



# SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

SATURDAY DECEMBER 28, 2002

## Merchants and Raiders battle to series split

By STEVE LeBLANC

*The Champion*

For Western Conference contenders, home-ice advantage remains a virtual trump card.

The division's top three teams — and only legitimate hopefuls for playoff prosperity — have been almost unbeatable in recent weeks, particularly so in their own barn.

That trend continued last weekend with a much-anticipated clash between the Merchants and Georgetown Raiders. The neighbouring rivals each scored a win against the other — doing so in front of the hometown crowd — and in the process, have likely exhausted their chances of overtaking top-seated Hamilton.

While Milton was no doubt the more disciplined and cohesive unit during the home-and-home series, that wasn't enough to deliver the knockout blow at Georgetown's Gordon Alcott Arena last Saturday.

Wes Clark tallied twice from close range in the opening half to put the sweep within striking distance, but his teammates exhibited little spark or finish through the balance of the contest — and were eventually edged 3-2. This marked Milton's first loss in 18 games — snapping the longest win streak in club history, one which lasted more than six weeks.

Standout Raider Ryan Busby sank both the equalizer and game-winner, with help from Dan Lliakis and Kevin Harvey. Georgetown overcame some early brain cramps — the most apparent ones delivered by resident bad boy Brad Naylor — to split the weekend, as well as its season series with the now 30-6-1 Merchants.

Cody Spicer and Georgetown counterpart Daniel Bellissimo were both sharp between the pipes.

Last Saturday marked a rare scoreless third period for Milton.

It was a much different story one night earlier at Memorial Arena. In front of one of the biggest crowds this season, the Merchants struck early and often — exploiting a positionally flawed defense along the way — to humble Georgetown 7-3.

The weekend-opening showdown featured plenty in the way of extra-curricular activity, including an evening-ending slugfest between defenceman Phil Sbrocchi and Nik Bibic.

Milton had enough scoring for the victory before first intermission. Captain Craig Macdonald led with a hat-trick, while Clark also stood out with a couple of markers. Rookie Dean Strong scored for the third time in four games, while Rob Ricci had a goal and an assist. Spicer turned back 30 shots for the win.

**Merchant notes:** Milton scoring leader Rich Meloche was held to just a single assist in the two games against Georgetown ... The Merchants have acquired 16-year-old forward Devon McElroy from the Mississauga Senators. He debuted against the Raiders in game two of the series ... The Merchants began the Newmarket Showcase Tournament yesterday morning against St. Michael's. They continue round robin play today against Albany, New York at 12:30 p.m. and finish up tomorrow versus Brampton at 11:15 a.m. The semifinals and finals will be played on Monday. All games are at Newmarket's Ray Twinney Sports Complex.



Merchants Rob Ricci (left) and Vic Oreskovich pressure Georgetown goalie Daniel Bellissimo Saturday night at Gordon Alcott Arena. The Raiders won 3-2 to split the weekend series at one game apiece.

Photo by  
HERB  
GARBUTT

## Haydar reassigned to Nashville

By STEVE LeBLANC

*The Champion*

Darren (Mini) Haydar was no doubt happy to tie one on in Tampa Bay last Saturday.

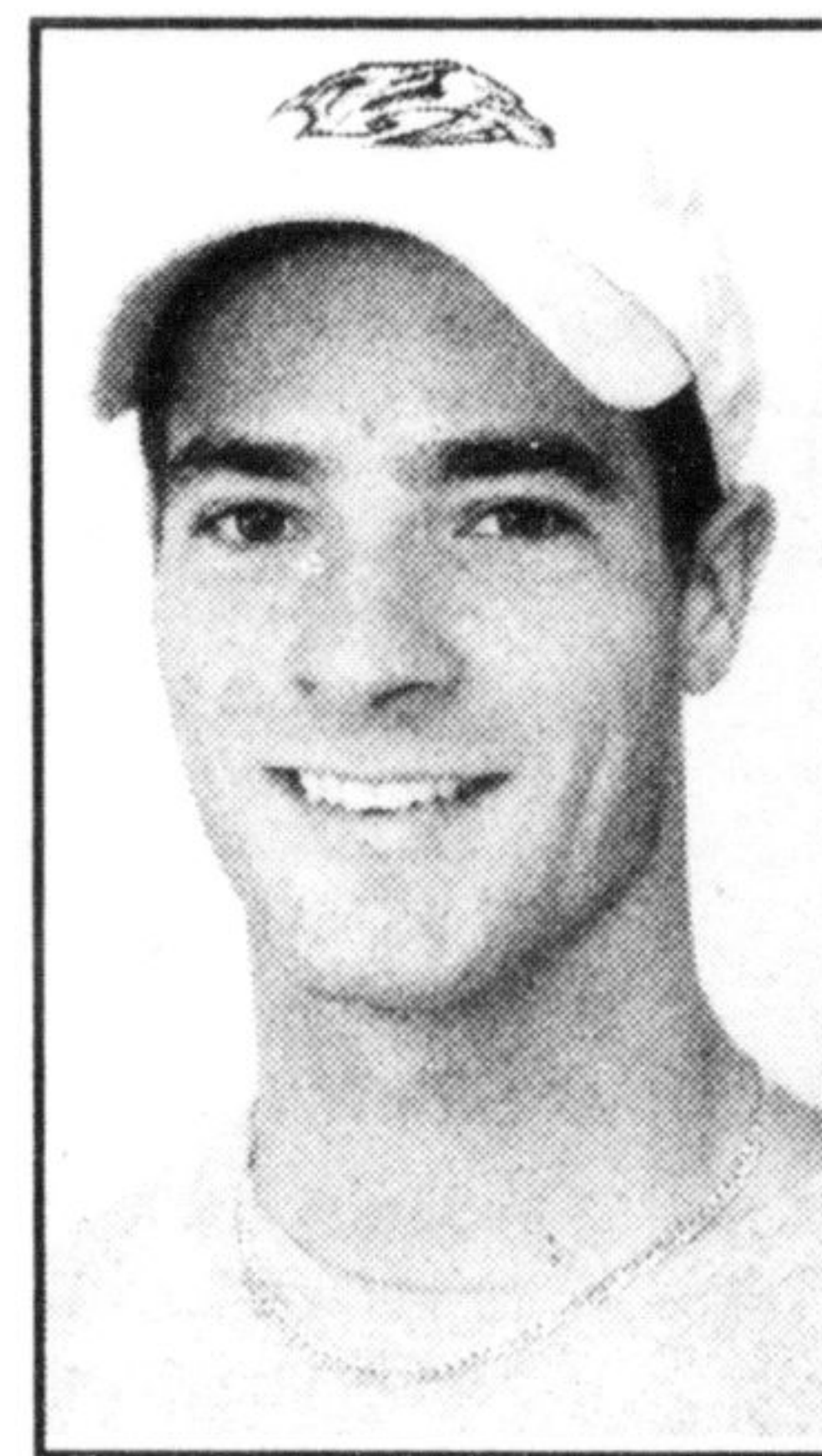
Not with regard to the increased elbow bending that's typical around this time of year, but rather a 2-2 draw as part of the Nashville Predators in his second call-up to the NHL.

Milton's top sniper saw about four-and-a-half minutes of play at the Ice Palace — all at even strength — while the Predators eked out a rare point on the road against the division-leading Lightning.

"I didn't see as much ice time (compared to NHL debut on November 17), but I felt a little more comfortable out there. I'm learning with every game," said the 23-year-old right winger, who replaced fellow freshman Vern Fiddler in the Nashville lineup late last week.

"And it was definitely good to get the tie, even though we really didn't deserve it. It's always big to squeak out a point on the road against a team like Tampa Bay."

His latest promotion followed a two-assist effort to help his AHL Milwaukee Admirals whitewash the San Antonio Rampage 3-0 December 19.



Darren Haydar

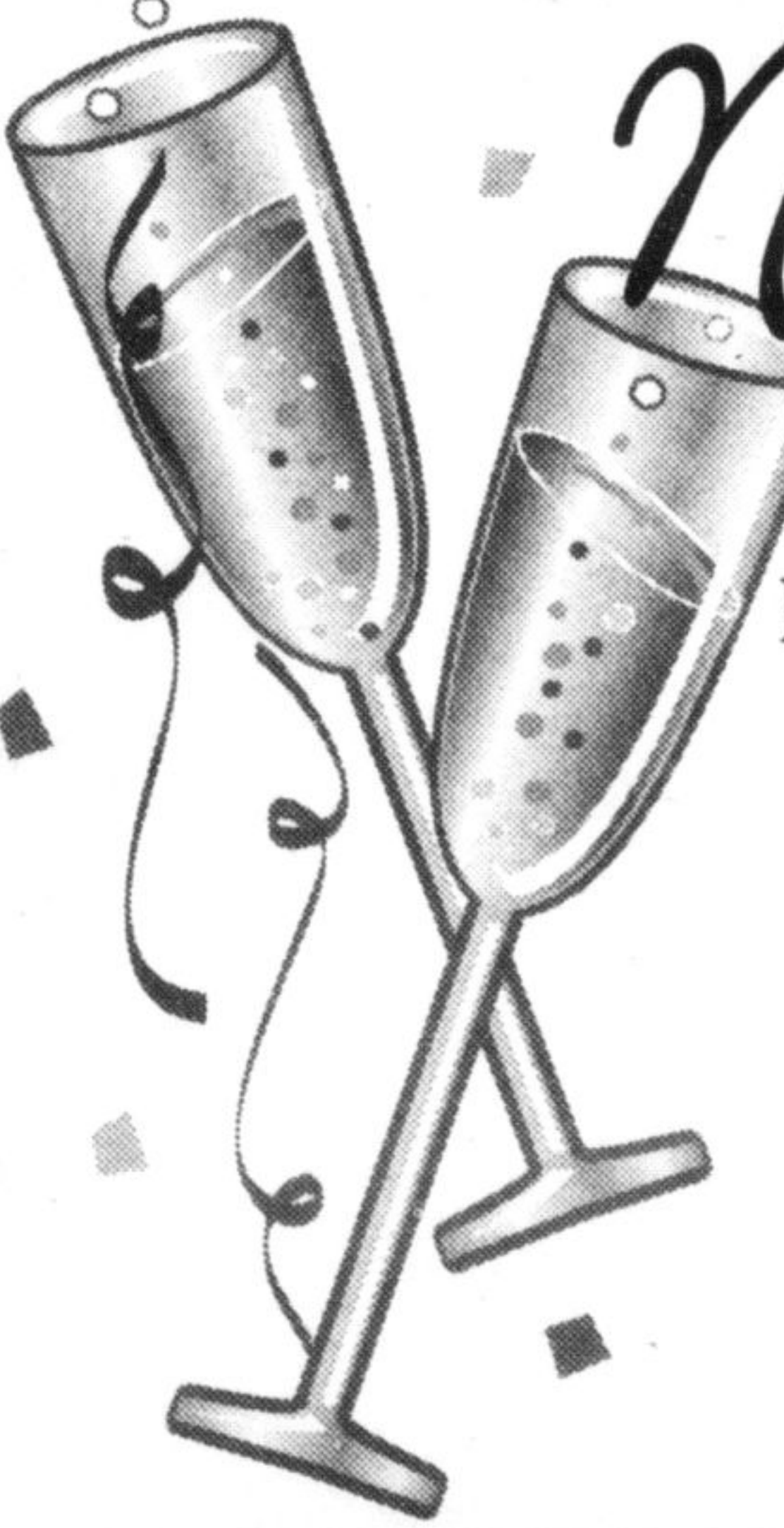
It marked Haydar's 10th multi-point performance of the season, and at the time of the call-up he sat top five in the AHL points race with a dozen goals and 20 assists.

Haydar was still with Nashville when the team flew to Florida Sunday afternoon, although it wasn't known if he'd be in the line-up for Monday night's tilt against the Panthers — which ran beyond *The Champion's* holiday press time.

But that kind of day-to-day uncertainty is commonplace for NHL hopefuls like Haydar, and is something that simply has to be accepted. "You can't let it (uncertainty) get in your way. You just have to be ready when the opportunities come," stressed Haydar.

Depending on the length of his stay with Nashville this time around, the local star may miss the Admirals' two-game stand at Hamilton's Copps Coliseum January 10 and 11.

If back with Milwaukee by then, Haydar will play in his own country for the first time in four-and-a-half years and almost definitely face former New Hampshire teammate Ty Conklin — now a premier netminder in the AHL and backbone of the top-seated Bulldogs.



## New Year's Eve Gala 2002

### Tuesday, Dec. 31, 2002

Hats - Noise Makers, Champagne at Midnight, Spot Prizes. Limited Tickets.

Menu

*Antipasto Bar* - Prosciutto, Italian Salami, Cheese, Caesar Salad, Grilled Vegetables, Seafood Salad, Mussels & many more items

*Pasta* - Ravioli with Meat Sauce

*Meat* - Roasted New York Strip & Chicken Roast Florentine with Vegetables & Potatoes

*Dessert Table* - Assorted Pastries, Cakes, Tortes, Fruit, Coffee & Tea & Bar Included

DINNER SERVED AT 7:30PM


Live Band


Double Exposure

\$90.

per person

Open Bar





3090 STEELES AVE. W., MILTON

905-878-6527