

SPORTS

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IceHawks set for new season

Milton juniors should sport more toughness and offensive balance, says new head coach

By Steve LeBlanc
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

Looking over his roster before practice Sunday, Bill McDougall seemed quite pleased with the IceHawks' lineup that'll kick off the 2008/09 campaign tonight at Memorial Arena.

But the focal point of his enthusiasm lies in something that won't be found in any stats column.

"We've got a surprising amount of chemistry for this early in the year," said the club's new head coach, who'll be joined by brother Rob and native Miltonian Bryan Gent behind the bench. "That's so important. I've played on teams that looked great on paper but didn't go anywhere, and others that didn't seem to have much potential but just gelled and went on to win a Calder Cup."

Added returning forward Kevin Caister, "It all starts with the coach. He's brought in a great bunch of guys

and right now we're just clicking." Milton's Tier 2 Jr. A club probably isn't ready to claim any championship hardware just yet, but may well take another step forward on the long road back to its former perennial contender days.

If such progress occurs, it'll be due largely to veteran Dillon Branco, who after a sensational playoff run last spring is poised to be among the division's — and perhaps league's — top net-minders.

Together with fellow returnee Steve Zoffranieri, the IceHawks may just have its most capable — and more importantly, stable — goaltending tandem in the past three years.

"Dillon's been selected for the Canada East camp (for Tier 2 Jr. A world championships) and has a good chance of making the team. I think that tells you how set we are between the pipes," said team president and co-owner Dean Piatt.

Said McDougall, "I think we may have the best one-two goalie punch in the league."

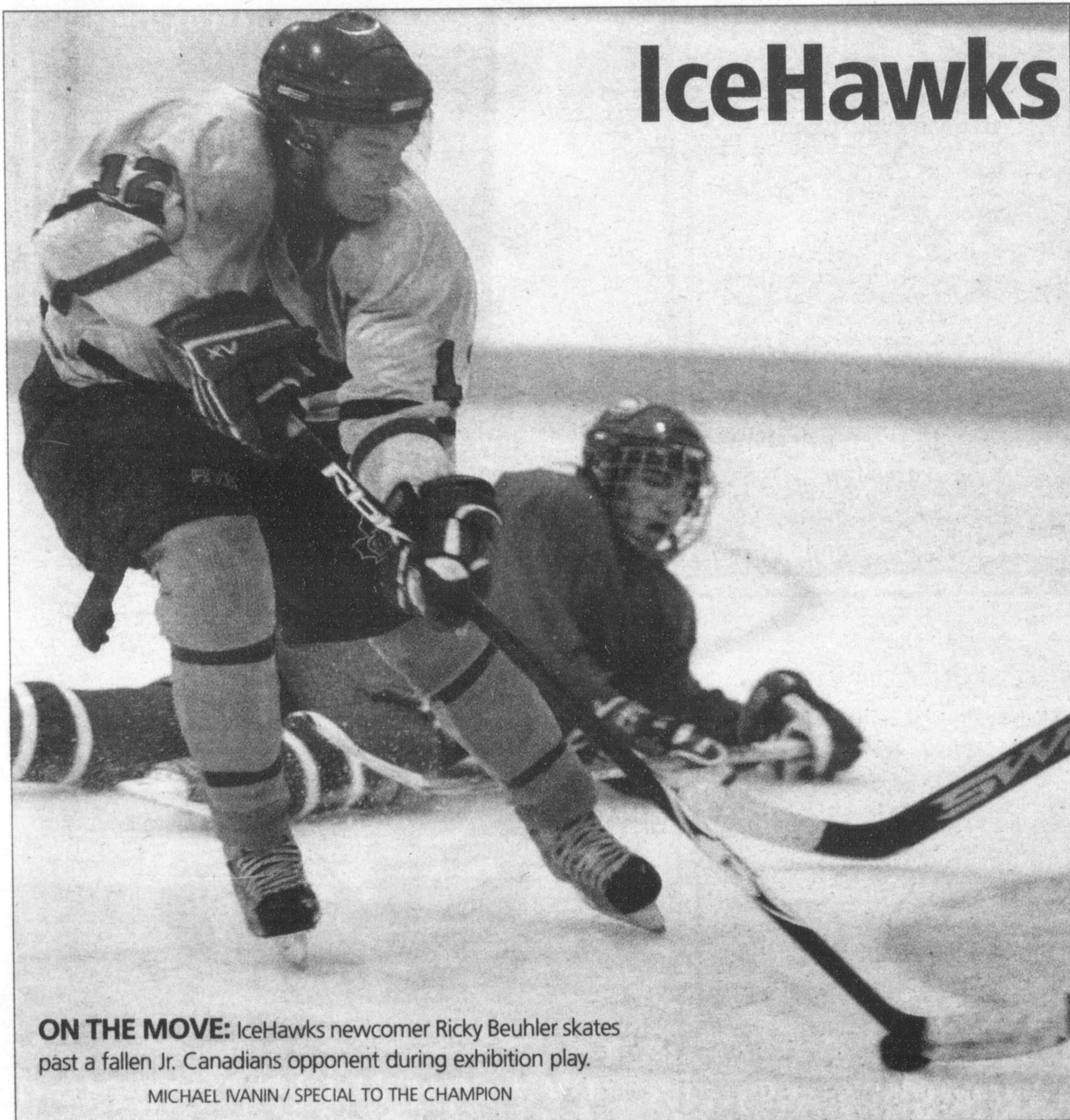
Offensively, the departure of David Vallorani — now toiling with UMass-Lowell — has to be considered the biggest single loss in recent memory.

About as influential to the club's success as any player in team history, the diminutive centre amassed 87 points (32g, 55a) last season and had a goal or multi-point performance in 19 of Milton's 22 victories.

With that in mind, the IceHawks will need much more 'production by committee' this season.

McDougall has every confidence they'll be able to deliver on that, with returning veterans like Kevin Caister,

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ON THE MOVE: IceHawks newcomer Ricky Beuhler skates past a fallen Jr. Canadians opponent during exhibition play.

MICHAEL IVANIN / SPECIAL TO THE CHAMPION



Here's what has changed with IceHawks and OPJHL

Both the IceHawks and the Provincial Jr. A League have undergone a number of key changes. Here's a quick look at the more prominent ones to bring fans up to speed.

What's new with IceHawks

- Hired shortly after last spring's playoff run, Bill McDougall — who's done a lot of development work and coached the Antigonish Bulldogs of the Maritime Jr. A league two years ago — is now running things behind the bench. He's joined by brother Rob and native Miltonian Bryan Gent.

- In an effort to bolster their advancement program, the team has brought in Steeve

Boulanger as its academic advisor and Bob Betts as a college liaison.

- Another addition sees John O'Brien step in as a risk assessment officer. At arm's length from the coaching staff, he'll serve as a sounding board for player concerns.

What's new in league

- While the re-alignment caused by the formation of the experimental or 'super' division doesn't mean much upheaval for the IceHawks, they will see Vaughan join their ranks in the newly-named MacKinnon Division, who lose only Hamilton to the newly-created loop.

- Run by former IceHawks owner Mario Forgiore and coached by ex-IceHawks skipper Randy Novak, the Bramalea Blues make their return to the West (MacKinnon) and will play out of the Powerade Centre.

- Inter-locking play has been resurrected, which will see Milton have home-and-home play against Aurora and Collingwood, plus a home game with Seguin and a road trip to Huntsville.

- A two-referee system is now in place.

- The league has switched back to its previous post-season format, with eight teams in each division making the playoffs.

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