



ROCHESTER AMERICANS

DAILY PRESS CLIPS

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TONIGHT'S GAME: Bridgeport vs Rochester

Will Borgen's physical style of play gives him puncher's chance with Amerks
Buffalo News
By: *Bill Hoppe*

C.J. Smith said he kept telling Rochester defenseman Will Borgen he should get into a fight.

After nearly a year in the AHL, Borgen had not yet been in a scrap. Smith knew his 6-foot-2, 187-pound teammate would hold his own.

"I kind of pushed him to get in one," joked Smith, Borgen's friend and roommate.

On Feb. 20 against the Cleveland Monsters, Borgen finally fought, dropping 6-3, 185 Ryan MacInnis by unleashing several wicked right swings as the crowd in Blue Cross Arena roared.

The frenzy of punches didn't disappoint Smith.

"I was pumped up watching that fight," said Smith, who was with the Sabres when Borgen fought MacInnis.

Smith added: "He was throwing some bombs."

Borgen looked like a seasoned fighting pro.

"It was wild, I guess," said Borgen, a fourth-round pick by Buffalo in 2015, 92nd overall. "I mean, I've never fought before, so I didn't know what to expect.

"It's not like you're going out there trying to fight someone. It was just the heat of the moment, it just happened."

While Borgen, 23, rarely fights, the prospect "loves the physical style of play," according to Amerks coach Chris Taylor.

"(He's) hard to play against and makes people pay a price," said one scout who has watched Borgen regularly this season.

Considering Borgen's penchant for contact, it's surprising it took him 58 AHL games to come to blows.

"He's definitely grown a lot of respect around the room in what he's been doing," Taylor said. "He's getting better every game."

Borgen left St. Cloud State following his junior year and was coached by Taylor for eight games last year. Still, Taylor said Borgen's physicality and conditioning during training camp surprised him.

"Ever since then, he's really defined himself as a good defenseman but also a person we can rely on in the offensive (zone)," Taylor said. "He's brought some offensive upside to him. He joins the rush, he makes really good plays at the blue line. His offensive side of the puck is really good as well."

Borgen possesses above-average speed, but so far, his offensive numbers — two goals and eight points in 57 contests — aren't eye-popping.

But Taylor said Borgen, who represented Team USA at the Pyeongchang Olympic Games last year, has continued to develop his offense. Taylor occasionally utilizes Borgen on the power play and he likes the way the rookie can get shots on net from the point during five-on-five action.

"You kind of don't think of that at the start," Taylor said of Borgen's offensive abilities. "Then over time, it's like, 'Wow, where did this come from?' It's like he keeps getting better and better right before your eyes."

Borgen showcased some of his offensive prowess Feb. 16 in Syracuse, moving into the slot and burying Yannick Veilleux's pass under the crossbar.

Ultimately, however, Borgen's grittiness and defensive abilities could help him reach the NHL.

"He'll finish hits," Smith said. "He just plays a hard game, really simple. He's just kind of a reliable D."

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Syracuse pushed past the Amerks and into first place with 75 points in the North Division on Wednesday when the Crunch beat Utica, 5-2.

The Amerks had been in sole possession of first place or tied since October. Both teams have played 58 games. They meet three more times this season.

Notes: The AHL suspended Amerks winger Remi Elie one game for an illegal check to the head of a Crunch player in Sunday's 4-1 home loss. Elie will sit out Friday's home game against the Bridgeport Sound Tigers. . . . Smith, a winger, has compiled 14 goals and 28 points in his last 24 outings going back to Dec. 5. Overall, Smith has scored 20 goals and 46 points in 45 games. . . . Amerks goalie Scott Wedgewood's 22nd win Saturday set a new career high. In his last 10 starts, Wedgewood is 5-3-2 with a 1.99 goals-against average and a .928 save percentage.

10 reasons why the Rochester Amerks are good again
Democrat & Chronicle
By: *Leo Roth*

From 2014-15 to 2016-17, the Rochester Americans missed the playoffs.

A three-year drought that was the longest in franchise history since the late 1960s.

A chaotic period of annual head coaching changes and player moves so numerous, pieces of tape sufficed for name plates.

Don't look now, but Rochester's storied AHL team has done an about-face and is streaking toward consecutive playoff berths under coach Chris Taylor.

With the regular season entering its final five-week push, the Amerks sport a 35-18-3-2 record, good for 75 points and a first-place tie with Syracuse in the North Division. After making a 24-point jump in the standings last season, Rochester is on a 46-win, 98-point pace, which would be its best since 2006-07.

Why the turnaround?

Captain Kevin Porter said there is a long list of reasons but said it begins with management. The parent Buffalo Sabres under general manager Jason Botterill and assistant Randy Sexton made rebuilding the organization's farm system a chief goal when assuming the reins in 2017.

They saw the system work in Pittsburgh, where player development in Wilkes-Barre/Scranton helped the Penguins capture back-to-back Stanley Cups. At the core was assembling a roster where prospects didn't have to carry the load and could prosper in a winning environment.

It's no surprise that Rochester's original roster this season consisted of 11 Sabres' draft picks and 11 veteran free agents.

"I've been on teams and it's all young guys and draft picks," said Porter, who was part of two Amerks playoff teams before a three-year stint in the Detroit Red Wings and Pittsburgh organizations. "The key is management. They want us to win here, they want these young guys to learn how to win and I think a big part of that is bringing in some older guys who have been there before."

With 18 games to play starting Friday at home against Bridgeport, here are 10 reasons why the Amerks are good again:

1. The Sabres care

Former Buffalo GM Tim Murray tried overseeing both the Sabres and Amerks, virtually an impossible job. Botterill assigning Sexton, former GM of Ottawa and Florida of the NHL, as GM in Rochester puts a dedicated set of eyes on the team so small problems don't become big ones.

2. A solid coaching staff

Taylor, the Amerks Hall of Famer and three-time MVP, has made a quick impact as a head coach. His rapport with players is behind the club's winning chemistry but he's quick to spread credit to his assistants, former Toronto Marlies head coach Gord

Dineen (defense) and Toby Petersen (offense). Together, Taylor, Dineen and Petersen played in 3,553 professional games. When they talk, players listen. "We understand what the players are going through and our doors are always open," Taylor said. "And we're not going to B.S. them."

3. The chemistry is real

Some teams put 35 guys in a room and hope for the best, but this roster was assembled with talent and personalities in mind. At the start of the year, 16 players were returnees while newcomers Scott Wedgewood, Victor Olofsson, Wayne Simpson, Lawrence Pilut, Rasmus Asplund, Jack Dougherty, Will Borgen, Yannick Veilleux, Andrew Oglevie, Tyler Randell and Brandon Hickey have helped bring the team to the next level. The thread that binds? "We all want to win," Porter said.

4. They've avoided slumps

The Amerks responded to an 0-2 start with a five-game win streak that did wonders for the club's confidence. They have lost back-to-back games only five times, their longest losing streak is three games, and they have collected 29 out of a possible 42 points since mid-January.

5. They can score

The Amerks didn't have a 20-goal scorer last season, just the second time in history that's occurred. They're on pace for five — Zach Redmond (21, record for a defenseman), Olofsson (20), Simpson (19), C.J. Smith (18) and Danny O'Regan (18). Taylor Leier has 13 goals.

6. They can defend

Veteran free agent goalies Adam Wilcox and Wedgewood have been solid in net, with Wedgewood becoming the workhorse. The former Albany Devils standout is a career-best 22-10-2 with a 2.70 GAA and .911 save percentage.

7. They're good in the clutch

In extra-session hockey, the Amerks don't flinch. They're 3-3 in overtime and 6-2 in shootouts. Redmond has nine game-winning goals and Olofsson has seven.

8. They are road warriors

The Amerks sport an 18-6-3-1 record (40 points) away from Blue Cross Arena. Only the Charlotte Checkers (20-8-2-1, 43 points) are better.

9. Special teams

Can't be a great team without them and the Amerks are very good on the power play (20.8 percent), which ranks fourth-best in the AHL, and penalty kill (82.0 percent), which ranks fifth.

10. They shook things up

Whether it's missing the playoffs three years in a row or getting swept in the first round of the playoffs by the Crunch last season, sometimes the drink just needs to be stirred. Over the past two years, Sabres trades have brought in Redmond (Nick Deslauriers), O'Regan (Evander Kane), Leier (Justin Bailey), Dougherty (Nick Baptiste) and Hickey (Hudson Fasching), along with Scott Wilson (2019 fifth-round pick) for a spell. Bailey and Baptiste, once promising Buffalo prospects, had a combined seven seasons in Rochester and needed a change of scenery. Losing defenseman Brendan Guhle (second round pick 2015) at the trade deadline was a blow for the Amerks but former Dallas Star Remi Elie, obtained on waivers last fall, is now in Rochester. Said Taylor of trades: "It can be OK, and it can be OK for both sides."

Rochester Amerks deliver Meals on Wheels

13 Wham

By: *Staff Report*

Some Rochester Amerks stepped off the ice Tuesday – to provide meals to seniors.

Kyle Criscuolo and Nathan Paetsch brought meals to local senior citizens to help raise awareness for Meals on Wheels.

Their work also helped kick off the March for Meals campaign, a month-long national effort to celebrate the program and seniors who take part in it.

Rochester's Meals on Wheels, a UR Medicine Home Care program, is the third-oldest in the country and has distributed millions of meals.

If you're interested in learning more about the program or volunteering, or call 585-787-TEAM. To donate, call 585-787-8748.

Amerks deliver meals to seniors for 'Meals on Wheels'
Rochester First
By: *Staff Report*

The Rochester Amerks have once again teamed up with Meals on Wheels.

The annual March for Meals campaign is a month-long, nationwide celebration of Meals on Wheels and the seniors who rely on the vital service.

Amerks players Kyle Criscuolo and Nathan Paetsch showed their support by helping to deliver meals and visiting with local seniors on Tuesday.

"So it's really to bring awareness about the Older Americans Act and the importance of the Older Americans Act to help keep seniors healthy and independent in their homes," explains Margaret Schweizer, Meals on Wheels.

"They are always involved with the community and the Rochester Americans do our best to make sure we're engaging with everybody because we get a lot of support from the community so it's our duty we feel to give back," adds Kyle Criscuolo, Rochester Amerks.

The local Meals on Wheels program is part of UR Medicine Home Care. It ensures that more than 1,400 people receive safety checks throughout the day and delivers approximately 250,000 meals per year.

Sabres prospect C.J. Smith lands opportunity after long journey

Buffalo News

By: *Bill Hoppe*

Liz Smith said her gut told her it was the right decision. Her son, C.J., had outgrown the competition around Des Moines, Iowa.

The family wanted to find out if he had a future in hockey.

So to test C.J.'s talents, part of the family left Iowa and moved to Minnesota, a hockey hotbed, when he was in eighth grade.

"We were going to give it a shot, and if it didn't work, it didn't work," Liz Smith said.

Her husband, Jeff, stayed in Iowa and ran the family's temporary staffing service. C.J.'s sister, Mackenzie, also moved to the family's new home in Bloomington, Minn., about 10 miles outside Minneapolis.

"We were first testing the waters to see where I was as a hockey player, if this is something I could compete with other kids at a higher level," said C.J., a Sabres prospect and one of the Rochester Americans' leading scorers.

C.J. would eventually thrive against some of the country's top teenage talent. But he had trouble finding the right fit. His development was slow.

The family moved again. He played for two high school teams and attended three schools.

Liz Smith said her son has "lived out of a bucket probably since he was in eighth grade."

"He gave up a lot," she said. "We gave up a lot for him, but he gave up a lot."

But C.J.'s parents never pressured him to keep at it. If he had chosen to quit hockey, they would've supported him.

"We said, 'C.J., as long as you're getting your grades and being respectful and appreciative, we'll go ahead and support you,'" Liz Smith said. "It was also one of those things, too, I told C.J., 'The day you want to quit hockey, that's OK, too.'"

Today, C.J., 24, is one of the American Hockey League's best wingers. His 2018-19 campaign — he has scored 20 goals and 45 points in 45 games — has earned him 11 appearances with Buffalo.

"That's also another reason I made it to where I (am) at," he said of his parents' support for whatever he wanted. "It wasn't something that was forced upon me. They wanted to let me decide for myself if it's something I wanted to make a career out of and something I wanted to do. So I really respect them."

C.J. Smith's arduous path taught him to be patient and respect the development process.

"I kind of learned from my past growing up just (to) keep working toward things and eventually the right situation will come around," he said.

That situation finally materialized in 2011, after he failed to make the Elite League, a circuit of the top high school players in Minnesota.

Before Smith's high school season began, he played some games with the Austin Bruins, a junior team in the North American Hockey League about 100 miles from Minneapolis.

Then a week before Smith's junior season was set to start at the Academy of Holy Angels, one of his teammates, Connor Hurley transferred. Hurley was later picked by the Sabres in the second round in 2013.

Suddenly, Smith said, the "team wasn't looking good."

Austin offered Smith a roster spot, so he grabbed it. The decision turned out to be a turning point in his career.

Smith started morphing into an NCAA prospect with the Bruins, a team coached by Chris Tok, a former college and pro player who would become a huge influence for the teenager.

After his first season in Austin, Smith had an opportunity to jump to the United States Hockey League, a higher level of junior hockey.

"I thought I was just going to be like a fourth-line guy, so (Tok) kind of just said, 'Hey, you can go play in the USHL, (but) you (can) work on your scoring down here and become a better scorer.'"

Smith stayed in Austin, scored 30 goals in 2012-13 and skated for two USHL teams the next season. By 2014-15, he was playing college hockey on a scholarship at UMass Lowell.

"I kind of found the right situation, what worked for me as a person and as a hockey player," Smith said. "When I went to junior, I found a really good coach and sort of good people that I think really sort of jump-started my hockey career to get where I'm at today."

The rest of Smith's story is well-known. Following a huge junior season at UMass Lowell in 2016-17, he signed an entry-level contract with the Sabres and jumped right to the NHL.

"Whatever happens going forward," his mother said, "you can say you played in the NHL, you're in the record books, you're there."

Sabres notes: Casey Nelson returns after three-month absence
Buffalo Hockey Beat
By: *Bill Hoppe*

Three months ago Monday, Casey Nelson suffered an upper-body injury in the Sabres' 4-3 overtime loss to the Toronto Maple Leafs.

The defenseman spent about seven weeks recovering and rehabbing before waiting another six weeks for an opportunity to play NHL games.

Nelson, who dressed for 22 of the Sabres' first 29 contests, began practicing again in late January and completed a five-game AHL conditioning assignment with the Rochester Americans on Feb. 17.

Upon returning to the Sabres, Nelson sat out eight straight games as a healthy scratch.

"I'm just waiting for an opportunity," Nelson said prior to Monday's 4-3 loss to the Edmonton Oilers inside KeyBank Center. That opportunity finally materialized Monday.

With defenseman Matt Hunwick in for Jake McCabe, who's sidelined five to six weeks with an upper-body injury, Nelson, 26, was the team's only spare defenseman.

But Sabres coach Phil Housley hinted Monday morning that Nelson, who skated as an extra beside forward Vladimir Sobotka before the game, might finally return.

Zach Bogosian couldn't play because of a lower-body injury, so Nelson moved into the lineup. Bogosian is day-to-day, according to the team.

"Just a mental battle, which I'm in a good state of mind, so it's not too hard when you got good teammates and good people around you," Nelson said of sitting out. "It's obviously tough not playing, but I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

The Sabres are in a three-month rut. They went 12-6-4 with Nelson in the lineup earlier this season.

So why didn't Nelson, a right-handed shot, play earlier?

"It's more the lefty-righty thing for me," Housley said. "We've got three righties and a lot of them haven't played on the left side."

Housley utilized newcomer Brandon Montour, a righty, on the left side in Saturday's 5-2 loss in Toronto.

Nelson skated beside rookie Rasmus Dahlin, his partner for several games earlier this season, Monday.

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Having won the award named after Ted Lindsay twice, Connor McDavid said he "had the honor" of meeting one of hockey's all-time legendary figures, who passed away Monday at age 93.

"Nobody's done ... what he's done for the players in the game," the Edmonton Oilers captain said of the former Detroit Red Wings star. "It's amazing. You can't say enough good things about him."

On the ice, Lindsay, nicknamed "Terrible Ted," was a Hall of Famer and one of the fiercest competitors in NHL history. Off it, he fought for the players.

In the late 1950s, Lindsay filed an antitrust lawsuit against the league in an attempt to start a players' association. While the bold move fell short, it laid the groundwork for the establishment of the NHL Players' Association in 1967.

McDavid, 22, said it's important today's players understand Lindsay's contributions to hockey.

"We all grew up playing this game, loving this game and kind of want to see how this game got to where it is today," McDavid said prior to the game. "He's obviously somebody that's played a huge role in basically starting the PA and giving the players a voice. It's pretty special what he's done for the players."

McDavid then mentioned he read Monday morning Lindsay refused to attend his Hall of Fame induction in 1966 because wives and families weren't invited to the ceremony.

"That's amazing," McDavid said. "That just shows what he's about. He was not afraid to stand up to anyone and stand up for what he believed in."

The Ted Lindsay Award is given to the most outstanding player selected by the NHLPA. McDavid won the award in 2016-17 and 2017-18.

The Sabres honored Lindsay with a moment of silence before the game.

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Keith Gretzky, Edmonton's interim general manager, was a third-round pick by the Sabres in 1985, 56th overall. Gretzky, Wayne's brother, spent parts of two seasons in the AHL with the Rochester Americans.

Amerks split weekend set w with Syracuse after 4-1 loss to Crunch
13Wham
By: *Staff Report/Amerks.com*

After allowing a season-high three power-play goals to the Syracuse Crunch (35-17-3-2) during Sunday afternoon's contest at The Blue Cross Arena, the Rochester Americans (35-18-3-2) could not complete the home-and-home sweep against their North Division rival as they came out on the short end of a 4-1 decision.

Despite the defeat, the Amerks have collected 29 out of a possible 42 points in their last 21 games and have notched 37 points in their last 28 dating back Dec. 26. Rochester, however, did see the Crunch grab a share of the top spot in the AHL's North Division standings while Syracuse also has a game in hand.

For the second time as in many games, Alexander Nylander got on the scoreboard as he notched his 10th goal of the campaign for the Amerks, who have earned at least one point in seven of the first nine meetings this season against Syracuse. Starting in the Rochester crease for the second straight night and sixth time in the last seven games, goaltender Scott Wedgewood (22-10-2) took the loss while stopping 23 of the 26 shots he faced. Over his last 18 games, the sixth-year goaltender shows a 13-4-1 record dating back to Dec. 26.

Mitchell Stephens (1+1) recorded his second consecutive two-point night while Carter Verhaeghe and Cory Conacher both chipped in a pair of helpers in the win for Syracuse. Alex Barre-Boulet, Boris Katchouk and Andy Andreoff all rounded out the scoring as Martin Ouellette made 36 saves in his second start of the season for the Crunch.

While being on the two-man advantage midway through the first period, the Crunch grabbed a 1-0 lead with 12:36 left in the first stanza. Seconds after being robbed by Wedgewood, Verhaeghe dished a pass to Andreoff to the right of the Amerks net and quickly fired a shot overtop the right shoulder and into the back of the net.

Early in the second period, the Amerks, despite being called for five penalties in the opening 20 minutes, tied the game at one as Nylander blasted a shot top corner near the right circle at the 3:57 mark. Matt Tennyson and Taylor Leier both were credited with the assists on the goal.

The game remained even at one for less than five minutes before the Crunch netted another power-play goal at the 6:38 mark of the frame. After being stopped on the initial shot, Verhaeghe sent a cross-ice pass to Barre-Boulet and the rookie connected on the feed for his 27th of the campaign and a 2-1 Syracuse lead.

Before the end of the middle frame, the Crunch tacked on their third goal the afternoon while on the man-advantage to take a 3-1 advantage into the intermission. Just 18 seconds after being whistled for interference, the Amerks thought they received a break as they knocked down a pass to the left of the net, but Stephens was there to roof the puck into the cage with eight minutes to go in the frame.

Rochester came out in the third period and tested Ouellette early and often during the final stanza as they trailed by a pair of markers, but the 27-year-old netminder stood tall as he turned aside all 17 shots he faced.

Syracuse added a late empty-net goal to record the 4-1 win.

The Amerks return to action on Friday, Mar. 8 as the Amerks and Bridgeport Sound Tigers close out their season-series at 7:05 p.m. at The Blue Cross Arena. Following the matchup, the Amerks face the Binghamton Devils in the first of back-to-back meetings to conclude the weekend. All three games will be carried live on The Sports Leader AM 950/95.7 FM ESPN Rochester as well as AHLTV.

Too many penalties cost the Amerks dearly in loss to Crunch
Pickin' Splinters
By: *Kevin Oklobzija*

It was bad enough that the Rochester Americans gave the Syracuse Crunch five power plays in the first period, creating a 1-0 deficit.

But then, just 2:03 after Alex Nylander's 10th goal tied the score for the Amerks early in the second period, defenseman Will Borgen cross-checked and roughed up Crunch super-pest and super scorer Cory Conacher.

Boom, another power play for the Crunch, another power play goal, and the Amerks ended up on the wrong end of a 4-1 score on Sunday afternoon.

With a chance to extend their lead in the American Hockey League's North Division to four points, the Amerks instead stumbled. Undisciplined play led to three power-play goals (on eight chances) for the Crunch.

As a result, Syracuse (35-17-3-2) and Rochester (35-17-3-2) now each have 75 points, but the Crunch are technically in first place because they have played one fewer game.

"There's 76 games in a year — it's hard to win all the ones you want to win," center Taylor Leier said.

He was looking at the big picture, with victories in Utica (3-1 on Wednesday) and Syracuse (5-3 on Saturday) providing four of a possible six points.

Still, it's difficult not to think the Amerks failed themselves by losing on Sunday, when the Crunch were playing for the third time in three days.

"When you get the first two, especially on the road, and you're coming back to your building, it's a little disappointing," coach Chris Taylor said.

That the Amerks allowed just one power play goal despite being short-handed for more than six minutes, including two extended five-on-three Crunch power plays, was a minor miracle.

But then more penalties led to two more power-play goals for Syracuse in the second period.

Borgen said he was at fault for the not-so-wise penalty. His coach, however, pretty much absolved his rookie defenseman of any significant blame.

Borgen was responding to Conacher's well-after-the-whistle slash on goalie Scott Wedgewood, who had frozen the puck in his glove.

"He slashed our goalie after he covered it and I got the retaliation," Borgen said. "That's on me."

A common-sense assessment of the situation was that Borgen figured Conacher was surely getting a penalty for the blatant slash. Thus, at the very worst, the manpower alteration caused by any penalties would be evened up.

"I think that's what he thought," Taylor said of Borgen. "Honestly, I think Conacher knew he was coming after him; he knew he did something."

The referees, Shaun Davis and Tim Mayer, didn't see it that way, however. They gave Borgen the only penalty, and just 38 seconds into the ensuing power play, Alex Barre-Boulet fired home a Carter Verhaeghe.

"He slashed our goalie, we're here to defend everyone," Taylor said of Borgen's response.

Remi Elie's interference penalty 50 feet from the puck led to a Mitchell Stephens' man-up goal at 12:00 of the second and the Amerks — who went 0-for-5 on the power play — couldn't overcome the 3-1 deficit.

"We took too many penalties," Nylander said. "That kind old wasn't so good."

Taylor was diplomatic in defense of the special teams failures by his team.

"Let's not make too much of it," he said. "We're top five in the league and top seven in the league in power play and penalty kill."

Amerks split weekend with 4-1 loss to Crunch
Rochester First
By: *Staff Report/Amerks.com*

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Amerks fall to Crunch, drop back into a tie for first in division

Buffalo News

By: *Staff Report*

It was the third game in 44 hours for the Syracuse and it was on the road. It made no difference. The Crunch finished the game with three unanswered goals in a 4-1 victory over the Rochester American at Blue Cross Arena. Syracuse scored three goals with the man advantage and added an empty-net score.

The victory put Syracuse (35-18-5) into a tie with the Amerks (35-17-5) for first place with 75 points each in the North Division of the American Hockey League. And, the Crunch has a game in hand on Rochester.

Alexander Nylander scored the only Rochester goal, tying the game at 1-1 at 3:57 of the second period. Andy Andreoff had given Syracuse the first lead with a power-play goal, his 22nd of the season, at 7:24 of the opening period. The game stayed tied for less than three minutes. Syracuse broke the deadlock when Alex Barre-Boulet scored, again on the power play, at 6:38.

Mitchell Stephens made it 3-1 with his third goal in two games against Rochester. It came at the 12-minute mark of the third period, his ninth of the season.

Boris Katchouk added the empty-net tally with Stephens getting the assist.

Syracuse was helped by 20 minutes in penalties incurred by the Amerks and was 3 for 8 on the power play. Rochester was 0 for 5 with the advantage.

Rochester had a 37-27 advantage in shots on goal, but Syracuse goalie Martin Ouellette, the game's first star, stopped 36 of them. Scott Wedgewood had 23 saves for Rochester.

Carter Verhaeghe had two assists for Syracuse and was second star. Nylander was the third star with his 10 goal of the season, his second in the last two games.

Rochester can look ahead to a three-game weekend this week. The Amerks will be home against the Bridgeport Sound Tigers at 7:05 p.m. on Friday. Then face the Binghamton Devils in a home-and-home series, Saturday night in Binghamton and Sunday afternoon at Blue Cross Arena.

Amerks split weekend with Syracuse
C&C Worldwide
By: *Staff Report*

After allowing a season-high three power-play goals to the Syracuse Crunch (35-17-3-2) during Sunday afternoon's contest at the Blue Cross Arena, the Rochester Americans (35-18-3-2) could not complete the home-and-home sweep against their North Division rival as they came out on the short end of a 4-1 decision.

Despite the defeat, the Amerks have collected 29 out of a possible 42 points in their last 21 games and have notched 37 points in their last 28 dating back Dec. 26. Rochester, however, did see the Crunch grab a share of the top spot in the AHL's North Division standings while Syracuse also has a game in hand.

For the second time as in many games, Alexander Nylander got on the scoreboard as he notched his 10th goal of the campaign for the Amerks, who have earned at least one point in seven of the first nine meetings this season against Syracuse. Starting in the Rochester crease for the second straight night and sixth time in the last seven games, goaltender Scott Wedgewood (22-10-2) took the loss while stopping 23 of the 26 shots he faced. Over his last 18 games, the sixth-year goaltender shows a 13-4-1 record dating back to Dec. 26.

Mitchell Stephens (1+1) recorded his second consecutive two-point night while Carter Verhaeghe and Cory Conacher both chipped in a pair of helpers in the win for Syracuse. Alex Barre-Boulet, Boris Katchouk and Andy Andreoff all rounded out the scoring as Martin Ouellette made 36 saves in his second start of the season for the Crunch.

While being on the two-man advantage midway through the first period, the Crunch grabbed a 1-0 lead with 12:36 left in the first stanza. Seconds after being robbed by Wedgewood, Verhaeghe dished a pass to Andreoff to the right of the Amerks net and quickly fired a shot overtop the right shoulder and into the back of the net.

Early in the second period, the Amerks, despite being called for five penalties in the opening 20 minutes, tied the game at one as Nylander blasted a shot top corner near the right circle at the 3:57 mark. Matt Tennyson and Taylor Leier both were credited with the assists on the goal.

The game remained even at one for less than five minutes before the Crunch netted another power-play goal at the 6:38 mark of the frame. After being stopped on the initial shot, Verhaeghe sent a cross-ice pass to Barre-Boulet and the rookie connected on the feed for his 27th of the campaign and a 2-1 Syracuse lead.

Before the end of the middle frame, the Crunch tacked on their third goal the afternoon while on the man-advantage to take a 3-1 advantage into the intermission. Just 18 seconds after being whistled for interference, the Amerks thought they received a break as they knocked down a pass to the left of the net, but Stephens was there to roof the puck into the cage with eight minutes to go in the frame.

Rochester came out in the third period and tested Ouellette early and often during the final stanza as they trailed by a pair of markers, but the 27-year-old netminder stood tall as he turned aside all 17 shots he faced.

Syracuse added a late empty-net goal to record the 4-1 win.

The Amerks return to action on Friday, Mar. 8 as the Amerks and Bridgeport Sound Tigers close out their season-series at 7:05 pm at the Blue Cross Arena. Following the matchup, the Amerks face the Binghamton Devils in the first of back-to-back meetings to conclude the weekend.

Crunch splits with Rochester, regains share of first

Syracuse.com

By: *Staff Report*

The Syracuse Crunch scored three power-play goals as they topped the Rochester Americans, 4-1, tonight at Blue Cross Arena. The win gives the Crunch four of a possible six points on the weekend's three-in-three and moves the team back into a tie with Rochester for the North Division lead with 75 points. The Crunch is now 35-17-3-2 on the season and 4-3-1-1 in the 12-game series with the Amerks.

Goaltender Martin Ouellette recorded the win with 36 saves in net for the Crunch. Scott Wedgewood turned aside 23-of-26 between the pipes for the Amerks. Syracuse converted on 3-of-8 power play opportunities and went a perfect 5-for-5 on the penalty kill.

The Crunch opened scoring during 5-on-3 play 7:24 into the first period. Carter Verhaeghe dug the puck out from the end boards and passed it for Andy Andreoff to net while all alone in the bottom of the left circle. Cory Conacher tallied the secondary helper.

The Amerks evened the score 3:57 into the middle stanza. Alexander Nylander kept the puck in the zone at the blue line, skated to the top of the right circle and ripped a slap shot just under the crossbar. Matt Tennyson and Taylor Leier earned the assists.

Syracuse regained the lead two minutes later with another man-up goal. Verhaeghe found a lane for a cross-zone feed that set Alex Barre-Boulet up for a backdoor one-timer from the right circle. Conacher made it a multi-point game with the helper.

The Crunch power play connected for another goal at the 12-minute mark of the middle stanza. Ross Colton's centering feed from below the goal line was broken up, but Mitchell Stephens got a stick on the loose puck and shoveled it in. Cal Foote recorded a point on the goal.

With 1:09 remaining in the game, Boris Katchouk potted an empty-netter with the help of Stephens to secure the win.

The Crunch travel to face the Utica Comets on Wednesday at 7 p.m.

Notes: The Crunch have recorded five power-play goals against the Amerks in the last two games. . . Barre-Boulet leads the league with 14 power-play goals. . . The Syracuse penalty kill is 16-for-16 in the last four games.

Crunch top Amerks 4-1

Local SYR

By: *Staff Report*

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Amerks back in first place alone after win over Crunch

Buffalo News

By: *Staff Report*

Rochester pulled back in front of the Syracuse for first place in the North Division of the American Hockey League with a 5-3 triumph over the Crunch on Saturday at the Onondaga War Memorial in Syracuse. It was the first of two weekend games between the teams. The teams will meet at 3 p.m. on Sunday at Blue Cross Arena in Rochester.

Taylor Leier scored twice for the Amerks in the victory giving him five goals in 16 games with Rochester since he was acquired from Lehigh Valley Phantoms in exchange for Justin Bailey on Jan. 17.

Leier scored a short-handed goal to give Rochester the lead at 3:40 of the opening period. C.J. Smith and William Borgen had assists on the goal.

Alexander Nylander scored unassisted just 10 seconds into the second period to make it 2-0. It was his ninth of the season but first since Jan. 4, a span of 14 games.

Mitchell Stephens' power-play goal for Syracuse made it 2-1 at 11:53, but Leier scored his second of the game and 15th AHL goal of the season to make it 3-1 at 13:43.

Stephens answered with another goal at 9:37 of the third, but Victor Olofsson and Smith tallied for the Amerks to make it 5-2.

Ross Colton scored for Syracuse with the man advantage with 1:16 left.

Rochester (35-27-5) leads Syracuse (34-17-5) by two points in the standings. Sunday's game will be the third in three days for the Crunch, which moved into a tie for first with a 4-0 victory on Friday on home ice against Lehigh Valley.

Amerks take first of two from Syracuse

C&C Worldwide

By: *Staff Report/Amerks.com*

Four different skaters turned in multi-point efforts to lead the Rochester Americans (35-17-3-2) to a 5-3 victory over the Syracuse Crunch (34-17-3-2) Saturday night at the War Memorial Arena in the first game a weekend home-and-home series between the two teams.

With the win, the Amerks have collected 29 out of a possible 40 points in their last 20 games and have notched 37 points in their last 27 dating back to a 4-0 shutout win in Cleveland on Dec. 26. More importantly, Rochester, again, regained the top spot in the AHL's North Division standings heading into tomorrow afternoon's rematch with the Crunch to kick-off the month of March.

Taylor Leier recorded his first two-goal outing as an Amerk while Alexander Nylander and C.J. Smith each tallied a goal along with an assist for Rochester, which has earned at least one point in seven of the first eight meetings with the Crunch this season. Zach Redmond collected a pair of assists to bring his season point total to 47, which matches a career-high, while Scott Wedgewood (22-9-2) earned his 14th win in the last 17 games. With the victory, his 22nd of the campaign, he extended his personal win streak to equal a season-long five games.

Mitchell Stephens chipped in a two-goal effort for Syracuse, which suffered just its sixth regulation loss on home ice this season, while Ross Colton rounded out the scoring. Goaltender Eddie Pasquale, who posted his third shutout of the campaign Friday night, stopped 37 of a season-high 42 shots but suffered the loss.

As the contest was winding down and Rochester holding a one-goal cushion, the Amerks tallied a pair of insurance-markers 58 seconds apart to take a 5-2 lead with just under five minutes to play in regulation.

On the first goal, Olofsson, who was skating with the puck along the near boards, attempted to center a pass along the goal-line towards Rasmus Asplund and Andrew Oglevie. With luck on his side, the shot snuck behind Pasquale at the 15:42 mark and gave Rochester a 4-2 lead with 4:18 to play in regulation. On the ensuing shift, Nylander, who celebrated his 21st birthday yesterday, was in same right corner of the Crunch zone and sent a cross-ice pass to Smith. The Amerks reigning Rookie of the Year crept in back-door and tapped it home to make it a three-goal advantage.

With Smith's 20th goal of the season, the Amerks join the Crunch as the only team in the AHL this season with three skaters with 20 or more goals (Olofsson-22, Redmond-21). Additionally, Smith has continued on his point-per-game pace, as he has 28 points (14+14) in his last 23 games dating back to Dec. 5, having only been held scoreless just four times over that stretch.

Syracuse attempted to mount a comeback as they made it a 5-3 game with 1:16 to go in regulation, but Wedgewood held off the attack to record the victory.

Less than four minutes into the game, the Amerks were whistled for the first penalty of the night. While on the penalty kill, the puck made its way near the top of the Rochester blueline and Smith swiped it out of the zone. Skating towards center ice, Leier gathered the puck and raced in all alone towards Pasquale. With the Crunch defenders behind him, Leier fired a shot over the right pad of the netminder for his 14th tally of the slate to give the Amerks a 1-0 lead.

After emerging from the dressing room with a one-goal advantage, the Amerks quickly doubled their lead as Nylander scored his ninth of the season just 10 seconds into the middle frame. The former first-round pick found a loose puck just inside the offensive zone and took a few strides towards the center of the ice. As Nylander was in-between the dots, he snapped a shot over the blocker of the Crunch goaltender for his ninth of the campaign.

The Crunch did not go away quietly, however, as they drew their fourth penalty of the night near the midway point of the frame and capitalized on the man-advantage as Stephens connected on a shot from just outside Wedgewood's crease for his first of two on the night.

The tally made it a 2-1 game at the 11:53 mark of the second period, but the Amerks were quick to answer. Just 1:50 later, Leier steered in a Lawrence Pilot shot for his second of the game and to restore Rochester's two-goal lead going into the intermission.

Much like in the second period, Syracuse trimmed the Amerks lead in half despite being outshot 31-13 to start the final frame. Carter Verhaeghe entered the Rochester zone with the puck and fired it towards Wedgewood. As the sixth-year netminder made the initial save, the rebound was put into the cage by Stephens to pull the Crunch within one.

Following the goal that made it 3-2 at the 9:37 mark, the Amerks scored a pair of goals less than 60 seconds apart and then survived a late push for the 5-3 victory, giving them 75 points on the season and sole possession of first place in the North Division standings.

After a quick turnaround, the Amerks and Crunch get right back at it as the home-and-home series shifts to The Blue Cross Arena on Sunday, March 3 for a 3:05 p.m. matinee in downtown Rochester. The North Division matchup will be carried live on The Sports Leader AM 950/95.7 FM ESPN Rochester as well as AHLTV.

Amerks take first of two with Crunch 5-2, move back into first in North
13 Wham
By: *Staff Report/Amerks.com*

Four different skaters turned in multi-point efforts to lead the Rochester Americans (35-17-3-2) to a 5-3 victory over the Syracuse Crunch (34-17-3-2) Saturday night at the War Memorial Arena in the first game a weekend home-and-home series between the two teams.

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Rochester Amerks dump Syracuse Crunch back into second
Syracuse.com
By: *Staff Report*

Only two points separate the first- and second-place teams in the AHL's North Division, although the difference looked a lot greater than that on Saturday.

Taylor Leier scored twice for Rochester and the Amerks dominated beyond what the final score indicated to grab a 5-3 win over Syracuse in the War Memorial.

The win broke a first-place tie in the North Division and gives Rochester a 75-73 points lead over the Crunch. Syracuse was trying to take over sole possession of first place in the grouping for the first time this season.

But the Amerks would have none of that, controlling play for most of the game. Rochester held a 42-26 edge in shots, including 21-5 in the second. Mitchell Stephens was the lone bright spot for the Crunch, tallying twice.

"Rochester was, by far, the best team on the ice tonight. They deserved their win," said Syracuse coach Ben Groulx. "Everything they did was good. They forced us to make mistakes, and we weren't good enough."

Crunch netminder Eddie Pasquale, making his sixth-straight start, stopped 37 shots. Rochester's Scott Wedgewood denied 23.

The loss snapped a 12 game Syracuse home points streak.

Syracuse visits the Amerks on Sunday in what could be another twist in some trade drama ahead of Monday's AHL swap deadline.

Groulx said Pasquale won't get the start, indicating it will likely go to Martin Ouellette. Ouellette was called up from Orlando of the ECHL on Thursday because the organization wanted to get another look at him.

But Ouellette has been with either Syracuse or Orlando all season, so Tampa Bay knows exactly what he brings to the table.

Meanwhile, a seemingly tired Pasquale got back-to-back starts Friday and Saturday, perhaps suggesting he's getting showcased for a possible trade in the right situation.

Second-year pro Connor Ingram (14-7, 2.26, .922 save percentage, six shutouts), would certainly have the organization's confidence as a playoff stopper and Tampa Bay probably wants to see how he responds in that role. He didn't dress Friday or Saturday, although Groulx said he's healthy.

While having a Pasquale/Ingram postseason tandem would be great for the Crunch, if Pasquale could bring a veteran playmaking defenseman in return, that'd be something to consider. The Crunch is OK in that area now, although it's likely either veteran Jan Rutta or Cameron Gaunce would get a look in Tampa Bay during the Lightning's postseason.

Rochester used its middle stanza dominance to build a 3-1 lead after 40 minutes.

Alexander Nylander needed just 10 second to change the scoreboard, gathering the opening faceoff and lining a shot from the right circle past Pasquale's stick side for 2-0 Rochester edge.

Stephens answered that with a power-play marker from just outside the crease with 9:07 left, but Leier countered with a deflection less that two minutes later for his second of the game and a 3-1 Rochester cushion.

"I think we weren't playing north-south hockey. We were turning pucks over. This late in the season, you just have to learn from the mistakes you made and regroup because we play them again tomorrow," Stephens said. "We're both two skilled, fast teams I think when we play our structure, when we play hard, we play fast against them, we give ourselves a good chance to win.

Coming down to the last 20 games of the season, that's how we have to play every night."

Stephens struck again at the 9:37 mark of the third to make it a one-goal game again, but Victor Olofsson and C.J. Smith beat Pasquale less than a minute apart late in the game to ice the contest.

The Amerks posted a short-handed goal as the only marker of the first. Smith banged the puck off the boards in the Rochester end, and it bounced through three Crunch players and onto the stick of Leier. That set Leier up for a breakaway, and Leier beat Pasquale 5-hole at the 3:40 mark.

Sabres' Scott Wilson contributing again after stint with Amerks
Buffalo Hockey Beat
By: *Staff Report*

When the Sabres waived winger Scott Wilson and assigned him to the AHL in early January, it wasn't a normal demotion to the minors.

Having won two Stanley Cups over nearly three years in the NHL, Wilson was already an established talent.

A season ago, Wilson earned regular duty with the Sabres, playing 49 games following his arrival from the Detroit Red Wings.

But Wilson, who will face his old team, the Pittsburgh Penguins, for the first time tonight, broke his right ankle Sept. 30. After missing more than three months, he needed to play games.

So on Jan. 9, the Sabres sent Wilson to the Rochester Americans, his first stint in the AHL since early 2016.

Wilson's acclimation to game action was a little slow. Early on, he said he even felt a step behind in practices.

"That kind of took longer than I thought," Wilson said of his skating legs. "You feel good in practice and you go in games and you're getting tired faster. You just feel not as fast."

Instead of rushing Wilson back and giving him a handful of games, the Sabres kept him in Rochester for more than five weeks.

"You got to take it day-by-day," Wilson said. "I think sometimes I'd wake up and I wouldn't be feeling good with regards to my foot and stuff. Some days I was feeling better. Kind of once you kind of string a few together and not have too many of those days that you're feeling a little bit off, you kind of get (on) a roll."

"I think the biggest thing is just kind of focusing every day doing the same things."

Finally, after compiling three goals and seven points over 17 appearances, the Sabres recalled Wilson last Friday.

"It's kind of good for me in a way," Wilson said of going to the AHL. "I think it had been three years or so. It was a little different just being down there, but they got a great group of guys down there."

Wilson said "the last 10 days is probably when I felt the best."

Tonight will be Wilson's fourth straight appearance. Sabres coach Phil Housley has mostly utilized him as a fourth-line winger.

"He's done a terrific job down there in his game and developing his game," Housley said inside KeyBank Center. "But I really like the way he's brought it since he's been here. He's creating offense down low, he's finishing his checks, he's tough to play against. He's a very reliable player."

Wilson, a regular during the Penguins' run to the Cup in 2017, said he doesn't have any extra motivation facing his old team.

"It's been a couple years now, so it's not super, super fresh," Wilson said.

Sabres notes: Tage Thompson understands development takes time
Buffalo Hockey Beat
By: *Staff Report*

Tage Thompson said he views his development as a marathon, not a sprint. Having played only 97 NHL games, the Buffalo Sabres winger understands he's raw.

"Everyone's got their own path," Thompson said prior to Saturday's 5-2 loss to the Maple Leafs. "It's going to take a little bit of time. You never want to rush into things."

So Thompson, 21, has embraced the Sabres' plan for him. While they've kept him in the NHL all season, his opportunities have sometimes been limited.

Early in the campaign, the Sabres scratched him seven out of nine games. After months of regular duty, he has sat out twice in the last month, including Tuesday's 5-2 road loss to the Philadelphia Flyers.

"I don't think they're doing it to punish you," Thompson said of getting scratched. "They're not angry at you. It's to help you and help my development and help the team as well. That goes back to the marathon not a sprint part. They have the best interest out for me. I trust them, I trust their decision making."

At times during his first season in Buffalo, Thompson has showcased the talents of an elite power forward.

But after scoring four times in six games after returning to the lineup in November, he has mustered just three goals in 36 outings.

The former first-round pick possesses a lethal shot and speed. Once he learns how to better utilize his 6-foot-6, 205-pound frame — he mentioned moving his feet and protecting the puck — his consistency should improve.

"When I'm doing those two things, using my body, that's where you see me holding on to the puck a little longer, making plays," said Thompson, a big piece of the Ryan O'Reilly trade with the St. Louis Blues.

In Friday's 4-3 overtime win against the Pittsburgh Penguins, Thompson displayed strong chemistry on a line beside center Casey Mittelstadt and Scott Wilson.

"They attacked the game," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "(They had) a lot of really good rushes into the offensive zone, and when they got into the offensive zone, they created, they were first to pucks, they protected the puck well. They got to continue to do that. I do like the speed element on that line."

The trio skated together again Saturday inside Scotiabank Arena. Thompson endured a rough night, compiling zero shots and a minus-2 rating. He also look weak defensively on Martin Marincin's early scoring chance.

The Sabres' plan for Thompson now includes a possible trip to Rochester. In a paper move on Monday, the Sabres sent him to the Americans, making him eligible for the AHL playoffs.

"When the time comes, we'll cross that bridge," Thompson said of going to the AHL, a place where he hasn't played since last season. "But right now, my focus is here."

Thompson played 10 AHL playoff games with the Chicago Wolves in 2016-17 after leaving UConn.

—

Thanks to the Sabres' late-game comeback and winger Conor Sheary's exploits in Friday's thrilling victory, goalie Linus Ullmark's 41-save effort almost got overshadowed.

Ullmark, 25, was terrific all night, especially early as the Penguins pumped 33 shots on him in the opening 40 minutes. Fresh off that outing, it seemed like Ullmark might earn a well-deserved night off Saturday.

But Housley started Ullmark against the Leafs.

"We just felt the play of Linus last game deserved to get him back in the net," Housley said.

Housley's move isn't without precedent. He started goalie Carter Hutton in Monday's 5-3 loss here and again Tuesday in Philadelphia. Hutton, however, was pulled from Monday's contest.

It was the first time Ullmark started games on back-to-back days this season.

Notes: The start of the game was delayed about nine minutes because a pane of glass had to be replaced. . . . The Sabres made one lineup change Saturday, inserting defenseman Marco Scandella, who missed Friday's game with an upper-body injury, for Matt Hunwick. . . . The Leafs scratched former Sabres winger Tyler Ennis so newcomer Nic Petan could play.

Sabres' Tage Thompson not ready to think about joining Amerks for playoffs

Buffalo News

By: *Staff Report*

No matter the outcome of the regular season's final five weeks, Tage Thompson knows he will likely be playing playoff hockey next month. The only question is whether he will be in Buffalo or Rochester.

The Sabres' 21-year-old winger was told by General Manager Jason Botterill this week that he will likely join the Amerks for the AHL Calder Cup playoffs if the Sabres are unable to make a playoff run over the season's final month.

Thompson is not interested in thinking about playing in the AHL again. His focus is on improving his game enough now to earn the trust of coach Phil Housley and help the Sabres snap their playoff drought.

"I spoke to Botts about it, but our mindset is here, right now, and helping Buffalo," Thompson told The News following Friday's optional morning skate in KeyBank Center. "I want to do everything in my power to help our team here make the playoffs. We'll cross that bridge if or when it comes."

Thompson, who was acquired along with Patrik Berglund, Vladimir Sobotka and draft picks from St. Louis in the Ryan O'Reilly trade, had seven goals among 11 points with a minus-14 rating in 54 games entering Friday.

He had not scored in 12 consecutive games and had one goal in 16 games. That is not the sole reason why he was a healthy scratch Tuesday night in Philadelphia, though. Thompson is at his best when using his speed to get to the net and unleashing his heavy right-handed shot to get the puck on net.

He also needs to use his 6-foot-6, 205-pound frame to finish checks and gain leverage on opponents. Too often Thompson has tried to stick-handle around defenders, which has rendered him ineffective.

"I think it's important for him to get his feet moving," Housley said. "That's when he's a much better player. When he's standing still and trying to stick-handle through people it doesn't bode well for him, but when he's moving his feet and using his speed, because he is a fast player, he attacks the game the right way and he uses that deadly release. ... He just has to get back to his foundation of moving his feet."

Entering Friday, Thompson, who was officially assigned to Rochester on Monday to make him eligible for the Calder Cup playoffs and recalled hours later, was averaging just 12 minutes, 23 seconds per game — including eight minutes, 40 seconds Monday in Toronto — and ranked second-to-last among qualifying Sabres with a 46.46 percent Corsi, a measurement of 5-on-5 shot differential.

He was acquired for his offensive upside with the hope that his defensive play would improve with more NHL service time. Thompson split last season between St. Louis and its AHL affiliate, scoring three goals among nine points in 41 games with the Blues.

The Sabres opted to keep Thompson in the NHL this season, even when he was a healthy scratch in seven of nine games earlier this season. He earned a spot on the team's top line for a 4-3 loss in Carolina last month, only to tumble down the depth chart

because of his defensive lapses and offensive tendencies. Now he's not generating enough chances and admitted he is pressing at times.

Thomson drew back into the lineup Friday against Pittsburgh, but he could be scratched again when Sobotka returns from an upper-body injury. The son of a former NHL player and current AHL coach, Thomson said his focus is on what he can control — performing well enough to remain in the Sabres' lineup the rest of the season.

"It's a marathon, not a sprint," Thomson said. "I want to be here for a long time. I want to help the Sabres win Stanley Cups for years to come. I'm a young guy. It's part of the development. You're going to go through ups and downs throughout your season, throughout your career. For me, it's keeping that mindset that when I'm not getting minutes just work hard and be strong in one-on-one puck battles. Do everything to help the team when I'm not contributing offensively."

Jack Dougherty 'keeps it simple' for Amerks
Buffalo News
By: *Bill Hoppe*

On a blue line featuring some of the American Hockey League's most dynamic stars, Jack Dougherty's talents can easily be overlooked.

Americans star Zach Redmond has scored 21 times in only 44 games and could break the AHL's single-season record for most goals by a defenseman.

Redmond's partner, Lawrence Pilut, has established himself as one of the league's slickest defenders, compiling 22 points in his first 17 outings.

And before the Buffalo Sabres traded Brendan Guhle to the Anaheim Ducks on Sunday, the prospect ranked among the AHL's best puck-moving defensemen.

All three earned a spot in the AHL All-Star Game.

Then there's Dougherty, 22, a former second-round pick the Sabres acquired from the Nashville Predators in exchange for winger Nick Baptiste on Oct. 1.

"He just keeps it simple," Amerks coach Chris Taylor said of Dougherty following a 4-2 win over the Cleveland Monsters in Blue Cross Arena on Feb. 20.

Dougherty's game lacks flash. As a stay-at-home defenseman, he just kind of blends in. Through 38 appearances this season, he has compiled one goal and eight points.

"Reliable, consistent," Dougherty said of his style.

The 6-foot-2, 195-pound Dougherty, however, possesses one gaudy number on his stat line: a team-best plus-19 rating.

In the analytics age, plus-minus has lost relevance. Still, when it's that high, you're probably doing a lot of things well.

"When you don't notice a defenseman as much, but you just kind of notice his plus-minus keep going up and up and up, that's a good sign of a defensive defenseman like him," Taylor said.

But count Dougherty among those who pay little attention to the plus-minus metric.

"We've played this game long enough we can look at our game and feel that we're doing the right things without looking at the stats," Dougherty said. "I don't look too deep into plus-minus because there's four other guys on the ice with you who could also have an impact on the play and sometimes you're just out there."

Dougherty, who showcases strong mobility for a defensive-minded defenseman, has developed into a solid prospect. One scout said he could play NHL games some day.

“He’s one of those guys that stays inside the dots, doesn’t get outside the dots too often, that’s (where) big mistakes happen,” Taylor said. “He’s a guy that when he gets to the blue line, he gets pucks down to the net, he doesn’t overhandle pucks, he doesn’t put himself in bad situations.

“He’s always on the right side of the puck, so it makes things easier.”

It took Dougherty time to earn Taylor’s trust. A lower-body injury he suffered in his second appearance sidelined him 12 games. The Amerks have had a surfeit of defensemen all season – they started the season with 10 – so guys have been moving in and out. Dougherty sat out Saturday.

“We didn’t play him for a little bit,” Taylor said. “We had a lot of guys in the lineup at that point, we didn’t really know much about him. He’s slowly gained our trust. He’s become a big part of our team.”

Joining the Amerks has energized Dougherty, who said earlier this season he felt like he was “stuck in a rut” after playing two AHL seasons with the Milwaukee Admirals.

His teammates and the coaching staff, a group he said has “just a genuine wish to see guys succeed,” have helped Dougherty’s transition to a new team.

“Just figuring out what game they want me to play and what game’s got me to this level (has helped),” Dougherty said.

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Last season, the Amerks didn’t have a 20-goal scorer for the second time in team history. This year, they already have two: Redmond and winger Victor Olofsson.

Olofsson, who’s in his first North American season, hit the mark Friday.

Three other Amerks – wingers Wayne Simpson (19 goals), Danny O’Regan (18) and C.J. Smith (18) – could each score their 20th goal soon.

The Sabres sent O’Regan back to the Amerks on Wednesday.

The Amerks haven’t had five 20-goal scorers since 2000-01, when Taylor scored 21 in his second season playing in Rochester. Redmond needs nine goals to tie John Slaney’s AHL record for goals by a defenseman, set with the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins in 1999-00.

Amerks skate past Utica, move back into first place

C&C Worldwide

By: *Staff Report/Amerks.com*

Thanks in part to a pair of third-period goals from Victor Olofsson and Remi Elie, as well as a near-perfect performance from goaltender Scott Wedgewood, the Rochester Americans (34-17-3-2) closed out the month of February with a 3-1 victory over the North Division rival Utica Comets (29-21-5-2) Wednesday night at Adirondack Bank Center.

With the win, the Amerks have collected 27 out of a possible 38 points in their last 19 games and have notched 35 points in their last 26 dating back to a 4-0 shutout win in Cleveland on Dec. 26. More importantly, Rochester regained the top spot in the AHL's North Division standings heading into this weekend's crucial home-and-home series with the Syracuse Crunch to start the final full month of the 2018-19 regular season. The Crunch remain just two points back of the Amerks with two games in hand on Rochester.

Forwards C.J. Smith notched his 19th goal of the season and 26th point (13+13) in his last 22 games dating back to Dec. 5, while Olofsson and Elie rounded out the scoring for the Amerks. Olofsson grabbed a share of the team lead with his 21st goal of the campaign to go along with his team-high 26 assists and 47 points, whereas Elie extended his point streak to five games as he collected his fifth goal in the last seven games. Wedgewood earned his 13th win in the last 16 games and stopped 30 shots on the night. With his 21st victory of the season, which is second-most in the AHL, Wedgewood has established a new pro career-high in wins as he boasts a 21-9-2 record.

Reid Boucher tied his own franchise record with his 25th goal of the season to put Utica on the scoreboard while former Amerks netminder Michael Leighton made 29 saves but was handed his second straight loss.

Much like the second period where the Amerks broke a tie game in the first minute of play, the visitors did the same in the third frame, as Olofsson scored his 21st just 21 seconds in, thus giving Rochester a one-goal cushion.

The Amerks dumped the puck in the offensive zone, and as the puck made its way near the goal-mouth, Danny O'Regan, who was reassigned earlier in the day from the Buffalo Sabres, swiped it across the crease to Olofsson. The Swedish forward quickly flipped it into the net past Leighton for his 21st of the season from O'Regan and Rasmus Asplund.

Rochester then made it a 3-1 score as Elie tucked a shot under the crossbar at the 6:55 mark. Sean Malone, playing in his 100th AHL game, earned the primary assist after the Buffalo native stepped in front of an outlet pass and handed Elie the puck near the Utica blueline.

The Comets attempted to mount a comeback as they were given their fourth power-play of the night before pulling Leighton for the extra attacker for the final two minutes, but Wedgewood stopped all 10 shots he faced during the period to preserve the win for Rochester.

The 3-1 victory gives the Amerks at least one point in 14 of the last 17 games against Utica dating back to the start of the 2017-18 campaign, going 9-3-2-3 over that span. Additionally, of Rochester's 32 goals this season against the Comets, 13 have been scored while on the power-play.

Following a scoreless opening frame, the Amerks, who drew their first penalty of the night with 47 seconds left in the first period, capitalized on the carryover man-advantage as Smith blasted a slap-shot overtop the glove of Leighton. Matt Tennyson kept the puck from exiting the offensive zone connected with Smith just 55 seconds into the second stanza. With the goal, Smith has recorded 18 points (8+10) since Dec. 26 while being held without a point just once in his last 13 games.

As the middle frame was nearing the end, the Amerks were whistled for a cross-checking infraction and Utica needed only six seconds to tie the game as Boucher tallied his 25th of the slate at the 16:38 mark.

The two clubs entered the intermission break even at 1-1 before Rochester added a pair of goals during the final 20 minutes of play to pick up the win.

The Amerks begin the final full month of the 2018-19 campaign with a home-and-home set against the Syracuse Crunch beginning on Saturday, March 2 at the War Memorial Arena in Syracuse. Following the 7 pm meeting, the series will shift to the Blue Cross Arena in downtown Rochester on Sunday for a 3:05 pm matinee.

**NOTES* — The Buffalo Sabres on Wednesday announced the team has assigned forward Danny O'Regan to the Rochester Americans. . . The Amerks announced that the team's road game originally scheduled for 4 pm on Sunday, March 24 against the Toronto Marlies at Coca-Cola Coliseum has been pushed back to a 5 pm start time. The game time change was made to accommodate another event being held at the venue earlier in the day.

Amerks notch pair in third, take down Comets 3-1

CNYHomepage.com

By: *Lucas Frankel*

The Amerks come to Utica and beat the Comets again.

For the second time in six days, Rochester took down Utica at the Adirondack Bank Center, the latest a 3-1 victory on Wednesday night thanks to a pair of goals in the third period.

Following a scoreless opening frame, C.J. Smith's power-play goal 55 seconds into the second period gave the Amerks a 1-0 lead.

Reid Boucher tied the game at one with a power-play tally of his own with 3:22 left in the frame. It was his 25th of the season, tying his own single-season team record.

In the third, Rochester pulled away with goals from Victor Olofsson and Remi Eli.

Michael Leighton made 29 saves in the losing effort.

The Comets are back at home on Friday night for their first matchup of the season with the Hershey Bears. Puck drop is scheduled for 7pm.

Comets Fall To Amerks After Pair Of Third Period Goals

WKTV

By: *Spencer Davidson*

The Utica Comets losing streak hit three straight games as they lost to the North Division leading, Rochester Americans, 3-1 at the Adirondack Bank Center, Wednesday.

The game was tied through two periods of play, but an early third period tally would prove to be the difference.

Despite many chances in the opening frame, both teams would head into the locker room scoreless.

In the second, just 55 seconds in with the Amerks on a power play, C.J. Smith took a slap shot from the top of the left circle that was redirected past Michael Leighton and into the back of the net to put Rochester on the board.

The Comets tied it up on a power play of their own with 3:22 to go in the stanza. Reid Boucher ripped a wrist shot, glove side on Scott Wedgewood, from the right circle for his team leading 25th of the year. Evan McEneny and Zack MacEwen assisted on the goal.

The Amerks opened up the third with a goal from Victor Olofsson just 22 seconds in, and Remi Elie gave Rochester an insurance marker six minutes later. The Comets unloaded a flurry of shots in the final minutes of the game, but couldn't fool Wedgewood for a second time.

The Amerks goalie finished with 30 saves, while Leighton ended up with 29 for the Comets.

Utica is next in action on Friday night, at home, against the Hershey Bears. Puck drop is at 7 p.m.

Comets can't catch Rochester in home loss

Observer-Dispatch

By: *Ben Birnell*

There will be nights like Wednesday, the ones where the Utica Comets just couldn't capitalize on their opportunities. The Rochester Americans made theirs count, however.

The Amerks scored twice within a six-minute span in the third period to break a tight game, and Scott Wedgewood made 30 saves to hand the Comets a 3-1 setback in the second meeting between the North Division rivals in the last week.

"Rochester just capitalized on a couple more chances," assistant captain Jaime Sifers said. "I thought we had plenty of opportunities to put some pucks in their net and keep some pucks out of our net. I think it just came down to that. I thought it was a good hockey game."

The result meant the third consecutive setback for the Comets (29-21-5-2, 65 points), who had two or three quality chances — Brendan Woods and Brendan Gaunce among them -- near the crease Wednesday that managed to stay out against Wedgewood and the Amerks.

"I thought in areas around the net we had some good momentum and just couldn't finish," Comets coach Trent Cull said of his team's 31 total shots.

It was the third consecutive win over the Comets for the Amerks (34-17-5-0), who are in the top spot in the North. C.J. Smith, Victor Olofsson and Remi Elie scored in support of Wedgewood.

The Comets — who have a one-point lead over Belleville for fourth place in the North — close February with a 6-3-2-0 mark.

Utica, which has 19 regular-season games remaining, has been short-staffed recently and was without regulars Jalen Chatfield (ill) and Tanner Kero (lower-body injury) and a few others for various reasons.

"They're valuable points, especially in the division," Sifers said. "It is extremely disappointing, but we have to move on."

Reid Boucher matched his career-best — and team-record — with his 25th goal of the season. Zack MacEwen — back in the lineup for the first time since making his NHL debut — added an assist to push a home point-streak to 10 games.

Michael Leighton turned in another solid performance, totaling 29 saves in falling in his second start in as many games.

"Leights is a huge part of our team and an amazing pickup," Sifers said. "We're super confident with him and wish we could have done more for him."

Both Leighton and Wedgewood were sharp in a scoreless back-and-forth first period.

Leighton made two tremendous saves about a minute apart near the mid-point of the period. First, he denied Victor Olofsson's shorthanded breakaway with a sprawling glove save and then came out of the crease to halt Remi Elie with a poke check.

Brendan Woods had one of the Comets' best chances with about 10 seconds remaining in tight after a centering feed from Jesse Graham, but Wedgewood made a diving glove stop to keep the puck out.

The teams traded power-play goals in the middle frame.

After C.J. Smith scored 55 seconds into the period on an abbreviated power-play for Rochester's fifth-ranked unit, the Comets grabbed some momentum late during a stretch that included a fight between Vincent Arseneau and Yannick Veilleux.

With the Comets — ranked 10th on the advantage — on their third power play of the game following a Dalton Smith cross-checking penalty, Boucher evened the game at 1 when he ripped a shot from the right circle for his 51st point of the season with 3:22 left. MacEwen — who had a screen in front — and Evan McEneny added assists.

Rochester seized control in the third period with Olofsson's goal from the left side of the crease 21 seconds in and then made it 3-1 about six minutes later from Elie — following a Comets' turnover.

The Comets had a power play with about five minutes to play and then pulled Leighton late for an extra attacker, but weren't able to pull closer.

"The third goal, it happens," Cull said. "I thought felt like we had good opportunities on the power play and the 6-on-5."

Note: Carter Bancks didn't play about the last seven minutes of the game after going to the bench in some discomfort. Trent Cull didn't have an update. ... The team added defenseman Jake Linhart on a professional tryout contract before the game as the team deals with injuries, illness and call-ups. He did not play. ... Before the game, the Comets honored team equipment manager Damion Parmelee, who worked his 1,500th pro contest Wednesday. There was a tribute video and other gifts for Parmelee.

Amerks' Olofsson on course for a reunion with Swedish teammate Dahlin
Democrat & Chronicle
By: *Leo Roth*

When it comes to forwards and defensemen, it has been awhile since the Buffalo Sabres were awakened by a "sleeper" pick in one of their drafts.

When a sixth- or seventh-round gem ripened on the vine and became a solid NHLer. Turning a draft class into a pair of pants pulled from the closet with a \$20 bill in a pocket.

One has to skate backward to, say, 2004 to find the Sabres' last case of found money.

Patrick Kaleta, the definition of heart and guts, played 348 NHL games as a sixth-round selection. Before that, there was seventh-rounder Paul Gaustad (727 games) in 2000, and in the late 1990s, sixth-rounders Ales Kotalik (542) and Brian Campbell (1,082) gave fans and kids with dreams a reason to feel inspired.

But don't look now, there's a player with Buffalo's farm team in Rochester that has the potential to turn the Sabres' 2014 draft into something more than No. 2 overall pick Sam Reinhart.

First-year winger Victor Olofsson, 23, a seventh-round pick that year out of Sweden, leads the Amerks in scoring with 20 goals, 26 assists and 46 points through 52 games.

His stylistic play is a big reason Rochester (33-17-3, 2) sits atop the AHL's North Division standings with 71 points, two ahead of Syracuse heading into a game Wednesday at Utica.

With six game-winning goals and 14 assists on the power play, Olofsson, "Olie" to his teammates, has demonstrated a flair for the dramatic. Making believers out of seers.

"I couldn't say enough good things about Olie," said veteran Zach Redmond, who is second in scoring with 45 points, including a franchise-record 21 goals by a defenseman.

"He's got an NHL skill set, an NHL mind. For him, this is just part of the process for a young guy to come here, develop, get some minor league seasoning. I don't see him being down here a ton longer, but we're super happy. He can skate, he can pass, he can shoot, he's got eyes in the back of his head. He's a special player."

A player whose goal is to play in Buffalo with his former Swedish Hockey League teammates Linus Ullmark and Rasmus Dahlin.

The Swedish pipeline has been good to the Sabres and now comes "Holy Moly Olie."

Buffalo's scouting department under then-general manager Tim Murray liked what it saw in an 18-year-old Olofsson. But then, nobody lies awake at night thinking of what to do with the 181st pick.

It mattered some that Olofsson comes from professional hockey stock; his father, Tony, was a longtime Swedish Division I player, and older brother Jesper stars for Farjestad.

"It was easy for me to jump on that train," Victor said of pursuing the game for a living. "It means a lot to me, growing up and watching my bother and dad play. They both have helped me all my life."

Rather than make the leap to North America too soon after juniors, a mistake many European players do make, Olofsson honed his game for four seasons in the top Swedish pro rank.

He played for two famed organizations, Modo, where his teammates included Ullmark and Toronto Maple Leafs star William Nylander, and Frolunda, where he teamed with Dahlin on more than a few goals worthy of YouTube.

Olofsson scored 18, 29, 27 and 43 points along with a total of 50 goals in his four SHL seasons. But AHL rinks are smaller in comparison. Like trading in a parking lot for a phone booth.

Any concerns Olofsson wouldn't be able to snap off his hard, accurate shot or find space to maneuver were alleviated quickly, however. He scored five goals in his first six games with the Amerks and had 22 points through 21 games.

He was AHL Player of the Month for October and people quickly stopped asking "Who's No. 12?"

"It helped me a lot in gaining some confidence and made me feel more comfortable," said Olofsson of his audacious start. "There's less room for sure, but it's gone a lot better than I thought it would be. There is less time and things are going a bit faster, but I think I've learned to play faster and right now nothing is an issue for me."

Like Redmond, Amerks coach Chris Taylor could pull up a chair, grab a coffee and talk forever about Olofsson, that's how much he's admired. Taylor lauded his defensive game — he's a plus-1 and pulls down key minutes killing penalties.

As a scorer, Olofsson needs little instruction. He's second to Redmond in shots with 144, working hard to find shooting lanes and places where the air isn't stuffy.

"I thought it would be harder for him because he was used to more time to shoot the puck (in Sweden) and here there is less time," Taylor said. "But he's adjusted well. He's hard to play against, he's so physically fit, so he's not getting bumped off the puck, he's the one doing the bumping and making room for himself. He's finding those good areas and making those areas for himself. He's just so smart and loves to score goals."

Sweden continues to be a hockey talent puppy mill. Its emphasis remains on producing players who, above every other skill, can skate like birds fly. And jumping from team to team, town to town? Never.

"I started off in Modo with my youth team, and played for them until I was 20, and then my last few years were with Frolunda," Olofsson said. "I stayed in one place growing up and I think that, I would say, is really important, too."

Dahlin, the No. 1 overall pick in last June's NHL Draft, spent but two seasons in the Swedish elite league, doing so at ages 16 and 17, a prodigy facing players much older.

When Olofsson heard Buffalo had secured the first overall pick, no crystal puck was needed to know Dahlin would be joining the organization.

"He's a great guy, a great teammate and watching him play is unbelievable," Olofsson said. "He's only going to get better. Obviously, it's fun that he's here. Right now we don't play together but hopefully in the future I'll be able to play with him again up there (in Buffalo)."

The way things are going, that's not an "if," but a "when."

Amerks ready for final stretch after NHL trade deadline

Rochester First

By: *Prescott Rossi*

Trade Deadline day is known for being turbulent, but that didn't seem to effect the Rochester Americans.

"You can't stress on those type of things," said Amerks defenseman Matt Tennyson. "Worrying about stuff like that is only a distraction."

The Amerks practice on Tuesday, one day after the deadline. The big moves that effected the Amerks happened along the blue line. Defenseman Brendan Guhle was dealt to Anaheim, and defenseman Lawrence Pilut was sent down from the Sabres.

"Sometimes you lose friends like with Guhle, but that is the sad part of the business," said defenseman Zach Redmond. "There is a level of clarity in the locker room afterwards because you know this is your team going forward."

The Amerks entered Tuesday on top of the North Division with 71 points. Syracuse is two points behind in second, but the Crunch have two games in hand over the Amerks. Toronto sits third on 67 points and the Utica Comets are fourth with 65.

On Wednesday, the Amerks travel to Utica for a 7:00pm start at the Adirondack Bank Center, then have a Friday/Saturday home-&-home with Syracuse this weekend.

"First and foremost we have to make the playoffs," said head coach Chris Taylor. "Enjoying what we're doing makes a big difference. This is where we can separate ourselves and have a lot more fun."

The Rochester Americans haven't won the North Division since the 2004-05 season, the same season they last reached the second round of the AHL playoffs.

"Almost everyone here has been here for the whole year," said Tennyson. "We are just excited. We are excited to finish the year strong and make a long playoff run."

C.J. Smith, central low a's first NHL goal-scorer, hopes to take his pro game another step further
Des Moines Register
By: *Ryan Stimson*

There's a saying in hockey that when an unconventional goal is scored or when someone finds the net through a particularly narrow gap, the puck "has eyes."

One look at C.J. Smith's first career NHL goal last month would tell you that a puck can have a little heart and desire, too.

The 24-year-old Johnston product was in the fourth game of his second pro stint with the Buffalo Sabres when he received a saucer pass from teammate Johan Larsson near the blue line. The winger's deft move back toward the goal preceded a quick flick of his left wrist.

The puck squeezed through the right side of New Jersey Devils goaltender Keith Kinkaid before trickling and wobbling toward the net. Almost a full second later, it inched across the goal line just before another New Jersey player could fish it out of harm's way.

The celebratory foghorn inside Buffalo's KeyBank Center blared. Smith, somewhat muted, skated toward his bench. The scenario was tenuous enough to elicit a scoring review.

After 45 seconds of waiting, the goal was upheld, and Smith received some pats on the shoulder and a few tousles of his helmet.

The central lowan had scored in the NHL.

"Once (the referees) came out and called it a good goal, my heart just stopped," Smith said. "I took a look around. It was a pretty special moment. Everyone came up, shook my hand, gave me a word.

"They've all been there and know how special it is."

That feeling is particularly special for an lowan. The Hawkeye State boasts just four NHL pros over the league's century-plus of existence: two goalies (Scott Clemmensen, who retired in 2015, and Cal Petersen, a rookie with the Los Angeles Kings), a defenseman (Tucker Poolman, who has spent time with the Winnipeg Jets) and Smith.

Of the four, Poolman is the only other player to score. He was born in Dubuque but considers East Grand Forks, Minnesota, his home.

So, in realistic terms, Smith lights the lowa lamp alone.

One goal didn't earn a ticker-tape parade down Court Avenue — Smith tallied his second in his next game on the ice — but it was another step on rarely traveled ground for someone who was rarely seen as big enough, fast enough, strong enough to take this path.

"I've always had to find a way when nobody wanted to give me credit," Smith said. "I've always been grateful, too, for people who have given me opportunities. It's my job to take advantage of them."

The first steps

Such chances in these stories usually begin with parents. Jeff and Liz Smith were of the prove-it-and-you've-earned-it variety:

Show us this is what you really want, and we'll really support you in return.

Jeff remembers C.J. professing his passion at about age 10. It wasn't the typical NHL fantasy, though.

"He came to me and said, 'Dad, I want to play Division I college hockey.' He wanted to play at Boston College," Jeff recalled. "And so both his mom and I, we said we will do anything within our power to help you achieve that goal.

"But there are three rules. No. 1, you're always going to be the hardest-working kid on the ice. Second, you're always going to get good grades. And you're always going to be respectful."

Whether anyone knew it or not, the hard work started when Smith was a toddler up in Mason City. The family would go out skating on a pond, but only if C.J.'s older sister, Mackenzie, was out there with him. Next thing the family knew, C.J. could skate backwards before he was 3 years old.

The family soon moved to the Des Moines metro. Jeff took 4-year-old C.J. to a youth league skate for 7- and 8-year-olds. He held his own skating, and his hockey IQ was bursting through.

"He was 4 years old, and was never going offside. When he started, I didn't know much about offside," Jeff Smith quipped. "But he did."

The story picks up speed from there. Watching lots of games on TV. Taking in just as many Des Moines Buccaneers games.

Zooming up the youth league ranks.

By the time C.J. was an eighth-grader, he was good enough to consider packing up and moving out-of-state to achieve his goals.

Instead of sending their son away, the whole family, older sister included, decided to make the move with him to Minnesota so that C.J. could put his skills to the test.

Jeff Smith maintained his business in central Iowa, so he would commute up and down Interstate 35 multiple times a week to keep the income flowing, and Liz and the rest of the family stayed in Minnesota to keep the dream going.

"He was always living up to those expectations we set, and was still working, still progressing," Jeff said. "People always doubted him. If he were a good pee-wee, then people said he'd never be a good bantam player. He was good in bantam, even though he only weighed probably 70 pounds, but then they said he'd never be a good junior.

"What we could see was his heart, his desire, from the time he was a little kid. It's kind of strange. We never had that 'Oh, my God' moment about what he could do. We said, 'OK, he's here, but let's get a little farther. It was about taking the next step.'"

The dramatic steps

Once in Minnesota, C.J.'s developmental career took a more conventional route. First, the Austin (Minnesota) Bruins of the North American Hockey League, where he graduated high school. Next, to a pair of Illinois squads in the United States Hockey League.

Last, not quite to Boston College, but in the same state to UMass-Lowell, for three seasons of college hockey and the lion's share of progress toward a finance degree.

Smith tallied 56 goals and 69 assists in that span. Reality was the next step.

"I had a really good year as a freshman, and I thought I could make a career out of hockey," C.J. Smith said. "The guys I competed against in college, I think I was just as good or better than a lot of them. I just buried my head and went to work."

Forgoing his senior season, Smith signed with the Sabres as an undrafted free agent in late March 2017, and made his debut a week later, tallying an assist. He felt comfortable. Then most of the leadership in Buffalo was replaced, so it was back to the proving ground again.

Smith found himself at a prospect camp with plenty of other players one step from the big stage, in the American Hockey League.

Chris Taylor, the new coach for Buffalo's affiliate in the league, the Rochester Americans, liked what he saw.

The competitiveness and effort (Jeff's Rule No. 1), the hockey smarts and intelligence (Rule No. 2), the humility and camaraderie (No. 3) were all screaming at Taylor.

"Everybody starts at that same kind of level, and he stood out. He'd attacked guys one-on-one and make plays. He has the hockey sense to read the game, know how to get in the right places. Most importantly, he has the drive. He wants to score goals, but it's not scoring every time out there. He doesn't cheat the game to get to the offense. He understands the process of getting there — defense creating the offense, reading a play before it happens, getting to the get and getting open.

"... And there's no better teammate than C.J. He gets along with the room and exemplifies professionalism at the rink every day. He gets better at the things he's not the best at. That's what I like. He does the uncomfortable things to get better. The drive is there."

Smith proved himself on the ice, all right, tallying 44 points as a rookie (17 goals, 24 assists) while being named MVP at the AHL All-Star Challenge and leading the Amerks to the playoffs. He didn't make it out of Buffalo's training camp this past summer and began the last season of his two-way hockey contract in Rochester again.

The producing clip increased, with Smith scoring 13 goals and adding 16 assists in 33 AHL games before being called up to the Sabres' roster in late December, He saw the ice four games, the last of which resulted in the maiden NHL goal in the 5-1 win over the Devils.

The reward? A prompt demotion back to Rochester.

The next steps

Smith didn't take the move as a slap in the face, though. Far from. In his return game, he scored a hat trick. In eight games overall, he scored five goals and seven assists.

The quicker pace of the NHL game rubbed off on Smith, who took that speed and urgency back to the minors.

"When he got sent back down, he didn't slow down," Taylor said. "You could just tell, that one extra step you need (in the NHL), he continued it here. He pushed himself. It showed me his desire and how much he wants it."

Another call-up came on Feb. 4. "I like what he brings, the spark and the speed and the skill," Sabres coach Phil Housley told the Buffalo News. "Obviously, he's going to get an opportunity."

The next night, Smith scored his second goal, potting a textbook pass from Sam Reinhart with a one-time finish against Minnesota. He's since played in another half-dozen games for Buffalo, averaging about 10 minutes of ice time on the Sabres' third line.

Entering the weekend, the Sabres were 28-24-8 and were six points out of the Eastern Conference's last playoff spot.

"We're going toward a lot more of a speed-and-skill type game. I'm not the biggest player," said Smith, who's listed at 5-foot-11 and 185 pounds, "so it's funny (the NHL) is trending toward a player like me."

In the meantime, Smith takes rare moments to enjoy being 24: Give him Netflix access to "Evil Genius," a true crime documentary, or a "Game of Thrones" binge session, and he's content as he looks out at the lake-effect snow near his Buffalo apartment window.

Smith took online classes to complete his finance degree in December. And he's always thinking and learning, learning and doing — a living embodiment of those three rules set before him more than a decade ago.

"He did those things, and that's why we ended up making as many sacrifices that we did," Jeff Smith said.

This offseason, C.J. hopes to return to the Midwest, as usual. He wants to spend time in Des Moines with his dad and Mackenzie and his childhood buddies who still live here. He'll head up to Minnesota to see his mom — his parents have separated since his high-school days — and spend some time reflecting there.

"They were all so supportive of me. It's your dream. I'm so grateful for everything that's happened in my life," Smith said. "I just try to take it all in and not take any of it for granted."

While at his mom's, he'll likely travel down to the basement, where Liz keeps his hockey memorabilia: dozens of jerseys and trophies, hundreds of press clippings, and old pieces of worn gear that don't fit anymore.

He'll want to add at least one prized possession to those mementos: The Sabres took the puck from his first goal and put it in a plaque.

"It can go down there until I have my own house," Smith quipped.

A house, to go with a new contract and hopefully a full-time role as a pro.

One step closer to earning his keep.