

## The Wrecking Crew

by Steve Currier

As the Seals opened their training camp in September 1974, they were still licking their wounds and trying to put behind them the most disastrous season in franchise history. Charlie Finley was gone, and thankfully, so were the white skates. Garry Young, the Seals general manager during the 1971-72 season, was rehired by the NHL when the league took over the Seals, and he started rebuilding the franchise by shoring up the defense, acquiring players such as Mike Christie, Len Frig, and Jim Neilson, and drafting hot shot Rick Hampton. For the first time since Young had been general manager, the Seals seemed to have a plan for the future, but that plan had to be approved by the league since it was now the Seals' owner. Young was named the Seals' Director of Hockey Operations, so technically he was making the roster decisions, but the league wanted him to keep costs low. Hence, the reason why higher priced talent like Ivan Boldirev, Reggie Leach, and Walt McKechnie were shipped out of town. While the Seals were moving in the right direction for the first time in years, the franchise, was for all intents and purposes, an orphan. When the NHL bought the Seals from Finley in February 1974, the league's seventeen other franchises became part owners of the Seals. If the Seals lost too much money, it was just a matter of time before the league moved or contracted them, not like this threat had ever stopped the league's Bay Area entry before.

Needless to say, there were going to be some holes to fill on the forward lines, but Young would not remain in Oakland long enough to see who would occupy these spots. Young left the Seals during the summer and later accepted a coaching job with the St. Louis soon after. To fill the void, Bill McCreary was named the Seals new Director of Hockey Operations. The idealistic, popular, and strategic Marshall Johnston had retired a few months prior, and had taken over behind the bench from Fred Glover. Now he was getting ready to start the season devising training strategies and playing systems he hoped would set the team on the path to success. Despite the gloomy picture, the team had within its grasp a very promising group of players who had the potential to take the league by storm. There was Al MacAdam (acquired from Philadelphia in the Leach trade), who would later become a participant in the NHL All-Star Game, not to mention an eventual winner of the league's Bill Masterton Trophy. Charlie Simmer had two fifty-goal seasons awaiting him. Rick Hampton had just been selected by the Seals third overall in the last amateur draft. Larry Patey was a solid two-way player who could put the odd puck in the net. Joey Johnston was coming off an excellent 67-point season, and, as the Seals only scorer of significance now that Boldirev, McKechnie, and Leach were gone, was expected to lead the Seals in scoring for years to come. Then there was the always reliable Gilles Meloche,

who, after three years of playing behind some of the most porous defense crews in hockey history, was looked upon as a real cornerstone around which the team could build its future.

Three players who were not expected to make much of an impact for the Seals were Dave Hrechkosy, Ron Huston, and Warren Williams, but for a short time, they would form one of the premier lines of the National Hockey League. Known together as the Wrecking Crew Line, they spent even less than half a season together, but their impact was huge on Bay Area hockey fans. Hrechkosy was acquired in May 1973 when the Seals sent veteran defenseman Bert Marshall to the New York Rangers. Hrechkosy had potential, like many other Seals prospects, having scored 36 goals and 71 points with Salt Lake City of the Western Hockey League. He also had a lot of flair. "He had quite an impression on the fans," remembers Seals Booster Club member Cathy White. "He was sadly missed when he left, because he was a player that played with abandon. He just went out and hit everybody, and we called him 'the Wrecker.'" Hrechkosy had a few other nicknames too. His pointy mushroom-like haircut earned him the nickname "Flintstone" and he was also dubbed "Crazy Legs" because of his unusual skating style.

Wayne King recalled a game in which Bobby Orr took the young Hrechkosy to school. "Orr was gonna take a shot from the point, give 'er one of those fake shots and turn around backwards," King recalled. "Hrechkosy came right to the bench and our captain Joey said, 'Wreck, you want a drink?' He stood straight up to block a shot, but Orr just went around him." Hrechkosy was a fun-loving guy who played lots of practical jokes on his teammates, and kept everyone loose. Despite his goal-scoring talents, he never saw the ice the first five games of the season. He didn't score his first goal of the season until November 6, in a 7-3 loss to the New York Rangers. Hrechkosy needed someone to feed him the puck, someone who instinctively knew where to find him on the ice. That would be Ron "Spike" Huston.

California signed Huston, a 27-year old free agent, in September 1972, but he toiled in Salt Lake City for almost two years before receiving the call he would be playing in Oakland. The 1973-74 Seals were a disaster from almost every standpoint, but "Spike" was a standout in Salt Lake, scoring 84 points in 1972-73 and another 52 in 50 games the following year. In 23 games with the Seals the latter season, he scored three goals and 10 assists. He didn't look like a typical hockey player; he was stocky, and only about 5'9" and 170 lbs. To most, he wasn't a great skater, but teammates would later say he was deceptively fast. "He was really smart, he had eyes in the back of his head," explained Salt Lake teammate Barry Cummins.

When the Seals sputtered out of the gate to start the 1974-75 season, McCreary made a deal that would shock many of the team's fans. Sensing a need for change, Bill McCreary traded Craig Patrick and Stan Gilbertson, who at the time had recorded only eight points between them, to St. Louis, for a pair of 22-year-old forwards, Dave Gardner and Warren "Butch" Williams. The

general feeling among fans was the Seals did not receive enough in the trade. Patrick and Gilbertson had 445 NHL games of experience to their credit, whereas Williams and Gardner had but 90. Gardner would go on to score a decent 166 points in 289 games with the Seals (and their successors, the Cleveland Barons), but in the short term, Williams proved to be the missing piece of the Seals' puzzle. "I don't think he had a whole lot of finesse, but he could score goals and he worked hard," said Huston. [\[i\]](#)

Williams and Gardner would become key contributors to the team, but the trade did little to turn the tide in the short term. Gilles Meloche delivered his long-awaited first win of the season on November 13, a 2-0 shutout over Chicago at the Coliseum, but the Seals lost their next six games. Despite strong starts from Stan Weir and Joey Johnston, both of whom had scored 11 points in the Seals' first ten games, scoreboards around the NHL indicated the Seals would be lucky if they repeated their 13-win season from a year ago. On October 28, the New York Islanders had just beaten the Seals 10-1. Three weeks later, the Rangers dealt the hapless Seals a 10-0 loss.

By early December, the Seals were 4-16-5, well behind third-place Toronto in the newly-created Adams Division. Marshall Johnston put Hrechkosy, Huston, and Williams together for the first time on December 3, 1974, and in their first six games together, they counted eleven goals. "Maybe we've jelled because we're three of the same type of hockey players," Hrechkosy said. "We think alike, do things alike. We're all mild mannered guys; we don't get down on ourselves or each other." [\[ii\]](#) The three players meshed well because, according to Huston, each player had a defined role. "'Wrecker' was up and down his wing and Butch mucked in the corners," Huston recalled. "I was the playmaker." [\[iii\]](#)

"It was two rookies and me and I was almost a rookie," Williams said. "We had fun together, we even hung out off the ice. They went to the horse races with me. We complimented each other well. Wrecker was not a great skater but he had a great shot. He liked the high corners. I dug the puck out of the corner and Spike passed it to Wrecker. It was a nice group." [\[iv\]](#)

On December 4 versus Atlanta, Williams scored twice while Huston scored once and Hrechkosy picked up two assists. The following game, against Minnesota, Williams scored a goal, and Hrechkosy added two assists. The line scored four points versus Kansas City on December 12, three against Montreal on December 14, and another three versus the same Canadiens on the 18<sup>th</sup>. The Wrecking Crew Line picked up another eight points in a 4-4 draw with the Rangers on January 17. Hrechkosy scored two more goals against Boston on February 21, 1975. It seemed as though the trio could do no wrong. During one 18-game span, sometimes playing without his linemates, Hrechkosy scored 13 goals and 21 points, and the Seals started winning a

lot of games... a lot by Seals' standards anyway. The Wrecking Crew's hot streak brought the Seals' overall record up to 11-23-8, which was hardly extraordinary, but there were plenty of reasons for optimism. The team was playing its best hockey in years, the third-place Leafs were still within striking distance, and the Seals were showcasing a bumper crop of rookies such as Patey, MacAdam, and Hampton.

The Wrecking Crew Line stayed together for all of nineteen days until Huston went down with an injury on December 22. When he returned after eleven games out, the Crew was briefly reunited until Huston went down for good on February 21. In all, the trio played about 25 games together, but it is difficult to pinpoint an exact number, since game summaries available on the Internet only indicate players who scored or recorded an assist or penalty. What is known however, is that during that quarter-season or so, Hrechkosy scored 12 goals and 8 assists in games when he suited up alongside both Huston and Williams. Huston had 8 goals and 10 assists while playing on the line, and Williams had 6 goals and 7 assists. The Seals went 8-14-3 during the Wrecking Crew's run, but only 11-34-10 when the three Wreckers did not suit up together.

Unfortunately, Cinderella's carriage soon turned back into a pumpkin, and the Seals returned to their losing ways. When Huston injured himself February 21, in a 6-4 win against Boston, the Seals were 16-36-10. Not a great season, but already three more wins than the year before. After the Boston win, the Seals went into a 3-12-3 tailspin to close out the season, and Dave Hrechkosy's scoring touch seemingly disappeared. To make matters worse for the trio, Ron Huston fell out of favour with Bill McCreary, who had become coach after Marshall Johnston was dismissed on January 22. McCreary accused Huston of faking his injury, and there were also a couple of incidents where McCreary believed Huston had been out past curfew, which Huston vehemently denied. Williams also did not get along with McCreary, who despised the fact "Butch" wore a beard. The writing was on the wall that the Wrecking Crew's days were numbered.

Huston was traded to, of all places, Phoenix of the World Hockey Association, prior to the start of the 1975-76 season, and Williams was demoted to Salt Lake after just 14 games, leaving Hrechkosy to fend for himself in Oakland. "Wrecker" suffered through a terrible sophomore jinx, scoring just 9 goals and 5 assists in 38 games, and he eventually found himself skating in the minors. Before long, he was dealt to St. Louis for two draft picks. Goaltender Gary Simmons believed Hrechkosy's scoring suddenly dried up because he had to play without his trusty centre, Ron Huston:

"Hrechkosy had a bonus for 30 goals. When Huston got hurt... [Hrechkosy] didn't get another goal the rest of the year. McCreary, in his infinite wisdom, the next year, figured that 'Spike' Huston was a bad influence on Hrechkosy so he traded Huston to Phoenix, and 'Wrecker' got a

few goals but he ended up getting traded to St. Louis. I mean, what kind of thinking is that? It doesn't take a genius to figure out the guy's got 29 goals when Huston gets hurt and he ends up 21 games later with 29 goals. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what the secret was. I mean, 'Wrecker' was a good goal scorer, but 'Spike' was a great passer and Spike set him up all the time."

While it is a bit of an exaggeration to suggest Hrechkosy was completely shut down after Huston got injured, the once-sizzling "Wrecker" scored just three goals in the final 17 games of the season, and he didn't score once in the final eight games. Hrechkosy had also scored five goals and three assists in the eleven games Huston missed between December 22 and January 16. It was well-known, however, that 'Wrecker' liked the occasional drink and often partied pretty hard off the ice. "His off-ice activities hurt him," said Al MacAdam. "It slowed him down. He was a big guy and he took the league by storm his first year and then he was out of the league two years later. A good time guy, but like a lot of the guys on our team, he didn't care where he was playing. He would play the same in California, Salt Lake or anywhere." [v] Wayne King got to know Hrechkosy well in the years they played together. "We played in Salt Lake before we came up," King remembers. "He was a good goal scorer, when he came to Oakland anyway." King did not know why Hrechkosy was traded, but he also admitted. "I don't want to think about [the reasons]," and then laughed. "Gotta keep those secret." For his part, Hrechkosy admitted responsibility for his difficult second NHL season. "I don't think I was mature enough to handle the press and outside interruptions that my success caused going into the 1975-76 season," he said. [vi] Dave Hrechkosy passed away in March 7, 2012.

Seals fan John Bonasera has many fond memories of "The Wrecker." "Who knew that he could score as many goals as he did? This was a guy who looked like anything but a person who could function on ice skates. He didn't look the part, kind of on the big, pudgy side, big curly hair. Just didn't really think much of him, and all of a sudden he's playing with Ron Huston and Butch Williams, and for some reason the line clicked."

For the most part, whatever success the Seals enjoyed, whether it was their second-place finish in 1969, Norm Ferguson's record-breaking 34 rookie goals, or an occasional win streak, it was usually fleeting, and the Wrecking Crew Line was no exception to the rule. Dave Hrechkosy retired from professional hockey as a 28-year old member of the AHL's New Haven Nighthawks. Butch Williams found his way to Edmonton of the WHA, and scored 13 points in 29 games for the Oilers. He played ten games for the American entry at the World Championships that same season, and played two more exhibition games for a team called the Sun Valley Suns, but at 25, he was also done with professional hockey. As for Ron Huston, he enjoyed far more success, scoring 66 and 59 points in two seasons with the Phoenix Roadrunners, but that was it

as far as his professional hockey career went. He played a few more seasons in the minors before retiring for good in 1981 at the age of 35. If there is one line that perfectly sums up the entire history of the California Seals, it is the Wrecking Crew. “For like half a season, they were awesome,” John Bonasera remembered. “Butch Williams went to have basically no career. Spike Huston went on to have basically no career... But for that magical few months, that was a fun group... It was just a sort of a convergence of the planets and the stars or something, and everything aligned properly.”

All quotes taken from personal interviews by Steve Currier, unless otherwise noted.

[\[i\]](#) Kurtzberg, Brad. *Shorthanded: The Untold Story of the Seals: Hockey’s Most Colorful Team* (Authorhouse), 255.

[\[ii\]](#) Kurtzberg, *Shorthanded*, 260.

[\[iii\]](#) Kurtzberg, *Shorthanded*, 277.

[\[iv\]](#) Kurtzberg, *Shorthanded*, 255.

[\[v\]](#) Kurtzberg, *Shorthanded*, 261.

[\[vi\]](#) Kurtzberg, *Shorthanded*, 261.