

SPORTS

THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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Merchants hang tough in top spot

By STEVE LeBLANC *Special to The Champion*

The Milton Merchants have been offered a helping hand in their quest to finish first, but instead are relying on a do-it-yourself approach.

In an effort to fend off Bramalea's late-season challenge, the local Jr. A club scored back-to-back victories last weekend. A two-game sweep by Brampton over Bramalea provided icing on the cake in Milton's campaign to remain in top spot — and secure home-ice advantage throughout the West Conference playoffs.

With two weeks left in the regular season, the Blues are five points back with two games in hand. The Merchants have four games to play before heading to Bramalea Sunday, Feb. 16 for a final showdown.

"Home-ice advantage is obviously a big plus for the post-season, but there's also a huge pride and confidence factor that goes with finishing first," said assistant Milton coach Dan O'Brien, whose team sits at 33-9-4.

Milton crashed and burned in the third period Friday and needed some overtime heroics by their top guns to escape with a 5-4 decision over St. Michaels. The return engagement from last Sunday in Toronto — enjoyed by a near-capacity crowd out for Merchant Family Night — saw the Buzzers unload with four unanswered goals, including Nelson Avila's last-minute equalizer which forced sudden-death.

Matt Van Arkel ended things early when he tucked in Darren Haydar's centering pass at 1:12. It was his second of the night and 54th this year.

Their team's third-period collapse was due mainly to cross-checking and instigator fighting penalties by Trevor Downey, who took down Buzzer tough guy Mike Hurst for an earlier spear on Travis Riggin. The third line winger took a two-game suspension for his trouble while the Merchants garnered a 12-minute short-handed stint which led to three visitor goals in six minutes.

"We took a couple of other rash penalties in the third, but the main thing is we found a



way to win," skipper Marty Williamson stressed. "The guys turned in a spirited effort tonight and I think that overshadows some of the other things that happened. It was probably our biggest win in a while."

A stellar defensive effort allowed St. Michaels just 15 shots before the third-period letdown. Stepping up their play with blueline anchor Mark McPhail serving a two-game suspension, Shane Sullivan and Shawn Smith were rock-steady in their own end and stymied the Buzzers' short-range shooting.

Ron Baker scored the only first-period goal on Milton's opening powerplay. Van Arkel and Troy Walczak boosted the lead to three with goals inside the first minute of the middle frame while Baker added his 40th of the season at 4:50, on a shorthanded, two-on-one rush with Van Arkel.

Lloyd Lafrance put together a 25-save performance for his sixth win. He was beaten twice by Buzzers' captain David Galló and again by Marc Capizzano before Avila's deflection at 19:25.

Drawing assists for the victors were Darren Haydar with two and Baker, Riggin, Van Arkel, Doug Janjevich and Jeff White with one each.

Milton scored four times in the opening period Sunday afternoon in Oakville, and hung on for a 5-3 win over the feisty Blades. Authoritative officiating by Hockey Night in Canada's Ron MacLean kept these two rivals in line while another solid outing by Smith helped Milton shut down their hosts' third-period comeback efforts.

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Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Leaning into it

Kelsey McKnight, 18, a former Milton Heights Ski Club racer, heads through a slalom gate Sunday afternoon at Glen Eden during the Ski School Challenge. More than 80 racers of various ages took part.

M&M don't melt under any title battle pressure

John McCart and Chad Merritt led E.C. Drury Dynamo wrestlers to a banner performance at the Ontario Junior/Cadet Championships last weekend at Brock University.

Milton's two newest provincial champs provided the highlights to a weekend that saw seven local grapplers reach the Ontario finals and crack the prestigious provincial top six.

McCart dominated the 94-kilogram cadet division with two pins and a 10-point victory. After preliminary wins over wrestlers from Huronia and Ottawa, he wrapped up the title with a 10-0 shutout over Jay Gallinger of northwestern Ontario.

McCart now has two Ontario golds to his credit. His first came in 1996 as a bantam champion.

An equally impressive outing saw Merritt go a perfect 5-0 with two pinfalls in the 58 kg. weight class. He dominated four matches, including the final where he took a commanding 7-0 lead before pinning Renfrew's Nathan Hewitt.

His best match came in the semis when he came from behind to score an overtime victory against defending Canadian champion Dennis Souza of the Hamilton Steelhawks Club.

Their efforts contributed to the Guelph Wrestling Club — with whom the Dynamos are affiliated — winning first provincial cadet

team title.

Kevin Heffron also reached the podium with his second consecutive Ontario silver in the 52 kg. division. Scoring two solid victories in early action, he bested Ottawa's John Ewing in the semifinals before relinquishing an initial lead in the finals and falling victim to a pin.

Rookie Andy Wadeson made his mark at the provincials with a fourth-place finish in a tough 42 kg. class. He went 4-2 with two pins before being defeated by two previous Ontario champs.

Also enjoying their first provincial placements were Adam Scott and Greg Moore, who finished fifth and sixth respectively. Tom Gallinger won three matches to place in the top 10.

While most of the success came in the cadet division, Milton also had two strong performances at the junior level. Blair Beaulieu placed sixth in his first year as a junior — with four 58 kg. class victories — while Justin Billingham was also impressive with an eighth-place showing.

McCart, Merritt and Heffron will join team Ontario for the National Championships in New Brunswick in April. Attention now resumes on high school competition, as E.C. Drury enters the Junior Haltons this Friday at Burlington Central and hosts the Halton Senior finals next Thursday. The Spartans are

Swimming Marlins on medal run

Milton Marlin swimmers struck gold, silver and bronze recently at the 10th annual Oakville Winter Invitational.

Taking one of each medal home was 12-year-old David Wassenich. The Marlin rookie was a force in the 11 & 12 year-old boys division with a gold, silver and bronze, and set two new club records in the 100m and 200m breaststroke.

Kristen McIlroy scored a gold and two silvers, as well as marking a new standard in the 10 and under girls 200m backstroke. Division teammate Yvonne Shekers earned a silver and a bronze.

Lisa Trenes, 12, led the way for the 11 & 12 year-old girls, claiming a gold and bronze in her favorite breaststroke events, in which she set two new club records. Fourteen-year-old Cassandra Slickers meanwhile, captured bronze in the 200m breaststroke, also establishing a new club mark.

Setting new personal best records were Jacquelin Clarke, Jennifer Claessens, George Dimitrov, Andrew Prenter-Duff and Ashleigh Snow while Michelle Claessens, Jennifer Porenta, David Mondoux and Kevin Winter all placed in the top 10 in their individual events.

Mac gets a shutout

Jody MacGibbon blocked everything fired his way while his major atom A Winterhawk teammates did the rest in a 3-0 shutout over the Georgetown Raiders recently, which kicked off their Tri-County playoff campaign in fine style.

Milton took control early on, scoring twice in the first four minutes of the game. From there, they played strong defence and iced the win with a second-period tally.

Tim Anderson, Kyle Saliba and Jeff Webber sank goals for the victors with assists drawn by Wade Mahoney and Mark McLeod.

The Hawks matched their game one output later against Georgetown, but allowed the same number of goals against in a close-fought tie.

Working the net was Craig Patterson, who received key blueline support from Craig Brigden, Ryan Pflarczyk, Nick Cashmore and John LaBella.

Webber once again counted a single marker, as did Greg Sheppard and Daniel Wetselaar. Assists went to Webber, Saliba and Doug Pottruff.

David Brown and Erick Lizon also turned in robust efforts up front.