

Lots of people want a piece of the Merchants

By STEVE LeBLANC

The Champion

Overage restrictions and university scholarships aren't the only elements conspiring to gut the Jr. A Merchants' championship roster.

The All-Ontario title holders knew they'd be losing a dozen players at the end of their 1997/98 campaign. Now Major-Junior hockey threatens to trim their ranks even further.

Future stars Mike Wheelihan and Matt Bannan were among those selected June 6 at the Ontario Hockey League (OHL) entry draft in Barrie.

Wheelihan, 17, was taken in the seventh round, 142nd overall by Peterborough. The six-foot, 170-pounder was the first natural centreman acquired by the Petes, and only the third forward with tier 2 Jr. A experience.

"They won't be losing too many players, so cracking the lineup will be tough," said the Campbellville native, who scored seven goals and five assists in 28 games this past season.

"I had talked with other teams like Mississauga and Ottawa but Peterborough expressed the most interest.

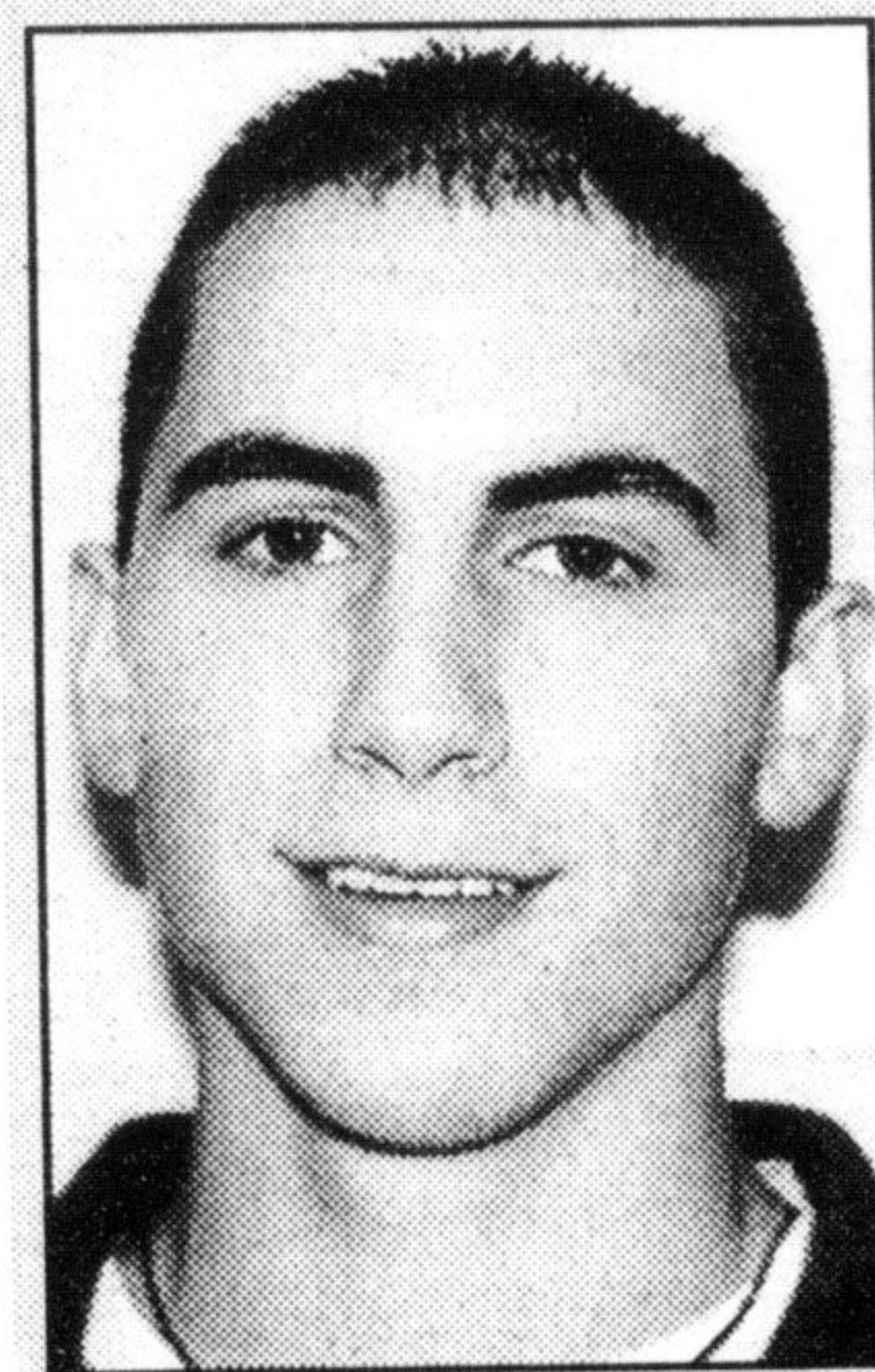
"Their general manager Jeff Twohey said I fit in nicely with their strong skating, defensive-minded style of play."

Wheelihan piqued the team's interest with impressive performances at both the Future Stars Game in February and the Prospects Camp last month in Guelph.

While earning a spot with the Petes would certainly be welcomed, Wheelihan stressed that he'd be just as happy to return to the Merchants — who're developing quite a reputation for getting their players U.S. scholarships.

"That's what I'm leaning towards," he added, referring to a paid education down south. "I've already talked to a couple of schools."

Bannan — one of the most promising defenceman



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— MIKE WHEELIHAN

to come out of the Provincial Jr. A League in several years — has already secured a full scholarship to the University of Michigan, which is set to begin in September 1999.

Despite assurances that he'll be returning to the Merchants this fall, the St. Michael's Majors couldn't resist drafting the 17-year-old in the 12th round.

The OHL franchise will no doubt use his past affiliation with St. Mike's tier 2 club and the appeal of a shorter commute — he lives in Toronto — to lure him away from Milton.

Bannan was rated as a second-round draft choice this past winter and would surely have gone that high if his intentions to go the scholarship route weren't so well known.

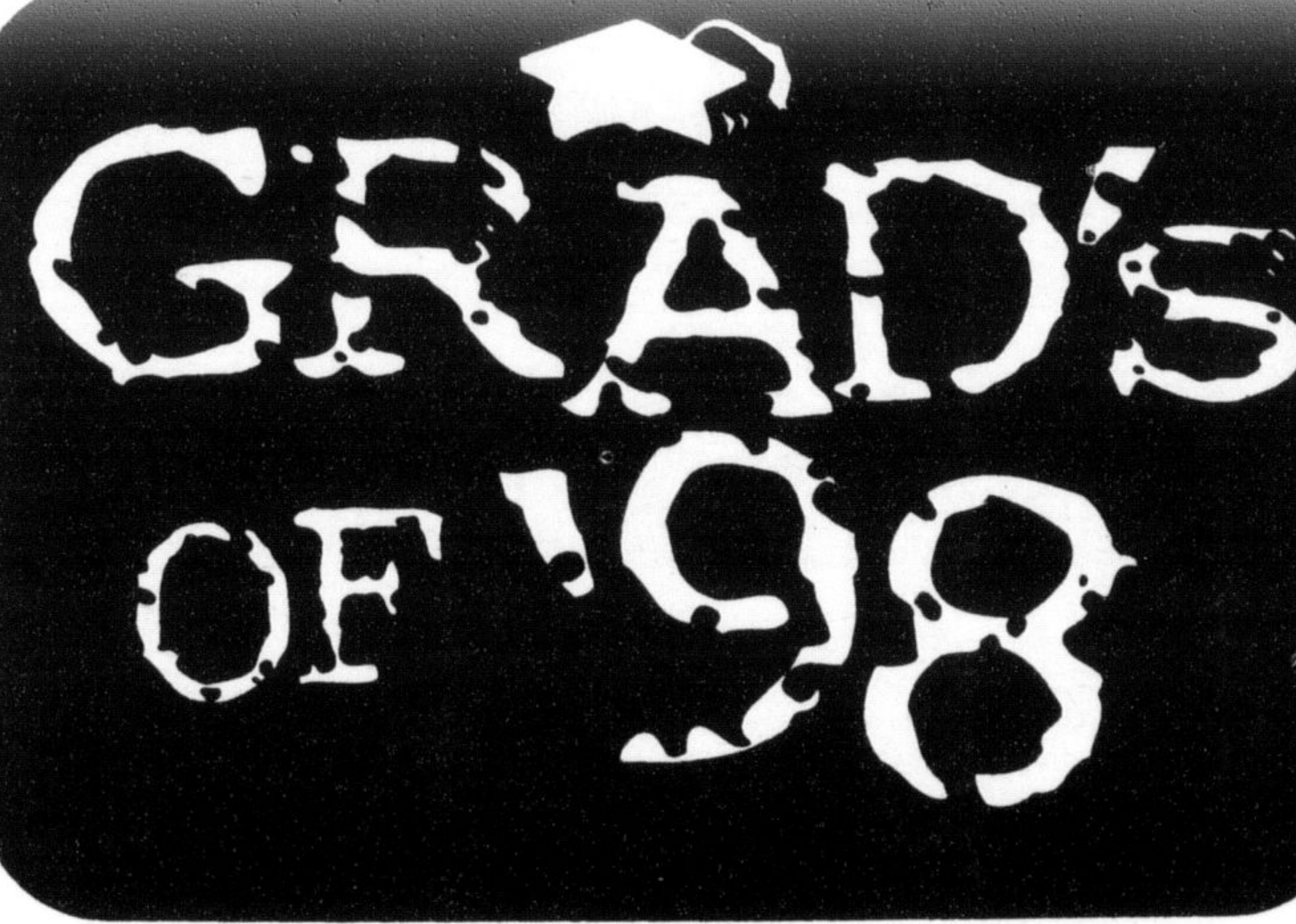
Said Merchants president Gregg Carrigan, "St. Mike's will work on him hard this summer, he'd be a major asset to them even if just for one season.

"In the end however, Matt's going to do what's best for Matt."

One Merchant who's definitely out the door is 19-year-old Kevin O'Flaherty, who just recently accepted a scholarship to Pennsylvania's Mercyhurst College.

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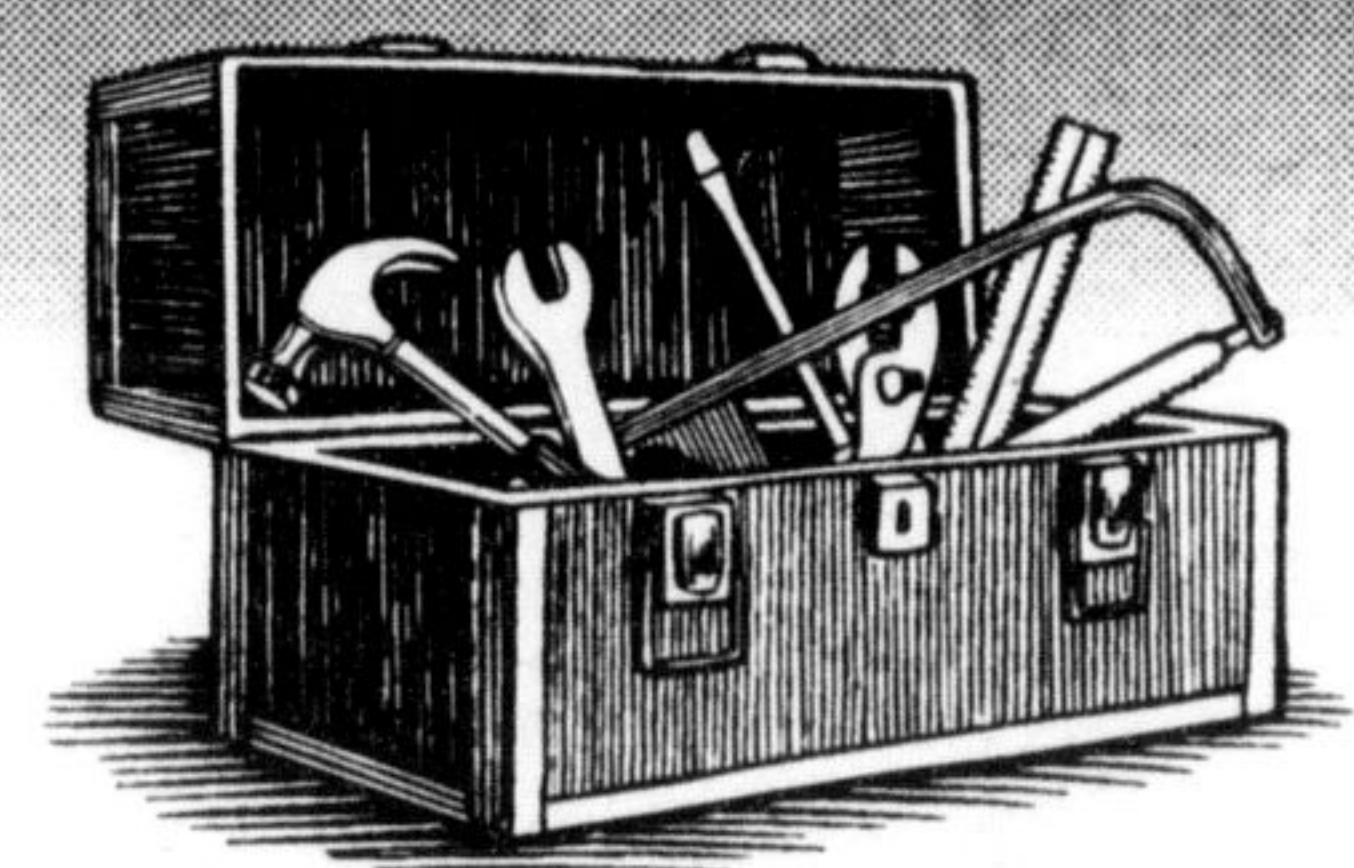
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