

## *Plenty of class hockey ahead*

# **Traditional skills stressed by Barons**

By BOB SCHLESINGER

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There are two basic ways to build a hockey team and Barons' general manager Bill McCreary chose the harder of the two. But I suspect that the decision to do it the hard way will make the Cleveland club a team for the times.

Particularly with the success of pugnacious teams like the Stanley Cup Bruins of a few years ago and the Flyers, some hockey executives tried to imitate their success.

But what they overlooked is that while those two outfits were muscular, the basis for their success was that they had a considerable amount of pure hockey talent with brawn as a welcome bonus.

Many bigwigs who set out to build a team thought they could do it by merely hiring a goon squad. Suddenly there was a premium on gorillas who could ice skate. Nobody asked about a kid's slapshot, they wanted to know about his hammerlock.

When they inquired about his stickhandling ability, they were asking whether he could use it as an axe or a spear.

The game plan was a simple one. Throw the puck into the other team's end and start a gang war. If you break all of the enemy's arms they won't be able to shoot it back out.

The beauty of the plan was that it was a lot easier to discover and sign guys who stood out in a barroom brawl than it was to find good skaters who could also shoot and pass a puck with great skill.

It was also thought to be a smart business move, that gang wars and blood would be great drawing cards.

Fortunately, that theory, as a hockey tactic and a business tactic, has been largely discredited by now. There has been a predictable and, I think, justifiable outcry against excessive violence. And the fans, who saw the quality of the game deteriorating, began staying away.

The rules are slowly being changed to drive the "goon" out of hockey. And it's not a minute too soon, when you hear of incidents in junior games, where the pros are

imitated, like the one where a hatchet man attacked and maimed the other team's best player DURING WARMUPS.

Anyhow, McCreary chose not to go that way but to emulate the Montreal Canadiens' organization for which he once worked.

As a result, this season you'll get to see some dazzling skating on the part of the Barons, speedsters like Dennis Maruk and Wayne Merrick, who are a threat to score on a breakaway anytime they touch the puck.

When all is said and done, the breakaway, puck carrier coming in alone to challenge the goalie, is still the most exciting play in the game.

And you'll see a kid like Rick Hampton, whose ability to thread the needle with a pass, to make the big play that in turn makes a goal, is absolutely uncanny for a 20-year-old youngster.

And if you want to take a kid to a game and show him a complete hockey player, one who does all the big and little things--offensively and defensively--exactly the way the text book says they're supposed to be done, tell him to keep an eye on left winger Al MacAdam.

By passing up the "cement heads" in favor of kids who have the traditional skills, McCreary has also come up with a bunch of players who are good people--the kind of folks you'll enjoy having in the community once you get to know them.

Capacity crowds on a regular basis aren't going to happen overnight. And nobody promised you a rose garden or a Stanley Cup in the immediate future.

But by going in the direction he chose, McCreary has put the Barons on a solid foundation.

Eventually, there will be traffic jams and scalpers and championships and champagne. And meanwhile, you'll be seeing classy hockey played by classy people.