

Barons begin drills Wednesday

Cleveland's top secret scheduled for unveiling

Not for want of effort, but the Cleveland Barons remain Northeast Ohio's best-kept professional sports secret 10 weeks after their arrival from Oakland.

About the best-known thing about the new National Hockey League team is its name, and that was here (as the nickname of a former minor league team) long before the team joined the NHL as the Seals in 1967.

Just who are these Barons who arrive en masse Wednesday to open their preseason camp at Kent State University's Ice Arena?

Well, the Barons are a lot like their coach, Jack Evans, someone else you don't know. Born in Gannant, Wales. Nicknamed Tex. Played professional hockey until he was 45. Played it rough. Looks gruff. The kind of guy who would pattern his team after the Broad Street Bullies (Philadelphia Flyers), right?

SORRY. You still don't know anything about the Cleveland Barons. Or Jack Evans.

"I like to watch Montreal play hockey," says Evans, who speaks almost in a hush. "But who wouldn't like a team with 20 All-Stars? The type of team I want is a winning team. I'm not going to copy anybody's methods. There aren't enough good hockey players around to say I want this or that kind of team and then hope to have it in a couple years."

But Jack, what about all those body checks you dished out while playing 12 seasons for the New York Rangers and Chicago Black Hawks?

"I had the attributes to play that way," he says, "and if there's anything I learned it's that you can't make somebody play a way they are not skilled to play."

And the Barons?

"We are not a physical team like Philadelphia," he says, "but we don't avoid physical contact. We are not an intimidating team physically. We rely on our speed and quickness, and we maintain it throughout all three periods."

"There is nothing more important than proper conditioning. You must have your body in shape so that you can express the talents you have to your best advantage," Evans says.

"The second most important thing for a coach is to select a system that is compatible to the talent at hand. You build around what you have."

WHAT EVANS has, basically, is a young team (10 rookies were regulars on the 19-man roster last season) that stopped being the laughing-stock of the NHL but still finished 18 points behind third-place Toronto in the Adams Division of the Wales Conference. Buffalo and Boston were 40 and 48 points further ahead, respectively, but Toronto is the immediate concern. The third-place team makes

Hockey

Steve Klein

the Stanley Cup playoffs. The fourth-place club does not.

"If I were predicting a playoff spot for us, I would have to go way out on a limb to say we would make it this year," Evans says. "But if we show the improvement we had last year, we'll be very close to a playoff spot. If we can get over the 500 mark (the Seals were 27-42-11 last season), we'll be there. It's not impossible for us to do."

CLEVELAND will have 47 players in camp; 19 or 20 will wear Baron scarlet, black and white when the team opens at the Coliseum Oct. 6 against the Los Angeles Kings. Several others will be farmed to Salt Lake City and Toledo and some will go home with Kent State as their only memory of professional hockey.

The Barons are strong at two positions — in goal and at center. Gilles Meloche, only 25, recently signed for an additional six-year hitch with the team after four

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Preseason roster

Goalenders (4) — Larry Hendrick, Gilles Meloche, Ernie Miller, Gary Simmons, Jim Warden, Jim Wisner.

Defensemen (11) — David Bates, Mike Christie, Len Fric, Rick Hamilton, Tom Jacobs, Bjorn Johansson, Brent Meeks, Jim Neilson, Glenn Patrick, Tom Price, Darcy Reaver.

Centers (11) — Lyle Bradley, Dave Gardner, Ragno Klussen, Mark Kristlo, Dennis Marik, Dennis Meloche, Wayne Merrick, Ange Morillo, Rick Shaska, Vern Sienlund, Tom Sundberg.

Left wings (9) — Mike Fider, Bob Georghi, Bob Girard, Robbie Harris, Gary Holt, Al MacAdam, John Martin, Charlie Sommer, Paul Talarzini.

Right wings (12) — Fred Ahern, Pat Devin, Wayne King, Ken Korak, Jim Mackay, Bob Murdoch, Jim Pappin, Jouni Rinta, Gary Sobourin, Frank Spring.

promising seasons in Oakland. His goals-against average last year was 3.44 a game. Most teams split the goaltending, however, and last season 31-year-old Gary Simmons had a 3.33 average in as many games as Meloche.

Wayne Merrick is Cleveland's most prolific center, having scored 32 goals and 67 points a year ago, but 5-8 Denis Maruk may be the Barons' most charismatic player. He scored 30 goals as a rookie and added 32 assists centering the 'M' line with Bob Murdoch (22 goals, 49 points) on the right wing and Al MacAdam (32-63) on the left.

PERHAPS the only name player offensively is Jim Pappin, a 37-year-old former Chicago Black Hawk who has scored 30 goals or more four times. Pappin was traded to Oakland last season, but he didn't like the climate and retired when bothered by injuries. Northeast Ohio is more to his liking.

Defensively, the name has been 34-year-old Jim 'The Chief' Neilson, a 14-year NHL veteran, 12 of those seasons with the New York Rangers. But the name to watch is Rick Hampton, just 20 but already a two-year veteran who rushes the puck about as well as anyone in the league.

There are other Barons, all equally unknown, who will be trying to change all that during the coming weeks. There will be two sneak previews at the Coliseum — Sept. 23 against Detroit and two days later against the New York Rangers.

To date, no one has knocked down the team's Coliseum office doors to buy season tickets, although a respectable 3,000 (including loge seats) have been sold. "Every season includes a lull," says Tom Cochran, the Barons' sales manager, "and we moved here during the lull and everyone's been on vacation."

Vacation's over now, and the Barons shouldn't remain a secret too much longer.