

## TWO DECADES LATER, SEALS BOOSTERS KEEP THE FAITH

by Scott Surgent

Every couple of months in the San Francisco Bay Area, approximately 65 hockey fans get together to enjoy each other's company, put up their feet, and talk hockey. The Sharks of San Jose are a hot topic these days, and the San Francisco Spiders of the IHL drew some interest during 1995-96, but invariably, the talk returns to their first love — the late, great California Golden Seals.

The who?

Older fans might vaguely recall there was once a National Hockey League franchise in the Bay Area (Oakland to be exact) from 1967 through 1976. The team was variously known during those years as the Oakland Seals, the California Seals, the California Golden Seals, and finally the California Seals once again. No matter the name, the team was most famous for playing bad hockey in front of empty houses while wearing garish kelly green and California gold uniforms and white skates. In most seasons, the Seals had clinched last place by mid-February. Aprils were reserved for family, golf and relaxing. The Seals were, in a word, awful.

But to Mr. Ty Toki and many others, the Seals were the glue that bound friendships together and helped form one of the most supportive booster clubs in the league — both back then and now. Today, Ty Toki is an energetic man enjoying his 70s. He has been associated with the Seals Booster Club since its creation back in the early 1960s in support of the old Western League Seals. The Boosters made the transition to the NHL with the Seals in 1967. In its heyday during the 1970s the Booster Club counted more than 1,000 members.

“Win or lose, most of us were die-hard fans,” recalls Toki. “We supported them 100%. We even made road trips to show [the Seals] that we were ‘all the way’ with them.”

Most remarkable is the fact that more than 20 years after the Seals were uprooted and moved to Cleveland, the Seals Boosters are still going strong. The lack of a hockey team was no excuse to stop meeting, these friends thought, and continue to meet they did. The Seals Boosters currently consist of 65 members, of which about 25 go back to the last Seals team in 1976.

“Many of our current members never saw the Seals play,” admits Toki. “They became members through friends in the Seals Booster Club.”

Ty Toki ran a dry-cleaning business, from which he is currently retired. His company was the official Seals cleaners, specializing in repairing uniforms and supplying towels. He also did cleaning for many of the Seals players and staff. His association with the team was deep, and very good. To this day he can recall with fondness his friendships with such luminaries as Bud Poile, Bill Torrey, Craig Patrick, Terry Murray and Charlie Simmer, among many others. Even the late Charles Finley, controversial owner of baseball's Athletics and one-time owner of

the Seals, gets high praise from Toki.

“I have nothing but good things to say about him. The majority of people that talk bad about [Finley] never met the man. [When] I ran into him in the team’s locker room, he always stopped to say hello to me.”

For nine seasons the Seals were in constant financial duress, shuttling from one owner to another with the NHL stepping in on more than one occasion to prop up the franchise. Mel Swig, owner of the Western League Seals, came aboard again in 1975 but could do little to save the franchise. By the time brothers George and Gordon Gund bought into the team in 1976, the NHL had all but given up on the Oakland franchise. A move was imminent, especially when the Richfield Coliseum outside of Cleveland became available after the World Hockey Association’s Crusaders folded that same year. From the NHL’s point of view, a franchise re-location was a no-brainer. The California Seals became the Cleveland Barons. The cadre of die-hard Seals fans did not greet the move warmly.

“When the month of July (1976) came by, we found that the team was moving to Cleveland. We and the players were shocked to hear that the team was going. Anyone knows that things like this don’t happen overnight. It really left a bitter taste for all the hockey fans in the Bay Area.”

So, you’re a rabid hockey fan in the Bay Area and all of a sudden your team is gone. Left town. No more. What are you going to do? Over the years, Ty and the Boosters kept vigil by meeting regularly, organizing get-togethers, and — when the need for a hockey fix grew to large to ignore — making the odd road trip to see the closest NHL team, the Los Angeles Kings. Even trips to Vancouver were not unknown. For 11 years, Ty served as Booster Club president. He helped to organize the 1994 NHL Booster Club Convention, which the Seals Boosters hosted. In attendance at these conventions are booster club members from all of the NHL teams, including some from the defunct Atlanta Flames and even the old Kansas City Scouts. The Seals Boosters are regular attendees at the yearly conventions, making a lot of hay for a team that hasn’t been around since 1976.

The Seals Boosters are still very visible in the Bay Area hockey scene. Every July they help organize and run the Snoopy’s Senior World Hockey Tournament at the Redwood Empire Ice Arena in Santa Rosa. The event is hosted by another hockey fan of note, Peanuts creator Charles Shulz. Teams compete from all over Canada and the United States, as well as from as far away as Japan and Australia. Former Seals players such as Ernie Hicke and Bert Marshall join in the fun, along with other ex-NHLers and those who just enjoy the experience.

As the years pass, the Seals will recede further into oblivion and there will come a day when virtually no one will remember them in all their glory. But not Ty. He has converted one of his rooms at his home into a virtual shrine devoted almost entirely to his beloved Seals. There are patches, pins, buttons, bumper stickers, trophies, pucks, photos, autographs, and much more, all featuring the Seals in some

way. But the most precious items in Ty's collection are his memories.

"Back in the WHL days, Bud Poile was the general manager and coach of the Seals," Ty recalls. "He once invited me to travel with him and the team (to Seattle and Los Angeles). At both games, I realized I didn't have a ticket, so I asked Bud. I was shocked when he told me to sit on the bench with him and the players. At Los Angeles, Howie Young (of L.A.) leaned over and told Bud 'Watch me skate through your entire team and score.' He almost accomplished the feat except that the puck glanced over the crossbar! I'll never forget watching a hockey game sitting on the players' bench."

In another incident, Ty traveled with the team to Sacramento for an exhibition game and the team picked him to sit in as coach! He won his only game behind the bench.

Today, Ty and his wife Mary spend their time following the San Jose Sharks, where they hold season tickets. In 1995, he helped form the San Francisco Spiders Fan Club, an entity totally separate from the Seals Boosters. Although a few Seals Boosters members held membership in the Spiders Fan Club and/or the San Jose Sharks Boosters, Ty was the only one to hold memberships in all three. The Spiders have since departed town, allowing Ty to follow his Sharks more closely.

The Sharks present a curious closure to the 15 years during which there was no big league hockey in the Bay Area. In 1978, after two unsuccessful seasons in Cleveland, the Barons were merged with the Minnesota North Stars, and the Gunds became owners of the new North Stars team. As time passed, the Gunds grew impatient with the money-losing team in suburban Bloomington. Very desirous of relocating the team, particularly to the Bay Area, the Gunds were convinced otherwise by the NHL. In an agreement, the Gunds sold the North Stars and were granted an expansion franchise of their own, the San Jose Sharks. The Sharks began play in 1991 and have become wildly successful at the gate, if not always on the ice. As an interesting footnote, the North Stars were eventually moved anyway, to Dallas in 1993. (The NHL will return to Minnesota with the Wild in 2000-2001.)

Ty is happy to have the Sharks in town, though very few fans at their games recall the Seals, or are even aware that there was a Seals team in the first place. Conversely, some holdover Seals fans remain wary of the Sharks — or more precisely of the Gunds.

"To this day, you'll find hardly any fans from the Seals era at Sharks games," notes Toki. "As long as the Gunds own the team, they're not supporting them."

Twenty-three years have passed since the Seals last graced the ice. Seals alumni are scattered around the NHL in various management positions, as coaches scouts, television analysts, or just happy retirees. The Seals are dead, long live the Seals Booster Club. And their sprightly leader, Ty Toki — happily retired businessman, Booster Club president, and the coach with the best record in Seals history.