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Amerks Return From Covid Pause With A Deeper Appreciation For Each Other, Organization
By Suzie Cool
Amerks.com

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After a 3-2 shootout loss to the Utica Comets on Wednesday, Mar. 10 at the Adirondack Bank Center, the Amerks were immediately shut down due to COVID-19 protocols the very next morning.

It came as a shock to everyone, especially in the sense that this year is so untraditional that it's difficult to determine where this could even stem from in the first place. Every few days the players, coaches and hockey staff are tested prior to walking into The Blue Cross Arena, there's plastic dividers keeping the players at a safe distance from each other in the locker room, coaches are masked at practice and games.

And that's just the start. Keep in mind the seemingly endless list of team protocols that are strongly enforced daily to ensure the health and safety of everyone.

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Appert then went on to add, "I do want to really make sure that we understand that our players have been nothing but exemplary in their on-ice work ethic and competitiveness, but also in their off-ice decision-making and habits."

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As the Amerks made the right decision to suspend game play for a period of time, it was how they decided to take care of the serious situation that should be noted.

For the first four days after the original confirmed case, there was an immediate pause in any team activities within the organization. Players, coaches and staff were immediately urged to stay home, and this gave the players the chance for a mid-season reset of sorts.

This meant no hockey, no film, just a chance to relax and take in a couple of beautiful, sunny days in the Flower City. For the coaches, though, this gave them some extra time to look over film and dissect the players and team that they have at hand.

When all was good and there were no longer any positive tests, Rochester then began coming back to practice in small-group form. For two days, the team showed up to the rink in shifts of players that were closely associated with one another to begin getting back to "normal."

Upon getting back to these small-group practices, Appert couldn't have better things to say about the group of guys that he has on his team and their positive attitudes that they bring to the rink every single day.

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After a few of days of small-group practices, it was time for the Amerks to get back to full practice about a week after the initial shutdown. Once back, Rochester hit the ice skating and had competitive practices day in and day out, wanting to ensure that they were ready at any moment for when they got the chance to play again.

That quite possibly could be one of the most challenging parts of this season, making sure that the team comes together and can create the energy needed despite the untraditional antics of this year and the small number of games allotted on the Amerks' schedule.

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"We talk about it all the time, that these games this year are precious and they're so valuable and they're so important," Appert continued. "We got so many young players here that need this development opportunity."

Games this year are precious indeed and are providing players with the opportunity that might not have been possible within a traditional season.

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In a year of untraditional circumstances, it comes as no surprise that the Amerks' last month and a half of play would be filled with three-game weeks and ample opportunity for individuals to make their mark in the American Hockey League. And although Rochester has overcome its first, and hopefully, its only COVID-19 situation of the season, the organization is still fully aware of how cautious it needs to continue to be.

While addressing the media Appert stated, "I wouldn't say that this has been a wakeup call, but it's just another good reminder of how important all of the decisions we're making are. Sometimes there's things outside of your control that you just have to address and then move forward."

If anything, this season has been more of a learning curve as to how the Amerks decision-making off the ice can affect what happens at the rink.

"I think that we all have learned, in this type of a year, that you have to be extremely flexible, and you have to be fluid with your decision-making." Appert then continued to say, "More than ever, the decisions we continue to make away from the rink impact our play and our ability to be at the rink."

No matter what, though, the most important thing learned is that Rochester put the health and safety of its players, coaches and staff first. The Amerks have now been back in game action for a week and a half, have played three games over that span and everyone has safely returned back to the lineup.

Let's take the time to acknowledge that as much as we all love the game of hockey, these players are human beings first and the organization showed that through how it handled adversity in an unfortunate circumstance.

Ruotsalainen ready for NHL opportunity following assignment to taxi squad

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

Arttu Ruotsalainen signed his entry-level contract with the Sabres in May 2019, coming off a breakout year with Ilves of the Finnish Elite League that saw him score a team-high 21 goals in 42 games.

His focus ever since - through two training camps in Buffalo, parts of two more seasons in Finland and now 13 AHL games with the Rochester Americans - has been on rounding out his game for the NHL.

With a chance now potentially around the corner, the forward said he feels ready to make the leap.

"I have been waiting for this moment for a long time now," Ruotsalainen said after practicing with the Sabres Monday. "I think, like, I'm ready now and hopefully I get the chance. But even if I can't get the chance, whatever. I just try to work hard every day and earn my spot on the roster someday."

The Sabres reassigned Ruotsalainen from the Amerks to the taxi squad prior to practice, swapping him with fellow forward Jean-Sebastien Dea. Interim head coach Don Granato said he expects the lineup in New Jersey on Tuesday to stay the same as it was in Saturday's win over the New York Rangers but added that the team hopes to get a look at Ruotsalainen in the near future.

"He has earned it by his work ethic, his commitment," Granato said. "All of the intangibles. He's done a nice job down there (in Rochester) and consistently progressed."

A brief refresher on Ruotsalainen's path: He was undrafted before his breakout season in 2018-19, which earned him an NHL deal with Buffalo. He attended camp with the Sabres the following season before being sent back to Finland to round out his game, with an emphasis on winning battles and playing with pace. He upped his production to .97 points per game.

The numbers rose to astronomical levels at the start of this season in Finland, which saw him tally 16 goals and 27 points in 19 games before the league paused play due to the COVID-19 pandemic in December. Both totals led the league.

For context, former Rochester forward Justin Danforth led the Finnish Elite League with 27 goals in 56 games in 2019-20. Ruotsalainen was on pace to score 50 goals over the full 60-game schedule.

Instead, the start of the North American season ended Ruotsalainen's campaign in Finland. He opened training camp with the Sabres before being reassigned to Rochester, where he leads the Amerks with 13 points in 13 contests. He has been a Swiss Army knife for coach Seth Appert, playing both center and the wing and appearing on the power play and the penalty kill.

"It's hard, you come over here and you obviously want to go right to the NHL," forward Steven Fogarty, who opened the season playing on Ruotsalainen's wing, said. "But it's a tough road and I think he handled it well going down there and just approaching every day as another day to earn an opportunity up here."

"You see the numbers he's been putting up and the consistency and the amount of ice time and different situations he's playing down there. I'm excited to see him up here and it was good to see him today."

Ruotsalainen said the transition to North American ice was a quick one. On top of his consistent offense, he feels his biggest growth has been in his defensive play.

"I felt pretty good at Rochester and I think I was doing well in training camp also," he said. "So, I think it's been a good year for me."

Cozens, Borgen to skate Monday

Dylan Cozens and William Borgen took the ice for a rehab skate after the rest of the team concluded practice Monday, a step forward toward their respective returns from injuries. Granato said the team will have a better idea on their timelines based on their reactions to the skate.

Borgen has missed 23 games since sustaining a forearm injury while blocking a shot in New Jersey on Feb. 20. Cozens sustained an upper-body injury upon being checked into the boards against Philadelphia last Monday and has missed the past three games.

"If it goes well, I would say, Dylan maybe within the next week back to practice," Granato said. "And Borge may be just a little bit longer than that. But again, we need a little more information."

Monday's practice

Kyle Okposo took a maintenance day but is expected to play in New Jersey on Tuesday, Granato said. Ruotsalainen filled in for him on a line with Victor Olofsson and Sam Reinhart.

Here's how the team lined up in full:

68 Victor Olofsson - 23 Sam Reinhart - 25 Arttu Ruotsalainen / 49 C.J. Smith
4 Taylor Hall - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 72 Tage Thompson
53 Jeff Skinner - 15 Riley Sheahan - 74 Rasmus Asplund
13 Tobias Rieder - 20 Cody Eakin - 17 Steven Fogarty

78 Jacob Bryson - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
33 Colin Miller - 62 Brandon Montour
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 10 Henri Jokiharju
44 Matt Irwin - 88 Brandon Davidson

35 Linus Ullmark
31 Dustin Tokarski
32 Michael Houser

Schedule change

UPDATE - The NHL announced Monday evening that Buffalo's home game against Boston on April 20 will begin at 6:30 p.m. Faceoff was originally scheduled for 7 p.m.

Sabres make roster moves, recall Arttu Ruotsalainen from Amerks
By Bill Hoppe
Buffalo Hockey Beat

The Sabres this afternoon recalled forward prospect Arttu Ruotsalainen to the taxi squad and assigned forward Jean-Sebastien Dea from the taxi squad to the Rochester Americans.

Ruotsalainen, 23, has enjoyed a terrific rookie season with the Amerks, scoring five goals and 13 points in 13 games. He just compiled two goals and five points in two weekend outings against the Syracuse Crunch.

Before the North American seasons started, Ruotsalainen starred for Ilves, a Liiga team in his native Finland. He left Ilves in December having scored a league-high 16 goals.

The Sabres' old regime signed the 5-foot-8, 181-pound Ruotsalainen as an undrafted free agent in 2019. He has mostly played center with the Amerks.

Ruotsalainen practiced this afternoon at right wing beside center Sam Reinhart and Victor Olofsson inside KeyBank Center. C.J. Smith also took reps at right wing.

Meanwhile, Dea, 27, went pointless in one game with the Sabres. He has compiled four goals and 12 points in nine AHL contests this season.

Update: Interim Sabres coach Don Granato said he plans to dress the same lineup for Tuesday's road game against the New Jersey Devils that he used in Saturday's 3-2 shootout win over the New York Rangers.

Winger Kyle Okposo, who missed today's practice for maintenance, will likely play.

Granato said the Sabres are interested in having Ruotsalainen play "at some point."

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Amerks End Skid With Bounce-Back Win Over Crunch
By Staff Report
Amerks.com

In a game highlighted by near-perfect execution on special teams and a combined seven goals in the first period, the Rochester Americans (7-5-1-1) halted the Syracuse Crunch's (8-6-1-0) five-game winning streak and ended a four-game winless streak of their own on Saturday with a 5-3 victory at Upstate Medical University Arena.

The contest was Rochester's second meeting in just as many days against Syracuse and was the seventh of 12 scheduled matchups between the two clubs this season. The Amerks are 16-9-2-1 in their last 28 contests against Syracuse and have taken four of the first seven contests against the Crunch this season.

Brett Murray (2+1) powered the Amerks offense by notching a point on three of the team's four goals of the night, marking the first three-point effort of his career. Arttu Ruotsalainen (1+2) had a three-point night as well, picking up his second straight multi-point effort and earning his fourth goal in six games. Rochester newcomer Griffin Luce (1+0) scored his first pro goal, which proved to be the eventual game-winner, while fellow rookie Jack Quinn (1+1) posted his first multi-point game. Dominic Franco (0+1), Oskari Laaksonen (0+2), Andrew Oglevie (0+1) and Mattias Samuelsson (0+1) all added assists on throughout the contest.

Goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen (6-4-1) made his third consecutive start in the crease for Rochester and stopped 25 of the 28 shots he faced.

Now 14 games into the campaign, Rochester's power-play has gone 19-for-59 with a 32.2% conversion rate that is currently tops in the AHL. The Amerks' 19 goals are also tied for most in the league with the Chicago Wolves, who have played in three more games than Rochester.

The Amerks have scored at least one power-play goal in 12 of their first 14 games this season and have registered multiple power-play tallies in three of their last eight outings overall.

The Crunch offense was led by both Boris Katchouk (1+1) and Alex Barre-Boulet (1+0), who notched their sixth goals of the season, respectively. Henry Bowlby (1+0) scored his second of the season and the first goal of the night's high-scoring contest.

Syracuse goaltender Spencer Martin (2-2-0) made his fifth start of the year and made 22 saves.

The scoring frenzy began just 1:40 into the contest as Bowlby broke to the net to find the first of three markers for the Crunch in the opening period.

The lead would be short-lived, however, as Ruotsalainen netted his fifth of the season and second in as many nights against the Crunch to make it a 1-1 game. After taking a pass up the left-wing boards from Samuelsson, Ruotsalainen unleashed a shot from just inside the Syracuse blueline that completely handcuffed Martin as it sailed over his right shoulder and into the upper corner.

The Amerks then set out on their first power-play opportunity of the night, which quickly turned into five-on-three two-man advantage, and Murray seized the opportunity with back-to-back goals 50 seconds apart while on the man-advantage.

The first of two power-play markers came from a pass exchange between Ruotsalainen and Quinn, who sat above the face-off dots in the offensive zone. When Quinn saw that Murray was positioned to the right of the Crunch crease, he sent a pass his way, which Murray in turn backhanded into the net to put the Amerks up by one.

Just 50 seconds later, Murray then lit the lamp for the second time of the night on the man-advantage for his second multi-goal game of his AHL career.

Ruotsalainen sat in the right face-off dot, taking his time before deciding where to send his perfectly placed pass in order to take advantage of the remainder of Rochester's second power-play opportunity. This time, though, Murray was stationed to the left of the Crunch net as he received Ruotsalainen's pass and tipped it in to push it past Martin for his second of the game.

The Amerks have now scored a power-play goal in 11 of their last 15 games against Syracuse dating back to last season, going 18-for-58 (31.0%) with the man-advantage over that span and have scored 11 power-play goals on their 27 chances against Syracuse this season.

Katchouk then pulled Syracuse within one almost a minute after the Amerks back-to-back powerplay markers, extending his goal streak to five games and making it a 3-2 score.

Luce restored Rochester's two-goal lead in the first. As Franco swiveled a pass from behind the Syracuse net, Murray was waiting on the right-wing boards, where he'd pick up the pass and fire a shot towards the Crunch net. As the rebound from Murray floated out between the face-off dots, Luce capitalized on a clear lane to the net and snapped home his first pro goal.

The Crunch, however, would not go into the first intermission without finding the back of the net once more in the first, making the score 4-3 before the period's end.

After a strong first stanza and a combined seven goals between the two teams, the second period would fate much different. Both teams fell silent as Rochester was held to just seven shots on goal and Syracuse 11.

In the final frame, Quinn gave the Amerks a two-goal lead as they added another man-advantage marker to the final scoreline, making them a near-perfect 3-for-4 on the power-play for the night.

Driving the puck through the neutral zone, Oglevie found Quinn making his way up the right boards and shifted the puck his way. Quinn accepted the pass in stride and roofed a backhanded shot with 4:35 remaining in regulation to secure the 5-3 win for Rochester.

The Amerks return home on Wednesday, April 7 for another go-around with the Crunch at The Blue Cross Arena to finish off their three-game series with a 7:05 p.m. face-off. All of the action will be carried live on The Sports Leader 95.7 FM/950 AM ESPN Rochester as well as AHLTV.