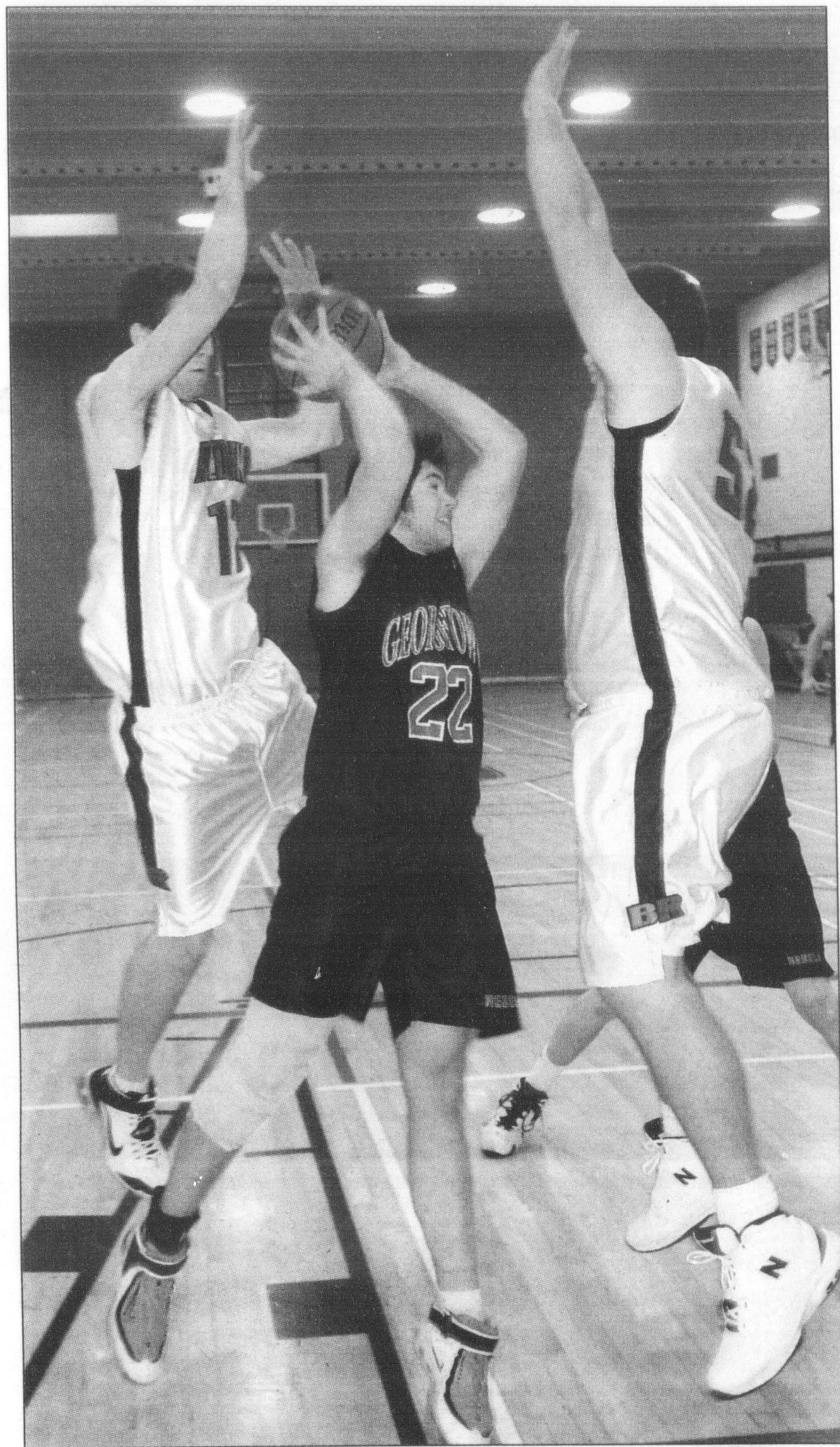


SPORTS

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GRAHAM PAINE / CANADIAN CHAMPION

CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE: Georgetown's Spencer Troop goes up for a shot while being guarded by Al Alilovic (left) and Matt Sewell of Bishop Reding during senior basketball play at BR Wednesday afternoon. The Royals lost 71-48 to finish the regular season at 8-2. They host either Iroquois Ridge or T.A. Blakelock in the Halton AAA semifinals Friday, starting at 3:30 p.m.

First taste of international competition awfully sweet

Armstrong's rink golden at Karuizawa showcase

By Steve LeBlanc
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Earlier this month Leigh Armstrong enjoyed her first taste of international competition.

And if results are any indication, it won't be her last.

The 24-year-old Miltonian and her rinkmates took a significant step toward what they hope will be a successful qualifying bid for the 2010 Olympics, winning the Karuizawa International Curling Championship in Japan.

Clinching top honours against an American team that's played in the Olympics and shining at the same rink where the 1998 Nagano Games were contested served only to bolster motivation for Armstrong's squad — which has been together less than a year.

"This is definitely incentive to get Canada on our backs again," said the local curler, who along with longtime teammates Julie Reddick and Stephanie Leachman of Oakville and newly-acquired leader Jo-Ann Rizzo of Brantford were picked to represent their country back in November.

Building on a strong finish at the recent Ontario Scotties Tournament of Hearts, Armstrong and company put together a 6-1 round-robin record to reach the playoffs, and — once there — toppled the Japanese national team 11-6 in the semifinals.

The Canadian contingent would then punctuate its gold-medal run with a measure of pay-

back, avenging a 9-5 loss to the U.S. in the final round-robin draw with a 6-5 title victory.

The American squad included an opponent awfully familiar to the winners. While now residing and competing in Oakville, Erika Brown remains a U.S. citizen and — consequently — isn't eligible to represent her adopted homeland.

"Yeah, it was very strange to go so far just to face someone we see all the time," quipped

Armstrong, the second on her Karuizawa championship team.

Looking to shake things up after a rough early stretch of the provincials, Reddick and Rizzo swapped positions — with Reddick assuming skip duties. Initially planned for next season, the move proved fruitful — with three straight wins to end round-robin play — and that reversal of fortune carried over into international play.

"The switch definitely worked well for us," said Armstrong, who won three consecutive junior provincial titles with Reddick and Leachman. "And even

though Rizzo wasn't skip, she still provided plenty of experience and leadership."

That was crucial in the final, as Canada jumped out to a 4-0 lead but was then pressured by the Americans, who narrowed the gap to one with points in the fourth, fifth and seventh ends.

Canada rebounded to notch two in the eighth, which proved vital after the U.S. countered with two of its own in the ninth. Canada then blanked the final end to secure the win.

For her part, Armstrong came through with some timely double takeouts to hold the opposition at bay in both the semifinal and final.

"We certainly didn't want to lose to them (U.S.) twice," Armstrong said. "We played well and just capitalized on our opportunities."



Leigh Armstrong

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