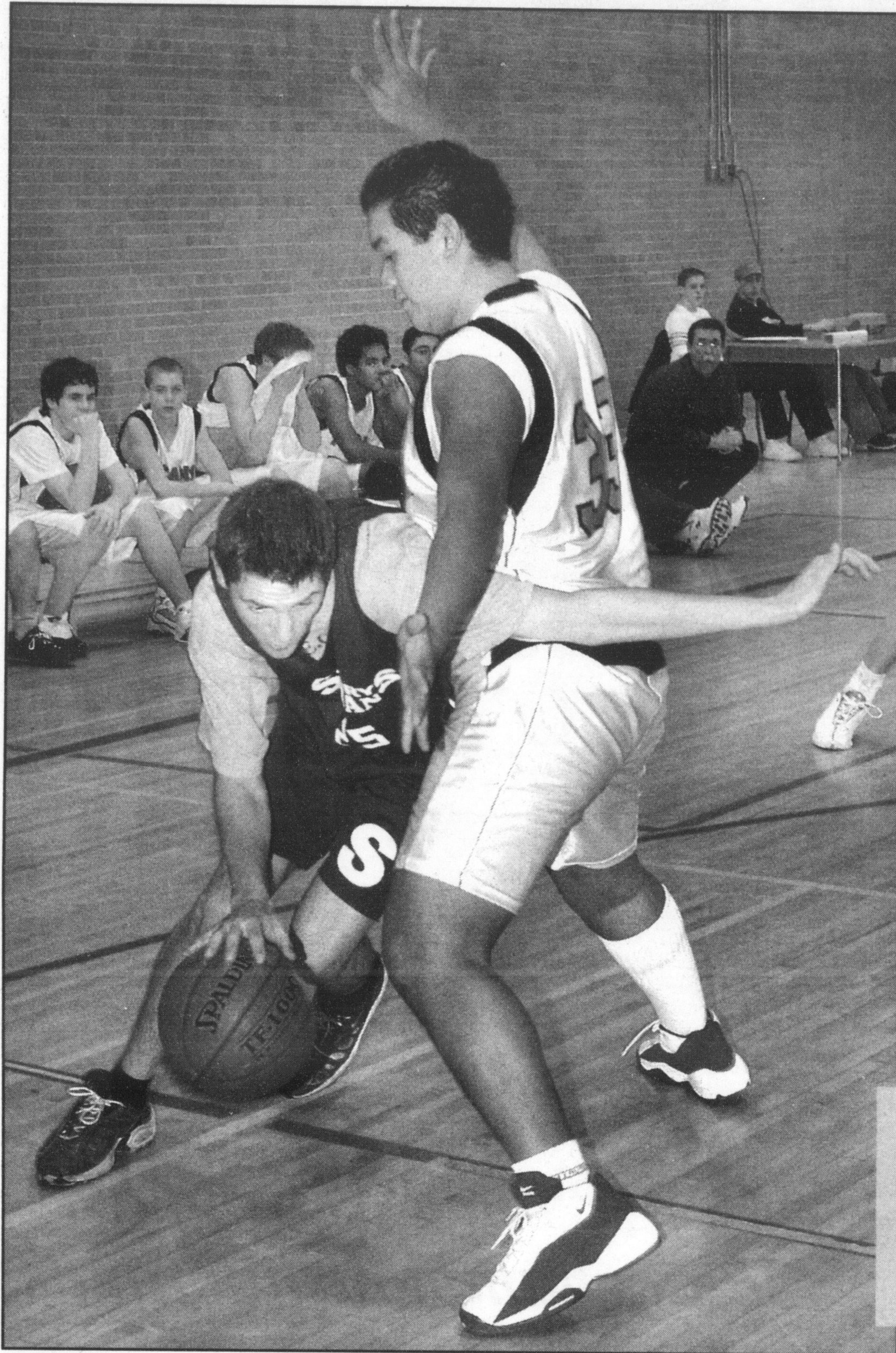




SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

FRIDAY FEBRUARY 7, 2003



Merchants' playoff drive starts tonight

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
The Champion

The countdown's nearly over, sports fans.

Starting tonight the Merchants begin their quest for a fifth division title in 11 years — and go into West Conference playdowns as the number one seed, having clinched first place last weekend.

The Merchants head into this year's post-season campaign sporting about as much momentum as they ever have — with an overall record of 41-6-1-1 and a remarkable 34-4 run since mid-October's breakthrough tournament showing in Michigan.

They boast a goals-against average of under 3.00 and arguably the best front-line attack in the division — not to mention the West's most dependable backstopper in Cody Spicer.

But above everything else, the local juniors' trump card could well be plain old home-ice advantage — which they'll enjoy throughout the division playdowns.

Going 24-1 at Memorial Arena this season, Milton clearly holds a psychological edge in its own barn.

All this makes Milton an odds-on

favourite to reach the conference finals — which for the first time ever could feature a north Halton clash between the Merchants and Georgetown Raiders, who ended the year on a 14-game win streak.

But for that much-anticipated showdown to occur, the neighbouring communities will have two clear two hurdles apiece.

Milton's first round begins tonight at home against the Streetsville Derbys — who despite taking the Merchants to overtime twice this year shouldn't pose much of a problem if the locals play anywhere near their capability.

The Merchants head into the playoffs on an eight-game winning streak — with their latest victory coming at Hamilton's Mountain Arena Monday night.

Spicer offered exceptional cage work, while Rob Ricci, Rich Meloche and Wes Clark scored in the regular-season finale — which despite being meaningless in regards to positioning featured playoff-like intensity.

Meloche just missed reaching the 50-goal plateau in the dying moments of play with an empty-net attempt that went just wide. He and Brad Efthimiou both finished with 100-plus points.

Milton Merchants vs. Streetsville Derbys (tentative first round schedule)

Game 1	Feb. 7	at Milton (7:30)
Game 2	Feb. 11	at St'ville (8 p.m.)
Game 3	Feb. 12	at St'ville (8 p.m.)
Game 4	Feb. 14	at Milton (7:30)
•Game 5	Feb. 16	at Milton (3 p.m.)
•Game 6	Feb. 18	at St'ville (8 p.m.)
•Game 7	Feb. 19	at Milton (7:30)

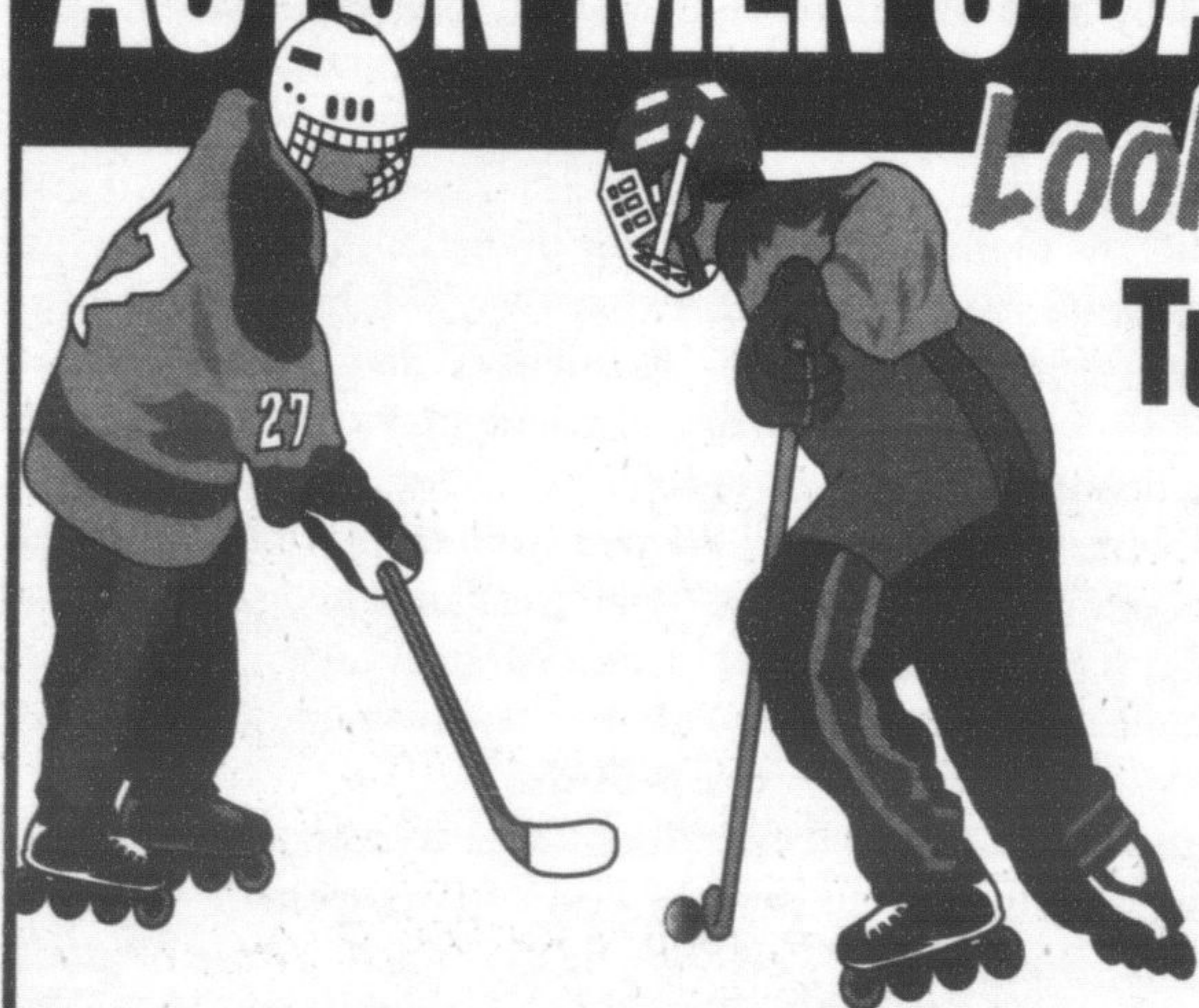
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Just passin' through

E.C. Drury's Kris Boomhuwer drives past a Holy Trinity defender during junior boys basketball play at EC Monday afternoon. The Spartans were doubled up 66-33.

Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

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