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SEAL CRAZY AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

It's easier to ice a hockey team than to ice the fans in the stands. Eleven years ago, the California Golden Seals passed the puck for the last time in the Bay Area, but the Seals Booster Club still cheers on.

No substitute sport will suffice for the SBC. "I simply despise baseball and basketball, and I only tolerate football," sniffs Howard Cochran, a member in good standing for 27 years. "But in hockey there's always action and movement and a great deal of sportsmanship."

With 132 members, the 27-year-old SBC is as strong and active as any of the other nineteen hockey fan clubs in North America—more so, in fact, since Seals supporters must traverse vast distances for thrills on ice. The closest venue is Los Angeles, home of the Kings, but the SBC also organizes annual trips to such hockey hot spots as Vancouver and Edmonton.

The club was formed in 1961 when the San Francisco Seals, then a Western Hockey League team, played at the Cow Palace. In 1966, the team shifted its sticks to the Oakland Coliseum, becoming the Oakland Seals and later the Golden Seals.

The team joined the National Hockey League in 1967 and for some years played as the Cleveland Barons, but ultimately it lost its identity completely in a merger with the Minnesota North Stars. Now, says booster club president Alan Dethlefsen, there are only three of the old Seals still on ice: Giles Meloche and Charlie Simmer of the Pittsburgh Penguins and Denis Maruk of the North Stars.

The Seals boosters, left bereft, must parcel out their adoration piecemeal and yearn for the day when a hockey franchise returns to the Bay Area. "We have our hopes," says Dethlefsen, who blames the loss of the Seals on former mayor George Moscone's opposition to a downtown sports arena proposed by team owner Mel Swig. "But we have to be realistic. We won't get a team until we get an arena."

In the meantime, group trips, monthly meetings, seasonal picnics and parties keep



Seals boosters, alive and kicking more than a decade after the last game: "We have our hopes."

the Seals lovers cozy in camaraderie. Their newsletter, the *Seal's Bark*, also keeps them apprised of trips, games, rumors and sports updates—not only during the October to May hockey season but all year long.

Three things keep the booster club alive and kicking, according to Dick Pantages, who joined in 1970 with his wife, Sandi: "First, hockey fans are kind of a rare breed, so we hang together for protection. Second, the booster club is like family for a lot of people. And last, even when there are no hockey games to see, we're always doing something. We've taken trips to England and cruises around Hawaii.

"But we're still hockey fans," Pantages is quick to assert. "We're going up to Edmonton in February to see a couple of games. It amazes people up there that we come from sunny California in the middle of winter to see hockey games. They're so blasé. We were sitting up in nosebleed heaven in their arena and you could hear the skates on the ice. They're just sitting there absolutely quiet—a little polite applause when they score a goal."

While Pantages and his contingent double the decibel level at other teams' games, the SBC continues to grow—Dethlefsen says the club still attracts new members. Some are friends of current members,

others hear of it through the hockey grapevine and still others have stumbled on the club in places such as Ricky's Sports Lounge and Restaurant in San Leandro.

According to Dethlefsen, Ricky's was one of the first places with a satellite dish to snatch sports signals from the air and televise them on a giant screen. Owner Ricky Ricardo Jr. says there are now five dishes, five giant screens and 30 monitors.

"We show hockey every night," he says. "We can show seven games at once."

The zeal of hockey fans has also produced booster clubs for the defunct Atlanta Flames and Colorado Rockies. But only the Seals left behind not one but two surviving clubs: a contingent in Cleveland still cheers on without the Barons.

And so loyal are Seals supporters that time and distance become irrelevancies. Although most SBC members live in cities around the Bay, 35 now reside in nine different states. All refuse to relinquish their fealty to the Seals.

If sports fans who keep their seats through staggering losses and in foulest weather are the die-hards, then those who swear allegiance to a team that left town more than a decade ago and subsequently vanished entirely must surely be the immortals.

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