

## Experience Helps Seals

# Merrick Predicts Cup Berth

OAKLAND (UPI) — Long before the California Golden Seals went on their recent hot streak, one veteran coach warned other National Hockey League teams that the perennial also-rans had turned the corner.

Although his team had beaten the Seals that night, Bill Reay of the Chicago Black Hawks said, "Nobody can take California lightly anymore.

"I think the Seals are the team of the future—the team that is going to shake up the National Hockey

League. Their record doesn't show it, but they are a very underrated team."

The Seals remain last in the Adams Division despite their 7-1-1 minisurge in January, but there's a newfound attitude on the club.

"The whole team is starting to jell into a unit," said second year defenseman Rick Hampton, one of the key reasons the Seals are being given a second look.

"Sure, I'm getting a little more confident starting plays, but everyone else is playing well, too. It's eas-



Wayne Merrick

ier to play for a team that wants to play together."

Center Wayne Merrick was more emphatic.

"We're going to make it (to the Stanley Cup playoffs) this year," Merrick declared. "I see no reason why we can't catch (fourth place) Toronto."

The team has already equalled its 1974-75 victory total of 19. In mid-December the Seals managed to pick up only nine out of a possible 24 points during a 12-game homestand. But Jack Evans, in his first year as coach of the Seals,

refused to let his players quit.

"I haven't lost faith in this team," he said one night after a frustrating December loss. "We have a lot of young, talented players with good speed and anticipation. It's the finesse experience that's hurting us right now. Once we get squared away, we'll be all right."

Meanwhile, it will be a homecoming of sorts for California star Wayne Merrick tonight when the Seals call on the St. Louis Blues and the California star admits he has been thinking about it.

"I've been excited about returning to St. Louis for my first game there since the trade."

The swap brought Merrick to Oakland in exchange for Larry Patey and is considered to be one of the best deals California ever made.