A team sealed with golden memories

Bay Area's first NHL franchise had a short but colorful history

By Ross McKeen

OEMER goalie Gary Simmons remembers the night the levely Washington Capitals celebrated the only road win of their 1974-75 expansion season by parading a trush can as an anti-Stanley Cup around the Oukland on

Ex-public relations director Len Shapero recalls counting the 976 fans who showed up in 1972 on the last Christmas Eve game played in the NHL.

Past becaters dub president. Ty Taki recollects heating an end-ofthe-season picnic that, unbeknownst at the time, was actually a goodbye to the team.

The NHL's first Sky Aren franchies lasted only nine sensors in Oakland. The Seals had many owners, a penchant for losing and a coinful history. When it was annoranced in the summer of 1976 that the team was moving, all that remained were measuries.

"I remember driving over the San Mateo Bridge and I heard the team was moving and there were four penable sites — Denver, Miansi, New Orleans and Cleveland," said Simmons. "And I said to myself, "It'll be Cleveland because there's nothing wrong with the uther three piaces." Sure enough, it was Cleveland."

Memories will be rekindled Friday night when Simmons and other former Seein participate in the Heroen of Hockey Game at the Sen Jose Arena. The anticoully televised 6 o'clock content will precide the NHL SuperSkills competition, preliade to Saturday's All-Star Game.

Simmons, 52, is 18 years removed from his NHL career. He settled in the East Bay to resume a business venture he and Shapiro began the year the Seak moved.

'The memories are still vivid in Simmons' mind.

"We didn't have solid ownership



Charles or

Even after 26 years, some fans still have visid memories of the likes of Scale' team captain Carol Vadrais, left, and the Red Wings' Gary Bergman (2).

until it was too late," Simmons and. "It's too had because we had the start of a good team. The fanathat we did have here were avesome. You won't find any better fam anywhere. They just didn't here much of a product to come watch."

AKLAND WAS one of eix cities granted franchises when the NHL embarked on its most ambitious expansion program. The Original Six became the East Division. The Senie were owned by businessman Earry Van Gerbig and coached by hard-mosed Bert Olmsteed, Playing in the Oskland Colineum Arena, they finished last in the new all-expansion West

"It was exciting to finally have an NHL team," and Toki, a City resident who serviced laundry and uniforms for toams since the early 1960s, when the San Francisco Soals were champions of the Westem Hockey League.

After just one assume, however, the Seals were looking to move. An attempt to relocate in 1965 to Vancurver failed, and the team was wid to a group hunded by Potter Palmer and George Gillett, owners of the Harlem Globetrotters.

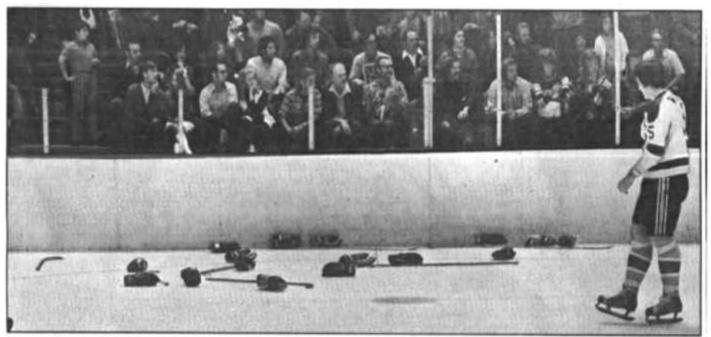
They were resold in '69 to Transnational Communications, an investor group that included baseball Hall of Famer Whitey

[See SEALS, B-4]



DUMBER FILL OWN

Former Seals qualie Gary Simmons works in the weight room in preparation for Priday night's Herom of Hockey Game at the San Jase Arena.



EXAMPLE (1971)

Seals captain Carol Vadnais has trouble finding his gloves after a fight, just as his team had trouble finding victories in the early '70s.

· SEALS from B-1

Sealed with golden memories

Ford and announcer Pat Summerall.

In 1970, Charles O. Finley purchased the team and changed the name to the California Golden Seals. He dressed them in the colors of his Oakland A's — green and gold, complete with white skates and tried a variety of gimmicks to arouse interest.

"I think we had a good corps of about 6,000 to 7,000 fans," said former Seals goalie Gilles Meloche, now goaltending coach and a scout for the Pittaburgh Penguina, who will participate Friday. "I always thought it could go there, it just didn't happen at that time."

The team was starting to make headway in the standings. They had escaped the cellar in three of four seasons by 1972, but the formation of the rival World Hockey Association, which was offering competitive contracts, gave players an appealing option.

"We lost nine players to the WHA who would have made us a better club," said Meloche.

The Seals would never leave the

cellar again.

The late Finley lost interest by 1974, and the league took control of the financially struggling Seals. Munson Campbell was assigned to run the team while local ownership was sought.

In 1976, local hotelier Mel Swig owned the Seals, but his attempts to get a new arena built in downtown San Francisco got shot down. By midseason, current Sharks majority owner George Gund became a minor investor in the Seals' ownership group.

"It was a shock to the players," said Dennis Maruk, whose rookie season with the Seals was the first of a 14-year NHL career. "I had a good following for a first-year player. I liked the area. It's too bad we had to move."

By the fall of 76 the Seals had moved to a suburb of Cleveland, where they stayed for just two seasons before merging rosters with the Minnesota North Stars in 1978.

"We went from playing golf after practice to throwing snowballs 26 miles out of town," Simmons said. "It was a travesty.

"The first time I stepped on the ice I noticed a whole bunch of dead flies in the corner," he added. "I said, "They committed suicide be-



DOMESTIC

Goalle Gilles Meloche was a bright spot during the California Golden Seals' nine-year existence in Oakland.

cause they're in Cleveland."

In all, the Seals were a combined 182-401-115 during nine regular seasons in Oakland. Six times they finished last.

The boosters club still exists. Approximately 50 members meet every other month. They continue to publish a newsletter, and the group still attends annual conventions.

"The group is getting smaller," Toki said. "They're either moving away or passing away."