

THE DIEHARDS

The Barons Boosters: Club that won't quit

By PHIL HARTMAN

Hockey's demise found most of Cleveland looking the other way. But for a hard core of hockey lovers, it was a wrenching loss, and hockey's death here is mourned even today.

It is nearly three years since the Barons and the National Hockey League moved on, but the Barons Booster Club still thrives — boosters in exile, without a team.

They meet and talk hockey. They travel to Pittsburgh, Detroit and other cities to watch it. And they hunger for its return to Cleveland.

For these 70 or so club members, hockey is a sport that stands alone. Booster Club president Dorothy Michalko says it for most of them.

"I just love hockey. I love the sport," says Dorothy, a slim blond with a ready smile for visitors to City Hall's licensing department.

"I have tried to get interested in other sports — soccer and basketball and football. But there is noth-

ing like hockey. It has so much action. It is so exciting.

"We try to keep interest alive. We see as many hockey games as we can out of town till it comes back. And we hope it does come back, to Cleveland, not the Coliseum.

"I am not talking about an Akron and Youngstown team. I mean Cleveland. The American Hockey League wants to come back here but there is no place to play. We would be happy with the NHL or the AHL. But not at the Coliseum."

Until their sport returns, the Barons Booster Club's membership hangs in there with hockey trips and with social and charitable activities.

Not everybody in the club agrees with Dorothy on the Coliseum as a site, incidentally.

Doug Archibald, the senior cardholder of the Boosters, commented during a club get-together the other night:

"The problem at the Coliseum
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Those Barons Boosters just don't know when to quit

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was a losing team. When the Cavaliers won there, you couldn't buy a ticket. But we had lousy hockey teams. That's why nobody went."

Given their choice, though, the Barons Booster Club members would prefer a city site.

"We tried to get the city to put a rink in Public Hall, but we didn't get anywhere. We don't have the clout. That would be a beautiful location," said Archibald, a driving instructor whose Booster Club membership goes back to the earliest club meetings at a tavern (he forgets the name) on Payne Ave.

"I think it was about 1948. The man who started the Boosters owned the tavern and he also owned the Coach House out on Rt. 21."

About a dozen members gathered at the West Side home of Kathy Rafferty, the second vice, for a short meeting the other night and it was evident that hockey dominates club chat.

"Pittsburgh got Paul Gardner,"

Ron Rimmel told the group.

"Oh, yes, I saw that," a chorus replied.

They all knew it, already.

Practically everybody in the club subscribes to Hockey News.

"That's how we keep track of our players," said Archibald.

The Barons Boosters are known around hockey as an active group.

Michalko says "We have a reputation with the other booster clubs. They say we're the club with no team that travels more than anybody else. We try to make a trip every other week.

"We have some out-of-town members. One from Long Island named Pete Manzillo was a Seals fan and joined our club when they moved here from San Francisco. And we had a member from England. He used to make one trip to the States each year to watch hockey and the Seals were his favorite team. He joined when they moved here, too."

The club members not only know

the players, they themselves are still known by some players and officials, although not as well now as in the old days.

Then, incidents like one that happened to Kathy Rafferty, the club's second vice president, were not unusual.

"The officials always stayed at the Sheraton-Plaza (ck) and took the bus out to the Arena. One night the two linesmen saw me on the bus and said, 'Going to the hockey game, aren't you?'"

"I said, 'how do you know?'"

"One of them said, 'You're at every game. I know exactly where you sit.' He did, too. When he got out on the ice, he skated by and he looked right at me with a little grin on his face."

Players and officials alike not only knew where Barons Boosters sat but in some cases knew the names.

"We used to give it to the other team during a game, pretty hard sometimes," recalls Archibald. "And I've seen players holler things

up to the stands you couldn't print in a paper and they would call you by name."

Frequent visitors now to the Civic Arena in Pittsburgh, Barons Booster Club members buy their seats in a block and are a familiar sight (and sound) to the Penguins and their fans.

Hockey is the glue that holds the club together. But the members are close for other reasons.

"We all agreed they can take away our team but they can never take away the friendships we've made," says Michalko. "A lot of singles have met and got married, and others have made lifelong friendships."

"It has been rewarding for all of us to work with the Jones Home, too."

"We make a profit on practically all of our trips and we try to raise some other money so we can do things for the kids there."

Some of the Boosters members keep close tabs on high school, local

amateur and college hockey. The club has a scholarship fund and has given several high school players small grants to help them with college expenses.

One of them, Mark Switaj from Bay Village, now captains the Boston College hockey team. Booster club member Dennis Moehring made it a point to be in the stands at Bowling Green this season as Switaj and his BC teammates beat the Falcons.

Moehring, the club treasurer, and some of the other Booster members, also attend many of the Junior Barons games at Parma Hts. Greenbriar Rink.

There are boosters' clubs throughout hockey, although oddly enough there are none in the most torrid hotbeds of the sport, Toronto and Montreal. Most other cities have them, and the Barons Boosters still attend AHL and NHL annual meetings to get together with booster clubs from other cities, and to stay abreast of hockey developments.

Club officers keep a tight holddown on prices as much as possible for trips, and the rates seem quite reasonable. Even for non-members, the only additional cost is \$4 for a membership.

A Montreal trip for later this winter includes three nights lodging, transportation and two hockey games at the Forum for \$225. The Pittsburgh trips cost \$25 for transportation and ticket and refreshments on the bus.

The junkets are fun for the Boosters, but they would prefer to have hockey at home.

Professional hockey was part of the scenery in Cleveland for 49 years, from 1929 to 1978. The Boosters think it will be back.

They still have their huge Most Valuable Player trophy, with just three names engraved on it (Gary Cheevers, Paul Shmyr and Rich Leduc), to give away if Cleveland ever gets a team again, and a most valuable player.

They plan to keep it polished up.