

Wayne Merrick: Seals Shooting Star

By **JOE DeLOACH**

For Wayne Merrick, the bitterness has quickly passed.

No longer is the 23-year-old centerman discontented by an early-season trade that sent him from the St. Louis Blues to the California Golden Seals.

After the announcement of the trade, Merrick was disappointed and a little disillusioned. The way Merrick had it figured, he was pretty important to the Blues, a team that he had helped to get into the Stanley Cup playoffs during the last two seasons.

But on occasion, professional sports can be a callous business, and after a "slow" start this year (15 points in 19 games, including seven goals), the St. Louis management became strangely disenchanted with Merrick's playing ability. Then, late in November, the Blues traded Merrick to the Seals for another youthful centerman named Larry Patey. To say the least, Merrick wasn't exactly thrilled by the whole thing.

"At first," Merrick says, "I was very, very shocked by the trade. All I knew about the Seals was that they had a losing record. The Blues always were in the playoffs, and that is one of the reasons why I wanted to play for them. I really was looking forward to this season in St. Louis and I thought they felt the same way about me."

While he was contemplating the trade, Merrick wasted little time in establishing himself with the Seals. In his first game, the smooth-skating Merrick scored the winning goal as California edged Vancouver, 2-1. From that point on, it was quite apparent that the Seals had acquired a highly-skilled performer; the type of centerman who is capable of doing much more than just scoring goals.

"There was a little bit of adjusting for me," Wayne explains. "For a while, I was in a daze, but now I'm really glad that I'm here. St. Louis always treated me fairly; they gave me a chance to play. But the Seals are a real class organization, too. Being traded is all part of the job. Just a part of life. I made up my mind to do the best I can."

Since coming to the Seals, there has been little to complain about Merrick's play. With a strong performance in December, Merrick quickly took over the team scoring lead and is headed towards his finest National Hockey League season.

Wayne has developed into a point-a-game scorer with the Seals. Through his first 30 games with California, Merrick had collected 16 goals and 15 assists for 31 points. His totals at that point included six power-play goals and four game-winning goals.

Merrick consistently scores goals, but he



WAYNE MERRICK
after the trade, a Seals' star

also is an adept passer and a competent checker.

"They (St. Louis) said that I wasn't aggressive or something," Merrick says. "I guess that is why they traded me. But you know, the irony of the whole thing is that they traded for a player who supposedly isn't aggressive, either. That doesn't make much sense."

When he made his debut with the Seals, Wayne was teamed with wingers Dave Hrechkosy and Jim Pappin. After California slumped late in December, coach Jack Evans adjusted his lineup. Merrick then skated on the same line with veteran Gary Sabourin and rookie Bob Girard. That combination quickly began to produce goals and the Seals started to win at a surprising rate.

"Their (Girard and Sabourin) style really complements mine," Wayne reveals. "A centerman is only as good as his wingers, and Bobby and Sabby aren't afraid to go into the corners to get the puck. I like to get the puck in the slot and my wingers are very unselfish about getting it to me. It is a real good feeling to play with players who work so hard."

While the Seals have held down last

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WAYNE MERRICK: SEALS' SHOOTING STAR

place in the Adams Division for most of the season, they still have an excellent chance at making the playoffs.

"We're going to make the playoffs," Merrick predicts. "We are a young team that just needs consistency. Look at all the really good teams. They are able to put winning streaks together. That is what we have to do. Toronto has a tough schedule during the last month of the season, and that is where we will catch them."

Merrick played a significant role last year as the Blues finished second in the Smythe Division. The 6-1 and 190-pound Merrick scored 65 points on 28 goals and 37 assists in just his third NHL season. Considering his scoring statistics, it is surprising that the Blues decided to trade him.

Most hockey experts are saying that Seals' General Manager Bill McCreary, the man who engineered the trade, pulled off the "steal of the year" in obtaining Merrick. While McCreary is being applauded, Blues' president Sid Salomon III was booed for his part in the deal. St. Louis fans gave Wayne a standing ovation when the Seals made their first appearance of the season there, and a huge banner said "Trade Sid Salomon III for Merrick".

"I never thought that it would happen," Merrick says about being traded. "I really don't think that I'm not aggressive because I'll mix it up when I have to. But if someone doesn't come after me, I'm not going to start something. I have to get mad to really get rough."

"When I play aggressively," Merrick admits, "I play a little better. I guess some teams will try to do aggressive things to stop you. I'll do what is necessary. If that means getting in a shot of my own, then I'll do it. You just can't let yourself become satisfied. When that happens, you start to lose. I'm not going to let that happen."

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