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Sports Illustrate a

This was supposed to be a sad story about the California Seals. Sorry about that, chief. Although still in the Adams Division cellar, and imprisoned in Oakland while the NHL searches for someone with a spare \$4 million who wants a hockey team for a tax shelter, since Christmas the Seals have routed Boston and Philadelphia and tied Buffalo at home. Having won only three of their previous 59 away games, the Seals in the last two weeks have won two, lost three and tied one on the road. Since Christmas, then, the Seals have posted a record of 4-3-2, and President Clarence Campbell is dancing in the boardroom at NHL headquarters in Montreal.

"The value of the Seals is going up daily," Campbell chirped last week after his orphaned team stunned the Blues 3-2 in St. Louis. At present the Seals are owned in equal parts by 15 other teams in the NHL who paid \$6.75 million to buy out Charles O. Finley last winter. "Owning the Seals has been an enormous dollar drain for us, more than I want to acknowledge," Campbell admitted. Besides the purchase price, the Seals also will cost each NHL club another \$200,000 for operating expenses this season. "If we keep winning like this," said Coach Marshall Johnston after the game in St. Louis, "maybe the other clubs will stop paying our bills."

The real question, though, is this: Can hockey survive in Oakland? Or must the NHL move the franchise across the Bay to San Francisco? Or back across the Rockies to Denver? Or to the insolvency league? In truth, the Bay Area has traditionally been a disaster spot for the NHL. In their 7½ seasons the Seals have had five owners, seven coaches, three names (California Seals, Oakland Seals, California Golden Seals) and three color schemes for their uniforms, including the present Pacific blue and California gold, a combination that makes the players look like a bunch of extras in an Andy Warhol flick. Not surprisingly, the Seals have made the playoffs only twice.

Three years ago the Seals had some of the best young players in hockey, but Finley underestimated the threat of the World Hockey Association and consequently lost the nucleus of his squad to the new league's checkbook raiders. Now once again the Seals control some of hockey's best young players, but the

These Seals refuse to play dead

The NHL's orphan team is getting so frisky it might find an owner

club's ownership situation—"We don't have an offer on the line," Campbell says—weighs heavily on them. "The trouble is, no one cares whether we win or lose," says Captain Joey Johnston. "In fact, now that we are owned by the other clubs, all they want us to do is lose."

To this day the NHL regrets that it awarded a 1967 expansion franchise to the 53-man group of partners that included 49er Quarterback John Brodie and was headed by former Princeton Goal-tender Barry van Gerbig. "Unfortunately, the original error was our own," Campbell confesses. "We gave the team to a schoolboy who played good golf and wore a Princeton tie. If we had that proper management out there at the start we wouldn't still be doing missionary work today."

Chaos set in early. Control of the Seals passed from the van Gerbig bloc to a group of Harlem Globetrotter owners, then reverted to van Gerbig and his friends. They planned to move the franchise to Vancouver, which did not have an NHL team at the time, but the league did not approve the proposal and was sued by van Gerbig. A New York conglomerate called Trans National Communications then assumed control of the Seals but encountered serious money problems and abandoned the hockey business. The chief rivals for the open franchise were Finley and Roller Derby Promoter Jerry Seltzer.

Seltzer approached the NHL's governors with a detailed outline of his marketing and promotional plans for the Seals. Then Finley went into the room,

told some funny baseball stories and go the franchise. He promised the governor that he would move to Oakland and promote the Seals throughout the Bay Area. True, Finley outfitted the Seals in a splendid traveling wardrobe, right down to new Guccis, and flew them first class, but he staffed the front office inadequately and, in time, suffered from the loss of key players to the WHA and a resultant drop in attendance.

Finley even had a Catfish Hunter case of sorts on his hockey team. To keep Defenseman Dick Redmond away from the WHA, Garry Young, then general manager, signed him to a two-year contract for about \$85,000 a season. When Finley learned about Redmond's contract, he let Young go. At the same time Finley decided that Redmond was worth only about \$30,000 a year and began paying him at that rate. Redmond screamed to the NHL Players' Association, and in short order a trade was worked out whereby he became a member of the Chicago Black Hawks.

But Finley is out, too. At present the Seals are operated by an appointed two-man caretaker force of Munson Campbell (no relation to Clarence) and Bill McCreary. Campbell writes interesting biographical sketches for Seals publications and likes to drop famous hockey names such as Jack Adams into conversations; however, his main hockey accomplishment seems to be that he was a Yale classmate of Detroit Red Wing Owner Bruce Norris. McCreary was an obscure checking forward during his five playing seasons in the NHL and he failed as a coach in St. Louis and Vancouver.

Campbell and McCreary obviously have been told to pinch pennies. The Seals frequently travel on the day of a game in violation of NHL rules, but it saves thousands of dollars in charter costs. And in what has to be described as an economy move, last week the Seals traded promising Defenseman Bruce Affleck, their No. 2 selection in the most recent amateur draft, to the St. Louis Blues for retread Right Wing Frank Spring. "Affleck carried a big ticket to the pay window," explained one member of the Seals.

Money problems aside, the Seals have displayed considerable flair on the ice, particularly in Oakland where a self-appointed cheerleader known as Crazy

George incites the 6,500 regular patrons with wild drum-beating and frenetic rushes up and down the aisles. "We ought to take Crazy George with us on the road," says Marshall Johnston.

The 33-year-old coach, a former Seals defenseman, communicates effectively with his young players, but he and McCreary seem to be on different wavelengths. One night McCreary decided Johnston needed coaching help, so he got walkie-talkie units in order to buzz the coach with instructions during the game. Early in the first period, Johnston recalls, he received his first message: "Beep-beep. Cab to 66th and Seminary."

"We have real talent here now," Johnston says seriously. "My job is to keep the kids—we are the youngest team in hockey—from getting down on themselves." Remember these names: Dave Hrechkosy, Larry Patey, Fred Ahern, Rick Hampton and Gilles Meloche. Hreshkosy is a top candidate for Rook-

ie of the Year, with 16 goals and several hundred solid body checks in just 36 games. The Seals discovered Patey, a big, strong center, when he was playing for the Braintree, Mass. Hawks, and he has scored 13 goals already. Last season at this time Ahern was playing right wing for Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. During the summer he returned to his home in South Boston and called Bill Cleary, the coach at Harvard, for help in furthering his hockey education. Cleary put Ahern in contact with Seals Scout Jim Sutherland, and Ahern was invited to training camp. "I thought they'd give me a quick look and say good-bye," Ahern says. Instead, he was sent to the Seals' top farm club in Salt Lake City, where he scored 19 goals during the first half of the season. When Hrechkosy was injured a fortnight ago, Ahern was summoned to Oakland. He beat the Flyers' Bernie Parent for a goal in his first NHL game, then scored the

winning goal against St. Louis two nights later.

Hampton is the 18-year-old defenseman who signed a three-year, \$500,000 contract with the Seals last summer and already rates with the best young players in the game. He carries the puck with authority and seems to be an artful defender in the J. C. Tremblay mold. "If Rick played for New York or Boston or Montreal," says teammate Jim Neilson, "they'd be talking about him as the second coming of Bobby Orr."

Meloche has been the Seals' regular goaltender since the 1971-72 season. In the past he has suffered from severe shellshock, but now, at the age of 24, he sees better days ahead. "One night I left the ice in tears after the Rangers beat me for about a dozen goals," Meloche says. "I had to learn the hard way. No more. I knew my time would come—and it is not that far away."

Anyone need a tax shelter?

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