

## Meet Mar-u-u-uk, Seals' instant hero

The sound seems to begin way up in the cheap seats, off in the darkened corners where only the true believers sit. It spills over the first railing, picking up momentum as it moves from throat to throat. Slowly and sternly it builds in volume. Finally it goes pouring out onto the ice, strong and vigorous. It gives one the impression that a steam locomotive is about to go crashing through the arena. You can run from it, but you can't hide.

The citizens are actually showing love for a hockey player, a phenomenon that could only be duplicated if London decided that it needed a major league baseball franchise. They speak with a single noise, a mutual emotion: "Maruuuuuuuuuuuuuk! Marrrrrrruuuuuuuuuk! Maaaaaarrrrrruuuuuuuuuk!" They make a simple monosyllabic surname, imported direct to Canada from the exotic Ukraine, sound like one of those Welsh railroad stations that nobody can pronounce. The customers are doing something hardly anyone ever thought they would. They have fallen hopelessly, dizzily in love with a young man who commits mayhem for a living.

As you know, hockey has been something of a disaster in these parts, at least for the past eight years since our conglomerate community was presented with a National Hockey League franchise. The Seals, by any name—and they were called by quite a few, were a thorough failure, mostly because of a series of remarkably stupid owners. It was like trying to get the beer concession in a Baptist Church in Ft. Smith, Arkansas. Nobody was going to listen to you, because you were a little bit crazy to begin with.

For the first time since expansion turned the NHL's ice barons into chain store operators there is a home town operation. Mel Swig, whose family doesn't exactly run hot sheet joints for a living, owns the San Francisco Seals, a team doing business in exile across the Bay with a ridiculous corporate name, "The California Seals." Instead of trading away draft choices this club actually signs them, which is why Dennis Maruk figures to be San Francisco's first major league hockey super star.

Imagine, if you can, Pete Rose growing up in Toronto and being daft over hockey instead of baseball. Put all that energy, all that personality, all that confidence on ice and you have Dennis Maruk. It is pronounced "MAH-rook." You have to drag

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those two "Os" in the second syllable out for half a minute if you plan to participate at Seals games while they endure the captivity over in Oakland. They said that Maruuuuuuuuuuuk was far too small at 5-8 to be an effective center in the National Hockey League. One man who is considered to be the finest hockey writer in either nation (Canada or the United States) informed the San Francisco Examiner last spring that the Seals had blown their second round draft choice on a guy who was "too small."

In retrospect one has to wonder what Dennis Maruk is too small for. About the only thing that comes to mind is that he is not tall enough to jump center in the National Basketball Association against Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. That about covers Maruk's limitations. Had he taken to baseball instead of skating he'd be playing third base for Cincinnati right now.

"So, I'm 5-8" he said. "That means I have to hustle a little harder. I know they said that I would have been a first round draft choice if I was taller. I don't think that means a thing. I want to get after those guys who think I'm short. I'm the same size as Marcell Dionne. The Los Angeles Kings traded away about half their team to get him from Detroit. I wasn't all that heavy as an amateur last year, but I've put on some weight and it isn't fat."

As a child, Maruk wanted to play for the Toronto Maple Leafs, which was no surprise since he grew up there, in that best of all British-American cities. He was dreadfully afraid that the Detroit Red Wings might take him in the draft. Having played only 90 miles away in London, Ontario he knew what the town was like. Somebody told him nine players got robbed in one night just trying to escape from the Detroit Olympia.

"This is heaven out here in the San Francisco

Bay Area," he said. "This is a whole different team than it used to be, they tell me. Jim Neilsen told me that it's like night and day. Nobody used to care about winning. Nobody used to come out and see the Seals play. You never knew whether the team was moving someplace. But now we know we're going to San Francisco when Mr. Mel Swig builds his arena over there. I know the customers are enthusiastic. They didn't start that 'Maruuuuuuuuuuuk' stuff until I really did something. These people are anxious to love us. That makes you want to get after it."

It has been suggested that Dennis Maruk is already one lap ahead on the rookie-of-the-year competition, for which one gets a silver peanut dish and an all-expenses-paid trip home to Toronto when the season is over. He has eight goals. He thinks he should have had 15 by now. To a certain extent, Maruk is right. He keeps getting those Broadway situations and he slams the puck into the goal post, a dumb move if there ever was one.

"You know I had Rogie Vachon whipped in Los Angeles? Can you believe that? He was over here and I moved the other way and there was nobody between the two of us. I slammed the puck against the post. Stupid! Dumb? I can do better than that. You know that game at Pittsburgh where I got the four goals. It could have been six and it should have been five. I couldn't do anything wrong that night. What a feeling that is."

Some hockey players will tell you that they know exactly how well they are going to do just by the way they warm up before a game. This is a delirium they share with jockeys and bull fighters. Maruk, who shaved the lower half of his Fu Manchu moustache off to please his mother who saw him reek out the arena in Buffalo the night before his big show in Pittsburgh, had this marvelous sensation that God was on his side against the Penguins.

"The fans start that Marrrrrrruuuuuuuk, Marrrrrrruuuuuk stuff . . . to me . . . well, I've never had that before. It excites me a little bit in a game. Well, it gives me a big lift. I don't know what it is. It took a couple of games for it to develop. I scored a short handed goal against the New York Islanders and they just started doing it. I skate out on the ice now and it starts. It makes me want to skate right through everybody."

They said that Maruk took ten shots at the Pittsburgh goalie. It might have been less. He has trouble remembering. He didn't make a bad one all night. He could just as easily have ended his work day with seven goals. The puck was always there and he just couldn't believe it. The next day his mother called him and wanted to know why he hadn't played like that in Buffalo, what with all his relatives crossing the International Bridge to see



DENNIS MARUK IN ACTION LAST NIGHT  
*Examiner Photo by Bill Neuman*

him play as miserably as he did against the Sabres. Don't worry, he told his mother, he'd end the season with 30 goals and she'd be able to walk in the neighborhood with her chin erect.

Despite his own blatant aggressiveness, Maruk, who looks a little like the kid you wish your daughter would bring home if the guy wasn't already engaged, he discovers that few National Hockey League veterans want to take a shot at him. It's all the young men he played amateur with who want to see what he has now that he's 20 and getting popular up in the big league. Why, Denis Potvin of the Islanders, whom he used to consider a boyhood friend acted as if Maruk was trying to decapitate Potvin's mother. They were amateurs together.

This wild acclaim that Maruk is enjoying is directly attributable to the fact that Seals have home ownership, that they will not trade away their high draft choices, that they have money to spend and that they will be here next year and the year afterwards.

If the San Francisco Giants had the same sort of base you'd hear 34,678 customers calling for John Montefusco in the same way. There is no substitute for stability.