

# Finley's Follies Fail to Amuse NHL Bigwigs

By LEO MONAHAN

OAKLAND, Calif.—The "Oakland" or was it "Bay Area?" Seals are now the California Golden Seals, a rather impressive nickname. New Owner Charlie Finley saw to that.

The California Golden Seals are bedecked in new uniforms—Finley's trademark of Kelly Green and California Gold. Charlie O. saw to that, too.

They wear two-tone skates, another Finley innovation. They have their names on the back of the uniforms. Ditto.

Finley, in truth, is trying to put a little pizzazz into one of the National Hockey League's worrisome franchises—another is Pittsburgh—but some of his promotional gestures are starting to rub fellow owners the wrong way. This shouldn't surprise baseball fans who have read of Finley's antics with the Oakland (nee Kansas City) Athletics.

One incident that particularly disturbs Finley's fellows is his use of a mule on the ice before games. That's right, a mule, but not a real live one like he uses at the ball park.

This is a "human" mule, such as you'd see at a professional skating show. Skaters man the fore and aft sections and cavort around the ice.

## Remember Sparkplug?

"They were doing this 35 years ago. Doesn't he (Finley) know that?" groaned one high-ranking NHL official.

They were, indeed. Back in the 1930s, Eddie Shipstad and the late Oscar Johnson, founders of Ice Follies, portrayed a spavined horse, Sparkplug, between periods of New York Ranger games at Madison Square Garden.

Those were the days when pro hockey had to hustle for customers and any added attraction was an incentive. Now most of the NHL rinks are filled to the rafters for every game. Owners like to think the game can sell itself without gimmicks.

"With players of the caliber of Bobby Orr, Gordie Howe and Bobby Hull around, we don't need mules to sell the game of hockey," said an NHL bigwig.

In addition to the mule, Finley offers more in his pregame and between-period spectacles—a line of dancing, er, rather, skating

girls. They flit about on silvery blades, waving flags to the spectators.

The between-period shows hold up the ice-making machine and drag out the times of games so that they run closer to three hours than the standard two hours and 30 minutes. This drags out broadcasts and telecasts of games—particularly to the East Coast, where there is a three-hour time differential. When games last until nearly 11 p.m., Pacific Coast Time, newspapermen have to dash to make their last deadlines in the East.

## Gate Promotions

Finley has been an NHL owner for only four months. Some of his projects have been good ones. For one thing, he broadened the radio and television coverage of the Seals.

He also set up a direct mail and promotional campaign covering the entire Bay Area.

Recently, Charlie O. had as his dinner guests some 2,500 barbers from the Oakland-San Francisco area. His thinking was solid: Barbers are in daily touch with prospective customers and they might help sell the game if they became interested in it themselves.

One of the big problems selling NHL hockey in Oakland is that the team draws very few people from San Francisco, across the Bay. San Franciscans, it seems, look down on Oakland as a minor league area and will not venture across the Bay Bridge.

The Seals have another problem—their hockey club. The Seals started off with a string of losses and it's difficult to see how they can contend with the likes of Chicago, St. Louis and Minnesota in the West Division.

## Problems of Personnel

Harry Howell, a veteran of 18 NHL seasons, and strapping Carol Vadnais anchor a so-so defense. Goaltender Gary Smith is adequate, but that's about all.

Up front, Coach Fred Glover's spearcarriers lack a couple of solid scorers. Norm Ferguson, who was a 34-goal man two seasons ago, slumped to 11 last season.

One of the reasons for Oakland's weakness was financial. The Seals had monetary troubles practically from the outset. They went through a series of ownerships, but always



Charlie Finley's Mule Gives a New Dimension to California Seals' Games.

there was a tight elastic on the bankroll. On a couple of occasions, players were made available to the Seals, but management didn't have enough money to purchase them. Things got so bad at one time

that the league had to bail out the Seals.

When Finley was negotiating for the Seals last May, NHL President Clarence Campbell, weary of the Oakland problem, made one tell-

ing statement. "One thing about Mr. Finley, he seems to have plenty of money."

Yes, Charlie O. solved one NHL headache. But will he cause another? Time will tell.

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