

SPORTS

SPORTS EDITOR: STEVE LeBLANC e-mail sleblanc@haltontsearch.com

One last run for veteran defencemen

Over-agers Reid and Shepley looking to write successful end to final chapter of OHL careers

By Steve LeBlanc
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

There's just no substitute for experience, especially the championship variety.

With that in mind, Milton's two OHL defencemen — both over-agers who've been to the Memorial Cup — will no doubt be called upon to provide a stabilizing presence during their final Major-Junior playoff run, which got underway last night (Thursday).

Elgin Reid's leadership could be particularly valuable to the rebuilding Windsor Spitfires, who missed the post-season last year and have only two other players with any real playoff experience.

A fifth-year veteran and assistant captain, the five-foot-11-inch, 190-pound blueliner has embraced the added responsibility placed upon him since putting off his pro hockey plans to aid the young Spitfires.

That's included one recent test of his character he never wants to be confronted with again.

"It's really difficult to describe what that did, but it forced some of us to grow up a little," explained Reid, referring to last month's sudden death of captain Mickey Renaud. "We became good buddies and he was someone I could lean on when there were problems."

Just how much they've been driven by inspirational fuel remains open for debate, but what's clear is that the young Spitfires head into the playoffs as the league's hottest team — punctuating an 8-0-1-1 run since their tragedy with Sunday's 3-2 comeback victory over the Memorial Cup host and nationally top-ranked Kitchener Rangers.

This gave them a 41-15-7-5 record and put them in a tie for second in the Western Conference with the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds, who won the tiebreaker by virtue of having three more victories.

Productive final season

Recently returning from yet another shoulder injury, Reid boosted his plus-minus to 26 over Windsor's late-season tear — to finish top-10 among all OHL defencemen in that department —

while his eight goals and 34 assists in 54 games makes him one of the most well-rounded blueliners in this year's playoff picture.

The opportunity to showcase his overall game was what drew him to Windsor, after being largely relegated to a tough-guy role with the Ottawa 67s — a three-and-a-half-year stint highlighted by a 2005 trip to the national championship in London.

"I have no hard feelings about my time in Ottawa, but the role they had me in — a grinder and enforcer — was one I was never really comfortable with," the seasoned blueliner said earlier this season. "I always considered myself a strong skating defenceman with good puck movement, and it was nice that someone finally saw that in me."

Although currently focused on the Sarnia Sting, Reid knows that all roads eventually lead to the Rangers, who might not even need the automatic host berth to this spring's national showcase.

But if momentum counts for anything, Windsor could be every bit as difficult to dispose of this spring.

"With (Steve) Mason, they probably have the edge in goaltending, but otherwise I think we match up well with them (Rangers)," said Milton's longest-serving OHLer in recent memory, addressing the possibility of a conference championship clash with the CHI's top dogs. "But that's still a long way off."

Like his fellow Miltonian, Zack Shepley's final year in the 'O' has featured both change and adversity.

The latter came in the form of off-season surgery to repair two herniated discs in his lower back.

A few months later, the six-foot-four-inch, 218-pounder not only found himself back in action, but back at home — with a late-November trade to the Brampton Battalion allowing him to live with his family, who moved here from Oakville a few years ago.

"That was kind of an adjustment after playing in Plymouth for three years," admitted Shepley, who helped the Whalers to the OHL title and a berth to the Memorial Cup in Vancouver last spring. "But now I get my meals cooked and I don't have to worry about anything but hockey."

Solid since return

That may have been just the thing to ease his return from a lengthy hiatus.

Bolstering an already sturdy blueline, the veteran defenceman's first game back ended in a 3-0 shutout over Niagara, while from there he helped the Battalion finish with the second-best goals-against average in the Eastern Conference — and secured the number two seed as well (having won the Central Division with a 42-22-1-3 record).

His physical presence and solid back-end coverage have contributed to Brampton limiting its opposition to two goals or less in 19 games since his December 7 debut.

"I think I've done pretty well since the return," noted the stay-at-home defenceman, who had six assists and was a plus-11 in 39 regular season games.

The move to Brampton definitely puts Shepley in a better position for the playoffs, with the division rival Barrie Colts providing first-round opposition.

In a similar scenario to what Reid's 67s faced three years ago, the Battalion could reach the Memorial Cup without need of an overall league championship.

Should Kitchener win the West, the Eastern Conference winners — be it Brampton, favourite Belleville or fellow contenders Oshawa or Niagara — will automatically earn a berth to the nationals.

Shepley realizes it's much too soon to talk about that, although his troops have been showing strongly in recent weeks and boast two wins this season over Belleville and one against Kitchener.

"I think we've got a good chance (to go far), as long as we stick to our systems and work hard," said the towering blueliner, who's carved out a credible OHL career for himself despite only being taken in the 10th round (199th overall) in the 2003 Priority Draft.

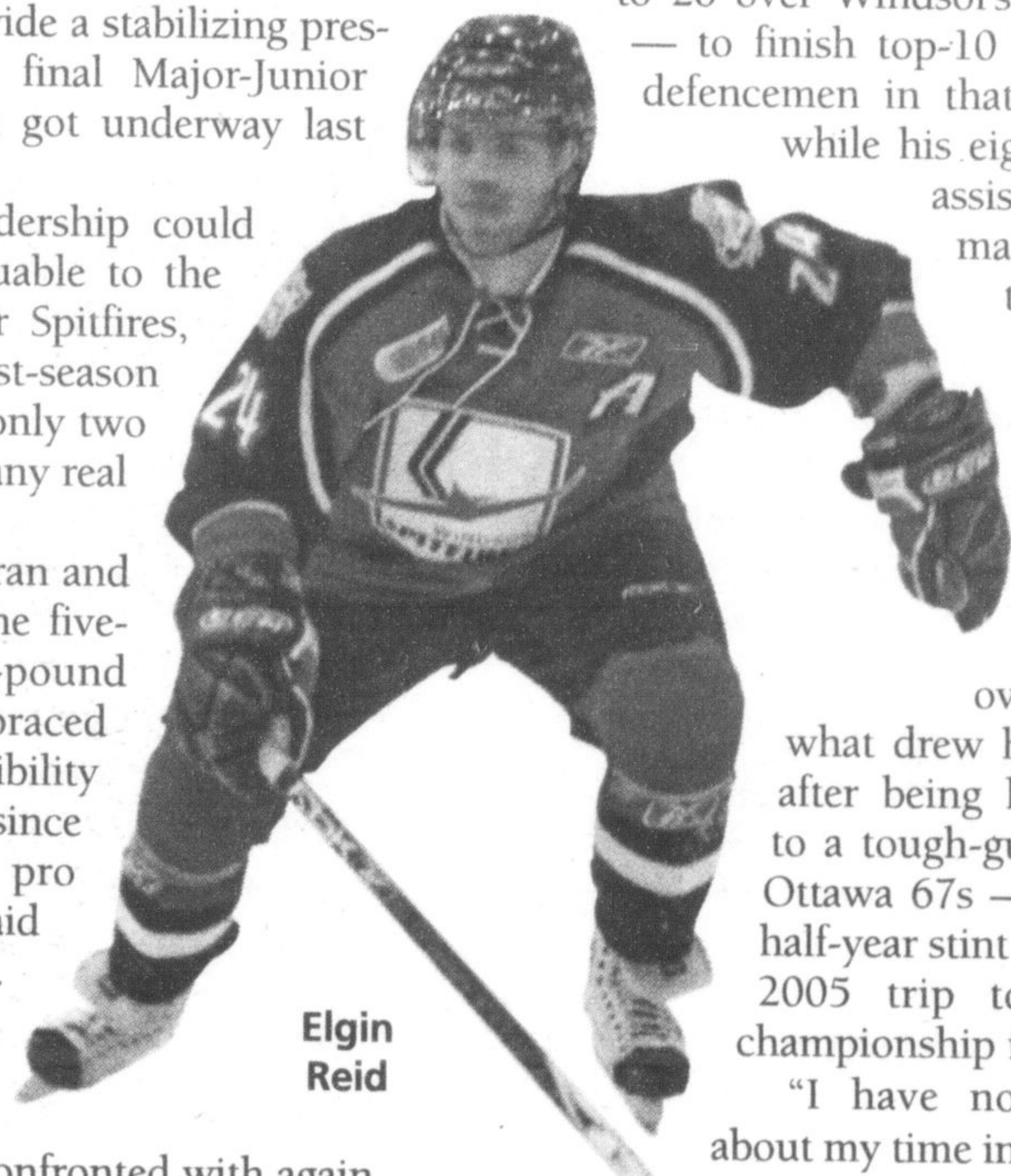
Though part of a club with a little more playoff experience than Reid's Spitfires, Shepley is the only Battalion who's been to the Memorial Cup.

So what advice does he have for his less-seasoned counterparts?

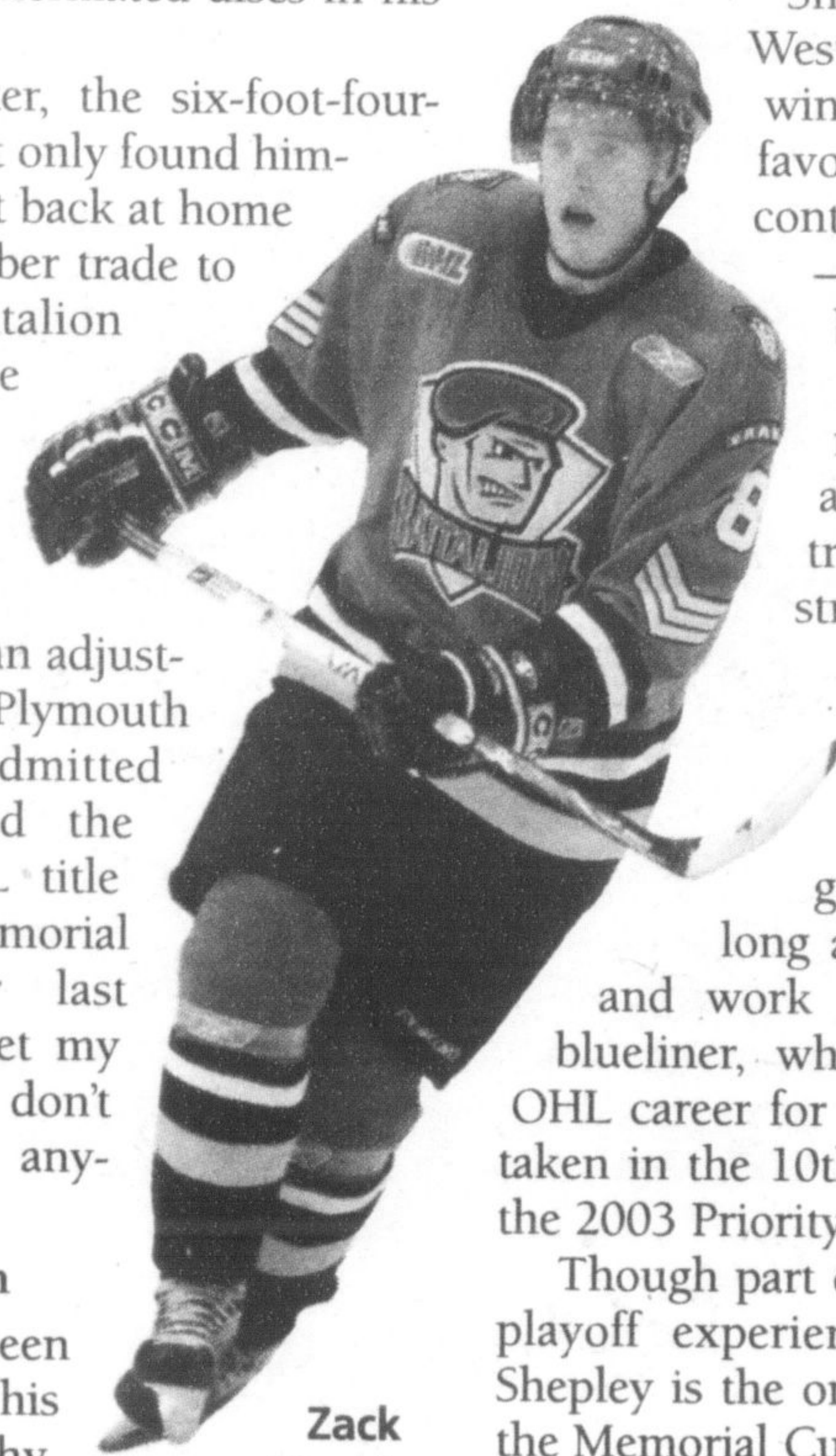
"Just that you've got to play one game at a time and defence wins championships," he offered. "Good offensive chances are usually the result of strong defence."

Meanwhile, Milton's other OHLer — 18-year-old Josh Brittain — will not see playoff action this year, as his Kingston Frontenacs finished second last in the East.

Enjoying a prosperous second season in Kingston, the six-foot-four-inch, 205-pound left winger played every single game and finished with 28 goals and 23 helpers.



Elgin Reid



Zack Shepley

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