

Bramalea gives Merchants the blues with sweep

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
Special to the Champion

Out came the brooms, and out went the Milton Merchants.

For the third straight year, the Merchants aren't going to the West Conference finals.

This season's heartbreaking end came Friday night on home-ice, where the Bramalea Blues doubled them up 6-3 to cap off a 4-0 series sweep.

While the absence of head coach Gregg Carrigan and a number of key players clearly hurt them through the final two games, Milton's real Achilles heel proved to be the same as it has been through the last three playoff runs — a lack of discipline.

The Merchants knew they would be in for a tough climb after dropping the first two games and losing Carrigan, goalie Dave Dolecki and

forwards Phil James, Cory Holland and Steve Clarke (injured) from last Sunday's bench-clearing brawl.

Rash penalties

However, they didn't make things easy for themselves as they continued to take rash penalties and kill any momentum they had going.

While a lack of discipline cost Milton back-to-back series losses to Oakville the previous two years, their recent showing hit new highs (or perhaps lows) of undisciplined play — as 11 of their 17 goals-against came on Bramalea power plays.

Many local fans spent much of the series complaining about the officiating, but Milton constantly put themselves in a position to take costly infractions, and played right into Bramalea's hands.

"Our game plan tonight (Friday) was to play

five-on-five. We felt we could handle any team in the league while playing even-strength hockey," said assistant coach Rick Osborne, who led the team with fellow assistant Jay Anderson. Both teams were coached by their assistants while Carrigan and Blues' counterpart Lindsay Hofford — co-winners of the Coach-of-the-Year Award — watched from the stands.

"You can't play shorthanded against Bramalea and expect to win. Not only will they capitalize on their chances, but it burned out our best players killing penalties," Osborne said.

Milton penalties led to two key turning points in Friday's series finale.

The first came late in the opening period, with Milton up 1-0. Brian Jones, who hadn't managed to play an entire first period without drawing an infraction, did it again with a roughing penalty. This led to Bramalea's first of three power play goals by John Nail at 14:28.

Their next two came less than 50 seconds apart in the second, following a double minor to David DeMonte for spearing. The Blues took full advantage of this break as Nail slammed home two more to turn a 2-1 deficit into a 3-2 lead.

"Even after they scored another, I wasn't too worried. I figured the next team who scored was going to win it. Unfortunately, that wasn't us," recalled Osborne.

Hopes buried

Adding to Nail's hat-trick was Tony Biggs, who tallied twice in the last six minutes of the second to all but bury Milton's hopes for a game five.

The Merchants did manage to pull to within two early in the third, but a goal by Bramalea's Dustin Kuk drove the final nail in their coffin.

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THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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Close, but no cigar for minor bantam Winterhawks

Team trails 2-0 in OMHA semi-finals

By **MURRAY TOWNSEND**
Special to The Champion

It was a perfect pre-spring Saturday afternoon. It was warm, the sky was blue, and the brilliant sun was melting off the last reminders of winter. Inside Milton Memorial Arena, however, there was a dark cloud hanging over the Milton minor bantam AA Lions Club team at the start of their Ontario Minor Hockey Association (OMHA) AA semi-final matchup against the Orangeville Flyers.

Before the first period was half over they were trailing 5-0, and the fat lady had been singing so much she lost her voice. Milton gave up their first goal less than a minute into the game, and then lost big Derek Birnie not long after when he was banished for a hitting-from-behind penalty. Orangeville scored twice during the five-minute power play and popped in another just as the penalty ended. And then added another.

Trevor Saliba made some good saves in the Milton net, but he was coming back from an injury, hadn't played in a couple weeks, and wasn't his usual sharp self. When Brett McClure took over in goal, the storm clouds moved out and the Milton team decided to forget the downpour from the first seven minutes and start all over again. If there was a silver lining in that cloud, it was that there was lots of time left.

Near comeback

Milton lost the game 7-5 to go down 2-0 in the best-of-five series, but along the way almost pulled off the biggest comeback since Rocky IV.

"When we were down 5-0 I figured forget it, we don't have a prayer," said coach Jim Marshall, "but the boys



Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Orangeville's goaltender couldn't seem to get either a blocker or glove out on this shot, as a Milton Winterhawk attacker and his blueline counterpart struggle for dominance around the net Saturday at Memorial Arena in OMHA minor bantam playoff action. The Flyers claimed a 7-5 decision to put a 2-0 strangle-hold on the best-of-five series. Game three was played last night (Tuesday) in Orangeville.

proved that they weren't going to run and hide from it. For them (Orangeville) to have to get an empty net goal to seal it really says something."

Jason Ford started the comeback when he picked up a pass from Kevin Heffron near his own blueline, zipped up the middle and split the Orangeville defencemen like a banana.

Ford was the best player on the ice for either team during the game. He checked hard, killed penalties well, won faceoffs like he was taking them alone, had two handfuls of chances, and scored two goals.

Heffron and Paul Pento did the legwork on the second marker, digging the puck out from behind the net and getting it to Ford, who had one chance at it and then fired home his own rebound.

By this time, the Winterhawks were all over Orangeville like butter on bread. If the puck made it to an Orangeville stick they were smothered. Milton forechecked hard, backchecked hard, and buzzed the net over and over again.

Defence shines

You don't hear this often from a coach whose team allowed seven goals, but in this case it was true. "I thought all our defencemen played well. Outside of that seven minutes, we outplayed them the whole game. Take away that penalty... but that's all hindsight."

Chad Merritt made an excellent defensive play on a two-on-one, Jeremy Robert lead rushes up the ice, Mike Leishman contributed some

good defence, and Bryan Gent was knocking Flyers flying around the net all game like they were bowling pins. One more and he would have had a strike. All four of the above defencemen seemed particularly adept at keeping the Orangeville team hemmed in their own end as they tried desperately to get it past the blueline.

On the Milton third goal, captain Paul Pento, who has more than 100 points on the season, used his patented play to score. He takes a pass, usually from Heffron, and steams up the right side going wide on the defencemen and leaving them in his dust as he cuts to the net. He did it about six times in the game, but that time it worked.

The Orangeville goalie made the save, but one of their defencemen had watched too many Toronto Maple

Leaf games and slid it back into his own goal.

Orangeville got one back in a scramble to make it 6-3 at the end of two. Heffron made it 6-4 early in the third when he picked up one of his four points on his least dangerous play of the game. He pushed a weak backhand toward the net from the top of the faceoff circle, trying for the pass, but the diseased puck somehow got through about eight players untouched and into the net.

Then the line of Heffron, Pento and Dan Bonham signed a lease for possession of the Orangeville zone, beating the Flyers to the puck or taking it away from them by a rough count of seven times in a row on one shift. It paid off when Heffron (again) slipped it out front to Bonham who banged in a power play marker.

Almost there

When that trio wasn't on the ice they subtlety the Orangeville zone to the other forwards, including Chris Bramwell, who had some nice body-checks; Joe Aquilina, who had a couple good scoring chances; Paul Faggion; and affiliated player Justin Arone. Missing from the lineup were other forwards Jon Sprenger, out with a broken hand, and Dave McFarlane who was away.

With the score 6-5, it appeared nothing was going to stop Milton from tying it. But, the Orangeville players, who had been innocent bystanders since they took the 5-0 lead, suddenly decided they'd better start playing again, and kept Milton from getting any good scoring chances in the last couple minutes. An empty net goal and it was all over.

During the regular season the two teams tied three times and Orangeville won once. But coach Marshall said he figures they're beatable and hoped the comeback would give his players some confidence. Game three of the series went Tuesday in Orangeville, with game four, if necessary, scheduled for Milton Memorial Arena Thursday at 8 p.m.