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# Seals Were Flip Flops Of the NHL

## Nine undistinguished seasons in Bay Area

First of two parts

By Tony Cooper  
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**T**he National Hockey League will return to the Bay Area this week in the form of the San Jose Sharks, and no one knows how successful the franchise will be. One thing is for sure, though: The Sharks couldn't do much worse than the last NHL team to play here.

Remember the Oakland Seals, also the California Golden Seals? They were a case study of how not to run a major-league sports franchise.

George and Gordon Gund, co-owners of the Bay Area's new expansion team, know all about the Seals. They were minority owners of the club for a time, and you can bet they don't want to duplicate the Seals' dubious accomplishments.

"The ownership wasn't committed to staying (in the Bay Area)," said Bruce Affleck, a 1974 Seals draftee who is now the director of ticket sales for the St. Louis Blues. "They'll get that this time."

Another factor that improves the chances for this expansion enterprise is the overall health of the league.

"In the 1980s, hockey has grown tremendously in popularity," said Pittsburgh Penguin general manager Craig Patrick, a Seals left wing for three-plus years in the early '70s. "When I played, all of our exhibitions were in Ontario. Now we play them in Florida, Texas, Southern California and Arizona. It's spreading through the U.S."

"There are still a lot of hard-core hockey fans in the Bay Area. Starting in the Cow Palace will develop a following in San Francisco. I think it's a good way to go. I think (the franchise) will do all right in the Bay Area."

The Seals, who were one of six expansion teams that entered the league in 1967, never did

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The Oakland Seals (above) played their games in San Francisco. The 1968 version is shown practicing at the Cow Palace. In 1975, Seals goalie Gary Simmons was victimized for a goal by Butch Goring of the Los Angeles Kings

*The Seals never finished above .500*



# SEALS

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very well. They were one big migraine for the NHL from the beginning, and there were rumors that the franchise was in financial trouble and was looking to leave Oakland only a few months after it was born.

In their nine years in the Bay Area, the Seals had seven owners (with Charlie Finley the most nefarious), eight coaches and several general managers.

Almost from the time they got here, the Seals seemed to be going somewhere else. Dallas; Miami; Hamilton, Ontario; Denver; Vancouver; Cleveland — they were all on the list. The speculation finally ended during the summer of 1976, when the Seals moved to Cleveland and became the Barons. The Gunds assumed full control of the Barons the following season.

But Cleveland wasn't the answer for the franchise, either — two years later, the Barons folded and were merged with the Minnesota North Stars.

The Seals made the playoffs only twice in nine years and never finished above .500. Their cumulative record in Oakland was a sorry 182-403-115.

"We had a lot of players who didn't really belong in the NHL," said Gilles Meloche, a Seals goalie from 1971-76 and now a Penguins' scout. "It was pretty scary and a tough way to learn (about pro hockey)."

Said former Seal center Dennis Maruk, the best player the team had: "When other teams played us, they thought it was an easy two points. No doubt about it. We didn't win a lot of hockey games."

Or draw a lot of fans. The Seals' best average attendance was a paltry 6,944 — in their final season at the Oakland Coliseum Arena. Overall, they averaged 5,604 in their Bay Area years.

"We had real good crowds lots of times," Patrick said. "They just weren't consistent enough."

## Seals Were a Bad Team But Good for Laughs

One thing about the California Golden Seals: They may have lost a bundle of hockey games in their time, but they had a certain morbid entertainment value about them. Especially off the ice.

Here are some of the more memorable moments in the annals of Sealdom:

■ The most tragic event in NHL history involved the Seals. On January 13, 1968 in a game at Minnesota, North Star center Bill Masterton was sandwiched by two Oakland players.

Masterton, who wasn't wearing a helmet (few players did in those days) fell backward and struck his head on the ice. He died of a brain injury two days later.

■ Broadcaster Joe Starkey was interviewing Seals center Walt McKechnie during a pregame radio show, and McKechnie was asked to sum up the attitude of the team in yet another sad season. Instead of giving the usual stock, cliché answer, he said:

"I don't give a damn. Nobody gives a damn. I don't care. Nobody cares. I'd just as soon go home and play golf. (Owner Charlie) Finley has made a mockery of the team — all the good guys have left. The sooner this season is over, the better."

■ More McKechnie: He roomed on the road with Bobby Sheehan, who can best be described as an erratic individual (Sheehan's luggage on one trip: a bottle of booze and a toothbrush). McKechnie hated Sheehan's incorrigible sloppiness, and legend has it McKechnie hung Sheehan by his ankles, from a hotel window, until Sheehan agreed to clean their room.

■ More Starkey: While doing a postgame show, someone called his engineer on the press box phone, saying the Seals had fired

coach Marshall Johnston and traded star winger Joey Johnston (not related) to the New York Rangers. The engineer passed the information on to Starkey, who read it on the air.

The whole thing turned out to be a hoax.

"No one ever found out who did it," said Starkey, noting that the press box phone number was a private line and only available to the media. "That was a bizarre one, to say the least."

■ The Seals in 1971 traded goalie Gary Smith to Chicago for another netminder, Gerry DesJardins. But when DesJardins showed up with a broken arm, the deal was nullified, and the league made the Blackhawks give up Paul Shmyr, Gerry Pinder and Gilles Meloche, all of whom turned out to be quality players.

■ During one game at St. Louis, the Seals had been outshot by the Blues, 20-1, in a period. After the public address announcer made fans aware of that fact, one Seal cracked, "OK, who was the wise guy who took the shot?"

■ Bert Olmstead, the Seals' first coach/general manager, once called two practices on Thanksgiving Day, then went home for dinner. But not before he padlocked the dressing room door so the players couldn't leave.

■ Krazy George, who got his professional cheerleading start with the Seals, walked over to the penalty box during a fight-filled game and began banging his drum in the ear of Boston Bruin Terry O'Reilly.

One of the NHL's more pugnacious types, O'Reilly, still wearing his skates, chased George through the Coliseum Arena stands. Luckily for George, O'Reilly never caught him.

— Tony Cooper

To get an idea just how hard it was for the Seals to attract folks to the Coliseum Arena, which could hold 12,000 fans for hockey, consider this: Only 600 season tickets were sold for the 1974-75 campaign.

### **How They Stood Out**

The Seals were, however, trend-setters in low fashion. Finley thought that dressing his troops in white skates would be a novel idea. The footwear may have been appropriate for Debi Thomas or Dorothy Hamill, but they weren't for supposedly rough-and-tumble hockey players.

"They looked kind of silly," said Meloche. "We heard comments (from opposing players) everywhere we went. They said we looked like sissies or figure skaters."

"And each skate weighed about 10 pounds each — they had to be painted every day. That's another joke."

Said ex-Seal winger Stan Gilbertson: "Well, they were a novelty at the time. Unfortunately, they didn't help us play any better hockey. They looked kind of ridiculous."

This bit of fashion levity lasted just one season — 1971-72. Then the Seals went back to conventional black skates, although they later brought green-and-gold skates to the NHL.

### **Where's The Draft?**

Like any bad team, the Seals never seemed to make good use of the draft. Often, their first-round picks were traded away. When they did have a pick, the team never seemed able to get anyone who could play.

The Seals had the league's seventh overall choice in 1969, the first year of the entry draft.

selected Chris Oddleifson — a marginal center who never played a single game in a Seals uniform.

The Seals didn't have a first-rounder in 1972 or 1973. In '74, they selected an offensive-minded defenseman named Rick Hampton, pegged to be the second coming of Bobby Orr.

Forget it. The guy was a total bust.

"He had no drive, no heart," said KGO radio sportscaster Joe Starkey, the voice of the Seals from 1972-76. "He had skills — (but) he rarely showed them."

Ralph Klassen, no more than a penalty-killing specialist, was the Seals' top pick — third overall — the following year. Then came defenseman Bjorn Johansson, a reputed "tough Swede" who never amounted to anything.

All this was nothing compared to the 1971 draft. The Seals had traded their first-round pick to Montreal, and the Canadiens

used that choice to happily scoop up Guy Lafleur, one of the best players ever.

Ironically, the best draft choice the Seals ever made was taking Maruk on the second round. Deemed too small by NHL observers (Maruk was only about 5-foot-5), the Seals took a chance on him.

"I was just hoping they (the franchise) would get stable," Maruk said. "That's the whole key. I was trying to plan a career and didn't want to move around — I wanted to make roots and build from there."

"People thought being drafted by the Seals was (an unstable situation), because they thought the franchise wasn't going to last very long."

That the Seals lasted nine years is a miracle in itself. This outfit was on shaky ice from day one.

*Tomorrow: The Finley Era arrives — and leads to the move to Cleveland*