



# SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

TUESDAY FEBRUARY 5, 2002



Milton Merchant Rick Carrier battles for possession in front of the Mississauga net while (above) Mike Fox-Higgins lands on one of his former teammates during regular season-ending play at Iceland Arena Sunday. Milton lost 5-3 and will now face Bramalea in best-of-seven opening-round play.

Photos by GRAHAM PAINE

## Merchants end regular season with costly loss

By STEVE LeBLANC

The Champion

The Merchants suffered a double whammy in Mississauga Sunday.

In front of an unusually sizable crowd at Iceland Arena, Milton lost both their regular season-ending contest and the chance to steal home-ice advantage out from under first-round opponent Bramalea.

A Milton win in Mississauga Sunday plus a Bramalea loss tonight in Oakville would have given the reigning conference champs the extra home game — which would have drastically changed the complexion of round-one, given the local juniors' much sturdier play within the friendly confines at Memorial Arena.

But Milton coughed up a two-goal lead on the division's biggest ice surface and wound up los-

ing 5-3.

The Merchants should have been awarded a penalty shot inside the final minute when the opposing goalie knocked the net off its moorings, but a controversial ending aside they really didn't show much sense of urgency down the stretch and displayed little in the way of playoff-calibre hockey.

Coach Dave Gagner reunited his mid-season forward units and the retooling paid immediate dividends with two goals in the first four minutes by Dan Carcillo and captain Dan Bognar.

Mississauga would tighten its defensive web for the remainder of the night and rallied with the help of two-goal outputs by veteran Chargers Michael Oliveira and Bernie Scanlon.

Teammate Justin Burke sank an empty netter with three seconds left to seal the deal.

The Merchants' other goal — a powerplay

deflection midway through the second — was posted by Rick Carrier.

Rookie Rich Meloche picked up an assist on goal number two to lift his team-leading point total to 69.

### Another comeback at home

At home Friday, Milton showed just how important home-ice advantage would have been to its playoff run with the latest in a series of comeback victories.

This one came against Rick Bince's Streetsville Derbys — who were looking to give their head coach his first win in more than seven years at Memorial Arena.

They made a strong bid toward that end early on, mounting a 3-0 lead in the first-period on a pair of goals by David Friel and a single by Miltonian Paul Pedulla.

But Trevor Battaglia — who's developing a knack for rebounding from shaky starts on home ice — enjoyed more defensive support through the balance of the night and stopped 14 of 15 shots to beat the Derbys 5-4.

Tristan Senior's well-placed backhand with under five minutes remaining served as the game-winner. Assisting on the play — to cap a three-point night — was Carrier.

He sank goal number three, while other singles went to Meloche, Shawn Mole and David Ovcjak.

The Milton-Bramalea series begins Friday night at Bramalea's Victoria Park Arena. Game time is 7:45 p.m. Game two will be play in Milton Sunday at 3 p.m.

This marks the first time in eight seasons that the Merchants will not enjoy home-ice advantage for the opening round of playoffs.

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