



SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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Merchants square series with gutsy victory

Milton's supporting cast comes through in game 4

By **STEVE LeBLANC**

The Champion

So just who has more depth?

That question has come to the forefront of the Merchants' opening-round clash with Bramalea — after many of each side's standout performers earned two-game suspensions following a game-three melee last Tuesday.

With both team's now missing half-a-dozen players — including most of the top scorers — the gauntlet has been temporarily thrown down to the longtime playoff rivals' supporting casts.

Milton rose to the challenge first in a crucial game-four encounter at Memorial Arena Friday. Heading into the night down two-games-to-one in the best-of-seven series, the defending conference champions simply couldn't afford another home-ice loss, and looked quite sturdy in preventing one with a gutsy effort to shade the Blues 3-2.

Said captain Dan Bognar, "We did a good job of stepping it up tonight. This was a huge win and now we've got the momentum."

Bognar came through with a goal and two assists, including one on Michel Bond's game-winning deposit — a bottom-shelf shot past Mike Ella midway through the contest.

Dan Carcillo notched the first goal while drawing a pair of helpers was defenceman Rick Janco. Bramalea's scoring was done by Andrew Martin and AP Brad White.

The Merchants' bantam call-ups offered noteworthy contributions as well. Miltonian Ryan Wildfang in particular displayed plenty of grit in his junior debut. He and Toronto Young Nats teammate Jordan Grant played a regular shift throughout the night and saw ice time right up until the end.

"I thought I played pretty well tonight," said Wildfang, a member of Milton District High's junior football team last fall.

Added head coach Dave Gagner, "I had to give them (call-ups) ice time tonight. We only had nine forwards. They played well. They're big, strong kids."

Fellow Miltonian Ryan McManus delivered his second win in as many games with a 28-save effort that featured several key pad and glove saves.

Meanwhile, Pat Devlin offered a solid stay-at-home defensive game and made a big shot block in the final second of period two.

Warren Wheeler was also impressive for the Merchants.

Bramalea hosted game five last night at Victoria Park Arena. The teams will return to Memorial Arena for game six tomorrow at 7:30 p.m.

Milton will have all of its players back for that game, with the exception of David Ovcjak. Bramalea will get four players back but will still be missing scoring leader Scott Neil and captain Alex Ward.

A seventh and deciding game, if necessary, will be played in Bramalea Friday.

Carrigan Blues' new coach

By **STEVE LeBLANC**

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Longtime Merchant fans saw a mighty familiar face on the visitors' bench during game four Friday.

In another surprise twist to what's becoming one of the most memorable post-season showdowns with Bramalea, Gregg Carrigan — Milton's architect for success through the mid-to-late 90s — now finds himself coaching the Blues.

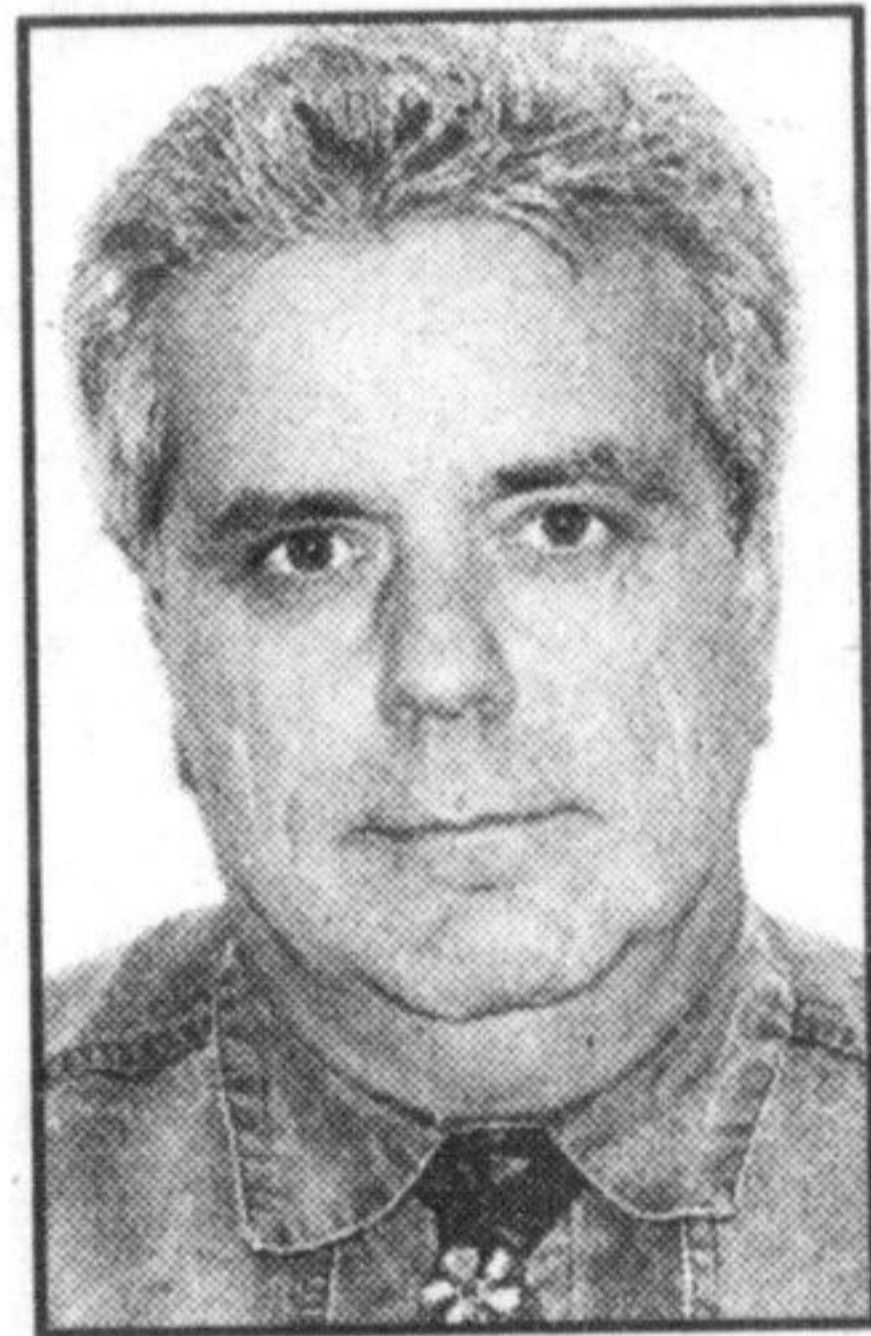
The move comes on the heels of Mike Yacynuk's 10-year suspension — punishment for striking referee Brian Harasymchuk during a game three-ending brawl.

Present at the melee last Tuesday, Carrigan was quickly offered the bench boss duties following the OHA ruling Thursday. At first he was resistant.

"I'd like to help, but it's Milton," he recalled.

However, Bramalea's persistence and a desire to get back in the game eventually overshadowed his reservations.

Said Carrigan, "They (Bramalea) were looking for someone with some experience and maturity because of the volatility of the situation. I've known Joe (Abraham, owner) and Dan (Gale, general manager) for years and they've done me a lot of favours, so I said 'yes'.



Gregg Carrigan

"This is an extremely difficult situation (facing Merchants)."

Equally tough will be working within Bramalea's free-skating style of play — a stark contrast to most of his championship squads in Milton and Caledon.

"That's (wide-open game) generally not my style, but I can't come in here and overturn a whole system in the middle of the playoffs. I've got

to try to just tweak it a little."

Merchants GM Nick Slawson — who worked alongside Carrigan through championship drives in 1998 and 1999 — credited Bramalea's decision to acquire the proven skipper.

"I think they made a good choice. I just hope he loses two more games to us," said Slawson Friday, following Milton's 3-2 victory to knot the first-round play at two wins apiece.

Carrigan has also brought former Merchant and Bramalea goaltending coach Sudarshan Maharaj back for the series.



Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Milton Merchant call-up Jordan Grant battles in front of Bramalea netminder Mike Ella while contending with Blues defenceman T.J. Moore during game four of their first-round playoff series. Milton gutted out a much-needed 3-2 decision to knot the best-of-seven series at two games apiece. Game six will be played tomorrow night in Milton.

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