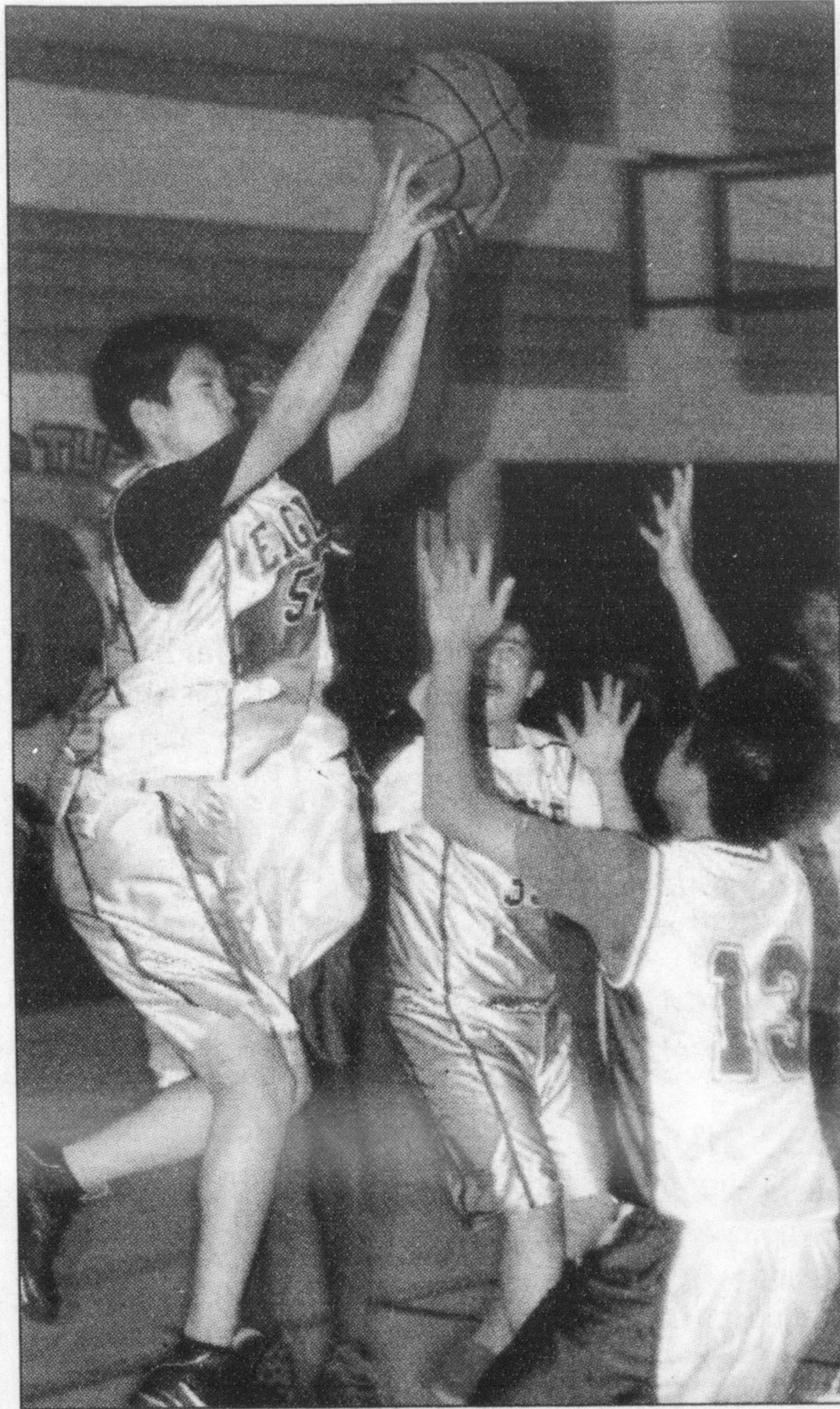


Guardian Angels hangs on to clinch north Halton title

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HERB GARBUTT / METROLAND WEST MEDIA GROUP

GOING UP: St. Anthony of Padua's Dylan Sabator takes a shot during Wednesday's north Halton finals.

Late comeback by St. Anthony offers dramatic finish

By Herb Garbutt
METROLAND WEST MEDIA GROUP

The schools are separated by the length of 62 basketball courts. It's likely that the players from Guardian Angels and St. Anthony of Padua covered that distance during the course of the north Halton Catholic boys basketball final.

And it's likely that the north Halton basketball championship won't travel much farther in the coming years.

The two Milton schools met to decide the title Wednesday, and this year the boys basketball title will reside south of Derry Road — after Guardian Angels held off a late comeback by their rivals for a 50-45 victory.

"This is good for the boys," said Guardian Angels coach Mark Stoetzel, whose team was eliminated by St. Anthony in last year's playoffs. "They all know each other. They were shaking hands before the game, but once they start playing there's that competitive fire. It's a little about bragging rights for them."

Those rights previously belonged to St. Anthony, who not only won last year's championship, but were undefeated coming into Wednesday's game. That undefeated season included a regular-season win over Guardian Angels.

But it was Guardian Angels who

jumped in front in the title rematch, taking a 32-20 lead into the half behind the play of Stefan Toral (11 points in the opening half) and Payne Wood (10).

Guardian Angels still held a comfortable 42-32 advantage with six minutes to play until St. Anthony capitalized on the numerous free throw opportunities it created by driving to the basket. St. Anthony narrowed the gap to six, but Guardian Angels — after restoring the lead to 46-37 with a minute to go — looked to be on its way to victory.

St. Anthony, which got 10 points each from Tristan Walker and Dylan Sabater and nine from Allen Alora, was not about to surrender its title so easily. It exerted furious pressure on Guardian Angels, creating turnovers and contesting every inbound pass. With 15 seconds left, St. Anthony had pulled within four at 49-45 but eventually time ran out on its comeback bid.

"We needed a few more minutes on our side," said St. Anthony's Kelly Erratt, who coaches the team with Jay Frenza.

While St. Anthony managed to keep Toral in check in the second half, they had no answer for Payne, who added 12 more points in the second half for a game-high 22.

"We just couldn't take 21 (Payne)," Frenza said.

"He's unstoppable," Stoetzel said.

"He's a ferocious big man that just goes and gets the ball."

Payne is also the centrepiece of a team that should not only challenge its southern neighbours for the Halton title, but help it contend once again next year.

He'll return next year along with fellow Grade 7 starter point guard Carlo Sanchez, as well as Matthew DaPape and Grade 6 guard Kobe Lopez, who came off the bench to provide some key minutes down the stretch.

Sanchez, who had seven points Wednesday, leads Guardian Angels' up-tempo game and if they can execute their plays, they may add the regional title to their trophy case. But while Stoetzel anticipates a big challenge from the south Halton schools, he knows he can't discount his neighbours, who also move on to the regional qualifiers.

"We can run with any team," Stoetzel said. "We're strong enough to compete with the Oakville and Burlington schools but it wouldn't surprise me if we meet (St. Anthony) again in the qualifiers. I look forward to that."

Stoetzel said the meetings between the neighbouring schools brings out the best in both teams, which is why it shouldn't be a surprise if they're waging another battle for the title next year.



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