



ROCHESTER AMERICANS

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TONIGHT'S GAME: Binghamton @ Rochester

Amerks are on the verge of ending their playoff drought

Democratic & Chronicle

By: Leo Roth

When team captain Kevin Porter had a chance to sign up for a second stint with the Rochester Americans, the decision was as easy as a tap-in goal with the goaltender caught behind the net.

Chris Taylor would be the head coach, Randy Sexton the general manager and Sabres GM Jason Botterill would oversee things from his perch in Buffalo. That combination was a no-brainer for Porter.

Taylor was an Amerks' assistant coach during his first Amerks life, and Taylor, Botterill and Sexton were each a part of the Pittsburgh Penguins organization that repeated as Stanley Cup champions last season, fed by a very successful farm team in Wilkes-Barre/Scranton.

“There were definitely a lot of reasons on why I decided to come back here,” Porter said after practice Thursday at Blue Cross Arena.

“Chris Taylor, I’ve had him as an assistant coach here and as an assistant in Wilkes-Barre. Him being named head coach was a big factor, and talking with Jason Botterill and Randy Sexton, being with them in Pittsburgh and knowing how they built good teams, I knew they’d do the same here, surrounding everyone with good players and good people.”

That they have.

The Amerks can end a three-year American Hockey League playoff drought as soon as Friday when they host Binghamton. They also host Springfield on Saturday with both games a 7:05 p.m. start.

Amerks coach Chris Taylor on playoff hockey: “You just want to see everyone come to the rink at this time of year wearing shorts and T-shirts to watch us. That’s an exciting time. It brings the whole community together.” Buy Photo

Amerks coach Chris Taylor on playoff hockey: “You just want to see everyone come to the rink at this time of year wearing shorts and T-shirts to watch us. That’s an exciting time. It brings the whole community together.” (Photo: JAMIE GERMANO, @jgermano1/Staff Photographer)

At 30-19-10-6, Rochester has accumulated 76 points, highest since 2013-14, the last season they made the postseason. The Amerks are in third place in the Northern Division with a magic number of three points to clinch a playoff berth.

The can do so Friday with a victory over Binghamton combined with a Laval loss of any type to Charlotte. The Amerks also clinch by earning one point against Binghamton and a Laval regulation loss.

Whatever the combinations, the Amerks sit pretty with 11 games to play and despite going 0-3 last weekend and being outscored 17-11.

“There are a few guys who have been here in the past so I think everyone is pretty excited,” said Porter, 32, a member of Rochester’s last playoff squad. “We’re not officially in but we’re getting there. We still have some games to win and we want to be playing better hockey these last 11 games. But it’s exciting and as we get closer, we’ll really start getting into it.”

More: Sabres' Eichel shows how far he's come in leadership department

More: It's hockey night in Rochester and new coach Chris Taylor is living the Americans' dream

As spring begins, there is a spring in everybody’s step at the hockey barn at Exchange and Broad. In all, Rochester has missed the playoffs seven of the past 12 years, hasn’t won a playoff round in 13 seasons and last won the Calder Cup in 1995-96.

A sure sign that the team is playoff bound is that nobody in the locker room is talking about needing to move out of their apartment, which had been the case as March turned into April in recent years.

“It means a lot to the whole community, for me, being around here, it’s not just to get to the playoffs, that’s not our only goal, it’s to go far and challenge these guys and get everything out of them,” said Taylor, the Amerks Hall of Famer and long-time assistant whose rookie season as head coach has already been memorable. “You just want to see everyone come to the rink at this time of year wearing shorts and T-shirts to watch us. That’s an exciting time. It brings the whole community together.”

Rookie sensation C.J. Smith is experiencing Amerks playoff fever for a first time. The former UMass-Lowell star leads the team in scoring with 17-25 – 42, recording his first professional hat trick against Hartford. He missed 12 games with an ankle injury.

“I know there have been some rough times here in the past but I think the community is starting to recognize what we’ve done, we’re getting more support and it’s a good feeling,” said Smith, who is from Des Moines, Iowa.

Last week’s New England swing wasn’t kind to the Amerks’ confidence. The good news is that with 11 games to play and a playoff invite at hand, the team has lots of time to be peaking for the postseason.

“This was a good week to work on things,” Taylor said. “Sometimes you can go into the playoffs and hide things because you’re winning. We’ve been scoring some goals but not winning so we’re uncovering things we need to work on.”

The Amerks remain undermanned with several key players on recall to Buffalo. Forward Seth Griffith was reassigned late Thursday. With the Sabres out of NHL playoff contention, all will return for Rochester’s playoff run, including All-Star goaltender Linus Ullmark.

Adam Wilcox (10-6-2, 2.80) will continue to start in Ullmark’s absence.

“It’s good to tap our depth now and see who can help us,” Taylor said. “Everyone gets better with competition.”

Porter senses the Amerks' best hockey is ahead of them and the timing could not be more perfect.

“It’s a long season and we’ve gone through stretches like this,” he said. “It’s good to get it out of the way now and not the playoffs. Hopefully we get some guys back from Buffalo and get our playoff lineup ready. We’ll keep working these last 11 games and see what happens.”

What, where, when: Amerks host Binghamton Devils on Friday and Springfield Thunderbirds on Saturday at Blue Cross Arena. Each game starts at 7:05 p.m.

At stake: The Amerks have 30 wins and 76 points and can clinch their first playoff berth since 2013-14. Their magic number is three points.

Dogs night: The Sixth Annual “Dogs Night Out” game is Saturday when fans are invited to bring their dogs. Dog owners can purchase a ticket for \$20 in addition to a \$5 dog ticket which will benefit Lollypop Farm. Sections 211-213 have been designated “K-9 Korner.” Go to www.amerks.com/dogs.

Sabres could utilize speedy line of youngsters in future

Olean Times Herald

By: Bill Hoppe

In parts of three AHL seasons together, Sabres forwards Justin Bailey, Nick Baptiste and Evan Rodrigues never skated together as linemates.

Bailey and Baptiste both played right wing with the Rochester Americans. Meanwhile, Rodrigues, a center these days, mostly skated as a winger.

So while the three prospects became close friends, they never showcased their talents together on the ice until Saturday afternoon.

When Sabres coach Phil Housley formed the line – Rodrigues at center, Bailey on the left and Baptiste on the right – the chemistry they shared was quickly evident.

Baptiste scored the first of his two third-period goals with his new linemates, buoying the Sabres' 5-3 come-from-behind win against the Chicago Blackhawks. In Monday's 4-0 loss to the Nashville Predators, the trio utilized its speed to create offense and forecheck.

Chances are Housley will keep the line intact for tonight's tilt against the Arizona Coyotes at KeyBank Center, a meeting of the NHL's two worst teams.

"We're just keeping it simple and using our speed," Rodrigues said Tuesday. "We all have kind of the same approach of just wanting to get pucks to the net and kind of hound the net, and we've been doing a pretty good job of that."

At the 72-game mark, on a team certain to undergo a significant offseason overhaul, it can be difficult to see lines that have a future. It's often hard to peg the Sabres' bottom trios because a few look like the third or fourth lines.

Yes, their time together has been short. But Housley could keep calling on Bailey, Baptiste and Rodrigues next season or beyond.

The youngsters all possess speed, probably the most important asset in today's NHL.

"They're both really fast wingers and I like to make plays," Rodrigues said. "So we're trying to play fast hockey, put pucks in space and let them skate into it. After that, once we get in the O-zone, just funneling pucks to the net. We're not trying to be too cute. We've gotten very close, especially the last game."

Bailey said his line is "all on the same page."

"We're doing the things we know we need to do to be successful, and that's keeping things simple, getting on the forecheck and making it a tough night for the other team's D," he said.

To Baptiste, when you're close to someone off the ice, you develop chemistry on it.

Baptiste and Bailey, both 22, lived together during their first two seasons in Rochester and have known each other since the Sabres drafted them one round apart in 2013. Bailey was in Rodrigues' wedding last summer.

"We know each other so well off the ice, that on the ice, we kind of know each other on the ice," Baptiste said. "Instinctively, I know what Justin's going to be doing because he plays a similar style to me. Evan, he makes such great plays out there, he's the one that finds pucks."

Bailey said: "We know exactly most of the time what each other's going to do so we're one step ahead of the defense. I think it definitely makes a difference when you're playing with guys you have chemistry with."

Rodrigues said the familiarity makes you "hold onto your stick a little bit looser."

"You trust them and you're not worried to make a mistake," he said. "We have each other's back. I think it also gives you a little bit of a boost, it's a little bit of fun and it puts a bit of extra giddy-up in your step."

Thanks to his speed, smarts and versatility, Rodrigues, 24, seems to have locked up a spot for next season. If he hadn't broken his hand during the preseason, he likely would've stayed up all year.

But these final 10 games are critical for Bailey and Baptiste, whose entry-level contracts expire following the season. The Sabres also have a totally new regime, the third since they were drafted.

"I wasn't sure whether or not I'd get back up here this season so I want to make sure, going into these next few games, that I leave everything I have out there and leave the best impression I can on the coaches," Bailey said.

Sabres goalie Linus Ullmark to start against scorching Predators

Olean Times Herald

By: Bill Hoppe

When Sabres coach Phil Housley said last week he planned to give goalie Linus Ullmark some starts, you figured he might ease the prospect in early.

Remember, while Ullmark has played 22 NHL contests, 20 of his appearances came as a rookie in 2015-16. The Swede has spent most of the last two seasons in the AHL.

But Housley will throw Ullmark, 24, into the fray against the scorching Nashville Predators tonight inside KeyBank Center.

The Predators, the NHL's best team with a whopping 104 points, have won three straight games and a ridiculous 13 of the last 14. They've won eight consecutive road contests. In the last six, they've roared from behind to triumph.

In an era of parity, the Predators possess remarkable depth. They have 14 players with 10 or more goals and eight with 40 or more points. They've also posted 10 shutouts.

Ullmark, an AHL All-Star, hasn't started an NHL game since his 44-save effort in a 3-1 win against Columbus on Jan. 11.

"We knew we were going to give him some games down the stretch here. What better game to get a challenge from Nashville?" Housley said this morning after the Sabres prepared for the Predators, the team Buffalo hired him away from last year. "I thought he did a terrific job the last time he stepped in against a good Columbus team."

Ullmark cautioned that was "just one game."

"You can't just go back and think I'm going to be a superstar," he said.

The Sabres will have more help against the Predators. Winger Kyle Okposo will return after a concussion sidelined him three games. Meanwhile, defenseman Casey Nelson, who missed Saturday afternoon's 5-3 win against Chicago with a lower-body injury, will also play.

To make make room for Nelson, rookie Victor Antipin will be scratched.

The Sabres made one paper transaction this morning, recalling winger Justin Bailey. They sent the youngster to the Rochester Americans on Sunday so he could "serve" his one-game AHL suspension.

Housley also said goalie Robin Lehner is sidelined for maintenance. Lehner skated briefly the last two days before leaving the ice.

Chad Johnson, who played Saturday, will back Ullmark up.

The Predators are 9-1-1 all-time in Buffalo.

Mittelstadt would be eligible for Amerks with AHL contract

Buffalo News

By: John Vogl

With news that Casey Mittelstadt's college season is over, questions have poured in regarding his availability for Rochester.

There is a way he could play for the Amerks, including the playoffs, but it wouldn't be his best business decision. It could help his hockey career, though.

The Sabres' top prospect could sign an American Hockey League contract or an amateur tryout contract with Rochester. It would allow him to participate in the remainder of the regular season and playoffs, an AHL source said Monday.

Mittelstadt's leverage, however, could lead him to seek an NHL entry-level deal – if he even wants to leave school now. The University of Minnesota freshman would burn the opening season of his three-year contract by appearing in just one game for the Sabres. The team has 11 remaining, starting with Monday's visit by Nashville.

If the Sabres signed Mittelstadt to an NHL entry-level contract that begins this season, he could not be sent to the Amerks.

The ideal situation from Buffalo's standpoint would be to sign the center to an amateur tryout contract for this season and an entry-level deal that begins in 2018-19. It wouldn't be the best business move for Mittelstadt if he preferred to burn a year, but it would allow him to get professional, minor-league games under his belt before next season.

The 19-year-old's future will be of interest to Sabres fans until last year's first-round pick decides to stay in school or go pro. He would forfeit his remaining NCAA availability with a contract.