

Should Seals Wear Spats?

For a while last week, it looked as though Oakland Seals hockey fans would soon see their favorite game turned into a circus spectacle. Twin albino seals honking about the rink ... players in white kangaroo-skin skates with matching spats ... splashes of gay colors painted on the ice. Such were the visions evoked by the news that Charles O. Finley, one of sport's most flamboyant and controversial figures, was out to buy the Seals.

By the end of the week, however, hockey purists were breathing a shade easier. Two different organizations currently claim ownership of the Seals; one wants to sell out to Finley, the other doesn't. And whether Finley, the owner of the Oakland Athletics baseball team, would come out on top in his assault on professional hockey was a question still unresolved even after days of labyrinthine judicial proceedings.

Debts: Oakland's difficulties go back to the original owner, Barry van Gerbig, a millionaire amateur golfer, who ran up a large debt, then sold out last year to former sportscaster Ellis "Woody" Erdman, head of a conglomerate called Trans National Communications. Erdman, however, didn't fare much better than van

Gerbig had. During last year's dismal season, the Seals' attendance averaged only 6,300 people a game. And Trans National, feeling the nationwide economy pinch, couldn't spare the cash needed to shore up the operation.

As a result, the Seals fell \$4 million into debt and Erdman often failed to stick to the loan-repayment schedules he had agreed to when he bought the team. Eventually, losing patience, former owner van Gerbig accused Trans National of default and went to court to regain the assets of the club—which he then intended to resell to Finley for \$4.1 million. In his first ruling, the judge left the door slightly ajar for Trans National to try and sell the team itself. But he also agreed that Trans National was in default and left Finley with the impression that he had just bought a hockey team.

At once the inimitable Finley began announcing plans for his new team. He would buy two white seals as mascots. ("I like the sound of the names Stella and Seymour.") He would make radical changes in the uniforms, so that they would match the garish outfits worn by his baseball team. ("Fort Knox gold and Kelly green are the only two colors in the country. Albino kangaroo skates are to be ordered as required uniform.") And even the ice itself wasn't to be spared. ("At the moment I have no plans to replace the ice with pistachio sherbet, but what's wrong with colored ice?")

Wild: This was vintage Finley—the characteristic outpourings of the man who first computerized baseball scoreboards; who proposed that baseballs be colored orange and the bases themselves red, gold and blue; who bought the first live baseball mascot, the mule Charlie O; who, in fact, ran through eight managers in eight years, and who kept up a bitter feud with the people of Kansas City until he angrily moved his team to Oakland.

But Finley's plans to perk up Oakland hockey were a bit premature. Erdman's Trans National surprised everyone by finding another prospective buyer for the Seals—a group headed by Oakland roller-derby king Jerry Seltzer, which offered \$4.5 million for the team. Triumphant, Trans National signed the respected Seltzer group to a contract and went back into court. And, this time the judge ruled, in effect, that the NHL would have to decide who was to get the Seals. With that, Erdman waxed ecstatic, while Finley retreated into an uncharacteristic silence.

The outlook now is that the NHL board of governors will receive franchise applications from both Finley and Seltzer when it meets in New York later this month. Erdman thinks the Seltzer group will get the club. "I'd be shocked if they didn't," he said. "They're offering more money and some of the league traditionalists won't want to see the franchise go to a man like Finley." Then, with a curl of the lip, he added, "Hockey doesn't need fireworks and live seals—the sport itself is electrifying enough."