



SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

FRIDAY FEBRUARY 18, 2000

Merchants grab series lead again

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
The Champion

The Jr. A Merchants' blue chippers cashed in with big goals — but it was the blue-collar class' tireless efforts that truly allowed for a profitable night.

Led by workhorse captain Chad Blundy Tuesday, Milton's penalty killers came through with a stronghold defense during all nine shorthanded stints.

This, plus enough commitment to the thankless tasks essential to winning pivotal playoff games, set the stage for some late heroics at Memorial Arena.

Merchants 3, Cougars 1 (Milton leads series 2-1)

Game 4 tonight in Burlington

Snipers Ian Malcolm and Phil Barski — number one and two respectively in team scoring this season — then nailed their starring roles in the final act.

They scored powerplay markers at the tail-end of periods two and three to topple Burlington 3-1.

The victory put the team ahead in the opening round series for the second time in five nights.

Andrew Gibson made a few key stops early on and was steady throughout the evening. His reflexes were swift — but he was even quicker at redirecting credit for the win to the other guys in the dressing room.

"The penalty killing was awesome tonight, just phenomenal," said the local cager, who faced just a dozen shots over the last two periods and only a handful in the final frame.

The Merchants found themselves shorthanded seven times in the middle stanza alone, yet gave up a measly five shots to Burlington.

And this without the services of James Coleman — one of their most reliable penalty killers, who was a healthy scratch for only the second time this season.

Helping pick up the slack was Mike Wheelihan.

The veteran winger hadn't done much before game three, but made a considerable contribution to thwarting the Cougars' powerplay — as did a number of others, on a night when numerous borderline infractions were called and even strength play was at a minimum.

Series low scoring

So far, the opening round series has been a low-scoring affair, with the team scoring first winning all three games.

Milton players are very wary of this fact, realizing it could be the key to putting things out of reach tonight in Burlington.

"We've got to get up on them early," said Malcolm, who sank the winning tally late in the second, deflecting a blueline floater by playoff-hardened rearguard John Nadalin. "They (Burlington) tend to get frustrated and make mistakes when they're behind."

Barski provided the insurance goal with under five minutes left to play. Leaping out of the penalty box, he found some open ice and beat opposing goalie Matt Cifelli on a long-range wrister.

Giving Milton its initial lead seven minutes into the night was Ryan Eby. The enigmatic winger — plagued by illness and injury for much of the season while thoroughly impressive in occasional stretches of good health — caught Cifelli way out of his crease on a broken play to record the team's only even strength goal of the series that hasn't been scored with the goal pulled.

Notching Burlington's lone marker midway through the first was Frank Curto. The Cougars are still without a couple of regulars including injured defensive anchor Jeff State.

• see **MERCHANTS** on page 22

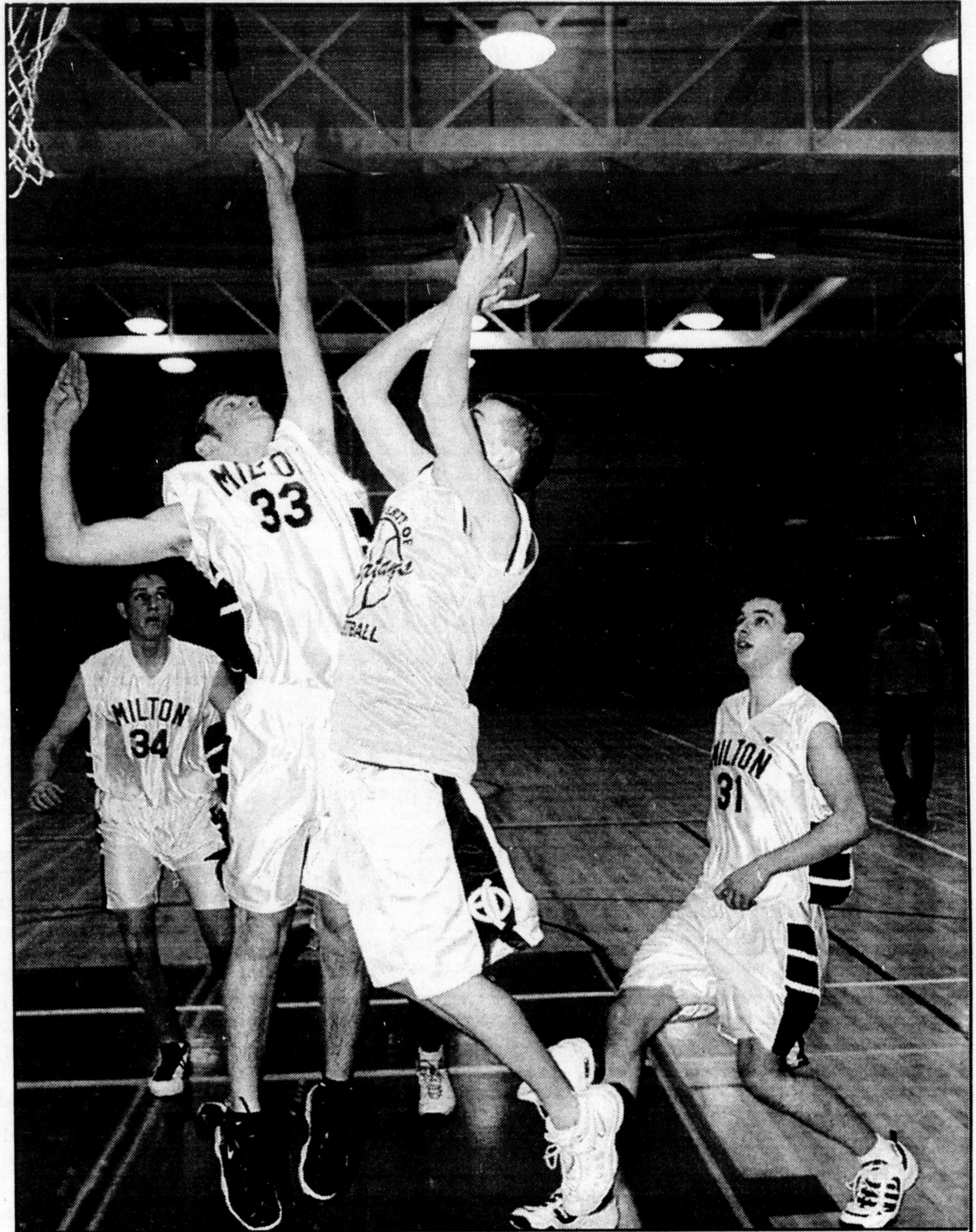


Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

✓ Final fling

Milton District High School's Adam Finkbeiner (33) guards against an unidentified Spartan shooter in the regular season finale of senior boys basketball play at E.C. Drury High School Monday. The Mustangs beat their hosts 64-52.

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