



Bob Murdoch

HOT TIME IN CALGARY

Since moving from Atlanta, the Flames have warmed the hearts of Calgarians—and begun to turn a profit.

By Marc Edge

Calgarians claim their city looks as if it's just been uncanted. It's got the boomtown flush, a heady atmosphere fueled by oil and gas, by big money and the games power brokers play. The cityscape, all sun-glazed towers and girder-hefting cranes in the Rocky Mountain foothills, is so new-looking you'd swear it had just been waxed and buffed. Someday, Calgarians will tell you, they'll have a great city if it ever gets finished.

Calgary was long famous only for its summertime Stampede. Now, a passle of *Dallas*-like deals later, it is the fastest-growing city in North America. Parking lots just don't last long in Calgary. But its latest acquisition—an NHL franchise—has starkly exposed the major shortcomings of a minor-league city.

It's symbolic that Calgary's only big-time sports team has been shoe-horned into a small-time rink. A

new one is promised — this city is big on promise — but for now the Atlanta-to-Calgary Flames must entertain opponents in the barnlike Corral, a 6,500-seat arena on the Stampede grounds that smells like a weekend stock show. It wins the NHL smallest-capacity award by 8,010.

Al MacNeil is muttering as he leaves the ice and hurries through the paperboard office trailers adjoining the rink. Brandishing a tightly rolled edition of the morning paper, he is glowering over an item on the sports page. The ruddy face is redder than usual. He is miffed. "What's this about a cultural wasteland?" he says. "I don't see any cultural wasteland."

As far as he is concerned the only wasteland is in his players' minds. Still, says the newspaper story, they are upset about trading cosmopolitan Atlanta for cowtown Calgary. About getting saddled with some of the highest real estate prices and harshest winters on the continent. And, cranes excepted, the town doesn't exactly swing. Saturday nights, the locals are used to kicking off the cowboy boots and downing a few beers while watching *Hockey Night in Canada*. In Atlanta, they take their fur coats for a walk.

Most of the Flames, management included, admit their hearts are still in Dixie, still pining for their stately homes and peach-tree winters. But the front office is oh-so-aware of the team's shaky standing in a community with a serious inferiority complex.

"Sure, ask me now if I like Calgary as much as Atlanta and I'd have to say no," says assistant general manager Dave Poile, a thermometer-thin graduate of Northeastern, where he was one of the top scorers in Huskie history. "But give me a few months and I'll probably get to like it. It's that way with the players, too."

For that to transpire, the bottom must drop out of the Calgary real-estate market. What the players banked from the sale of their south-

ern homes barely exceeds the down payment on a two-car garage in Calgary. "Everything is so expensive," says Guy Chouinard, center of the club's top line and the only 50-goal scorer in Flame history. "To buy a house here costs three times what it did in Atlanta." Indeed, a three-bedroom bungalow can top \$200,000. Most players now pay between \$1,000 and \$2,000 monthly to cover the mortgage. "I'm right in between," laments Willi Plett, who this season has abandoned his Roberto Duran routine to become one of the Flames' top three scorers. "I took a step down and paid more."

Some players resisted the move to Calgary and were traded post-haste. Away went such big-contract hirelings as Garry Unger and Jean Pronovost. Jim Craig, his public-relations stock lowered by the move to Canada, was shipped home to Boston. Curt Bennett quit and fled to Japan. Goalie Dan Bouchard, a Canadian who sings the U.S. national anthem rather than his own, openly requested a trade and was finally humored. That left a roster dotted with new blood — Kevin Lavalee, Jim Peplinski, Brad Smith, Paul Reinhart, Alex McKendry and Pat Riggin, who had usurped Bouchard's No. 1 role. First-round pick Denis Cyr, an underager, should crack the line-up next season.

Some of those remaining from the Georgia Flames, while lighter in the wallet, seem to have found renewed life on the ice. By late February Eric Vail had equaled his 1979-80 points total. Bill Clement, who had 7 goals and 14 assists last season, had 11 and 16 after 60 games. Phil Russell and captain Brad Marsh are playing soundly on defense, while Pekka Rautakallio had eclipsed last year's points total of 30 by 14. And the Flames' leading scorer, Kent Nilsson, had set up shop in the NHL's Top 10 with 100.


Worrying the players are the expectations Calgarians have of them. In Atlanta, they played knowing full well that no matter what they did they would play backup to football, baseball and basketball. They

only missed the playoffs twice but, then again, they won only two of 17 playoff games. In Calgary, hockey is the only game in town, and the players finally have a few autographs to sign. They are celebrities expected to bring glory to Calgary and bad news to archrival Edmonton. "People know hockey better here," says Willi Plett, "and with the constant media pressure we don't want two home losses in a row." That hasn't happened all season; in fact the Flames posted a 14-game un-

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beaten streak that was snapped by St. Louis in late February. When in Atlanta, the Flames were awful on the road — winning only a third of their games — and not much better at home, winning only half.

At the start of the season, Calgarians were convinced that playing in the Corral would improve the Flames' record, and they backed up their belief by snapping up every available ticket at a league-high top of \$21 as soon as they went on sale. More than 10,000 ticket requests were received by the first day and many fans had to accept standing-room or half-season packages with the promise of season seats in the 18,000-seat Coliseum, the rink that is still on the drawing boards. "Those early days were a mess," recalls Poile. "We had garbage pails filled with money."

Has all that faith paid off? Well, yes. The Flames are still no great shakes on the road but by late February they had a 29-21-12 record — the eighth best in the league. And they seemed assured of a playoff spot. So Calgarians hope the team that long came up cold in warm climes can turn on the heat in the cold country. 

Kent Nilsson: the first European to break the 100-point barrier in an NHL season.

