



HERB MICHELSON

Seals In Trouble;
Just Can't Draw

OAKLAND — People are so reluctant to come to hockey games here in the early season, it's a wonder even the players are bothering to show up. One actually didn't the other night—depositing a note on teacher's desk that he'd be happier elsewhere.

On one of the evenings that the Seals drew almost 3,000 into the Arena, I asked a team executive if he were concerned. That's always a cheerful way to begin a conversation, I've found.

"Not yet," he smiled bravely. "But if it's like this come November, we'll be in trouble."

The Seals were in attendance trouble even before the season began. Their financial woes would make a good case study for that new curriculum in sports administration that Ohio University has going. Any student figuring a way out of the National Hockey League dilemma in the Bay Area would automatically get an A, plus the bonus of a master's degree — if not the presidency of the Oakland Seals.

THE MORE you're involved on the "inside" of major league athletic doings, as I was for a year while passing through the comatose state of publicizing, the more you're stupefied by both the actions and inactions of sports titans.

And sports, I've discovered, is one of those rare business ventures in which a desultory administration in one year can practically destroy the deal for seasons to come. The Ford people can always get out of trouble with the development of a Mustang. Sporting sorts aren't that lucky — even with a winner.

THE ANSWER to the Seals' predicament of 1968-69 is the Seals of 1967-68. Plus the Oakland Raiders.

The Raiders finally reached the point of financial return last year. All local competition felt the bite. And with the Seals making their NHL debt and incurring a heftier player personnel budget, the bite was of a gluttonous size, lasting until mid-January.

THE HOCKEY folks did recover a bit in February and March, particularly in games against the six old teams in the league. By that time, though, a lot of bread had gone through the shredder.

There was good reason to

believe the Seals were moving to Vancouver. The league's fathers were casting a wary eye on then owner Barry van Gerbig. Hockey fans in the Bay Area got the idea their last place favorites were as good as gone. Enthusiasm in an eloping lover of necessity subsided. When the lover changed his mind and canceled the Rent-A-City service in British Columbia, it was already early summer.

Those who once cared about big league hockey here seemed not to care much any more — not even when van Gerbig sold out to the Harlem Globetrotter fellows. The new conglomerate dumped aging favorite Charlie Burns in a trade and proceeded to bring in what amounts to a new team. Which made two new teams in two years.

THE TIPOFF of attendance trouble has come in the first two home games against old teams, Boston and Montreal. Those crowds averaged about 5,000. No home crowd so far has exceeded 6,000.

Until the ownership strives mightily to convince people the Seals will be here for a while and spends some effort in people-to-people communication, the hockey club will be greeted with a perceptible yawn. Scheduling five games in the Cow Palace will not help either — just serve to convince East Bay fans the Seals might eventually play all their games "over there."

However, we are holding off final rites until November.