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ED LEVITT

A Cold Season

From a distance across the Oakland Arena he looked like a mild-mannered gentleman.

He wore a gray suit and horn-rimmed glasses . . . this man in the seventh row on the aisle.

After an official whistle stopped play in the first period and a Seal player was handed a two-minute penalty, the hockey fan bolted out of his seat as if his pants were on fire.

He ran down the seven rows in a half second, leaned over the rail and shouted something at the stripe-shirted whistle blower.

What he said couldn't be heard by this observer, but his finger waving at the official was worth a thousand words. Finally, he settled down and went back to the seventh row.

There were dozens of boisterous scenes like the one above during the slashing, hard-checking battle here the other night between the Seals and the Bruins.

Hockey is the kind of contact sport that brings out the tiger in men . . . and women.

They don't run out on the ice for obvious reasons. They'd either wind up sliding on their backsides or having an irritated player slashing or hooking them with a hockey stick.

But Seal fans realize their hockey team needs help — any kind of help.

Consulting the standings you find the Oakland club in last place. The Seals have won 17 games, lost 47 and tied five.

Their glorious campaign opened in mid-October and, benevolently, ends April 3.

They have been averaging three victories a month. Still, there are nitpickers who will tell you that they have found the performance of the Seals unacceptable.

Among them is Charles O. Finley, who owns the team. Another is Fred Glover, who coaches the team.

Neither one gets any particular kick out of being seen in the company of losers. It is particularly hard on Glover. He lives and dies with his players. He is with them day and night. Even when he goes home at night to sleep, he still sees them skating up on the ceiling, making their usual mistakes.

It's been a torturous season, all right, and things aren't getting better.

The Seals have been outscored, 16-6, in the last two games. And in each one they appeared to be on their way to victory.

★ ★ ★
Sunday, they took a 3-0 lead over the Red Wings in the early part of the second period. Now a 3-0 lead in hockey in the second period is equivalent to a 10-0 lead in the eighth inning of a baseball game.

Still, the Seals managed to end up losing, 8-5.

But Glover insists, "When we started the season, our roster was a good one. It was capable of doing the job and making the playoffs."

The Seals, though, won't make the playoffs and you ask Fred Glover "What the hell happened?"

"What happened," he tells you, "was that since last summer, when we lost Bert Marshall because of an operation on his wrist, we've had one or more players in casts. At one time we had three men sidelined with broken bones.

"We just don't have the depth to compensate for all our injuries. Also, we've lacked a team leader, a take-charge guy, a fiery fighter who will show the others how to go all-out to win.

"Some of the players are not putting out. I've warned them that if they can't straighten themselves out during our remaining seven home games, they won't be around next season.

"Let's face it: when you have a year such as we've had, you must make changes. You owe it to the public. If our players don't live up to their capabilities, they don't belong here."

★ ★ ★
The Seals already have traded away their No. 1 draft picks for the next three years.

But Glover still sees a bright future for hockey in Oakland.

"We're already working on next year," he says. "We're making sure that when we get into the draft meetings in June that we'll be well prepared for them.

"We're looking to expand our organization. We want to own our own farm clubs, to develop our own talent. The way it is now, all we have is a partial working agreement with Providence. It's just not enough."

What about the remaining games this season?

"We may be out of the race," says Glover, "but I hope and trust we'll be battling everybody just like we were going for the championship."

That's Fred Glover, a coach with intensity — and a last place team.