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THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Too close for comfort

Winterhawk goalie Nicholas Emuss contends with traffic while one of his teammates barely keeps the puck out of the net during AA major novice play against Brampton Sunday. Milton lost the afternoon tilt 6-3.

Merchants captain sinks overtime goal to beat lowly Blues

By STEVE LeBLANC

The Champion

John Nadalin has been the Milton Merchants' inspirational backbone and defensive anchor all season long.

Tuesday night, the seasoned blueliner added team hero to his list of credentials — sinking the overtime winner and, in the process, helping his cohorts avoid what could have been an otherwise humbling finish against the vastly inferior Bramalea Blues.

In a near split-second move which stunned most in attendance — or at least those familiar with his long-on-substance-short-on-flash style — the local captain burst off the bench, darted into the offensive zone and wired a loose puck past David Digironimo.

The 1:17 tally lifted the Merchants to a 4-3 win and allowed them to close out the first half of the season much the way they've ended most games as of late — in victory.

Salvaged subpar effort

Nadalin's sudden death goal provided an exciting conclusion to what was overall an uninspired performance for the hosts, who as of last night enjoyed sole possession of first place in the Ontario Provincial Jr. A League's Western Conference.

They sat two points up on Brampton, while a handful of other teams trail closely behind.

Though not expected to be as motivated as during last week's home-and-home series against Brampton, Milton seemed largely disinterested for most of the tight two-hour contest and didn't score until late in the second period.

They finally took the lead midway through the third but then surrendered a goal with a mere 14 seconds left which allowed the Blues to force overtime and gain a much needed point in their ongoing fight for the last playoff spot.

Milton's special teams play proved to be a deciding factor — with a five-on-three disadvantage being killed off at the tail-end of the second, shortly before Ian LaBrash banked in a doorstep rebound on the powerplay 2:27 into the third.

Defenceman Vince Guiducci got the Merchants on the scoreboard with three



John Nadalin

minutes left in the middle stanza, netting his first of the year on a blueline floater through heavy traffic.

The point was used to score goal number three as well — only that time it was veteran winger Dan DeLong

tipping in a blast by Nadalin.

Picking up a pair of assists on the night, including one on the game winner, was recently acquired winger Jason Harshaw — who has 11 points in six games. Nadalin also had two helpers while single assists were registered by Elliott Altberg, Kevin Arruda, Ryan DelMonte and Andy Rozak.

Crafty cage work

Increasing his season win total to 12, Joel Cameron delivered a more than respectable effort — stopping 28 shots including all 14 in the second period. He came up with a couple of dynamite glove saves during that stretch which if not turned back could have been enough for Bramalea to prevail.

Also delivering solid performances were Mike McGrane and Arruda — who continues to see key ice time, including on crucial penalty kills.

The Blues got two goals from Sean Gilmore and a single from Rick Varone.

Centre Flavio Fagionni was knocked out of the game late in the first with a minor shoulder injury, but is expected back sometime this weekend.

The 16-5-3 Merchants, who've won seven of their last nine games, wrapped up the first half of the season with the same number of wins and just one less point than they did last year.

Merchant notes: Dan Bognar, James Coleman and Scott Malcolm all finished up two-game suspensions Tuesday and will be available this weekend — when the Merchants host Mississauga tonight and, weather permitting, travel to Buffalo tomorrow ... Defenceman Steve Schentag could be back from knee surgery as early as tonight. Fellow rearguard Chris Rook, out with a separated shoulder, is expected to return early next month.

Merchants ranks beefed up

By STEVE LeBLANC

The Champion

The Milton Merchants remain caught in a numbers game.

Only now the problem isn't finding enough available bodies to fill the lineup, but rather finding enough ice time to accommodate everyone.

That's already becoming a tough task — with four additions made in the past few weeks — and one that's about to get downright daunting with the impending return of injured defencemen Chris Rook and Steve Schentag.

With 25 players currently on the roster, general manager Nick Slawson has all but admitted there'll be some mid-season auditioning going on for long-term positions. "They (Merchants) can't take any nights off," he said. "It's going to be hard keeping everyone happy here, we recognize that."

Among the new recruits, Milton's GM has been especially impressed with former London Knights winger Jason Harshaw — who has had multi-point performances in four of six games thus far.

"Jason brings an element of energy and hard work up front that we were previously missing."

And looking down the road, Slawson believes ex-

Hamilton Kilty Bees defenceman Chris Krieg — acquired last week in a cash deal — will be able to make a strong contribution on the powerplay and take some of the load off captain John Nadalin.

While these newcomers could be major building blocks towards a successful second half, a number of role players have been largely responsible for the team's impressive 16-5-3 first half.

Slawson said in particular forward-turned-defenceman Dan Bognar deserves a great deal of credit for sacrificing his individual statistics — and potentially limiting his appeal to NCAA scouts — for the best interest of the team.

"Dan's really given something of himself and I think that's symbolic of the team this year," said Slawson. "I think we owe the guy a debt of gratitude and I'd like to get him back up front as soon as possible."

Milton isn't expected to do much player movement before the December 1 cut down date — when five cards must be sent back to the OHA. As for the next cut down in January, well that's another story.

"That might be the time when things happen," admitted Slawson. "We've still got a wish list."

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