



ROCHESTER AMERICANS

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TONIGHT'S GAME: Charlotte @ Rochester

A season opener to forget for the Amerks
Pickin' Splinters
By: Kevin Oklobzija

They talked about how this would be the season they'd take the next step, and maybe a giant one at that.

They talked about the balance of experienced veterans and talented youth on defense. They talked about the depth of quality forwards. They talked about focus and pride and opportunity and potential.

This Rochester Americans team talked about how excited they were to start the new season.
It's too bad talk can't play.

After a build-up of excitement and promise through training camp and their abbreviated American Hockey League preseason, the Amerks played a dreadful season-opener on Friday night, losing 6-2 to the Charlotte Checkers.

"That's a good team over there," Amerks captain Kevin Porter said, "but we made them look like NHL All-Stars."

And they made Janne Kuokkanen look like Conner McDavid. The second-year center from Finland scored two goals and assisted on two others, setting up the tie-breaking goal in the final minute of the second period before scoring the back-breaking fourth goal 72 seconds into the third.

But it was more than just the turnover that led to the Nicolas Roy goal with 47 seconds left in the second period that gave Charlotte a 3-2 lead. And it was more than the defensive lapse that allowed Kuokkanen to slip behind defensemen Brendan Guhle and Will Borgen for the early third-period goal that created a 4-2 deficit and left Amerks coach Chris Taylor bewildered.

It was the all-around level of uninspired, not-so-smart play.

"I've never seen anything like it," Taylor said. "The turnovers . . . we didn't want to hit anybody . . . our 'D' jumping up out of nowhere . . . our forwards wouldn't back up our 'D.'"

Like father, like son. The parent Buffalo Sabres were booed off the ice at KeyBank Center on Thursday night in a 3-0 loss to the Boston Bruins. The 5,203 fans at Blue Cross Arena at the War Memorial weren't as ornery, but they were equally disgusted.

The players were too.

"I don't think our fans deserve that kind of showing on opening night," center Kyle Crisculo said. "Top to bottom we need to be better."

The transformation must happen overnight, too, since the Amerks and Checkers play again at 7:05 p.m. Saturday in downtown Rochester.

Just what needs to change? Funny you should ask.

"Everything; everything," Taylor said. "Our compete, our will, our structure, finishing bodies. Everything."

Taylor talked on Thursday about how his team needed to be better from the opening faceoff in Friday night home games. That was a major problem a year ago.

Nothing has changed. The Amerks fell behind 2-0 in the first period, allowing goals to Kuokkanen and Roland McKeown 35 seconds apart in the 13th minute.

The Amerks did tie the score in the second period. C.J. Smith played sniper just 32 seconds in, then defenseman Larry Pilut scored a power-play goal at 14:59 on a perfectly spotted wrister from the center point.

The rookie defenseman from Sweden showed some true jubilation after his first goal in North America.

"It was nice to score but it would have been even nicer to get a win," Pilut said. "Now that goal means nothing."

Amerks thumped 6-2 by Charlotte in season opener

Rochester First

By: Staff Report

The Rochester Americans (0-1-0-0) opened their 63rd American Hockey League season and 37th as the primary affiliate of the Buffalo Sabres Friday night at The Blue Cross Arena, but it was the Charlotte Checkers (1-0-0-0) who earned a 6-2 victory in the first game of the 2018-19 campaign.

Rookie forward Lawrence Pilut made an immediate impact in his North American debut, leading led Rochester with a goal and an assist for a two-point night. Second-year forward and reigning Rookie of the Year C.J. Smith netted the other goal during the second period. Goaltender Scott Wedgewood, who also made his Rochester debut, made 33 saves.

Janne Kuokkanen had a game-high four points (2+2) for Charlotte, while Nicolas Roy (2+1), Andrew Poturalski (1+2) and Spencer Smallman (0+2) all turned in multi-point efforts. Roland McKeown rounded out the scoring while netminder Alex Nedeljkovic stopped 22 of 24 shots he faced to record his first win of the campaign.

The Checkers, who led the AHL in scoring last season, tallied a pair of goals 35 seconds apart during the first stanza and took a 2-0 lead into the intermission break.

Rochester, however, came out in the middle frame and Smith trimmed the lead to one as he ripped a shot over the glove just 32 seconds into the period. Pilut and Kyle Criscuolo teamed up to spring the Des Moines, Iowa, native into the offensive zone with Pilut recording his first AHL point on the marker.

Rochester drew its second power-play less than five minutes later and Pilut evened the game with his first AHL goal just 10 seconds into the infraction.

"Kevin Porter won the face-off back to me," said Pilut. "I waited it out to find a lane, then I saw one and shot the puck. Luckily for me, I had a screen in front and it when into the net."

Porter and Victor Olofsson, who also made his Amerk debut, each were awarded the helpers.

Charlotte, though, was quick to regain the lead with just 46 seconds left in the frame and took a 3-2 lead after 40 minutes of play.

"Any time you get scored on in the final minute of a period is tough," said Criscuolo. "No matter the game it's never easy, but we just have to look at the film and compete on every shift from top to bottom."

The Checkers silenced any thought of an Amerks comeback as they scored three goals during the first-half of the final frame and made it a 6-2 contest.

"We were not ready to play and it's on me and the leadership team," Porter said. "We dug ourselves a hole and we were able to battle back but credit them. They are a good team, but we made them look like NHL All-Stars tonight."

"It's disappointing," Amerks head coach Chris Taylor said. "It was disappointing how we started the game, but the only bright spot was Wedgewood all night."

Rochester had eight players make their Amerks debut, four of which made their AHL debuts.

The Amerks continue their three-game homestand to begin the 2018-19 season with a rematch against the Checkers on Saturday, Oct. 6 at The Blue Cross Arena. Game time is slated for a 7:05 p.m. start.

Amerks lose home opener to Charlotte
C&C WorldWide
By: Craig Potter

For a team entering the season with the high expectations that the Rochester Americans have, i.e. General Manager Randy Sexton feels with the talent here the team can win the Calder Cup, the Amerks did not perform up to that expectation in the 6-2 loss to the Charlotte Checkers on Friday night before 5,203 fans at the Blue Cross Arena.

"That's a good team over there," said Amerks captain Kevin Porter, "but we made them look like NHL All-Stars."

"I've never seen anything like it," said Amerks coach Chris Taylor. "The turnovers . . . we didn't want to hit anybody . . . our 'D' jumping up out of nowhere . . . our forwards wouldn't back up our 'D.'"

"It was totally out of character for our team and what kind of structure we teach them. Our defense was jumping into the play, but our forwards wouldn't back up our D. We had no one on our blue line and we were all trying to play offense. It wasn't a good night.

However, there was one ray of sunshine, goalie Scott Wedgewood made 33 saves.

"The disappointing part was how we came out and started the game. The one bright spot was Wedgewood," Taylor said.

Despite giving up the 6 goals, it was not all Wedgewood's fault which is why Taylor kept him in the game.

The Amerks battled back from a 2-0 deficit to knot the count 2-2 in the second on a power play tally from C.J. Smith, who was last season's Amerks' Rookie of the Year, and Swedish rookie Larry Pilut scored his first career AHL goal.

"It was nice to score but it would have been even nicer to get a win," said Pilut. "Now that goal means nothing."

However, Rochester turned the puck over in the final minute of the stanza for a 2-on-1 which the Checkers converted to take the lead for good. They doubled their output in the third period for the final score.

"Every time we chipped the puck behind their guys, I thought we did a good job," Taylor said. "We got the forecheck . . . We had a lot of good chances but a lot of time we had turnovers. We didn't want to hit anybody, we were weak in our own zone. We gave up a lot of 2-on-1s, 3-on-1s. It's just uncharacteristic for our team."

The Amerks fans, however, were not as disgusted as the fans in Buffalo who booed the Sabres off the rink following a 3-0 loss to the Boston Bruins Thursday night in Buffalo.

At least the Amerks fans did not boo, this night. The players were equally disappointed with their performance as well.

"I don't think our fans deserve that kind of showing on opening night," center Kyle Criscuolo said. "Top to bottom we need to be better."

When Taylor was asked, 'What needs to be change for (Saturday) night?' He responded, "Everything; everything. Our compete, our will, our structure, finishing bodies. Everything."

**NOTES* — The Amerks opened their 63rd AHL season, the 37th as the primary affiliate of the Buffalo Sabres...The loss dropped the Rochester's all-time home-opening record to 38-19-6, and season-opening record to 32-24-7 all-time...The Amerks return 3 of their Top 5 scorers from last season — Zach Redmond, Kevin Porter, and C.J. Smith...Larry Pilut, Rasmus Asplund, and Victor Olofsson all made their North American debut after playing professionally a year ago in Sweden. Pilut led the Swedish Hockey League defensemen in scoring with 38 points and was named the SHL Defenseman of the Year...The two teams go at it again Saturday night at the BCA with a 7:05 pm faceoff.

Smith, Pilut score as Americans fall in season opener

Buffalo News

By: Staff Report

The Rochester Americans mimicked their parent club, dropping their season opener Friday night. The Amerks, playing in their 63rd season, fell 6-2 to the Charlotte Checkers at Blue Cross Arena.

Charlotte went up 2-0 after the first period, but C.J. Smith responded with the first goal for Rochester, a transition wrist shot from the left dot, to cut the Checkers' lead to 2-1 in the second.

Lawrence Pilut, playing in his first North American game, tied the score with just over five minutes remaining in the middle frame.

The tie didn't last long, as Nicolas Roy scored in the final minute of the second.

His tally kicked off a four-goal run for Charlotte, including scores by Jaane Kuokkanan, Williamsville native and Nichols grad Andrew Poturalski and two by Roy.

Familiar face: Friday was the Checkers debut of former Sabres prospect Cliff Pu, who was jettisoned to the Hurricanes organization as part of the Jeff Skinner trade. He didn't record a point or a shot on goal but did finish as a plus-one.

Breaking the mold: The loss pushes Rochester to 38-19-6 all-time in openers.

Up Next: These two teams will meet once again Saturday at 7:05 p.m., the second game of Rochester's season-opening three-game homestand. The stretch concludes on Wednesday against the Syracuse Crunch.

Amerks Nylander out to put finishing touches on AHL apprenticeship
Democratic & Chronicle
By: Leo Roth

Alexander Nylander did all he could to make the 2018-19 roster of the Buffalo Sabres.

He put the work in during the summer, eating right, living in the weight room.

He stood out during the Sabres' prospects camp, then followed that up by leading the team in scoring during the preseason with one goal, five assists and an even plus-minus rating in three games.

He skated, he checked, he made things happen.

And then . . . got sent down to the Rochester Americans for a third time in three seasons, ever since the Sabres made the youngest son of longtime NHLer and former Amerk Michael Nylander the No. 8 overall pick in the 2016 NHL Draft.

Yes, life isn't fair.

But Alex Nylander learned long ago it's not about getting knocked down that matters, it's about getting back up.

"I had a really good summer and I feel I had a really good camp, but now I have to build off of that, get better here every day and play as good as I can and maybe be the first one they call up," said Nylander, who leads the Amerks against the Charlotte Checkers in their American Hockey League season opener Friday night at 7:05 at Blue Cross Arena.

"I feel I had a good camp but it's not something I can do anything about. I can continue to play well here."

The Sabres fully expect he will and will be keeping close tabs.

Amerks coach Chris Taylor and his staff have been entrusted with seven Buffalo draft picks, including second-rounders Justin Bailey (2013), Eric Cornel (2014), Brendan Guhle (2015) and Rasmus Asplund (2016).

And while any prospect from anywhere — former RIT star Myles Powell made Rochester's roster as a free agent — can become the next "big thing," it's Nylander who will draw the most attention and scrutiny by virtue of his first-round draft status.

Reassigning him to the Amerks wasn't something Buffalo general manager Jason Botterill and coach Phil Housley took lightly, but the decision did make sense. With forward depth much improved, why have Nylander wait for playing minutes on the Sabres' fourth line when he can gobble them up on the Amerks' first line?

"We had a very positive meeting with Alex prior to assigning him here," said Amerks general manager Randy Sexton, as he watched practice. "We recognize the great body of work he did prior to this season to get ready, we recognize the outstanding rookie tournament and camp he had.

There are a few things we'd like him to work on; we love the skill, where his game is at. And I'll tell you, this last 90-minute practice he was flying so it tells me he came down here with a positive attitude and he's ready to work."

Nylander confirmed that his attitude is where it needs to be, not that it's easy.

Tage Thompson, a 6-6 center and the No. 26 pick in the 2016 draft, did make the Sabres' roster after being obtained from the St. Louis Blues in the Ryan O'Reilly trade.

"It's a chance to get my game even better," Nylander reasoned. "I know I can dominate in this league, it's matter of working hard every day."

Nobody has questioned Nylander's talent, it's making that talent work on a consistent basis and not being a liability defensively.

After accumulating 28 points in 65 games as a rookie, he played just 51 games last season while dealing with a leg injury, scoring 8-19-27. He failed to score in the playoffs as the Amerks were swept in three games by the Syracuse Crunch.

On a positive note, Nylander improved his plus-minus from minus-24 to a plus-3. At 6-1, 196 pounds, Nylander's body has caught up to his skill.

"Getting stronger and bigger and I feel even faster now," he said. "I went into camp with a lot of confidence, now I just have to build off that."

Of the Class of 2016's Top 10 picks, only Nylander and Vancouver's Oli Jvolevi (No. 5 overall) have yet to earn a full-time NHL roster spot and make an impact.

Toronto's Auston Matthews (134 points in 145 games) and Winnipeg's Patrik Laine (134 points in 155 games), who went 1-2, were instant stars. Calgary's Matt Tkachuk (98 in 145) also made an impact his NHL draft year.

But almost everyone else taken in the Top 10 went back to their junior or college team for a year before becoming established NHLers last season.

Edmonton's Jesse Puljujarvi, who played 28 NHL games in 2016, and Nylander, were two players who did the rare feat of playing in the AHL as 18-year-old rookies. Developing against much older players isn't an easy road.

Nylander's goal is to be with the Sabres sooner rather than later, but he's not staring at a calendar and marking off his days in hockey purgatory. He's here to help the Amerks win, because if the team wins, and he's a big reason, the sooner he gets that phone call.

"We have a lot of new faces like last year but also guys who have come back. I feel we have really good team," he said. "Coming down here it felt good. We were happy to make the playoffs but obviously we want to go further and win the Cup. We have to keep going and build off what we did last year."

Eight points to ponder as Rochester Amerks start season

Pickin' Splinters

By: Kevin Oklobzija

The 91 points earned by the Rochester Americans last season looked good on the stat sheet and even in the American Hockey League standings.

But in reality, it's difficult to consider the season a success. The talk had been about rebuilding the stature of what once was a cornerstone AHL franchise. And while progress was made in restoring pride in the Amerks crest, the season ended in a first-round playoffs sweep.

"That just raises our expectations to the season," third-year defenseman Brendan Guhle said. "We're going in with the mindset to go a lot deeper."

Here are eight points to ponder as the Amerks head into Friday's 7:05 p.m. season opener against the Charlotte Checkers.

The defense appears to be stacked

If defense wins, then the Amerks will be just fine. There's a perfect mix of experience with Zack Redmond, Taylor Fedun, Nathan Paetsch and Andrew MacWilliam, and young prospects in Guhle, Jack Dougherty and rookies Will Borgen, Brandon Hickey and Lawrence Pilut.

In some ways, it's a trip back in time to when the Amerks defense always had that mix of talented veterans and NHL prospects (think 1999-2000 Mike Hurlbut and Doug Houda alongside Brian Campbell, Dmitri Kalinin and Jean-Luc Grand-Pierre).

Amerks coach Chris Taylor can certainly draw parallels because he played on those perennial playoff powers of the late 1990s and into the 2000s.

"That's what you need to groom those young defensemen," Taylor said. "But it's not just the experience back there, it's the youth; Dougherty and Borgen and Pilut."

Who's stopping the puck?

The Amerks believe it usually will be Scott Wedgewood, with Adam Wilcox again serving as the backup. Linus Ullmark, the mainstay in goal the past two seasons, has graduated to the parent Buffalo Sabres.

Wedgewood is starting his seventh pro season and is intent on re-establishing himself as a goalie with NHL skills. He missed most of 2016-17 with a shoulder injury and last season was traded twice and never really felt at home anywhere.

The Sabres signed him on the first day of free agency, an indication they believe in his ability.

Who's going to score goals?

This won't necessarily be a goals-by-committee approach. Left winger C.J. Smith will build on a very good rookie season, when he produced 17-27-44 in 57 games, and center Danny O'Regan needs to rebound from a so-so sophomore season.

Right winger Justin Bailey has 30-plus goal potential. He certainly didn't plan to be starting his fourth season in the AHL, but if he's going to play in the NHL, then he needs to dominate here.

The top rookie to watch

Baseball fans love the home-run hitters and hockey fans love the goal-scorers. Which means left winger Victor Olofsson should be pretty popular.

Olofsson piled up 27 goals in 50 Swedish Hockey League games, best in the league and the highest total in the SHL in three years.

He has the advantage of experience, since he's coming to North America at age 23.

"We expect the same thing," Taylor said. "We expect a little bit of adjustment but that shouldn't take away from his goal-scoring. And he's a really good passer."

Does Alex Nylander emerge as a legitimate prospect?

He'd better, because this is Year No. 3 for the player chosen eighth overall in 2016. He scored 8-19-27 in 51 games last year after 10-10-18-28 in 65 games as a rookie.

The thing is, the organization isn't saying it's make-or-break time. Nylander is still just 20. While his brother, William, was playing NHL games at age 19, there is no chart that says every player matures at the same rate.

He has dominated against his age all throughout his career, so there is a school of thought that says he'll be just fine in time.

"Everybody's their own person," Taylor said. "You can't judge on siblings or on this guy or that guy. Every individual is different."

A large leadership group

Taylor named 32-year-old Kevin Porter, an 11th-year veteran, his captain again. But instead of two players wearing the "A" as alternate captain, he named five, opting to rotate the A's among Redmond, Fedun, MacWilliam, Paetsch and center Kyle Crisuolo.

Will the Amerks be better on Fridays?

Taylor hopes so, because the team was pretty awful in a lot of Friday first periods on home ice a year ago. They often found themselves trailing by two or three goals.

Taylor said he had his team practicing harder early in the week, then tapered toward Friday. "I'm kind of going the other way on that this year," he said.

New at the arena

A video board with a screen that is 10 feet high and 16 feet wide. It's the same board that is used in nine NHL arenas.

Delaware North has replaced the SMG subsidiary as the concessionaire.

Fans to all events in the arena will be subject to search wand upon entry.

The glass partition the separated the ticket windows from the lower concourse has been removed, opening up the lobby somewhat.

Amerks announce team captain for 2018-19 season

WHEC

By: Staff Report

The Rochester Americans announced Thursday that veteran forward Kevin Porter has been named team captain for the 2018-19 season. Additionally, the team will rotate among forward Kyle Criscuolo and defensemen Taylor Fedun, Andrew MacWilliam, Nathan Paetsch and Zach Redmond as the five assistant captains throughout the course of the season.

Porter will serve as the Amerks captain for the second consecutive season and third time in his 11-year career. Last season, Porter, who also captained the Amerks during the 2012-13 campaign, finished second on the team with 17 goals and fourth in points while leading Rochester to its first playoff berth in four years. The Detroit, Mich., native has amassed 122 points (51+71) over 164 career games with the Amerks and has added eight points (1+7) in eight playoff appearances for Rochester.

"It's a huge honor," said Porter. "This is a great organization and to be the captain is pretty exciting. We have a great group of guys and anyone of them could have been the captain. I'm honored to be picked by the coaching staff."

"We have a great group of guys here and as a staff we couldn't just name just two alternates," said Amerks head coach Chris Taylor. "By committee, they will run the locker room the way it should be."

Rochester opens its 63rd American Hockey League season at home on Friday, Oct. 5 against the Charlotte Checkers at The Blue Cross Arena. Amerks 2018-19 Season Ticket Memberships, which start as low as just \$12 per game, are on-sale now. Full-season ticket member benefits include, but are not limited to, Riverside Club VIP Room access with Amerks Alumni, family meet and greet and annual Skate with the Players event, an exclusive preseason Ice Breaker Party and Chalk Talk with the Amerks coaching staff, your very own Season Ticket Member ID and Discount Card and much more. For more information, visit www.amerks.com/seasontickets or call 1-855-GO-AMERKS.

Kevin Porter named captain of Rochester Americans for third time

Buffalo News

By: Staff Report

Veteran Kevin Porter will serve as captain of the Rochester Americans for the second consecutive season and the third time in his 11-year career., the team announced Thursday.

Porter, who also was captain in 2012-13, had 17 goals last season as the Amerks earned their first playoff appearance in four years.

"It's a huge honor," Porter said in a statement released by the team. "This is a great organization and to be the captain is pretty exciting. We have a great group of guys and anyone of them could have been the captain. I'm honored to be picked by the coaching staff."

Rather than two assistant captains, the team will rotate among five players: forward Kyle Criscuolo and defensemen Taylor Fedun, Andrew MacWilliam, Nathan Paetsch and Zach Redmond.

"We have a great group of guys here and as a staff we couldn't just name just two alternates," said Amerks head coach Chris Taylor. "By committee, they will run the locker room the way it should be."

The Amerks also announced their roster for Friday's season opener against Charlotte at 7 p.m. at the Blue Cross Arena in Rochester.

Forwards (15): Rasmus Asplund, Justin Bailey, Eric Cornel, Kyle Criscuolo, Alexander Nylander, Danny O'Regan, Andrew Oglevie, Victor Olofsson, Kevin Porter, Myles Powell, Tyler Randell, Wayne Simpson, C.J. Smith, Dalton Smith and Yannick Veilleux.

Defensemen (9): Will Borgen, Jack Dougherty, Taylor Fedun, Brendan Guhle, Brandon Hickey, Andrew MacWilliam, Nathan Paetsch, Lawrence Pilut and Zach Redmond.

Goaltenders (2): Scott Wedgewood and Adam Wilcox.

Will Amerks contend with Nylander on Rochester roster?

Spectrum News

By: Staff Report

The Rochester Amerks will look to build on last year's success, when they finished third in the AHL's North Division with a 37-22-record. The Amerks open the regular season on Friday and former top Sabres pick Alexander Nylander is back with the team.

His return to Rochester a bit of a surprise since he played well during the Sabres preseason.

"I think I had a really good camp," Nylander said. "It's their decision and there's nothing I can do about it. I just need to get playing here and play well. I felt great. I had a really good summer and I had a really good camp, so I just need to build off that, get better here every day and play as good as I can and hopefully — I'm obviously trying to be the first one for them to call up."

Forward Justin Bailey is beginning his fourth season in Rochester and once again he'll be expected to produce offensively.

Obviously disappointed with not making the Sabres, Bailey also dealing with the trade of teammate and close friend Nick Baptiste: The forward was traded to Nashville on Monday.

"Obviously it's tough to see him go," Bailey said. "We were hanging out yesterday when he got the call. It kind of came out of nowhere but at the same time I think it's a great opportunity for him. A change of scenery is sometimes the best thing for you."

"I'm happy for Nick to find a new start for himself," said Chris Taylor, Amerks Head Coach. "He's a great kid and we're going to miss him and obviously it's one of our guys and one of our family members that's leaving. He was a big part of our team last year and a big part of the organization for a lot of years."

Sabres got defenseman Jack Dougherty from the trade with Nashville — he's expected to join the Amerks this week before the team hosts the Charlotte Checkers for the season opener at the Blue Cross Arena Friday at 7 p.m.

And there's a lot to look forward for those attending Friday night's season opener. The team is having a special two-hour Party on the Patio, presented by Genesee Brew House, from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. before the puck drops. The riverside event will feature live music from Big Eyed Phish and \$2 drafts of Genesee and Genesee Light. Fans will also have the chance to win some prizes, including a set of custom-made Amerks cornhole boards autographed by this year's team.

Simply making playoffs isn't enough for Amerks this year

Democrat & Chronicle

By: Leo Roth

Rochester Americans general manager Randy Sexton called it a "top-down, bottom-up approach."

In Buffalo, the parent Sabres provide the resources. In Rochester, the Amerks provide the environment for developing successful players who will one day help the Sabres be successful.

Year 1 of the Great Culture Change put in place by new general managers Jason Botterill in Buffalo and Sexton in Rochester — two men who once worked magic for the Stanley Cup champion Pittsburgh Penguins — bore quick fruit: a playoff berth for the Amerks, their first in three seasons.

However, a quick three-game sweep at the hands of the Syracuse Crunch, coupled with the Sabres' playoff drought hitting seven years with yet another last-place finish in the NHL, showed just how extensive this organizational rebuilding project would be.

"Playoffs was one of our goals and we wanted to go deeper, so we didn't achieve that goal," Sexton said. "But in terms of changing the culture, putting in place the standards we believe are critical for sustainable-success, and getting the right people here, no doubt we felt it was a successful season."

It means that when the puck drops for the Amerks' 63rd American Hockey League season Friday against the Charlotte Checkers at Blue Cross Arena, the bar will be set higher.

The last of Rochester's six Calder Cups came 22 years ago, its last playoff series win was 13 years ago.

But last season's 24-point jump in the standings under rookie coach Chris Taylor, the retention of 14 players off that team, the addition of a handful of AHL free agents, and seven rookies, three of them strong Sabres' prospects, gives everyone reason to believe a legitimate run at a title is possible.

"Regular-season success is one measure of your model, but playoff success is a more accurate measure of your model and how it's working," Sexton said. "Part of development is playing in tough games, tough series, the grind of pressure-packed games, the big crowds. That's part of development. And it's no secret part of our strategy is to build the right culture in Rochester and when players flow up to Buffalo, they take that winning culture with them."

Taylor, the Amerks Hall of Fame player, has been entrusted to nurture a crop of Sabres' draft picks that include first-rounder Alex Nylander, the No. 8 overall pick in 2016, and second-rounders Justin Bailey (2013), Eric Cornel (2014), Brendan Guhle (2015) and Rasmus Asplund (2016).

But he has help.

The veteran corps Sexton and Botterill handed him includes Nathan Paetsch, Zach Redmond (team-leading 47 points), Taylor Fedun and Andrew MacWilliam, which will form the backbone of a deep defensive corps, along with ageless center Kevin Porter, who keeps churning along in his 13th pro season. Porter had 17 goals and 25 assists last season.

The Amerks lost some goal-scoring but do get back team Rookie of the Year C.J. Smith, who finished with 17 goals and 27 assists, and Kyle Criscuolo (15-19 – 34).

A lot will be expected of Nylander (18 goals in two seasons) and Bailey (53 goals in three seasons) early before the inevitable recalls kick in. Nylander and Bailey each made a strong bid to stick with the Sabres full-time.

Veteran free agent forwards Wayne Simpson, Tyler Randell and Yannick Veilleux add size to the lineup when a physical style is called upon. The Amerks were also anticipating the addition of 22-year-old defenseman Jack Dougherty, a former second-round selection, obtained in a trade with Nashville for Nick Baptiste.

Linus Ullmark, a workhorse in net for three seasons in Rochester, earned his long-expected NHL roster spot in Buffalo. But consummate pro Adam Wilcox and free agent Scott Wedgewood, who played 20 NHL games last year with Arizona, figure to form a strong battery.

"There was a reason why we brought these guys back, the leaders they were in the dressing room and on the ice, and we've got some young guys coming in, some second- and third-year guys," Taylor said. "I think we have a good mix. You never know until we actually step on the ice Friday and see how we do. But right now, I'm excited and I know our fans should be excited."

In preseason play, the Amerks beat the Crunch 4-1 and split two games with the defending Calder Cup champ Toronto Marlies.

Bailey, who starts his fourth pro season in Rochester, said experiencing the playoffs last year forced him to raise his game to another level and looks forward to doing it again.

"That playoff series was fast-paced and very physical," said Bailey, who scored two goals. "For me, I kind of made that decision to play fast and physical and finish off my hits. They were definitely dishing it out, and I ended up having a good playoff."

As for a change in culture, Bailey said he felt it like one of those checks dished out by the Crunch.

"You create a culture by the type of people you bring in," Bailey said. "Chris Taylor is a super positive guy whether we're winning or losing, and that trickles down to our leadership group, the young guys and the guys in the middle. We stressed in meetings that everyone is here for a reason, every guy is a character guy, a good person and I think that translates to the ice."

The super-skilled Guhle, a second-round pick in the Connor McDavid-Jack Eichel year, established himself as a player to watch last season with 26 points in 50 games in Rochester. He also appeared in 18 games for Buffalo, picking up five assists.

"It's a blessing in disguise, a chance to work on my game some more, hopefully get some wins," said Guhle when asked about returning to Rochester.

"We definitely think we have a championship team in there (the locker room), a lot of skill, a nice mix of older and younger guys, veterans to lead the way. We feel we can play any style and we've set a high standard for us this year."

As for Taylor, who will be assisted by Gord Dineen and Toby Petersen again, nobody knows the storied history of the franchise better than he. He helped write it. And now that fans have tasted the playoffs again, Taylor welcomes the fact expectations have been raised.

"There's always pressure, always nerves," he said. "I'll be nervous Friday. I want to get off to a good start, I want the players to get off to a good start, I want this organization to get off to a good start. I care deeply about it, what's in Rochester with our fans and how much they care about this team. It's like when I played. I'll be nervous but they're good nerves."