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McNeil award winner 'natural hockey leader'

BY MICHAEL HAYAKAWA
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When James McLeod received a call informing him he was this year's recipient of the Whitchurch-Stouffville Minor Hockey Association's Dan McNeil Award, it caught him totally off guard.

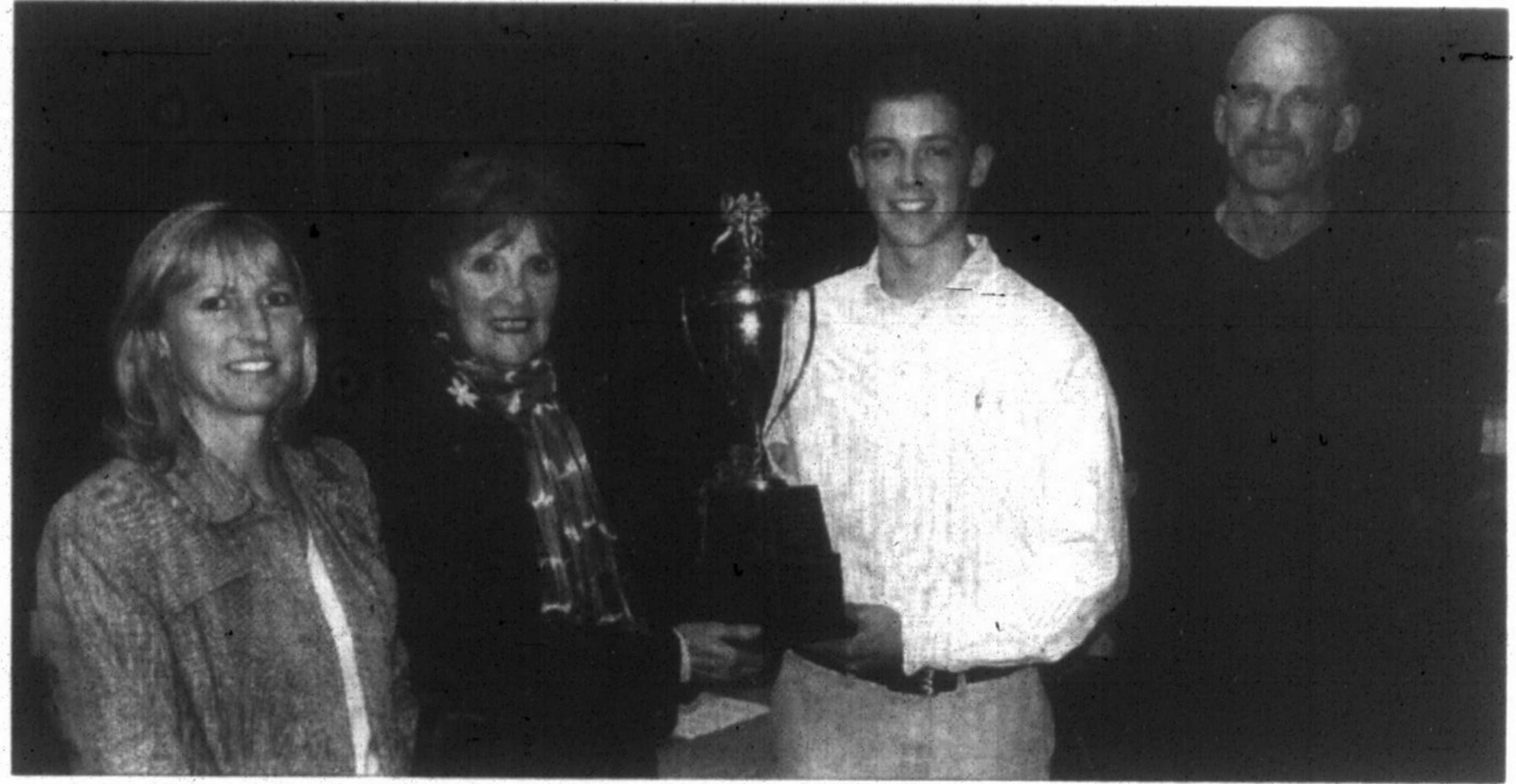
The last thing the 18-year-old Stouffville resident and member of the Stouffville Clippers midget team thought he would earn would be an award of that nature, which is presented to a player of bantam age or older who stands out due to leadership, sportsmanship and involvement in the community.

But the reality of it sunk in Thursday when the Whitchurch-Stouffville Minor Hockey Association conducted its annual general meeting that included the presentation of the award to McLeod.

A Grade 12 student at Stouffville District Secondary School, McLeod was to have played this past season in the association's house league and with the school's senior boys' team.

But when the school elected not to ice a squad, McLeod became an affiliated player with the Clippers midgets. He quickly established himself as an anchor on defence.

As the Clippers progressed through the Ontario Minor Hockey Association playdowns and into the Ontario Hockey Federation Championships, McLeod became a full-time player on the team.



STAFF PHOTO/JIM MASON

Cindy (from left) and Sheila McNeil present the Dan McNeil award to James McLeod as Joe Palma of the Whitchurch-Stouffville Minor Hockey Association looks on at Nineteen on the Park Thursday.

Don Easter, a minor hockey coach for 30 years, including this past season with the Clippers midget A entry, said he hasn't coached a more deserving player.

"James, despite his quiet, unassuming demeanor, is a natural leader on and off the ice," said Easter, who is the association's president.

He leads by example, demonstrating a work ethic in games and practices that would bring a smile

to any hockey coach. He's the player others look to and rally around when the going gets tough. He never takes a shift off.

McLeod said it ranks among the highlights of his minor hockey career that began in Stouffville when he was five years of age.

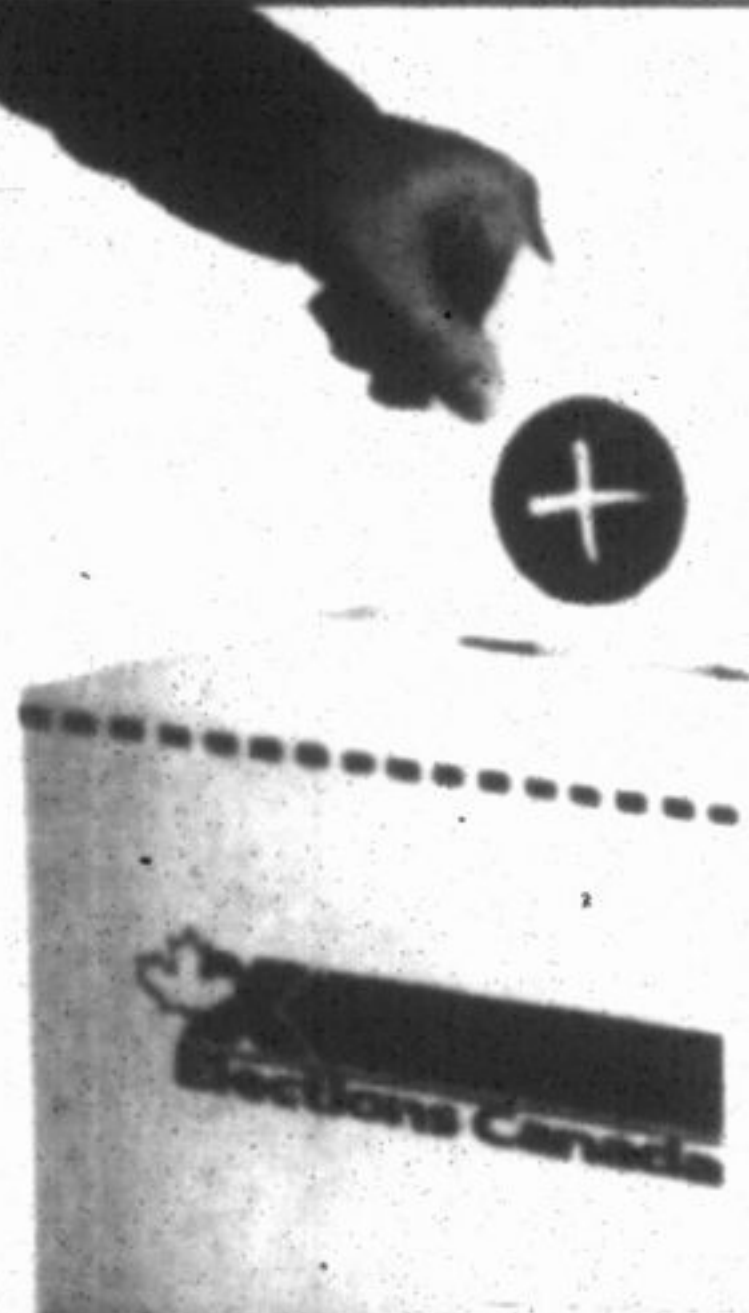
"It's not a team award like we won a title, but it's nice to be recognized," he said.

Also excelling in rugby and cross-

country running at Stouffville Secondary, McLeod plans on attending university next year.

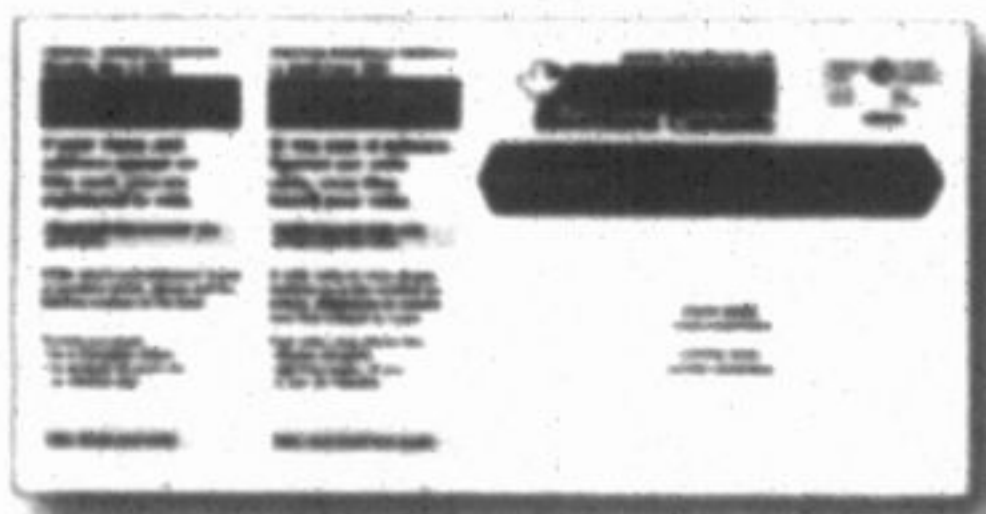
While undecided if he will continue to play hockey, McLeod hinted he might turn to coaching at the house league level.

Dan McNeil was a 19-year-old association graduate who died in a car crash in 1992 returning from a game with his new team, the Uxbridge Jr. C Bruins.



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