

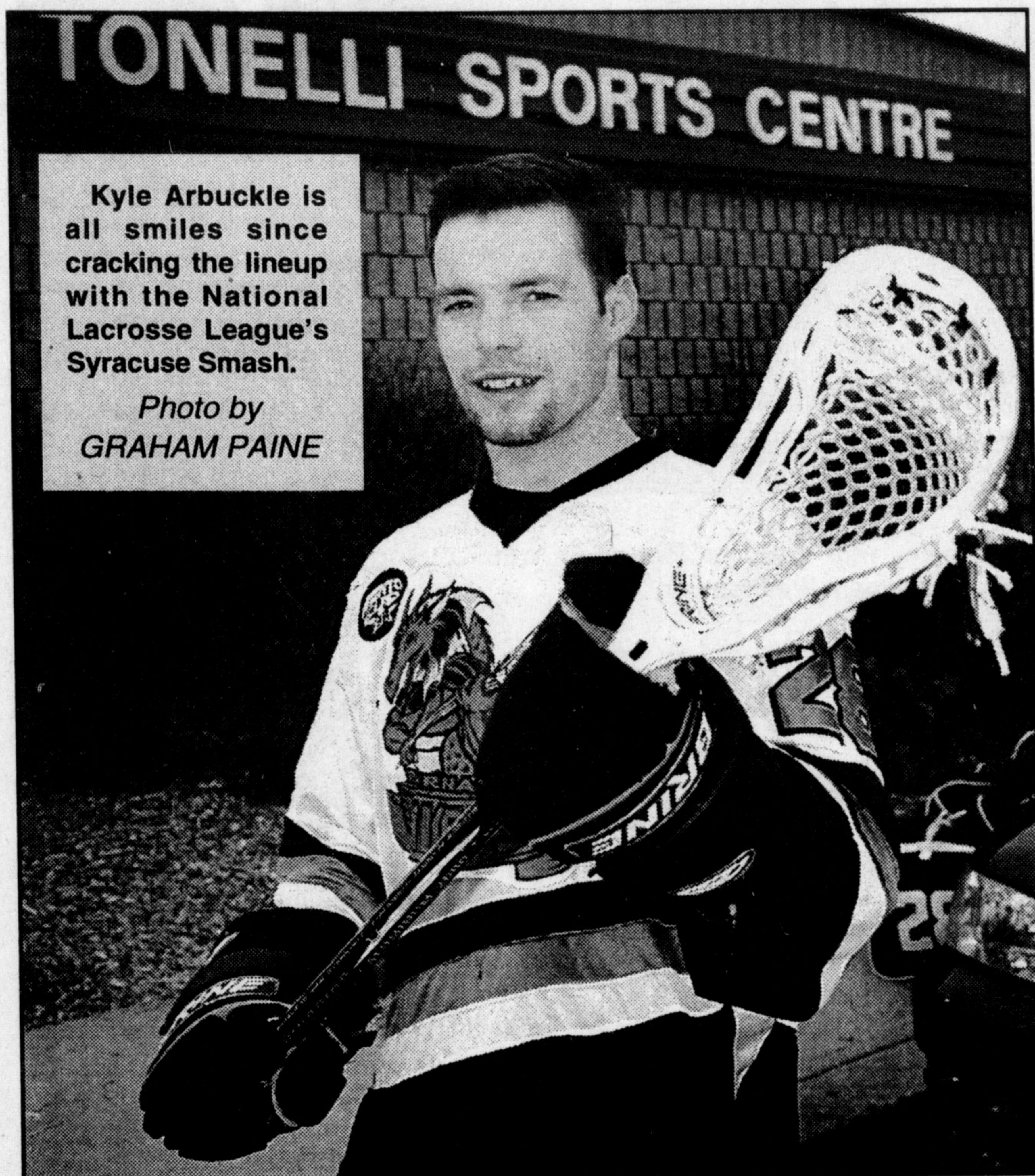


SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

TUESDAY DECEMBER 21, 1999

Arbuckle breaks into professional lacrosse



Kyle Arbuckle is all smiles since cracking the lineup with the National Lacrosse League's Syracuse Smash.

Photo by
GRAHAM PAINE

By STEVE LeBLANC

The Champion

Kyle Arbuckle believes interest in professional lacrosse is ready to take off.

So Milton's top player has strapped himself in for the ride.

The 22-year-old — who played all of his minor lacrosse in town — just recently earned a spot on this coming season's Syracuse Smash.

While optimistic about the chances of turning pro, he had initially expected to crack the National Lacrosse League (NLL) with the Buffalo Bandits.

That's where his first invitation to rookie tryouts came, and where his only ties to the league were — as Buffalo's coaches were the same guys who guided his St. Catharines majors over the summer.

But Arbuckle was encouraged by teammates to attend both freshman camps — and discovered a much more appealing scenario awaiting him in Syracuse.

"They (Smash) have very few lefties who can score, so it's a perfect situation for me," remarked the southpaw shooter, currently in his final year at the University of Guelph.

"Buffalo I think decided on their team back in the summer when I was 20 pounds heavier and still hadn't completely healed from my ankle injury. And anyway, my chances of dressing are at least five fold in Syracuse."

Arbuckle figures he's picked the ideal time to join the league — as it sits poised to expand, both in terms of the number of teams and an overall fan following.

Right now it's essentially a part-time league with bare minimum salaries for all but the most productive players. But that could change dramatically, he said, with a little better exposure and marketing.

"For my money it's the best sport to watch," he commented. "Hockey's great, but there's the neutral zone trap plus so much obstruction with hooking and everything. In lacrosse there's no offsidess and nothing to hook onto. The good players are able to play like they're supposed to. It's really exciting."

Making Syracuse is the latest achievement in the local star's highly accomplished career. He's shone at every possible level including university, major and junior — in which he helped lead B.C.'s Burnaby Lakers to the

national Minto Cup two years ago.

With Guelph he was the team's primary offensive threat over the past two years — both of which he finished top five in league scoring.

He looks to continue in that role when the Smash's 12-game regular season schedule starts against Rochester January 8.

"I expect to dress for every game and hopefully average a goal a game. I think that's definitely possible, especially if I get a chance to play with Paul Gait (league's top scorer)," said Arbuckle. "I think we'll do okay. Last year the team went 3-9, but lost four games by just one or two goals."

The Miltonian will iron out his rookie contract within the next two weeks and likely be the lineup for an exhibition tilt at Buffalo's Marine Midland Arena December 27.

Syracuse's first regular season clash in Buffalo is slated for Saturday, January 29 while they'll be in Toronto to challenge the Rock March 3.

"I'm really happy and excited about playing pro now. I'm looking forward to a long career," said Arbuckle.

Merchants break out of slump by thrashing Blades

By STEVE LeBLANC

The Champion

The Jr. A Merchants found a cure for all that ailed them at Memorial Arena Friday.

Getting rid of the bad taste in their mouths that was still lingering from consecutive losses including yet another to Streetsville, Milton bulldozed their way out of a pre-holiday slump by dismantling the punchless Oakville Blades 10-1.

It marked the club's most lopsided win of the year and the third time this season they reached double digits. The pasting was a clear reminder of just how dominating the perennial powerhouse can be and exactly how deep their offensive well runs.

The West Conference front-runners hadn't done much to extol these virtues in recent weeks — but made up for lost time as seven different players both scored goals and had multi-point efforts in the team's final battle before Christmas.

"We really needed a big win like this," said

captain Chad Blundy. "After two losses, it felt great to spank Oakville. Now we've got the momentum back that we'll need for the Newmarket Showcase."

Milton was a little lackluster out of the gate and didn't really shift into high gear until about the midway mark of the opening frame — when defenceman Adam Sturgeon took exception to roughhousing by newly acquired Blade Dave Burt.

All Milton

The Merchants' young rearguard wound up pummeling his adversary in an ensuing fisticuffs clash — which seemed to light a fire under the hosts.

From that point on it was all Milton.

They outshot the visitors 44-15 while mounting 2-0 and 6-1 period leads en route to victory.

"After so many close games, it was nice to be a little relaxed on the bench tonight. It was a nice atmosphere," said coach Marty Williamson. "Also, the offense has come back over the past couple of games, which is a good sign."



Among other positives were his charges clearly winning the first period and staying composed from start to finish — neither of which they've done on a regular basis lately.

Phil Barski registered a season high of six points — netting one goal and adding five assists to pull himself back among the top three division scorers — while gritty linemate Elliot Altberg delivered his first hat-trick of the year.

Standing out with a goal and three assists was Rob Martin. Ryan Eby tallied twice and added a helper while rounding out the hit parade with a goal and an assist apiece were Ryan Carrigan, Richard Peverley and Ian Malcolm.

Goaltender Joel Cameron's bid for a perfect game was spoiled late in the middle stanza, when he was caught way out of position and beaten on an upstairs wrister by Mike Lukajic.

Oakville's lone marksmen accounted for roughly half of their shots on net — only a couple of which could have been classified as quality scoring chances.

Milton now sports a 24-6-1-3 record and are four points ahead of Georgetown.

Merchant notes: Veteran Mike Wheelihan was out nursing a sore shoulder Friday. Also missing from the lineup was suspended winger Matt Belanger ... Mike McGrane has been released ... Milton killed off all six of their short-handed stints against the Blades, which boosted their penalty killing proficiency back up to about 87 per cent.

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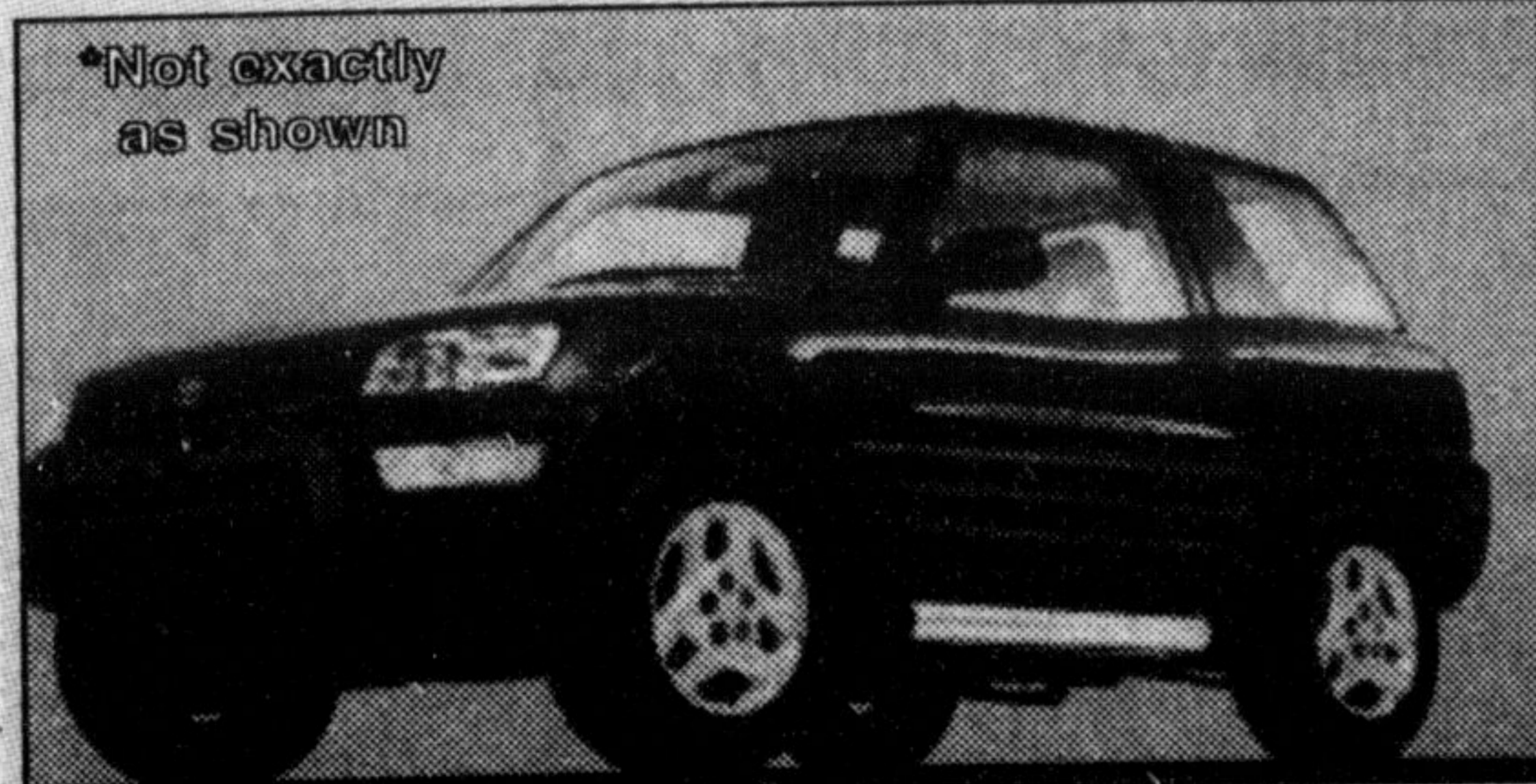
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