

Suddenly, They're Cinderellas

Seals Force Open the Cellar Door

By DICK DRAPER
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If there is a true Cinderella team in the National Hockey League this season, it has to be the California Seals.

The Seals . . . untidy, scuffed and bruised from their years in the NHL cellars. The Seals . . . unwanted, unloved, with their NHL step-sisters ridiculing them, scorning them.

But now the door to the cellar has been opened, albeit just a crack. And the Seals — currently the hottest team in the NHL — are catching the eye of royalty in the Prince of Wales Conference.

They might get an invitation to the postseason playoff ball, after all.

"This win puts a lot of pressure on Toronto," enthused Seals' defenseman Bob Stewart following his club's 5-3 victory over the Maple Leafs Sunday in Oakland which boosted California to within eight points of the third-place Canadians in the Adams Division.

"They're gonna be looking over their shoulder now, for we're coming into our own. We have a lot of young guys and a lot of new guys, but this team's coming together, and we're gonna give Toronto one helluva run for their money. If we can keep going like this they'll be no stopping us.

"This was the game we HAD to win."

said Stewart. "It was as simple as that. And we did."

Four goals in the first period and a hat trick by Wayne Merrick — his second of the season — gave the Seals their fourth straight win and extended their unbeaten streak to five games. They are 7-1-1 in the last nine and 19-24-4 overall.

"I'm very happy, we finally beat somebody in our own division," said Seals' Coach Jack Evans. "I think they were playing our system well enough from day one, but now they're scoring goals. It's coming natural to them and they can concentrate on the offensive part of the game. I think experience is the big thing. At the first of the season they were all a little awed by everything. But now they know they can skate with anyone."

The Seals, with two goals by Merrick and one each by Dennis Maruk and Al MacAdam, gunned to a 4-2 lead in the first period, but were lucky to survive a lethargic second period which had Evans more than edgy.

"I got very scared in that second period," he admitted. "They must have been in our end for 15 minutes, and I got a little frightened."

Toronto cut the margin to 4-3 on a goal by Errol Thompson, and MacAdam felt

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(Times Photo by John Storey)

THE INSTANT OF IMPACT

California Seals' left wing Bob Girard is checked hard against the boards by Toronto defenseman Brian Glennie during second period of Sunday's game at the Oakland

Arena. The Seals won, 5-3, registering their first victory over an Adams Division foe this year.

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the Seals had relaxed too much. "We got a little complacent, and we sat back. We just didn't skate."

But Merrick pumped in his third goal of the night — his 20th of the year — on a feed from Garry Sabourin just 20 seconds into the final period, and the Seals officially gave notice to Adams Division foes they are a real threat.

"Skate with confidence, that's what we did tonight," explained MacAdam. "We're at our peak now and hopefully we can stay there. The big thing tonight was not getting too uptight about the game. This was THE game. It's hard, but to win

we'll just have to play better." It'll be hard, but to make the playoffs we'll just have to play better — it's a matter of everybody getting themselves up."

NOTES — The Seals' acquisition of center Wayne Merrick from St. Louis earlier in the season may be the Trade of the Year. "It certainly looks that way right now," commented Coach Evans. "He's a real fine hockey player. I knew of his reputation for fast speed and his scoring record was increasing every year he was in pro hockey. But (General Manager Bill) MacCreary would get the credit. He had the eyes on him and had scouted him since he was in juniors."

With Sunday's victory, the Seals have equaled their entire 1975-76 output. Their 5th win last season didn't occur until March 3, and the entire 1974 win-over record was in game 53 on Feb. 5, 1974.

California meets Washington Wednesday at the Oakland Arena, then hosts Norris Division leader, Montreal on Friday.