



SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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Merchants appear to have better shot than they did in '97

By STEVE LeBLANC

Special to The Champion

They say that if you've got your health you've got everything.

This often empty gesture holds plenty of weight right now for the Jr. A Merchants, who're half way through what they hope will be a successful run to the Royal Bank Cup in Nanaimo, B.C.

Compared to this point last year, Milton players are as healthy as horses. Their disabled list has been wiped clean and all 25 players are ready to go.

An injury-free roster this late in the season could be the final piece of the puzzle needed to get them to the nationals.

Diehard fans will recall how at this point last year the Merchants were already without the services of Shawn Smith and Rich Williams and were about to lose Shane Sullivan and Lloyd Lafrance.

They also lost star defenceman Jeff White to an NCAA age restriction midway through their league championship — a situation Milton doesn't have to worry about this spring.

While the Merchants would have been hard-pressed to beat the formidable Rayside-Balfour Sabrecats under the best of circumstances, having a shortened bench as well proved just too much to contend with in the All-Ontario finals.

Milton isn't only healthier this year but have a deeper talent pool from which to draw.

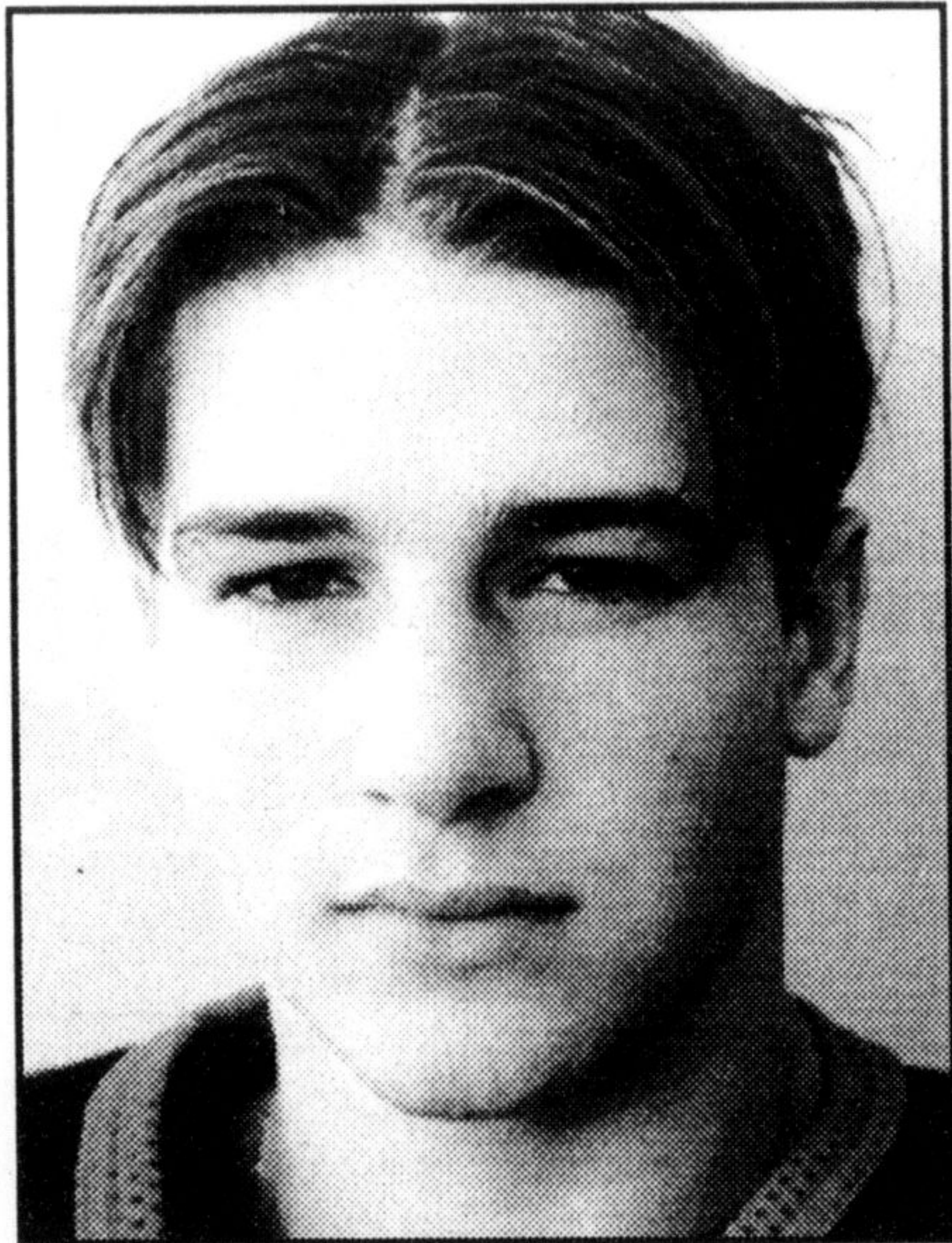
Marty Williamson had few substitute players he could call on last year, and fewer still who were able to make a real contribution.

Rectifying the situation this season, he went with more players this year and got the rookies and affiliate players into more game situations, often scratching stars like Jeff Haydar and Mark McPhail in the name of team development.

As a result, future stars like Chad Blundy, Jeff Seeds and Mike Wheelihan are factoring into Milton's success now.

Perhaps the best illustration of Milton's depth came last week, when they won the West Conference title without the services of gifted winger Jeff Hutchins, who's sure to bolster their powerplay upon his return.

And while Daniel Jacques seems to be the number one man in the cage right now,



Jeff Seeds

Jeremy Wenzel is a much more effective replacement now than he was under Lafrance.

In fact, he's arguably the best back-up tender in Jr. A hockey today.

With a dozen more wins still needed to reach the Royal Bank Cup, depth will likely be Milton's trump card.

But don't discount a more seasoned coaching staff either. Having run the provincial playoff gamut last season as well, Williamson and company know what it'll take to beat the stronger teams.

And while a seven-game showdown with Newmarket softened Milton up for All-Ontario heartbreak, the Trenton Sting shouldn't be as difficult to dispose of in the Provincial Jr. A League finals.

Sure they've got East Conference scoring leader Noel Burkett — who amassed 52 goals and 115 total points — but they just don't seem to have the depth or goal-tending the 87's enjoyed last spring.

In terms of the numbers game, eight different Merchants are averaging a point a game while they've given up almost a goal less per game compared to last year's post-season.

Add this all up and you've got a very promising spring ahead for the Merchants, who'll begin their league title defence tonight (Friday) in Trenton.

Game two will go Sunday at 7:30 p.m. in Milton.



Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Carrie (left) and Chrystal Johnston will join Team Ontario this spring for an all-star soccer tour through Mexico. The sisters are hoping to gain sponsorship for their trip.

Sisters earn berth on tour

By STEVE LeBLANC

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Having already dominated on both sides of the 49th parallel, the Johnston sisters are ready to finish off their North America soccer tour.

Carrie and Chrystal — 17-year-old twins at Milton District High School — will join Team Ontario cohorts for a 10-day swing through Mexico in May.

Along the way they'll battle top state and national teams in international exhibition play.

The Johnstons qualified for the 18-player squad through a series of winter tryouts at Lamport Field in Toronto. Remarked Carrie, "There were different girls at different sessions so it's hard to tell just how many tried out, but I'd say it was close to 100."

Chrystal said she's feeling nervous excitement about her forthcoming trip.

While their roster spots are secure the twins have one obstacle still in front of them, namely a financial one. Their reward for making the under-18 provincial team is a bill for \$3,100 each (cost of flight, accommodations and food), for which they're hoping to get

partial sponsorships.

"We'd really appreciate anything we can get. Anyone wishing to sponsor us can call our home number (878-1209)," said Chrystal.

Qualifying for Team Ontario is the latest in a series of accolades for sisters who only began playing soccer seven years ago.

In that short time they've graduated past the local house-league ranks and contributed to the success of two out-of-town rep squads.

Last summer they helped Scarborough's elite team finish second in Ontario while two years ago they were part of a Burlington contingent that captured the highly coveted WAGS (Washington Area Girls Soccer) Tournament title.

Carrie's contribution came in the backfield while Chrystal's role was on offence.

Soccer is just one of a handful of sports the Johnstons have excelled at over the past few years. MD's basketball, volleyball, track and field and badminton teams have all benefited from what one coach calls their "innate athletic sense."

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