

SPORTS

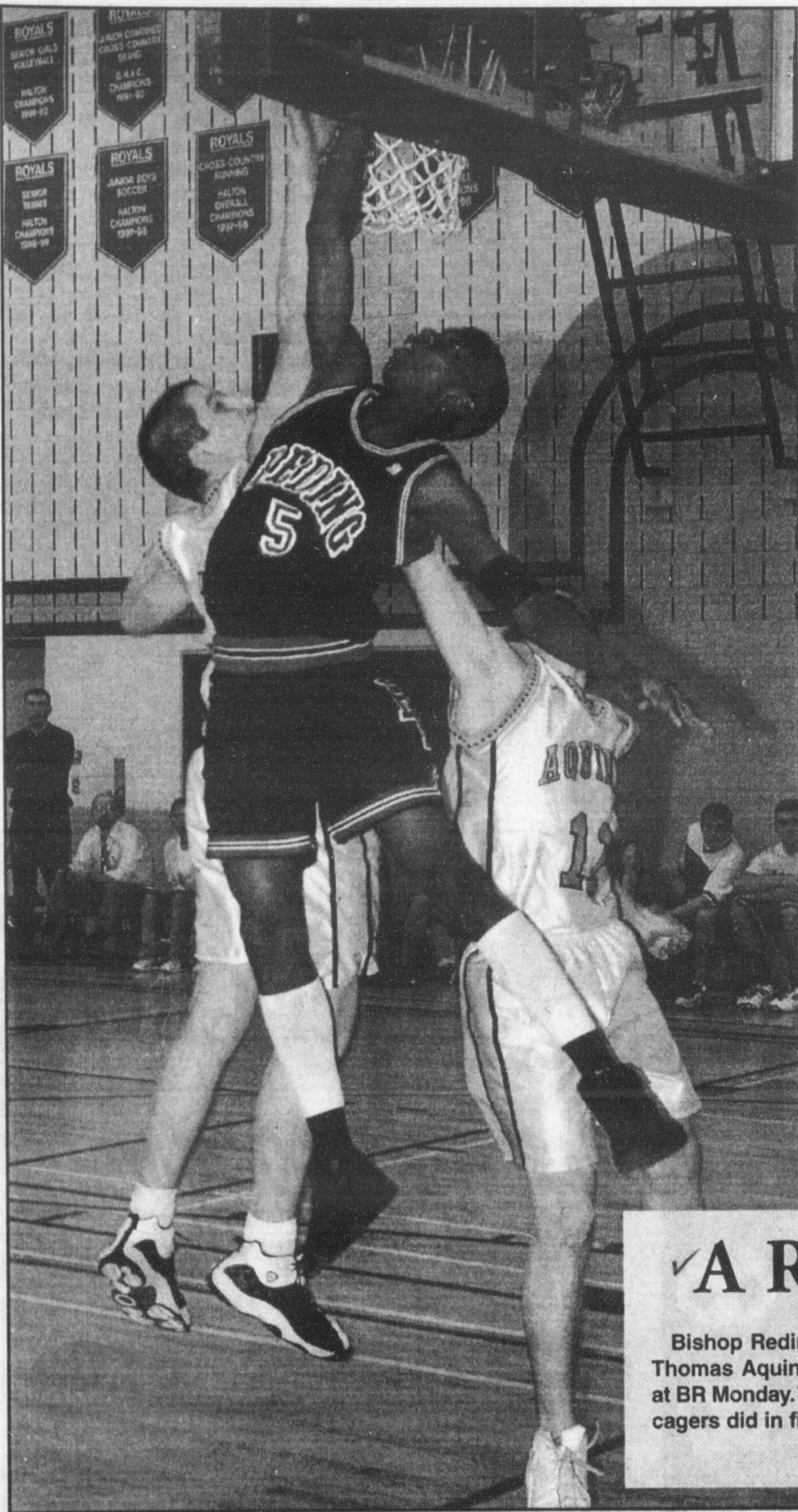
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FRIDAY FEBRUARY 16, 2001



Jr. Merchants' home-ice supremacy goes missing

By **STEVE LeBLANC**

The Champion

A couple of troubling trends have quickly developed for the Merchants.

After reigning supreme on home-ice throughout the lion's share of regular season play, the local juniors have dropped three of their last four games at Memorial Arena.

And after coming out on top in four straight battles against Bramalea, Milton has done so just once in its last four encounters with the Blues.

These changes come at the worst possible time, and now have the perennial powerhouse squad trailing two games to one in first round playoff action.

The Merchants, who're just two losses away from a second straight opening round exit, fell behind once again in the best-of-seven series in front of a rather large but lifeless crowd Tuesday. Coughing up three separate leads — as a result of ill-timed penalties, shaky goal-tending and a disjointed defensive effort — they were outdistanced by visiting Bramalea 7-5.

Jamie Williams' roughing after the whistle infraction led to the game-winning goal midway through the final frame — but his brain-dead actions were hardly the only cause for defeat.

Defenceman Adam Sturgeon has been fighting the puck since his return and continued to do so in game three while a less than stellar performance was delivered by veteran stopper Joel Cameron.

Furthermore, Milton was far too eager to hand over its momentum at crucial points on the night.

"We keep getting down too easily. We've got to stay more focused," added assistant captain and playoff scoring leader Andy Rozak.

His comments refer to first and third-period breakdowns — which were the result of shorthanded stints



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ANDY ROZAK

and a general lack of enthusiasm on the bench.

Challenging Bramalea's David Digironimo 23 times in the second period and only coming away with a couple of goals had to be a major source of frustration and likely led to an uninspired finish.

Milton held their guests to two dozen shots on net, a respectable total for this level of hockey, but were caught flat footed on a few too many occasions.

Said Rozak, "They're a really fast team and we're having trouble containing them in our own end."

They certainly did with Scott Neil. The Blues' powerplay specialist scored three times with the man-advantage and finished the night with five goals — the last of which was an empty net insurance marker.

Rozak led offensively for the hosts, tallying twice and setting up Andrew Francone.

Also standing out with three assists, plus a nifty bit of work creating traffic in front of the opposing cage, was fellow first-liner and rookie-of-the-year Kevin Arruda.

The Merchants' other marksmen were Sturgeon and checking winger James Coleman, who netted goal number five with a beauty backhand four minutes into the third period. Milton capitalized on one of five powerplay chances Tuesday. Overall, their playoff record with the extra-attacker stands at a fairly disappointing 3-for-14.

To date, all three games have been won by two goals — with an empty net marker sealing the deal each time. Also, all three victories have gone to the team firing fewer shots on net.

Game four of the series goes tonight at Bramalea's Victoria Park Arena. Game time is 7:45 p.m. Milton hosts game five Sunday at 7:30 p.m.

Other West Conference playoff match-ups had Georgetown and Brampton leading 3-0 over Hamilton and Streetsville respectively heading into last night's action while Mississauga led Buffalo 3-1.

✓ A Royal air-strike

Bishop Reding's Joel Castro (5) ascends past a couple of St. Thomas Aquinas defenders during senior boys basketball play at BR Monday. The Royals lost 59-56. For a story on how the local cagers did in first round playoff action, see page 27.

Photo by **GRAHAM PAINE**



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