



ROCHESTER AMERICANS

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TONIGHT'S GAME: Bridgeport @ Rochester

Sabres recall Smith

Pickin' Splinters

By: *Staff Report/Amerks.com*

The Buffalo Sabres today announced the team has recalled forward C.J. Smith from the Rochester Americans (AHL).

In his second full professional season, Smith (5-foot-11, 181 lbs., 12/1/1994) is currently tied for the Amerks' team lead with 29 points (13+16) in 33 games this season. In his last 10 games for Rochester, Smith has recorded 11 points (6+5) and 38 shots on goal, propelling him into a tie for third in the AHL with 108 shots on goal this season.

In 2017-18, Smith tied for 10th among AHL rookies with 44 points (17+27) in 57 games and was named MVP of the 2018 AHL All-Star Classic. The Des Moines, Iowa native recorded one assist in two NHL contests in 2016-17 after the conclusion of his three-year collegiate career at UMass-Lowell, where he was named to the Hockey East All-Rookie Team in 2015 and garnered Hockey East All-Tournament honors in 2016 and 2017.

Sabres notes: C.J. Smith earns recall from Amerks
Buffalo Hockey Beat
By: *Bill Hoppe*

Late in the 2016-17 season, the Sabres rewarded C.J. Smith with two NHL games after the forward left UMass Lowell following his junior year.

Then Smith, 24, quietly began the next season in the AHL, where he morphed into a top scorer and an intriguing prospect with the Rochester Americans.

Still, the Sabres kept Smith in the AHL nearly a year and a half before finally summoning him prior to Monday's 3-1 loss to the New York Islanders.

Even as the Sabres struggled mightily last year, Smith, an AHL All-Star, stayed down and continued developing. This season, despite a strong training camp, the Sabres chose winger Tage Thompson over him.

So his first NHL appearance since April 3, 2017 was extra special for Smith, who has utilized his shot more often this season while scoring 13 goals and a team-high 29 points in 33 games with the Amerks.

"Honestly, I think I'm even more excited to get in tonight than I was maybe my first NHL game, because everything happened so quick, I really didn't take for granted the whole situation," a smiling Smith said inside KeyBank Center. "I worked really hard to get back to this point. Obviously, the coaching staff down there has helped my game out a lot. I think I've been pretty consistent and a pretty good overall player."

The 5-foot-11, 181-pound Smith is the first forward the Sabres summoned this season. They've usually had an extra one since claiming Remi Elie on waivers Oct. 1.

But the Sabres, who rank third in the Atlantic Division, have struggled since their 10-game winning streak last month, losing 10 of their last 14 contests (4-6-4) entering Monday. Their offense, most notably the secondary scoring, has also dried up.

Enter Smith, who has compiled 30 goals and 73 points in 90 career AHL games.

"We're just trying to give us a spark," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "He's been playing some really good hockey in Rochester. . . . He's been playing in all situations and we just felt it was a good time."

Housley and general manager Jason Botterill decided Smith deserved a look.

"We need some more help in scoring," Housley said. "Not to put all the pressure on him, but I think he's done a terrific job in Rochester playing in all situations. He's crafty, very good hockey IQ. I think he can provide us with a spark."

Only Sabres captain Jack Eichel, who left the game in the first period with an upper-body injury, played less than Smith, who also killed penalties.

"I really liked the way he attacked the game using his speed, he created some opportunities offensively," Housley said. "He was around the puck all night."

Smith tried to embrace his demotion — "Going down and pouting is not going to help your situation," he said — and utilize his additional time in Rochester.

"They didn't think my game was NHL-ready, so (I) had to keep working and keep finding out ways and keep playing better and better and getting more consistent to get the opportunity," Smith said.

Clearly, that consistency — Smith hasn't gone more than two games without a point all season — impressed the Sabres.

"It's a long season," Smith said. "I think I learned a lot of things that help to just be ready every night to play. I think last year I would have a couple good games and maybe even a game off, where I think this year, even when you are a little tired, I've been finding ways to help out the team even when you don't have it all."

While the Amerks fell into second place in the North Division over the weekend, they've still enjoyed a terrific season.

"When you're first in the division, teams are going to give you your best game every night," Smith said. "So that's one thing that honestly helps us, come the end of the season we have to show up every night and we can't take a night off."

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Islanders coach Barry Trotz on Sabres rookie defenseman Rasmus Dahlin: "I look at him and I see (Hall of Famer) Nick Lidstrom. Very efficient, probably doesn't realize how good he is yet. He's going to be a dominant player for years to come. He's just scratching the surface of what he's going to be."

Notes: The Sabres scratched Elie and defensemen Matt Hunwick and Lawrence Pilut. . . . Sabres center Vladimir Sobotka played his 500th NHL game. . . . The Sabres have today off.

Sabres recall C.J. Smith; Jack Eichel a game-time decision vs. Islanders
Buffalo News
By: Lance Lysowski

It took 39 games but the Buffalo Sabres finally promoted a forward from Rochester, recalling winger C.J. Smith ahead of Monday night's game against the New York Islanders in KeyBank Center.

Smith, 24, is tied with Victor Olofsson for the Amerks team lead with 29 points in 33 games, including 13 goals, and has posted a plus-8 rating. Coach Phil Housley and General Manager Jason Botterill felt Smith could help provide some much-needed secondary scoring; however, it's unclear who Smith will replace in the lineup.

Jack Eichel will be a game-time decision against the Islanders after he missed practice Sunday for "maintenance," according to Housley. Regardless of the corresponding move, Housley made it clear Smith was called on to provide a "spark" to the Sabres' struggling offense.

"We're just trying to give us a spark," Housley said Monday morning. "He's played some very good hockey down in Rochester. ... He's playing in all situations and we just felt it was a good time to bring him up and reward him for his hard work. It's just a decision Jason and I came to that obviously we need some more help in scoring. Not to put all the pressure on him but I think he's done a terrific job down in Rochester playing in all situations. He's crafty, very good hockey IQ and can provide us a spark."

In addition to his production, Smith is tied for third in the AHL with 108 shots on goal. He has excelled on the power play and is capable of helping the Sabres on the penalty kill after they lost Zemgus Girgensons to injury. Smith is tied for the Amerks' team lead with two shorthanded goals and has eight power-play points.

Last season, Smith tied for 10th among all AHL rookies with 44 points, including 17 goals, and was named MVP of the league's All-Star Classic. Smith played the final two games of the 2016-17 season for Buffalo after signing with the Sabres as a free agent and recorded an assist in his NHL debut against the Islanders on April 2, 2017.

Yet Smith has not played in a game for the Sabres since. He performed well in camp this season, only for the Sabres to keep Tage Thompson on the roster. Smith has scored at every level. He had 56 goals in three seasons at UMass-Lowell, where he was named to the Hockey East All-Rookie Team in 2015.

"I think I've just been really consistent," Smith said. "The pro game is a long season. I think I learned a lot of things to be ready every night to play. I think last year I would have a couple good games and maybe a game off. This year even when I am a little tired I'm finding a way to help the team even when I don't have it all."

Despite Smith's success, the Sabres chose to use Remi Elie when a forward has been injured. Elie, 23, was a second-round draft pick of Dallas in 2013 and played in 72 NHL games with the Stars last season. He has failed to score a goal and has only one assist with a minus-2 rating in 12 games with Buffalo, but he was promoted to the second line in a 4-1 loss in St. Louis on Dec. 27.

Though Elie has shown flashes at times, this could be an opportunity for the Sabres to finally get a look at Smith, who signed a one-year contract extension with the team in July. Buffalo has scored only nine goals in its last five games. Smith also possesses one quality Buffalo has lacked recently: a willingness to shoot the puck.

"I think my willingness to shoot the puck," Smith said. "I think I maybe passed up some shots last year, I think it maybe made me a little nervous sometimes to do stuff. But I think overall I've kept it pretty simple and I think just getting to the hard areas and just being a competitive person has helped me."

Former Sabres draft pick Devante Stephens becoming trusted defenseman in ECHL

Buffalo News

By: *Bill Hoppe*

Once prospects get over the initial disappointment of being assigned to the ECHL, they often realize the league can be a terrific place to develop.

"The game is built around confidence, and it's always a blow to your confidence when you get assigned back to a level that you were hoping you wouldn't be in," said Matt Thomas, who coaches the Cincinnati Cyclones, the Sabres' ECHL affiliate.

But in addition to extra playing time, the league that bills itself as "AA hockey" can offer youngsters opportunities they likely wouldn't enjoy in the American Hockey League.

"You can play the game you want to play a little bit more; not the game you're just flat-out required to play," Thomas said. "So there's a little bit more leeway in terms of taking some chances and growing from mistakes. One mistake isn't going to have you parked at the end of the bench where you're not going to see the ice for the rest of the night."

The league has buoyed the growth of defenseman Devante Stephens, a prospect the Sabres drafted in the fifth round in 2015, 122nd overall.

Instead of receiving short minutes with the Americans or sitting out, Stephens, 21, has morphed into a trusted defenseman with the Cyclones, drawing regular duty against the opposition's top line.

"I just needed to play," Stephens said earlier this month in Blue Cross Arena during his brief recall to the Amerks. "You look at the D-men roster up here, and there's a lot of D-men. I don't know if I would've got as much ice time as I would've needed. . . . Just playing those game reps, that's how you develop your game, right?"

Besides a gaudy plus-21 rating, which led the ECHL entering Saturday's games, Stephens had scored five goals and 15 points in 27 games. Stephens compiled zero goals and eight assists in 33 games as an ECHL rookie last season.

"When Buffalo drafted him, they wanted to see him become a certain type of defenseman . . . and this level is allowing him to discover that," Thomas said.

While the 6-foot-2, 179-pound Stephens played well enough to earn three promotions to the Amerks last season, the adjustment to pro hockey wasn't easy.

A torn labrum and broken orbital sidelined him much of the season.

"Game one of this season to today, I think his growth is his habits and how he practices and how he shows up and how he prepares," Thomas said. "He's really been able to develop a routine that's shown him success and allowed him to be consistent as a pro. I think a lot of it for him was getting into a rhythm."

Part of that rhythm includes Stephens utilizing his speed. That's why Thomas uses him in a shutdown role. Stephens' feet have also helped him create more offense.

"He's got a lot of raw ability, but his skating is certainly his No. 1 asset," Thomas said. "I think like all players, when he's in that zone, and you couple that with his skating, that's when you really see him jump up into the play and create offense in his game.

"But his feet give him a lot of leeway to take some risks up ice and the ability to get back and defend and not have it cost him." Still, Stephens said his "fundamentals are defense."

"I don't let a lot of goals against me," Stephens said. "But I think with maturity comes developing your game. Obviously, you look at the D-men in the NHL now, they can all score goals and contribute that way."

Four other Sabres draft picks – defenseman Anthony Florentino, forwards Vasily Glotov and Judd Peterson and goalie Jonas Johansson – have played for the Cyclones this season. However, only Johansson and Stephens have NHL contracts.

The path from the ECHL to the NHL can be arduous. Just one current Sabre, goalie Carter Hutton, played in the league.

"It's a league that's up-and-coming," Stephens said. "It's a lot better than it used to be. There's a lot of skill down there. I think that's why my offense is getting a little better, there's a little bit more room down there."

Thomas said the NHL recognizing the value in "AA" hockey has helped the ECHL grow. The changes taking place at hockey's highest level quickly trickle down.

"It's pretty remarkable to see how quickly those changes are becoming visual and evident at the different levels," Thomas said. The demise of the Central Hockey League and United Hockey League has also made better players available.

"It's created a wealth of talent at this level that the league hasn't seen across the board," Thomas said.

Nylander hurt

Amerks winger Alexander Nylander left Friday's 5-1 home win against the Toronto Marlies with an upper-body injury and is day-to-day, coach Chris Taylor said.

Nylander, the eighth overall pick in 2016, missed Saturday's 4-3 road loss to the Utica Comets. The Swede has compiled eight goals and 21 points in 30 games this season.

The Amerks' first game of the new year is Wednesday against visiting Bridgeport.