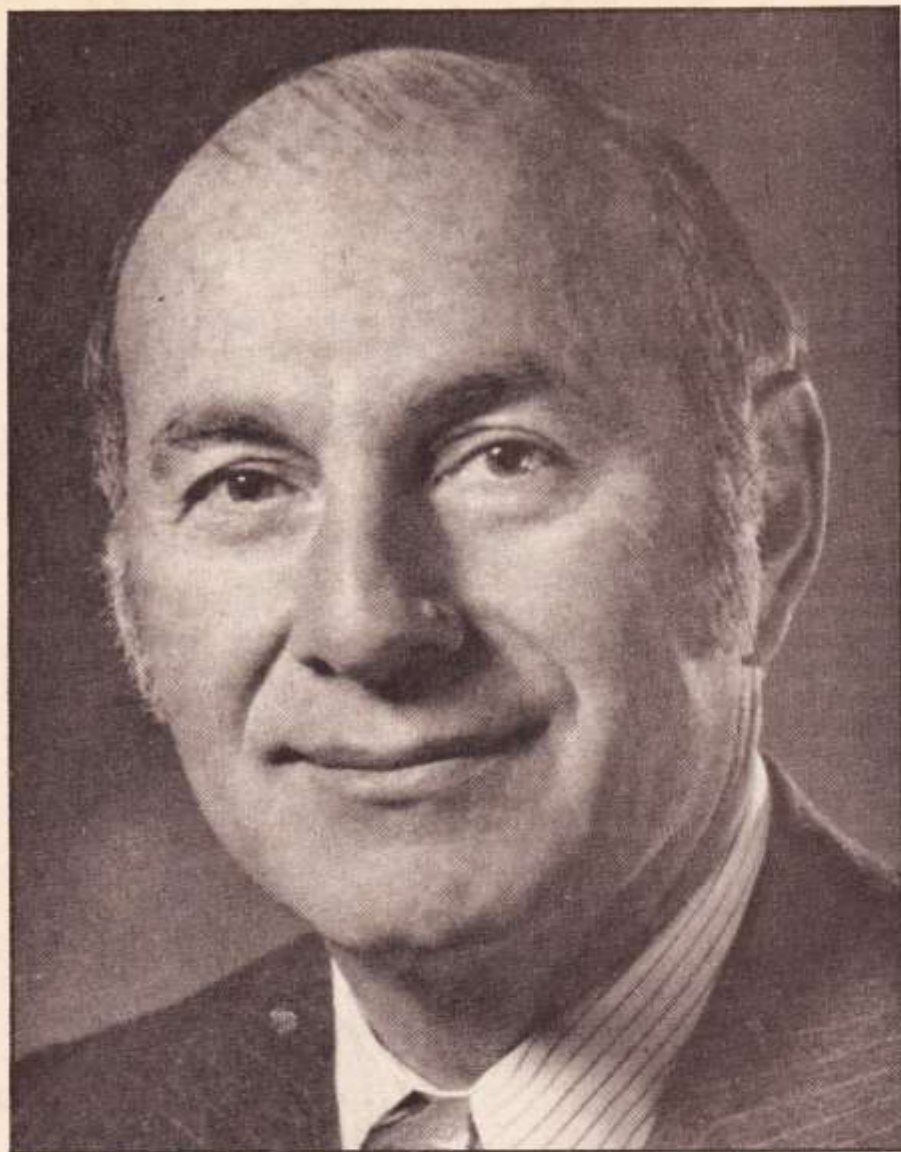




BIG SAVE IN BAY AREA

Thanks to Melvin M. Swig the California Seals are still alive and aiming for a playoff berth.

BY GEOFFREY FISHER

YOU MIGHT SAY that it was a one-time shinny-playing kid, flopping around the frozen ponds of Boston, Mass., who grew up to become the hero in the battle to save the California Seals' National Hockey League franchise for the Bay Area.

That might be reaching a bit, for the sake of romancing the situation, but if you were familiar with the personal history of Melvin M. Swig you would know that there is more truth than fiction to that characterization.

The Seals, who had been awarded an NHL franchise in the first expansion of the league in 1967, were all but lost to the Bay Area. They were on their way to Seattle, or Denver, or just about any place that could come up with the buying price and a sheet of ice.

But Mel Swig doesn't lose often, and never does he lose easily.

And if this new Swig enterprise develops like most of his ventures, the only move the Seals are going to make is towards the top of the National Hockey League standings.

Swig's fight to win the Seals franchise and keep the club in the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Area may be the biggest major league sports story Northern California has witnessed in years.

From the beginning as an NHL entry in 1967 the Seals' franchise had been battered about as pathetically as a punch-drunk boxer, and only the refusal of the NHL board of governors to vacate the Bay Area and provide an opening for a World Hockey Association entry, kept the Seals from disappearing into the depths of

San Francisco Bay.

It was Berand van Gerbig who was awarded the original franchise in 1967. He bought the Western Hockey League Seals from none other than Mel Swig and associates. It was an abortive venture for van Gerbig and in 1970 he sold the club to a conglomerate called Trans National Communications who operated it for just one season and sold it to Charles O. Finley, the owner of the Oakland Athletics of the American Baseball League.

Finley, whose reputation as the Barnum and Bailey of baseball is only topped by his reputation for vendettas with his players, managers and the news media, was confident he had the magic formula for making the club a power in the NHL.

That formula consisted of getting

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rid of most of the high calibre players under contract because they were paid too much (according to Finley) and in their place substituting a series of flamboyant Finley Follies.

He renamed the club the California Golden Seals, changed the colors to his favorite Kelly Green and California Gold, and put the names of the players on the uniforms, the latter action certainly ill-advised since the way they were playing they would rather have remained anonymous.

Finley discovered to his amazement that uniforms don't win hockey games and the Seals ended up dead last among the seven teams in the Western Division. They played to mostly empty seats.

The next season (1971-72) Finley made another memorable contribution to his club. He outfitted them with white skates, a development that soon had the Seals absorbing some very unsettling commentary from the fans in opposing rinks, and some opined that Finley was about to convert the Seals to an ice show in competition with the Follies or Capades. The Seals did manage to climb one notch, ending up sixth in the West. But the fans were not buying and the attendance figures did not produce enough revenue to cover the rent for the Oakland-Alameda County Coliseum, an attractive structure that can accommodate only 12,500 for hockey, a factor that never caused a problem for the Seals.

The floundering franchise was becoming a major headache for the NHL. Finley repeatedly sought a way to unload it, and finally in February, 1974 the NHL clubs bought Finley out and found themselves in a cash-draining position of supporting a costly venture that kept going ever deeper into the hole.

Then began a search by the NHL to find a qualified buyer.

"They had so much difficulty and they had to unload the club," says Swig. "They finally came to me in the summer of 1974 and that's when we started our negotiations."

As it developed, the talks were on again, off again for more than a year.

But the NHL chieftains were becoming more and more convinced that if the Bay Area franchise was to be saved it would have to be Mel Swig who saved it.

Swig, a six-footer, athletic-looking and in his mid-50's, had the impeccable credentials. A noted community

and civic leader, he is a prominent real estate investor and developer. Married, he has four children, Steven, Judy, Kent and Robert.

Swig-headed the old San Francisco Seals entry in the Western Hockey League back in the 60's one of the most successful minor league hockey franchises around.

He had been a scholastic athlete in all major sports and when he went on to Brown University at Providence, R.I., an early spawning ground for ice hockey in the U.S., he quickly won a starting position as a defenseman.

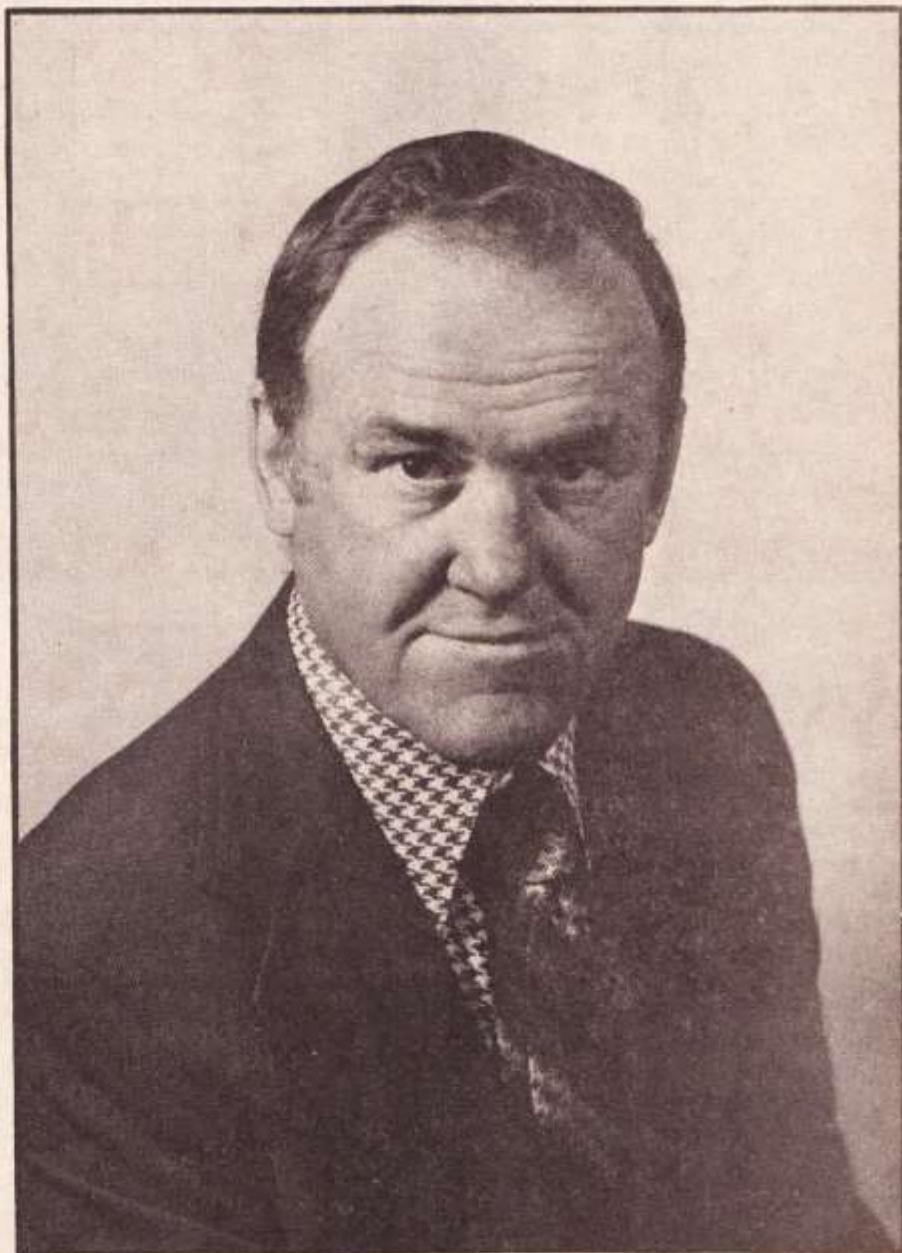
"I loved the game right from the start, more than any other sport," he says.

That early flirtation with hockey has matured and deepened through the years and if ever a man's ultimate desire was achieved, it has occurred with the ownership of an NHL franchise for Mel Swig.

He is fond of recalling how the old Seals, coached by Bud Poile in 1962 and 1963 won back-to-back championships (The Lester Patrick Cup). They played at the Cow Palace in San Francisco and averaged about 6,000 a game, outdrawing every WHL club with the exception of Portland.

"We had a relationship of warmth and intimacy with the fans and that's the kind of atmosphere we hope to rekindle," he says.

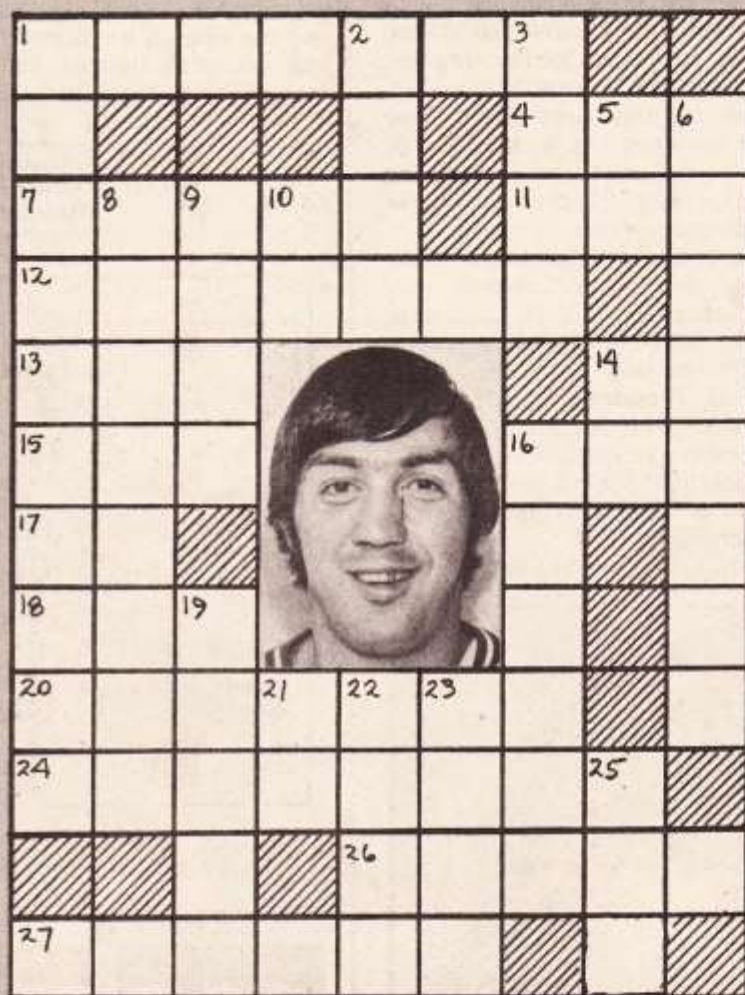
Swig and his associates needed lit-



Seals' new coach Jack Evans is an old pro who is tough and demands discipline.

HOCKEY CROSSWORD

By John Arnold



Across

- 1—One of the Leafs.
- 4—Affirmative.
- 7—Wears No 11 for Washington.
- 11—A former NHL linesman.
- 12—One of the Bruins.
- 13—This will help get a player in shape.
- 14—An NHL general manager. (init.)
- 15—Estimated time of arrival.
- 16—Everyone reading this magazine is one.
- 17—Initials of Heatley.
- 18—Black gold.
- 20—An NHL defenseman.
- 24—Former Leaf forward.
- 26—Former NHL defenseman Stanley.
- 27—Former Buffalo team in AHL.

Down

- 1—Pictured player.
- 2—U.S. Space agency.
- 3—Goaltenders need good ones.
- 5—One of the Rangers. (init.)
- 6—Former Red Wing and Leaf forward.
- 8—An Ex-NHL defenseman.
- 9—Girls name.
- 10—One of the Kings. (init.)
- 14—Coaches Toronto in Junior OHA. (init.)
- 16—A cone ending in a tube.
- 19—Jungle animals.
- 21—Initials of Thiffault.
- 22—One to the Hawks answers to this.
- 23—Plural of 18 across.
- 25—Linesman Scapinello answers to this.

(Solution In January Issue)

the time to convince the NHL that they were capable of producing the necessary financing for the purchase of the Seals. But once negotiations got down to serious calculations it became apparent to Swig that there was no way to make a go of the franchise in a building with the limited seating capacity of the Oakland Coliseum.

"There was just no way we could play in Oakland and make a living or even break even," said Swig. "If we sold every seat in the building every game we still could not come out even. The prices were too low and even with the increases we have instituted this year they remain the second lowest in the league."

Swig told the NHL that the key to the deal would be to have a building of proper size.

"It might have seemed ludicrous to say you needed a building with 17,000 seats when you couldn't fill one with 12,000 but we had to look to the future. The key was a new building and it had to be in San Francisco."

The need for a new sports arena kicked off what Swig refers to as "a hairy situation" of coming to terms with the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency as to who would build, how it would be financed and how it would be designed.

As late as June, 1975, with the NHL deadline for the Seals rapidly nearing the final days, the proposed sports arena in the planned Yerba Buena complex of San Francisco's vast redevelopment was shot down by a series of class action law suits.

In a desperate second effort to beat the NHL deadline, Swig dashed off to the office of San Francisco Mayor Joseph Alioto. In a rapidly assembled conference between Swig, the mayor, the head of the Redevelopment Agency and other key officials, a new drive was begun to come up with a sports arena. In the meantime, others had been working on plans for a sports arena that did not include the obtaining of the NHL franchise. The competition over which group would win the right to develop the proposed building once again nearly spelled doom for the Seals.

In retrospect, Swig sees the tumultuous bickering and maneuvering over the issue that ensued through the early summer months as being beneficial to the Seals.

"We got just a little less media coverage than the signing of the World

HOCKEY PICTORIAL

War II peace treaty," he says, "and people found out there is a hockey team in the Bay Area and I think it revived a great deal of interest in the team."

Finally, with heavy pressure from the mayor's office, the Swig group was given the green light to join with Yerba Buena Developer Lyman Jee to develop the building which is targeted for occupancy in 1977. Jee's involvement is limited to the design and development of the building.

The Seals were saved for the Bay Area on July 24, 1975 and the NHL had maintained its treasured policy of never having moved a franchise.

Despite the damaging effects of stories telling of the impending departure of the club, the Seals' season ticket sales leaped significantly once it had been determined they would be around.

"Many of the old fans that used to come out for the Western Hockey League Seals, and had stopped attending the games, are coming back," said Swig.

Swig is convinced that home

ownership of the Seals will go a long way in revitalizing interest in the club.

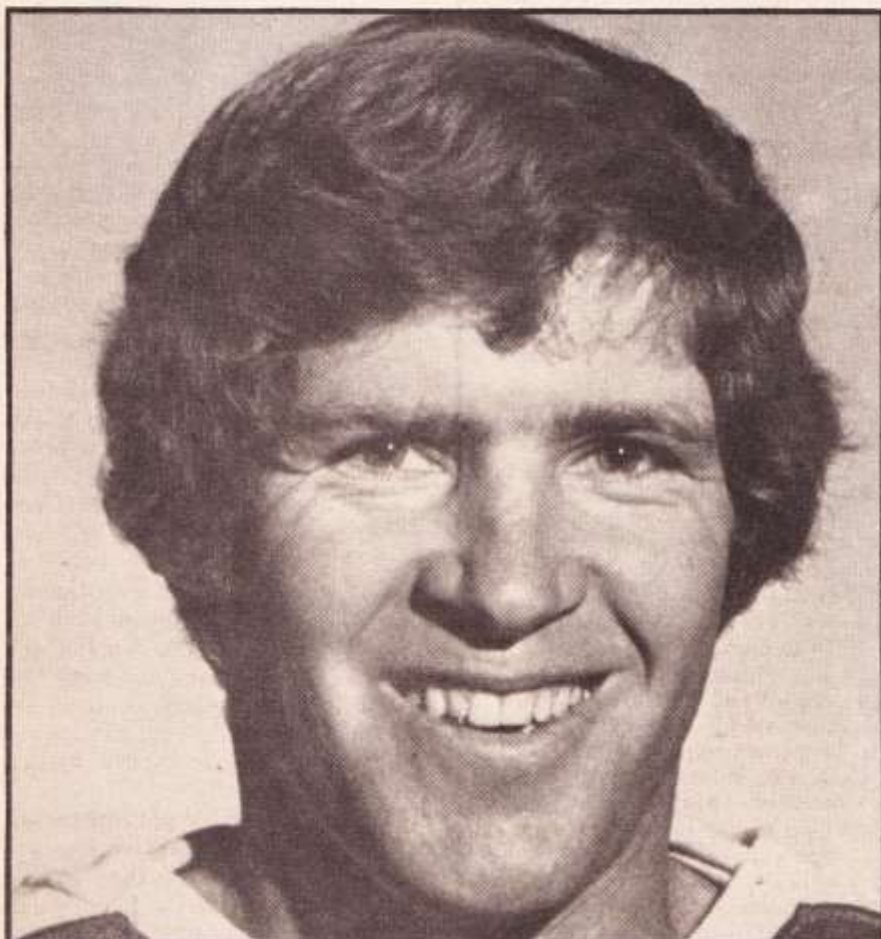
"The Seals have never had local owners and the club has been sadly neglected in that regard of establishing a warm relationship between fans and management. If we as local management show good faith with the fans and they know that we are trying to do the right job they're going to turn out and support us."

What the Bay Area fans will be asked to support is a collection of very young and highly promising players, seasoned with a sprinkling of established veterans.

Swig speaks with admiration of the job done by Munson Campbell, who was installed by the NHL last year to run the club during the league's caretaker ownership. Campbell continues as President with Swig as Chairman of the Board.

He points out that last year was the first time in the history of the Seals that the club had ever signed its first draft choice.

"Guy Lafleur would have been a



In an effort to add more punch to their attack, the Seals obtained Gary Sabourin from the Toronto Maple Leafs in an off-season trade.

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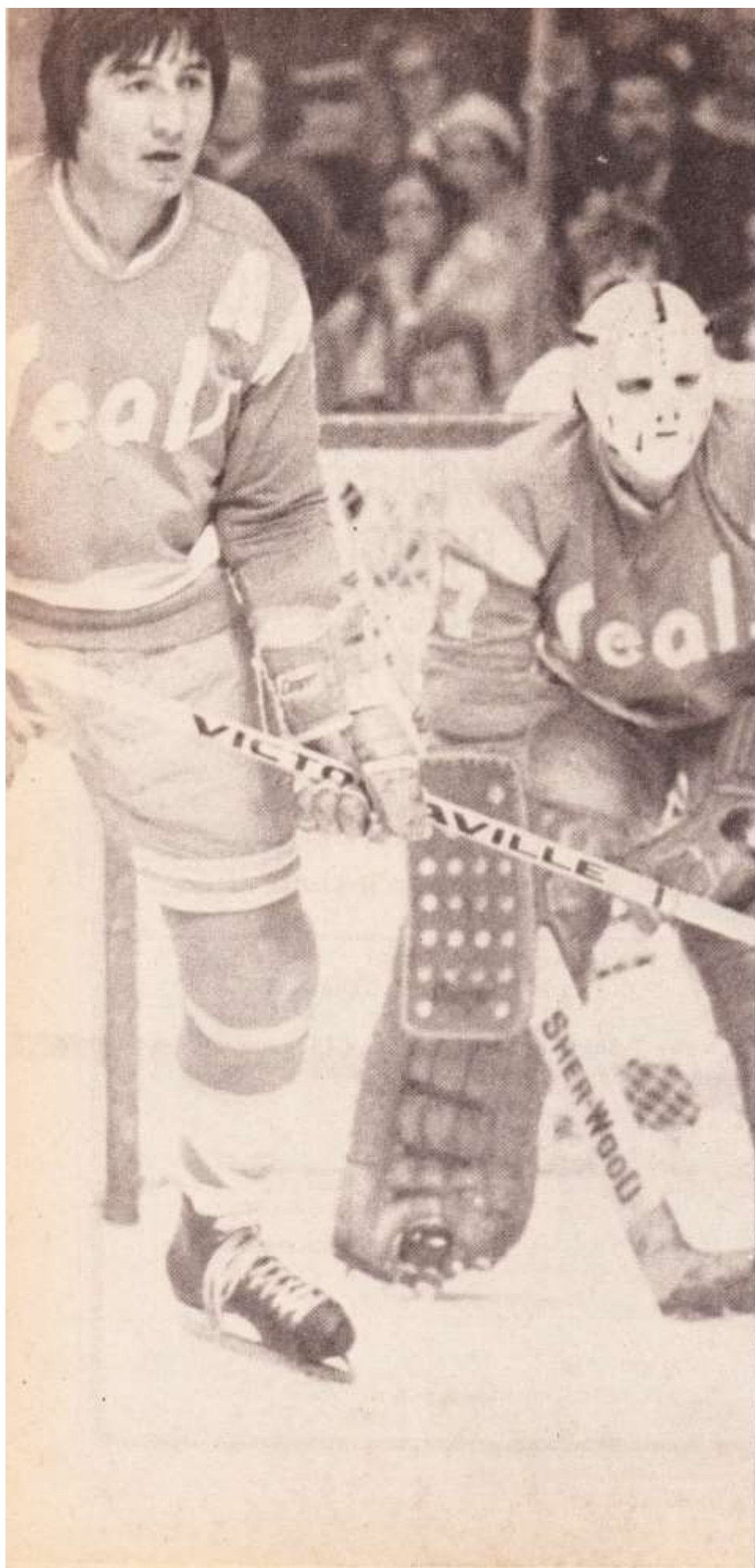
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Seal had the club not traded away all its draft choices. Now we have Rick Hampton, a 19-year-old kid with real potential to be an NHL star. He's colorful and can put people in the building."

By late summer the Seals had already signed two top draft choices, a couple of centers named Ralph Klassen and Dennis Maruk.

There were also some trades that seemed destined to help strengthen the attack. Captain and left wing Joey Johnston was traded to Chicago Black Hawks for veteran Jim Pappin who it is hoped will bolster the Seals' weak right flank. Youthful center Stan Weir was traded to Toronto Maple Leafs for the experienced right winger, Gary Sabourin. Spearheading the defense corps is 34-year-old Jim Neilson. Besides Neilson on the backline the Seals will have Bob Stewart, Mike Christie, Len Frig, George Pesut and Hampton. The goaltending is in the capable hands of Gilles Meloche, backed up by Gary Simmons.

Up front the Seals will be depending on a nucleus of holdovers such as Larry Patey, Frank Gardner, Dave Hrechkosy, Charlie Simmer, Gary Holt, Wayne King, Bruce Greig and Al MacAdam.

The job of putting these players into an effective NHL contender will be that of new coach, Jack Evans, one-time New York Ranger defenseman, who the Seals promoted from coaching their championship Salt Lake City Golden Eagles of the Central Hockey League.

(Continued on page 65)

Defenseman Jim Neilson and goalie Gilles Meloche are being heavily counted upon to keep the opposition off the scoreboard.

HOCKEY PICTORIAL

Swig...

(Continued from page 56)

Bill McCreary, one of the brightest young executives in the NHL, who played and coached for the St. Louis Blues, is the general manager of the Seals. McCreary joined the Seals as Director of Hockey Operations in August, 1974, succeeding Garry Young.

Swig says that the emphasis for the Seals will be to develop "a disciplined style of hockey."

Acknowledging that the Seals at this stage in their development do not threaten to blow anyone out of the rink with their firepower, Swig declares that what is needed at this time is to learn how to skate the wings and check.

"I'm convinced Evans will do a good job for us. He's an old pro, tough and insists on discipline. He's fair and the players like and respect him."

What about new owner Mel Swig, who has been carrying on a love affair with hockey since he was in knee pants? Will he take an active role in the day-by-day activities of the Seals?

"I'll stick pretty much to the business end of the operation," he says. "I'm not going to be a second-guessing owner who says you should have played this kid or that kid, or trade this or that. On the other hand, any moves that are made in player personnel, I want to know about. I want to know about everything that is being done."

"Munson Campbell, Bill McCreary and I are exactly on the same wavelength in terms of how we want the game to be played and the kind of team we want to develop."

By 1977, when Swig gets his new \$22 million igloo, Bay area fans are hoping that "wavelength" will be broadcasting a bright, new era for the Seals. ★

AHL...

(Continued from page 63)

Shield programs if they are to survive the Connecticut Clan, one of the biggest and toughest ever put together in the AHL.

While his United States counterparts ponder free agents, working agreements, et al, Al McNeil sits confidently in his Halifax arena office simply waiting for "a few more" from Montreal.

DECEMBER 1975

But one of the biggest additions came from Atlanta, who have a mutual working agreement with the Voyageurs, in the form of veteran defenseman Noel Price.

Price will be the club's player-coach allowing McNeil more time to the general manager's end of the operation.

Price, a very popular player in the Nova Scotia area, was a star performer for them in the 1971-72 season. In 15 playoff games that year, Price scored four goals and had seven assists for 11 points.

Traveling back down south, we stopped off in Hershey where coach Hamilton was awaiting the final cuts from Pittsburgh and Buffalo.

Both teams are considered as Stanley Cup contenders and an influx of your blood from the Penguins and Sabres is expected to make Hamilton's coaching chores a little easier.

General manager Frank Mathers is on hand to give Hamilton some friendly coaching advice and it couldn't come from a better source.

Hamilton, who looks as young and even younger than many of his players, is battling to bring Hershey

back from one of its worst seasons, a campaign in which the Bears won just 27 games.

With Mathers around to help out and with Hamilton gaining more familiarity with the league, the Bears' growl will be loud.

The journey ends in Richmond and Wilson and his Robins.

Wilson, one of the most fiery coaches in the league will get a real test of his ability as a coach this year. The Robins work with Philadelphia, the Stanley Cup champs, and Washington, a team that won only eight games in its first year. A low draft position did not give Philadelphia much in the way of outstanding young talent to send Wilson's way, while Washington has to keep much of its youth movement around in order to improve.

But Wilson was hired by Richmond owner A.J. Robbins, not by Philadelphia or Washington and it is for Robbins that Wilson must produce, therefore he can establish his own playing system without interference from the big boys of the NHL. ★

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