



**ED LEVITT**

## Aching Seal

At the beginning of the season the word was: "Give hockey a chance. It'll grow on you."

Now, at the midpoint of the campaign, sure enough the interest in the Oakland Seals is growing — smaller.

But the Seals aren't the only new club in the National Hockey League meeting as much cold resistance at the box office as on the ice.

Pittsburgh, which battled Oakland here last night before only 2,638, also is running into fan apathy.

And Los Angeles attendance is skimpy. This has been a contending club, full of fiery action.

Yet the L.A. Kings are averaging no more than 1,000 to 1,500 more customers per game than the last place Oakland Seals.

Which brings up an interesting point: If L.A. could not draw big with a winner, how can Oakland with a loser?

"Even if we had an exciting winner here," says Seal boss Barry Van Gerbig, "it would not have made a great deal of difference in our attendance."

### Too Many Happenings

It is the opinion of the Seal hierarchy that three things damaged the club more than losing games.

"The spectacular success of the Raiders drew so much fanfare it had to take attention away from the fact that we were bringing a new sport into a new territory," says Van Gerbig.

"We were delighted to see the Raiders win the championship. We all hope it happens again next season. But all that focus on the Raiders had its effect on us.

"Secondly, the announcement that the Athletics were coming to Oakland hit at the start of our season. It just coincided in a way that the vital early interest we needed so badly was directed to another sport. And, of course, it detracted from what we had to sell.

"Finally, all the attention drawn to the conflict as to whether Rick Barry would play for the Oakland Oaks or the San Francisco Warriors also took some of the emphasis away from our debut in the National Hockey League.

"We are not complaining. These happened to be the facts of life. They occurred and they hurt us."

### No Deadline on City

But the Seals are scrappers. They're fighting back. They're making trades.

And they insist they are still confident Oakland will prove a solid member of the NHL family.

But suppose the sport continues to be in the doldrums here.

"How long will you be able to withstand the losses?" we asked the Seal brass yesterday.

"We will not place a deadline on the city," said Frank (Sandy) Tatum, who is attorney for the club.

"The sport has to be built up . . . bit by bit. After all, hockey isn't played by many people in California. It'll require more time to develop.

"Hockey comes through very effectively on television. TV also has proved itself a remarkable educator as well as a sound source for getting people interested in a certain sport.

"Look what it's done for golf. It can do the same for hockey. The intrinsic attractiveness of hockey is bound to assert itself."

Van Gerbig reminds that the sport started slowly in Chicago and New York but now both cities are doing extremely well.

### 3-for-1 Trade 'Unbelievable'

It can also happen here. The three for one trade the Seals negotiated last week with the Detroit Red Wings, says the Oakland owner, will enhance the club as nothing else has this year.

Acquiring center Ted Hampson, defenseman Bert

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Marshall and minor league wing John Brenneman "will make us a big threat from here on out," says Van Gerbig.

"This has to be the trade of the year. I was just in Toronto. There they are calling the trade unbelievable.

"It has given us an established National Hockey League center, which was one of our shortcomings. It also has given us a tremendous amount of speed up front.

"Our entire offense has been perked up. The trade already has made an effect among the other players on the club. We've got something now.

"And we will continue to do everything we can to attract the public's interest."

To which the Seal attorney added: "We have every intention of staying in Oakland and developing the franchise into one of the best in the league before this season is through."

Van Gerbig nodded. Then the harassed owner smiled reassuringly for the first time in weeks.