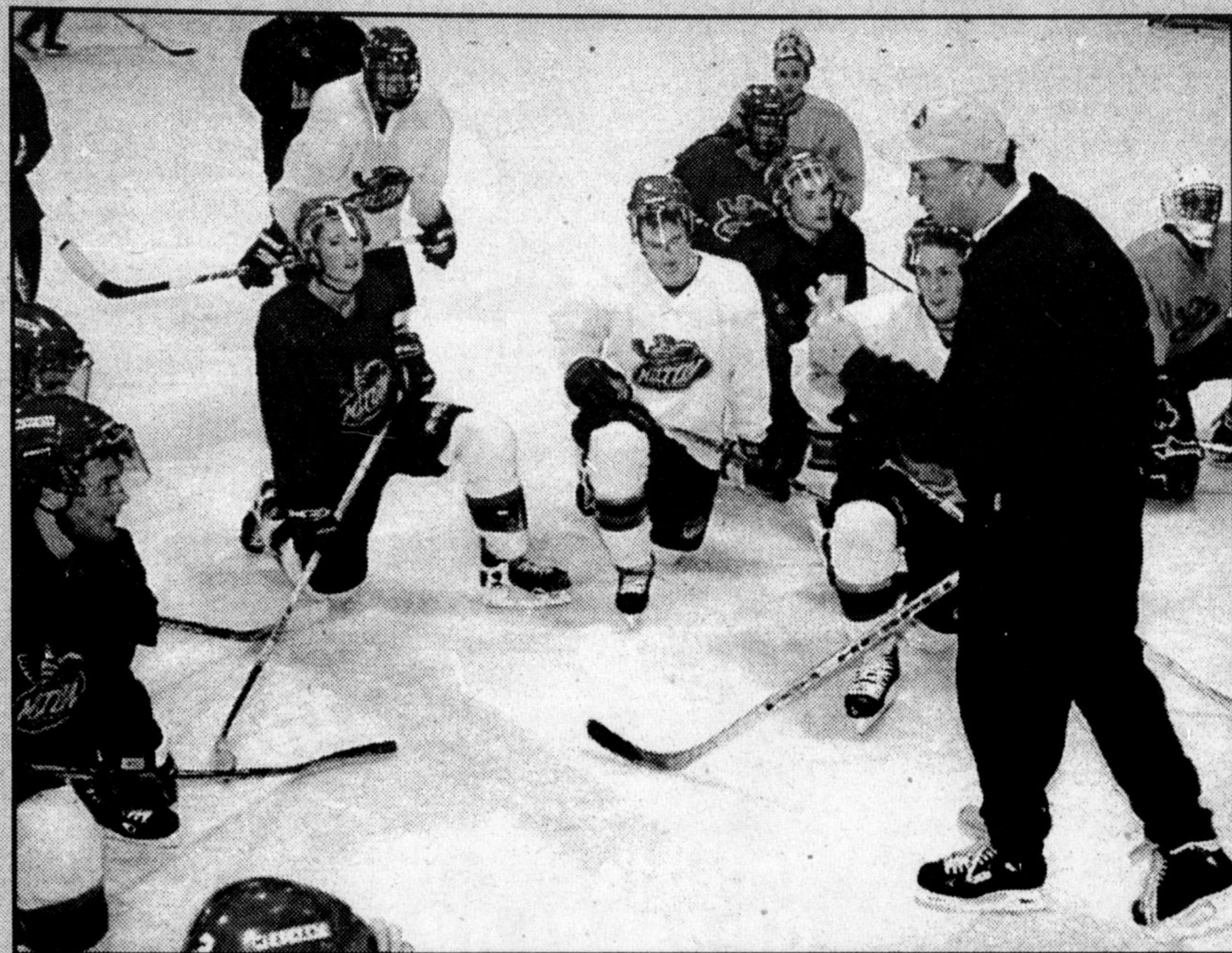




SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

TUESDAY JANUARY 25, 2000



Photos by GRAHAM PAINE

Merchants coach Marty Williamson (left) and assistant Glen Walsh (above) take their underachieving troops through a much-needed refresher course at practice Sunday.

Pitiful weekend sees ...

Merchants cough up division lead

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
The Champion

The Jr. A Merchants should start scrounging up any leftover gift wrapping supplies from Christmas.

Because if the team is intent on giving away first place, they might as well do so with a pretty package.

At Memorial Arena Friday, Milton's generosity began with an absolutely appalling non-effort and subsequent defeat to Brampton.

The 4-2 final was extremely flattering for the local club — whose attention to detail and overall work ethic were nowhere to be found until well into the final frame, when a couple of fluky goals put them back within striking distance.

But for those who assumed things couldn't get much worse, a rude awakening was offered just across the border the following afternoon.

While Milton showed a little more desire on foreign soil, their execution and team play hit a season low — which resulted in them being whitewashed by the next-to-last place Buffalo Lightning 3-0.

The shutout loss was the club's first since May 4, 1998 — when they were blanked by the national champion South Surrey Eagles 3-0 in round two of the Royal Bank Cup.

The Merchants' lost weekend now has them seated third in the division. As of last night they were four points behind top seated

Georgetown and three shy of Brampton, with a game in hand on each of them.

Coach Marty Williamson said his team's current placing, the lowest since he took over nearly four seasons ago, isn't as surprising as how poorly they've been playing in recent weeks.

"We're just not doing the little things. We're separated right now and that's a bad sign this late in the season," he remarked, just prior to practice Sunday. "Brampton had a short bench and was ripe for the picking. We just didn't take advantage of that."

Friday's letdown — according to some — may have had a lot to do with an especially easy game against Bramalea Wednesday.

Captain Chad Blundy suggested, "I think we went in too confident and unprepared for a first-place game."

But the disappointment from taking their first regulation time loss at home took a back seat when compared to being shut out this late in the season by a team that won't even be participating in the playoffs.

"It was definitely the most humbling loss since I've been a Merchant," said Blundy. "Falling to third this weekend really opens your eyes as to what can happen, about possibilities."

Buffalo's Charlie Goivino earned the distinction of becoming the first goalie of the new millennium to stone Milton. He faced a lot of



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MARTY WILLIAMSON

rubber and delivered a huge glove save against leading scorer Ian Malcolm.

But for much of the afternoon tilt the local boys — who've dropped six straight on the road — offered a lot of help in making the freshman cager look good.

The Lightning nursed an early lead for almost two periods before tallying twice down the stretch to seal the deal. Joe Guenther scored a couple while also burying the biscuit was Jason Kuczanski.

Sitting out for the visitors with a mild concussion was Phil Barski.

On Friday, Milton gave up three goals in under five minutes. However, an isolated breakdown certainly didn't cost them the game.

Up until the final few minutes of play the hosts looked like they wanted to be anywhere

but on the ice. Passing was shoddy, corner work was non-existent and play in their own end was just plain embarrassing.

Andrew Gibson got the hook after allowing three goals on four shots in the middle stanza. Replacement Joel Cameron made a dozen saves over the balance of the contest to keep his team in the hunt.

Cutting Brampton's lead in half through the third were unlikely scorers James Coleman and Ryan Eby. The Capitals, perhaps the most fundamentally sound squad in the conference, got inspired performances from a number of players including leading scorer Trevor Large.

He deposited goals one and two while building on that with singles were Matt Cordoso and Simon Mangos.

Milton will have to put the weekend behind them in short order, as tonight they face a stiff challenge in Streetsville — where they're 0-2 this season.

Merchant notes: Milton's 27-10-1-3 record is by far its worst in four seasons ... Former Merchant David Csumrik had four points in the OHL St. Michaels Majors' 6-4 loss to Belleville Saturday ... The Merchants are expected to have a couple of prospective players at practice tomorrow evening. If all goes well, they could be in the lineup for this weekend's home-and-home series with lowly Mississauga.

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