

The Night the Oakland Seals got their “Championship” -- sort of...

By Jim Rodrigues

The bad boy of the NHL, Chicago's Keith Magnuson skated "cross ice" and angrily eyed number 5, Carol Vadnais. “Vad” had slammed Magnuson into the boards earlier in the first period and everything pointed to the fact that Magnuson was holding a grudge about the incident. He was recognized as the heavyweight champ of the NHL but that generally held opinion didn't seem to bother Vadnais much. He was glaring back at Magnuson.

It was the powerful Chicago Blackhawks against the offensively “too young” Oakland Seals. The ‘Hawks had the intricate center Stan Mikita and the rocket firing winger Bobby Hull. The Seals had the ultra-versatile, Carol Vadnais. He was a defenseman from Montreal.

We Oakland Seals' fans needed a reason to show up for the home games of a team of perennial also-rans. Carol Vadnais was that hero. He reminded me of Bobby Orr in the sense that he was an excellent defenseman who also led his team in offense. Add to those skills the fact that Vadnais was the Seals' enforcer and you have the most versatile player in Oakland's brief NHL history.

As Magnuson and Vadnais continued to circle each other, the challenger, Vadnais said something to the champion Magnuson and Magnuson said something to Vadnais. Suddenly the sticks and the gloves dropped to the ice. The two enforcers began to throw blows. After a few seconds of battle, the Oakland Seal sent the Chicago Blackhawk to the ice with a stinging overhand right. Vadnais quickly jumped on top of Magnuson and pounded his head into the ice. When the refs finally pulled “Vad” off “the champ,” Magnuson was doing some major bleeding. Round one to the Seals' Vadnais!

They both looked angry as they sat out their five-minute fighting penalties in the Oakland/Alameda County Arena penalty boxes.

Between periods my college girlfriend and I chatted about the fight and enjoyed the mesmerizing sight of the Zamboni as it seemed to “magically” transform the damaged ice into something new and smooth. The experience brought up the subject of a recent Oakland Seals program cover. It showed Snoopy driving the Zamboni with a big grin on his face.

That led to a discussion about a recent Charles Schulz “Peanuts” cartoon. Schulz was a big Oakland Seals' fan. In the cartoon, Charlie Brown is getting ready to throw a baseball pitch. He glances back toward second base and sees Snoopy swinging a hockey stick in several different directions. Charlie Brown says, “I've got the only shortstop in the Stanley Cup playoffs.”

The Zamboni disappeared behind closed doors and the players returned to the ice for the second period. It had quickly and logically become apparent that our scrappy but outgunned Seals would

lose to a great Chicago team. That sad fact had become nearly irrelevant. All that mattered was the Vadnais-Magnuson feud.

The rematch was inevitable! Magnuson was angry about losing the fight to Vadnais and wanted another shot at him.

It's strange how hockey violence works. Sometimes when a player gets beat-up in a fight, the pain and humiliation makes him more cautious. He becomes less eager to fight. This was not the case with Magnuson. Even from a hundred feet away, we could see the fire blazing in the Blackhawk enforcer's eyes.

The fight broke out because it had to. This time, all the screamed "kill him" in the world couldn't save the Oakland Seal hero from "the baddest boy in the league." It was Carol Vadnais' turn to watch his blood drip onto the west Oakland ice.

It was one fight victory each as we reached the third and final period. The next fight would be for the championship. The murmur throughout the crowd was about that upcoming rematch. Somehow everyone knew it was coming. It would be one more chance for someone to bleed. One more chance for Oakland to win a hockey title...sort of

As a kid I enjoyed an old Walt Disney "Goofy" cartoon. It was a brilliant piece of work, with Goofy doing battle with an enemy hockey player. The two just plain "out and out" didn't like each other. They fought in each period in an outrageously funny piece of animation. Part of me wondered if cartoon history could possibly become human reality.

My question was quickly answered. With the game already all but decided in Chicago's favor, Vadnais and Magnuson quickly went after each other. Punches were crashing into faces and the crowd was screaming for "Vad" to kill the Blackhawk bad boy. A quick and hard right uppercut got through to Magnuson's jaw. He staggered to the ice. Once again Vadnais jumped on him and pounded his fists into his opponent's face. The refs finally jumped in and pulled the bloody combatants apart.

The crowd roared with glee as both men were escorted from the ice. The Oakland Seals had won their "title." Carol Vadnais was the NHL Heavyweight Champion.