

Kings' goalie No. 2—and happy Simmons tattoos legend . . . or does he?

He comes off the ice flushed, sweating and breathing heavily, and before he settles down to talk he asks for some cigarettes and soda pop.

Gary Simmons doesn't drink and plays about as much, which is his lot with the Kings as backup goaltender to Rogie Vachon. He is Wally Pipp to Lou Gehrig, Terry Hanratty wherever he may be.

So Simmons works hard in practice because he doesn't get much exercise on game nights, save to skate around in circles between periods. It's too bad, because most fans will never appreciate him. Simmons is the stuff from which legends are made.

First, there are the tattoos. "I've got about 10," he says, "and I'm not getting anymore. I suppose most people, after they get 'em, are ashamed of 'em, so when they're asked why they got 'em they'll say, well, I was drunk at the time."

"I was 16 and stone-cold sober. Three of us went up to Calgary to join the (Canadian) Navy. We did all the stuff you have to do and then we went to the tattoo parlor."

Simmons' explanation is simple: "All sailors have tattoos."

Almost immediately, Simmons changed his mind and backed out of the Navy, although he couldn't do anything about the tattoos. His buddies stayed in and will retire in four years.

"But I'll have a better pension," Gary says.

SIMMONS IS a partner in two pizza restaurants in northern California.

But he says, "I don't eat pizza. I hate pizza."

Nevertheless, he adds, "We can use the plug."

His nickname is "Cobra," bestowed by minor league veteran Bob Barlow when Simmons was at Phoenix. But Gary is terrified of snakes.

He has done some bull riding in

rodeos and loves horses, although they don't like him. They make him sneeze and wheeze.

"I'm asthmatic," he explains. "I'm going to take some shots."

That's good, because he owns a 20-acre ranch near Angels Camp and plans to buy horses for his wife and daughter.

IT SAYS SOMETHING about professional goalies that the National Hockey League Guide lists them separately from the other players, in the back.

"When I think about it," Gary muses,

"I realize that because I'm playing behind the best goalkeeper in the world I'm not going to play much, so I have to work hard and be ready when I do play . . . and I'm enjoying it."

"There are a lot of goofy goaltenders. The nature of the job, if you'll let it, will get to you."

"The goalie with the Rangers, Gilles Gratton, streaked in a restaurant where they were playing one night."

"A few years ago a coach walked into the dressing room and heard somebody talking. Looked in the bathroom and the goaltender was in there shaving and going over the Scriptures to the mirror."

Simmons allows that "he was a Christian, and if you have to have habits, that's probably the best one to get into. But you don't see it very often."

"I remember reading about the old timer Willie Cude. His wife was just trying to make conversation about the weather and he threw a steak against the wall. By the time it hit the floor, he'd retired."

"What about the guy the other night—Al Scalth in Buffalo? In warmups, he waved to the crowd, skated off the ice and nobody's seen him since."



GARY SIMMONS
He's No. 1—in practice

DESPITE HIS unusual variety of interests, Simmons believes he is nearer normalcy than most goalies.

"I'm probably more cozy going than most of them," he says. "My partner here, Rogie, is too."

There are those who would believe he is too lackadaisical because, even with experience and two leagues, Simmons, now 32, didn't reach the bigs until he was 31.

"Maybe I got that reputation," he says, "but I didn't have it in Phoenix when I played there. We won two championships. I worked hard. I did get in a rut with the Seals. They had been losers for so long that maybe after awhile I got lazy and adopted a loser's attitude."

Then the NHL shipped Simmons and the poverty stricken Seals from Oakland to Cleveland, which he calls "Mistake-On-The-Lake."

"That had to be the worst three months of my life," he says.

HE CAME to the Kings on Jan. 21, along with forward Jim Moxey, in exchange for Juha Widing and Gary Edwards, Vachon's previous understudy who was not happy at all playing a supporting role.

Presumably, Edwards is no happier in Cleveland, where nobody gets paid.

Simmons prefers his position.

"I realize that because I'm playing behind the best goalkeeper in the world I'm not going to play much, so I have to work hard and be ready when I do play . . . and I'm enjoying it."

"It makes it much easier knowing you're playing with the best. Rogie is the best. I love to win and I hate to lose, but I'm very much for the team aspect. I pull just as hard for Rogie as I do for myself. It's a tall order, but when I play I have to give the club the same goalkeeping they get when Rogie plays."

SEEK, Gary Byrne Simmons can be serious. Although he seldom plays and he drinks nothing stronger than ginger ale, he will receive his share of publicity because he is a colorful personality.

Perhaps the first media person to discover this was the radio announcer who once interviewed him between periods of an obscure game in Newfoundland, which even Canadians consider to be two blocks from the edge of the earth.

"Well, Gary," the announcer said,

"in your short time here what do you think of Newfoundland?"

Simmons: "Not much."

Announcer: "Well, er, this has been quite a game so far, don't you think?"

Simmons: "I couldn't say. It's so dark in this rink you can't see a thing. It's hard to tell if you're playing hockey or getting nudged."

The announcer, laughing hysterically, broke for a commercial.

Arriving in L.A. last month, Simmons was greeted by a longtime acquaintance

RICH ROBERTS



who is a well-known Southland TV sports personality. The man mentioned Gary's abstinence from alcohol.

"Then he said something about his abstinence. I told him right on the air that I didn't know he drank until I saw him sober once."

SIMMONS WILL admit to the truth of most of the stories about him, but a few are apocryphal. For example, following each season he does not depart civilization to live with the Indians in Arizona.

"I don't know where that got started," he says. "When I was playing in Phoenix I had a friend on the team, Howie Young, who was a reformed alcoholic and knew the problems Indians have with booze. Two or three times I went out with him to an Indian school, and that's all we'd talk about."

Are there any tales left untold? Gary ponders the question.

"One thing I've never told anybody," he begins, "is about how I really got into hockey. My whole career in hockey stemmed from when I went to a strip show at the Calgary Stampede . . ."