

Come see the Seals basking in the sun

Red Fisher

OAKLAND — The face is pale, almost waxen, from too many nights lost in drafty hockey rinks in towns few people know and most people want to forget. The eyes are humorless. The lips are a thin, straight line and, even when the teeth show, there's little warmth to the smile — not because Garry Young doesn't feel or doesn't enjoy, but because he has spent what surely must seem like a lifetime serving The Game. He will be only 36 on the second day of the new year, but it seems like a lifetime.

Always serving. As a scout at Boston — even its chief scout since 1967 — there were people like coaches and general-managers and owners to serve. And now in Oakland, even though he's a general-manager in this cemetery of a hockey city, he's still serving. The stakes are higher, but more than ever, he's serving, because The Man is Charles O. Finley, and among owners in two major sports, he's considered tough and ruthless.

It is for this reason, no doubt, that Garry Young, ex-scout, ex-fairly low man on the totem pole doesn't yet consider that he has it made or has a job he can depend upon. All the right words are spoken and all the bright hopes are worn on his chest like shiny, new medallions, but in Oakland, the word has always been uncertainty.

When coaches and general-managers aren't being fired, they're squabbling among themselves or with the successors of owners who have been associated with the California Golden Seals. It's a hard way to make a living.

Needless to say, Garry Young doesn't say so, but most people would walk miles to avoid being the general-manager of the California Golden Seals. Harry Sinden, who was the coach at Boston when Young was chief scout, turned it down. Scotty Bowman turned to coaching in Montreal rather than undertake GM duties here. It's too risky and the fan support is meagre, but to some people, like Young, it's a challenge, right?

It's a move up for a kid who had to quit hockey when he was 15 because of a back injury and who as recently as seven years ago was completely paralyzed because the back injury suddenly flared up again — and would have remained that way without another operation.

It's a move up even for a chief scout with a winning, affluent and solid organization like the Boston Bruins. The Bruins recently threw their practice doors open and 6,000 fans paid their way into the rink, which often is roughly twice as many fans who can be coaxed away from their swimming pools to watch the Seals in a regular-season game — but it's still a move up. It's never been easy for Garry Young, and being general-manager of the Seals isn't easy. There is Charles Finley and there are too many questions still seeking answers.

Young knows all this and, because of this, there is something unique about the Seals operation and, by extension, to professional sport anywhere.

In a few words: the franchise is in this city where golf is played by red-faced people 12 months a year, but the working office is in Oshawa, Ont., where general-manager Young has his home and where his family resides.

The hockey players are here, wearing their funny-looking colored skates, but the scouting reports and paper work that go into the development of players of the future are in Oshawa thousands of miles away.

Oakland's outdoor swimming pools do big business 12 months a year, but

it's on the bleak outdoor rinks of Canada and in the too many drafty arenas where Young left his youth that the search for talent goes on.

To Young, expansion isn't a word. It's a sentence.

He doesn't drive to work. He commutes.

He doesn't catch the 7:50 or the 8:20. With Young, he's more at home with numbers like 747 and DC10.

"Actually, some people have exaggerated this thing. It's new, I'll admit. I guess," says Young, "we'd be the only team in any sport with a franchise in one city and a working office thousands of miles away. But the hockey players are miles and miles away from here. We don't expect to find anybody skating on the Bay. So it makes sense to have our full-time scouts in Canada and to have an office and a secretary in Oshawa. It makes things a lot harder for me and I don't know how long I can keep this up. But I've got to find out a lot of things about the operation here."

"I'm on the telephone to Oshawa every day when I'm not there, but when you get right down to it, I'm still spending most of my time in California. My family is still in Oshawa and right now, until I know more about where we're going, I don't want to move them out of there until I'm established in this city. I've got four small children. My oldest boy plays hockey. I don't want to take them away from their home."

Charles Finley has said that Young is the first real general-manager the Seals — who await Canadiens' visit here tomorrow — have had. If being a real general-manager means trading personnel in wholesale lots, then Young is everything Finley says. If wheeling in youth by the carload to replace a forest of tired, old legs means being a real general-manager, then Young qualifies.

He has done all this. He inherited an aging, broken-spirited team which faded out of sight in the West Division last season and replaced it almost entirely with flair and youth. Whether the youth has talent is something that isn't known for certain yet. There are signs that it has. What it surely has is speed, but youth also has its deficiencies, like inconsistency.

"That's what tears you apart," says Young. "We're getting hurt in games by our lack of experience. We're good one night and bad the next. We go into Philly for a real big game, and we're nothing. A couple of nights later, nobody can catch us."

The inexperience isn't confined to the athletes. They learn, and so does a general-manager. It could have been inexperience, for example, which prompted Young to trade away his goal tender Gary Smith — perhaps among the best half-dozen goalies to Chicago for Gerry Desjardins, Gerry Pinder and a minor leaguer. Desjardins had broken an arm late last season. The arm had not mended during the off-season, and it was only good fortune that prevented Young and the Seals from emerging as big losers in the deal. Young, through owner Finley, complained to the league. The result: Desjardins was returned to Chicago and the Seals were repaid with young Gilles Meloche, 20, and a journeyman defenceman named Paul Shmyr.

"Meloche," says Young, "does things that veterans 10 years in the league can't do. He can turn either leg and kick shots into the corner. He never leaves a rebound. He's learned to poke-check at the puck. He reminds me," he says, "of Terry Sawchuk. Chicago didn't really want to let him go. Why did they when I insisted on having him? I think," he says, "they tried to help us. They really tried to help us."

There has been progress on the ice — and off it. Last year: two full-time scouts. This year: four. Last year, the Seals were far back in the league race.



This year, they have surprised a lot of teams. Maybe it's the exuberance of youth. Maybe it's Young and the addition of coach Vic Stasiuk, who replaced Fred Glover early in the season, but the Seals have surprised a lot of people. Remember their 2-0 victory in Boston early in the season? Even the great teams aren't supposed to do that to the Boston Bruins. Especially with a 28-year-old goaltender named Meloche in the nets.

Scouting is a humbling experience. Always, it's a matter of answering to people. Now people are answering to Young, but how does an even-tempered almost docile man become

the general-manager in a matter of months. How does he go from follower to leader?

"It's not a question of deciding whether or not to be tough," says Young. "You have to be tough. I expect curfews to be respected. I demand one hundred per cent in practices and during games. I don't shout and rave at people. I talk to them. A day doesn't go by that I'm not talking to somebody. Sometimes, it's personal problems, but I talk. There's not enough of it done by general-managers in the NHL. Person-to-person stuff, and I think the players respect for it. I hope they do. Sometimes, I even have to talk to

Stasiuk. You know how tough he can be. Sometimes he has to be told not to get too involved, but right now, I don't know what I'd do without him. It's never easy to work with kids, but Stasiuk does it as well as anybody I know in this league and better than most."

"You talk about kids and you look at this Sheehan (Bobby) kid. Defensively, he's bad, but he does so many other things well, you overlook some of his bad habits. I've had to be tough with him. The other day, I had to fine him, but what's \$200 to a kid like Sheehan? He's so full of life and fun he laughs at it. I see him make defensive mistakes, but then I see that not too many play-

ers can touch him up front, and everything's all right again."

"It's no secret he's short on stamina. Send him out in a game, like tomorrow night against Canadiens after he's had a rest, and he'll be flying. But if we have a game the next night, don't expect too much from the kid. You hope for the best, but you don't expect too much. Know what I mean?"

Hope for the best? It's as much as anyone can do in a city that has been a graveyard for officials and players since Expansion Year One and where nobody has attended the funeral.

"You hope," says Young. "You also work. You work like hell."