

Why complain? The playoff format is fair

This year's Ontario Provincial Jr. A playoff scenario — which offered one lucky loser new life through a semifinal wild card seat — was bound to meet with some criticism.

What's astonishing is just how much negative reaction has come from local fans, whose own Merchants gained the second chance and should have erased any controversy surrounding it by toppling Collingwood last week.

On Monday's SportsZone Live a number of callers bashed Milton, claiming that they didn't deserve to be in the playoffs and that the wild card situation was a joke.

Similar rumblings have been heard throughout area arenas over the past week, and not all from Bramalea Blues followers.

Funny thing, I don't remember hearing any complaints when all this was being decided last year. And don't even think about pleading ignorance because the playoff format was well publicized months ago in both the newspaper and on television.

Sure, having one conference loser advance wasn't ideal, but

Up front



with STEVE LeBLANC

there's nothing unfair about how it was set up. Giving a wild card to the team with the best playoff winning percentage put everyone on equal footing and forced genuine contenders to take each stage of their playoff run seriously.

Milton did just that — winning all but one contest on their way to the West Conference finals and taking a couple of wins from Bramalea before eventually falling in six games.

The question now is, will fans let the Merchants get past this one blemish in their season or continue beating a dead horse?

Say what you will about the legitimacy of a wild card berth, but quite frankly the top two teams — Milton and Bramalea — are currently battling it out for the league championship and I'd defy anyone to say anything different.

Of course having the Northern League champs come down and complete a four-team semifinal round would have been a better situation, but that isn't what happened, so maybe we should just deal with that and move on.

And maybe local fans should appreciate the fact that they can still watch their hockey team compete this late in the season.

I know hundreds of Georgetown residents who'd trade places with us in a heartbeat.

So Mini, what do you do for an encore?

That's the million dollar question following Darren Haydar's spectacular season with the University of New Hampshire — who made it all the way to the NCAA championship finals this past Saturday before falling to Maine.

Mini did just about everything humanly possible during his first year with the team — winning Hockey East's Rookie of the Year, breaking freshman scoring records, placing second in the country for goals and ninth for total points, providing overtime heroics in the quarterfinals and figuring in on both UNH goals in the title

match.

His smooth transition to university hockey shouldn't be much of a surprise though. Nor should the fact that several NHL clubs have expressed interest in the local superstar.

I know what you're thinking — Mini's 5'9" and 160 pounds, numbers that don't exactly fit the mold for your prototypical professional hockey player.

But what about Theo Fleury, Sergei Samsonov, Ray Whitney and Donald Audette? Can anyone say pint-size impact player?

Fact is, Mini doesn't play like a small guy. He proved that in last year's provincial finals against the towering Rayside-Balfour Sabrecats and did so again this past season.

Sure the above mentioned NHLers are a special breed, but then so is Mini. He's been dominating at every level he's ever played at and has delivered in just about every big game over the past few years.

Whether or not he makes it to the show is still any body's guess — I just don't think his size will be the determining factor.

Anyway, congratulations Mini. Keep up the good work.

...

It's been months now since local hockey arenas' snack bars were converted into mini convenience stores and I'm still finding new things available there on every single visit.

If there's a better concession stand in junior hockey — or hockey period, for that matter — I'd like to see it.

Memorial Arena isn't just packed with a wide variety of fast foods, including every type of candy manufactured in the Western Hemisphere, but it's staffed by enough employees to offer convenience as well as selection.

And what a great idea to open up food stands at both ends of the rink during Merchant games, when some fans like to stick close to their seats for fear of losing them.

Proprietor Scott Anders should be commended for seeing a golden opportunity and running with it.

A nice splash

Jeff Dolby sure knows how to make a good first impression.

In his inaugural season of Yokohama Winter Rally car racing the 22-year-old Miltonian, along with partner Frank de Kat of Dundas, took first overall in the novice class.

With Dolby acting as navigator and de Kat behind the wheel, the duo dominated the five event series — claiming a pair of first-place finishes plus a second and third.

They missed the final race, as de Kat was involved on the organizing committee for that one, but already had enough breathing room on the top contenders not to worry about losing their title.

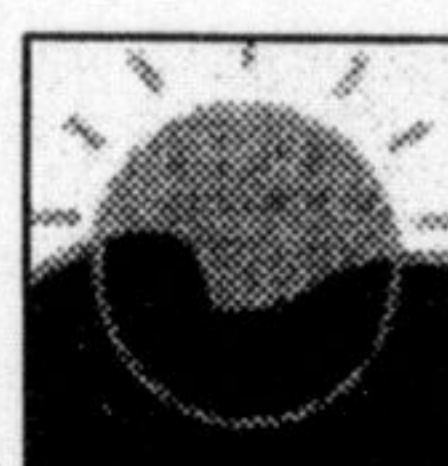
Dolby plans to do some racing with fellow Miltonian Ross Wood, who has guided several teams to provincial gold.



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April 14, 1999

7 p.m.

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