

End of the ride for the Barons

By MIKE HARRIS
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CLEVELAND (AP) — The end of the roller coaster ride appeared to be at hand today for the Cleveland Barons, with the National Hockey League Board of Governors expected to decide the fate of the staggering franchise.

The board was scheduled to meet today in New York, following the disclosure here last night by Chairman John Ziegler that the league's most likely option was to dissolve the franchise by assigning the players' contracts to other teams.

Seventeen of the 27 Barons still under contract to the beleaguered franchise met here yesterday, first with Alan Eagleson, executive director of the National Hockey League Players' Association, then with Ziegler and fellow board member William Wirtz.

FOLLOWING those meetings, Ziegler said: "There are three options open at this point. First, there is the possibility of the sale of the team; secondly, there is the possibility of the league taking over the franchise, and there is the possibility of winding down the franchise, which would include assignments of the players' contracts to other teams.

"The first two possibilities seem remote at this time, but remain possibilities," Ziegler added.

Eagleson said, "The players tried for three weeks to keep the franchise alive. They played without pay and without contract protection. I can no longer persuade them to play, nor

would I do so. They are risking their futures and their careers.

"The players have decided, unless their contracts are guaranteed properly and their salaries guaranteed properly for the rest of the year by someone other than the current management, they would not play," Eagleson continued.

Last Friday, after he failed to meet the Feb. 15 payroll, the Barons gave majority owner Mel Swig an ultimatum to sell the team or pay them back salary owed by Tuesday noon, or they would declare themselves free agents. Eagleson said it had been determined the Barons could not now gain free agent status, but would likely opt for retirement status until a solution is reached.

THE BARONS said they would refuse to play the game scheduled here tonight against the Buffalo Sabres.

"I would suspect there will be a sale, auction or assignment of players to other teams by direct sale or by draft," the Toronto attorney noted. "And I expect the Cleveland Barons' situation to be little more than the tip of the iceberg.

"The financial difficulties being encountered by several teams in the NHL are obvious to me and anyone who can count," he added. "All one has to do is look at the scores, not on the ice, but the attendance in the box scores. I told these players a little while ago not to be surprised if they are with another team next year and I wind up making this same talk to them.

"From the players' point of view, I would hope they (the NHL governors) would get something settled today, resolve any impasse that exists and get these players back to work with some team in the league as soon as possible," Eagleson added.

THE BARONS' severe financial difficulties became public during the all-star break when Swig went to the league for help. He was given a proposal by the league, which he turned down.

The Jan. 31 payroll went unpaid until after the players asked the league for free agent status. Then, when the back pay was forthcoming, only 27 Barons received it, with three members of the NHL roster and 16 minor league players at Salt Lake City being cut loose by Swig.

When the San Francisco businessman missed the next payroll, player representative Bob Stewart led the Barons in coming up with their ultimatum that the owner either pay up, sell out or the players would walk out.

The Barons played nine years in Oakland, Calif., as the California Golden Seals before being transferred to Cleveland in July, 1976. During their years in California, the Seals were pulled out of financial difficulty several times by the league, to the tune of about \$8 million.

Swig has said he has lost about \$5 million in his three years as owner of the team, not including a loss estimated at about \$2 million this season.



PACKING IT UP for the Cleveland Barons forever is equipment manager Gerry Dean after yesterday's practice. (AP photo)