

The Wrecking Crew

by Steve Currier

As the Seals opened their training camp in September 1974, they were still licking their wounds and trying to put behind them the most disastrous season in franchise history. Charlie Finley, the Seals' eccentric and short-sighted owner had sold the team to the NHL for a tidy profit, and more importantly to the players, his beloved white skates went the way of the dodo, never to return. While the Seals were moving in the right direction for the first time in years, the franchise, was for all intents and purposes, an orphan. When the NHL bought the Seals from Finley in February 1974, the league's seventeen other franchises became part owners of the Seals. If the Seals lost too much money, it was just a matter of time before the league moved or contracted them, not like this threat had ever stopped the league's Bay Area entry before.

Garry Young, the Seals' general manager during the 1971-72 season, was rehired by the NHL when the league took over the club, and he was named the Seals' director of hockey operations. Technically, he was making the roster decisions, but the league wanted him to keep costs low. Hence, the reason why higher priced talents like Ivan Boldirev, Reggie Leach, and Walt McKechnie were shipped out of town. In their place were less heralded, but solid defensive players such as Mike Christie, Len Frig, and Jim Neilson. Hot shot defenseman Rick Hampton was selected third overall in the 1974 amateur draft.

Needless to say, there were going to be some holes to fill on the forward lines, but Young would not remain in Oakland long enough to see who would occupy these spots. Young left the Seals during the summer and later accepted a coaching job with the St. Louis Blues soon after. To fill the void, Bill McCreary was named the Seals new director of hockey operations. The idealistic, popular, and strategic Marshall Johnston had retired from playing a few months prior and had taken over from Fred Glover behind the bench. The league liked the fact that Johnston was still under contract, so he came a lot cheaper than hiring a brand new coach from outside the organization. Johnston finished out the 1973-74 season with the players he had inherited from the Finley regime, but now he would have the opportunity to devise new training strategies and playing systems he hoped would set the team on the path to success.

Despite the gloomy picture, the Seals actually had within their grasp a very promising group of players who had the potential to take the league by storm. There was Al MacAdam (acquired from Philadelphia in the Leach trade), who would later become a participant in the NHL All-Star Game, win the Bill Masterton Trophy for dedication to the sport, not to mention become the franchise's all-time leading scorer. Charlie Simmer had two fifty-goal seasons awaiting him in the 1980s. Rick Hampton had all sorts of potential on the blue line. Larry Patey would become

a solid two-way player who could put the odd puck in the net. Joey Johnston was coming off an excellent 67-point season, and, as the Seals only veteran scorer of significance now that Boldirev, McKechnie, and Leach were gone, he was expected to lead the Seals in scoring for years to come. Then there was the always reliable Gilles Meloche, who, after three years of playing behind some of the most porous defense crews in hockey history, was looked upon as a real cornerstone around which the team could build its future.

Three players who were not expected to make much of an impact for the Seals were Dave Hrechkosy, Ron Huston, and Warren Williams, but for a short time, they would form one of the premier lines of the National Hockey League. Known as the Wrecking Crew Line, the trio spent less than half a season together, but their impact on Bay Area hockey fans was huge, and they still remember the line fondly.

Hrechkosy was acquired in May 1973 when the Seals sent veteran defenseman Bert Marshall to the New York Rangers. Hrechkosy had potential, like many other Seals prospects, having scored 36 goals and 71 points with Salt Lake City of the Western Hockey League. He also had a lot of flair. "He had quite an impression on the fans," remembered former Seals Booster Club member, the late Cathy White. "He was sadly missed when he left, because he was a player that played with abandon. He just went out and hit everybody, and we called him 'the Wrecker.'" Hrechkosy had a few other nicknames too. His pointy mushroom-like haircut earned him the nickname "Flintstone" and he was also dubbed "Crazy Legs" because of his unusual skating style.

Wayne King recalled a game in which Bobby Orr took the young Hrechkosy to school. "Orr was gonna take a shot from the point, give 'er one of those fake shots and turn around backwards," King recalled. "Hrechkosy came right to the bench and our captain Joey said, 'Wreck, you want a drink?' He stood straight up to block a shot, but Orr just went around him." Hrechkosy was a fun-loving guy who played lots of practical jokes on his teammates, and kept everyone loose. Despite his goal-scoring talents, he never saw the ice the first five games of the season. He didn't score his first goal of the season until November 6, in a 7-3 loss to the New York Rangers. Hrechkosy needed someone to feed him the puck, someone who instinctively knew where to find him on the ice. That would be Ron "Spike" Huston.

California signed Huston, a 27-year old free agent, in September 1972, but he toiled in Salt Lake City for almost two years before receiving the call that invited him to the Big Show. The 1973-74 Seals were a disaster from almost every standpoint, but "Spike" was a standout in Salt Lake, scoring 84 points in 1972-73 and another 52 in 50 games the following year so it was no surprise he received a promotion. In 23 games with the Seals the latter season, he scored three goals and added 10 assists. He didn't look like a typical hockey player; he was stocky, and only

about 5'9" and 170 lbs. To most, he wasn't a great skater, but teammates would later say he was deceptively fast. "He was really smart, he had eyes in the back of his head," explained Salt Lake teammate Barry Cummins.

When the Seals sputtered out of the gate to start the 1974-75 season, McCreary made a deal that would shock many of the team's fans. Sensing a need for change, Bill McCreary traded Craig Patrick and Stan Gilbertson, who at the time had recorded only eight points between them, to St. Louis, for a pair of 22-year-old forwards, Dave Gardner and Warren "Butch" Williams. The general feeling among fans was that the Seals did not receive enough in the trade. Patrick and Gilbertson had 445 NHL games of experience to their credit, whereas Williams and Gardner had but 90. McCreary, however, deserves credit for making a good deal. Gardner would go on to score 166 points in 289 games with the Seals (and their successors, the Cleveland Barons), but in the short term, Williams proved to be the missing piece of the Seals' puzzle. "I don't think he had a whole lot of finesse, but he could score goals and he worked hard," said Huston. [i]

Williams and Gardner would become key contributors to the team, but the trade did little to turn the tide in the short term. Gilles Meloche delivered his long-awaited first win of the season on November 13, a 2-0 shutout over Chicago at the Coliseum, but the Seals lost their next six games. Despite strong starts from Stan Weir and Joey Johnston, both of whom had scored 11 points in the Seals' first ten games, scoreboards around the NHL indicated the Seals would be lucky if they repeated their 13-win season from a year ago. On October 28, the New York Islanders had just beaten the Seals 10-1. Three weeks later, the Rangers dealt the hapless Seals a 10-0 loss.

By early December, the Seals were 4-16-5, well behind third-place Toronto in the newly-created Adams Division. Perhaps out of desperation, and a lack of better options, Marshall Johnston put Hrechkosy, Huston, and Williams on a line together for the first time on December 3, 1974, and in their first six games together, they counted eleven goals. "Maybe we've jelled because we're three of the same type of hockey players," Hrechkosy said. "We think alike, do things alike. We're all mild mannered guys; we don't get down on ourselves or each other." [ii] The three players meshed well because, according to Huston, each player had a defined role. "'Wrecker' was up and down his wing and Butch mucked in the corners," Huston recalled. "I was the playmaker." [iii]

"It was two rookies and me and I was almost a rookie," Williams said. "We had fun together, we even hung out off the ice. They went to the horse races with me. We complimented each other well. Wrecker was not a great skater but he had a great shot. He liked the high corners. I dug the puck out of the corner and Spike passed it to Wrecker. It was a nice group." [iv]

On December 4 versus Atlanta, Williams scored twice while Huston scored once and Hrechkosy picked up two assists. The following game, against Minnesota, Williams scored a goal, and Hrechkosy added two assists. The line scored four points versus Kansas City on December 12, three against Montreal on December 14, and another three versus the same Canadiens on the 18th.

The Wrecking Crew Line stayed together for nineteen days (10 games) until Huston went down with an injury on December 22 versus Vancouver. During those 10 games, the Seals went 3-6-1, which was encouraging considering they had won all of 13 games the previous year.

When Huston returned January 17 after eleven games out, the Crew was reunited and picked up eight points in a 4-4 draw with the Rangers on January 17. In a 6-4 win over Boston on February 21, Hrechkosy scored his 24th and 25th goals even though Huston and Williams were held off the scoresheet. It seemed as though the trio could do no wrong, and the Seals started winning a few games here and there, and there were plenty of reasons for optimism. The team was playing its best hockey in years, the third-place Leafs were still within striking distance, and the Seals were showcasing a bumper crop of rookies which made other teams envious.

Unfortunately, Huston ran into injury troubles again, and after the big win over Boston, "Spike" was forced to sit out a month and would not return until March 28. During phase two of the Wrecking Crew era, the Seals went 5-9-2.

Huston returned to the lineup March 28 for what became one of, if not the most infamous games in team history: the night the Washington Capitals won a Stanley Cup resembling a plastic green garbage can. The Capitals entered the game without a single victory on the road, but on this night, they were motivated and put out a great effort. The Caps stormed out to a 3-1 lead in the first period, and the Seals were not able to even the score until Dave Gardner potted one in the third period. Washington's Nelson Pyatt put the underdogs back up by a goal just two minutes later, and the Capitals put the icing on the cake with an empty-net goal at 19:28. Butch Williams, playing against his brother Tommy, scored a goal and two assists, but it was bittersweet night. Sure, his brother could finally claim a win away from home, but at this expense of the Seals was downright embarrassing. Even worse was the fact the Capitals all signed a green plastic garbage can in their dressing room and paraded it around the arena before a sea of empty seats like it was a major championship. The following season, visiting players remembered seeing the garbage can at the Oakland Coliseum.

After the humiliating defeat at the hands of the expansion Capitals the Wrecking Crew Line played another four games together but failed to register a point as the Seals lost all four games to close out the season. In all, the trio were in the lineup 31 games, but it is difficult to pinpoint whether or not they actually skated on the same line each time out since game

summaries do not go into such detail. What is known however, is that during that stretch, Hrechkosy scored 12 goals and 8 assists in games when he was in the lineup with both Huston and Williams, while Huston had 8 goals and 10 assists, and Williams had 7 goals and 9 assists. The Seals went 8-19-4 during the Wrecking Crew's run, but only 11-29-9 when one or more members of the trio were off the lineup card.

Unfortunately, Cinderella's carriage soon turned back into a pumpkin, and the Seals returned to their losing ways. When Huston injured himself February 21, the Seals were 16-36-10, which was hardly reason to celebrate, but the team already had three more wins than the year before. After the Boston win, the Seals went into a 3-12-3 tailspin to close out the season, and Dave Hrechkosy's scoring touch seemingly disappeared. To make matters worse for the trio, Ron Huston fell out of favour with Bill McCreary, who had become coach after Marshall Johnston was dismissed on January 22. McCreary accused Huston of faking his latest injury, and there were also a couple of incidents where McCreary believed Huston had been out past curfew, which Huston vehemently denied. Huston also did make a fan out of McCreary when he called out his new coach after a 4-1 loss to Pittsburgh February 7. "I can't say anymore about that guy. We're [2-6] since he took over as coach. You know what I think of him." [\[v\]](#) Williams also did not get along with McCreary, who despised the fact "Butch" wore a beard. If the Seals had won more games, McCreary probably could have tolerated a few slings and arrows in the form of newspaper quotes, but with few wins to show for its effort, the line's days were numbered.

Huston was traded to, of all places, Phoenix of the World Hockey Association, prior to the start of the 1975-76 season, and Williams was demoted to Salt Lake after just 14 games, leaving Hrechkosy to fend for himself in Oakland. "Wrecker" suffered through a terrible sophomore jinx, scoring just 9 goals and 5 assists in 38 games, and he eventually found himself skating in the minors. Before long, he was dealt to St. Louis for two draft picks. Goaltender Gary Simmons believed Hrechkosy's scoring suddenly dried up because he had to play without his trusty centre, Ron Huston:

"Hrechkosy had a bonus for 30 goals. When Huston got hurt... [Hrechkosy] didn't get another goal the rest of the year. McCreary, in his infinite wisdom, the next year, figured that 'Spike' Huston was a bad influence on Hrechkosy so he traded Huston to Phoenix, and 'Wrecker' got a few goals but he ended up getting traded to St. Louis. I mean, what kind of thinking is that? It doesn't take a genius to figure out the guy's got 29 goals when Huston gets hurt and he ends up 21 games later with 29 goals. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what the secret was. I mean, 'Wrecker' was a good goal scorer, but 'Spike' was a great passer and Spike set him up all the time."

While it is a bit of an exaggeration to suggest Hrechkosy was completely shut down after Huston got injured, the once-sizzling “Wrecker” scored just three goals in the final 17 games of the season, and he didn’t score once in the final eight games. Hreckkosy had also scored five goals and three assists in the eleven games Huston missed between December 22 and January 16. It was well-known, however, that ‘Wrecker’ liked the occasional drink and often partied pretty hard off the ice, which may have been a factor in his decrease in productivity. “His off-ice activities hurt him,” said Al MacAdam. “It slowed him down. He was a big guy and he took the league by storm his first year and then he was out of the league two years later. A good time guy, but like a lot of the guys on our team, he didn’t care where he was playing. He would play the same in California, Salt Lake or anywhere.” [\[vi\]](#) Wayne King got to know Hrechkosy well in the years they played together. “We played in Salt Lake before we came up,” King remembers. “He was a good goal scorer, when he came to Oakland anyway.” King did not know why Hrechkosy was traded, but he also admitted. “I don’t want to think about [the reasons],” and then laughed. “Gotta keep those secret.” For his part, Hrechkosy admitted responsibility for his difficult second NHL season. “I don’t think I was mature enough to handle the press and outside interruptions that my success caused going into the 1975-76 season,” he said. [\[vii\]](#) When I contacted Hrechkosy for an interview for my book on the Seals, I was informed that he was suffering from Glioblastoma brain cancer making it difficult for him to process memories. Less than a month later, on March 7, 2012, he passed away.

The late John Bonasera, a long-time Seals fan even after the team moved to Cleveland, shared some of his memories of “The Wrecker” when he was interviewed for my Seals book. “Who knew that he could score as many goals as he did?” he mused. “This was a guy who looked like anything but a person who could function on ice skates. He didn’t look the part, kind of on the big, pudgy side, big curly hair. Just didn’t really think much of him, and all of a sudden he’s playing with Ron Huston and Butch Williams, and for some reason the line clicked.”

For the most part, whatever success the Seals enjoyed, whether it was their second-place finish in 1969, Norm Ferguson’s record-breaking 34 rookie goals, or an occasional four-game win streak, it was usually fleeting, and the Wrecking Crew Line was no exception to the rule. Dave Hrechkosy retired from professional hockey as a 28-year old member of the AHL’s New Haven Nighthawks. Butch Williams found his way to Edmonton of the WHA, and scored 13 points in 29 games for the Oilers. He played ten games for the American entry at the World Championships that same season, and played two more exhibition games for a team called the Sun Valley Suns, but at 25, he was also done with professional hockey. As for Ron Huston, he enjoyed a bit more success, scoring 66 and 59 points in two seasons with the Phoenix Roadrunners, but that was it as far as his professional hockey career went. He played a few more seasons in the minors before

retiring for good in 1981 at the age of 35. If there is one line that perfectly sums up the entire history of the California Seals, it is the Wrecking Crew. “For like half a season, they were awesome,” John Bonasera remembered. “Butch Williams went to have basically no career. Spike Huston went on to have basically no career... But for that magical few months, that was a fun group... It was just a sort of a convergence of the planets and the stars or something, and everything aligned properly.”

All quotes taken from personal interviews by Steve Currier, unless otherwise noted.

[i] Kurtzberg, Brad. *Shorthanded: The Untold Story of the Seals: Hockey’s Most Colorful Team* (Authorhouse), 255.

[ii] Kurtzberg, *Shorthanded*, 260.

[iii] Kurtzberg, *Shorthanded*, 277.

[iv] Kurtzberg, *Shorthanded*, 255.

[v] “Seals Start Grumbling,” *Hayward Daily Review*, February 19, 1975.

[vi] Kurtzberg, *Shorthanded*, 261.

[vii] Kurtzberg, *Shorthanded*, 261.