

## Sr. 'Stangs win playoff opener

No home-field advantage. No early lead. No problem.

Milton District's football seniors won three regular season games this season — two when playing hosts and the other when the upper hand was established quickly.

The Mustangs enjoyed neither luxury during tier two quarterfinal action against Oakville Trafalgar Friday afternoon — but prospered just the same.

Shaking off any ill effects from an initial nine-point deficit, the visitors amassed four unanswered touchdown drives to sink the favoured Devils 27-16.

OT's second major was scored inside the last two minutes, once the threat of a rally had pretty much been extinguished.

"This was the third game that our starting defense didn't allow a touchdown," pointed out head coach Keith Pearce, whose Mustangs closed out the regular season with straight shutout victories before clearing their first playoff hurdle.

Fresh off a strong set-up role to help dismantle Bishop Reding, Lee Frittenburg donned the spotlight with two touchdown runs — the latter following a key field goal block by Jamie Johnson. Dan Cordner scooped up the loose ball and ran it deep into enemy territory, setting the stage for another end-zone push by Frittenburg.

Todd Arruda scored the third major, while the other TD was the result of a big pass-and-run play between Cordner and QB Ryan Page.

Defensively, MD linebackers Frittenburg, Brandon Anderson, Mark Galick and Dan Greenland-Perry were the brightest spots on a unit that overall, was suffocating.

MD now moves on to face Burlington Central in the semifinals Friday at 2 p.m. in Burlington.

Meanwhile, MD's juniors dropped a 25-0 decision to T.A. Blakelock in first-round playoff action October 30, while Bishop Reding's seniors fell 28-8 to top-seated Q.E. Park Friday in opening-round play. Rory Johnston scored BR's lone major on a lengthy pass from Andrew Pepper.

## Merchants' win streak snapped

By STEVE LeBLANC

The Champion

Superman has kryptonite. The Merchants have Ice Sports Arena.

Milton has put together a couple of six-game unbeaten streaks so far this season — and each time the club's seemingly unstoppable run has been halted with a weekend visit to Oakville.

Saturday night marked the latest occasion in which the local juniors were made to look like mere mortals at Ice Sports. Just 24 hours removed from a near superhuman rally to topple Burlington, Milton had all sorts of trouble around the net and was dumped 4-1.

An 0-for-9 powerplay donut was the biggest obstacle on the night, although a close second was the sharp cage work of newly acquired Blade Chris Hyk.

Rich Meloche's 20th goal of the season put the visitors ahead before the game was five minutes old — but the rest of the evening consisted of a lack of fortune and finish for the Merchants.

Oakville scored with the man-advantage,

while shorthanded and at even strength — in that order — during a six-minute span in period two, and then sealed the deal with an empty-netter.

Meloche's deposit was set up by Vic Oreskovich and Rob Ricci.

With the exception of a few glitches during special-teams play, Milton's defense was quite stifling. Freshman Andrew Bonello offered a particularly gritty effort, as did returning spark-plug Phil Sbrocchi.

Saturday's defeat was the local juniors' first since October 6.

In a home-ice tilt for second place against Burlington Friday, the Merchants looked like they could leap tall buildings in a single bound through the final frame.

After getting shut out in straight periods by the Cougars, Milton delivered a nothing-short-of-spectacular uprising to triumph 6-3. Ex-Merchant Shawn Mole scored a potential backbreaker midway through the second, but — like the rest of his new teammates — was severely humbled down the stretch.

Wes Clarke began and ended the rally,

stabbing in a rebounding 47 seconds into period three and then putting one into the empty net. MOR linemates Meloche, Oreskovich and Ricci all scored as well, while credited with the other goal was Mike Nicoletti.

A 21-4 shots on goal differential was a strong indicator of just how completely the hosts dominated third-period play.

Native Miltonian Craig Macdonald gave an impressive two-way showing against Burlington Friday and continued to provide spot duty on a blueline that has yet to be injury-free this season.

New to the lineup this weekend was Ryan Silveria — a rookie with last year's championship Brampton Capitals team who's been averaging a point a game since returning from a season-opening shoulder injury.

He's now centering a line with Macdonald and James Duhamel.

The 13-4-1 Merchants, now one point out of second, begin their busiest week of the season tonight at Georgetown's Gordon Alcott Memorial Arena at 8 p.m.

## Is rivalry headed toward title clash?

By STEVE LeBLANC

The Champion

North Halton Jr. A hockey tilts have always meant something special in terms of fanfare.

And in recent years, increased competitiveness has been added to the mix — not to mention a few intriguing footnotes, the most memorable of which was hometown Merchant Jeff Seeds' 1998 trade to Georgetown.

Yes, Milton-Georgetown encounters have included a bit of everything — except of course, a spring-time clash for the Western Conference title. But that could easily change this coming March.

For the first time in more than a decade, the neighbouring rivals both seem capable of contending for the division championship. The two teams each sit top-four in the conference and enjoy the necessary resources — namely coaching, contacts and cash — to continue building on already strong rosters.

A Western Conference final between the two organizations seems more likely this season than any other in recent memory — and that notion is no doubt appealing to long-time junior hockey enthusiasts in north Halton.

High on that list is SportsZone Live's Mike (Hammer) Hancock, who's been covering the local junior scene for about a decade now but up until the late 90s wasn't

privity to too many close battles.

"It seems these two teams have teased us over the past few years with the possibility of meeting in the conference finals," said the well-known broadcaster, "Now with two truly new regimes, I think we're finally going to see that — making this the ultimate battle of north Halton.

"I think it's going to be very exciting for fans who've followed the rivalry so religiously."

Echoing those sentiments is David Dermo, Milton's assistant director of hockey operations. One of few holdovers from the last year's ownership change, the long-time executive member has enjoyed Merchant-Raider showdowns — but clearly recalls a time when blowouts and brawls outweighed quality hockey.

Said Dermo, "For seven or eight years now, going into Georgetown used to be like going to war. With the disparity between the teams, you never knew what you were going to get. Now without that disparity, I think we're going to see more hockey than in the past.

"If for some reason Milton couldn't win the conference this season, I'd want Georgetown to — just because their fans have been through a little more than ours. I'd like nothing more than to see a seven-game Milton-Georgetown final."

Caught in a vicious cycle of futility through most of the 90s, Georgetown final-

ly joined its regional rivals among the upper-echelon clubs when general manager Jack Moon came aboard five years ago and began making some much-needed repairs.

But financial shortcomings continued to plague the Raiders — at least until this summer, when international businessmen Stu Hyman and Peter Freedman bought the team and injected the funds needed to truly build a winner.

Since then, all roads have led to tonight's Milton-Georgetown clash — the first in a five-game regular season series that could finally serve as a prelude to a meeting for Western Conference gold.

However, Georgetown's GM isn't putting any extra stock into tonight's confrontation. Why?

"It's always big between these two teams," he stressed.

But Moon can't deny that his 2002/03 Raiders, like never before, are a championship contender — and that Milton is also part of that elite group. "I'd say they (Merchants) are one of the teams to beat."

Both teams have been on hot streaks as of late, although the Merchants hold a slight edge in terms of momentum — having won six of their last seven game and scored at least six goals in each of those victories. Tonight's game in Georgetown begins at 8 p.m., while Milton hosts round two of the series Friday at 7:30 p.m.

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