



ASK AL

Fans get shafted

By AL PATERSON
Daily News Sports

You really can't blame Kelowna Wings fans for being hot under the collar these days.

The faithful has suffered through hard times but it doesn't look like they will get to see the payoff. Not unless they make the trek to Spokane.

The Wings have lost money the last three years. They played in a dinky rink in Kelowna which was the laughing stock of the league. None of which was the fans' fault. They sat there in hard-as-concrete seats and took it for the first two years when the team struggled for any semblance of respectability.

Mark Pezzin, Wings' general manager and his scouting people, have done a truly remarkable job in assembling a decent player list. WHL insiders have told me privately the Wings' list is one of the top three in the league, behind only Prince Albert and Regina.

This coming season the Wings figure to be a force to be reckoned with in the Western Division of the WHL. It's a damn shame that Kelowna fans won't be there to see what could be a division winner. Lord

knows the fans have paid their dues.

LOST MONEY

Vic Fitzgerald, Wings' majority owner, says the club lost \$40,000 this past season. I don't believe the man. There is no way the club could survive the huge costs involved in running the budget required by every WHL club in such a tiny rink. Wing losses had to be more than \$40,000. Double it and I'll consider the losses close to being accurate.

It is noteworthy that, so far at least, the move to Spokane is unofficial. I've seen stranger things happen in this game. It could be a gigantic power play to force Kelowna in to erecting a proper edifice. You don't need a taskforce to know that a city of 60,000 needs a rink into which 5,000 fans can enter on any given occasion. The current Memorial Arena was built in 1948. Fact is we've come a long ways since then.

If the Wings do end up going to the States, I can't see them ever coming back to Kelowna. I doubt the fans would welcome them back. I doubt many fans want them even now. It's not the brightest way I've ever seen to sell season tickets.

What has been overlooked in this whole deal is Kamloops. They must be close to

taking the gas pipe. If the Wings move, the nearest road trip for the Blazers will be New Westminster, then Spokane or Calgary. If the Wings move, can the Blazers be far behind?

Peter Mah, of Edmonton, has repeatedly applied for a WHL team for his home city. Next season there may not be any Okanagan representation in the WHL.

There will, however, be no shortage of applicants beating a B.C. Junior Hockey League path to Kelowna's door. Summerland Buckaroos would like to move back. Gord McBeth is currently trying to bring a team to Kelowna. If he succeeds everybody could make money.

REDUCED COSTS

Think of the reduced travel costs. The longest Interior road trip would be Merritt. You could throw a blanket, around the rest of the Interior Division loop: Penticton, Summerland, Kelowna, Vernon and Salmon Arm. Beautiful. Rivalries abound. Players wouldn't have to miss any schooling. It's a great scenario. Provided the Wings move.

Still, I can't help but feel sorry for Wing supporters who are getting the shaft. They deserve better.