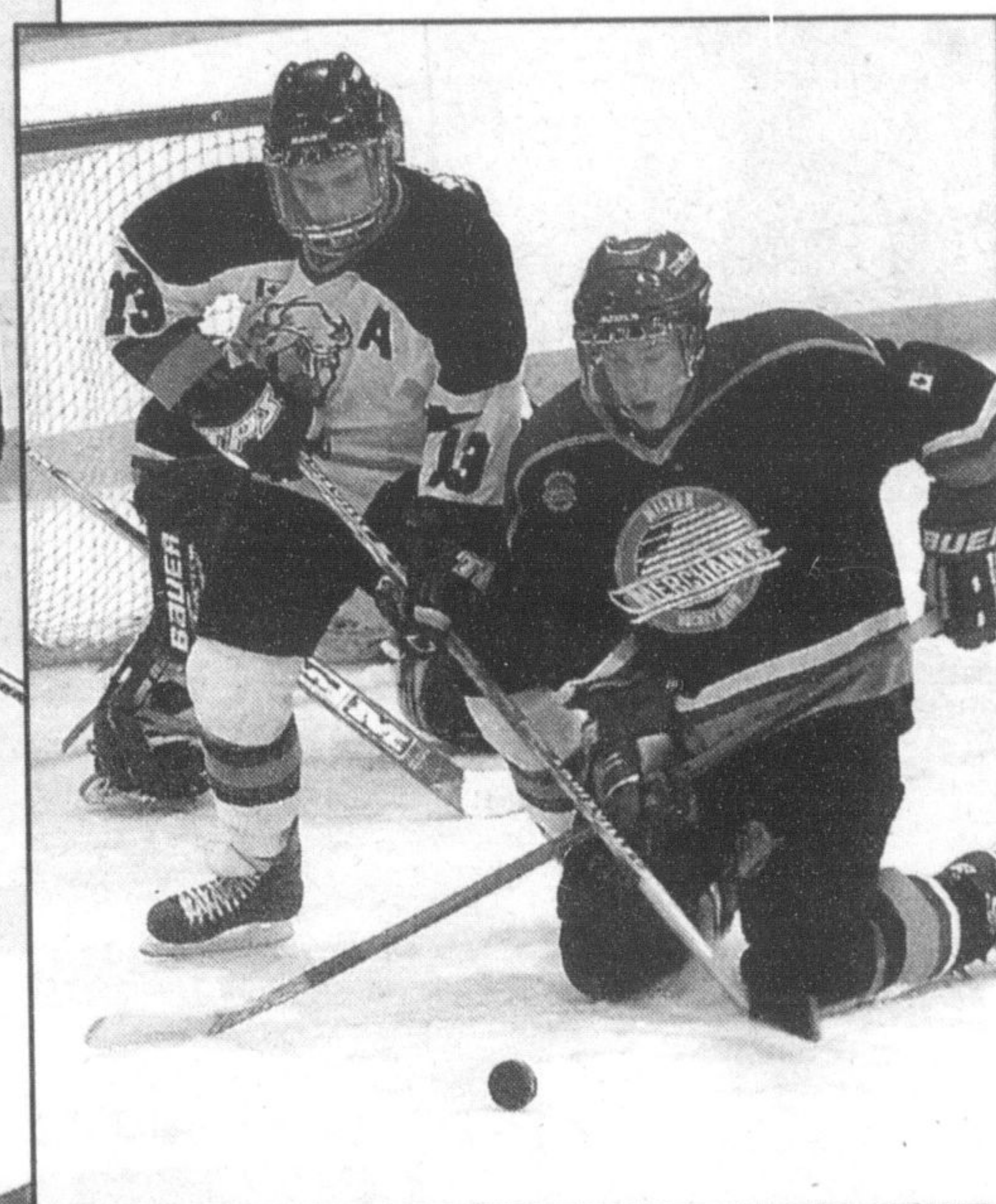




SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

SATURDAY DECEMBER 29, 2001



Photos by HERB GARBUTT

Merchant goalie Trevor Battaglia keeps his eye on the puck while (inset) defenceman Justin Nattress looks to clear the zone during year-ending league play in Georgetown last Saturday. Milton gave up two late short-handed goals and dropped their fifth straight road game — losing 5-2 to the Raiders.

Merchants deliver pre-holiday weekend split

Still undefeated at home but road woes continue with a subpar effort in Georgetown

By STEVE LeBLANC

The Champion

The Merchants were severely shortstaffed for year-ending league play in Georgetown last Saturday.

Unfortunately, their hosts were also short of holiday generosity. That proved to be a costly combination for the defending conference champs — whose under-manned ranks coughed up a pair of shorthanded goals down the stretch en route to being humbled 5-2.

Even with Tristan Senior, Michel Bond and Rick Janco on the sidelines with illness and injury, Milton should have had enough to more effectively challenge their regional rivals.

However, a mid-evening melee resulted in early ejections for veteran defencemen Pat Devlin and Chris Krieg — leaving the visitors' blueline extremely vulnerable.

The Raiders spent the balance of the night exploiting their short-staffed guests, collecting four unanswered goals to pull themselves into a fifth-place tie with the 18-15-2-1 Merchants.

Milton has now dropped its last five road games and hasn't scored more than two goals in its last three — troubling trends for a team that in all likelihood won't be enjoying home-ice advantage for first round playoff action.

T.J. Trevelyan led the victors with a hat-trick — punctuating his scoring surge with both shorthanded goals three minutes apart in the final frame — while chipping in singles were Marco Divona and Noah Hamilton.

Replying for the Merchants were David Ovcjak and newcomer Chris Brussa-Toi, a veteran right winger recently acquired in a cash deal with the Oakville Blades.

Merchants lacklustre

Milton had few quality scoring chances on the night, due in large part to its inability to create traffic in front of the opposing net.

The Raiders' win was particularly satisfying for head coach Mike Kalapaca and assistant Dan Sales, both fired as assistants with the Merchants a month into the season.

The first meeting with their old team solved nothing — ending in a 2-2 stalemate.

Georgetown honoured former hometown standout Mike Knoepfli at first intermission by retiring his #21 jersey.

At Memorial Arena December 21, Milton extended its undefeated home stretch to nine games by trimming the Mississauga Chargers 5-4.

In front of a healthy hometown crowd that included many returning alumni on hiatus from NCAA competition, the Merchants scored three times in the third period to add to their long series of one-goal victories this season.

Rick Carriere sank the game-winner inside the final five minutes of play to cap a three-point performance while rookie Rich

Meloche tallied twice and added a pair of helpers to pull within one of the half-century point mark.

Senior also had a four-point night, scoring one marker and assisting on three more, while the local juniors' other marksman was freshman rearguard Shawn Mole.

Trevor Battaglia turned back 39 shots for the win — his sixth as a Merchant and third since returning from a separated shoulder injury.

Milton now sits eight points behind fourth-place Oakville and will be hard-pressed to make up the difference with just 13 games remaining, including seven on the road where they've been rather inconsistent as of late.

Merchant notes: Heading into the annual Newmarket Showcase Thursday (which ran beyond the weekend deadline),

Milton was still looking to beef up its defensive ranks for the season's stretch run ...

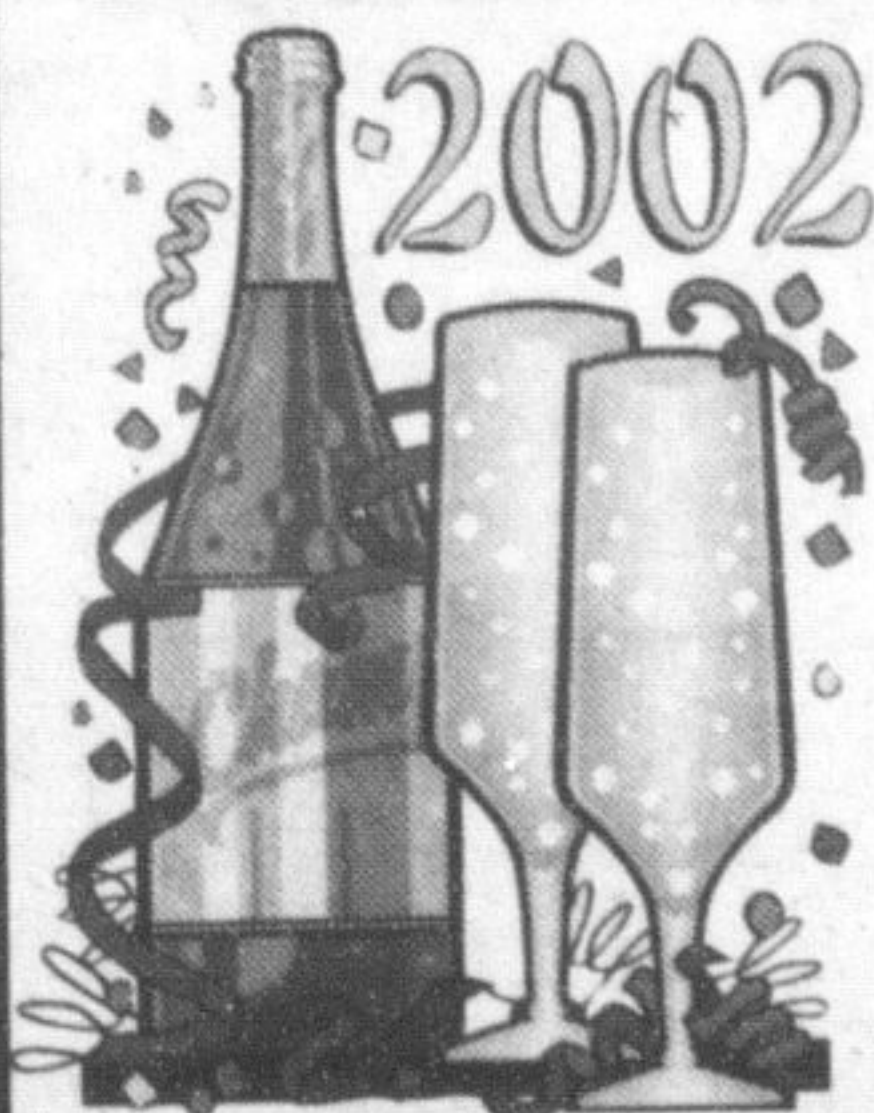
Goaltender Ryan McManus wrapped up his five-game gross misconduct suspension in Georgetown ...

Veteran defenceman Vince Guiducci, who's been in and out of sick bay all season long, remained on the injury reserve list heading into the Newmarket Showcase, as did captain Kevin Arruda ...

The Merchants have a make-up game in Mississauga Wednesday, Jan. 2 at 11:30 a.m. at Iceland Arena. They return to Memorial Arena Friday, Jan. 4 to host basement-dwelling Buffalo ... Milton has just four games remaining against teams above them in the standings



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