



ROCHESTER AMERICANS

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Tonight's Game: Belleville @ Rochester

Gionta thanks Amerks teammates before heading to South Korea

Rochester First

By: Thad Brown

For the last time, maybe ever, Brian Gionta practiced with the Amerks on Tuesday.

He'll be on a plane to South Korea on Wednesday and walking in the opening ceremonies on Friday.

On Tuesday morning, he said goodbye, and thank you, to his Amerks teammates.

Gionta had a big worry for this morning's practice.

"Just trying to get through practice without taking a shot in the ankle or something like that. Just praying I got through the last practice."

Gionta concluded his four months of practice with the Amerks without disaster, and he made sure to shake the hand of every Rochester teammate.

"These guys have been great all along. You grow close to them even though you're just practicing with them. You're around them every day. You form a bond with these guys. Obviously, it's a little bittersweet."

The same could be said about Gionta's game with the Amerks Friday. He was bitter they lost, but scoring a goal in front of nearly 10,000 and hearing the USA chant, was very sweet.

"The building was crazy. Obviously, it was a packed house. To score, the place went crazy. For sure, the chant gave me chills. You're on the ice and people are chanting, it just gives you chills. It was pretty special."

Gionta missed the opening ceremonies when he went to the Olympics in 2006, but not this time. And even better, he's the nominee among both hockey teams to carry the flag and lead Team USA

"I won't know right until before. If that were to happen, it would be pretty cool. Carrying the flag in for the opening ceremonies would be pretty special. It's something I haven't been a part of and to go to that level of it would be pretty cool."

Gionta left the door open to an Amerks return after the Olympics, but for now his full attention is on South Korea.

"Just want to get over there and get going on it. It's been a long anticipation on this whole thing. So hopefully just get over there and get settled."

Brian Gionta came to skate and Amerks fans embraced the U.S. captain

Democrat & Chronicle

By: Andy Lipari

It's fitting that one of Rochester's most accomplished professional hockey players would come back to play on a night dedicated to "Hometown Heroes."

Greece native Brian Gionta suited up for the Amerks as a tune up before he captains the men's Olympic team in the Olympics next week.

Gionta didn't disappoint the 9,836 fans at the Blue Cross Arena at the Community War Memorial, adding his name to the scoring list with a goal 12:26 into the second period.

Gionta's boost wasn't quite enough for the Amerks to overcome the first-place Toronto Marlies as Toronto soured the night with a 4-2 victory.

After Gionta scored, the crowd went into a U-S-A, U-S-A chant, in honor of the U.S. captain.

"I knew it was going to be a good night, a special night when something like that happens," Gionta said. "It was a fun moment for sure and the building was alive tonight."

The 39-year-old Gionta has accomplished a lot his hockey career, from an NCAA championship with Boston College, to a Stanley Cup title with the New Jersey Devils in 2003. He'll try to add a gold medal to his resume starting next week in PyeongChang, South Korea.

Gionta has practiced with the Amerks all year. He said multiple times how much he appreciates what the organization has done for him as he prepared for the Olympics, and Gionta is ready for the tournament.

"When you're playing with good players it makes things easier but I felt pretty good," Gionta said. "I felt great all along, if I didn't get a game I still would have felt good. But it's good to get that out of the way and be a part of the game again."

The Amerks (25-11-5-5) are happy to have Gionta around. Head coach Chris Taylor gave a lot of credit to Gionta for the team's success this season.

"This whole organization acknowledges what he's done for us, what he's done for the young guys, what he's done for the coaching staff, the trainers, everything," said Taylor. "We're fortunate to have him."

"We wanted to thank him for what he's done for us. I don't know if we would be in this position if it wasn't for him. We've had a good year so far and a large part of it has got to do with him. He's one of those guys that brings a great atmosphere to the rink, brings knowledge and brings how to be a pro."

Gionta has played in 1,006 NHL games with the Devils, Montreal Canadiens and Buffalo Sabres over a 16-year career, recording 588 points on 289 goals and 299 assists. Gionta has played nearly a year and a half in playoff games, with 68 points (32g, 36a) in 112 career postseason appearances.

Gionta, who is a free agent, could be a great veteran presence for a team making a Stanley Cup run this spring. If the NHL doesn't come calling after the Olympics, don't rule out the possibility of Friday being the first game as an Amerk for Gionta ... not the last.

"I've left all my options open and these guys have been great," Gionta said. "I'm going over there to concentrate on the Olympics and we'll see from there what opens up. There will be some decisions made for sure."

Gionta always has a team and a city that will welcome him back if he needs a place to skate.

Amerks send Captain America to Olympics in style

Spectrum News

By: Staff Report

39-year old Greece native Brian Gionta helped draw nearly 10,000 fans to the Blue Cross Arena and scored a goal that brought the house down in a 4-2 loss to Toronto.

Playing on a line with Alex Nylander and Kevin Porter, Gionta gave the Amerks a 2-1 lead in the second as Porter sent him on a breakaway. The veteran calmly switched to the backhand and buried it for his first Amerks goal. The Amerks partisan started chanting USA, sending an electricity through the building.

Arvin Atwal scored his first Amerks goal 49 seconds before Gionta's goal to tie game, the Marlies scoring the last three.

Gionta will captain Team USA in the Olympics which start next weekend in Korea.

Gionta's Olympic tune-up with the Amerks gold-medal worthy *Pickin' Splinters*

By: Kevin Oklobzija

Before he skates onto the Olympic stage in South Korea next weekend, Brian Gionta played a little Rochester Americans hockey — Hollywood style — on Friday night.

Billed long ago as Hometown Heroes Night, this was a movie script game to be sure. Gionta's cameo appearance merely accentuated the promotion which honored local members of law enforcement, fire fighters and military personnel.

A crowd of 9,836 fans jammed into a toasty War Memorial on this frigid mid-winter Friday, cheering for the Amerks. They were rooting even louder for Gionta, unleashing an impromptu "USA! USA!" chant or two along the way. It was the largest crowd for an Amerks game in downtown Rochester since April 17, 2015 (10,641).

Many fans, of course, wore Amerks sweaters. Many others wore Gionta sweaters. The Gionta 14 he wore for seven seasons with the New Jersey Devils. The Gionta 21 he wore for five years with the Montreal Canadiens. The Gionta 12 he donned the previous three seasons with the Buffalo Sabres.

"I knew it was going to be a special night," Gionta admitted afterward. "I just wish there had been a little better outcome."

Indeed, the 4-2 loss to the Toronto Marlies derailed the Amerks (25-11-5-5) drive toward the top spot in the AHL's North Division. They now trail by seven points, with the Marlies (33-11-0-1) once again stamping themselves as the class of the Eastern Conference.

"They're a good hockey team," Amerks captain Kevin Porter said. "We're right there with them but we're just making mistakes that are costing us."

The Amerks could have used the victory; losing to the Marlies is getting real old for them. Gionta certainly did his part to help them win in his final — make that only — tune-up before the PyeongChang Winter Games. He'll be Captain America for the Americans team.

On Friday night he displayed the speed he's always had. He was on the puck. He showed that veteran guile in one-on-one battles. He gave Marlies goalie Garret Sparks fits on occasion with a net-front presence.

And Gionta scored a breakaway goal in the second period that sent the YouTube channel of the brain into search mode for the breakaway goals he scored on NHL ice for the Devils and Canadiens and Sabres.

For a guy who has only been practicing with the Amerks since October, whose only games of the season came during a weekend in November in Germany with the basic design of the U.S. Olympic team's roster, the 39-year-old Greece native looked more than ready to play.

"I've felt good all along," he said. "If I didn't get a game in, I would have been fine. But to be able to play was even better."

The parent Sabres gave Gionta the chance to play for the Amerks out of courtesy and as a thank-you. They want to see him and Team USA do well in the Olympics.

But they also wanted to make sure he knew they appreciated all the little things he has done as a practice player.

"I don't know if we'd be in this position if it weren't for him," Amerks coach Chris Taylor said. "He brings knowledge, he brings how to be a pro."

"For me, he's been huge and this organization acknowledges what he's done for us, for the young players, for the coaching staff, for the training staff, for everyone. We're so fortunate to have him."

Gionta, in return, said his time with the Amerks has been invaluable for his Olympic preparation.

"What these guys have done for me this year means a lot," Gionta said.

His breakaway goal came as he sped down the right wing. Porter had the puck come up the left wing at about the Amerks blue line and made the diagonal pass through the neutral zone.

Gionta hit high gear, left defenseman Martin Marincin in his wake, sliced through the deep slot and, with Sparks extended to the max, confidently flicked a backhander into the net.

Talk about mid-season patience.

"It's being old and having veteran status," Gionta joked.

The crowd roared when the puck entered the net, and in an instant the "USA! USA" chant broke out.

"It sends chills up your back when something like that happens," Gionta said. "The crowd was great tonight."

The goal at 12:26 of the second period gave the Amerks a 2-1 lead, but the Marlies tied it just 41 seconds later and they won it on Miro Aaltonen's goal with 4:33 to play.

It was very likely the only game Gionta will play for the Amerks. At least the grand plan doesn't have him coming back after the Olympics.

Goal No. 1 following PyeongChang is to sign with a Stanley Cup contender for the remainder of the season. He'll come relatively cheap, and unlike contenders that must add talent through deals at the trade deadline, Gionta would come for only the price of a contract. And he's fresh. There is no wear-and-tear of a long season on his body.

But if there isn't an NHL offer? Would he come back to wear the red, white and blue of the Amerks after wearing the red, white and blue of America?

"I've left all my options open," he said.

A profile in persistence, Gionta hopes to pan Olympic gold

Rochester Business Journal

By: Scott Pitoniak

Hockey, like life, is filled with rejections. Shots ricochet off pads and posts. Occasionally, you get blind-sided with a check that smashes you into the boards or onto the ice. Success often is determined by your persistence, by your desire to show your pluck chasing that puck. Bloodied but unbowed, you must pick yourself up. You must keep skating and shooting until you find a way to ram that vulcanized rubber disk into the back of the net.

In four-plus decades covering sports, I've encountered few athletes more persistent and determined than Brian Gionta, a pint-sized, 5-foot-7 winger who's made a career of out-hustling, out-working and out-thinking people who sell him short.

The finest hockey player in Rochester history had hoped to finish his career with the Buffalo Sabres, but when a new regime took over after last season, Gionta was shown the door. Other teams expressed interest in signing him, but he was faced with a dilemma. The 16-year National Hockey League veteran did not want to uproot his wife and three kids a fourth time. Nor did he want to spend 10 months away from them, living in some lonely apartment in some faraway city.

But the recently turned 39-year-old also wasn't quite ready to hang up the skates and say, "The puck stops here."

It just so happened that the NHL opted not to interrupt its season this time around for the three weeks its players would need to compete in the Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, South Korea.

By closing that door, the NHL opened one for Gionta. USA Hockey was looking for experienced players to fill its roster. Officials immediately targeted Gionta, who had logged 1,006 games with the New Jersey Devils, Montreal Canadiens and Sabres. It also was a plus that he had played on the 2006 U.S. Olympic team in Torino, Italy. The prospect of returning to the Winter Games intrigued him. After spurning NHL overtures before and during training camp, he accepted USA Hockey's offer.

To stay in shape, he arranged to work out daily with the Rochester Americans. It proved to be a win-win. Gionta was able to stay in hockey shape, and the young players on the Sabres' top farm team loved being mentored by a guy who once scored 48 goals in a season and won a Stanley Cup.

It also was beneficial to Gionta because it allowed him to live at home and become more involved in his kid's activities—activities he often had to miss during the slog of never-ending NHL seasons. So after skating and lifting, he was able to attend his daughter's violin recitals and help coach his sons' youth-league hockey teams.

"This so-called semi-retirement has been both rewarding and challenging," he said recently. "It's enabled me to be more involved in my kids' lives, and that's a great thing. And I've been able to stay close to the professional game through my practices with the Amerks. For more than three

decades, my life revolved around my hockey games. It's been different and strange this time around, but in a good way."

Gionta came out of "semi-retirement" recently and scored a goal for the Rochester Americans in the first game he ever played for his hometown team. Well aware that Gionta was using the American Hockey League contest as a tune-up for the Olympics, the Blue Cross Arena crowd of 9,836 erupted into chants of "U.S.A! U.S.A!"

"It sends chills up your back when something like that happens," Gionta said after realizing a boyhood dream of playing for the Amerks.

He hopes to experience more spine-tingling moments in the coming weeks. He became familiar with the "Miracle on Ice" story when he was about 12. It was inspiring, learning how a group of amateur hockey players from the United States upset the mighty Soviet Union and went on to win Olympic gold at Lake Placid in 1980. "It was the ultimate underdog story," he said. "And I love underdog stories." Gionta would have fit in perfectly on that team. He's been an underdog and an overachiever his entire life.

At Boston College, he scored an NCAA-record five goals in one period on just five shots, led the nation in scoring and captained the Golden Eagles to a national championship his senior year.

Despite those lofty achievements, there were doubts he could succeed at the next level. Selected 82nd overall in the 1998 NHL draft, Gionta defied naysayers by helping the Devils win the 2003 Stanley Cup and setting a single-season franchise goal-scoring record. He later became only the second American to be named captain of hockey's most famous team, the Canadiens. He also wore the captain's "C" while playing for the Sabres, and will do so again when the U.S. hockey team takes the ice for its first game next Wednesday in South Korea.

"I love the enormity of the Olympics," he said. "There's nothing like it."

He's hoping for a better outcome than in 2006, when the U.S. failed to medal, despite his robust scoring. The 2018 American squad faces an uphill battle against powerful teams from Russia, Canada and Europe.

"It's not going to be easy," he said. "But I believe we can come together quickly and make history. I'd love nothing more than to come back and share that medal with the Rochester community that has been so supportive of me."

And after the Olympics? There's a good chance some NHL team could use a player with Gionta's experience and guile for the stretch run. Playing for the Amerks is a possibility, too. And after that it wouldn't be surprising to see Gionta involved in coaching or player development.

He'd be great at it. He knows what it takes to succeed. He would provide a profile in persistence that's hard to beat.