. He seemed to have found a potential customer in Indianapolis in 1973, but the proposal was shot down by

the NHL's board of governors. In the end, Finley sold the team back to the NHL for \$6.585 million and let the fate of the California Golden Seals rest in the league's hands.

While in limbo, the hockey club was rumored to be making a move to Denver in 1975 as part of an agreement awarding the city a team as part of a "conditional" franchise expansion. This deal never came through and the Seals were facing liquidation by the end of the 1975-76 season until Mel Swig had a renewed interest and repurchased the Seals on July 28, 1975. His purchase was done with the intention of moving the team to a new area in San Francisco, but with the team missing the playoffs and a recent mayoral election, arena development was stopped. Finally, after all of the push back from the league, the NHL gave in; the Seals were approved to be relocated.



The final team photo of the California Golden Seals following the NHL division restructuring and before the move to Cleveland.

*Cleveland Barons defenceman
Bjorn Johansson.*



Chapter 3
**Cleveland
Barons**

A Lasting Impact

“I owe a lot to the California Golden Seals because they drafted me... They drafted me and I got to come to the NHL to show what I could do as a player...It was a special time for me.”

- Dennis Maruk (Seals forward)

Relocation efforts began in earnest following the 1975-76 season, the final time the California Golden Seals would play in Oakland. Wanting some control over the relocation, minority share owner George Gund III managed to persuade Mel Swig to move the team to Cleveland, Ohio. Cleveland was the home town of Gund but had little ties for Swig, as he had much more equity in San Francisco. A similar sentiment was felt among the players about this potential relocation. Play-by-play announcer Joe Starkey said “[The Seals] went as far as they could...They tried very hard. I think at the last minute they really were desperate to try to keep it. Nobody wanted to go. Swig certainly is a three-generation San Franciscan. His family name in the city is magic...” As well, Seals Booster Club PR

leader Len Shapiro commented, “The move to Cleveland was very tough to swallow...I was totally depressed. I finally land my dream job and now it was gone.” Despite this push back, Gund eventually won out and the Seals last day as a team would be July 14th, 1976.

The rebranding of the Seals came in the form of the Cleveland Barons, a name chosen to honor the renowned AHL team that had played in the city from 1929-1973. Despite the original Barons success, having won nine Calder Cups, their owner Nick Mileti moved the team to Florida so his WHA team (the Cleveland Crusaders) could take over. Besides Gund’s personal connections, Cleveland was not new to potentially having an NHL team. During a particularly bleak

Cleveland Barons versus the Montreal Canadiens.



period of the Canadiens history in the 1930s the team had considered relocation to here as well had been turned down for an expansion team three separate times.

Approval for the move took place on July 14th, 1976 by the NHL but all contract details would not be finalized till the end of August, edging on the start of the 1976-77 season. This gave the Barons very little time to promote themselves, something that would permanently damage the team in their short existence.

Arriving to Cleveland to start the season, the Barons would make their new home out of the Richfield Coliseum in Richfield, Ohio. Richfield Coliseum was built for the Cleveland Crusaders and the National Basketball Association (NBA)'s Cleveland Cavaliers, with a whopping 18,544 seats. Despite the large capacity, the location left a lot to be desired; it was 26 miles outside of Cleveland and only able to be reached via a two lane highway. Attendance was low for the Crusaders due to this and would ultimately lead to their folding after only four seasons.

Attendance proved to be just as much of a struggle for the Barons in Richfield Coliseum and even worse than the attendance in Oakland. Never filling the arena once in its two year stay, the opening season game on October 7, 1976 had only a mere 8,900 fans in the stands. Over the course of 1976-77, the Barons would only draw around 10,000 fans to seven out of forty home games. With worse attendance than before and a bad leasing contract, Swig became worried the



Gilles Meloche as goaltender for the Cleveland Barons.

team may not even make it to the end of the season. Swig reached out to the NHL for help but was met with no assistance, as the board did not believe it was as bad as he made it seem. At the time, the NHL had not had a team fold since the Montreal Maroons in 1947 and no team fold mid season since the Montreal Wanderers in 1917-18. With no help, it all came crashing down in Cleveland; team workers went unpaid for two months and the team missed two payrolls. Finally acknowledging



Center Dennis Maruk playing the New York Islanders in 1976.

the issues, the NHL debated on what to do; they considered a dispersal draft or just folding the team.

Fed up with the treatment by the management and the league, Barons players began to retaliate. They threatened a strike by not playing against the Colorado Rockies and were looking into other teams to take contracts with. In order to save face from a strike and team folding, the National Hockey League Players Association (NHLPA, a union meant to protect players in the league) came in with a \$1.3 million loan to help the Barons finish out the season. Money did little to help their

actual ice ability and the Barons would finish out this tumultuous season in last place in the Adam division.

Swig decided to move on from the Barons and sold his last holdings in the club to Gund and his brother Gordon. The Gund's would pour a great deal of money into the club during the 1977-78 season to moderate success, with impressive victories over then Stanley Cup champions the Montreal Canadiens. Player trades were made by general manager Harry Howell to toughen up the team, bringing in players that would take down the Toronto Maple Leafs, New York Islanders, and



Gilles Meloche playing for the North Stars following the merger.

Buffalo Sabres. This winning streak would come to an end during a contest with the Philadelphia Flyers that resulted in a tie, tail-spinning the team into a 1-13-8 streak that disqualified them from playoffs.

A fast decline came from the disqualification; the Gunds had tried to purchase the Richland Coliseum but failed. The Barons were such a minor team in the sports market of Cleveland and the Gunds saw that there was nothing the team could do to become more relevant. Eventually, the brothers would put the team up for sale, taking bids from Kenneth Schnitzer (who owned the WHA Houston Aeros), but the plan fell through.

Across the United States, a team named the Minnesota North Stars were facing a similar set of financial struggles. Seeing the issues plague both teams, the NHL approved the decision to merge the two teams on June 14, 1978. With this the Barons were no more, as they took on the North Stars' name, colors, and history under the ownership of the Gund brothers. Unfortunately, the North Stars would never really move past their financial problems and would be sold to Howard Baldwin (owner of the Hartford Whalers) and be relocated as the current Dallas Stars in 1993.

Hockey was not gone from the Bay Area for too long, however. The Gunds wanted to return the sport to California and, in 1991, were granted an expansion team in San Jose. This would develop into the San Jose Sharks, a team, while not directly tied to the California Golden Seals, would honor the history of

the team through their main Pacific teal brand color.

Despite a messy history and lackluster performance on ice, the California Golden Seals have remained a team with a cult following. Author Brad Kurtzberg would publish the first comprehensive book on the Seals in 2006, titled *Shorthanded: The Untold Story of the Seals: Hockey's Most Colorful Team*. A website dedicated to the team called GoldenSealsHockey.com was founded in 2016 to act as an archive and news source for everything relating to the Seals, from history to players to memorabilia. As well, filmmaker Mark Greczmiel took on a personal project to document the team in his film *The California Gold Seals Story*, a documentary funded through Kickstarter and released on iTunes in 2017. Another book was written on the team with the help of GoldenSealsHockey.com titled *The California Golden Seals: A Tale of White Skates, Red Ink, and One of the NHL's Most Outlandish Teams*, which offered a comprehensive history of the team from the WHL to becoming the Cleveland Barons.

San Jose has payed multiple tributes to the California Golden Seals as well. In 2017, the Sharks hosted a 50th anniversary tribute night during a home game against the Detroit Red Wings. Seals alumni Bert Marshall, Dennis Maruk, Gilles Meloche, Norm Ferguson, Ernie Hicke, Gary Simmons and even play-by-play announcers Tim Ryan and Joe Starkey were set to attend. To the team members surprise, there was a massive turnout in support for the Seals.

Gary Simmons said Dennis Maruk, "I can't believe

they remembered us,” as people lined up to meet the players. Tables full of memorabilia including pennants, sticks, photos, and jerseys were on display in the SAP Center, allowing fans old and new to see part of the Bay Area’s hockey history. Lines were massive to see the Seals, with fans wrapping around the concourse of the SAP Center patiently to get to see the players.

During the opening face off of this game, all Seals players came down to the ice wearing Sharks jerseys and were introduced before the crowd of 16,856. In the stands, fans wore jerseys and shirts of the Oakland Seals logo and rose to give the players a standing ovation. Asked about the event, Bert Marshall said “That was wonderful...It’s been so long. You wondered if people still remembered us.”

And remember they do; in 2022, as part of Adidas’ Reverse Retro 2.0 jersey collection, the Seals appeared once again before modern hockey fans. Taking the jersey designs post the NHL’s purchase of the team, the San Jose Sharks stepped on the ice wearing Pacific teal, California gold, and snow white with a logo saying ‘Sharks’ in the same typeface as the Seals logo.

While the Seals history was one wrought with issues and struggles, their fans have never stopped believing in them. No matter what had happened to the club, the Bay Area will always remember the California Golden Seals as their hockey team and keeps their memory alive to this day.



[ABOVE] Erik Karlsson of the San Jose Sharks wearing Seals inspired Reverse Retro 2.0 jersey.



[TOP RIGHT] Seals display table at SAP Center in honor of the Seals 50th anniversary.



[BOTTOM RIGHT] Fans lining up to meet the present Seals alumni at the SAP Center.



Seals alumni being introduced to the crowd of the SAP Center before the ceremonial puck drop.

“A lot of [Seals] players, they talked about how close they became. Here they were in Oakland, they weren’t big celebrities, but they just had a lot of fun.. They lost a lot of games, but they had a lot of fun.”

- Mark Greczmiel (Seals documentary film maker)

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Hockey's Most Colorful Team

The California Golden Seals are still known as one of the most outrageous teams in all of the NHL's history. From their early roots in the Western Hockey League, *Seals: A Visual History* looks at this colorful team from start to finish. With Cow Palace to white skates to a relocation journey across four different states, this book is the visual companion to the wild story of the California Golden Seals.

