



ROCHESTER AMERICANS

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TONIGHT'S GAME: Syracuse vs. Rochester

Chris Taylor's steady hand has Amerks in position for Cup run

Buffalo News

By: Lance Lysowski

April 5, 2019

With 40 minutes of grueling practice drills complete, the Rochester Americans huffed and puffed between sips of water or Gatorade while listening to second-year head coach Chris Taylor deliver instructions.

Suddenly, most of the team broke out with a raucous cackle that echoed throughout an empty Blue Cross Arena. When Taylor was done explaining the drill, the Amerks split into groups and furiously skated the length of the ice to the soundtrack of the coach's whistle.

The mood on Tuesday was light despite the rigorous workout prior to this weekend's games against Syracuse with first place in the North Division at stake.

That is what Taylor's players have come to expect when they arrive at the rink each day. He encourages the typical joking and lighthearted antics between drills or off the ice; however, each player, no matter their age or status, is expected to execute every drill to perfection.

The well-traveled 47-year-old's philosophies and hockey acumen are the product of 28 years in professional hockey, and his willingness to adapt has led the Amerks to consecutive playoff appearances while developing the next wave of Buffalo Sabres.

"He's a guy who garners respect because of the way he is," Amerks goalie Adam Wilcox said. "How he coaches is effective. There are different ways you can get more out of players. You can do it by scaring them, but I think he gets the most out of players by being around them, enjoying them. He lets them be creative and be themselves at the rink and enjoy each other. That doesn't take away from working hard or playing well. It has the opposite effect. It helps everyone. They want to come to the rink to play for a coach like him."

"Player-style coaches"

Taylor began planning his post-playing career almost six years before his final game. He was 32 years old and played 54 games with the Buffalo Sabres in 2003-04, the season before the NHL's work stoppage.

Taylor thought a return to the sport's highest level was unlikely at his age. While his passion for hockey still burned, he wondered when his body would tell him to stop. He always was a leader on and off the ice. Even in the American Hockey League, where he was the oldest Amerk competing against younger players to earn a call to the NHL, Taylor enjoyed teaching his teammates the intricacies of the game and the maturity needed to be a professional.

His teammates always knew what would come next.

"It was pretty obvious that he'd be a coach," Nathan Paetsch, a 36-year-old do-it-all Rochester veteran who played four seasons as Taylor's teammate, said. "He was a captain and one of those player-style coaches already. He was intelligent. Played the game in a smart way that can translate to being a coach."

Over time, Taylor's fear of not getting another call to the NHL became a reality and he finished his career with 32 points in 149 games at the sport's highest level. Still, following the league's lockout, Taylor spent three more years in Rochester and three in Germany. During that time, he balanced trying to earn another opportunity in the NHL and preparing himself for a post-playing career.

He spent additional time with younger teammates after practice and began watching game film through the lens of a coach.

In Rochester, Taylor continued to mentor and teach younger players. In Germany, he learned that Europeans often struggled with homesickness while pursuing a professional career in North America. He experienced the same problem when he played in Europe. That perspective, Taylor said, helped him better understand the psyche of young European players he would eventually coach.

Paired with the lessons and observations while learning under a number of former coaches, including Butch Goring, Gary Agnew, Pat Burns, Lindy Ruff and Randy Cunneyworth, Taylor achieved a better understanding for the questions that lingered throughout his playing career.

"You see what works, what doesn't work, how the guys feel," Taylor told The Buffalo News. "How I wanted to be coached. How I wanted the coach to react to different things. I took all that in. There are times you wonder why a coach does a thing and then you realize that's why and you learn. I've taken a lot of different coaches and instances from when I played and translated it into what it is today.

"There are times you can be hard on guys. There are times you can let guys have a break. It's always interesting that when you go back to how you were as a player, it helps you as a coach – the empathy of what they're feeling."

Taylor, a second-round draft pick of the New York Islanders in 1990, was 39 years old and had played 617 AHL games when the 2010-11 season ended, yet he believed he could continue playing. At the same time, he began looking for assistant coaching jobs. His search ended when former Sabres General Manager Darcy Regier offered him to work as a player development coach in Rochester.

Upon joining the staff, Taylor gave individual skill sessions to the Amerks, but there was a particular focus on prospects Marcus Foligno and Zack Kassian. When the three weren't skating together after practice, they were usually talking about hockey or sharing ideas while watching game film.

Though Taylor was only a few months removed from playing, he wanted to understand how young players responded to certain situations on and off the ice. He found the job addicting. Taylor craved more responsibility and his role grew the following season when he was promoted to assistant coach with the Amerks. He would spend four seasons on Rochester's staff before taking the same job with Wilkes-Barre/Scranton and returned as coach in June 2017.

"I love it," Taylor beamed. "Working with young guys is the most gratifying thing. There's nothing better than telling a young guy he's going up to play his first NHL game."

Consistency

Paetsch gritted his teeth, leaned over to a wooden table adjacent from the team's dressing room and knocked twice with the knuckle of his right index finger.

The gesture was in response to a question about another remarkable statistic: the Amerks had not lost more than three games in a row all season.

He then shared the unique perspective that comes with playing 807 games between the NHL and AHL.

"That's coaching," Paetsch said of Rochester's consistency. "Coaching and we have some really good leadership in that locker room. It's accountability. If you have someone who will get on you, freak out and panic — it starts with the coaching. It starts from the top and trickles down to the players, and we don't have that. We have accountability and we work hard every day, but we don't allow it to slip because we have that leadership from up top."

Paetsch's teammates shared similar views. When the Amerks' goaltenders struggled in a 9-4 loss to Springfield in November, Taylor pulled aside Scott Wedgewood and Wilcox to give a quiet vote of confidence. There were no threats to decreased playing time, Wilcox recalled. Instead, Taylor wanted them to remain calm. They responded by helping Rochester earn three of four points the following weekend.

"Sometimes coaches may play mental games with goalies and it can backfire, but brushing stuff off like that and remaining calm helped us going into the next game," Wilcox said. "As long as we're doing the right things and working hard, he's not going to hammer them for losses."

When the Amerks were swept in the first round of the Calder Cup playoffs last April, Taylor wanted to make subtle adjustments for this season. Though he kept the team's offensive and defensive structure, he made tweaks after assessing what worked and what didn't. He also began asking his players for feedback after practice and, during film sessions, asked them which drills they liked.

When Paetsch was a healthy scratch earlier this season, Taylor asked the defenseman for additional perspective. Taylor never shies from spending time with players in the dressing room, but has delegated responsibility to Paetsch and veterans.

There is also an emphasis on patience.

"As a player, it bugged me when, if the team had a bad game, all the lines changed and other things changed," Taylor said. "We have a good structure and I want to stick with it. If there is something we need to improve and I see it in a 10-game span or a five-game span then we'll change that. I think patience is key. Be respecting of the players and what they want, how they want it, and what I think is best for them, is what you have to do. You can't panic in those situations."

Positive atmosphere

Taylor often joins the Amerks for breakfast before practice. Conversations aren't dictated by the outcome of the previous game. Harsh critiques and teaching points are saved for practice or film sessions.

That strategy is part of Taylor's plan to maintain a positive atmosphere that has helped put Amerks back in the playoffs. He wants his players to enjoy coming to the arena every day. While on-ice sessions are rigorous and he doesn't mince words, he doesn't want to disrupt the chemistry his veterans have helped build.

"That makes me want to work harder because he lets you have fun but you can lose that," Wilcox, 26, said. "You want to keep that atmosphere and the coaches happy, so you work harder to keep the atmosphere. ... Guys want to play for him and win for him."

Taylor's impact can be best illustrated by the development of the Amerks' young players. Victor Olofsson, Rasmus Asplund and Lawrence Pilut, all of whom are in their first season in North America after playing professionally in Sweden, have flourished. Prior to his recall, Olofsson led the Amerks with 27 goals among 60 points. Winger C.J. Smith entered Friday's games with 27 goals and winger Alexander Nylander proved ready for the NHL once he was called up last month. Taylor's work with assistants Toby Petersen and Gord Dineen has the Amerks playing with the consistent structure that can be difficult during a grueling schedule.

"Tails' is great at teaching the little things, which way to turn your stick, how you want to make this pass or that pass, where to look if you want to look a defenseman off," said Amerks' 33-year-old captain Kevin Porter, who also played under Taylor in Wilkes-Barre/Scranton in 2016-17. "Little things like that, he's great at teaching forwards. I think it's definitely helpful with young players. When you come from juniors or college, it's a different game."

Entering Friday's games, the Amerks were competing for a North Division title and the team's first Calder Cup since 1996. They ranked third in the league in goals scored and are expected to have defenseman Zach Redmond back for the postseason.

No matter the stakes, the Amerks don't plan to change their culture. Neither does Taylor.

"We have a lot of work to do, but it's been great," Taylor said. "Every year you wonder are we going to have the same type of guys? Are we going to have the same vibe in the dressing room? We have. We created that and I'm the type of guy that I want everyone coming in feeling good about themselves."

"Yeah, you're going to have some bad games and we're going to talk about it, but it's not going to change our personalities of each other or what we are as a group. That's something I will always do, I won't change my personality, win or loss. I will make sure it's well-known what we need to get better."

Amerks Pink the Rink
Rochester First
By: Staff Report
April 3, 2019

The Rochester Americans are supporting Gilda's Club Rochester with the team's annual "Pink the Rink Night" this Friday, April 5 at 7:05 when they host the Syracuse Crunch.

Amerks Host Erica Whyte and Gilda's Club Rochester CEO Melinda Merante discussed the atmosphere at the Blue Cross Arena and what fans can expect Thursday during News 8 at Noon.

"This is one of the most moving nights of the entire season because it is dedicated from start to finish to breast cancer awareness," said Whyte. "We recommend that everybody who comes to the game wear the color pink, which I am wearing here, and if you do, you won't be alone because the Amerks themselves will be wearing these absolutely awesome pink jerseys on the ice and they'll be auctioned off their backs throughout the course of the night and given to the highest bidder at the end of the night. There's a lot of other amazing things happening within the arena itself including Pink the Rink Mystery Pucks. So, for \$10 you get a mystery puck. You don't know who has signed it until you actually open it. And we have a beautiful tribute going on in the intermission."

Merante is grateful for the partnership with the Amerks.

"It means the world to us because we believe that everything we do in our community is about collaboration and partnership, and this is a wonderful night," she said. "It really fits in with one of our key core values which is community - community connection and providing some type of social opportunity for our members and for other people that we serve. So this is a wonderful night. They come out to the game. They are amongst other people who are going through the same thing they are. They can share their stories. They can share a fun evening."

The night is about so much more than hockey.

"We get the opportunity again to go out on the ice and we get to be part of holding the flag and the human ribbon, and all of those types of things," Merante noted. "It's really very moving for those who are there with us because they feel that they are now being recognized and people are understanding and hearing about their stories, seeing them out there, and they feel that sense of connection, which is very important. They're so proud. Since the tickets become available we can barely keep them in our hand. It's because that's how much people want to be a part of this event."

Tickets can be purchased for as low as \$18 at the Box Office or online at Amerks.com/pink.

Amerks, Gilda's Club team up to 'Pink the Rink'

Fox Rochester

By: Staff Report

April 3, 2019

The Rochester Americans and Gilda's Club Rochester are teaming up for a night of hockey and cancer awareness.

A portion of the proceeds from this weekend's Pink the Rink game will go toward Gilda's Club Rochester, which helps people in our community affected by cancer.

We're joined in studio by Amerks reporter Erica Whyte to talk about the event, which will be held on April 5.

Cincinnati is home to Cyclones Houser, Vaive
By: Staff Report
April 3, 2019

Michael Houser certainly felt like an outsider last October.

Sprinkled into a crowd of more than 60,000 people at Paul Brown Stadium, the 26-year-old goalie for the Cincinnati Cyclones was in the minority of jubilant fans when Antonio Brown's 31-yard touchdown reception with 10 seconds left in regulation lifted his Pittsburgh Steelers to a 28-21 victory over the Cincinnati Bengals.

Houser was born in Youngstown, Ohio, and moved to Pittsburgh when he was 11. Having the Pirates and Steelers play in the same divisions as the Reds and Bengals has been a luxury for Houser when living in Cincinnati.

Houser inked a three-year entry-level contract with the Florida Panthers in July 2012 and has called many places home over his professional career. Houser has made stops in San Antonio, Ontario, Cleveland and Tucson, but has seemingly always found a way back to Cincinnati.

In September, he signed a one-year deal with the Rochester Americans, the Cyclones American Hockey League affiliate, and returned to Cincinnati for the fourth time in his career.

"This is number four for me," Houser said. "I grew up with that Midwestern feeling being in Pittsburgh, which is nice. I'm used to the seasons and the downtown of each city is similar; they're not flashy but it's fun. Everyone is super friendly and you don't get that northeastern rep or that western kinda scene. It's more Midwest feel and that's what I'm used to."

Houser made his first trip to the Queen City when he was 20, and learned to clean and cook at his Blue Ash apartment. His second stint lasted only a month with the Cyclones, but the last two have been season-long stays.

By the time he signed with Rochester last September, Houser and his family were happy about a return to U.S. Bank Arena.

"My parents will visit and they stay at either Fountain Square or Newport," Houser said. "I was excited when I signed with Rochester this year because I knew I was going to be back in Cincinnati and I knew the city pretty well. Every time I've been back, it's just been familiar faces and I've always gotten a comforting feeling being here."

Houser has seen the growth in popularity during his extended tenure with the Cyclones, too, saying the attendance has improved with the winning pedigree the franchise has set in recent years.

"Obviously, the major sports will always dominate the cities that they are in, but we've had great draws, especially this season," Houser said. "I think slowly and slowly this is becoming somewhat of a hockey town and I think it appreciates that it has a winning hockey team."

Cyclones left wing Justin Vaive (15) swings around Nailers defender Dan Milan (6) as they fight in the first period of the EHL hockey game between the Cincinnati Cyclones and the Wheeling Nailers at US Bank Arena in downtown Cincinnati on Saturday, Justin Vaive has a similar journeyman story. The 6-foot-5, 29-year-old left-wing has scored 19 goals and tallied 15 assists this season – his third with the Cyclones.

Vaive was born in Buffalo, New York, and visited Cincinnati for random Reds games when he lived in Oxford and took the ice for the Miami RedHawks. His mom would visit Oxford and made day visits to downtown and shopping trips to Kenwood.

A fourth-round pick of the Anaheim Ducks in 2007, Vaive signed with the San Antonio Rampage in 2011 and headed to Cincinnati.

"When I first got here, I was obviously a bright-eyed kid; I was 21 years old and just out of school. Looking back it seems like a long time ago. A lot has changed and not a lot has changed," Vaive said with a laugh.

Vaive bounced around with AHL stops in San Antonio, Hartford, Bridgeport and Belleville, then found himself back in a Cyclones uniform in 2016.

"I loved it here and obviously the team was amazing. At the same time, going to Miami kinda helped because I knew people in the area and there's a familiarity to it," Vaive said. "It definitely felt kinda homey for me out of all of the places I've played."

Like Houser, Vaive has grown up with year-round sports and appreciates the variety he gets in Cincinnati with football and baseball.

Last summer was his first living in Cincinnati and he got to explore what it had to offer when he wasn't living out of a suitcase for months at a time.

"There are a few good golf courses around the city where I like to play. I really like craft beer so I've had the chance to go to MadTree and Rhinegeist – places I never knew were here my first couple of years and now I've had the experiences that a normal person would have working in the city," he said.

While his family lives just beyond the northern border in Niagara Falls, Vaive said the Cyclones have offered a family feel like no other minor league team he's played for. That's a rarity in a league that is fueled by turnover with players bouncing between affiliates while chasing the NHL dream.

Especially on a first-place team like the Cyclones, which will likely be the top team in the Kelly Cup playoffs later this month.

"Usually the better your team does, the better everybody looks, the more likely someone gets called up and goes elsewhere. That's one thing that's been different this year is we've actually had the same group basically the whole year. My first or second year, we had 68 players come through on the transaction page and this year I'd be shocked if we had more than 30," Vaive said.

"When you have 68 players wear a jersey, not that we weren't close, but it's tough to get to know everybody, where this year we've been able to form a good bond and really close relationships because there hasn't been too much movement. We're literally a family."

With playoff berth clinched, Amerks set sights on first division crown since 2005

13 WHAM

By: Staff Report

April 2, 2019

The Amerks clinched their second straight playoff berth with a 6-4 win over Binghamton on Saturday.

Now the team is focused on winning its first division title in 15 years.

Rochester is just one point behind Syracuse in the North Division with six games to play, and three of those games are against the Crunch.

If the Amerks can outperform their rivals over the season's final two weeks, then Rochester will take home its first division title since the 2004-'05 season, when head coach Chris Taylor was the team's captain, and 36-year-old veteran defenseman Nathan Paetsch was a 22-year-old in his second year with the team.