



GEORGE ROSS Seals Are At Fault

MIAMI — The Oakland Seals have once again rocked the community with another sale by off-and-on owner Barry Van Gerbig, who says this time the struggling hockey club will move to Buffalo.

The National Hockey League has shown itself staunch enough in the past to withstand Van Gerbig's attempted bail-outs from its well-designed plans to expand into a truly national league.

His sale, this time for an announced \$3.5 million to the F. W. Woolworth heirs in Buffalo, must get the approval of the NHL board of governors, who nullified his effort last year to sell it to a Vancouver brewer, before he "sold" it to two Floridians.

The plain fact is that the failure of the Oakland Seals is a failure of the Oakland Seals, not of the NHL, not of the sport of hockey, and not of the rich Oakland-area population center which has consistently told Van Gerbig: Build it right and we'll buy tickets.

The National Hockey League, a one-time fat cat society of club owners in the Northeastern United States and two Canadian cities, expanded from six teams to 12 for only one very good reason — television.

The owners weren't principally interested in making Barry Van Gerbig rich. They were only incidentally interested in making Oakland better known in Toronto. They were only institutionally motivated to popularize the ice-country sport of hockey in a section of California where even the fish ponds rarely freeze over in mid-January.

They expanded to convince television that they could reach the entire North American continent with a video spectacle which would draw sponsors. To do it they need the West Coast.

Large TV Market Would Be Darkened

Merely because Van Gerbig hasn't yet given Oakland a product it will back at his turnstile is not evidence to the NHL governors that their master plan is a flop. It is, in fact, a runaway success in four of the six new cities.

And NHL franchise in Buffalo would steal TV revenue from Toronto and Boston and Detroit and maybe even Chicago, while absence of an NHL team in Northern California would darken a vast television market and leave the league with only one market west of St. Louis.

The NHL has never been accused before of such dollar stupidity.

When young Van Gerbig first came here he said: "An NHL franchise is a license to manufacture money."

He wasn't far wrong, except in underestimating the good sense of sports fans and his end of the workload.

Three factors build sports franchises: A population with money to spend; an attractive playing site accessible to traffic, an entertaining and competitive product.

So far, the community has provided him two of these elements in demonstrated measure. He hasn't supplied the other, although the team is better this season.

There's a great recent sports history for him to review, that of the Oakland Raiders.

Oakland hungered for the Raiders to succeed, but until the two missing elements — the stadium and the quality product — were provided, the fans stayed away and the ownership lost money in amounts to make Van Gerbig look like a dime-chip poker player.

Needed: Hulls, Howes or Orrs

When the Raiders got it right, the fans lined up to get in, television enriched the pot, the Raiders moved in to the established territory of the NFL 49ers and said: "Move over, buck, there's room enough for two." In 1968 they had 88 per cent of capacity attendance.

Oakland witnessed one of the great spectacles of the sports season last year when Bobby Hull slammed a last-seconds shot into the Seals' net and scored a 1-0 victory for Chicago in a great hockey game.

It was fine entertainment, a great professional game, and Van Gerbig had a complete sellout.

All he's got to do to build a season-long succession of sellouts, proving the NHL expansion, is to put on the Oakland ice a team which has its own Hulls or Howes or Orrs. It may take a while...

He says he has stars now, and a winning club, and Lord knows their names and ages and records have been published enough to help him push that argument, but the sad fact remains they're hardly bright-light national heroes to John Public.

He says you owe it to him to come out anyway because it's costing him money to operate, which is the world's worst sales talk.

He owes it to you to excite you with team success and superstar performers so you'll want to dig into your jeans for the price of a ticket.

It works the same way in Oakland as in St. Louis, Toronto, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh — or Buffalo.

If the NHL owners still believe in what they're doing they'll let him sell out. And get out. And they'll keep the club in Oakland.

NHL hockey will go in Oakland. When we get it.