



SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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Merchants suffer OT heartbreak in game 7

Harvey's five-hole blast seals Milton's fate in do-or-die tilt

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
The Champion

Milton's hockey heartbreak has never run deeper.

With every possible nook and cranny occupied at Memorial Arena Tuesday, Merchant fans let out a collective gasp of devastation around 10:45 p.m. when their beloved juniors surrendered a double overtime goal to Georgetown's Kevin Harvey.

The five-hole slapshot, which beat Cody Spicer 12:51 into the second sudden death period, capped a 3-2 Raider victory in a winner-takes-all seventh game of the Western Conference finals — the first ever between the north Halton rivals.

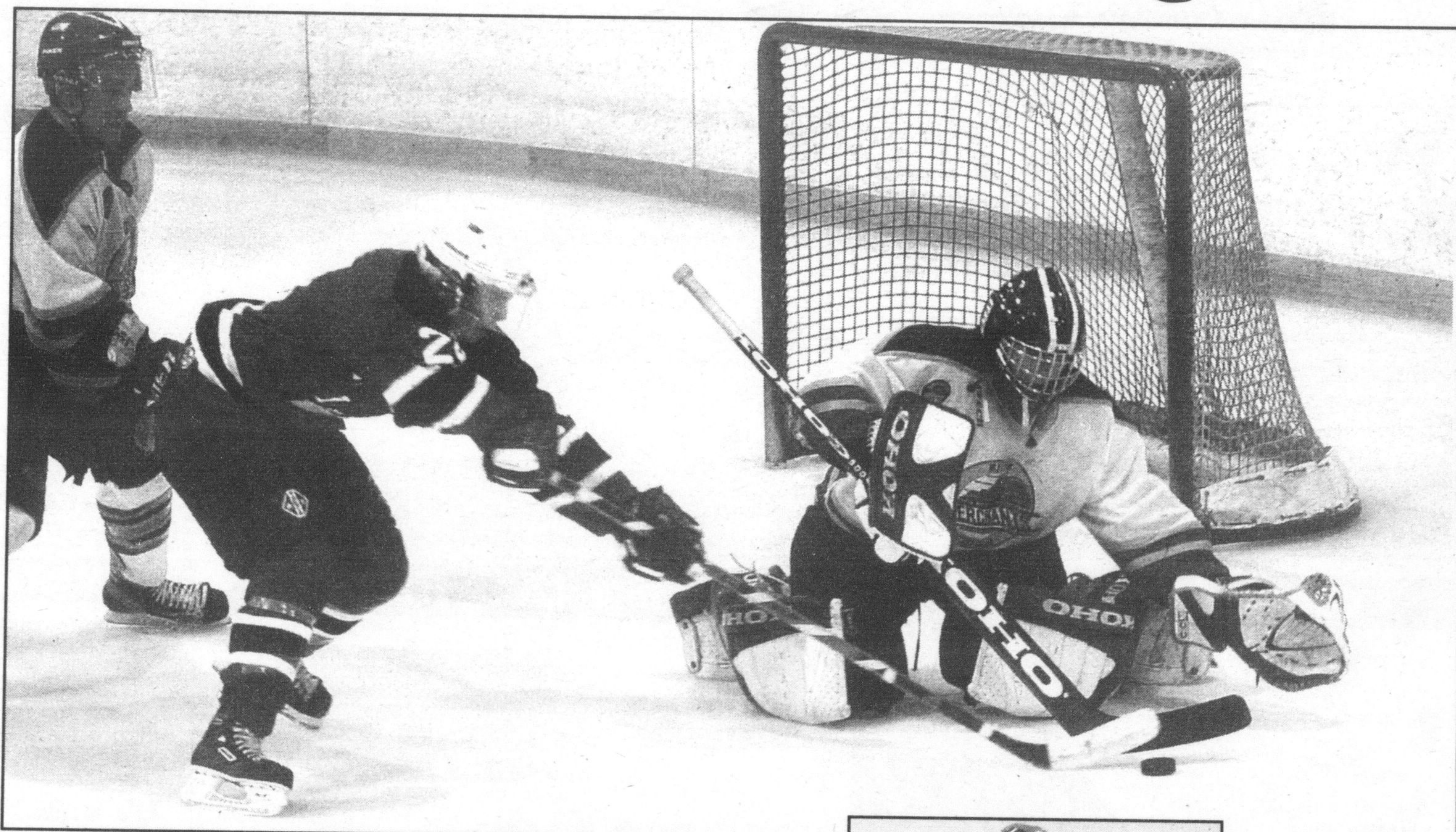
Roughly 1,400 spectators were on hand for the epic encounter, which ended with the Merchants' first loss in 27 home games. It was also the first time in 25 Milton-Georgetown tilts — dating back to the mid-90s — that the Raiders tasted victory in the Thompson Road barn.

Milton had strung together three narrow wins at home in the series — including a double overtime victory of their own in game one — but just couldn't dodge that last-remaining bullet. Needless to say, tears and disappointment were in ample supply for the Merchants once game seven's deciding vote was cast.

"I really thought we had it," said dejected assistant captain Rich Meloche, who scored midway through the third period to force overtime in his last junior game before heading off to Bowling Green this fall. "The worst thing will be not going to practice anymore. This is a great bunch of guys, and I love this place (Memorial)."

For head coach Mario Cicchillo and general manager Dave Brown, Tuesday's OT loss could best be characterized as painful déjà vu. Two years ago — almost to the day — their Brampton Capitals were vanquished by the Merchants in sudden death of game seven.

But to suggest either has become de-sen-



sitized to championship-level defeat would be ludicrous to say the least. "Any time you lose a game seven in sudden death it's hard to swallow," said Brown.

Added Cicchillo, "No, it never gets any easier. Once you get down to overtime in game seven, it doesn't matter how many practices you've had, somebody's going to lose it on a mistake."

In this case it was a defensive pinch which allowed a blocked shot by Harvey to be quickly converted into a breakaway and subsequent game winner. Up to that point, Spicer had been nothing short of masterful with 13 sudden death denials — including four glove saves that were worthy of any over-the-top form of flattery imaginable.

"You have to feel bad for Cody," said Meloche. "He played so well and was such a key part of this team."

Meloche's third-period goal — his 101st of league play in two seasons as a

Merchant — was the second equalizer of the night for Milton. Fellow assistant captain Phil Sbrocchi sank the first midway through period two, highlighting a stellar all-around performance with his fourth playoff goal and second in as many home games.

Rob Ricci and Brad Efthimiou assisted on both goals, while scoring in regulation time for the Raiders were Brent Hughes and rookie defenceman Steve Spade.

If there's any consolation to be found with Tuesday's heartbreaking defeat, it's that the Merchants' coaching staff — when with Brampton — has turned this type of adversity into triumph before.

"The year after we lost to Milton (in the conference finals) we came back and won everything," noted Cicchillo. "This should only make us stronger."

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Milton Merchant goaltender Cody Spicer denies Georgetown Raider forward Scott MacDonald during second-period play, but later (inset left) hangs his head in dejection after giving up a double overtime goal to Kevin Harvey that ended the 3-2 game seven showdown at Memorial Arena. It was Milton's first home-ice loss in 27 games.

Action photo by HERB GARBUTT

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