

Excerpt from the manuscript of Steve Currier's new book: *The Washington Capitals, the Kansas City Scouts, and the Coca-Cola Cup: How Two NHL Flops Became Japanese Hockey Champions* (working title)

The 1974-75 Washington Capitals, in their first season of operation, were shaping up to be quite simply the worst professional hockey team in history. Double-digit losses were the norm. Shutouts (against the Caps, that is) seemed as plentiful as snowflakes in a blizzard. After dropping a 7-3 decision to the New York Rangers on February 9 to drop their record to a horrendous 4-45-5 rookie coach Jimmy Anderson was mercifully relieved of his duties. In to replace him was George "Red" Sullivan, who actually won two of his first four games behind the bench, but the good times wouldn't last long. The remainder of the Red Sullivan era of Capitals hockey could be summed up in four words: no wins, fifteen losses. Minutes after the Caps suffered a 8-2 beating in Boston on March 22, Sullivan resigned. "I can't hack it anymore," Sullivan explained. "The old stomach is all bugged up. I'm not eating properly; I'm not sleeping properly. I can't do it anymore at my age." ⁱ Yes, he was a veritable senior citizen at a ripe old 45 years!

In this excerpt from the manuscript of this book on the Capitals, Scouts and their April 1976 four-game exhibition series in Japan, general manager Milt Schmidt goes behind the bench to finish out the last seven games of the 1974-75 season.

Uncle Miltie Takes Over

"I'll coach until I find someone," Milt Schmidt said. "It could be that I'll be that someone and stay with it." And like that, the Caps were on their third coach of the season. Schmidt had lots of coaching experience having stood behind the Boston Bruins' bench for over ten years in the 1950s and 60s, and he very nearly started the season as the Caps' bench boss, but he decided against wearing that extra hat. "Maybe I listened to too many people who said, 'No, Milt, no,'" he said. "Now it's my baby. . . for better or for worse." ⁱⁱ

When Schmidt took over behind the bench, the Caps had already lost 15 consecutive games, which tied the NHL record set by the 1930-31 Philadelphia Quakers. It wouldn't be long before the Caps smashed that mark too, posting losses in Schmidt's first two games as coach. "I have been sitting upstairs and cursing all year," the NHL's newest coach said. "I had to go down

to the bench and try to do something myself. It's obvious, though, it's going to take more than coaching.”ⁱⁱⁱ

With the Capitals on the road for their next game, a victory seemed highly unlikely, even against the lowly California Golden Seals, who usually played decent hockey at the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum. That being said, the Seals were dead last in the Adams Division with a 19-45-12 record, and had long since been eliminated from the playoff picture. The Caps' last two road games were against Detroit, who was beatable, and Montreal, who was not. If the Caps wanted to end their losing streak, Oakland was the best place to do it.

Coming into their March 28 game with the Seals the Caps were riding a 37-game losing streak away from home, which tied the league record for futility set one year earlier by these aforementioned Seals. *Hockey News* columnist Russ White compared the Capitals' plight to the famous Wilbur Mills-Fanne Foxe sex scandal that had erupted in October. After she became famous, “stripper Foxe had record breaking engagements on stage in Boston and New York.

“Her road record was a lot better than that of the new Capitals ice hockey team, which gets undressed almost as often as Ms. Foxe.

“Trouble is the Capitals don't have as much up front as the Tidal Basin Bombshell.”^{iv}

Perhaps knowing another awful historic moment was staring the Capitals square in the face, the boys in red, white and blue got out in front 3-1, and the Seals barely seemed to notice. In the second period, however, the Seals reduced the Caps' lead to 3-2 on a goal by Charlie Simmer, and Dave Gardner made it 3-3 five minutes into the third period. Washington stormed back less than two minutes later on a goal by Pyatt, but the Seals could not get the tie and salvage their pride. Pyatt scored an empty netter at 19:28 to seal the deal, and Washington skated away with a shocking 5-3 win. Ron Low tore the mask off his face and revealed a smile that stretched from ear to ear. Schmidt proclaimed that the victory was “sweeter than the Stanley Cup.”^v

Needless to say, Seals director of hockey operations Bill McCreary was none too impressed by the end result. “With the good weather, [the players'] minds seem to be on golf and tennis,” he said after the game. For former Seal Stan Gilbertson, who went from playing for what was arguably the worst team in the expansion era just one year earlier to playing for the absolute worst team in league history, he finally had a reason to hold his head up high. “When we got those two quick first period goals, we thought we had a chance to win,” he said. “We've been beaten so often, it's

really good to win. I spent enough time with the Seals and we always seemed to be setting negative records.”^{vi}

It was a bittersweet night for the Seals’ Butch Williams, who, personally, had played a great game. “I got to play against the Capitals, my brother’s team... I ended up with a few points (one goal and two assists),” he recalled. “I was the first star and Tommy (two assists) was the second star... Our dad was listening to the game over his short wave and that made it special... Tommy marched a garbage can around their dressing room like it was the Stanley Cup.”^{vii}

The story of the “Stanley Cup” garbage can has been told countless times, but Ron Lalonde shed some new light on the famous post-game celebration. “We came in the dressing room, and we were quite happy, and one thing led to another,” he said. “We all signed – it was a plastic green garbage can¹ – and then somebody suggested taking it out, and they actually took it out back into the arena and skated around the ice with it. There was nobody left in the rink, but we made a big deal of this garbage can. I think [the Seals] were in the league for the next year, and that garbage can was still there with all our names on it.” Jack Lynch remembers that night fondly. “We got back to the hotel,” he wrote in an e-mail correspondence, “and partied like hell until the wee hours!! I don’t recall if the can was still there the next year but I do remember someone from another team saying that they had seen the can in the visitors [*sic*] dressing room.”

Even old Milt got in on the fun. He drank Coors beer like it was the first celebratory drink after his release from prison. Players kept cheering “Break up the Caps” as they hoisted the garbage can over their heads. Even the new guys could appreciate the significance of the victory. “It may be the end of the year,” said Pyatt, “but finally it is a start.”^{viii}

Predictably, the Caps lost their home-and-home series against Detroit. In the first game, in D.C., the Capitals still had some leftover adrenaline from their big win in Oakland, and stormed out to a 5-2 lead thanks in part to Ron Lalonde’s hat trick, the first in Capitals history. “Scoring the Caps’ first hat trick was a highlight for me that first year,” he admitted in a 2019 interview for this book. “It happened towards the end of the year, and that’s a record that Ovechkin can’t break. Looking back, and I didn’t think of it at the time, being the first hat-trick, but it was an accomplishment for me. I had one in a pre-season game, but I’d never had an NHL hat-trick. It was an achievement for me that I still talk about today. My grandsons like to tell people... ‘My

¹ According to Ron Low in an interview with Alex Prewitt of *Sports Illustrated*, it was Ace Bailey who came up with the idea of signing the garbage can.

grandpa, he scored the Washington Capitals' first hat-trick.' So, it's the answer to a few trivia questions in around Washington every once in a while."

It looked as though the Capitals were assured their first-ever two-game winning streak, but then reality set in as the Wings clawed their way back, and then some, with *six* unanswered goals to take the game, 8-5. Marcel Dionne scored two goals near the end of the middle frame, and Schmidt was furious his team could let its guard down so quickly. "By now these guys should know how important it is to play those closing minutes of any period. Our defense wasn't big league," he said. ^{ix} The Caps' defense wasn't big league the following game either as the Wings took it easily, 8-3, in Detroit.

The Capitals finished their inaugural campaign a dismal 8-67-5, a mark of futility that has yet to be matched.

ⁱ Facht, Bob. "The trials and tribulations of the early Capitals," *Washington Capitals 20th Anniversary souvenir magazine*, 1994, p. 9.

ⁱⁱ "Despite new coach Capitals lose again," *Frederick (Maryland) News*, Mar. 24, 1975.

ⁱⁱⁱ White, Russ. "History Catches Up With GM As Caps Set Futility Record," *The Hockey News*, Apr. 11, 1975.

^{iv} White, Russ. "Stripper's Record Much Better Than Capitals'," *The Hockey News*, Dec. 20, 1974.

^v White, Russ. "Caps Substitute Trash Basket For Cup," *The Hockey News*, Apr. 18, 1975.

^{vi} McDonald, Hugh. "NHL's Worst Team?" *San Mateo Times*, Mar. 29, 1975.

^{vii} Kurtzberg, Brad, *Shorthanded: the Untold Story of the Seals*, Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2006, p. 256.

^{viii} White, Russ. "Caps Substitute Trash Basket For Cup".

^{ix} White, Russ. "Caps Substitute Trash Basket For Cup".