

EX-FIGURE SKATER

The Unique Seal

By SPENCE CONLEY

Mike Laughton, rugged blond center for the Oakland Seals, is unique — he traded in a pair of figure skates for a career in the National Hockey League.

Lanky and powerful, the 23-year-old Laughton first drew on a pair of skates when he was three, but the eventual objective was school figures, three-lobe waltzes, and split-jumps, not puck-passing and goal-scoring.

But an interesting twist of events has helped Mike jump from the Senior Men's freestyle championship of Nelson, B.C., into the historic NHL expansion draft, and today, a regular pivot's job with the Seals — in two years.

Like most Canadian kids, Mike liked hockey, but he was intent on building a career as a figure skater. He did well too, winning championships right along, plucking off the Kootenay (a large region in B.C.) titles in singles, dance,

and pairs three straight years.

"I'd kept my hand in hockey all along," recalls Mike. "I used to play in figure skates all the time, but when I was eight they made me switch to regular hockey skates. The others were too dangerous because of the teeth on the front.

"I was doing pretty well as a figure skater and even went so far as to take fifth in the Western Canada Championships as a novice.

"I went on to the University of Notre Dame in Nelson and started to play a little for the Nelson Maple Leafs, a senior team in the area. I scored 36 goals for two straight years and had over 70 points both years as well."

That kind of production eventually caught the eye of a scout for the Toronto Maple Leafs and Mike was encouraged to give pro hockey a try. He did — for one exhibition game!

"I told the guys on my ama-

teur team that I'd come back and I wasn't too sure about the pros, but all the next summer I got letters and telephone calls asking me to try again."

The next season, the 6-2, 187-pound Laughton signed a two-year contract with Toronto and they placed him with Victoria in the Western Hockey League.

Mike played better than he figure skated: 16 goals and 11 assists for 27 points in a top minor league and the effort resulted in his selection by the Seals in the 16th round of the draft.

"I tried to give it everything I had while I was in Victoria," says Mike. "The guys there were great; they really helped me learn.

"Being in the draft was the farthest thing from my mind and when a friend told me I had been taken, I couldn't believe it."

Mike went to training camp with the Seals in Port Huron, Mich., but before the regular NHL season opened, he was assigned to the club's Vancouver farm affiliate.

He was going so well there and the Seals so bad in the NHL that Seal boss Bert Olmstead called him up 15 games ago.

Today, Mike is enjoying "the biggest thing to ever happen in my life."

Mike is currently centering for wings Charlie Burns and George Swarbrick. He has scored one goal and assisted in four others, so far.

He still has a tendency to skate on his heels — a throwback to figure skating technique — but he has overcome that problem by being tough, aggressive, and downright mean.

Hardly the kind of conduct you'd expect from a figure skater.