
TURNING POINTS

Ten Landmark Moments That Defined California's Seals

BY STEVE CURRIER

THE FRANCHISE BEST known as the California Golden Seals existed from 1961 to 1978, in various leagues, under different names and in numerous locations. Its first five years were spent in the minor-pro Western Hockey League (WHL) as the San Francisco Seals. In 1966, the club was purchased by a group led by Barry van Gerbig, relocated to Oakland and renamed the California Seals; it later became one of the NHL's 1967 expansion franchises. After an early, lukewarm reception from Oakland fans, the team was rechristened the Oakland Seals in December 1967. When Charles O. Finley purchased the struggling franchise in 1970, he decided, two games into the new season, to rename the team the California Golden Seals, which is the name that stuck until the team moved to Cleveland in 1976. There were more lowlights than highlights during the team's 17 seasons, but 10 defining moments truly shaped the history of the franchise.

The First Championship

May 6, 1963: Seattle Totems 3 at San Francisco Seals 4

The WHL Seals' best-ever team earned the nickname "Adversity on Ice" for its tenacity and refusal to quit, no matter how dire the situation. It took the Seals the maximum 17 games — six in overtime — to win their first Lester Patrick Cup. In the second round of the 1962/63 playoffs versus first-place Portland, the Seals battled back from being down 3-1 in the series to win. In the final

against the Seattle Totems, the Seals faced another 3-1 deficit, even though the entire series was played at the Cow Palace in San Francisco due to a scheduling conflict in Seattle. The Seals rallied to win the next two contests and force a climactic seventh game.

Before a league-record crowd of 12,404, the Seals fell behind 2-0 in the second period, but San Francisco's Duke Edmundson and Moe Mantha drew the two teams even before the period-ending buzzer sounded. Danny Belisle then put the Seals up 3-2 at 5:09 of the third, but Seattle's Jim Powers tied it up just a minute later, forcing overtime for the fourth time in the series.

Throughout the overtime period, it sounded as though fans were stomping their feet or pounding their fists on anything they could find. One would swear the game was taking place in Montreal or Toronto, but no, these Bay Area fans were just that lively. The crowd went completely bananas when the Seals' Orland Kurtenbach scored the winner at 4:09 of overtime.

"Danny Belisle shot the puck," recalled Kurtenbach. "It hit [a] Seattle defenceman and bounced over to Larry McNabb. He shovelled it over to me. I shot from 10 feet out and it went in. I heard a 'pl-ing' as it bounced off the inside of the post."¹

The crowd's reaction to Kurtenbach's goal could best be described as euphoric. Teammates hugged and kissed San Francisco's newest sports hero, as about a hundred fans poured onto the ice. Radio colour man Bill King

pointed out that “there’s a lady out there — she can’t be a day under 65 years of age — in high heels, and she came skidding and sliding on her posterior 20 feet.”² On the air, the noise from the jubilant crowd was deafening.

If ever there had been a case for San Francisco’s entry into the NHL, it was made throughout the 1963 playoffs. Attendance had regularly topped 10,000, which was an impressive figure for a minor-league team, let alone one from California. For years after the team had gained admittance into the NHL, fans, players and historians would refer to the Seals’ minor-league fan support in San Francisco as evidence that the team should have remained there instead of moving to Oakland.

Welcome to the Big Leagues

October 11, 1967: Philadelphia Flyers 1 at California Seals 5

The Seals won a second Patrick Cup in 1964 and continued to draw big crowds to the Cow Palace. In 1966, majority owner Barry van Gerbig decided to move the Seals across the bay to Oakland, where the club would play its final WHL season at the brand new Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum as the California Seals. The NHL had accepted San Francisco as an expansion city, but the league did not believe the Palace was an acceptable arena due to its poor sightlines and minor-league ambiance. The place also smelled like . . . well, cows. Van Gerbig believed the San Francisco fans would simply make the trek across the Bay Bridge to attend games at the beautiful Coliseum. He was wrong; the longer the Seals played in the NHL, the longer that bridge became to fans.

On October 11, 1967, in the Seals’ inaugural NHL game, former Toronto Maple Leaf Kent Douglas scored the franchise’s first regular-season goal at 3:23 of the first period, while Philadelphia’s Bill Sutherland scored the first goal against the Seals at 10:07 of the second. California outshot Philly 33–25, while Douglas, Bill Hicke and Gerry Ehman each picked up three points.

For one night, the Seals actually had the highest winning percentage of any team in NHL history, but a disappointing crowd of just 6,886 attended the game when over 9,000 fans had been expected. The small crowd did nothing to deter van Gerbig from showering

his team with naive praise. “I think it is unbelievable to have this kind of game played by a new team,” he was quoted as saying. “It’s the best-coached team for this early in the season that I’ve ever seen.”³

The Seals’ first NHL game foreshadowed all sorts of problems the club would endure the next nine years: poor attendance, clueless owners and false hope. The newly renamed Oakland Seals finished the season a pitiful 15–42–17. Coach Bert Olmstead skated his players ragged and eventually resigned. When attendance plummeted, van Gerbig tried to move the team to Vancouver, but the league balked, giving him no choice but to sell the team instead.

First Fatality

January 13, 1968: Oakland Seals 2 at Minnesota North Stars 2

Most of the Seals’ inaugural season was filled with misery and disappointment, but little did the players know they would experience true sadness on January 13, when the Minnesota North Stars’ 29-year-old rookie Bill Masterton was fatally injured on an innocent play.

Masterton had been passed over numerous times by NHL clubs, but he never gave up on his dream, and, finally, after years of toiling in the minors, he made the North Stars’ opening-day roster. At the time of his death, Masterton had recorded four goals and seven assists while playing on a line with Dave Balon and Wayne Connelly.

Although the exact details of what happened to Masterton vary from one eyewitness account to another, according to the *Winnipeg Free Press*, Masterton “had led a rush into the Oakland zone when he was hit by one or two Seals defenders” in the first period. Seals left wing Wally Boyer was also there and recalled years later that Masterton “came across the blue line and I moved out of the way. Ronnie Harris hit him when his head was down and he fell backwards onto the ice. It was not a dirty check; it was just the way he fell that caused the injury.”⁴

At Fairview-Southdale Hospital near Bloomington, Minnesota, a team of five doctors, including two neurosurgeons, could not save his life. Masterton died without regaining consciousness at 1:55 A.M., January 15, 1968.⁵

Every year since 1968, the league has awarded the Bill Masterton Trophy to the player who best exemplifies the qualities of perseverance and dedication to hockey. The award has been won by players such as Saku Koivu, Cam Neely and Bobby Clarke, who all persevered to overcome illness and/or deep personal tragedies to continue their hockey careers. As for helmets, it was not until 1979 that all players entering the NHL would be forced to wear them.

Meloche Shocks the Bruins

October 28, 1971: California Golden Seals 2 at Boston Bruins 0

The stakes might not have been high, but this may be the most famous game in the Seals' history for a number of reasons. For one thing, it marked Gilles Meloche's debut in a Seals uniform. He would become the player most people think of when they hear the name "California Golden Seals." What makes this game truly special, however, is that the Seals actually beat the Boston Bruins in Beantown. How huge a feat was this? In California's six previous meetings with Boston, the Bruins had outscored the Seals 33–7. Besides, Boston was gearing up for its eventual Stanley Cup win just a few months down the road, and had not been shut out in over a year.

Early on, it seemed as though the game was going to follow the usual script. Even though the Bruins outshot the Seals 15–5 in the first period, California took a 1–0 lead on a goal by Norm Ferguson. Defenceman Dick Redmond then scored at 6:26 of the third to put the Seals up 2–0. The Bruins pressed, but Meloche turned everything aside, including 12 shots in the third period. When the final buzzer sounded, Meloche had stopped 34 shots to earn his first career shutout. Seals coach Vic Stasiuk was so excited by Meloche's performance that he kissed the young rookie after the game. "He was great, he was fantastic, he acted like he'd been in the league 10 years," Stasiuk beamed.⁶

Today, former Seals captain Joey Johnston believes it is the most memorable game he played in as a member of the Seals. When asked to describe the game, Johnston did so in four simple words: "Two–nothing. We won," he responded emphatically, and then chuckled, seem-

ingly still amazed that the Seals actually beat the legendary Big Bad Bruins on their own turf.⁷

The Boston Debacle

February 23, 1972: Boston Bruins 8 at California Golden Seals 6

The 1971/72 Seals managed to show tremendous improvement throughout the season thanks to the strong efforts of players like Gilles Meloche, Gerry Pinder, Bobby Sheehan and Dick Redmond. They had already shut Boston out earlier in the season and fans felt confident their ailing franchise had finally turned the corner. Attendance was up, and the team sat in third place in the West Division most of the season, but a late-season slump put the Seals' playoff dreams in jeopardy. To shake things up, general manager Garry Young traded disgruntled star defenceman Carol Vadnais and forward Don O'Donoghue to Boston for youngsters Reggie Leach, Bobby Stewart and Rick Smith. It just so happened these two teams were scheduled to play each other that very night.

The Seals drew first blood, seemingly looking for revenge for all the beatings the Bruins had laid on them in the past. Dick Redmond scored twice in the first period, and the rest of the Seals skated rings around the dumbfounded Bruins. Fred Stanfield cut the Seals' lead to one with a goal at 17:37, but Gary Croteau put the Golden Ones up 3–1 with a goal of his own at 19:52. Wayne Carleton, Gary Croteau and Craig Patrick all scored before the second period was half over, putting the Seals up 6–1.

Nothing seemed to be going right for Boston until Wayne Cashman finally scored at 14:36 of the middle period. Not long after, Stanfield was awarded a penalty shot, but Meloche made a huge save to preserve the Seals' four-goal lead. When play resumed, Bobby Orr delivered a crisp pass to Stanfield that sent him in alone on Meloche once again, but this time the puck went in. In the third period, with the Bruins down 6–3, Orr scored on a screen shot from the blue line to make it 6–4, and Stanfield completed his hat trick at 5:59, after receiving yet another gorgeous pass from Orr, to make it 6–5.

As time wound down, Phil Esposito skated in on Meloche's right, picked an airborne Ed Westfall pass out

of the air just in front of the net and sent the puck past the goaltender at 14:31 to tie the score 6–6. Just a few minutes later, Cashman took a weak shot from the lip of the faceoff circle near the boards to the right of Meloche, and Esposito was right there in front of the net to tip it in. The Bruins had just taken the lead for the first time.

With the game now completely out of the Seals' control, Meloche was called to the bench in favour of an extra attacker. As time was running out, Derek Sanderson skated into the Seals' zone and took aim at the empty cage. Dick Redmond manoeuvred backward, hoping to defend the Seals' net, and he managed to valiantly block the shot. Redmond made perhaps the best save of the night, but Sanderson picked up the rebound and scored. The angry Seals D-man viciously slashed his stick against the post, upset his team had just blown a five-goal lead to the eventual Stanley Cup champs.⁸

If there was one game that perfectly summed up what it was like playing for the California Golden Seals, it was this one. They should have won it, just as they should have won so many others before. They had the talent to take a huge 6–1 lead against a team as formidable as Boston, yet the result was another loss. Fleeting moments of greatness buried under a series of gaffes, leading to frustration and, ultimately, failure — the very definition of the California Golden Seals.

Guilty Pleasure

January 3, 1973: Vancouver Canucks 3 at California Golden Seals 11

“They could have been a dynasty, I’m not kidding you,” says Seals Booster Club member Larry Schmidt about the star-crossed 1971/72 Seals. “They had some great players. They had Bobby Sheehan, Gerry Pinder, Wayne Carleton, Tom Webster, Ron Stackhouse, Carol Vadnais. God, they were the team of the future.”⁹ Until, that is, the World Hockey Association came along and convinced the Seals' best players to defect. The team never recovered from the mass exodus.

The 1972/73 season was shaping up to be one of the Seals' worst. Some days, it was probably difficult for the players to even find a reason to get out of bed in the morning. In fact, on January 2, nine players were late for practice one morning at Berkeley's Iceland; they thought

coach Fred Glover had scheduled it for 12:45, when it was in fact at 10:45. “They said it was a misunderstanding in times,” Glover growled. “It’s a funny thing. Some of them found out the right time.” At the end of practice, Glover made it clear he was angry at his troops. “There will be a skate for everybody at 11:30 tomorrow,” he said. He then looked up at the clock on the wall, banged his stick against the ice and went to the dressing room. Interestingly, at the end of the practice, one observer commented, “You would think that the Seals would feel guilty enough to make sure they win tomorrow night.”¹⁰ Boy, did they ever feel guilty!

The tiny crowd of 2,702 witnessed an absolutely extraordinary contest. Not only did these folks see the Seals play arguably their best game ever, but they were also actually witnesses to seldom-seen owner Charles Finley taking in one of his handful of hockey games since buying the club three years earlier. The Seals took a 5–3 lead into the third, but then exploded for six more on poor Bruce Bullock to win the game 11–3. Pete Laframboise became the first Seals player to score four goals in a game. As fate would have it, the one game Charlie Finley decided to attend was the Seals' most lopsided win in team history. With such a result, he probably never understood why the people of Oakland came to the Coliseum in such small numbers.

Blood Feud, Part 1

December 2, 1973: California Golden Seals 1 at Philadelphia Flyers 5

In the mid-1970s, if there was one team with which the Seals had a blood feud, it was the Philadelphia Flyers, and it all originated on December 2, 1973. On this night, the Flyers were leading the Seals 2–1 midway through the second period when all hell broke loose. Bobby Clarke inadvertently struck Seals rookie Barry Cummins under the eye with his stick. In retaliation, Cummins skated toward Clarke and swung his stick like a baseball bat at the Flyer captain's head, opening up a gash that would require 18 stitches. Since the unwritten rule at the time stated that no one ever hit Bobby Clarke without paying a price, the Flyers' Bill Flett immediately charged at Cummins to avenge the fallen captain. Soon after, Bob “Hound Dog” Kelly joined the melee and the Seals' bench

emptied onto the ice. By this point, Cummins was buried under a mountain of Flyers. He emerged with a bloody face and was helped to the dressing room.

The Seals' Hilliard Graves and the Flyers' Dave "Hammer" Schultz went at it on and off for about 10 minutes following the Cummins–Clarke encounter. Eventually, the Flyers' Ed Van Impe, Don Saleski and Schultz, along with the Seals' Graves, were thrown out and fined \$100 each. Cummins was handed a game misconduct (and was later suspended three games and handed a \$300 fine), as were Kelly and Flett for having left the bench.

Cummins immediately regretted his actions: "Clarke had cut me under the eye with his stick. I was mad and didn't have time to think. It was an impulse action that I regretted a second after it happened. I'm sorry — you always are when you hurt somebody." The next day, Cummins called Clarke and apologized. "He was really sick about what happened," said Clarke. "It takes a little courage to make a call like that."¹¹ Clarke and Cummins might have buried the hatchet, but the Seals and Flyers would have many nasty encounters in the next few years.

The Montreal Miracle

March 2, 1974: California Golden Seals 4 at Montreal Canadiens 3

The Seals never enjoyed much success against Montreal, but there was one night when all the stars were perfectly aligned and Olympus fell. By March 2 of the 1973/74 season, the Seals were 11–42–8 and dead last in the NHL; the Habs were 37–16–8 and the defending Stanley Cup champions. Despite the solid record, the Habs hadn't been quite the same that season. Ken Dryden had taken a year off to practise law, leaving the Canadiens' crease in a weakened state, but the team still boasted a formidable lineup that included 11 future Hall of Famers.

The Seals arrived in Montreal on a 24-game road losing streak, and one would have been a fool to think they even had a chance against the mighty Habs. "When we went out there," remembered Seals defenceman Bobby Stewart, "the comments in the paper were something like, 'We're on a winning streak and Oakland's coming to town.' They figured we were an easy win and it pumped us up real good."¹²

Montreal had four breakaways in the first period, but Gilles Meloche stopped them all. Claude Larose eventually beat Meloche on a rebound at 10:45 to put Montreal up 1–0. Thirty seconds later, the Seals' Ray McKay and Joey Johnston sent Reggie Leach in alone on goaltender Michel Plasse. Leach rifled a good, hard shot from the lip of the right faceoff circle and tied the game 1–1.

The Canadiens pressed harder in the second period, taking a 3–1 lead on goals by Claude Larose and Jacques Lemaire. Montreal dominated the Seals, but Hilliard Graves gave California some life with a lucky goal at 19:49. Graves made a pass to Ivan Boldirev in front of the Canadiens' net, but the puck bounced off defenceman Guy Lapointe and trickled past Plasse to make it 3–2. As every hockey fan knows, those last-minute goals can be killers.

In the third period, fate intervened to turn the game in the Seals' favour. With the Seals still down a goal, Hilliard Graves unleashed a slap shot that hit Plasse square in the face. Plasse immediately dropped to the ice as Stan Weir poked in the rebound. The Habs protested, but to no avail. The famous Forum ghosts must have been in the bathroom at that moment; the goal stood.¹³

The ghosts must have stopped by the concession stand for a few beers on the way back from the bathroom, because Gary Croteau scored at 12:15 against replacement goalie Michel Larocque to put the Seals up 4–3, which is how the game ended. Despite being outshot 41–25, Gilles Meloche held down the fort, ending the Seals' lengthy road losing streak.¹⁴ Ray McKay summed up his teammates' feelings best when he said, "Beating Montreal in Montreal: that was our Stanley Cup right there."¹⁵ Did the humiliating defeat affect the Habs? It's hard to say, but the fact is the Canadiens were outscored 15–2 in their next two games, barely played .500 hockey over the last month of the season, and were later bounced out of the first playoff round.

Blood Feud, Part 2

October 25, 1974: Philadelphia Flyers 1 at California Golden Seals 4

During the 1973/74 season, before the Seals' final game versus Philadelphia, Hilliard Graves told Dave Schultz

it was on! “I’m not afraid of him,” Graves said, referring to Schultz. “I beat him twice before and I’m ready to do it again if I have to.” Graves also claimed the Flyers had taken liberties with the Seals, something Philadelphia never did with the league’s tougher squads. “Philadelphia likes to run around against us, but they don’t play that way against Boston,” he claimed. “We’ve beaten the Bruins more than they have in the last four years.”¹⁶

The following season, Graves was playing for Atlanta, and many of the players who had been significant contributors to the Golden Seals had been traded away for prospects. When the Broad Street Bullies arrived in Oakland on October 25 for the teams’ first meeting of the 1974/75 season, they were greeted by a Seals squad loaded with rookies who had only heard about their nasty reputation. The Seals, as usual, came into the game riding a long winless streak — this time, seven games.

Surprisingly, California was up 4–0 when the Flyers’ Orest Kindrachuk and the Seals’ Mike Christie got into a fight. Kindrachuk was given an extra minor penalty. Several eyewitnesses said Don Saleski tried to goad Christie into taking an extra two-minute penalty by getting the Seals defenceman to jump back onto the ice, but Christie would have none of it. Kindrachuk then skated past Saleski to the Seals’ penalty box to get at Christie. Bob Kelly joined Kindrachuk and Saleski, and the three men laid a beating on Christie while other Flyers kept the Seals players at bay. Did the Seals’ youth and inexperience make them a tad passive? Possibly.

“It was just awful,” said goaltender Gary Simmons. “It was embarrassing. . . . Poor Mike, he really got waylaid that night, and I don’t remember him getting much help.” Simmons also said Christie “just worked his butt off. He was the enforcer, he was the guy that always was the third man in when one of our guys was getting beat up; it was always Mike. If everybody had Mike Christie’s heart, we would have done a heck of a lot better.”¹⁷

It was a very difficult time for the franchise. For years, the players had been embarrassed by white skates, bright yellow uniforms and owners who didn’t give a damn. The Seals’ pride hit its nadir in this game, and it would not be easy instilling a positive attitude in the players.

Restoring Pride

April 4, 1976: Los Angeles Kings 2 at California Golden Seals 5

In the 1975/76 season finale, the Seals gave their hometown fans something to cheer about as the visiting Kings were soundly defeated 5–2 in front of 6,442 patrons. For once, the Seals had enjoyed a bit of success during the season, ending up 14th out of 18 clubs instead of the usual last-place finish, and setting over 25 club records. The roster boasted real talent, with such future NHL stars as Dennis Maruk, Al MacAdam, Charlie Simmer and Gilles Meloche in the lineup.

In the first period, rookie Bob Murdoch, standing behind the net, grabbed the loose puck and flipped it over a confused Rogie Vachon’s head and into the crease, where a hungry Maruk was waiting to score his 29th goal. The Kings’ Gary Sargent evened the score two minutes later, but Maruk scored a power-play goal two minutes after that to put the Seals back up 2–1. From that point on, it was all Seals.

The Seals had improved by leaps and bounds over the course of the season, and the players’ attitude had greatly changed. The team had come a long way since Mike Christie was pummelled by the Philadelphia Flyers. Players were proud to be plying their trade in Oakland. According to centre Larry Patey, tossing the Seals’ sweater to the ground was considered a crime. “Your sweater, when you took it off, it never hit the floor,” he said. “In other words, if you’re upset, you made a mistake, you lost the game, whatever the story is, you never take your sweater off and throw it on the floor. You take it off and you hang it up.”¹⁸

The Seals may have won their last NHL game easily, but it was a simple gesture by classy veteran Gary Sabourin that puts this game on the list of significant moments. Sabourin had undergone an appendectomy just six days earlier, but he wanted to play in this game, which had absolutely no effect on the standings. “I think I’ll give it a try,” he said before the warm-up. Sabourin did not see any ice time that night, but his dedication to the team did not go unnoticed. “The most significant thing we’ve accomplished this season is developing a pride in the uniform,” said general manager Bill McCreary.

“Look at what Gary did. He didn’t have to do that, but that’s the kind of players we want.”¹⁹

The pride that had been lost during the Charlie Finley regime had finally been restored. Things should have remained as they were; the Seals were on a real upswing and finally had some real talent on their roster. Had owner Mel Swig been able to strike a deal with San Francisco city council to build a new arena, the Seals would have had a new home in the city where they should have been since day one. Instead, they were off to what would prove to be the hockey wasteland of Cleveland, Ohio, and eventually, oblivion.

Notes

1. Hugh McDonald, “Record Crowd Sees Seals Do It,” *San Mateo Times* (May 7, 1963), p. 11.
2. Quote taken from a radio clip of Game 7 vs. Seattle, KFRC San Francisco, donated to the Bay Area Radio Museum by Len Shapiro: <http://bayarearadio.org/people/storey.shtml>.
3. Bobby Baun and Anne Logan, *Lowering The Boom: The Bobby Baun Story* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2000), p. 190.
4. Brad Kurtzberg, *Shorthanded: The Untold Story of the Seals* (Bloomington, Indiana: Authorhouse, 2006), p. 54.
5. “Minnesota Centre Dies after Injury in Game,” *Cornwall Standard-Freeholder* (January 15, 1968).
6. Frank Barrett Jr., “Goalie Frustrates B’s,” *Lowell Sun* (October 29, 1971), p. 21.
7. Author interview with Joey Johnston, May 4, 2012.
8. Chris McDonnell, *The Game I’ll Never Forget* (Toronto: Firefly Books, 2002), pp. 102–3. The description of the game is based on television highlights found on YouTube.
9. Interview with Larry Schmidt, September 10, 2013.
10. John Porter, “Get Seals to Rink on Time,” *Oakland Tribune* (January 3, 1973), p. E37.
11. Bill Fleischman, “Cummins Regrets Near Tragic High-Sticking of Flyers’ Clarke,” *The Hockey News* (December 21, 1973), p. 2.
12. Brad Kurtzberg, *Shorthanded: The Untold Story of the Seals* (Bloomington, Indiana: Authorhouse, 2006), p. 209.
13. According to *The Professional Hockey Handbook*, published in time for the 1973/74 season, NHL rule 19(f) states, “When a player is injured so that he cannot continue play or go to his bench, the play shall not be stopped until the injured player’s team has secured possession of the puck.” This means that Weir’s goal was perfectly legal.
14. John Porter, “Seals Rally, Win on the Road, 4–3,” *Oakland Tribune* (March 3, 1974), p. 19.
15. Kurtzberg, *Shorthanded*, 230.
16. John Porter, “Seals Square Off against Broad Street Bullies,” *Oakland Tribune* (January 25, 1974), p. 37.
17. Personal interview with Gary Simmons, July 2, 2011.
18. Personal interview with Larry Patey, January 26, 2012.
19. John Porter, “Anatomy of the Improved Seals,” *Oakland Tribune* (April 6, 1976), p. 38.