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TUESDAY APRIL 21, 1998

Wenzel weathers storm, then shuts down the 'Cats

By STEVE LeBLANC

The Champion

Jeremy Wenzel squeezed a sparkling diamond out of a lump of coal Friday night at Memorial Arena.

The sophomore cager was cleanly beaten twice within five-and-a-half minutes of game two, which presented a clear and present danger to the Merchants' quest for the All-Ontario title.

But the puck stopped there — at least for Rayside Balfour.

Visiting snipers fired 25 more shots, almost all with real authority behind them, but were denied at every turn. Their adversary was simply sensational between the pipes, stealing the show with lightning-quick glove saves and a handful of diving blocks that left onlookers flabbergasted.

"How on earth did he stop that second shot?" asked one stunned and overjoyed hometown fan near the end of the second period when Wenzel instinctively stacked the pads to deny game one star Todd Crane on a rebound wrist shot.

Wenzel's teammates didn't waste time with questions but seized their opportunity and delivered a 5-2 comeback victory to even the Dudley Hewitt Cup finals at one win apiece.

'Big goaltending'

"He (Wenzel) stood on his head and once we got the upper hand never let Rayside Balfour back in it," said goaltending coach Dan Sales, who's been able to keep both tenders at peak output throughout the playoffs.

"Good things happen when you get big goaltending. The guys rallied around it and really took it up a peg tonight."

The Merchants turned in one of their best efforts in recent weeks Friday and, unlike the series opener, were able to stay focused through a three-hour free for all that featured a couple of near line brawls, seven 10-minute misconducts and close to 200 penalty minutes.

Their confidence got an early boost at 8:20 of the first when Jeff Hutchins caught star goalie Jarrett Rose out of his net and dumped in a backhand to trim the Sabrecats' lead.

From there the Merchants gained more and more steam, particularly after Raitis (Razor) Ivanans instigated a fight — albeit a lacklustre one — with Simon Alary and eliminated Rayside's loose cannon from the equation.

Good penalty killing

Milton did a top-notch job killing the extra two minutes Razor garnered for his unselfish act as they did on 11 other shorthanded stints.

Standout performances in the penalty killing department came from Troy Walczak, Steve French, Jeff Haydar, Mark McPhail and Shawn Smith — who pressured well behind the net while the 'Cats enjoyed a pair of two-man powerplays.

Darren (Mini) Haydar tipped the offensive scales, notching the equalizer and game-winner before first intermission, plus a couple of assists down the stretch.

His go-ahead goal at 12:29 — number 23 of the post-season — came on a one-time wire that handcuffed Rose on the glove side.

Ron Baker set him up with a short-range drop pass and assisted on Kevin Crowe's second-period insurance tally as well.

Salting things away early in the third was Kevin O'Flaherty, the trailer on a three-on-two, who popped in Mini's doorstep rebound.

At this point Rose was replaced by Brian Harrison, who faced just two more shots over the last 14 minutes.

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Jeremy Wenzel

Coach says: We're tough, that's tough

Rayside Balfour's defence is no defence at all.

"Hey, we play a very physical style of hockey, it's that simple," said head coach Ken MacKenzie, in response to Merchant owner Brad Grant's claims that the Northern League champs use overly aggressive tactics to intimidate his team.

"I'm going to be honest, most of the shots we take are in retaliation. They (Milton) initiate a lot of stuff and we're not a team that takes that from anyone."

MacKenzie said the Merchants are the best team his players have faced in two years and that establishing a slow, hard-hitting pace is the only way to beat them.

"If we allow things to open up it's going to be a short series for us," he explained.

While admitting that Tier II Jr. A referees "aren't great anywhere", Rayside's bench boss said he certainly hasn't seen any one-sided officiating during Merchants-Sabrecats games up north, as Grant suggests.

"Not for one minute did we see any indication of bias among the officials," stressed MacKenzie.

The coach of the defending All-Ontario champs said he takes no offence whatsoever to Grant's accusations — that he has every right to make his feelings known.

"That's what junior hockey's all about. He's here to put people in his building.

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Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Rosebank Public School's Jennifer Sceney (in black) grapples with Holly Kelly of Durham Thunder in the gold medal match of Saturday's Ontario Youth Championships at E.C. Drury. Kelly won the match.

Farm system ticking along for E.C. Drury

There's nothing like a little home court advantage to bring out the best in the Milton Dynamos.

The local wrestlers showed little hospitality — on the mats anyway — Saturday at E.C. Drury High School during the Ontario Youth Championships.

Five of seven Dynamos captured medals with two grabbing gold, which added another highlight to a stellar season for Drury's wrestling program.

Leading the way were Gary Ferrier and Mike Devries — who were crowned champions in their respective Kids and Bantam age groups.

Ferrier won his first provincial gold after taking the silver last spring and stringing together an unblemished 1997/98 campaign.

He ran roughshod over each of his four opponents, ending every match early with the 10-point superiority rule.

Devries went 3-0 to claim his second Ontario title, wrapping things up with a pin over Huronia's Lance Duncan in the finals.

His biggest victory, however, came in the semifinals when he scored a come-

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