



SPORTS

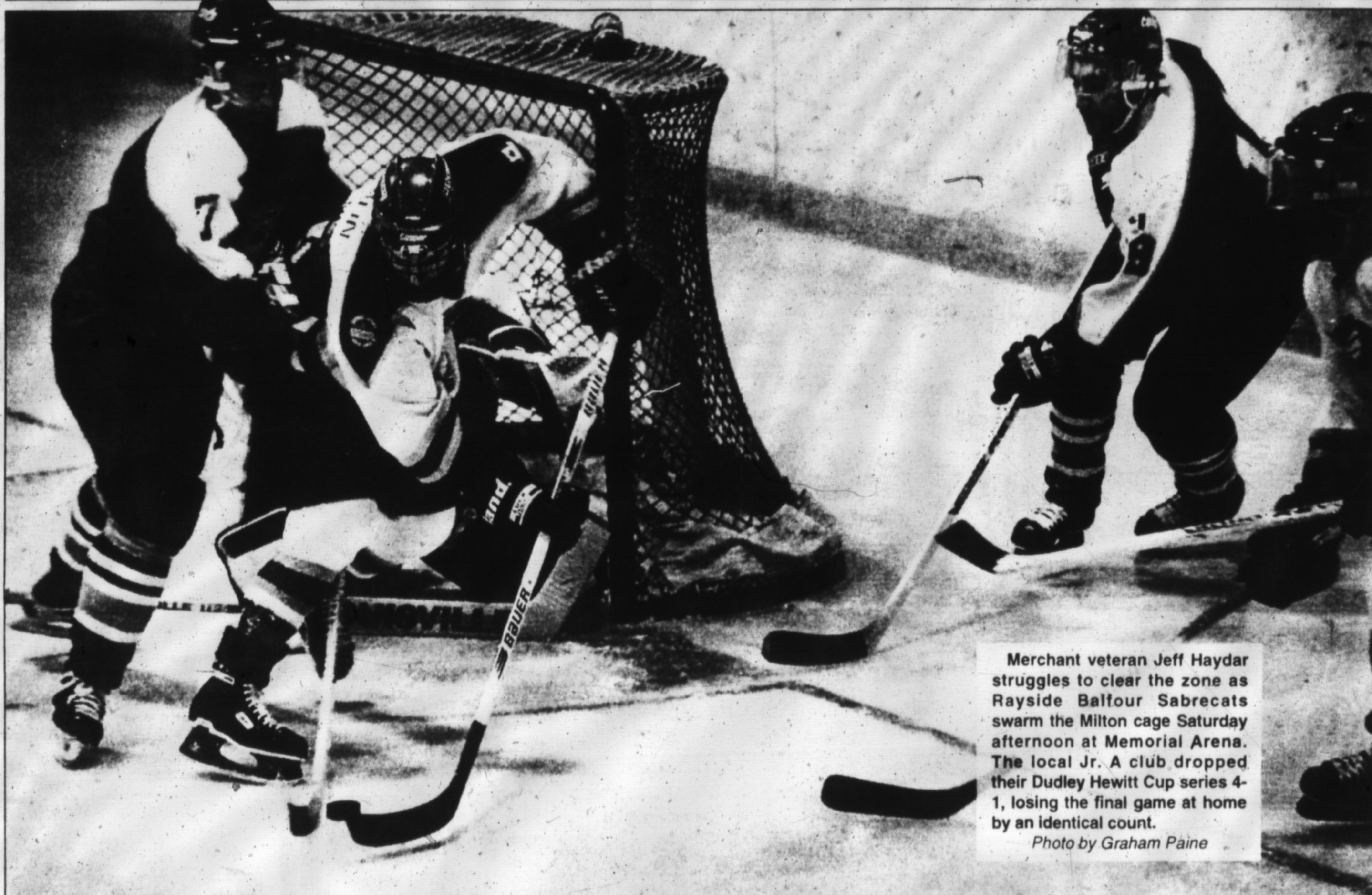
THE CANADIAN CHAMPION

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Merchant veteran Jeff Haydar struggles to clear the zone as Rayside Balfour Sabrecats swarm the Milton cage Saturday afternoon at Memorial Arena. The local Jr. A club dropped their Dudley Hewitt Cup series 4-1, losing the final game at home by an identical count.

Photo by Graham Paine

Schedule, powerplays finally do in the Merchants

Rayside ends Milton's Hewitt Cup hopes with clinching 4-1 win

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
Special to The Champion.

It's been said success has a thousand sons, but failure is an orphan.

The latter part of that quote never held less merit than it did last week for the Milton Merchants — whose inability to claim the Dudley Hewitt Cup can be blamed on everything rather than just anything.

The following is a list of obstacles (their order of importance is subject to the individual reader's opinion) the Jr. A hockey club faced in their quest for the all-Ontario title.

- Simple fatigue — the Merchants were in 22 playoff games and back-to-back seven-game showdowns prior to facing Northern Ontario champs Rayside Balfour, who played just nine by comparison.

- A coughed up puck on an overtime breakout that gave the visiting Sabrecats a game-two victory and new life after taking a beating in the series opener.

- A thin blueline corps in the later stages of the series, courtesy of Shane Sullivan's ankle injury and a lack of discipline by T.J. Lee and Mark McPhail.

- The absence of star defenceman Jeff White for the entire series.

- A nearly non-existent powerplay effort that produced just two goals and none in their last

Milton Merchants



two outings.

- The absence of playoff sensation Lloyd Lafrance in the final game.

- A clear size disadvantage next to the massive Sabrecats.

- A lack of fan support for the series clincher at Memorial Arena.

All of these factors, and perhaps others, contributed to Milton's 4-1 series loss. They were eliminated by an identical count Saturday afternoon, in their 82nd game of the 1996/97 season.

Offence handcuffed most of game

Disappointingly, the Merchants went out with a bit of a whimper.

Despite outshooting Rayside Balfour 35-25 and controlling second-period play, they were held scoreless until the final four minutes of the game. By then their window of opportunity was all but sealed shut.

Matt Falcioni placed a final dagger in Milton's heart 90 seconds later. Perhaps the biggest factor for Rayside Balfour in the series, Falcioni was the hero of game two and scored twice in game

three's 5-3 decision. The 19-year-old winger also notched Rayside's third tally midway through the final frame Saturday, which essentially ended Milton's hopes for a comeback.

"Matt sure came up big when we needed him," said Sabrecat skipper Ken MacKenzie. "After game one, we knew we had to neutralize their (Milton) speed in order to be successful. We made some adjustments in our forechecking, which helped slow them down.

"Winning game two in overtime was a huge emotional boost as well. We were confident nobody was going to beat us in our own building, but we needed to steal one in Milton to take the series and fortunately that win came early."

At the other end of the arena, Merchant head coach Marty Williamson said his club's mental toughness just didn't hold out after grueling back-to-back battles with Bramalea and Newmarket.

"The little things started piling up on us, and we didn't have the stamina to keep going. Surprisingly, they (Rayside Balfour) didn't physically dominate us up in Sudbury. If anything it was special teams play which made the difference. They ate us up on the powerplay, with an 11-2 margin of victory," said Williamson.

"However, we have to be extremely proud of what these guys accomplished this season. There were a lot of leaders on this team and they should hold their heads high."

With a bruised and battered Lafrance sitting out Saturday, Jeremy Wenzel got the start in net and stopped 10 shots before Rayside rookie Derek MacKenzie beat him for a powerplay goal at 1:55 of the second and teammate Robbie Jones connected with a shorthanded tally five minutes later. Replacing Wenzel at that point was Bramalea's Bobby DaCosta, whom the Merchants picked up prior to the series.

Power play problems

Milton's lack of powerplay juice featured a pair of unconverted two-man-advantages in the second and three unused five-on-four stints in the final frame.

The home team also logged their share of penalty-killing duty, as McPhail and Bill Emra spent much of the afternoon contest in the box.

Scoring their lone marker was Lee, with assists going to captain Steve Clarke and line-mate Darryl Dam.

Sabrecat goalie Jarrett Rose was rock solid in the cage, particularly in the second when Milton threw 17 shots his way but were denied at every turn.

Rose and Steve Fabilli split the netminding duties two nights earlier on home ice, where Rayside Balfour pounded their guests 9-2. Lafrance allowed four goals on eight shots in the second period alone and was replaced by

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