

Seals' Defense Shines in Record Run

By **RON McGRATH**

With a veteran NHL defenseman as coach of the club, you would think that defense would be the Seals' long suit, and it is. An accent on defense and a disciplined style of play are trademarks of this most successful Seals team of all time.

The big problem is that the defense is like the infantry . . . not noticed as much as the cavalry, but without the foot soldiers protecting that goal, the battles of hockey would never be won.

This season, the torch of leadership on the ice was passed from one defenseman to another: Jim Neilson to Bob Stewart. The two veterans make excellent team leaders. When captain Neilson was badly injured early in the season and had to go through surgery on his right knee, the big "C" of the captaincy was passed along to Stewart, who has been the club leader

on and off the ice since that time.

Jack "Tex" Evans, with 12 years of NHL blueline experience under his belt, is appreciative of the efforts his defensemen have produced in helping the Seals record the most successful run in the history of the franchise.

Tex has pointed to the defense work in January as an outstanding example of good talent producing for the team.

"Len Frig has played extremely well for us this past month," said Evans, "and Stewie has been hitting people all over the ice. Mike (Christie) and Rick (Hampton) have improved steadily and are turning in some great efforts, and we can't overlook young Tim Jacobs. I think Tim has handled himself very well under a lot of pressure."

Pressure has been on the Seals' defense most of the season, but this has been the year when the blueline corps has come of age. Individually, they are all maturing. With the forwards coming back to help out, manning the Seals' blueline is no

longer a lonely job against oncoming hordes of attackers.

Hampton, now in his sophomore year at 19, has gone through a major transition. As the Seals' "offensive defenseman", Hampton has picked up valuable experience quickly and has become a bona fide scoring threat when he moves the puck up ice with his long strides.

Neilson's absence has placed an added burden upon all of the defense, but they have responded with a cohesive performance which puzzles opponents who realize that the entire Seals' defense is composed of about the same people as last year.

"The difference now," says Stewart, "is our system of play. We have more confidence. All the guys are doing a big job out there . . . everybody is contributing."

Stewart and his four defensive partners are sometimes overshadowed by the play of all the new Seals' forwards, but you can bet that two men at least are aware of how much the defense has improved: goalies Gilles Meloche and Gary Simmons.



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SWEEPING UP THE LEAFS — Rugged defensive work has typified the play of the Seals in the big January surge that has brought them onto the heels of Toronto in the race for a play-off spot. Here, tough Bob Stewart, Seals' captain, gets ready to clean Leafs' Pat Boutette out of the slot in front of cobra-masked goalie Gary Simmons. It was this kind of defense work that helped the Seals hammer the Maple Leafs, 5-3, in last Sunday's classic encounter. (For more on goalie Simmons, read the new feature on page 9.) —Photo by Bill Fox

