

# SPORTS

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## Alilovic making strides with Cape Breton

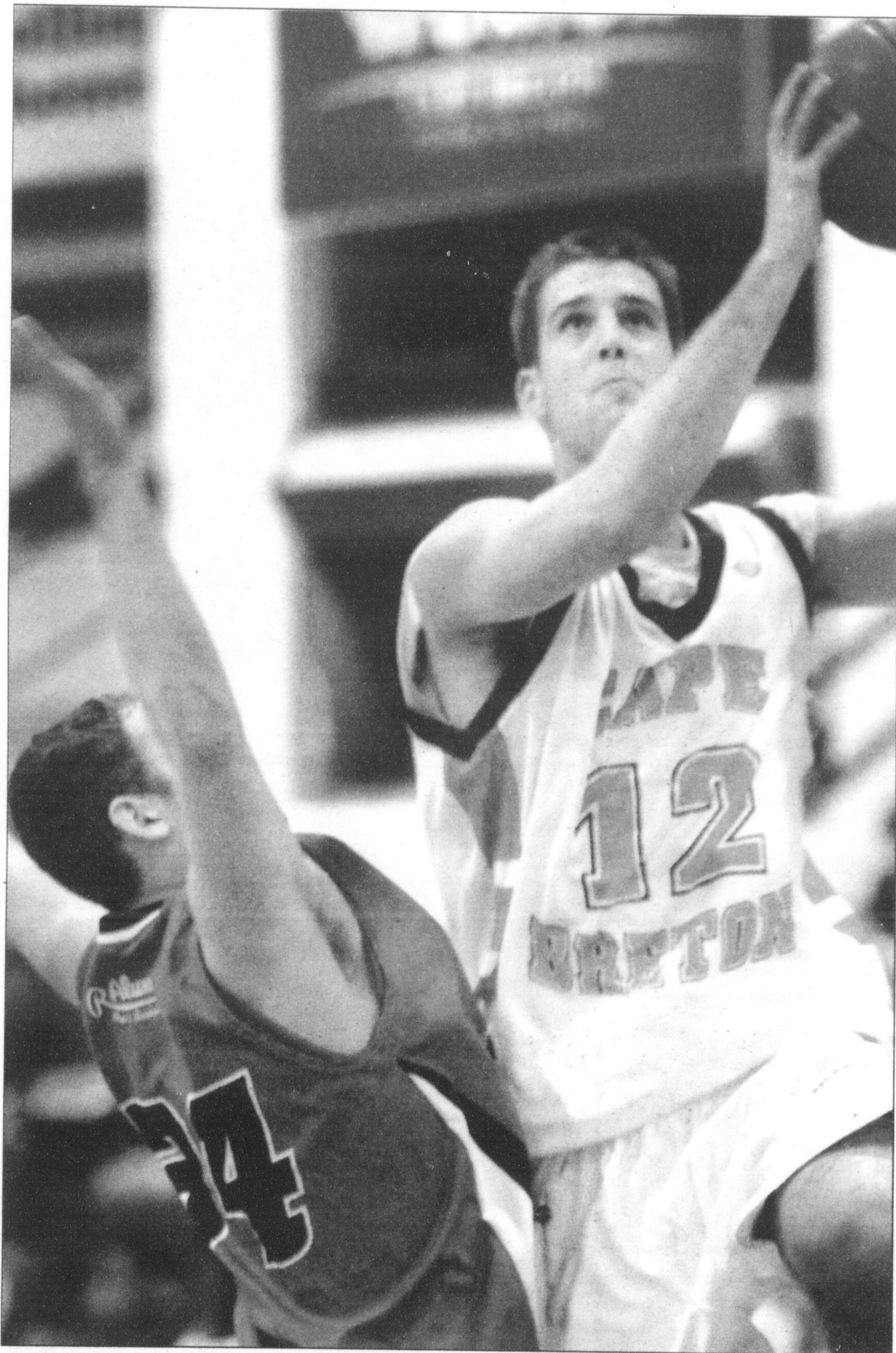


PHOTO COURTESY OF VAUGHAN MERCHANT

**HOLDING COURT:** Al Alilovic goes up for a shot in action with the Cape Breton University Capers.

### *Freshman showing strongly in early development with powerhouse Capers*

By Steve LeBlanc  
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

For Al Alilovic, the road to a university starting position didn't have to be a difficult one.

Among his options this time last year were the rebuilding York Yeomen — a move that not only would have allowed him to stay close to home and keep playing with Madd Dawg teammates Dalton Olinoski and Nathan Carter, but would have likely made him an instant first stringer.

But the path of least resistance wasn't one the 18-year-old Miltonian cared to travel.

"Yeah I'd have got more playing time at York, but I liked this place and figured it was best for my long-term development," said the six-foot-six-inch, 200-pounder, now in the late stages of his freshman year with Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Capers.

Opting to join a perennial contender — one that with just three games remaining at holiday press time (Friday afternoon) was ranked among the CIS's top-10 and held down top spot in the Atlantic conference — meant the high school and club star has had to temporarily shelf his lifelong tenure in the spotlight.

#### Tough adjustment

And Alilovic readily admits that hasn't always been easy.

"Having been a go-to guy for so long, there were times early in the year when I'd get upset with only seeing a few minutes of a game. I just had to keep reminding myself that I'm a rookie and right now it's about learning and improving."

The Bishop Reding graduate didn't get too comfortable riding the bench through the early part of the season, however, as a couple of injuries thrust him into the starting lineup for a four-game stretch in November.

"That first game against Memorial was pretty nerve-wracking, all right" recalled Alilovic, who helped Reding to four straight

trips to the Halton finals.

The Cape Breton rookie managed to harness that anxiety enough to hit double-digits that night — something he's managed five other times this season. And while an eventual return to the supporting cast ranks has meant limited court time, the towering forward is staying positive — realizing that becoming a Capers starter is more about baby steps than a giant leap.

"Right now I'm a role player," said Alilovic, who's averaging five-and-a-half points and 14 minutes a game — with his rookie season so far highlighted by a 15-point, six-rebound effort in an 87-85 win over host PEI in the finals of October's Mickey Place Tournament. "My job's to hustle, help the other guys and learn. I've still got work to do to be able to keep up with the speed of this level, but I think I've adapted pretty well so far."

#### Coach pleased with progress

Cape Breton's head coach concurs.

"Al has had a great year so far as a freshman," noted Jim Charters, whose cagers were 14-3 at press time and wrap up the regular season this coming weekend with a two-game set at St. Mary's in New Brunswick. "He has greatly improved his skills and strength by working hard on his individual program and we feel he is going to be ready for a much bigger role next season."

Until then, Alilovic is content to bide his time and learn all he can from his veteran teammates — who'll no doubt provide some valuable lessons during the conference championships in Halifax early next month.

"I can't wait for the playoffs. I've heard stories about how intense it gets. The atmosphere sounds incredible."

But then it's not like the university rookie has been hurting for sizable crowds or a spirited game environment this season.

"They really pride themselves on sports down here and the fan support is amazing, way better than when we visited Ontario."

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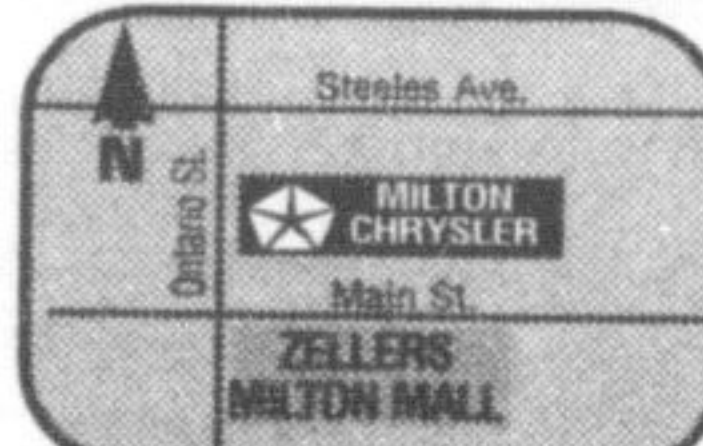
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