

Gallo returns with big win

The Great Gallo is back. Gallo Blue Chip, the richest pacing standardbred of all time, returned to work after a five-month layoff and went wire to wire in the second leg of the Spring Pacing Championship at Mohawk Racetrack Saturday night.

Driver Mario Baillargeon put the five-year-old Magical Mike gelding on the lead and posted fractions of :26.3, :56 and 1:23.4 and held on for a quarter-length victory in 1:51.1.

"I was nervous all day," said trainer Mark Ford. "You never know how this horse is going to race. He acted funny warming up and in the paddock prior to the race, so I didn't know what to

expect." Ford did say he'd make a few equipment changes for this week's final, after talking with Baillargeon.

The win — number 38 in his career — boosted Gallo Blue Chip's lifetime bankroll to \$3,731,611 for New York owner Martin Scharf.

Whosurboy, also trained by Ford, was runner-up with Roger Mayotte driving. False Alarm, in rein to Tony Kerwood, was third.

Off as the favourite, Gallo Blue Chip paid \$3.20 to win.

The prized pacer will no doubt be favoured again for this Saturday's \$116,500 final.

Merchants' shake-up goes on with the release of GM

By **STEVE LeBLANC**

The Champion

The changing of the guard continues.

This time last year local trucking magnate Brad Grant sold the Milton Merchants to an Oakville-based trio that included former NHLer Dave Gagner as well as businessmen Mario Forgione and Ken Chase.

Phase two of the shake-up occurred five months later when the new owners fired the entire coaching staff — led by veteran skipper Glenn Walsh — 11 games into a shaky season.

Now another piece of the Merchants' old guard has been swept aside, with the recent release of general manager Nick Slawson — who was let go last Tuesday during a telephone conversation with Forgione, Milton's team president.

"There was nothing really specific behind the move, it's just that we're trying to refocus this organization and instead of trying to get the old guard to buy into our system we thought it would be better to make a clean break," said Forgione, whose vision for the team met with a fair amount of criticism from longtime Merchant followers this past season. "Nick (Slawson) is a classy guy, but our philosophies were just different."

Slawson, however, feels the move had more to do with recent rumours surrounding Grant's attempt to purchase the financially-ailing Georgetown Raiders — who late last week were actually sold to the North York Canadians minor hockey organization.

Grant had withdrawn his offer just before the decision was made.

Among the scuttlebutt in local hockey circles was that Slawson — as well as others from the Merchants' heyday — would be following Grant to Georgetown.

"It's safe to say that I had some loyalties to the organization's former owner and there were some rumours that I'd be going with him (to Georgetown)," explained Slawson, who during his five-year tenure in

Milton helped guide the team to an All-Ontario title and two conference championships. "I guess they (Merchant owners) had to protect themselves, on the assumption that I was going. The fact is though, my intentions were to come back to Milton."

"I can't say I'm all that surprised, although I am somewhat disappointed. I wish they could have talked to me about this earlier."

When asked if the new owners gave him enough credit for this past seasons' efforts — which included bringing in top guns like Tristan Senior and Rick Carrier — Slawson was somewhat hesitant to respond, but did state, "I wasn't looking for acknowledgment. This was a real year of learning for the new owners and the team's process (of acquiring players) got slowed down."

Forgione maintains that rumours about Grant and the Raiders had little to do with Slawson's release — adding that the move was necessary for the team to move forward.

The Milton president said his trio's new philosophy includes success both on and off the ice — with emphasis on community involvement and promoting young players to the next level. "Milton will regain it's winning ways, but there's no reason why it can't have both (on and off-ice success). I think the community's just got to be open to changes."

In part two of this spring's shake-up, Gagner has decided to step down from the head coaching post and devote more time to working one-on-one with the younger players as the new director of player development. He'll hold onto the bench boss reigns until a new coach can be found. "I'll still be very involved with the team, but helping out the young players individually is the part I enjoy more."

Meanwhile, Forgione will assume the general manager duties. The re-tooled organization began recruiting bantam and midget playoff games late last month and will hold prospects camps in May and June.

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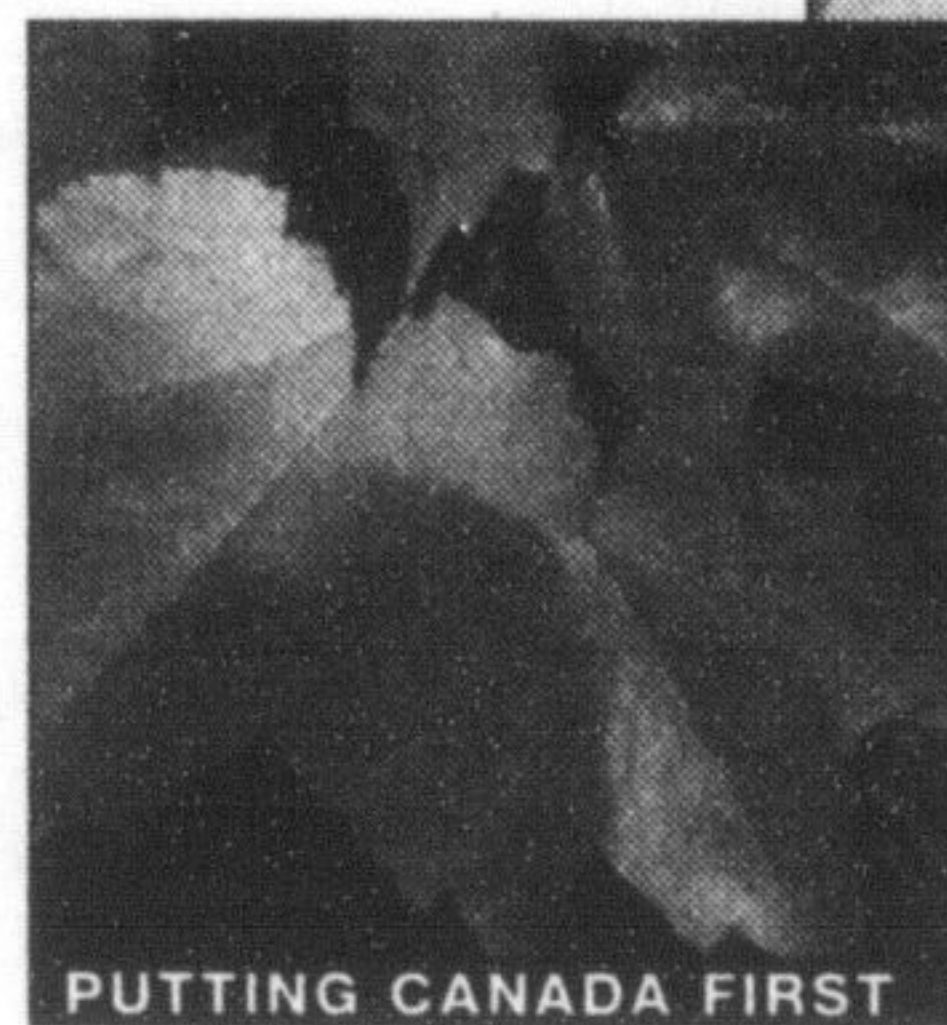
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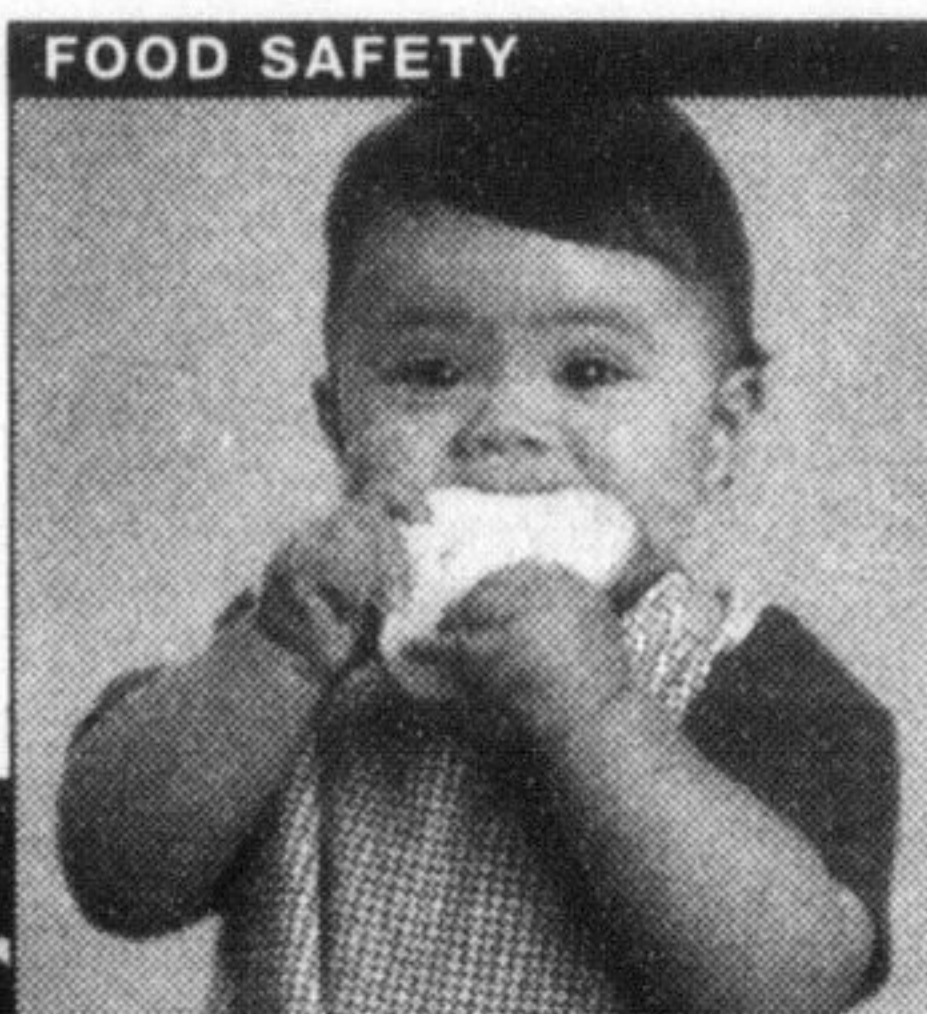
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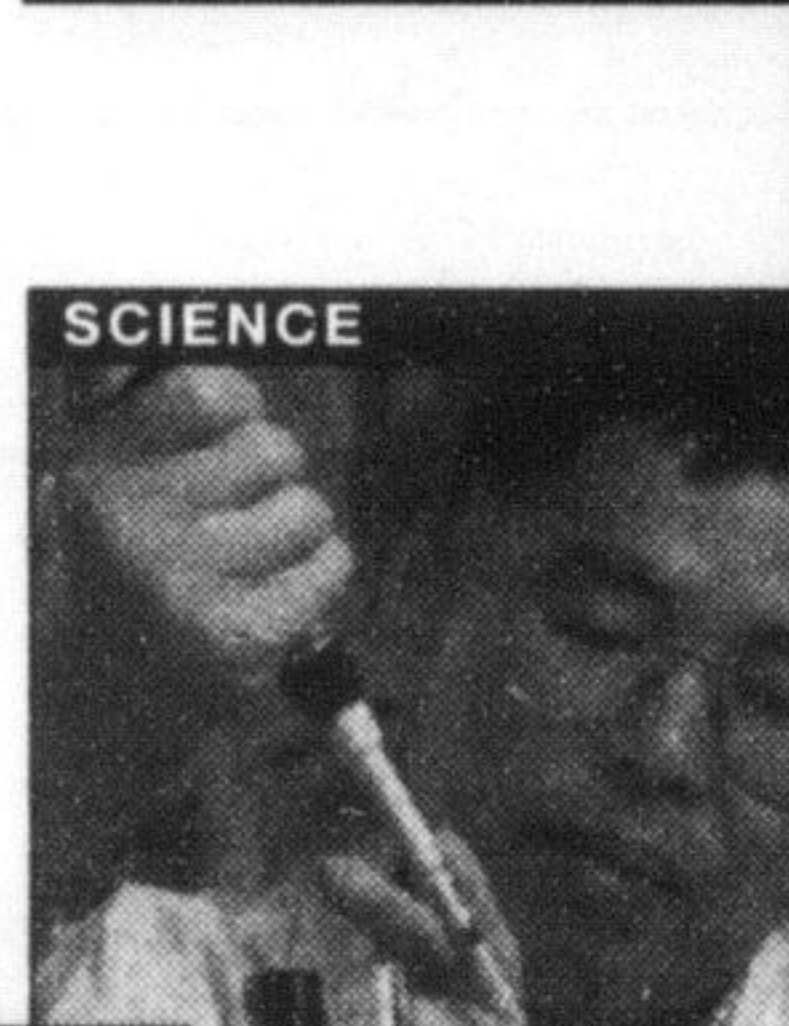
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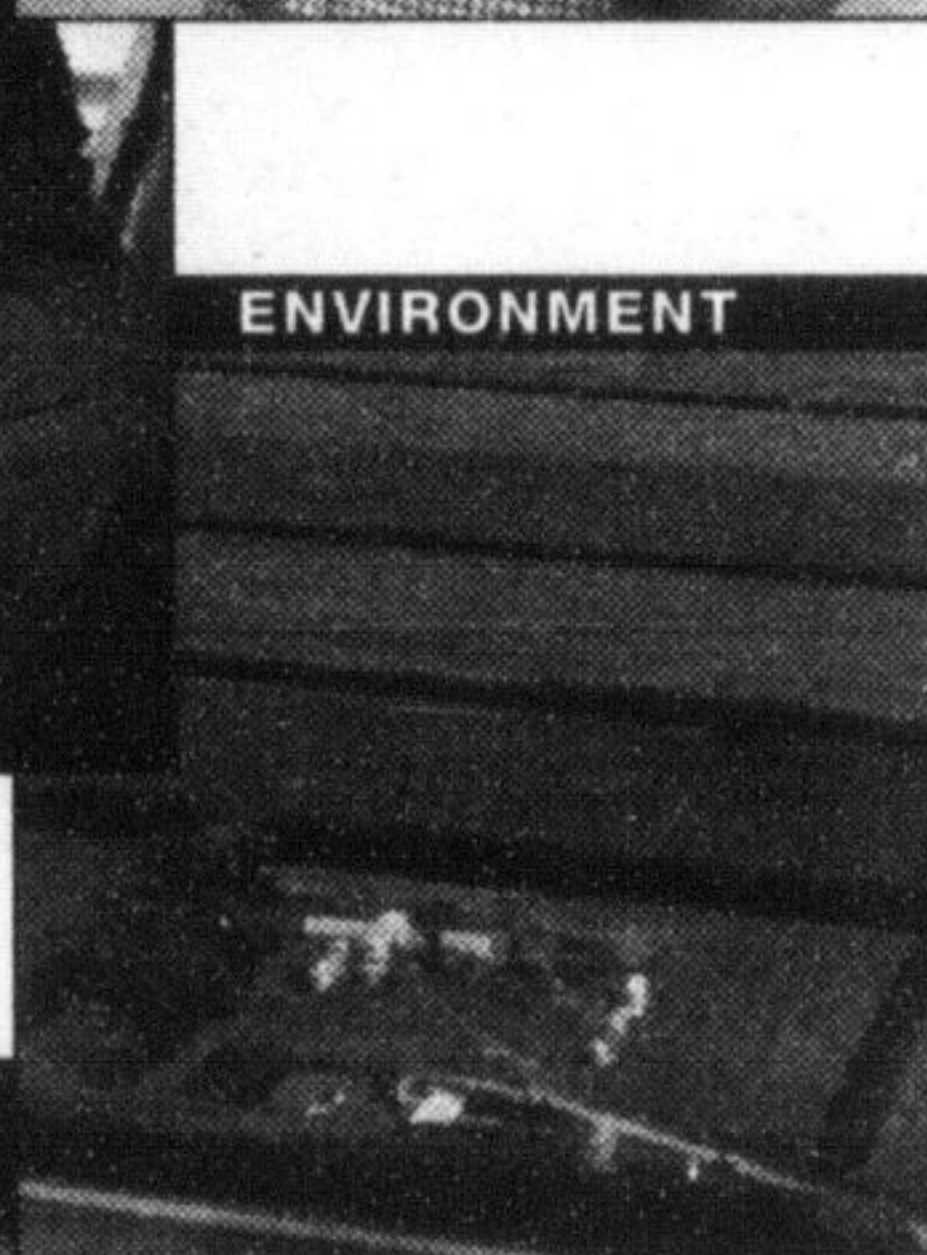
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'Mini' Haydar shows a lot of class in defeat

A collective cringe washed over Milton's sporting community Thursday afternoon — and a repeat performance was offered up the following day.

Most diehard local hockey fans were no doubt glued to their television sets or uscollegehockey.com to find out how Darren (Mini) Haydar's New Hampshire Wildcats would fare against Maine in the NCAA's national semifinals Thursday.

A 7-2 dismantling no doubt left most disheartened — a feeling that carried over into the weekend when on Friday, Mini was edged out of the Hobey Baker Award by Minnesota's Jordan Leopold.

I myself was more than a little disappointed by the double whammy — and for those who've known Mini longer, or know him better, it was even more painful.

But perhaps we can take solace in the fact that one of our own did his absolute best this past season.

And before the chants of 'big deal' start flying, consider what that last statement really means — or at least what it should mean.

Most of us aren't called upon to give it our all on a regular basis. That's not to say we shirk our responsibilities — but let's face it, how many of us go home at night thinking 'Boy, today I gave a hundred per cent'?

For most of us that doesn't happen very often, and when it does it's usually not a lengthy situation.

But Mini left it all on the ice just about every night this past season and can genuinely say he gave it his best. He did everything humanly possible — both on and off



with **STEVE LeBLANC**

Up front

the ice — to claim the Hobey Baker Award, and because of that his runner-up status should be a lot easier to live with.

And the fact that a weekend-closing conversation with yours truly centered around the disappointment at not winning the national championship says a lot about the type of player Mini is.

As he's always said — "Hockey's a team game, that's why I'm here."

That kind of unselfish attitude has taken Mini a long way already — and will hopefully put him in good stead at the next level, whether that be the AHL or NHL.

And while we're at it, some other local players deserve a few kudos this year as well.

Among them are Scott Bertoli and Jeff Haydar — both of whom just wrapped up great regular seasons in the semi-pro ranks. Bertoli's ECHL Trenton Titans are still alive and currently gunning for a second straight trip to the Kelly Cup.

Meanwhile, Milton's AA midgets have provided the best team success story of the year with their OMHA title victory and upcoming trip to the All-Ontario finals.

Good luck guys!