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IceHawks edge Blades for season's biggest win

Cusick stands tall in narrow victory over first-place club

By Steve LeBlanc
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Although not likely to improve his IceHawks' first-round prospects much, Randy Novak seems determined to close out the regular season by reclaiming seventh place.

And suddenly that seems possible.

In front of a sparse but spirited crowd at Memorial Arena Tuesday night, the IceHawks engineered their first genuine upset win of the season — eclipsing the top-seated Oakville Blades 2-1.

David Vallorani provided the heroics — netting his team-leading 19th goal on an odd-man rush with two-and-a-half minutes to go — while Vince Cusick weathered a late storm and stopped 41 shots overall for his biggest junior victory to date.

"We're not just looking ahead to next year. Catching Mississauga is our goal right now and we feel that's doable," said the IceHawks head coach, whose club now sits five points back of the Chargers with a couple of games in hand heading into the final two-and-a-half weeks of regular-season play. "After tonight, every game is potentially winnable."

While no doubt pleased with the evening's outcome, Novak felt his team delivered a stronger overall performance in Oakville Saturday — when despite being blanked 3-0, Milton out-

chanced its hosts and held them scoreless until late in the second period.

As a result, the latter half of the home-and-home series appeared very much up for grabs — as surprising as that may have seemed just a couple of weeks ago.

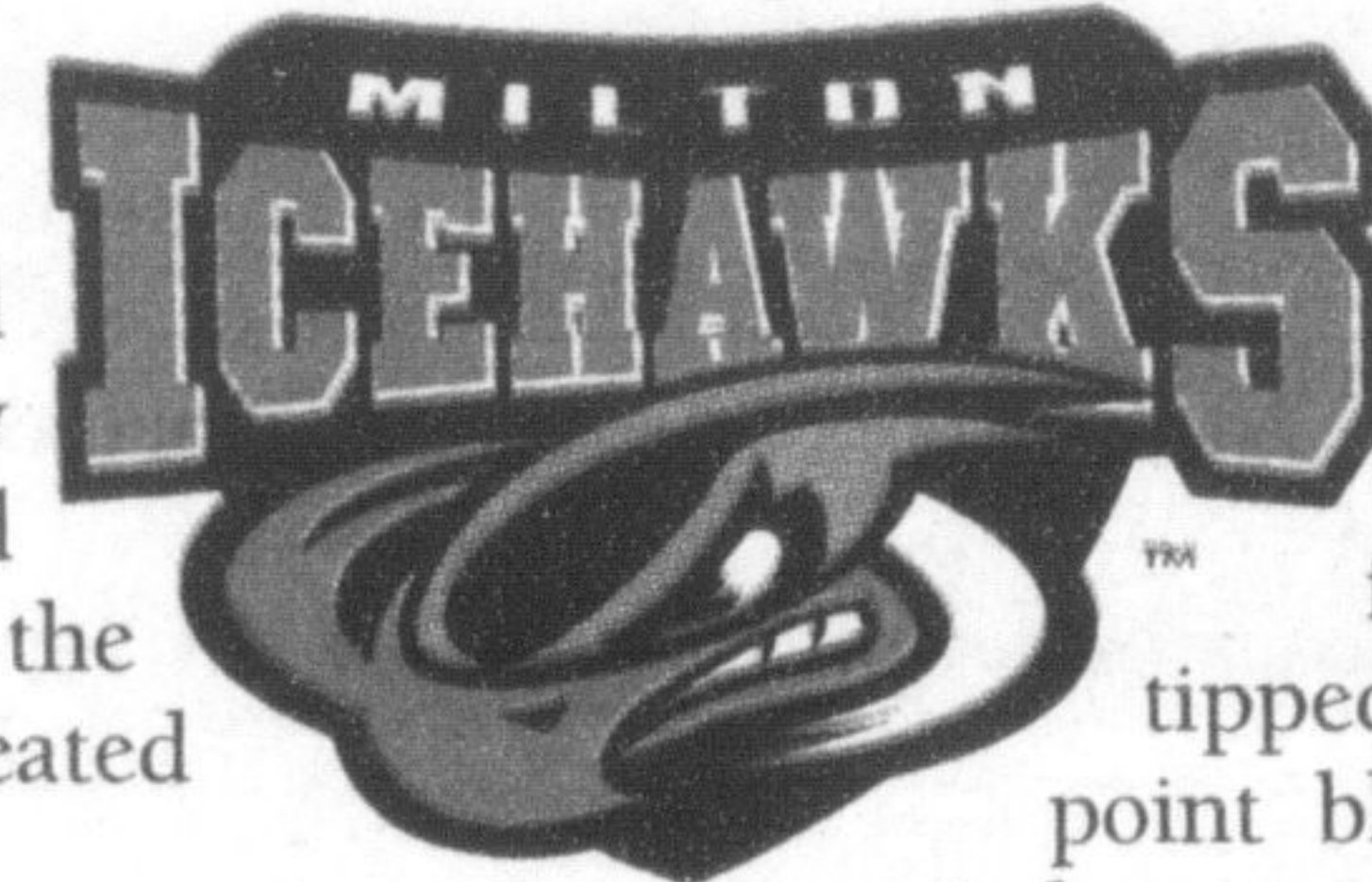
"After Saturday we really thought we had a chance of beating them, and the guys played great," said Cusick, who turned back 66 of 69 shots in the two games against the Blades to lift his save percentage to .879. "Hopefully we can keep this rolling."

The IceHawks were held to 20 shots or less for the third time this season against Oakville Tuesday, but went into the final frame up 1-0 after Allen Petretic tipped in David Fortino's powerplay point blast with 1:31 left in the second period.

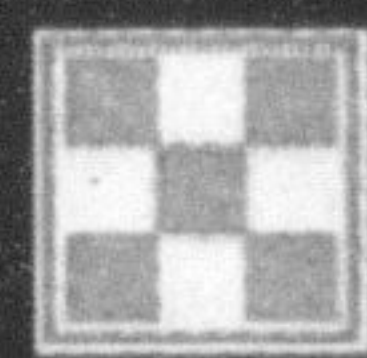
Blades veteran Trevor Elliott evened things up 6:44 into the third on a wide-angle deposit — with a blueline shot bouncing off a skate and coming right to him — before Cusick quickly regrouped to hold off a couple more flurries and set the stage for Vallorani's late winner.

Fortino assisted on both goals for his second two-assist effort in as many home games, while the IceHawks' blueline unit was hometown call-up Scott Stover of the midget Hurricanes — who got a fair amount of ice time and was out for the first Milton goal.

Tonight at Memorial, the IceHawks will take on the Brampton Capitals for the first time since their new coach departed ways with them two months ago after a showdown involving the discipline of a player. Game time is 7:30 p.m.



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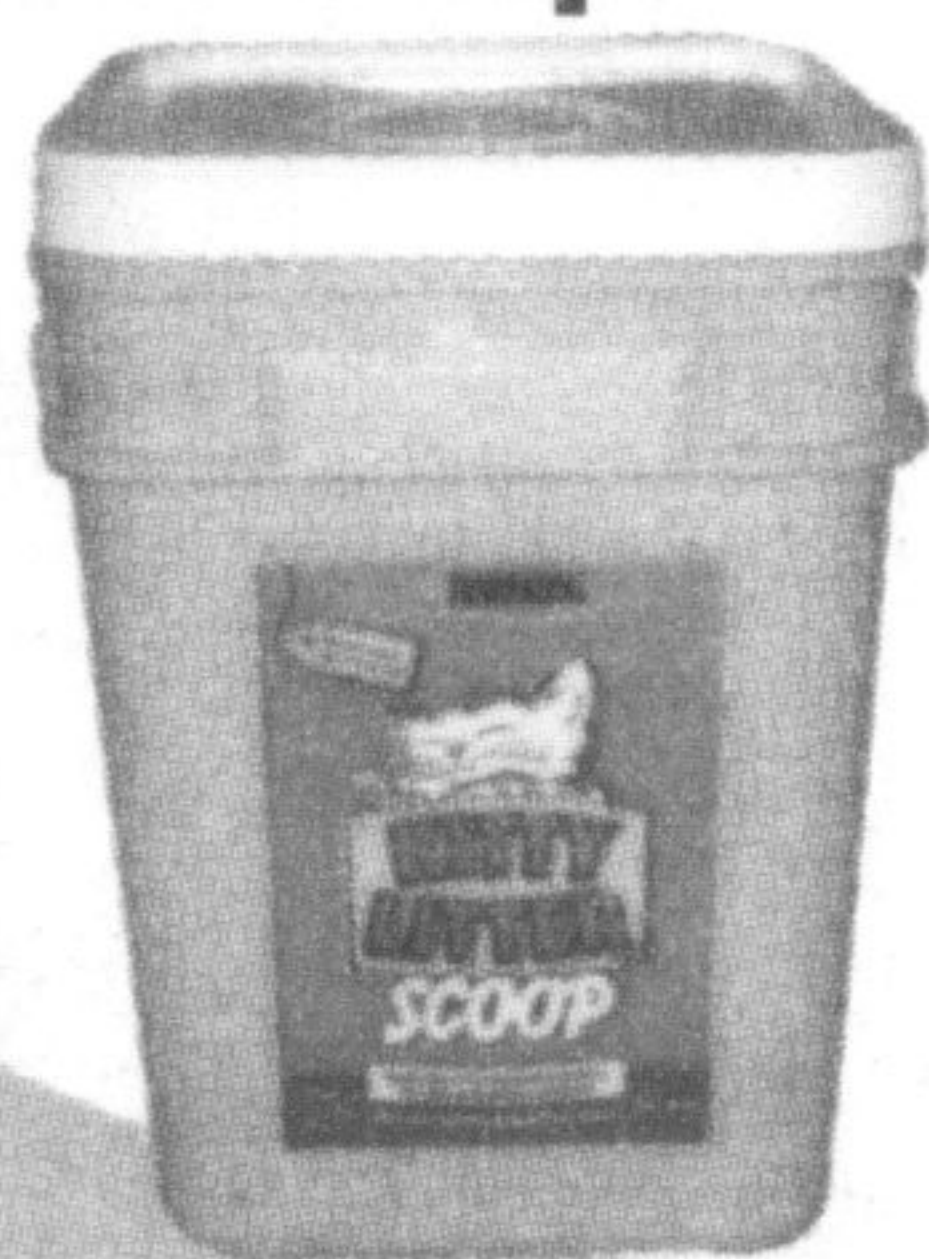
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