

# After They Melted the Ice

By Barry Janoff

This should be a story about Northern California's only professional hockey team, the California Golden Seals. It should tell of a young, aggressive club well on the road to improvement. It should say that they're going to bring a championship crown to the Bay Area.

This should be a story about all of these things. It won't, however, because the California Golden Seals no longer exist.

The Bay Area is a virtual treasure chest of professional sports activities. No other period in time has seen two pro baseball teams, two pro football teams, three pro soccer teams, a pro softball team, a pro basketball team, and a pro tennis team all in action. Almost every sports buff is represented and satisfied in one area or another.

Except for the fans who follow professional hockey. Because of financial, political, and social obstacles, the California Golden Seals of the National Hockey League have moved to Cleveland. And that move leaves a bigger hole in this area's sport scene than most people imagine.

"I've been a hockey fan for my entire life," said Bob Stern, a San Francisco businessman. "I followed the Seals when they were members of the Western Hockey League, and then ecstatically followed them when the NHL moved in.

"They weren't always good," he continued, "but they were fun to watch. Now something is missing because that fun has been taken out of my life."

The history of the Golden Seals, who would have started training camp here next month, was short, restless, and unpredictable. Members of the Western Hockey League from 1961 through 1967, the team won two championship titles and drew enough fans at the Cow Palace to entice the NHL into the area. A group headed by Barry von Gerbig purchased the Seals in 1966 and moved them to Oakland.

After their initial season a new group bought the club and renamed them the



Oakland Seals. The next year Charles Finley purchased them, changed their name to the California Golden Seals, stayed around until 1974, then sold them. Mel Swig acquired them next and remained in the Bay Area until last month when he moved the team to Cleveland and christened them the Barons.

"They usually had more action going for them off the ice than on," stated Denny

Ingram, a former season ticket holder. "And it wasn't easy for us fans to keep up with their comings and goings. But we were rewarded in many ways, especially last season."

"The Seals hadn't improved much last year, but all the signs for future improvement were apparent," Cindy Lawrence said. "My friends and I went to over 25 games and we could see the makings of a championship team. They were young, aggressive, and smart; all they lacked with experience. Now that they've moved some other fans will get the rewards of a fine hockey team."

Naturally Seals' fans feel a great loss by the move. But others are effected in different ways. Junior hockey players, for instance, will have no major league home team to aim for. The move could also start an exodus of pro sports from the area. The Giants may not be around much longer, the A's might leave if attendance doesn't increase, and professional leagues in general could look elsewhere for further expansions.

"I had the choice of staying here or moving with the team," explained Len Shapiro, the Seals' former assistant director of public relations. "But I enjoy living in the Bay Area too much. I wouldn't want to live in Cleveland, anyway. So, for now, I'm out of a steady job."

"I was the real star of that team," said Krazy George, who used to lead the cheering section at every Seals' home game. "Where are they now, without Krazy George to inspire them?"

California's Golden Seals are now the Barons of Cleveland. They're gone from the Bay Area because the money wasn't there, because politics got in the way, because they weren't winners when they needed to be. But they did instill a spirit of loyalty and respect among their followers that lingers still.

One of their fans summed it up best when, echoing the thoughts of countless others, he said, "They've melted the ice at the Coliseum, but they can't melt the alliance we formed with the Seals. That will be here forever."