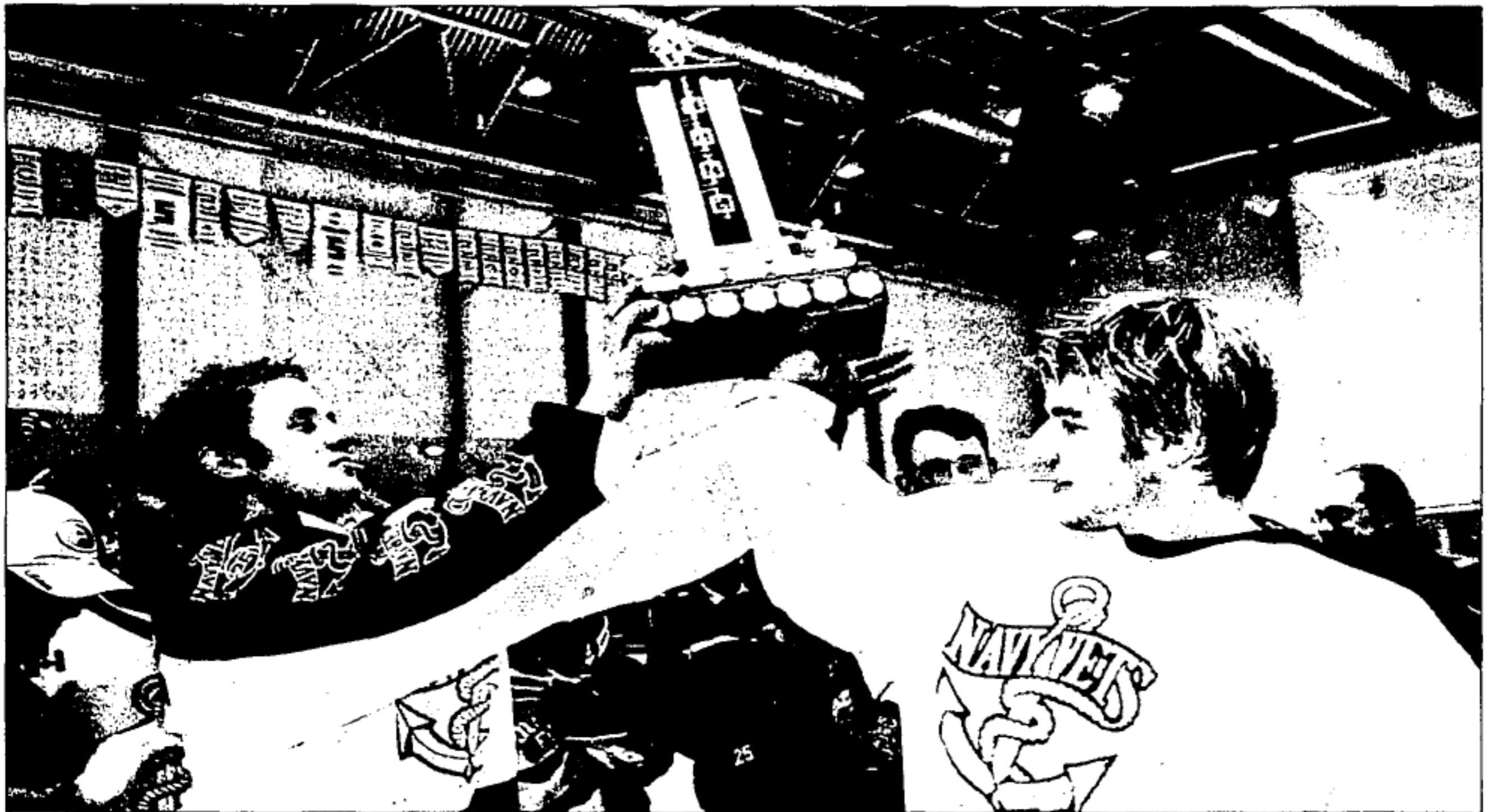


CHAMPIONS!



Woodstock **Navy Vets** Scott Roode (left) and Mike Matika (right) hoist their championship trophy after the team's 4-2 series win. Photo by Elliot Ferguson

Navy Vets win Niagara final in triple OT thriller

By Bruce Urquhart
SPORTS REPORTER

WOODSTOCK — After six periods of gut-wrenching hockey, it was the Chippawa RiverHawks who blinked first.

When Taylor Winkler rifled the puck to the top corner at 11:30 of the third overtime period, the Woodstock Navy Vets finished this marathon, winning the Niagara District Championship in front of 1,500 cheering fans.

Yes, the Woodstock **Navy Vets**, after a gritty, nerve-wracking 3-2 win, are the Niagara District Champions.

"Wow," said Woodstock coach Scott Brooks. "What can you say?"

After trailing early in this series, the **Navy Vets** won their last three games to capture the title. The **Vets** are now one of four teams still contending for the Ontario Hockey Association Championship.

By the third overtime period, the skaters were running on fumes. While the players were sluggish, exhausted by close to two hours of straight hockey, both Chippawa and Woodstock were intent on ending the 2-2 deadlock. Both teams had good scoring chances in the frame, but Woodstock's Mike Matika and Chippawa's Chad Collins continued their goaltending duel.

Midway through the frame, Winkler picked up a Brent Laur pass and snapped a hard shot past a shackled Collins to score the game winner.

"The kids were beat," said Brooks. "I was beat. Your nerves are gone to a frazzle."

The second overtime was physical, with both teams clutching and grabbing, trying to bog down the opposing rushes. There were plenty of scoring chances, but Matika and Collins were outstanding.

Woodstock's best chance in this frame came late, but a grounded Collins made a kick save on a Jeremy Demarest backhand. Matika was tested earlier, knocking aside a William Blake wrister.

"Both of the goalies just stood on their heads," said Brooks. "They were both unbelievable."

With the players still relatively fresh, the first overtime period was a frenzy.

The **Vets** began extra time with a two-man advantage, courtesy of late-game infractions by Chippawa's Dwayne Fryer and Jason Shawana. Chad Paton almost ended the game, snapping the puck high on Collins, but the Chippawa netminder made a game-saving stop, batting the puck down with his blocker.

Woodstock kept up the assault for the next few minutes, wanting to end this series, but Collins was a wall, blocking shots from Paton, Jamie Hough and Matt Carey.

With the extra frame winding down, Chippawa had its turn in Woodstock's ice, but Matika denied both Tim Velemirovich and Ken Groves.

Woodstock had a short-lived second-period lead. Velemirovich netted the equalizer early in the third. Setting up on their power play, Velemirovich one-timed a point-shot, cashing in a DeCarlo pass. Robert Orr also earned an assist on the goal.

The final regulation period was wide open after Velemirovich's tying goal. Both Woodstock and Chippawa exchanged chances. After a stretch of **Navy Vet** pressure, the RiverHawks would have a turn, shelling Matika with a barrage of shots. But both goalies were steady, sending this game into three periods of very tense overtime.

The RiverHawks played an intense second period, wanting to build a lead before the third. Chippawa had half a dozen solid scoring chances

from Velemirovich, DeCarlo and Matt Catherwood in this middle frame. Like in previous games, Woodstock was impeded by some undisciplined play in this period, resulting in unnecessary penalties.

Matika, however, wasn't keen on letting Chippawa build a lead. Matika was superb in the second frame, frustrating an increasingly desperate Chippawa offence. His finest moment may have been early in the second, when he weathered a Chippawa two-man advantage and made a spectacular save on DeCarlo then, still on his back, batted away the R.D. Lacroix rebound.

While the first period ended in a draw, Woodstock was the more aggressive team in the early going, testing Collins with some opening pressure. But Collins proved to be sharp in the first few minutes, keeping Paton and Demarest from netting the puck. The **Vets** continued to carry the play, however, benefiting from their stubborn forecheck.

But even with this pressure, it was the RiverHawks who opened the scoring, with Blake's clearing pass becoming a DeCarlo breakaway. DeCarlo, waiting at the Woodstock blue-line, managed to get a couple of steps on Woodstock defenceman Scott Roode, allowing the Chippawa winger to beat Matika with a backhand. Velemirovich also picked up an assist on the goal.

But the **Vets** didn't stay off the scoreboard for long. With Chippawa's Blair Egerter and Dwayne Fryer cooling in the penalty box, the Vets took full advantage of their two-man advantage. Matt Carey made the first pass, finding his brother Andrew waiting in the faceoff circle. Andrew Carey tapped the puck ahead to Paton, who flipped the puck top corner.