

Seals Booster Club still alive and well

Members gather monthly despite not having a team

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THE FAMILY that roots together stays together, even when it doesn't have a team to root for.

For 30 up-and-down years, a plucky organization called the Seals Booster Club has proven that point.

It didn't matter that much to club members when the California Golden Seals moved to Cleveland 15 years ago. And it doesn't matter that much now that the San Jose Sharks are bringing major-league hockey back to the Bay Area.

This is a group that has shown it doesn't need its favorite sport in order to survive.

"It was a shame that hockey went kaput here," said Ty Toki of San Francisco, a charter member and former president of the club, "but when it did, we weren't going to quit going to meetings. We'd become too attached to each other."

The club was formed by Burlingame realtor George Spanek in 1962, a year after the San Francisco Seals joined the Western Hockey League and began play at the Cow Palace.

When the California Golden Seals entered the National Hockey League in 1967 and set up shop at the Oakland Coliseum Arena, the booster club went along, growing to more than 1,000 adult and junior members at its crest.

When the Golden Seals moved to the Midwest in 1976, a number of hardy boosters stayed.

And now the club seems stronger — and more united — than ever.

"The key is that we're such good friends," said Toki. "I've never seen such nice people — people who don't forget each other."

The boosters, about 130 strong at the moment, are generally happy to see hockey return. And they'll support the Sharks, even though they have a couple of long-held reservations.

"We don't care that much for the owners (George and Gordon Gund)," said current Seals Booster Club president Harry Brown. "They did us dirt in '76 (George Gund was a minority owner of the Golden Seals then, and suggested the move to Cleveland) and a couple of other places along the way. But if we get a team that plays well, the old feelings could go away."

Either way, the Seals Booster Club — more social club than fan club now — doesn't plan to go anywhere.

"If the Sharks form a booster club of their own, we'll probably join it," said Toki, who has season tickets for Sharks games, "but I'm sure about 35 or 40 of us will want to keep our club going, too." walk-in van."

George Black, who joined the club in 1968, first went to a game because he got a free ticket.

"I didn't know anything about the sport, but after I saw a game I was hooked," he said.

His ties to the booster club were not so quickly forged.

"It took me a couple of years to get used to everybody," he said. "But after that, it was like family."

Good memories

There simply are too many good memories not to.

The club members have partied and picnicked together, traveled together, gone through generations together. Kids and grandkids of early members have joined the ranks. Fifteen couples have met and married through the club.

Some of the members are trans-



EXAMINER/DWIGHT CHAPIN

California Golden Seals boosters, from left, Ty Toki, Terry and Tom O'Connell and Bruce Gotjen say they'll now be rooting for the Sharks.

plants from other NHL cities, but most of the people involved were not born-and-bred hockey fans.

Toki was in the dry-cleaning business in the early '60s and got involved with the minor-league Seals by cleaning player uniforms, furnishing towels, repairing equipment.

"Since hockey was new here at the time, very few people were knowledgeable about it," he said. "During the first season, they used to come to games in tuxedos and fur coats. They didn't even know what a puck was. I got to know the players by meeting them at the airport after road trips and picking up their luggage with my big

Road trips

Black, a Pleasanton travel agent, now sets up trips for the club. Every season, 25-30 members travel to see games in Vancouver, Los Angeles and other sites (they'll be headed to Edmonton and Calgary in November), and go on NHL cruises to the Caribbean and Hawaii that feature current and former players and hockey Hall of Famers.

Toki is the club's cruise champion. "I think I've been on nine over the years," he said.

The organization is so tightly knit and well regarded that it was chosen as host for the NHL Boost-

er Clubs' convention in 1985, even though the Bay Area was without a team at the time. "And we'll be bidding for the 1994 convention," Brown said.

Brown, a retired toy buyer who has been in the club for two decades, and his sister, Ruth Driscoll, now are in charge of Seals Bark, a monthly newsletter that has been produced for the last 20 years and helps maintain ties with old Seals and Golden Seals players.

"They were looking for somebody to take it over the year I retired, in 1980," he said, "so I volunteered. I enjoy it. It really doesn't take that much time."

Brown also chairs monthly club meetings at The Ranch restaurant in Hayward.

And he and Toki are ready and willing to enroll new members. Dues are \$15 annually for adults, \$25 for family plans, \$10 for out-of-state members. Information may be obtained by writing Seals Booster Club, P.O. Box 445, Mt. Eden 94557, or by calling Toki at (415) 681-1751.

"I know a lot of people can't believe we've existed through all these years and are still here," said Brown. "But we've never really given any thought to disbanding. No one wants to drop out."