

A Look at the Seals' Mod Squad

OAKLAND (UPI) —If youth is fickle, combative, yet sometimes amazing, color it green and yellow and call it the California Golden Seals.

Despite being the youngest team in pro hockey with an average age of 24.6 and having only six skaters who played together all of last season, the Seals are the highest scoring club in the National Hockey League West and have already shut out the Bruins at Boston Garden.

But on the other side of the stick, rookie goalies Gilles Meloche and Lyle Carter have allowed a NHL high of 99 goals in 22 games, including 13-1 and 3-1 losses to the New York Rangers. This hardly puts Meloche and Carter in the running for the Vezina Trophy.

"You can't blame the goalie," said new coach Vic Stasiuk who at 42 is the oldest man associated with the team outside of owner Charles O. Finley. "Those big losses were a combination of our forwards not doing their job of checking at their end of the ice.

"The other team has got to

move 60 to 90 feet before they're in a position to score. They get there too easy. Any team that's winning is hitting and forechecking like crazy."

The young Seals have been hand-picked by Garry B. Young, 33, whom Finley hired from the Bruins in May as his general manager. Young began wholesale trading, buying and releasing of players and coaches.

He fired Fred Glover as coach after the fourth game of the season and brought in the briefly retired Stasiuk who had played 13 seasons in the NHL and later coached the Philadelphia Flyers. Every player over 30 was either traded, sold or released.

"The veterans I let go were not helping the club," said Young. "They were content to just take their paychecks and not try to make the playoffs."

In Meloche, a former Chicago Black Hawk, the Seals have a goalie whom Young scouted for the past five years.

Young calls 4-1 Carol Vadnais, the 25-year-old captain of the Seals, "the second-best

defenseman in the league...a proud leader, tough guy, born winner."

"Everybody wants Vadnais. Some teams even offered us four players for him. But we're holding on to him. He's the quarterback of this club. He plays better on one leg than most do on two."

In Ivan Boldirev, a 22-year-old Yugoslavian whom the Seals purchased recently from Boston, Young hopes he has a playmaking center that might develop into another Jean Beliveau, Stan Mikita, Phil Esposito or Jean Ratelle.

But Bobby Sheehan, a 22-year-old former "rink rat" from Weymouth, Mass., is the Seal who most excites the average of 3,700 (and increasing) Oakland fans who turn out for home games. Sheehan, obtained from Montreal, lifts the fans screaming from their seats on his jet-propelled breakaways and blurred shots on goal.

Regarded in the same speed class as Yvan Cournoyer of Montreal and Bobby Orr of Boston, the 5-foot-7, 155-pound Sheehan leads the Seals in goals scored with 12. He is one of four American-born players on the Seals. Others are Stan

Gilbertson, Tom Williams and Craig Patrick, son of Lynn Patrick, general manager of the St. Louis Blues.

"Bobbie now looks like a fly zipping from place to place on the ice," said Stasiuk. "When he gets some experience, picks his spots and learns to check, he'll be among the great ones. Do you see his shot—zing—one of the hardest in the business."

Even owner Finley recognizes Sheehan's potential. "He could be for my hockey team what Vida Blue was to my baseball team," said Finley of this year's Cy Young Award winner and MVP in the American League.

Sheehan, who also used the name "Bob Terry" so he could play more hockey throughout New England while at Weymouth High, admits there is room for self-improvement.

"I've had five breakaways in one game on our recent road trip and missed all of them," he said. "I got a little nervous but I don't know why."

"No I'm trying to funnel my energy and use my speed only when I have to. I like it here in Oakland because I'm playing regularly. If I was still in Montreal I'd be on the bench like (Larry) Pleau and (Phil) Roberto."

Vadnais, who insists the Seals will make the playoffs this season, thinks Finley and Young made the right move in discarding nearly all of the veterans and starting practically from scratch.

"We are suffering early in the season," said Vadnais. "But if you want a better team eventually, you might as well suffer for a while and build from there. When these guys get to know each other better and play together awhile, we should get going in about another month."

"These guys have great spirit," adds Stasiuk. "Most of them were great players as juniors. The transformation to the tougher pro style is a frustrating thing. It's just a matter of maturing which

hopefully they will overcome soon."

Young also feels that hockey's youngest team is bound to improve.

"We have a coach that's doing an outstanding job with the young kids," he notes. "I'm very satisfied with our progress so far. We must be patient. Remember, we've already played Boston, Montreal and New York twice and Chicago once."

"It's going to take a lot of sweat, sacrifice and overall development to make us a winner. The forwards have got to start hitting and we've got to get some breaks along the way."

"If we play 500 hockey from here on out, we'll make the playoffs. In the next year or two we'll be right up there fighting for the championship."