

Seal Goalie's Slap-Happy Life

By SPENCE CONLEY

For a lot of reasons, you have to like Charlie Hodge.

He's colorful, highly skilled, pleasant and talkative, but most of all you like him because he's going through life as an underdog.

At 5-6, 150 pounds, his main task in life is blocking 100-mile-an-hour slap shots of a hard rubber hockey projectile boomed by the likes of Bobby Hull and Gordie Howe, getting crunched by careening, off-balance forwards hoping to drive him into the nickel

seats, and tending the goal for the Oakland Seals of the National Hockey League.

Anybody who does that for a living, regardless of the pay, has to rate as first class nut! And in Hodge's case, his small size makes his job even tougher, more suicidal, more nutty.

But because of Charlie's consistent quality performance, the Seals have as good a net defense as there is anywhere in the NHL.

To be sure, the Seals are only in fifth place in the West-

ern Division, but certainly through no fault of Charlie's.

Shabby defense and listless forward play, yes, but Hodge, no. Of the 56 goals against the Seals so far, few can be directly blamed on inept goal play.

The Hodge-led Seals go against the division-leading Los Angeles Kings tomorrow night in the Southland, and the Oaklanders are hoping to keep intact their undefeated string of three games.

The latest victory, that 2-1 upset of the awesome Mont-

real Canadiens, was one of Hodge's most gratifying experiences.

"It was one of the best things that's happened this season," Hodge said yesterday. "It's got to be one of my better wins—for a lot of reasons."

The big one, though, is the fact that the Canadiens threw Hodge into the Expansion Draft last June, in favor of developing youngster Roga-

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Hodge Has Suicidal Seal Role

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tian Vachon as the club's goalkeeper.

Vachon has been less than successful. In fact he was bombed 4-1 Sunday night in Los Angeles. The Seals had a tougher time with veteran Gump Worsley.

"It used to be just one team (Toronto) that I'd love to beat . . . now it's two," says Charlie.

Because of Hodge, improving team play, and the continued scoring of the Burns-Laughton-Swarbrick "Helmet Line" there are suddenly some bright snarts of sun gleaming through the previously stormy skies.

Of his own play, Hodge comments:

"I'm pleased, but not satisfied. When you get satisfied you're dead and we've got too far to go to be really pleased with anything less than winning.

"I've felt pretty good and only felt tired in two games, the 5-2 loss to Philly back East, and then in New York (a 5-3 loss).

Hodge knows, too, that a team can be affected psychologically by its own lowly position.

"It's always tougher to play when you are 4th, 5th, or 6th," explains Hodge, "because the teams that are on top know they have to beat the lower clubs in order to get the points they need to stay on top. In the meantime the lower clubs start to get inferiority complexes.

"We've had it rough. Now, if we can keep playing the way we have, we are going to be OK. The fans have been on our side, too, and that helps.

"They've been very good. We've got a certain number of them, who keep on coming out, giving us the encouragement we need instead of cutting us up. They are with us, not against us and you always try to give your best for them as well as yourselves."

Yeah, you've got to like a guy like Charlie Hodge.