

# A team sealed with golden memories

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

By Ross McKeen  
OF THE OAKLAND STAFF

**F**ORMER goalie Gary Simmons remembers the night the lowly Washington Capitals celebrated the only road win of their 1974-75 expansion season by parading a trash can as an anti-Stanley Cup around the Oakland ice.

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

Past beacons club president Ty Toki recalls hosting an end-of-the-season picnic that, unbeknownst at the time, was actually a goodbye to the team.

The NHL's first Bay Area franchise lasted only nine seasons in Oakland. The Seals had many owners, a penchant for losing and a colorful history. When it was announced in the summer of 1976 that the team was moving, all that remained were memories.

"I remember driving over the San Mateo Bridge and I heard the team was moving and there were four possible sites — Denver, Miami, New Orleans and Cleveland," said Simmons. "And I said to myself, 'It'll be Cleveland because there's nothing wrong with the other three places.' Sam coughed, it was Cleveland."

Memories will be rekindled Friday night when Simmons and other former Seals participate in the Heroes of Hockey Game at the San Jose Arena. The nationally televised 6 o'clock contest will precede the NHL SuperSkills competition, prelude 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 Seals moved.

The memories are still vivid in Simmons' mind.

"We didn't have solid ownership



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

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

**O**AKLAND WAS one of six cities granted franchises when the NHL embarked on its most ambitious expansion program. The Original Six became the East Division. The Seals were owned by businessman Barry Van Gettig and coached by hard-nosed Bert Olmstead. Playing in the Oakland Coliseum Arena, they finished last in the new all-expansion West Division.

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

After just one season, however, the Seals were looking to move. An attempt to relocate in 1985 to Vancouver failed, and the team was sold to a group headed by Potter Palmer and George Gillett, owners of the Harlem Globetrotters.

They were resold in '89 to Transnational Communications, an investor group that included baseball Hall of Famer Whitey

[See SEALS, B-4]



Former Seals goalie Gary Simmons works in the weight room in preparation for Friday night's Heroes of Hockey Game at the San Jose Arena.



EXAMBER/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 Pittsburgh Penguins, 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-



EXAMBER/1973

Goalie 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."