

NHL, WHA to merge

CHICAGO (UPI) — The champagne flowed in the Houston Aeros front office at the news the World Hockey Association might be merged into the National Hockey League in time for next season.

The details of the merger plan announced by newly-elected NHL President John Ziegler were inconsequential, Aeros Vice President Harrison Vickers said.

"We will qualify for the Stanley Cup playoffs and our players will qualify for the NHL All-Star game," he said. "And all I can say is it's the best news we've ever had."

Barons rescued by Gund's funds

RICHFIELD, Ohio (UPI) — George Gund III said Saturday he has finalized purchase of the Cleveland Barons from Mel Swig for \$5.3 million in cash and notes and has rehired Jack Evans as coach.

He also said he has appointed Harry Howell as general manager of the National Hockey League franchise.

"Hopefully, this will be an investment that will pay off in the long run," said Gund, whose brother, Gordon, also put up money to help buy the club. "We hope the merger (of the NHL and World Hockey Association) will provide some (monetary) relief for everyone."

The price tag, Gund said, includes \$500,000 cash, \$3 million in notes to Swig and \$1.8 million in notes to Oakland A's owner Charlie Finley who sold the NHL club to Swig when it was playing on the West Coast.

Although Gund declined to reveal the lengths of the pacts given Howell and Evans, Howell said: "You could say we'll both be around for quite a while."

"So far, I've had no restrictions on signing players or trading players to strengthen the franchise," Howell said. "Our first goal is to sign our top draft choices, Mike Crombeen, a potential star, and Dan Chicoine, who also would be a great asset. The others would be invited to camp and signed if their play warrants it."

The GM, who says he expects to have 30-32 players under contract, also

A merger would end a five-season battle for hockey supremacy that drained talent pools, boosted player salaries and generally was viewed as diluting the quality of play in professional hockey.

Ziegler's plan calls for formation of a WHA Division next season, including at least six of the nine teams now in the WHA. Within two years, Ziegler said, a complete realignment of NHL divisions would be completed. The final details of the merger were expected to come at a July 13 meeting in Toronto.

"No details have been worked out on anything except the idea of the sepa-

indicated that Salt Lake City, the Barons' farm team last season, probably would not be used this season — adding that two undisclosed American Hockey League clubs are in contention.

Of the merger or acquisition proposal of six WHA teams into the NHL, Gund said inter-league play is "three years down the road."

"The first year teams would play in their own division," he said. "The second year, they would play six games with the WHA division, playing a home-and-away series with each of three teams.

"The third year, they would play a home-and-away series with the other three teams. And after that, there would be a geographical alignment of all 24 teams," Gund said, adding that the NHL, as a whole, discussed building up minor league hockey during its recent league meeting in Chicago.

rate division in which four of their top teams would then participate in the playoffs," Ziegler said. "There would be no regular season play between the divisions this year."

The offer of entry for six WHA teams brought speculation as to which teams would be left out of the new division. It was speculated that the troubled Cleveland Barons of the NHL might merge with the Indianapolis Racers of the WHA, that Vancouver of the NHL might engage in another merger, and two other teams from the NHL and the WHA might combine.

But Racers operations Manager Brian Conacher said he was optimistic the Indianapolis team would be included in the new division.

"I believe there are more people locally interested in seeing us in the NHL than in the WHA," he said. "The question is, will those people come forward to bring it to reality?"

Vickers wasn't worried about reality. After learning Thursday of the NHL governors' decision to keep the Cleveland Barons alive, the Aeros management decided the NHL was expecting an influx of money and signed their top draft choice.

Vickers said players not picked up in the merger might be the object of a dispersal draft or an auction.

The cost of entering the NHL was not revealed Friday because, Ziegler said, the WHA teams are still being asked for their reaction. Estimates ranged as high as \$3.2 million but a more likely figure is somewhere in the \$2 million range.

"It's an expensive opportunity," Conacher commented, "but it's the only one I can see in the foreseeable future."