

Diminutive rookie making big impact with Merchants

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
The Champion

Kevin Arruda was brought aboard to be a future building block for the Merchants.

However, his immediate impact with the junior club has been to say the least impressive — and to say the most outstanding.

The 16-year-old's physical stature may be small, but his on-ice performance is usually big — and often larger than life.

Take Friday for example. In a pressure-filled game five clash with the Mississauga Chargers, Arruda rose to the challenge with a two-point effort — highlighting the night with a tying tally inside the final five minutes of regulation that set the stage for an eventual sudden death deposit by Dan DeLong.

Three nights earlier, the diminutive winger delivered what was arguably the hardest-working goal of the playoffs — holding off a defender in both gutsy and dynamic fashion before jabbing a shot through the legs of opposing cager Trevor Battaglia.

"He's got such soft hands (around the net)," said general manager Nick Slawson.

But Arruda's natural talent represents just one dimension of his game.

His knack for absorbing punishment in the slot — from guys as much as twice his size — has been just as great an asset, and is something the West Conference's top rookie has always tried to incorporate.

"When you're a small guy, you've got to be able to take it (hits in front). Otherwise you're just non-existent," said Arruda, who three years ago led his peewee squad to the All-Ontario finals.

Added Slawson, "Kevin never shies away from any kind of traffic."

That's one of the main reasons behind the young forward's late-season promotion to the first line. Since hooking up with team scoring leader Andy Rozak, Arruda has taken his already productive game to new heights.

Finishing top three in goals (21) and top five in points (41) on the club for the regular season, he's stepped it up for the playoffs and sits second in both goals and points with six and 17 respectively — all along acting as one of the team's top penalty killers.

"It's really an honour to play on the first line, espe-



File photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Kevin Arruda (seen here in first round playoff action against Bramalea) has been showing strongly in his freshman year with the Milton Merchants.

cially as a rookie, and my linemates have done a great job preparing me for games," said Arruda.

Skipper Glenn Walsh has been extremely pleased with how the young forward has performed under duress, responding like someone with much more than just one season of junior hockey.

"I just can't say enough about his character. He's so strong on his skates and plays like he's got years of experience," said Walsh. "Hopefully we'll be fortunate enough to have him around for three or four years."

That would suit Arruda just fine, since he's got his sights set on going the NCAA route.

"I'm definitely hoping to get a scholarship so hopefully I'll be around for a while. It's a great organization," he said.

Cameron continues rock-solid playoff run for the Merchants

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Meanwhile, Cameron turned back more than three dozen shots including 11 in overtime.

Counterpart Trevor Battaglia saw a lot less rubber in game five but did come up with the stop of the night — robbing Arruda with a grand-theft larceny glove save midway through the first extra session.

Andy Rozak was the hosts' other marksman, scoring with a powerplay wrist to lift his team-leading playoff goal total to 11. The first-period marker extended his point-scoring streak to an incredible 14 games.

Mississauga's Jeff Loucks tallied twice while teammate Kevin Tracey netted the other.

At Iceland Thursday, Milton was in second gear for much of the night and was eventually denied the sweep.

Back-up Richard Fournier — perhaps rusty from a lengthy inactive stretch — wasn't quite up to par between the pipes while his teammates, while certainly disciplined, weren't exactly impressive.

Sturgeon and Rick Ferroni dented the twine for Milton.

The Merchants will now have a bit of a break before

squaring off with the defending league champion Brampton Capitals in the division finals. The series starts in Milton Friday.

Merchant notes: Milton had three shorthanded goals versus Mississauga. They now have a total of four for the playoffs, surpassing their regular season mark in that department ... Milton and Brampton have not done battle in the playoffs since 1993.

Milton Merchants Vs. Brampton Capitals (best-of-seven West Conference finals)

Game 1	Fri. March 9	at Milton
Game 2	Sat. March 10	at Brampton
Game 3	Tues. March 13	at Milton
Game 4	Thurs. March 15	at Brampton
• Game 5	Fri. March 16	at Milton
• Game 6	Sun. March 18	at Brampton
• Game 7	Tues. March 20	at Milton

• if necessary

All home games start at 8 p.m.

All away games start at 7:30 p.m.

Be sure to check out Friday's Champion for a preview column on the Merchants-Capitals West Division finals.

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