

Young Seal's Rough Road

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It seemed odd for Ron Stackhouse to say he loved California weather while the rain pelted his uncovered head in Berkeley the other day.

The rookie defenseman of the Oakland Seals ignored the dousing. After all, his mother had written him a few days earlier that there were still three feet of snow blanketing his home town in Canada.

With four games left in the National Hockey League schedule for the Seals, Ron will be going back to West Gaidford, Ontario, pop. 150, very soon.

After today's game in Vancouver, the 21-year-old will have just one week left on the West Coast.

Looking back at the season, Ron saw some high points and a lot of low points.

Back in training camp was where he had to make it or break. It was either the Seals or a return sentence to the town that hated him — Providence, R.I.

The New England Stackhouse haters didn't get their chance to jeer Ron again. Fred Glover liked what he saw and the Oakland coach played Stack full-time in the big league.

Arriving in the Bay Area, Stack and his buddy Tony Featherstone, also 21, were stranded in a hotel.

"We couldn't rent a car because no one would give us one," Stackhouse recalled. "We weren't 25 and we didn't

have any credit cards. Finally, we borrowed Ernie Hicke's car and rented the first place that had an opening."

Featherstone and Stackhouse room together on the road, but their youthful shenanigans were curtailed somewhat when Tony got married.

On ice Stackhouse is serious. One thing that bugged him was that first National Hockey League goal that kept eluding him, in part because of Ernie Hicke.

Twice Hicke tipped in shots for goals that at first appeared to belong to Stackhouse. A game in Detroit ended Stack's anxiety.

"When I finally did score I looked around to see where Ernie was," he recalled. That time Hicke was on the bench.

One of the toughest things for a rookie is to prove himself to the rest of the league and to his teammates, according to Stack.

Early in the season he wound up in a fist battle with Dennis Hextall at a practice.

"I thought he shoved me, so I tripped him," Stack said simply. "He gave me a shot and then we went at it. It was forgotten the next day."

In another sport, a fight like that could destroy a team, but hockey is different. Fortunes of a club rise with the number of fights in practice, one NHL coach has claimed.

"I'm not a fighter," claimed Stackhouse. Then as an afterthought: "I'm not a lover, either."

Maybe not, but he is a good, young hockey player.