

Barons' beards counter hockey's 'clean cut' image

RICHFIELD (AP) — It's been a hairy season for the Cleveland Barons, but that isn't keeping the players on the National Hockey League club from making it even hairier.

So far, 10 Barons have begun growing beards and a couple more are thinking about joining the movement.

The whole thing began when the Barons started their current eight-game trip nearly two weeks ago. Several of the players didn't bother to shave for a couple of days and they wondered if coach Jack Evans took offense.

DEFENSEMAN Bob Stewart, the man who did the talking for the Barons during their recent financial crisis, acted as

intermediary and received the coach's permission. Soon the club's clean-cut image disappeared.

The initial group of bearded hockey players included defensemen Len Frig, Mike Christie and Stewart, as well as center Dennis Maruk and winger Rick Hampton.

Next to leave their razors unused were Wayne Merrick, Bob Girard and Ken Kuzyk, members of the same line, as well as rookie defenseman Brent Meeke.

Even Fred Ahern, the right winger who has been on the injured list since early December with a broken arm, has sprouted a beard.

Frig admitted he was the first Baron to take on the new look, but quickly added there was "no significance" to the beards.

"It's a matter of being ourselves," Frig said. "We're playing for personal pride now. Before, we weren't playing that well and were uptight. Now, we're loose."

The Barons are 3-1 since the trip — and beard-growing — began. "And we shouldn't have lost that one," Frig said.

There are some Barons, like goalie Gilles Meloche and winger Al MacAdam, who say they can't grow beards because of bald spots, but even the players who have grown them have some problems.

HAMPTON says his beard itches, "particularly when the dog gets near me."

Another factor for some, such as Greg Smith, Dave Gardner and Ralph Klassen, is youth and light complexion.

Meanwhile, Evans said, "If sportswriters can wear them, why can't the players?"

Asked if he planned to join his players in growing facial hair, Evans said, "No, I don't think so. I grew one this past summer when I was fishing and it came out gray. It didn't go well with my brown hair."

The Barons are idle until tonight, when they meet the Flyers at Philadelphia.