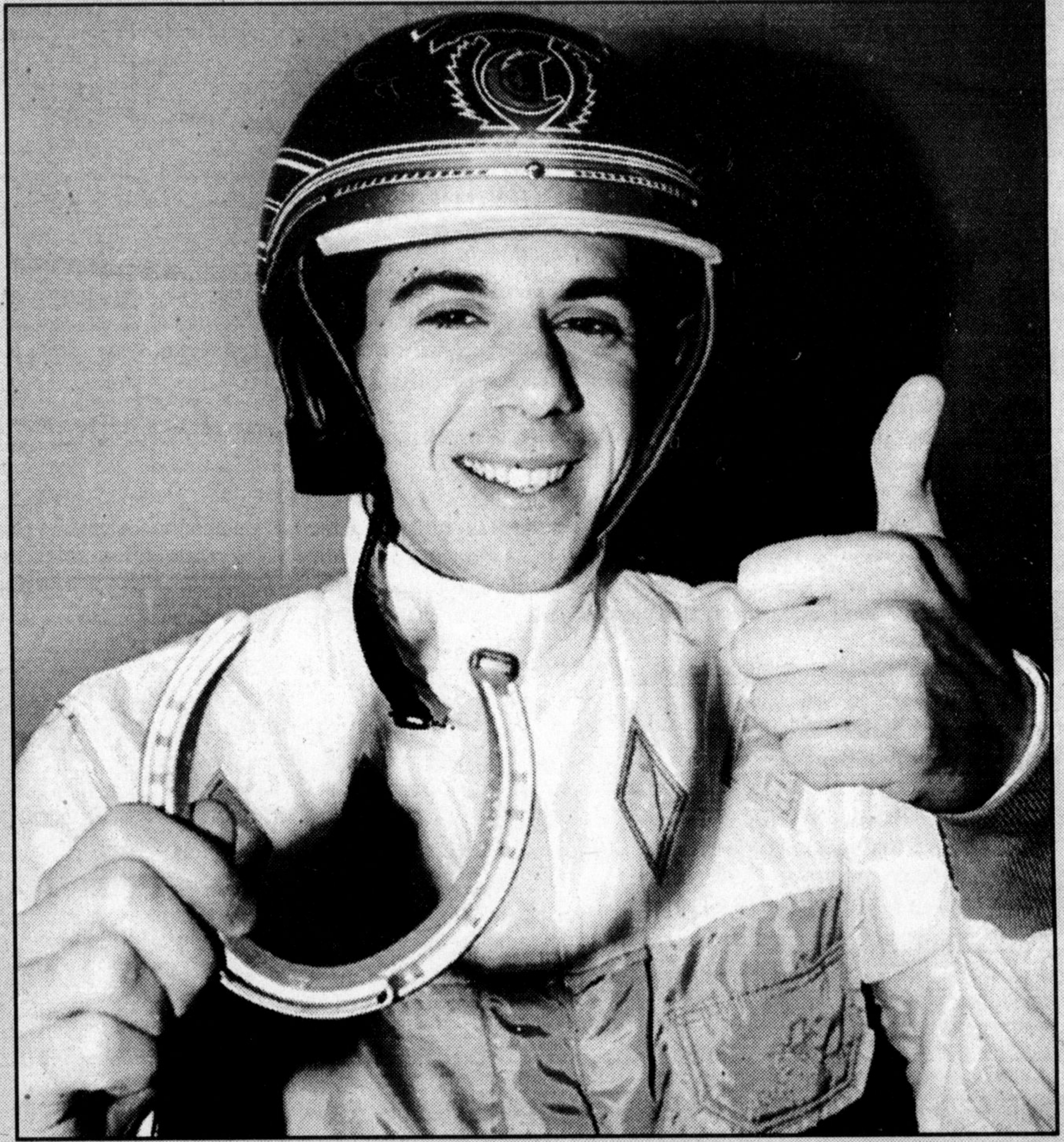




SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

FRIDAY FEBRUARY 11, 2000



Photos by STEVE LeBLANC and GRAHAM PAINE

✓ Milton's golden boys earn national awards

Miltonians Ben Wallace (left) and Chris Christoforou captured Canadian Trotting Association awards for trainer and driver of the year respectively last weekend in

Mississauga. Also, Wallace's prized partner Blissfull Hall was named horse of the year.

Merchants real wildcard for playoffs

Inconsistent, erratic and downright unpredictable.

That in a nutshell describes this year's Jr. A Merchants.

Many of us have spent the better part of the season trying to figure out just where the hometown boys rate in the championship picture — but for the most part, it's been an exercise in futility.

At times this current crop of players have looked every bit as splendid as their recent predecessors, yet far too often (particularly leading up to the playoffs) they've wallowed in mediocrity and seemed uninterested in making any kind of title run.

The Merchants seem to have no equals in their conference when it comes to overall team talent, but it's been a whole different story when it



with STEVE LeBLANC

Up
front

comes to effort and intensity.

And on those nights when desire has surfaced, there have often been shortened lineups or bad breaks to further hinder their momentum — something the club hasn't had to any degree in a couple of months.

Yet Milton hasn't dropped that far in the peck-

ing order and remains one of the toughest teams to beat at home. Only Streetsville and Brampton have done so this year.

And there's still plenty of guys in the dressing room — more than any other squad in the conference and maybe the entire league — who've been through a lengthy playoff drive.

This all adds up to just one thing, that the Merchants are the true wildcard of this year's post-season. While some feel they're ripe for a first round flop, others figure a couple of big wins through the early going could be enough to propel them to another championship season.

I just wish I knew what side of the fence I sit on. That's changed almost on a nightly basis lately and will probably continue on through round one against the injury-plagued Burlington Cougars.

How far they go is anybody's guess. But few would argue that the Merchants will have to shed a lot of unfavourable trends in short order if they hope to avoid an early exit.

• see KEYS on page 28

Merchants Vs. Burlington Cougars

Game	Date	Venue
Game 1	Fri. Feb. 11	at Milton
Game 2	Sun. Feb. 13	at Burlington
Game 3	Tues. Feb. 15	at Milton
Game 4	Fri. Feb. 18	at Burlington
• Game 5	Sun. Feb. 20	at Milton
• Game 6	Mon. Feb. 21	at Burlington
• Game 7	Tues. Feb. 22	at Milton

• If necessary

♦ Gms. 1,3,7 at 8 p.m. Gms. 2,4,5,6 at 7:30 p.m.



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