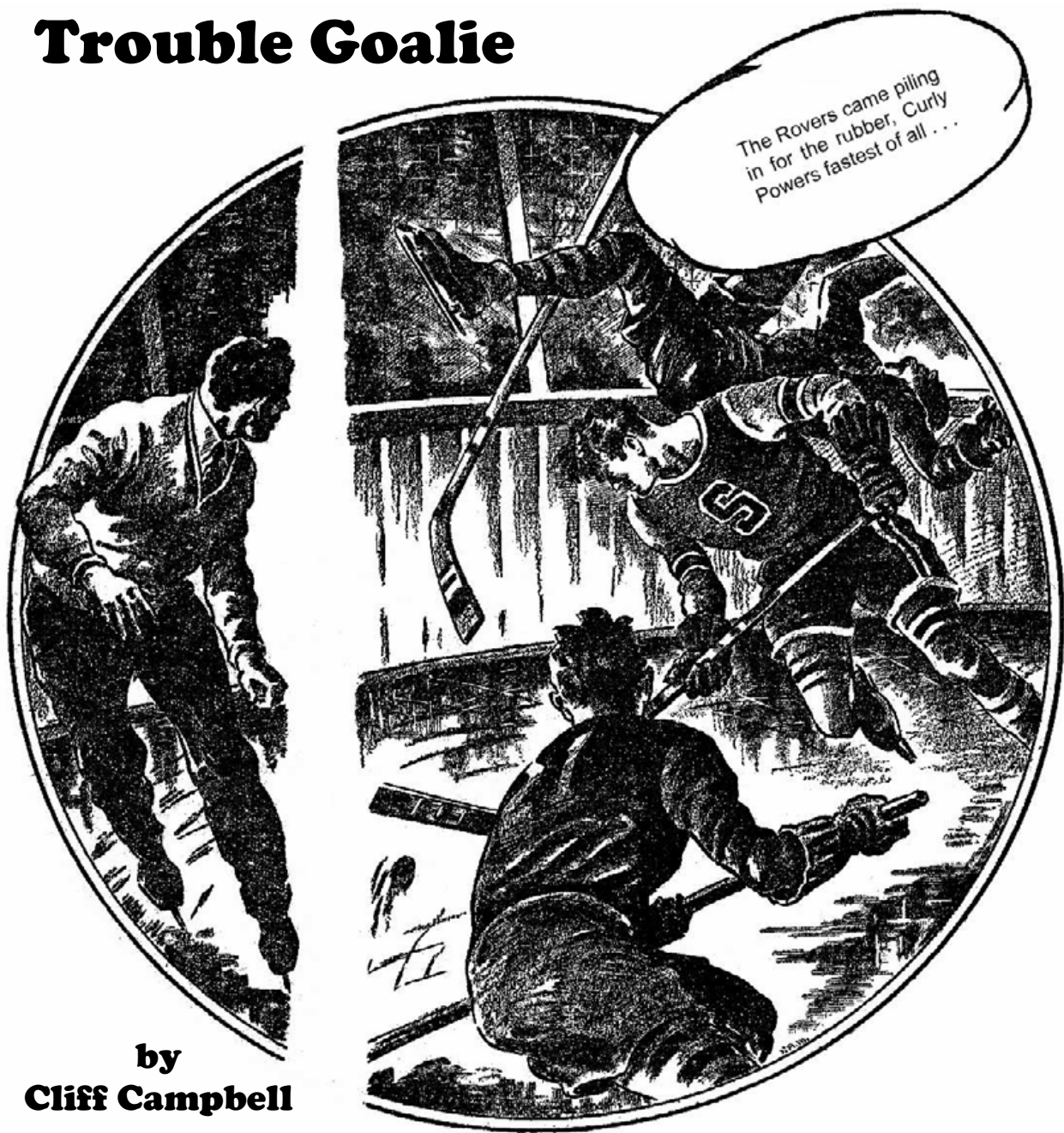


Trouble Goalie



by
Cliff Campbell

He was a flop on the defense, the goalie who couldn't keep that puck away and whose fiery temper sent his teammates to the penalty box at crucial moments. But for all that, those in the know picked him as a winner . . .

AN ATTENDANT stood in front of a door upon which was painted in big black letters: "Private—Keep Out." Behind that door sleek and well-conditioned young men were climbing into pads and adjusting skates in preparation for taking the ice as members of the New York Rovers, representatives of the National

Hockey League—although because of their disappointing showing and lowly standing some scribes challenged their right to be in major league hockey.

Two breezy individuals in slouch hats and loosely hung topcoats ignored the sign on the door. "Baker of the Globe," said the tall and slender

scribe. "Hardwick of the News," grunted the other scribe who was just as tall and built on the lines of a wrestler. He had been an All-American center.

"We wanta see Farrel," grunted Baker. He put his hand on the knob, Hardwick put a shoulder to the door, and they went in. A group of players in all stages of undress looked up from benches and stools scattered around the littered dressing room. The smell of steam and dead liniment odors was almost stifling. A trainer in shirt sleeves was working over the left arm of Curly Powers, the Rovers defenseman. Jim Farrel, the leathery-faced, beady-eyed manager, looked on. He turned—and a scowl deepened as he saw the sports writers. He didn't like sports writers. Not after what they had been saying about him lately. Especially this big guy, Hardwick.

Hardwick snapped the ashes off a cigarette. He said, "Farrel, what's this about you goin' to use a new goalie tonight?"

The manager's iron jaw seemed to click. "So long as you know that, you know all there is."

Baker of the Globe said, "Oh, yeah? I've been looking this guy Toomey up. He never was in big league hockey and the last time he played professionally was five years ago."

"And," contributed Hardwick, "why in Heaven's name a new goalie? The man you've got, Stubile, has the lowest goals-scored-against record in the league. If you had to get new blood, why didn't you locate some forwards who could score an occasional goal? What this team needs is punch—"

"And who told you what this team needs?"

Hardwick turned and looked down at a red-faced man in underwear. He had a stubbled jaw that protruded like the bow of a battleship, and a pair of blue eyes that blazed like sun-reflecting jewels. The newspaper man knew all the players and so decided this must be the new man—Toomey.

He said in a tone that was not the least complimentary, "Oh, so you're Toomey?"

"So what? It says on the door 'Keep Out,' and that means you. Outside, bums."

The big newspaper man laughed. "Now—"

He didn't finish. The door remained open. The sandy-haired new addition to the Rovers crashed the newspapermen like a charging billy goat and butted them out into the corridor. He slammed the door behind them and turned to face the surprised Rovers.

Curly Powers, big defenseman, said, "You shouldn't do that, old-timer. Those are newspapermen. They can make or break you."

"Yeah? Nobody makes or breaks you but yourself. Maybe you'd be a little more useful if you worried less about what the papers said."

Powers crimsoned but he made no comment. Toomey moved over to his locker, his face deep in scowl. There he had gone and done it right off the bat, picking a jam with strangers and newspapermen at that and then picking on the star of the team, a man to whom he had just been introduced. Farrel never should have sent for him. Maybe he thought he had mellowed with age. Maybe Farrel felt he owed him a debt and here was the way of showing it—a chance to play in one big league game before he hung up his skates forever.

And to think that he had been nursing the hope that he might stay up with the Rovers. The newspapermen were right. They would burn his ears off in their articles. They would pick on Farrel, too. He'd better tell Farrel to call the whole deal off—

"Okay, team," the manager barked, "get out on the ice and show something."

MIKE TOOMEY, crouched in front of the net watching two centers face each other on the creamy surface while a white-sweatered referee stood by ready to drop the puck, could hardly believe his eyes. If he hadn't so much padding on him he would try pinching himself. When that puck dropped to the ice he would be actually and officially starting a big league hockey game. He, Mike Toomey of the uncontrollable temper; an old buzzard washed up years ago, with only a swell guy like Farrel to remember him.

And this team was supposed to be laying down on the manager. What kind of bums were they to dump a swell guy like Farrel—

The puck dropped. Toomey was actually in the game, but the significance of the first play escaped him. The Falcons jumped the puck and it seemed to Mike that the Rover center had been a little lax. Toomey mumbled to himself. A blue-jerseyed formation of Falcons breezed in on the white-sweatered Rovers.

Flanked by wings, the Falcon center shot across the blue line. Rovers closed in with Calhoon trying to steal the puck, but the Falcon wing swung Curly Powers. Stiff checks spilled his mates, but the

watching Toomey saw the Falcon wing set for his shot. The rubber came with bullet speed. The veteran rookie flung up his stick and the deflected puck glanced into the seats beyond the screen.

While a new puck was being called for by the referee, Toomey reached Curly Powers with quick and short skate strokes. His gray-blue eyes blazed and his head commenced pecking like a gamecock's.

"What do you think you are—th' Statue of Liberty? Don't wave at those guys when they go by—stop 'em! You're big enough."

Toomey returned to his goal, still fuming, and he left behind a big defenseman speechless with anger at being bawled out.

The referee faced off the new puck and in the resulting jam the Rovers came piling in for the rubber, Curly Powers fastest of all. The big defenseman smacked the first Falcon that got in his way—and drew a penalty.

With the Rovers a man short, the Falcons poured over the blue line like so many blue jays. And even as Mike Toomey fought off the hail of flying pucks he remonstrated with himself. He had got Curly Powers mad—his old weakness of causing trouble—and as a result Curly had committed a foul, and the Rovers were without his services.

Toomey turned back shot after shot, but in a scramble the puck slid past him and the red light glowed. It was a shot Toomey realized he should have saved. A goaltender like the man he had replaced, Stubile, might have stopped it.

Not satisfied with one goal, the Falcons sought to run up the count while Powers remained in the cooler. They pressed hard. Blue streaks of bone and muscle slithered up and down the ice, but the desperate Rovers handed out stiff body-checks. Players crashed into the boards and went spilling along the surface with showers of powdered ice. The fans, hunched forward in their seats, seemed to love it. They booed the visitors for their stiff body-checks and cheered the Rovers for doing the same thing.

In the midst of a scrimmage Curly Powers popped out of the cooler. Instead of skating more or less leisurely to his defense post as he might do ordinarily, the big defenseman tore after the puck like a bulldog after a bone. Bouncing aside both Falcons and Rovers, he pounced on the rubber and then swung his stick to gain speed—and Curly

Powers under full speed was like a runaway express train.

With his foot-over-foot style of skating and carrying the puck cradled against his stick, the big defenseman cut diagonally across the ice and you could see from the press box that he was talking to himself. A Falcon wing tried to back-check him and that was just too bad for the wing because he turned a somersault from the impact.

CHEERED on by the fans he seemed to have forgotten, Curly Powers soloed across the center neutral zone and blazed over the Falcon blue line. The Falcon defense pair closed to scissors him. Now there are several things a soloing puck pusher can do. He can stall and wait for a mate to skim into a pass-receiving position. He can rag the puck and try to slip through. He can swing the defense. Or—Curly did this—he can hit the defense full speed like a fullback going through the line. But football players don't carry sticks or wear razor-sharp blades of the finest steel.

Curly exploded against the defense pair and bodies and sticks flew. Powers climbed from a kneeling position with two Falcons prostrate and recovered the elusive black pellet. He got under stride again and then wound up like a golfer and whistled the puck off the hook of his blade. The Falcon goalie never even saw the streak of black. But the goal judge did when the disc bulged the strings and the red light glowed.

The Rovers had tied the score and the fans loved the manner of the scoring. Powers came back to his position with the roar of the crowd pounding in his ears. Curly rode up to the net. "How do you like that?" he demanded of the goalie.

Toomey put his glove to his nose and said, "Phewy."

The play began again with a new face-off and with both teams eager to extend the score. Substitutes streamed from the benches and hard-riding forwards slashed the ice and lapped the puck around and piled into the boards. Bing Mason, a Rover right wing, took a rebound over on the wrong side of the ice and cut across in front of his net. Toomey shot out of the strings, swung his stick along the ice and hooked the surprised Mason.

The angry Toomey stood over the amazed Mason. "Where the heck did you learn to play hockey? Don't try to tell me Farrel never told you not to carry the puck in front of the net, because I

know better.”

Mason scrambled to his feet, enraged, but he had no time to answer the goalie. He fought the puck away from charging Falcons and set sail up the ice and barged into enemy territory. He banged the rubber to the boards and breezed in for a rebound. Two Falcons cornered him, but terrier fashion. The little Rover wing fought for the puck while the fans howled themselves hoarse as players wrestled all over the ice. Mason stole the rubber, dragged it away from the entire Falcon team and then darted in to beat the goalie.

The Falcons got sore about that goal and someone tripped Curly Powers from behind—and Curly blamed Toomey. While they jawed at each other with each man getting madder and madder, one of the Falcons wisecracked and Curly swung on him. Before the general fight subsided a dozen cops came sliding over the ice that was littered with programs and papers. Curly drew a major penalty.

With both teams short-handed from penalties, neither side added to the score and the period ended with the Rovers out front 2-to-1 and the fans had seen more action crowded into one period than they usually saw in a full game in which the hitherto docile Rovers participated.

The pair of newspapermen who had earlier crashed the Rover dressing room once again arrived at the Rovers' quarters where they found the same attendant standing guard with Cerberus-like fidelity. He scowled at the newspapermen. “Lissun—youse guys aren't goin' in. I got trouble enough now. Come back after the game is over.”

From within the portals came strange sounds and unexpectedly the door opened and Win Blossom, the bald-headed trainer, emerged, his wizened face wrinkled in bewilderment. While the door remained open there could be heard a barrage of salutations and threats worthy of a small riot.

Win Blossom turned and yanked the door shut behind him and saw the newspapermen. He threw up his hands.

“That new guy, Mike Toomey,” he gasped. “He c'n start more trouble than a fox in a hen coop. He's got 'em all in each other's hair and Farrel don't say a word. I wonder what he has on the boss.”

The trainer hurried away, maybe to put in a call for the riot squad, but he left the newspapermen staring at each other. If Toomey did have something on Farrel from the old days, that would

explain a lot. So far no logical reason appealed to the scribes for replacing the clever Stubile with the erratic veteran—even if the Rovers had finished the first period with a lead.

Inside the locker room Mike Toomey was in the center of a group of angry players. He had started criticizing and his caustic remarks got under the players' skins. What right had a new man to bawl them out, even if he was older than they were. And the more Mike Toomey realized he should shut up, the more he argued. He guessed he was born with a chip on his shoulder. He would never get over it. Five years out of hockey and the old habits came back.

Finally the Rovers had no more arguments left and they shunned the goalie as though he had leprosy. Scrapping with his teammates, always fighting once a game got underway. It had always been that way. Only one man had ever seemed to understand him. Farrel. Where was Farrel now? He had ducked out and left him.

THE TWO teams came onto the ice for the second period with players from each side scheduled to spend more time in the penalty box. The teams switched goals, but just to show that position meant nothing, Toomey started crabbing right away. A Falcon wing swinging by snapped at him.

“Pull in your head, you turkey, or I'll cut it off.”

The wing started back up the ice, but an interception of the puck caused him to brake sharply and dart back for the net. A Rover recovered and the wing coasted by. Toomey helped with a whack of his stick across the broad section.

The whistle shrilled and the referee came shooting down to tell Toomey that if he tried anything like that again he would go off the ice. But no referee had ever out-talked Mike yet. He jawed back until the referee swung away in disgust. The fans backed Mike. A fighting Rover was something they had not witnessed for many a moon.

Hopping around the cage like a monkey, whacking the ice and calling his defensemen back into position when they seemed too far down the ice and bawling out the Rovers with a raucous voice, Mike Toomey kept the game seething.

From the manner in which the Rovers cleared the puck away from their own end of the ice one would gather they feared to come near the biting

tongue of their goalie. Curly Powers in particular did more puck carrying tonight than a half a dozen previous games combined. His shots drilled the Falcon net and a couple blasted through.

With the Rovers leading 4 to 1 the game appeared to be in the satchel, but Frenchy Benoit, sharp-eyed manager of the Falcons, continued to juggle his team until he got a combination who could forget back-checks long enough to concentrate on playing the puck.

Frenchy had finally impressed his mates with the idea that if they would only take their time they would find that this veteran in the nets had weaknesses unknown to the younger Stubile.

Getting together a smooth skating formation, the Falcons breezed in on the net in the closing minutes to bury the puck waist-high in the strings to make the score 4 to 2 at the end of the second period. And all the fans and the puzzled scribes could do was watch and wonder. As Baker said, "I still claim Toomey must have something on Farrel to stay in there."

The players turned the ice over to the scrapers and went in to their dressing rooms for the brief respite before the final period. The fans settled back for a breather and appeared well pleased with the night's activities so far.

When the Falcons came on the ice for their final period, Benoit had something to cheer about because it was quite evident from the businesslike way in which they went about their work from the opening face-off that Frenchy Benoit had made his charge spark their tempers in the dressing room.

The blue-jerseyed Falcons took their bumps and stiff cross-checks with grim-lipped silence and kept their nose on the puck. Even so, the home team got the breaks when the starting forwards pounced in on a rebound and sank the pellet for another score.

But the Falcons came right back, ragging the rubber from a face-off and sending a trio of fast-skating forwards over the blue line. A wing-to-wing pass brought the right winger in on the Rover net and a sharp lift caught the veteran goalie flat-footed.

Two minutes later they came back again. Curly Powers and Jim Edwards, the current defense pair, smashed into the attack but clever stick work centered the rubber in front of the net. As a blue wing raced in for a shot, Toomey came out of the net and dove. The whistling puck caught him on his lantern jaw and he flopped spread-eagled on the

ice.

THE WHISTLE blew and players gathered around him. He rolled to his feet a bit groggy but shook the fog out of his eyes. Then he saw the wing whose shot had kayoed him. Toomey hurled away his stick and went after the wing, yanking off his big gloves as he charged. He was swinging punches until Curly Powers pulled him away. And then Toomey turned on Powers. Papers and programs dropped to the ice and some of the more belligerent fans started over the rail but the police intervened. Newspaper photographers snapped pictures. This was history—for the mild-mannered Rovers at least.

Toomey was wrestled back to his net and the game began again. This time the aroused Rovers swarmed over the Falcons and punched home a sixth marker, making a total of goals larger than the combine scoring of their last three games. Mike Toomey could glance over his shoulder at the score and the clock and breathe sighs of relief. He realized that he hadn't been so hot as a goaltender. But the Rovers were winning, and that was what counted.

But the Falcons had not folded up by a long shot. Frenchy Benoit substituted a forward for one of his defense pair and sent a four-man attack sweeping over the chopped ice.

They poured in on the Rover defense and Mike Toomey, tired and stiff from the night's ordeal, felt as if he were being peppered by a machine gun. He made a brilliant save of a corner shot, but a speeding Falcon snapped in the rebound.

The Falcons came streaming down again and sifted through the defense with Mike yelling instructions at his protectors. Mike slapped down a drive, whacked away another thrust, flopped upon a loose pill—and then saw the rubber plop in from a face-off.

The Falcons continued to bore in on the troubled and groggy, but still fighting, Mike Toomey, and the count mounted. Mike looked desperately at the clock and barked at Curly Powers to do something. But the tying marker slipped in.

With little more than two minutes of play remaining, the Rovers with full strength once more turned on the heat. Curly and his mates whistled up the ice. On a blazing drive Curly set the play up for Mason to cash in on the score that put the Rovers out front again.

Toomey glanced anxiously at the clock. Only a minute or so of play remained. He saw that the fans were already moving toward the exits. But suddenly Smythe of the Falcons hooked the puck away from Mason, who was stalling behind his blue line. Smythe was in like a flash. Mike sensed his danger and tried to jump across to the corner of his net. But the tired limbs refused to respond with necessary speed. The puck breezed into the net and the score was tied again.

Mike felt sick at heart. Just when he thought he was going to get the breaks, Lady Luck was mocking him again. Mike danced up and saw Curly Powers looking at him with a sneer on his lips. Mike blazed.

"So what, y' big palooka?" he growled. "If you were any good they wouldn't get near here."

With but seconds of play remaining, the referee faced the centers at mid-ice. Mike Toomey scarcely looked at them. In a second or two the bell would ring and the teams would go on to an overtime. He couldn't stand an extra period. Farrel would have to put Stubile in his place. Maybe the Rovers would win and maybe they wouldn't, but in either case he was all washed up.

Toomey had heard of goaltenders pulling the miraculous—grabbing the puck and skating away for a goal. Baloney—

Mike Toomey never saw what happened. And in that respect he was not alone. The puck dropped to the ice and a Falcon wing recovered. With scarcely a second of play remaining, the wing haphazardly took a goal shot in the direction of the Rover net. The puck lobbed over the heads of the defense pair and landed on the ice in front of the net—and bounced in!

The red light flashed—and almost instantly the gong sounded the end of the game. Stunned fans gazed at the score which now read Falcons 8, Rovers 7.

Poor Mike Toomey just stood in front of the net and felt as if the rink were crashing about his head. Other players skated off the ice, but Mike stood as if frozen. He was thinking that he had made a mess of things. He would be taking the next train out. And back home, where he was wont to speak his mind and perhaps give the impression what a great goaltender he would have been if ever given the chance, they would have something on him for the rest of his days.

Why had Farrel done this to him? He may have

meant well—but he should have known how things would turn out. Now he would be the laughingstock back home as he was here tonight.

MIKE SHOOK himself. He couldn't stay here. He would have to go in and dress.

The veteran rookie appeared at the door of the dressing room. He entered, stick in hand. Then he stood there glaring them down.

"All right," he challenged, "say it. Maybe I'll never use this stick again in a game, but I can still bend it over the first guy that opens his mouth."

A knock sounded on the door and broke the spell. The attendant stuck in his head. "Them newspaper guys," he said disgustedly, "they're here again."

"Let 'em in," ordered Farrel.

And when the scribes entered the manager was actually beaming.

"Well, boys," he said, "congratulate me. I think after tonight I can safely predict that the Rovers will win the Stanley Cup, and," his arm went around the surprised Mike Toomey, "here's the man that will win it for us."

The expression of the newspapermen clearly indicated that they thought the manager had gone daffy, which would explain a lot. Even Mike Toomey blinked suspiciously. Farrel laughed, understanding how they felt.

"Listen," he said, "when I first broke into hockey I was discouraged. I wanted to quit, but one man got me fighting so that quitting on anything was the last thing I would ever think of. I owe plenty to Mike and so does many another man. Time and time again when I saw my team fail to realize on their ability I told myself, 'If I could only find another Mike Toomey for a sparkplug.'"

"So," said Hardwick of the News, "you sent for the original."

"Right," agreed the manager. "I didn't tell him what I wanted him for. I let him believe I was only satisfying his ambition to play one game as a big leaguer. Oh, don't worry, I never thought of dropping Stubile. But I wanted to try an experiment. Sure, we lost the game. But the important thing is that the team scored seven goals. Give my team an average of three goals a game with Stubile in the net and the Cup is as good as ours."

Mike Toomey looked up at the smiling manager. There were tears in the veteran's eyes and

a lump interfered with his talking.

"You—you mean," he stammered, "that I'm stayin' on?"

Farrel smiled. "And how—as coach. That's what I hired you for."

Mike's eyes blinked—and then they blazed. Gripping his stick tightly, he turned on the Rovers.

"You hear that. I don't know how you bums could lay down on the swellest guy that ever drew the breath of life—but you just try it while I'm around and"—Mike spat on his hands and gripped the stick again—"I'll brain you one by one."

MIKE TOOMEY turned on the scribes. "And that goes for newspapermen, too, if they don't give Tim Farrel a break."

Hardwick laughed, but turned hurriedly for the door, pulling Baker of the Globe with him. "Okay, old-timer," he said. "You win. See you in the Cup Series."

Mike stared at the door and his eyes blinked again. His fingers ran caressingly over the big stick. Then he saw Curly Powers observing him. Mike's jaw became hard and he glared at the big defenseman. He wasn't going soft. He was never going soft again.