

Lis faces a challenge

Mel Lis is facing one of the biggest challenges of his life.

Lis purchased Vernon Lakers last week. He must try to operate a successful B.C. Junior Hockey League franchise . . . a feat few men have been able to accomplish.

Most BCJHL franchises are as shaky as leaves on a windy October evening. At last weekend's BCJHL annual meeting in Victoria, league governors granted Salmon Arm Blazers a one year leave of absence . . . leaving the Interior Division with five clubs.

Two other teams, Merritt Warriors and Summerland Buckaroos, are reportedly on shaky ground. Warriors have operated on a shoestring for several years and Buckaroos have already announced they will not pay their players room and board allowance next winter.

The Coast Division has not operated with the same number of franchises, in the same cities, for two consecutive years, in more than a decade.

Vernon, which has been one of the league's most stable franchises, took a one year leave of absence in 1980. In the past 15 years, about 20 men, including two groups, have owned the local franchise.

Lis' predecessor, Carl Enemark, owned the club for three years. He ruled with an iron hand and operated his team like a business. In his tenure, Enemark made some controversial decisions. He fired two head coaches, Chuck Tapp and Don Moores, and on both occasions replaced them with his son, Mike. He had several heated confrontations with the media. Enemark wasn't afraid of confrontation and as he pointed out on numerous occasions, he was the one paying the bills and he would run his team the way he wanted.

Enemark became disenchanted with poor attendance during the 1985-86 season and his club's inability to win BIG games. After three promising seasons, Enemark watched his club eliminated in the first round of BCJHL playoffs every time.



by
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Daily News
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Lis faces several problems, but he appears to be a realist. He knows that to attract fans, he must have a competitive team on the ice. Fortunately, he'll have 10-15 players returning from last year's club which placed third in the Interior Division before being eliminated by Kelowna Packers. He has already started recruiting prospects and has established a scouting network.

To break even financially, Lakers must attract about 700 fans per game. For the big games, against Penticton Knights and Kelowna, it is reasonable to expect crowds in ex-

cess of 1,000 people. But, on a cold January night, it is tough to get 300 people in the rink to watch Merritt or Summerland. Lis will have to be a promoter and get Vernon excited about its junior team.

One decision the new owner will make soon, perhaps today, is who he wants to coach his team. In making his decision, Lis said one of the priorities was finding someone on the same wavelength as him. "No matter who I choose, it won't make everyone in Vernon happy," he said. "But, I have to select someone I can work with and who will do a good job with the team."

Lis realizes the importance of community involvement and said he wants the community to feel, "it is their team."

Lis is a newcomer to junior hockey and he is bound to make a few mistakes along the way. But, he is enthusiastic and dedicated to giving Vernon a good hockey team. And if he makes a mistake, he has nobody to answer to but himself because he is paying the bills.