



SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Milton's Ken Armstrong (centre) will lead these Finnish curlers to the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City Utah in February.

Armstrong set to lead Finnish curling team to Winter Olympics

By STEVE LeBLANC

The Champion

When it comes to reaching the Olympics, Ken Armstrong is definitely taking the road less travelled.

The majority get there as athletes — while a much smaller number do so as coaches for their country's representatives. Still others book passage by joining forces with hopefuls from the other side of the globe.

Milton's curling enthusiast now find himself among this third group — as he prepares to lead Finland's Olympic curling team into Salt Lake City, Utah for February's 2002 Winter Games.

This unique opportunity is the result of an ongoing partnership with the Finnish five — which began a few years ago during their trip to Canada.

"If you want to play at a top level, you've got to come to Canada," explained lead Jari Laukkanen, who competes alongside former school-mates Tommi Hati, Ville Makela, Markku Uusipaavalniemi and Pekka Sarrelainen.

Looking for somebody who knew the provincial curling scene and could both arrange adequate competition and offer counsel to sharpen their game, they met and immediately recruited the services of Armstrong.

And it's been smooth sailing ever since.

"Ken does all kinds of things for us. He's really taken the

pressure so we can just concentrate on throwing rocks." Laukkanen remarked.

Armstrong has been a calming influence for the team over the years and certainly knows the game — having secured several provincial championships as a player and helped lead his daughter Leigh's junior team to two national events.

Still, the chance to coach an Olympic-bound curling team has been an overwhelming turn of events. Said Armstrong, "I nearly fell out of my chair when they made the request. It still hasn't sunk in quite yet."

While this will be the Finns' first crack at the Olympics, they're no strangers to international competition.

They've gone to the last five world championships — capturing bronze in 1998 and 2000 — and have become a perennial powerhouse in both their own country and across Europe.

An Olympic medal, however, would no doubt be the crowning jewel to their career — and, according to Laukkanen, is well within reach. He said, "That's what we're aiming for (a medal)."

The Finnish team recently completed a competitive fall tour of southern Ontario and after their national and European championships in December, will return to the area shortly before the Winter Games.

Jr. Merchants' winning streak ended by Blues

Second-period letdown costly

By STEVE LeBLANC

The Champion

Third place will just have to wait.

Bramalea has grown quite attached to the number three spot and proved that to the revitalized Merchants Tuesday night at Victoria Park Arena.

Handing Milton its first loss in nine games, the conference's most stationary team — standings wise, at least — used their explosive transition game to full advantage and generally out-hustled their guests en route to winning 5-4.

Three unanswered goals against in the second period and a botched two-man advantage with four minutes remaining combined to temporarily sidetrack the Merchants.

Ryan McManus' first brush with mediocrity between the pipes didn't help matters either.

On a more positive note, rookie sensation Rich Meloche delivered his second hat-trick of the year — capping it with a last-minute shorthanded tally — to boost his team-leading goal total to 19.

Furthermore, Dan Bognar and Shawn Mole both returned following one-game absences and looked no worse for wear from the punishment they absorbed during last Friday's encounter with Hamilton.

Also back in the lineup — playing the role of understudy through the final stretch of his recovery from a separated shoulder — was veteran tender Trevor Battaglia.

These additions, however, were overshadowed by a sub-par opening half in which the blueline unit was penalty prone and their forward counterparts generated few quality scoring chances beyond those buried by Meloche.

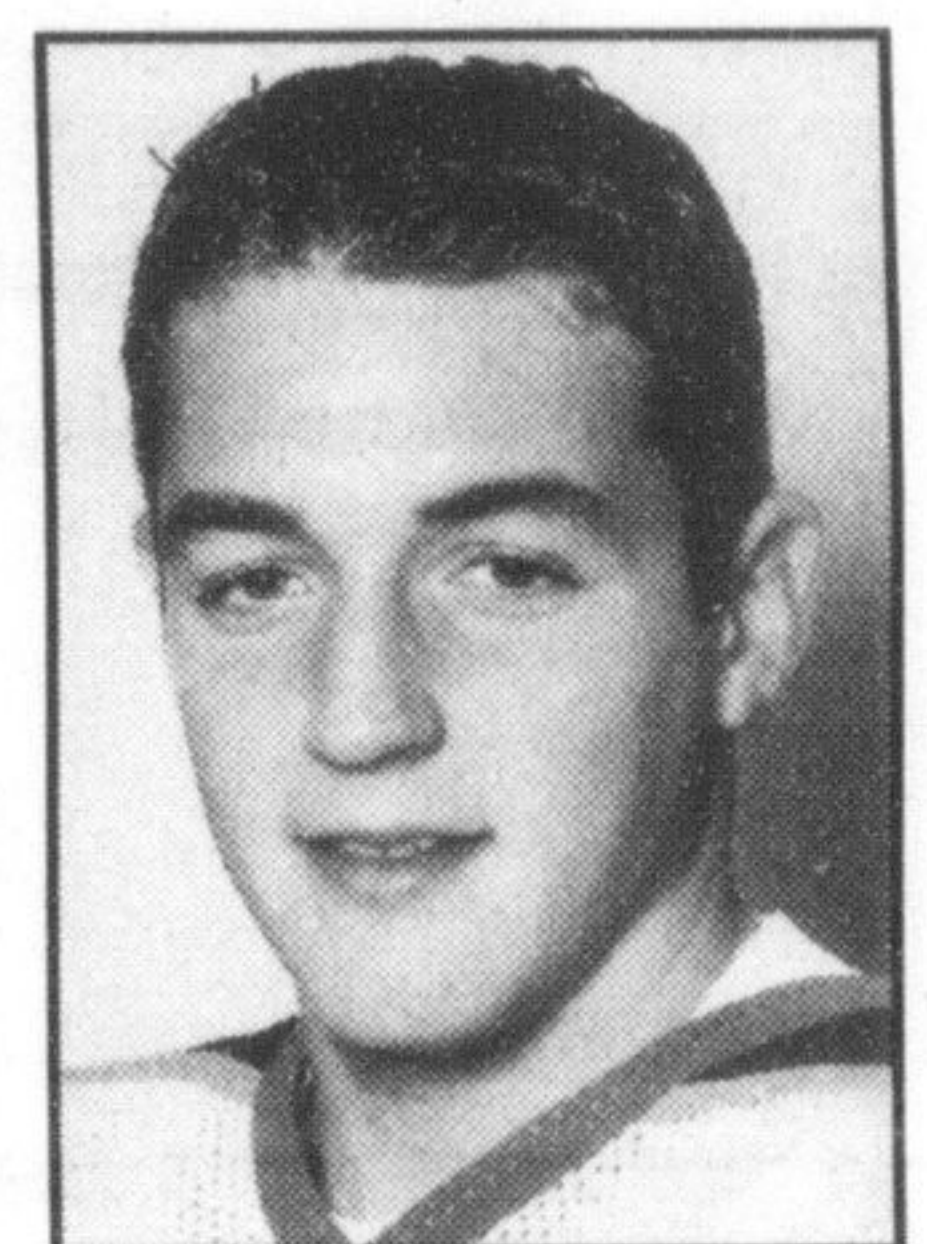
Rick Carriere set up his second goal with a gift-wrapped backhand pass in the slot, did a rather effective job killing penalties and was even better at agitating a number of opponents including veteran Blue Scott Neill.

The two — who were at odds from the opening faceoff — closed out the night with a heavyweight slugfest at the final buzzer. Carriere — who's been quite the all-purpose sparkplug since joining the team about a month ago — earned a one-game suspension as the instigator.

Mole deposited a point shot early in the final frame for his third goal of the season while drawing two assists apiece were Bognar and Michel Bond.

Andrew Martin and Alex Ward each tallied twice for Bramalea.

Merchant notes: Goalie Sean Samuel has been dealt to Newmarket for cash ... Ex-Merchant coach Rick Bince will make his return to Memorial Arena tonight as the newly appointed skipper of Streetsville. Milton then travels to Oakville Sunday ... Former Merchant defenceman Chad Vinden, has been picked up by the Georgetown Raiders.



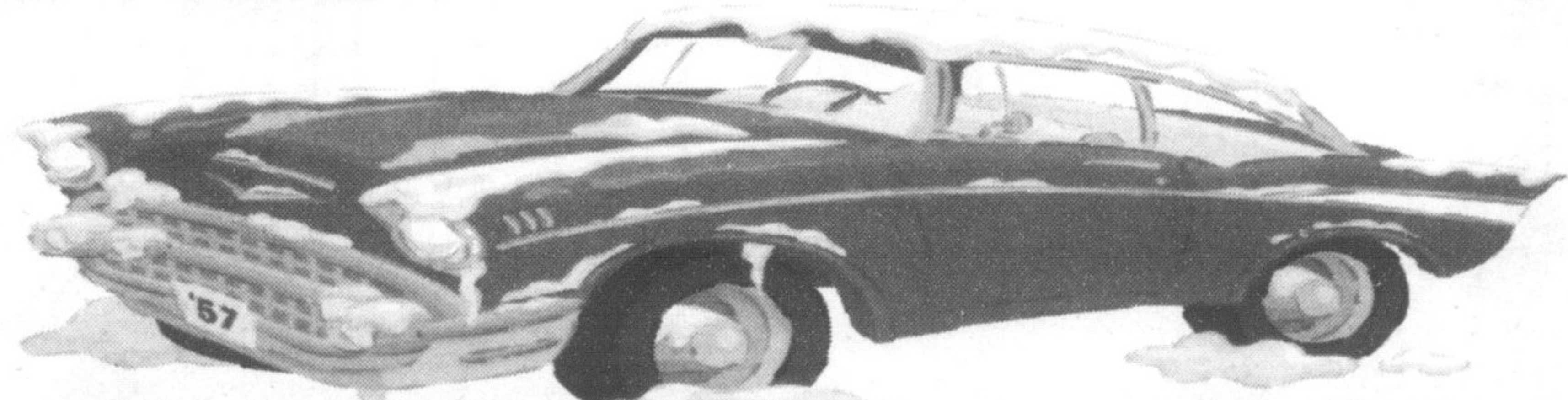
Rich Meloche

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