

## Seals / Barons All-Time Team

by Steve Currier

The Seals never enjoyed much success on the ice, that is no secret, but one thing that is often mentioned when one finds an article on the California Golden Seals and Cleveland Barons is that they had extremely talented players, but many of them were just beginning their careers and never had the time to blossom in Oakland. Players such as Gilles Meloche, Dennis Maruk, Reggie Leach, and Carol Vadnais. There were other players who, while not quite over the hill, were certainly hanging around the summit and enjoying one or two great years. I'm thinking of Ted Hampson, Bobby Baun, and Harry Howell, among others.

What would an all-time best Seals/Barons team look like? This is not my suggestion for an all-star Seals/Barons team *per se* but rather the best NHL Seals team by position, role, and specialization. It is team built to compete with the best the NHL can offer, so in order to do so, players of different skill sets were required. In other words, I couldn't pull an NHL '94 and just put all my fastest players out there; there needed to be some pluggers, hitters, grinders, defensive specialists, and penalty killers to round out this team. Each player was chosen for his contributions in a Seals/Barons uniform and not necessarily for what he accomplished before or after arriving with the club. Also, the length of time spent on the team was not considered as well, so players who spent one year or five years in a Seals uniform were all considered. The most important factor in choosing a player for the all-star team was skill, and what other intangibles he once brought to the table. This team might not win the Stanley Cup, but as you'll see, the greatest Seals team is an impressive collection of talent that could defeat many other NHL teams' all-star collections.

### Goaltenders:

For any team, solid goaltending is of the utmost importance. Luckily for this team, it was an easy task picking two very good netminders. I could have gone with former Vezina Trophy winner Charlie Hodge or even the aggressive, but fun-loving Gary Simmons, but in the end, there were really only two goaltenders I could consider to defend this new Seals team's net. As this team's number one goaltender **Gilles Meloche** got the nod over Gary Smith due to a few factors, namely his perseverance, dedication, and teammate's respect. Ask almost any Seals or Barons player from 1971 to 1978 who the team's unquestioned MVP was, and they will likely answer "Gilles Meloche". While **Gary Smith's** stats, including winning percentage, goals-against average,

and save percentage were all better, he also played for better teams. Smith is also the only goalie in franchise history to record a winning season, going 22-21-7 in 1968-69. Meloche, however, is the franchise's all-time leader in wins (93) and shutouts (11) despite playing for some awful teams, notably in 1972-73 and 1973-74. He also holds the team record for assists by a goaltender in one season (6), so his puck-handling skills may come in handy as well.

### **Defense:**

For any team to be successful, it needs a certain combination of defensemen. It needs a couple of sturdy offensive-minded players who can run a power play, but it also needs a couple of defensive-minded players who can keep the puck away from the goaltender. Finally, a good team needs a defenseman who can drop a nasty body check or two and maybe even drop the gloves just to keep the other team honest. **Carol Vadnais** was a shoo-in to be a part of this team, since he was not only the Seals' best-ever defenseman, he also brought pizzazz to the old West Division at a time when defensemen usually stayed away from the opposition's net. Whenever other general managers called the Seals about a potential trade, guess whose name came up the most? Vadnais had offensive skills that few defensemen of the late 1960s possessed. He led the Seals' defense in scoring his first two seasons in Oakland (42 points in '68-'69 and 44 points in '69-'70). In the latter season, he also led the team with 24 goals, even though part of the season he played as a forward. He also had a mean streak and he loved dropping the mitts to send opposing players a message. In 1968-69, he led the team with 151 penalty minutes, and led it again with 212 the following year. He was the total package, and that's why he's going to get the most playing time of anyone on the team.

Joining Vadnais as a major minute-muncher and power play specialist we have **Rick Hampton**, who holds the franchise records for most points by a defenseman in one season (51) and as a member of the Seals/Barons (152). He was also a popular player in his two seasons in Oakland, so we're counting on him to bring the kids and other new hockey fans to the arena, ensuring the team's survival for many years. **Dick Redmond** is the all-important third member of the power play specialist group. He had a rocket shot from the blue line, and he scored an impressive 35 assists and 45 points in his first full NHL season (1971-72). To keep the puck away from Meloche and Smith, we have **Jim Neilson** and **Bert Marshall**. Both were solid stay-at-home defensemen with leadership skills, and both were once team captains. Closing out our Top Six, we have **Bobby Baun**, the club's first captain, and one of the NHL's all-time great hitters, not to

mention the fact his pain threshold was through the roof. Come playoff time, Baun is going to be a true on-ice leader.

### **Forwards:**

This was the most difficult group to put together since the Seals had so many good forwards over the years. It is impossible to create a competitive team using nothing but the best offensive players, so I have selected my forward line-up keeping in mind that all-stars, grinders, and defensive specialists will be needed to make this team miserable to play against.

This Seals team's first line was a no-brainer. Of course, the 3-M Line of **Al MacAdam**, **Dennis Maruk**, and **Bob Murdoch** will be this team's bread and butter. Not only were these guys dynamite together in the mid-1970s, but MacAdam and Maruk are going to see lots of ice time on this team's power play and penalty kill. MacAdam and Maruk were top-notch penalty-killers in 1975-76, scoring nine shorthanded goals between them, so they will be invaluable to this new Seals team. All three members of the 3-M Line scored at least 20 goals in 1975-76 and 1976-77. Maruk scored a franchise-record 36 in 1977-78, making him the only player in team history to record three seasons of 20+ goals. He also ended his Seals/Barons career with a franchise record 94 goals. His 211 career points with the team are second only to Al MacAdam's 217.

On the second line, we have **Reggie Leach**, **Walt McKechnie**, and **Joey Johnston**. They were a great combination in 1973-74, and during that season, all three players achieved career highs in points per game. Leach had back-to-back 20-goal seasons in 1972-73 and 1973-74, something only five other Seals/Barons ever did. McKechnie was one of the rare players to enjoy back-to-back 50-point seasons, which he accomplished playing alongside Johnston both years. The swift-skating Johnston scored 28 goals in 1972-73, and 27 goals and 40 assists the following year. He was also a three-time NHL all-star game participant as a member of the Seals, and he was team captain from the final weeks of the 1973-74 campaign through the end of the 1974-75 season.

For the third line, we have to include **Ted Hampson** at center because he had some great offensive skills, but he was also a responsible defensive player. He will also be this team's captain. His 49 assists and 75 points in 1968-69 remained a franchise record until 1976-77, and he is the only player in franchise history to win a major NHL award, copping the Bill Masterton Trophy for dedication to hockey in 1968-69. He was also runner-up that same year for the Lady Byng Trophy

for sportsmanship and gentlemanly conduct. His one-time line-mate **Bill Hicke** will also join him on the third line, but he will likely see some time on the power play as well since his 12 goals with the man advantage in 1967-68 and 25 career power play goals are both franchise records. Joining them at left wing will be **J.P. Parise**, whose time in Cleveland was brief, but who also enjoyed a sensational NHL career. He had some great offensive skills, and he could also play it rough as well. He will be the muscle on our third line.

Rounding out the forward lines, we're going to have one hell of a gritty fourth trio. At center will be the rabid wolverine **Dennis Hextall**, who led the 1970-71 Seals in points (52), penalty minutes (217) and fights (21). On his flanks, we have the no-nonsense **Gary Croteau** alongside **Hilliard Graves**, the master of the low hit (cheap shot?) who never took crap from anyone, especially not the Philadelphia Flyers. We'll need these guys come playoff time when the games start getting serious and the bumps start getting bigger. As a bonus, not only are these guys going to dig in the corners, but they can put the odd puck in the net too.

#### **Press box guys:**

Over the course of a season, there are bound to be a few injuries here and there, so we're going to add five more players to sit in the press box in case their services are needed on short notice. In case we have a big hole to fill on offense, we're going to be able to call on **Ivan Boldirev**, who always had some serious play-making skills, but who had the ability to break a game wide open. In fact, he is one of the few Seals players to ever record a four-goal game. The other forward we need to have on the team is **Norm Ferguson**, who scored 34 goals in 1968-69, a team record that stood for eight years. Even though he never repeated those numbers in the NHL, we feel he may come through for us when called upon. In case we lose a defenseman to injury, we're giving the call to the menacing **Paul Shmyr**. What was great about him was that he could put up some points as well, so if the going gets rough, we can go to him, but if the power play needs a spark, we can go to him too. We're also adding **Gerry Odrowski** to the team for his defensive skills. Of the nine career goals he scored in Oakland, five of them were shorthanded. Enough said. I have to say that I really wanted to add Bob Stewart to the team as well, but in the end, I felt that Shmyr brought the same nastiness to the table, but had more offensive skill. As for Odrowski, his defensive skills were too good to overlook. Stewie, on the other hand, finished his Seals career -208. Finally, we're adding **Mike Christie** to the mix because no other Seal displayed as much heart as he did. Every team needs a character guy, a glue guy that everyone will want to rally around. Christie's our guy.

That, in my opinion, is the best team that could be assembled from players who spent time in Oakland or in Cleveland. There were a few players I felt bad leaving off the list, namely Harry Howell, Bob Stewart, Earl Ingarfield, Charlie Hodge, Wayne Merrick, Gary Jarrett, Gerry Ehman, and Charlie Burns, who all made great contributions to the team at one time or another, but to create a team that had the absolute best player at every position, I had to go with players who had a particular set of skills that would come in handy in making a solid all-around team, and not just a mid-season all-star team that would get pushed around in the first round of the playoffs. This team is in it for the long haul!

Let the debate begin!