

Defending champs raring to go

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
The Champion

Winning Halton and GHAC baseball titles last spring obviously didn't do much for Bishop Reding's profile.

Seeded seventh in the Toronto Star's initial GTA polling last week, the defending champion Royals were mistakenly identified as cross-town rival E.C. Drury.

"If that doesn't keep us grounded, I don't know what will. They don't even know our school's name," quipped head coach Joe Jurus, adding that he doesn't put much stock in rankings anyway.

Nevertheless, Reding has to be considered a top threat once again in Halton.

While graduates Conan O'Brien and Andrew Pepper leave some big shoes to fill in terms of both production and leadership, BR certainly isn't hurting for talent.

In addition to Reg Taylor and Liam Tennant — who frustrated hitters throughout 2003 and will likely do more of the same starting next week — the Royals have a number of promising players com-

ing over from this year's highly-successful senior basketball team.

Said Jurus, "Winning is as much about attitude as anything else. It's a habit. They (cagers) showed a lot of mental toughness through their season. You can only win so many close games before people realize it's more than luck."

Among the newcomers looking to keep Reding's baseball squad on top are Marcas Gray, Sean Mathé and Nick Mazzorato — who's expected to split the catching duties with veteran Tim Kirk.

The biggest question marks heading into Monday's home opener against Oakville's Iroquois Ridge are whether or not Taylor and Tennant can shoulder the leadership load this year and if the Royals can find a capable number two pitcher to replace Matt Tales — who's now attending Georgetown's Christ the King.

Eleventh grader P.J. McColl appears to be the best shot at filling that hole in the rotation. The young lefty doesn't come in with a whole lot of velocity or fanfare, but

then neither did Tales — who often rivaled Tennant as Halton's most effective hurler last spring.

"I still don't know how Matt got all those guys out. He certainly wasn't that powerful," recalled Jurus.

A concentrated two-week regular season could be the biggest obstacle for the Royals, who as of yesterday still hadn't had an off-field practice — with recent downpours leaving Maplehurst and Brian Best parks unusable.

However, Jurus' frustration over this seems overshadowed by overall optimism. But then heading into the season as defending champs will do that. "We've got the trophy and everyone wants it," he said.

Meanwhile, Milton's two other ball teams — the E.C. Drury Spartans and Milton District Mustangs — could be in store for a rather tough spring.

Both teams have few returnees — particularly the Spartans, who're back from a one-year hiatus and have just three players from 2002.

Infielders Jordan Fagin and Chris Whiting are expected to be among the bright spots in the lineup.

The Mustangs should be at least credible on the mound with veterans Chris Jones, Aaron Mark and Adam Rosanally back in the fold. Beyond that, however, MD doesn't have much experience — which could make consistent hitting tough to come by.

The Mustangs kicked off 2004 with a 7-3 exhibition win over Hamilton's Westdale Monday and host Oakville Trafalgar Monday at Brian Best.

E.C. Drury will also get its regular season campaign underway Monday with a trip to Negaweya to face Oakville's Q.E. Park. All games start at 3:30 p.m.

Midget cagers strike gold

After three third-place finishes, the midget Madd Dawgs have finally netted top tournament honours.

They did so with a perfect campaign last weekend in Hamilton, punctuating the title drive with a 63-55 overtime victory against the host Wildcats Saturday evening.

Trailing by 10 at the half, Milton cranked things up more than a few notches to force the extra session — which they dominated 8-0.

Al Alilovic led with 19 points, while Dalton Olinoski and Malik Diaz-Mercurius contributed 15 and 10 respectively.

The Madd Dawgs' reversal of fortune was sparked by Nathan Carter, who forced three turnovers for fast break baskets early in the third quarter.

En route to the finals, the eventual champions knocked off three opponents. They

began with an 85-25 massacre of Woodstock and then turned aside Gloucester (58-22) and Kawartha (43-32).

Back at Bishop Reding Secondary School Wednesday evening, the Madd Dawgs were upstaged by Toronto Five-O 59-49 in the last remaining game before the OBA final rankings are set.

Down by 20 heading into the fourth quarter, the host cagers delivered a strong finish to make the outcome a little more respectable. However they fell behind early and just couldn't measure up to their guests in terms of speed and rebounding — despite beating them just a couple of weeks earlier.

Diaz-Mercurius recorded nine points in the final frame and 15 overall to lead Milton's production, while Olinoski highlighted the first quarter with three straight field goals.



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