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TONIGHT'S GAME: BELLEVILLE VS. ROCHESTER

How Andrew Hammond brought his idea for a Buffalo-inspired goalie mask to life
The Athletic
By: Joe Yerdon
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Andrew Hammond's "Hamburglar" nickname has followed him to each of his NHL stops. He's done his part by sporting the cartoon image of the McDonaldland burglar on his goalie mask in different forms since his early days in Ottawa.

After signing a one-year, two-way contract with the Sabres in July, Hammond wanted to add a little Western New York flavor to his mask art. He's been known as the "Hamburglar" since his college career at Bowling Green. The nickname gained national recognition when he carried the Senators to the Stanley Cup playoffs late in the 2014-15 season, going 20-1-2 with a .941 save percentage. During that run, Ottawa fans began to toss hamburgers on the ice to celebrate wins.

When moving to the Sabres' AHL affiliate, the Rochester Americans, Hammond brainstormed a way to localize his now-famous "Hamburglar" mask.

"The process, when you get the mask painted, is my painter will send me an email with broad questions if you have ideas, themes you want to go with, what colors you're looking for, sometimes other masks that you like and you follow along with that style," Hammond said. "For me, it was my first time to Buffalo/Rochester living here and I wanted to have something that I thought went with the area."

The 31-year-old Hammond came up with an idea, but in order to bring it to life, he had to find the right artist. The creative mind behind Hammond's previous masks, Jason Bartziokas, had recently left the business.

Enter Sylvie Marsolais and partner Alexandre Mathys, the creative duo at Sylabrush based west of Montreal. For Marsolais, a hockey goalie herself who grew up in Quebec and has been playing the sport for about 25 years, there is more to the artistic process than taking an idea and a request to "draw this."

"We start first by asking a couple questions to the goalie," Marsolais said. "Just basic things like, what would he like to have on his chin? Does he have a nickname or would he prefer to have a logo there? After that, we do a sketch — me and Alex — and then we send the sketch to the goalie. And when he approves the sketch, we start the painting."

In the 20 years that Marsolais has been in the business, she's built an impressive clientele of professional and amateur goalies who seek her out to come up with their designs. The masks of Tampa Bay Lightning starter Andrei Vasilevskiy, Columbus Blue Jackets starter Joonas Korpisalo, Tristan Jarry of the Pittsburgh Penguins and Dallas Stars backup Anton Khudobin are counted among her latest designs.

Hammond's idea that made the cut was an image featuring "Hamburglar" going over Niagara Falls in a barrel. The concept is a morbid, yet fascinating, part of Western New York's history. Since 1901, only 12 people have barreled over the Falls and lived to tell the story.

Before Marsolais and Mathys went to work, though, they considered one other idea.

"I think he's a bit of a funny guy by his previous masks," Marsolais said. "So he wanted to keep his 'Hamburglar' and he wanted him to do something funny like going down Niagara Falls in a barrel. His other idea was to have the Buffalo Bills Mafia and have Hammy jumping from maybe a Zamboni or something and jumping on a table."

Hammond's inspiration for the Bills-themed mask came from the NFL fan base's notorious tailgating behavior, which includes the rowdiest fans jumping off the tops of cars onto (and sometimes through) tables. He also recognized the Sabres' connection to the Bills, with Terry and Kim Pegula owning both Buffalo franchises.

"Outside of the Sabres, probably the most passionate thing about this area is the Buffalo Bills," Hammond said. "I try making (the mask art) funny at times and you see all the videos that are coming across that go viral of people jumping through tables, so I thought if the 'Hamburglar' was jumping through a table, it might draw a few extra fans or something."

"But, I think from the painter's perspective, it may have been a little easier to have the 'Hamburglar' going over the Falls rather than through a table off a port-a-potty or something."

Marsolais explained why they landed on the Niagara Falls theme from the artists' perspective.

"We always start with one sketch and we'll redo it if they really don't like it," she said. "He told us he liked a mask we did in the past for Jeff Glass when he played for the San Diego Gulls. He wanted to have the colors similar to that, like the same kind of recipe, so we based the design on a little bit of Glass's previous elements. So we started with the two ideas and we discussed that, Alex and I, the one with the barrel and Niagara Falls were more representative of the Buffalo area and the team and that's why we went with that idea."

A goalie's mask is an artist's canvas, but the functions of the mask — the area for the cage and the fit on a player's head — don't leave the artist with much real estate to work with. It's one thing to come up with an idea that could go viral if done right, but it's another to find a combination that fits the surface area and represents the artistic vision of each person involved.

Creating the mask from first sketch to finished product, Marsolais said, takes anywhere from 20 to 60 hours, depending on the complexity of the designs.

"With the kind of design Andrew wanted, and to get something similar to Jeff Glass, it wasn't leaving enough room to be able to do that," she said. "So we thought the other idea, the barrel, was better for that. The idea of the Buffalo Bills Mafia was good, too; we just thought (the barrel) was fitting better with the design and representing the Buffalo Sabres better than the Buffalo Bills because they're the football team."

Nailing a goalie mask is a point of pride for all involved. It gets people to notice the goalies and artists alike.

A mask connecting Buffalo's two sports franchises may have attracted outside attention for the message alone. But, on top of the artistic challenges, Hammond knew the Bills Mafia tribute might face other roadblocks.

"It's got to get approved by (Sabres equipment manager) Dave Williams up in Buffalo, but it never got to that point really," Hammond said. "We erred on the side of caution and it turned out great, so I don't have any regrets about that. Who knows, maybe in the future it can still happen. We'll see."

Collaboration between Sabres, Amerks produces 'good development story'

Buffalo News

By: Lance Lysowski

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The collaborative process used to prepare prospects for an opportunity with the Buffalo Sabres began, in earnest, shortly after Ralph Krueger arrived in Buffalo.

Rochester Americans coach Chris Taylor traveled the Thruway one June morning to meet with Krueger over breakfast, and the two spoke in great detail about the style of play and systems they wished to use.

"That was the biggest relief was that we had the same ideas and principles in how we wanted to play," Taylor said in a phone interview Monday. "It was something really nice. It was instant, the connection between Ralph and I."

Out of that conversation, and a subsequent coaches' symposium ahead of the organization's Prospects Challenge in September, came what Krueger refers to as "Sabres hockey." The Sabres, Amerks and Cincinnati Cyclones are using the same philosophies, systems and verbiage with their players.

The model is similar to those implemented by organizations throughout the National Hockey League. However, Curtis Lazar's performance Saturday against the Los Angeles Kings illustrated how well the Sabres are executing their development plan.

"It's a good development story," Krueger said. "We had him up here, there were some things we thought he needed improvement on and to work on. We communicate that to Chris Taylor, he goes to Rochester, spends some time down there and works specifically on the game he needs to play here in the NHL. It was working down there, too, and he becomes a major player for them. He returns a better player and returns embracing the system and principles, the concepts that are up here."

Lazar, a 24-year-old former first-round draft pick of the Ottawa Senators, averaged just 8:51 of ice time during his first six games with the Sabres this season. He had a highlight-reel goal by blocking a shot and scoring on a breakaway during his first game in a Sabres uniform Nov. 14 against Carolina, only to struggle with the nuances of playing wing in the NHL.

Lazar, who has played center for most of his junior and professional careers, also was not moving his feet enough in the offensive and defensive zones. The Sabres shifted Lazar back to center when he was assigned to Rochester and gave him an on- and off-ice program to work on his agility and quickness.

Lazar had five points in seven games upon returning to the Amerks and was recalled by the Sabres on Friday when center Johan Larsson suffered an upper-body injury during a 6-1 loss to Philadelphia. During his first game back in Buffalo, Lazar helped close out a 3-2 win over the Kings by playing 15:53, his most ice time in an NHL game since he logged 17:57 for the Calgary Flames on March 29, 2018.

Lazar didn't have to spend time learning systems or principles in his return to the Sabres since Taylor is teaching and speaking to the Amerks in the same manner as Krueger.

"It's been like that since day one," Lazar said. "Not much of an adjustment for me. That's set me up for success. When (Amerks assistant coach Gord Dineen) was at the helm there, or with Taylor, everything we do in Rochester is the same as up here. You don't have to think as much. You can just go out there and play your game."

The collaborative process wasn't limited to Krueger and Taylor. Following their one-on-one conversations in Buffalo and at the NHL draft in Vancouver, they were joined by the coaching staffs of the Sabres, Amerks and Cyclones to exchange ideas. Krueger used a similar process during his 13 years as coach of Switzerland's national team. He learned the importance of player development in the NHL from Hall-of-Fame center Steve Yzerman, who is now general manager of the Detroit Red Wings and held the same job with the Tampa Bay Lightning from 2010-18.

Krueger asked the Amerks' and Cyclones' coaching staffs how they wished to play, their ideas on how to defend and score. Those concepts produced one style of play that can be seen in Buffalo, Rochester and Cincinnati.

"That's the goal, I think, of every organization is to have a seamless set of dynamics between the two teams, so when players arrive in the NHL, you don't have to do too much teaching from a systemic perspective," Sabres assistant general manager Randy Sexton said. "You can just go right into the game tactics and the game plan, and the players are comfortable with the nomenclature, the drills and the approach. We've worked very hard at it. It's a work in progress, but happy with where it is right now."

Adjustments are made at every level throughout the season. For example, the Sabres must tweak their penalty-killing strategy based on an opponent's power-play tendencies, whereas the Amerks typically stick to their structure.

However, the core principles remain the same. Even Krueger's "Stay Connected" mantra is used by the Amerks and Cyclones. Sexton suggested that players throughout the organization quickly bought in to the systems since Krueger has implemented an "exciting" style of play, and Cincinnati coach Matt Thomas explained last month that his NHL counterpart has assisted development and eased the transition by passing on a way to keep the concepts simple.

"It's as simple as this: if you're going to pressure the puck, you need to look to see if you're connected," Thomas said. "You can't go pressure by yourself. That's a big word he uses a lot, is we've got to be connected. It's a simple term and it's not that anybody's never heard it before, but it's a focal point of every zone in our system. Are we connected? If we are, we can pressure. If we're not, we've got to wait for our opportunity to pressure. For me, that's a real clear-cut way for guys to be able to understand that we're in go-mode because we're connected."

The collaborative process is a tenet of the player development model Sexton and General Manager Jason Botterill brought to Buffalo in 2017. Execution depends on constant communication throughout the organization -- Taylor helped with the process in Rochester while working as an interim assistant coach with the Sabres for their first 22 games -- and has been assisted by veteran Amerks players, according to Sexton.

Team meetings and practices are run in the same fashion, Taylor said. In addition to Lazar, forward Rasmus Asplund made a successful transition to the Sabres upon being recalled Nov. 15. Asplund, 21, has emerged as one of Buffalo's top penalty-killing forwards while playing each of the team's last 20 games.

"We want guys to be comfortable in what they're doing," Taylor said. "If someone gets recalled to Buffalo, we want to make sure they know exactly what to expect. There's nothing to learn. It's get in there and get to playing. That takes a lot off the player's mind, so he doesn't have to go through different systems."

The Sabres are building their team through drafting and player development. After spending most of last season in Rochester, former seventh-round draft pick Victor Olofsson leads all NHL rookies with 34 points through 38 games and is on pace for the most goals by a Sabres rookie since Ray Sheppard scored 38 in 1987-88.

Linus Ullmark, who spent parts of three seasons with the Amerks, has emerged as the Sabres' No. 1 goalie and has a .918 save percentage in his last 12 starts. Rochester's roster includes a number of promising prospects, including Lawrence Pilut, Will Borgen, Jacob Bryson, C.J. Smith, Andrew Oglevie and Jonas Johansson.

Casey Mittelstadt, who was drafted eighth overall in 2018, was assigned to Rochester last week to build confidence and develop his game after playing 114 games with the Sabres. A similar plan helped Tage Thompson rediscover his scoring touch with the Amerks, though the 22-year-old winger has been out the past five weeks with an upper-body injury suffered in his first game back with Buffalo.

With Larsson likely to return Friday against Boston, the Sabres assigned Lazar to the Amerks late Monday night. However, Krueger is going to need reinforcements throughout the final 44 games of the regular season, and the Sabres' development model has eased the transition for those who receive the call.

"We believe in collaboration, we believe in unity and we believe in one," Sexton said. "We've practiced that and preached it from day one. It is rewarding and gratifying to see players coming from Rochester fitting in, some playing better than others, but as we remind all of our players all the time, becoming an every day NHL player is a process. You don't get recalled once and you're there forever.

"We tell our coaches all the time it's a little bit like a stock. Some days it goes up and some days it goes down a little bit, but we need to make sure the trend is always up and to the right. Not every player is going to have a great day every day, but if we're focused on collaborating internally and working with our players to help make them get better, then more often than not it works."