



# SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

TUESDAY APRIL 28, 1998

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## At the end of a long, hard road; triumph

By STEVE LeBLANC

*The Champion*

**T**he calendar may have read April 24 but for the Merchants it was Christmas, New Year's Day, all their birthdays and every long weekend rolled into one.

Milton's Jr. A hockey players laughed and wept with joy around 10:30 p.m. Friday after completing the final leg of a marathon journey to their first ever All-Ontario championship.

Following back-to-back overtime victories earlier in the week the Merchants kicked in the gates to the promised land with a 3-1 clincher over the Rayside-Balfour Sabrecats.

Their 4-2 series triumph also earned them the right to represent Central Canada in Nanaimo, British Columbia at the 1998 Royal Bank Cup.

Milton's national debut comes Saturday night when they do battle with the tournament hosts.

"This is nothing but pure excitement," an emotional Shane Sullivan blurted out, while being mobbed by some of his younger fans. "The great thing is that this whole organization is responsible for our success, from owner Brad Grant right on down.

"Everyone made a contribution."

Not one square inch of Memorial Arena was vacant when Sullivan and fellow assistant captains Steve French and Mark McPhail were presented with the William T. Ruddock Trophy for winning the All-Ontario title.

Moments later team leader Jeff Haydar — who's talked about his team's depth and determination all year long — hoisted the Central Canadian Dudley Hewitt Cup high and the building erupted in celebration.

Chants of "B.C., B.C., B.C." shook the roof.

Said Haydar, "What can I say, this is amazing!"

"We're not quitting yet though, no matter how hard the nationals are."

Much like games four and five, the Merchants wore down Rayside-Balfour with several energy draining checks Friday and came up with key penalty killing.

After nearly three years of being the hunters, the Sabrecats were suddenly the hunted and had little left to fight off the kill.

They ended the season on a three-game losing skid — their longest since 1994-95.

Milton bench boss Marty Williamson likened the series turnaround to the Rocky movies, where Sly Stallone's opponents measure him with crushing blows before running out of gas themselves.

"That's what we used as our motivation. Rocky always takes a kicking but after a while he gets use to it. That's how it was for us," explained Williamson, who along with team president Gregg Carrigan helped the Caledon Canadiens reach the nationals three years ago.

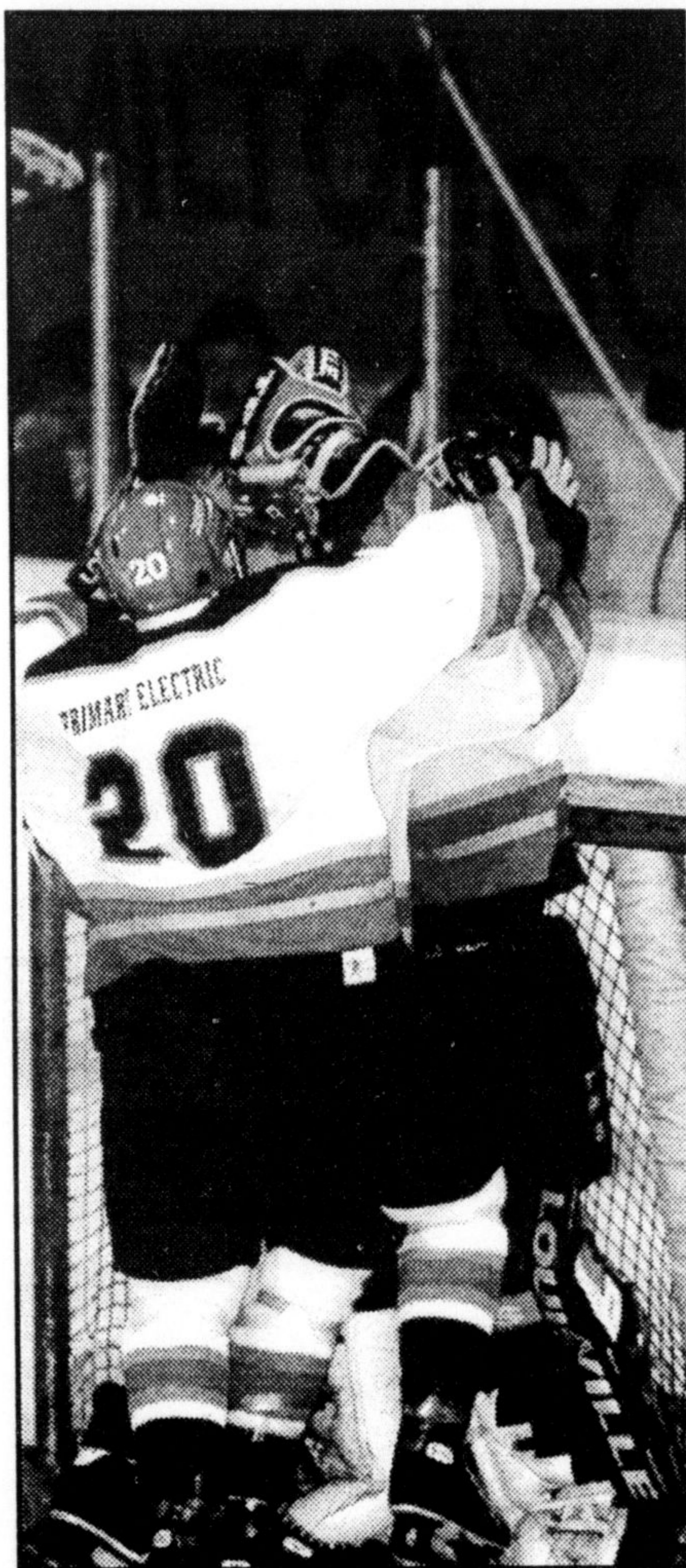
"Rayside-Balfour's a big, overwhelming team but we eventually wore them down. Being able to throw Jeff Seeds in for game four and getting some strong defence out of Mike Hurst down the stretch really helped.

"It's that depth that made us successful."

The Merchants stoned their Sudbury-area rivals for the last 57 minutes of game six, after 'Cats captain Todd Crane gave them one last lead on the season.

Holding the fort was third-string goalie Ryan Penney. The 20-year-old Bowmanville Eagle and East Conference MVP displayed tremendous poise and scrambling ability in stopping 27 of 28 shots.

T.J. Lee — the hero of game four — would even the count at



Photos by STEVE LeBLANC

It was celebration time Friday for the Merchants, who won their first ever All-Ontario title. Chad Blundy and captain Jeff Haydar were the first to mob goalie Ryan Penney (left) while Darren Haydar (above) receives the Most Sportsmanlike Player award for the series from OHA director Tom Lundy.

## Some key points in the remarkable run

Wasn't that a party?

Friday night was a moment that every hockey player dreams of, winning the big one in front of the hometown crowd.

It's no longer a dream for the Milton Merchants, who undoubtedly will remember every detail of the evening with unparalleled joy and pride for the rest of their days.

But let me tell you something guys, it pretty special for the rest of us as well.

My own recollection of April 24 — the day the Milton Merchants went national — began a whole five minutes after I arrived at work, when phone calls started flooding my office (well, work station anyway) about how the boys had done the previous night.

The excitement of a potential game six victory and accompanying provincial title (which yours truly predicted) didn't let up until well after it came to fruition, when in the wee hours of the morning at a local watering hole super fan Gary Sim showed me a vintage copy of a 1959-60 Milton Merchants program — a tangible reminder of how far the club has come.

From start to finish the day belonged to local hockey and local hockey heroes who've held our heart-strings hostage for over two months — and won't be letting



with STEVE LeBLANC

Up  
Front

go now for another week and a half.

But as much as game six's 3-1 victory marked an incredible climax — one available for purchase from our friends at Halton Cable — getting there was half the fun.

Here's a rundown of some of the highlights of Milton's 1998 playoff run, so far anyway.

- Kevin O'Flaherty's double overtime winner against Oakville after back-to-back losses in the second round. In his team's most desperate hour, he donned the shamrock and helped turned Milton's fortunes around for good.

- Milton's remarkable 15-game unbeaten streak that stretched for nearly six weeks.

- Steve French's double overtime winner in game two against Wexford. This put the Raiders meagre hopes for winning the

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## Did Troy chase off demons?

By STEVE LeBLANC

*The Champion*

It took perhaps the most fearless Merchant of all to finally exorcise the demons of Chelmsford Arena.

After five straight losses up north Milton had to be wondering just what it would take to beat Rayside-Balfour in their own barn heading into game five Thursday.

In the end it took an overtime winner by Troy Walczak — Mr. Kamikaze himself — to lift the curse.

"The puck bounced off a defenceman's skate in the slot and I needed two whacks to put it past (Jarrett) Rose's blocker side," recalled Walczak, whose heroics gave Milton a 2-1 win and set the stage for their eventual All-Ontario series triumph.

Perhaps it was fate that Chelmsford

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• see WALCZAK on page 22

## EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH



RON STURLEY

RON STURLEY takes pride in being Georgetown Toyota's Sales Manager. He has been in the car business for five years and enjoys the easy atmosphere at Georgetown Toyota. "It puts the fun back into selling," says Ron, "And Kevin and Jack are a great, fun, bunch of guys to work with!" His favourite spare time activities include mountain biking, sea-dooing and snowmobiling.

Ron has been at Georgetown Toyota for a year and welcomes you to come in and experience a 'low pressure' deal with a local friendly dealer.



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