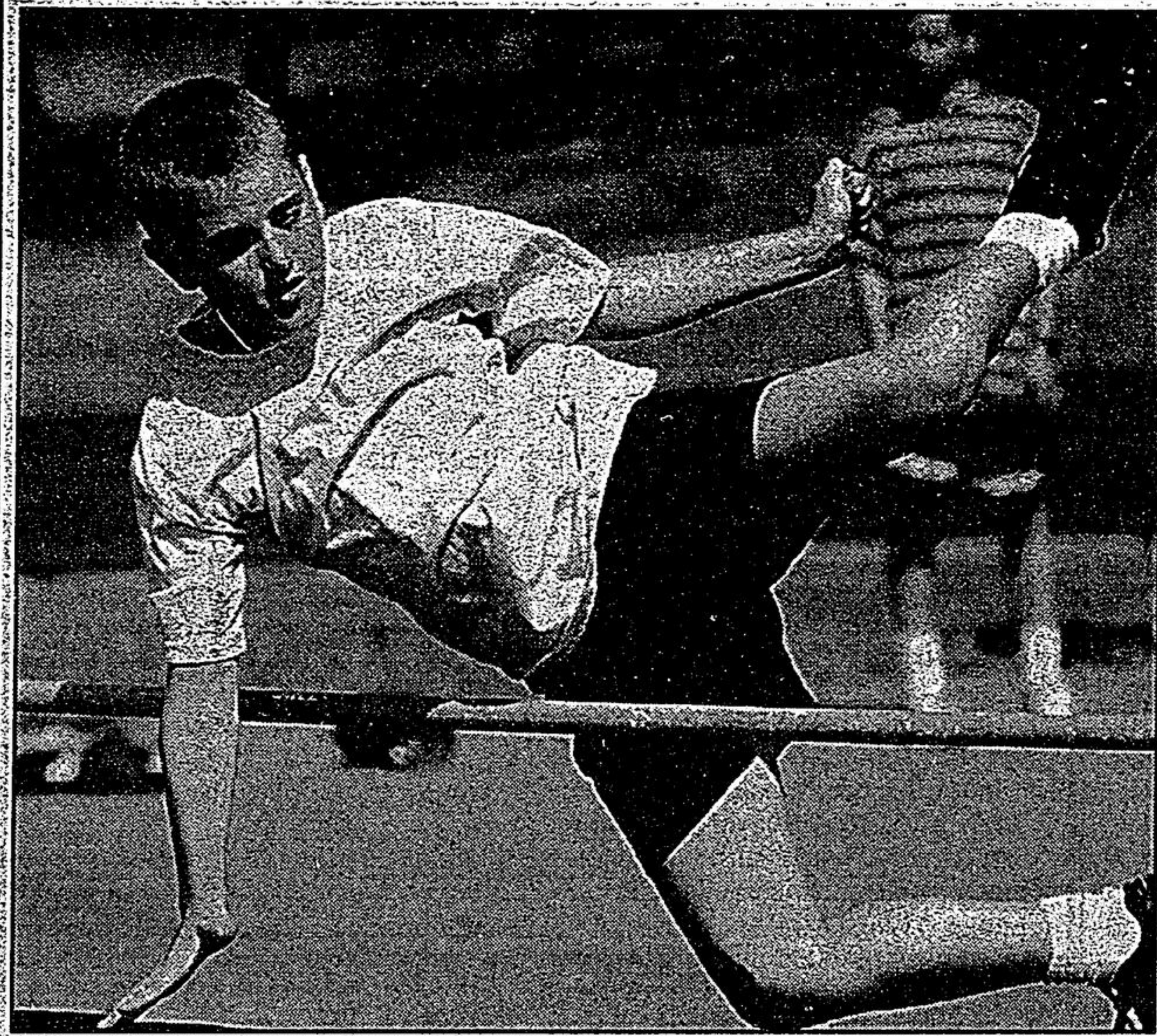


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A TRACK AND FIELD DAY FOR ORCHARD PARK STUDENTS: Students from Orchard Park Public School took to the Stouffville District Secondary School track on Tuesday to take part in their annual track and field meet. Part of the festivities saw Jesse Miller (left photograph), take part in the high jump competition. In the right photograph, a group of tyke-aged girls run to the finish line in a 200-metre heat event.

Photos by SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Spirit welcome league amalgamation

BRUCE STAPLEY
Correspondent

A merger is being finalized between the Ontario Hockey Association Provincial and Metro Junior A Hockey Leagues that will see the Spirit of Stouffville entered into an 11-team division including the Markham Waxers.

Provincial League officials said the coming together of the two leagues is all but complete.

"I would say it's going to be a done deal," Provincial

League commissioner Bob Hooper told the Tribune on Thursday. "Everything is basically done."

The Metro League had been asked to approve a proposal from the Provincial League outlining conditions under which the merger could be accepted. The Metro League gave its approval earlier this week, but Hooper was awaiting a written confirmation.

"If the Metro League approved our proposal, then it's history, the two leagues are becoming one," said Hooper.

The sticking point had involved the unwillingness of the Provincial League to accept the union if the Metro League kept its teams in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Niagara Falls, New York and Syracuse, New York. But Pittsburgh is to be dropped from the league, while the Syracuse and Niagara Falls clubs have agreed to pay a portion of the extra travel expenses incurred by the existing Provincial League teams.

Spirit owner Ed Hakonson said he welcomed the merger because of the potential to establish a rivalry with neighbouring Markham.

"We're very excited at getting the chance to play against Markham," he said. "It should make for a good rivalry down the road."

Spirit general manager Dieter Schmidt

was also enthusiastic about the union. "I think it will be a good thing," said Schmidt. "I'm all for it."

Schmidt said the merger will put an end to the uneasy atmosphere that has characterized relations between the two leagues.

"It will stop all the name calling and behind the back telephone calls and attempts to steal away players from the two leagues. I certainly welcome it, and I'm sure everyone else in our league welcomes it. It can only be a positive thing."

The Waxers, who are to amalgamate with Thornhill's Metro League team, and the Spirit will be part of the Central Conference in the new league. They will be joined by existing Provincial league teams the Newmarket Hurricanes, Collingwood Blues, Couchiching Terriers and Aurora Tigers. The conference will be rounded out by former Metro league teams including the North York Rangers, Huntsville Wildcats, Wexford Raiders, Durham Huskies and the Shelburne Wolves. The Shelburne club is said

to be a question mark for the coming season. Niagara Falls is to play in the West Conference, while Syracuse is aligned with the East Conference.

Hooper downplayed rumours that the Lindsay Muskies might be switched from the Eastern to the Central Conference. "Lindsay will be staying there (in the Eastern Conference)," he said.

The Eastern and Western Conferences are

■ Please see page 18 ■

Spirit and Bruins to work together

BRUCE STAPLEY
Correspondent

The dream match up is finally a reality as the Spirit of Stouffville and Uxbridge Bruins have joined forces.

The two teams announced Thursday that an agreement

has been made which will see the Central Ontario Junior C Hockey

League Bruins become an affiliate squad for the Spirit of Stouffville of the Provincial Junior A Hockey League.

The arrangement makes it possible for more Stouffville and Uxbridge area players to suit up with the Bruins. The Uxbridge club's roster has traditionally included several Stouffville area players, but those numbers have been decreasing in recent seasons.

"This is the way it should be," said Spirit owner Ed Hakonson of the affiliation.

"We've been trying to do this for three years."

Bruins general manager Ron Archibald,

whose team was affiliated with the Ajax Axemen of the Provincial league last season, agreed the time had come for the move.

"It makes a lot of sense," said Archibald. "It's too bad we didn't put it into place last year."

The Spirit had been affiliated with the Bradford Junior C Bulls last season. That meant that Junior C level players hoping to eventually crack the Stouffville lineup had to play with the Bulls.

"It didn't really make sense (being affiliated with Bradford)," said Spirit general manager Dieter Schmidt.

"The majority of the boys in the Stouffville and Uxbridge area didn't want to drive to Bradford to play."

One Stouffville resident, Brandon Crossen, signed with the Bruins after seeing limited ice time with the Spirit at the start of the 1997-98 season.

But there was no official agreement between the two teams.

Archibald said the affiliation now makes it possible for aspiring Stouffville and Uxbridge area players to start with the Bruins on their way to achieving Junior A status.

"We're hoping it can serve to lock up a lot of local kids between the two organiza-

tions. The towns are so close, it makes a lot of common sense. Now we can work together to give the kids a ladder to climb."

Archibald said the arrangement couldn't have come at a better time.

"This is such a crucial year," said Archibald. "Both towns (Stouffville and Uxbridge) have such good crops of midget aged kids coming through who are ready to make the jump to Junior hockey."

"They can start by playing Junior C in Uxbridge, then perhaps play Junior A with the Spirit next year. It seems like a natural for the Stouffville kids to have their first experience in Junior hockey in Uxbridge."

Archibald said the arrangement will also facilitate the shuttling of players that normally occurs between affiliated teams throughout the season.

"The proximity of the two locations makes it easy to have kids move back and forth."

He said the move can only mean an increase in interest in Junior hockey in both towns.

"There's still a Bruins flavour in Stouffville with former Bruin Ken Burrows as assistant coach. Now the potential will be there to announce during a Spirit game that the fans can see next year's Spirit players tomorrow night in Uxbridge."

