



AMERKS DAILY PRESS CLIPS

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Amerks Rally To Take Down Comets
By Staff Report
Amerks.com

Facing a 2-1 deficit in the closing minutes of the second period, the Rochester Americans (8-5-2-1) reeled off three straight unanswered goals, including the game-winner from rookie forward Dominic Franco, on their way to a 4-2 win over the intrastate rival Utica Comets (6-3-0-1) Friday at the Adirondack Bank Center.

With the win, the Amerks extended their point streak to three straight games (2-0-1-0) and have now collected at least one point in 23 of the last 32 games against Utica dating back to the start of the 2017-18 campaign, going 17-9-2-4 over that span.

Franco's first pro goal midway through the third period broke a 2-2 tie and the Amerks held on for their third win of the season over Utica. The first-year forward has collected points in three straight games.

Forward Remi Elie (1+1) and defenseman Oskari Laaksonen (1+1) each scored a goal with an assist while picking up their third multi-point outings of the season. Laaksonen is now tied for second amongst all AHL rookie defensemen in assists and fourth in points while also showing goals in two of his last five appearances. Forwards Jean-Sebastien Dea (0+1), Brett Murray (0+2) and Patrick Polino (0+1) and defenseman Mattias Samuelsson (0+1) all added assists on the night while veteran forward Michael Mersch scored his fourth goal in the second period to ignite the rally.

Rookie goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen (7-4-2) made his fifth consecutive start in the crease for Rochester and 10th in the last 11 games, making 34 saves to pick up his second win of the month. The Finland native ranks sixth in the AHL in wins and has made 25 or more saves in nine of his last 12 appearances dating back to a career-best 43-save performance at Cleveland on Feb. 12.

Forward John Stevens (1+0) scored Utica's first goal back after a month without games with his fourth marker of the season and Mitch Reinke also scored his first of the year to round out the scoring for Utica.

Netminder Jake Kielly (3-2-0) made his first start in the crease since Mar. 10 against Rochester and fell to 1-1-0 in two appearances this season against the Amerks after stopping 21 of 24 shots he faced.

Despite being outshot 28 to 14 through the first 40 minutes of play, the Amerks entered the final frame with momentum following the equalizer from Mersch. Carrying the puck with speed through the neutral zone, Laaksonen weaved his way through a number of Utica defenders to gain the Comets blueline. As Franco was joining in on the rush, Laaksonen shoveled a pass to the streaking rookie centerman who zipped a shot over the left shoulder of Kielly for his first professional goal to put the Amerks ahead 3-2 at the 10:43 mark.

Rochester held off the Comets for the remaining 9:17 of regulation before Elie added an empty-netter with 31 seconds left to seal the 4-2 win for Rochester.

With the contest knotted at 1-1, Utica would take its first lead of the game on the man-advantage with only 5:44 to go in the second period thanks to Reinke's first of the season.

Despite back-to-back markers by the Comets, the Amerks answered just over two minutes later as Mersch connected on a centering feed at 16:21 for his second in as many games against Utica.

Skating the puck through the neutral zone, Murray went flying up the left-wing before turning around and sending a pass to Polino up the boards. Polino then swiveled the puck right back to Murray, who was now behind Utica's net, where he'd redirect a pass to Mersch in front of the blue paint. Mersch then roofed a shot over the glove-hand side of the Comets netminder, marking the second consecutive contest Polino has recorded a point this season.

After holding Utica scoreless through the first 20 minutes of play, Utica would tie things up in the middle frame at the 14:05 mark.

With a zone entry play, Sam Anas created time and space before sliding a pass to Stevens, who was sitting atop the Amerks crease. On a redirect, Stevens backhanded the puck past Luukkonen to tie the game up at one apiece.

As the Amerks embarked on their first man-advantage opportunity less than four minutes into the game, they opened the scoring for the second consecutive game.

From the offensive zone, Dea drove the puck up the right-wing while sending a backhanded pass to Elie above the right face-off dot. Elie then slipped a pass to Laaksonen in the slot and the rookie defenseman stepped into a one-timer that found the back of the net just 6:23 in to Rochester a 1-0 lead.

The Amerks have scored at least one power-play goal in 12 of their first 15 games this season and have registered multiple power-play tallies in three of their last nine outings overall, including three this past Saturday alone.

The Amerks and Comets came into the matchup ranked first and second in the North Division with a 30.6% and 22.7% success rate on the power-play, respectively. The Amerks' 20 goals on the man-advantage are tops among North Division teams and trail only the San Diego Gulls for most in the AHL.

The Amerks return home to The Blue Cross Arena on Saturday, April 10 when they host the Cleveland Monsters in the first of three straight meetings between the two teams. Game time is slated for a 6:05 p.m. start and will be carried live on The Sports Leader 95.7 FM/950 AM ESPN Rochester as well as AHLTV. Saturday's matchup will also be televised live locally on CW Rochester.

Comets return to ice with loss to Amerks
By Staff Report
UticaComets.com

For the first time in over a year, the Utica Comets welcomed fans back to the Adirondack Bank Center for a matchup against the Rochester Americans.

It was Rochester who tallied the game's first goal after Lukas Jasek was assessed a double minor for high sticking. After killing more than two minutes of the four-minute penalty, Oskari Laaksonen ripped it past Jake Kielly to take a one goal lead. The Comets would pressure hard the remainder of the period but couldn't get it past Rochester goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukonen. The Comets outshot Rochester 16-8 in the first period.

The Comets continued to pressure the Americans in the second period forcing Luukonen to make several big saves. The Comets would find the back of the net off when John Stevens tapped home a beautiful feed from Sam Anas at the 14:05 mark of the second period.

After trading penalties back and forth, the Comets found themselves on the man advantage at 6:06 in the second period. With just seconds remaining on the powerplay Anas fired a cross-ice pass over to Jonah Gadjovich to give the Comets the 2-1 lead. Just minutes later Michael Mersch skated down the ice and fired a puck over the right shoulder of Kielly to tie the game at two.

The tie wouldn't be broken until 9:17 in the third period when Dominic Franco wristed a shot past Kielly to give Rochester a 3-2 lead. The Comets would go on the powerplay with 6:45 remaining in the game but could not capitalize. With 31 seconds remaining on the clock, Remi Elie shot the puck into the Comets empty net to give the Amerks a 4-2 lead.

Utica outshot the Americans 36 to 25 and had a power play goal but fell short by a score of 4-2. The Comets return to action tomorrow when they battle Syracuse on the road.

Comets return to ice with loss to Amerks

By Steve Jones

Rome Sentinel

The Utica Comets returned to the ice for the first game since March 10 on Friday night. They lost 4-2 to the Rochester Americans at the Utica Aud, in a game that included fans for the first time this season.

Head coach Trent Cull said he was pleased with the initial effort. "Our pace was good to start the game." But, he added, "In the third period they played the game a bit heavier. We weren't as fleet of foot." He continued: "I didn't like our third period. Our puck management needed to be better."

"Overall it's been a long time off," Cull said. The players have to get their feet back under them and get themselves back to game speed. Despite the loss, he said, "It was a positive evening for us," especially to get to play in front of fans again.

Despite a freewheeling first period for both offenses, only Rochester could manage a goal in the first 20 minutes. The visitors were on an extended power play due to a double minor for high sticking on Utica's Lucas Jasek. With 13:37 left in the opening period, Oskari Laaksonen sent a point shot through traffic that beat Utica goalie Jake Kielly and gave Rochester the 1-0 lead. The power play goal came on assists from Remi Elie and Jean-Sebastien Dea.

The Comets nearly tied the game with eight minutes left in the first period when Mitch Eliot came in on a rush, loaded up and fired a blast from the right faceoff circle that rang around the posts but stayed out of the goal. The hosts were not without chances in the first period, where they outshot Rochester 16-8.

The Comets did knot the score at 1-1 just under six minutes into the middle frame. After killing off a penalty, the Comets switched gears. Sam Anas brought the puck into the zone and got off a shot from low in the right circle. The puck didn't get across the goal line, but as it trickled close, John Stevens guided it home for the score. Anas and Jonah Gadjovich each earned an assist on the score.

The rest of the second period was plagued by penalties, starting with fighting majors for Utica's Tanner Kaspick and Brett Murray of Rochester 8:34 into the period. A few minutes later, two Rochester penalties in quick succession gave Utica 1:41 of five-on-three advantage. The hosts could not capitalize to break the tie.

Utica then took a penalty, followed by another by Rochester. This time, Utica did make them pay. As he's done more than a few times this season, Anas found space along the goal line near the boards and sent a feed toward the goal mouth. That was where Gadjovich was stationed, and he redirected the pass into the net to make it 2-1 Utica with 5:44 left in the period. Anas and Sven Baertschi tallied assists. It was Gadjovich's team-leading ninth goal and Anas' team-leading ninth assist.

It was, said Anas after the game, "exciting to be back out there." He hadn't played a game in over seven weeks, having been called up to the St. Louis Blues' taxi squad before the Comets' layoff due to COVID-19 protocols. There will be, he said, "details we can sharpen up."

"I thought we did all right," said Gadjovich after the game. "Tough situation we were in, but we did our best." Of his own performance, he said: "I felt all right. I did some things good but there were areas of my game that could have been better."

The lead didn't hold for long. The Amerks got the game tied at 2-2 when Murray sent a pass from behind the Utica goal to Michael Mersch, who scored to even the score with 3:39 left in the period. That's how it would sit as the teams headed to the second intermission. Utica still held an overwhelming advantage in shots on goal, with 28 to Rochester's 14 at the break.

Domnic Franco got the eventual game winner on assists from Laaksonen and Elie when he broke in on the left side just over half way through the third period. Franco scored his first goal of the season when he snapped off a wrist shot that beat Kielly high.

The Comets had one more power play later in the period but the Amerks killed off the man advantage. The Comets would later pull the goalie for an extra attacker, but Elie scored into the empty net to seal the win for Rochester.

Kielly made 22 saves in the loss. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen had 34 saves to earn the win in net.

The Comets came into the game with a 3-1-1 record against Rochester this season, having played the Amerks in five of the team's first nine games. With the loss, they fall to 6-3-1 on the season.

The Comets will play in Syracuse Saturday night at 7.

Anas said the team knows it has to overcome opponents who have had little to no interruption to their game schedules. "No one feels sorry for us. Teams have gone through things, whether we know it or not."

"It's tough, obviously," said Gadjovich of the two games in two nights coming on the heels of a month-long layoff. "We're going to be pretty sore." But, he added, the team knows it has to bring it every night. "No excuses."

Taylor Hall 'still involved' with Sabres as trade talks continue

By Buffalo News

Lance Lysowski

Taylor Hall has likely played his last game with the Buffalo Sabres, but the former Hart Trophy winner isn't away from the team while awaiting a possible trade.

Hall, ranked second on TSN's latest Trade Bait list ahead of Monday's deadline, remains out of the lineup as General Manager Kevyn Adams negotiates with other teams. However, Hall remains involved in team meetings and off-ice workouts while Buffalo wraps up a homestand this week, interim coach Don Granato said.

With Hall still on the roster, the Sabres don't have enough salary cap space to add a forward to the active roster. This forced Granato to deploy an 11-forward, seven-defensemen lineup for a second consecutive game Thursday night against the New Jersey Devils.

"He's still involved with everything," Granato said following the optional morning skate Thursday. "The same other than being held out of the game. As I mentioned, it's part of this week. There's some oddities that are presented this week, even affecting our lineup and what we do within that lineup. This is just one part of it. I feel the players all understand this and it's not a distraction going into any meeting or practice or prep or the game itself."

According to CapFriendly.com, the Sabres had \$669,675 of available cap space as of Thursday morning. The team even moved defenseman Jacob Bryson and forward Steven Fogarty to the taxi squad Wednesday to accrue space.

Richard Kyte: Why gun owners need a change of heart

For whatever reason, the Sabres have yet to place defenseman Jake McCabe on long-term injured reserve after he suffered a season-ending knee injury. Doing so would create additional cap space for Adams to supplement the roster while waiting for a Hall trade to be complete.

It's unclear how many suitors are involved in talks with Adams, but one possible fit is gone after the New York Islanders acquired forwards Kyle Palmieri and Travis Zajac from the Devils on Wednesday for two prospects and two draft picks, including a first rounder.

Adams is reportedly trying to acquire a first-round draft choice in any Hall trade. Such a scenario would likely require the Sabres to retain 50% of the salary Hall is owed. It's also unclear what the market is for Hall, who has two goals with 17 assists and a minus-21 rating in 37 games with Buffalo.

Hall is shooting a career-low 2.3% — he shot 14% during his Hart Trophy season with the Devils in 2017-18 — and leads the Sabres in on-ice shot quality at 5-on-5, according to Evolving-Hockey.com. The 29-year-old played out of position on the power play and never benefitted from skating alongside Jack Eichel. Hall's skill was also suppressed in former coach Ralph Krueger's ultra-conservative system.

Florida is one possible trade partner after the Panthers cleared \$4.1 million in cap space by trading forward Brett Connolly to Chicago in a salary dump on Thursday.

Reinhart trade chatter

TSN's Darren Dreger mentioned recently that teams around the NHL have called Sabres General Manager Kevyn Adams to gauge the price tag to acquire winger Sam Reinhart.

Which contender wouldn't want Reinhart? Entering Thursday, the 25-year-old led the Sabres in goals (13) and points (24) while counting \$5.2 million against the salary cap this season. He's a pending restricted free agent and won't be eligible for unrestricted free agency until 2022.

The former second overall draft pick had no interest in discussing those rumors when broached with the topic following an optional morning skate Thursday.

"Not much," Reinhart said if he thinks about the trade chatter. "I mean, what's going through my head right now is a game tonight against New Jersey."

UPL's week

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, the organization's top goaltending prospect, had a difficult week after spending some time on the Sabres' taxi squad.

Luukkonen, 22, recorded a .844 save percentage in three starts with the Rochester Americans, stopping 65 of 77 shots during a three-game series against the Syracuse Crunch. A second-round draft pick in 2017, Luukkonen has a 6-4-2 record, 3.48 goals-against average and .888 save percentage in 12 games with the Amerks this season.

Additionally, defenseman Oskari Laaksonen missed the Amerks' game Wednesday with what coach Seth Appert described as a minor lower-body injury.

Sabres prospect Jack Quinn adapting to AHL, showcasing skills with Amerks
By Bill Hoppe
Buffalo Hockey Beat

In scoring his second goal as a pro, Buffalo Sabres prospect Jack Quinn showcased some of the slick skills that made him the eighth overall pick in 2020.

On Saturday, Quinn utilized his speed to beat a Syracuse Crunch defender down the right wing before his hard backhander from the edge of the slot cemented the Rochester Americans' 5-3 road win.

But Quinn's willingness to cut to the net and go to the so-called "dirty area" grabbed coach Seth Appert's attention.

Quinn possesses a shot so lethal he could've scored from the wing.

"What I liked about it was he got to the inside," Appert told the Times Herald. "That's something that's important to do for a goal scorer. I know that's something he worked a lot on with his coach in junior hockey, getting to the inside. And it would be easy to take that puck and stay wide."

The power-play goal illustrated some of Quinn's development during this unique season.

"That's a big way for me to score goals," Quinn said of taking the puck to the net. "I need to figure out how to get to the net a little more."

In a normal year, Quinn, 19, would've returned to Ottawa, where he likely could've scored at least 50 goals for the Ontario Hockey League's 67's. The winger scored 52 times in 62 OHL games last season.

Teenagers usually can't play in the AHL if they have junior eligibility. But the COVID-19 pandemic has kept the OHL season paused, meaning Quinn and other prospects have a unique opportunity to compete against men.

"It's important that he's learned how good the American League is and how hard it is to score at this level, how strong guys are, and that's going to fuel and drive even more relentless work from him in the offseason," Appert said.

The 6-foot, 176-pound Quinn has looked comfortable in the AHL from the get-go, scoring a shootout goal and recording an assist in his debut Feb. 18.

Still, he's cognizant his skill will only take him so far. So he has embraced the challenges that accompany playing pro hockey as a teenager.

"As challenging as it's been, it's also, I think, the best thing for me," he said. "I think you can grow a lot when you face adversity. I think I've faced adversity this year. I haven't played as well as I want to, but I think that's helping my game grow a lot as I was figuring it out here this year."

So far, Quinn has registered six points in 11 games. Saturday's outing — he also recorded an assist and four shots — might've been his best performance.

"That was probably the most dangerous he's looked offensively throughout a whole game," Appert said. "Like, there was many shifts where you felt he could score."

Appert said Quinn has quickly adapted to the faster style he must play in the AHL.

"And I don't mean by how fast he's skating; I mean by understanding that you've got to play give-and-go hockey at this level to become a great offensive player," he said. Very few players in the world can just hold it, hold it, possess it, lean on people. ...

"The best scorers at higher levels, in the NHL, they don't have the puck a lot usually. They give it and then find an opening and get it back and then deliver that potent shot, and I think that's something he's really delivering on here."

Amerks Fall In Overtime To Crunch
By Staff Report
Amerks.com

The Rochester Americans (7-5-2-1) erased a one-goal deficit to force overtime, but it was the Syracuse Crunch (9-6-1-0) who scored 1:37 into the extra frame to win the third straight meeting between the North Division rivals Wednesday at The Blue Cross Arena.

Despite the overtime loss, Rochester has recorded points in six of the first eight games this season against the Crunch by going 4-2-2-0, including a 1-1-2-0 at home. The Amerks are 16-9-3-1 in their last 29 contests against Syracuse.

Forwards Dalton Smith and Remi Elie each tallied their first and fourth goals of the season, respectively, while rookie defenseman Mattias Samuelsson netted his second to send the game into the extra stanza. Dominic Franco found the scoresheet for the second time in as many games as he, Brandon Biro, Casey Fitzgerald and Patrick Polino all recorded an assist.

Rookie goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen (6-4-2) made his fourth consecutive start in the crease for Rochester and ninth in the last 10 games, but was dealt with the overtime loss despite making 17 saves. The Finland native is tied for eighth in the AHL in wins and has made 25 or more saves in seven of his last 11 appearances dating back to a career-best 43-save performance at Cleveland on Feb. 12.

The Crunch offense was paced by Mitchell Stephens as he matched a career-best with three points on one goal and two assists. Boris Katchouk (0+2) registered his third straight multi-point night while Alex Green (1+1) and Sean Day (0+2) also picked up two points. Alex Barre-Boulet (1+0) sealed the victory as he scored for the fourth consecutive game while also extending his point streak to nine games. Netminder Samuel Montembeault improved to 3-0-1 in four appearances this season versus Rochester as he stopped 25 of 28 shots he faced.

With the win, the Crunch have won six straight on the road dating back to March 3, outscoring the opposition 27-14, including 12-3 in the first period over that span.

Late in the first period, it seemed the Amerks were heading into the intermission ahead by a pair of goals but Syracuse chipped into the deficit as Stephens scored his first goal of the season in the final minute of play.

Then in the second period, Rochester again led for much of the middle frame before the Crunch capitalized on the man-advantage to even the score as Raddysh tallied his third of the season at the 19:05 mark.

Syracuse carried the late-goal momentum into the third period as Green gathered his own rebound between the face-off dots and sniped in his first AHL goal just 44 seconds in. Stephens and Katchouk each were credited with the helpers on the tally.

The Amerks pushed to tie the game, and thanks to Biro's wall play inside the Crunch zone, he handed a pass to Samuelsson atop the left point. With bodies screening Montembeault, Samuelsson flipped in his second of the campaign to make it a 3-3 game.

In overtime, neither team generated much offense until Barre-Boulet finished off an odd-man rush 1:37 in to give the Crunch their sixth straight road win dating back to March 3.

The Amerks opened the scoring for the fifth time of the season as Smith and Elie both scored 1:40 apart.

After gathering a pass inside the Rochester blueline, Polino one-touched a pass to Franco, who sprinted through the neutral zone. After beating and getting behind the Crunch defense, the first-year forward dished a backhanded pass across the goal crease to Smith for his first tally of the slate.

Later in the period, despite the Crunch winning a face-off outside the blueline, Elie dove to break up a pass between the Syracuse defensemen. While on his knees, Elie managed to poke the puck free and fire a shot past an unsuspecting Montembeault to give the Amerks a 2-0 lead at the 7:32 mark.

The Amerks face-off against the Utica Comets for the first time in nearly a month on Friday, April 9 in a North Division showdown at the Adirondack Bank Center. Game time is slated for a 7:00 p.m. start and will be carried live on The Sports Leaders 95.7 FM/950 AM ESPN Rochester as well as AHLTV.

Franco continues to show progress but Amerks fall in OT
By Kevin Oklobzija
Pickin' Splinters

At West Point, Dominic Franco was a standout scorer, leading the Black Knights in scoring three consecutive seasons.

But life is little different for Franco in the American Hockey League. The Rochester Americans aren't asking him to think offense first. They want him using his 6-foot-5, 218-pound frame to jar bodies and slow the opposition, to be solid in the defensive zone.

The adjustment has been slow and steady, but Franco showed on Wednesday night that there definitely has been significant progress.

He set up the game's first goal by linemate Dalton Smith and played perhaps his best game, though the Amerks lost 4-3 in overtime to the Syracuse Crunch.

Remi Elie and Mattias Samuelsson also scored for the Amerks, who fell to 7-5-2-1 by losing for the fifth time in six games (they did earn points in three of the losses).

Franco's progress transitioning into a different role in the pro game compared to college was one of the bright spots on Wednesday, when the Amerks opened a 2-0 lead in the first eight minutes but couldn't maintain the pace of pressure.

"At Army, he was their top player, their first-line center and now he has to do things that your bottom six forwards have to do," Amerks coach Seth Appert said. "He has to be strong on the puck, he has to be good defensively, he has to be willing to block shots."

Franco is more than willing to do what's asked, but he's not abandoning the game he played at Army in Atlantic Hockey. In nine games, he has three assists.

"Obviously having some success at West Point, I still focus on using my body and a lot of my points and goals and good things in college came from net front so it's easy to lean on those habits I learned in college," the 25-year-old Rhode Island native said.

With his size, playing the body is paramount. But he must do it smartly, according to Appert.

"When you're 6-5 and you're Brett Murray and you're Dom Franco, it is part of the game," Appert said. "But because skating isn't your greatest strength, you also can be taken out of position when you're trying to run for hits.

"Where we need to use his size is on winning puck battles, playing below the goal line in the offensive zone and then being around the net in the offensive zone. But when he has opportunities to finish checks, we absolutely want him to."

Unlike the previous three home games, and four of the past five games, the Amerks stormed out of the gate, opening a 2-0 lead in the first 7:32 on goals by Smith and Elie, but eventually ended up losers as Alex Barre-Boulet scored 1:37 into overtime.

Franco triggered the Amerks fast start, setting up Smith for a goal 5:52 into the game. -break two-on-one, converting a perfect centering pass from Franco for his first goal — and point — of the season.

Franco charged up the left wing, banked a pass off the board to himself to get past defenseman Noah Juulsen and then found Smith in the slot.

"That was all Franco," Smith said. "I was right place at the right time."

Said Appert: "He ended up making a real smart play. He didn't have anything so instead of trying to do something that was outside his skillset, he played the puck past an opponent and then he won a race and his skill took over and he made a heck of a pass."

Elie scored his fourth goal 1:40 later while on his knees. Crunch defenseman Devante Stephens mishandled the puck just above the hash marks in the Syracuse zone and Elie snapped it past goalie Samuel Montembeault on the stick side.

But as dominant as the Amerks were for the first 18 minutes, when they outshot Syracuse 13-3, they didn't finish the period well and the Crunch scored with 43.1 seconds left. Boris Katchouk led the rush into the zone and danced around defenseman Casey Fitzgerald above the circle before feeding the puck to the goal mouth, where Mitchell Stephens was positioned to steer it past goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen.

"I thought we gave them one at the end of the first period; that was a mistake by us," Appert said.

The Crunch scored another last-minute goal in the second period, tying the score at 2-2 during a power play with 54.7 seconds remaining. Mitchell Stephens darted down the right-wing boards off the rush before passing into the slot to Taylor Raddysh, who quickly fired a shot in off the right post.

"We almost go through the second," Appert said, "but you're not going to dominate a team as good as they are for 60 minutes."

Alex Green put Syracuse ahead only 44 seconds into the third period with a rebound goal. He initially set up Katchouk well to the left of the net for a one-timed redirection. Luukkonen read the play well and stopped Katchouk's shot but the rebound caromed high into the left circle and Green had an empty net for his first goal of the season.

Samuelsson tied it at 8:03 when his wrister from the left point eluded a partially screened Montembeault after Brandon Biro weaved out of the left corner to set him up.

"Biro made a nice play and I'm just doing my job, putting it on net, and there's guy all around the net creating chaos and it hit something in front," Samuelsson said.

Rasmus Asplund promoted to Sabres' first line, close to earning regular duty

By Bill Hoppe

Buffalo Hockey Beat

Sabres winger Rasmus Asplund said his first taste of the NHL last season exhausted him mentally. The Swede couldn't let go of what transpired during games. He even had trouble falling asleep.

"I felt last year that I started off my first five games really good but then I got really tired mentally," Asplund said on a Zoom call following Wednesday's optional practice.

So in the offseason, Asplund, 23, began developing what he called his "mental game." Now after he plays, for example, he tries to slow down his mind by laying down and doing mental exercises for 30 minutes to "reset."

"Just take my time, just stop and just relax for a little bit and let the mind rest and just go through what I've been doing good and great," he said. "It started with the workouts this summer."

Asplund said he can "just put that day in the past."

"I'm looking forward to the next day, which I felt last year I didn't do," said Asplund, a second-round-pick in 2016, 33rd overall. "I was still (thinking about) yesterday and thinking about the game yesterday. Just my mind never really got a rest. So when you get to play like 25, 30 games like I did last year, your mental game is not there. You feel tired, you're not sleeping well."

His work has started paying dividends. Asplund, who played only seven of the Sabres' first 36 games, has quickly earned interim coach Don Granato's trust.

Granato promoted Asplund beside top center Casey Mittelstadt and Tage Thompson early in Tuesday's 5-3 road win over the New Jersey Devils.

"It was instant chemistry," Granato said after the Sabres prepared for tonight's game against New Jersey at KeyBank Center.

Asplund converted Mittelstadt's nifty pass 9:56 into Tuesday's game, his fourth goal in only 10 games. That goal total is double what winger Taylor Hall, who had been playing on that line, has produced in 37 games. The Sabres held Hall out of Tuesday's contest as a precaution as they try to trade him.

Not surprisingly, Granato said he plans to keep the line intact tonight.

"There's no need to reinvent the wheel," he said. "If those guys have chemistry and it's going and they feel good, there's no reason to change that."

The line generated Corsi For on Tuesday — the percentage of shot attempts by the team while a trio is on the ice five-on-five — of 60% during 9 minutes, 51 seconds of ice time, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

"We're all really good friends," Mittelstadt said of his linemates. "It's nice to go out there and have some familiar faces. I think what we did well (Tuesday) is we're trying to make plays and if they don't work, just make sure we got a guy back. If I mess up, Aspy and Tommer are backchecking hard. If one of them do, I'm going back hard."

Asplund said: "We know each other pretty well, know what type of hockey we want to play together."

Granato said Asplund used his 29-game run with the Sabres last season as "almost an apprenticeship." He believes Asplund figured out his strengths and weaknesses and arrived this season ready to grab his opportunities.

Of course, the 5-foot-11, 189-pound Asplund had to wait to play regularly. He has spent most of the season on the taxi squad. He also played three games with the Rochester Americans.

After the Sabres suffered a few injuries up front and traded center Eric Staal, a spot finally materialized in late March.

"He was finding and searching his way around the NHL a year ago and now he's targeting what to do and what he can do within a shift and a game," Granato said. "And that's where you see the results now. He's very results-oriented. He knows what's wanted from the coach, from the system he plays and obviously within the game itself.

"He's ready for that next opportunity. Being ready to seize it is really the biggest difference as he's built himself up."

No timeline for Sabres to receive Covid-19 vaccinations, says interim coach Don Granato

By Lance Lysowski

Buffalo News

Medical personnel from the Buffalo Sabres are investigating how soon players, coaches and staff can receive Covid-19 vaccinations.

With availability greater and restrictions eased in New York State, the National Hockey League's Rangers and Major League Baseball's Mets revealed their organizations will receive vaccinations this week as professional sports continue during the pandemic.

The Sabres endured a Covid-19 outbreak in February that paused and eventually derailed their season. Nine players were placed on the league's protocol list, some of whom tested positive. Defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen was bedridden while experiencing debilitating symptoms, including chest pain, and former coach Ralph Krueger, 61, was also symptomatic after testing positive.

The Sabres, still last in the NHL with a 9-23-6 record, have 18 games remaining, beginning Thursday night in KeyBank Center against the New Jersey Devils.

"I know that the medical team here, the trainers have been looking at that," Granato said following an optional practice Wednesday when asked about vaccinations. "I don't have any news today on it, but they've been looking at that for a while, when this will potentially become available for our guys. So, I'm sure they're hard at work on it. I know, like I've said, they've been hopeful for that day to come sooner than later."

More teams across professional sports in North America are receiving vaccinations. MLB and NBA and their respective players' associations have issued joint memos to players encouraging acceptance of vaccines and offering a reprieve from certain protocols if doses are complete. MLB told its players that full-vaccinated individuals can gather inside hotel rooms and other indoor spaces without masks.

The Mets even held a mandatory education session for players and staff members Tuesday in Philadelphia, an attempt to ease concerns from anyone hesitant to receive shots.

The Sabres' last encounter with a possible Covid-19 situation occurred last month in Pittsburgh, when Granato and interim assistant coach Matt Ellis entered the protocols after producing what was later determined to be false positives. Granato, who was hospitalized in October 2019 while battling pneumonia and a blood infection, later told the media that he had already received both doses of the vaccination.

In addition to the Sabres' Covid outbreak in February, their top minor-league affiliate, the Rochester Americans, also had their season paused after three players tested positive for the virus last month. The NHL, though, continues to battle the spread of the virus.

The Vancouver Canucks' season remains on pause, as the team announced Wednesday that 25 members of the organization have tested positive for Covid-19. The source of the infection was confirmed as a variant.

Prominent role

With Taylor Hall likely on his way out of Buffalo, the Sabres will continue to use forward Rasmus Asplund on a top-six line alongside Tage Thompson and Casey Mittelstadt.

Asplund, 23, has four goals in 10 games this season, including the Sabres' first in the 5-3 win over the Devils on Tuesday night. The former second-round draft pick has three goals in his last five games, one of which he played only two minutes because of an upper-body injury. It's a significant improvement after Asplund scored only one goal in 21 games with Buffalo last season.

"I felt last year that I started off my first five games really good, but then I got really tired mentally," Asplund said. "That's a thing I've really been trying to work on and really be able to reset after every game and be ready mentally to be 100 percent every night. It's a tough league to play in and this year it's been even tougher. So, I've been trying to get my mental game to where it has to be to stick around in the NHL."

Not-so-special teams

Mittelstadt's goal in the third period Tuesday night broke another slump for the Sabres' struggling power play, which is 2-for-38 over the past 21 games. Both units have routinely failed to enter the zone with ease and the top group hasn't developed a second shooting threat to complement Victor Olofsson.

The power play was one of Granato's primary duties as an assistant coach under Krueger, but the Sabres have turned their focus to fixing the 5-on-5 game. With few full team practices amid the truncated schedule, Granato has not had enough time to address the woes on the man advantage.

"You guys know there's analytics for everything, there's hundreds of thousands of different things you could be working on and pick apart to work on," said Granato. "But unfortunately, as a coach and as a team, you have to make a priority list and hit a few of those with the way the schedule is. So, the power play probably fell victim to us needing to focus on the 5-on-5 game and the penalty kill probably benefited from that focus on a 5-on-5 game. That's just the way it is."

Lineup notes

Winger Kyle Okposo was among the Sabres to participate in an optional practice Wednesday, an encouraging sign after the 32-year-old had sat out recent on-ice sessions while recovering from a minor injury that has not prevented him from playing.

Linus Ullmark also skated, which might indicate that Dustin Tokarski will start in goal Thursday night against the Devils. If so, Ullmark can then return to the lineup Friday when the Washington Capitals are in Buffalo for puck drop at 7 p.m.

Sabres assign Davidson, Smith to Amerks
By Jourdon LaBarber
Sabres.com

The Buffalo Sabres have reassigned forward C.J. Smith and defenseman Brandon Davidson from the taxi squad to the Rochester Americans, the team announced Wednesday.

The Amerks host the Syracuse Crunch at 7:05 p.m.

Smith has seven points (2+5) in six games with Rochester this season. Davidson made his Amerks debut against Syracuse last Thursday and tallied three shots.

Buffalo hosts New Jersey on Thursday at 7 p.m. Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30.

Asplund credits improvement to offseason mental training
By Jourdon LaBarber
Sabres.com

Rasmus Asplund appeared in 29 games for the Sabres after making his NHL debut last season. He realizes now that the grind took its toll mentally.

"I was still (thinking about) yesterday and thinking about the game yesterday," Asplund said. "Just my mind never really got a rest. When you get to play like 25, 30 games like I did last year, your mental game is not there. You feel tired, you're not sleeping well."

Asplund put mental training atop his list of priorities during the offseason. He is seeing the results of late, having carved out a role in the lineup after beginning the season shifting back and forth between Rochester and the taxi squad. He has four goals in just 10 games this season, three of which have come in his past five appearances.

Sabres interim head coach Don Granato referred to Asplund's taste of Buffalo last season as an "apprenticeship" of sorts. Granato saw Asplund return this season as a more refined player, aware of his strengths and weaknesses and willing to take command of his role at the NHL level.

"That's what you see now," Granato said. "He was finding and searching his way around the NHL a year ago and now he's targeting what to do and what he can do within a shift and a game. And that's where you see the results now. He's very result oriented."

"He knows what's wanted from the coach, from the system he plays, and obviously within the game itself and he's ready for that next opportunity. Being ready to seize it is really the biggest difference as he's built himself up."

The biggest factor, Asplund said, has been his ability to leave games in the past. He set aside a half an hour after each workout during the offseason to lay down and complete thought exercises that essentially allowed him to reset his mind.

He's carried the practice into his postgame routine during a season that has been as mentally demanding as any, with a compacted schedule compounded by off-ice restrictions.

"I watch my video, then I do those exercises until I kind of close the book and just put that day in the past," he said. "I'm looking forward to the next day, which I felt last year I didn't do."

The Sabres held an optional skate in preparation for back-to-back games against New Jersey and Washington on Thursday and Friday, respectively. Thursday's game will be the last of the season between the Sabres and Devils.

Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30 p.m. The puck drops at 7.

Barre-Boulet's OT goal propels Syracuse Crunch past Rochester Amerks
By Staff Report
Syracuse.com

Alex Barre-Boulet scored the game winner in overtime to lift the Syracuse Crunch over the Rochester Americans, 4-3, Wednesday at the Blue Cross Arena.

The victory moves the Crunch to 9-6-1-0 on the season and 4-3-1-0 in the 12-game season series with Amerks.

Goaltender Sam Montembeault earned his fourth straight win with 25 saves in net for the Crunch. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen stopped 17-of-21 between the pipes for the Amerks. Syracuse went 1-for-4 on the power play and a perfect 3-for-3 on the penalty kill.

The Amerks were first on the board 5:52 into the game when Dominic Franco skated in down the left wing and backhanded a feed for Dalton Smith to send in as he came down the slot. Two minutes later, Remi Elie broke up a pass and quickly capitalized on the turnover with a shot while on his knees.

The Crunch stole one back with 43 seconds remaining in the first period. Boris Katchouk threw the puck just wide of the net for Mitchell Stephens to chip in back door.

Syracuse evened the score with another late period goal at the 19:05 mark of the middle stanza. Stephens carried the puck into the zone along the right-wing boards and centered a feed to Taylor Raddysh to snap home while on the power play.

The Crunch took the lead just 44 seconds into the third period. Alex Green fired a shot from the left circle that was stopped, but he grabbed his own rebound and scored on the second chance.

At 8:04, the Amerks tied the game at 3-3 to eventually force overtime when Mattias Samuelsson sent in a long left-point shot through traffic.

One minute into the overtime frame, Barre-Boulet found just enough space to tuck the puck between the post and Luukkonen's left skate to net the game-winner.

The Crunch returns home to host the Utica Comets on Saturday.

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

Exactly one year to the day of the Rochester Americans' last game of the 2019-20 season, it seemed as if we were living in the movie Groundhog Day.

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.

When first addressing the media over the mid-March situation that the Amerks faced, Amerks head coach Seth Appert simply said, "this was an unfortunate situation and it happened at no fault of our players."

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."

From March 11 on, there were five games postponed over the span of 16 days for Rochester, however, the first-year coach wanted it to be known that the organization wasn't taking this lightly and this was to ensure that there was no mass spread and that this situation was being taken care of as soon as possible.

"We made the decisions that we made, in terms of postponing games, out of an abundance of caution and to avoid a situation where we had a mass spread," said Appert.

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.

"Our guys, like I said, have been fantastic. This has been such a great group to coach in their work ethic and their competitiveness, but also in the decisions they're making and the attitude that they've come to the rink with every day."

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.

"We've found ways to have a lot of energy and a lot of positivity early on and some good results early on, despite not being able to do the normal things that you'd like to do as a team."

"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.

After the Amerks' 16-day pause, they finally were able to get back into action at home against the Syracuse Crunch on Friday, March 26. Including this particular night's contest, the Amerks embarked on 22 games in 51 days to close out the 2020-21 campaign – a challenge that each player seemed excited to face.

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.