

# Challenging year has rewarding finish for McMillen

By Steve LeBlanc  
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Perseverance is a valuable commodity in any sport, and was especially crucial for one rep hockey team this past season.

Fortunately, head coach Andrew McMillen had plenty of it to go around.

A sixth grade teacher at W.I. Dick Middle School, McMillen certainly had some trying times over the past year with the additional entry novices — who almost didn't hit the ice due to a shortage of players.

"At our first tryout we had eight players and a goalie. We had to put an ad in The Champion calling for more kids and we only got up to 13," recalled the 40-year-old Miltonian, April's Champion Coach of the Month. "There were weeks when we wondered if we'd make it through, and certainly had our fingers crossed during flu season."

Throw in the fact that the novice AE Winterhawks lost two players to the 'AA' team in the fall, went several weeks without rep jerseys and didn't exactly have much success to speak of through the regular season, and McMillen's frustrations could have easily gotten the better of him.

But as one parent put it, the AE novice skipper muddled through it all with a positive and reassuring demeanour. "If these incidents got under Andrew's skin, he remained pro-

fessional and didn't allow himself or his team to be affected in any way," said Jody MacKinnon, who nominated McMillen as April's Coach of the Month along with husband Paul and son/team member Hollis. "He quietly kept on track, never losing focus on what he wanted to accomplish."

Added Hollis, "I think coach Andrew is the best because he treats me and everyone else with respect. He doesn't yell and he knows what he's talking about."

That type of praise came from more than just the MacKinnon household.

"Andrew delivered positive reinforcement to the team and always made sure every player understood what was required of him or her. The players had fun, but they also learned how to improve on their abilities," said Ingo Stahlmann, the grandfather and avid fan of Owen Ellsmere.

Finding an effective balance between fun and development, McMillen saw a tangible payoff of his efforts by season's end — with the AE novices making an improbable trip to the Tri County finals.

"That was great for the kids, a nice, rewarding way to end the year," said the Winterhawks skipper, whose team was one of three to qualify for Tri County championship play last month.

A first-year bench boss at the rep level this past season — after a few years at various other capacities —

McMillen said when coaching younger players it's particularly important to walk the line between teaching them and making sure they're enjoying themselves. "It's got to be fun, but then I've told people that a kid can also have fun rolling down a hill and it doesn't cost \$1,000 a season," he quipped. "It's a type of fun that requires a commitment and a great deal of effort to get a reward."

Wife Kelly — a teacher herself — figures his dual role as an educator and father of two rep sons played a key role in him creating an enthusiastic and energetic environment for the young Winterhawks.

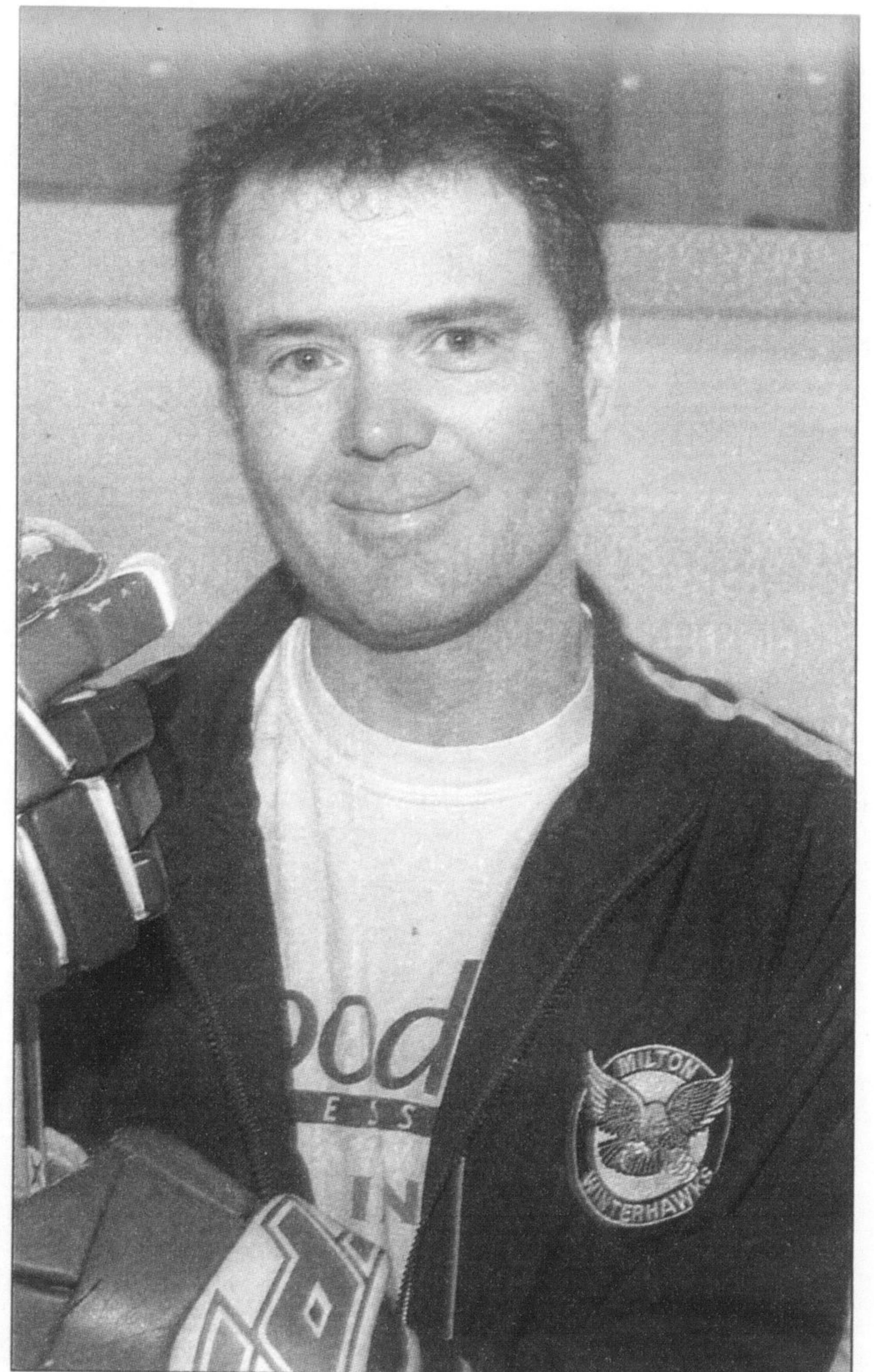
"He keeps the kids busy and moving, and keeps his instructions short and sweet, as opposed to some coaches who don't understand the length of a child's attention span," she said.

McMillen certainly doesn't claim to know everything about coaching, but figures he's learned two vital lessons about it over the past few years.

"I try not to do everything myself. There were four coaches on the ice for every practice this year and we all played a role. And keeping yourself educated is important. I've talked to and enlisted the help of a number of other coaches and tried to pick up on what makes them successful."

Much like his team reaching the Tri County finals, McMillen said his Coach of the Month nomination was rather unexpected — and a welcome way to cap the 2005/06 season.

"It was nice, a real honour."



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