



ROCHESTER AMERICANS

DAILY PRESS CLIPS

Friday, April 20, 2018

TONIGHT'S GAME: Rochester @ Syracuse

Playoffs start Friday for Amerks vs. Syracuse Crunch

Buffalo News

By: John Vogl

The first step is complete. The Rochester Americans are ready to take the next one.

The Amerks' goal this season was to end the franchise playoff drought. They did, and the Buffalo Sabres' American Hockey League team starts the first round Friday. The Amerks will play a best-of-five series against the Syracuse Crunch, the affiliate of the Tampa Bay Lightning.

"Obviously, that was the biggest step," Amerks coach Chris Taylor said of making the postseason. "Developing and getting to the playoffs at the same time is great. That's what we want, and that's what we want to create around here."

While the Sabres have gone seven years without a playoff appearance, the Amerks have ended their skid at three seasons. They'll play Friday and Saturday in Syracuse, and Wednesday in Rochester. If necessary, the teams will play April 27 in Rochester and April 28 in Syracuse.

"We believe in each other, and that's the biggest thing for me is that everybody believes in each other and everybody really likes each other," Taylor said in BlueCross Arena. "Our team is special right now, and I think that we can do a lot of different things."

Advertisement

The Amerks' lines and defense pairs Thursday at practice:

Alex Nylander-Colin Blackwell-Nick Baptiste
Danny O'Regan-Kevin Porter-Justin Bailey
C.J. Smith-Kyle Criscuolo-Seth Griffith
Garret Ross-Sean Malone-Hudson Fasching
Eric Cornel-Sahir Gill-Dalton Smith-Adam Krause

Brendan Guhle-Casey Nelson
Matt Tennyson-Zach Redmond
Andrew MacWilliam-Taylor Fedun
Nathan Paetsch-Stuart Percy-Will Borgen

Linus Ullmark
Adam Wilcox

Audition continues for Sabres prospects as Amerks start playoffs

Buffalo News

By: John Vogl

Before Nick Baptiste turned pro, the playoffs were an annual event. He may have picked up a superstition or two.

"I can't remember them it's been so long," Baptiste said Thursday.

The drought is over for Baptiste and the Rochester Americans.

While the Buffalo Sabres watch the playoffs for the seventh straight year, their American Hockey League team is back in the postseason. The Amerks will face Syracuse in a best-of-five series that begins Friday at the home of the Crunch.

"It's definitely exciting," defenseman Brendan Guhle said after practice in Blue Cross Arena. "I'm hoping to be here for a couple more months."

The Sabres hope that, too. One of the organization's goals this year was to build a winner in Rochester, and a playoff appearance is proof it worked. Rochester has ended a three-year absence, which coincides with the length of the pro careers for prospects such as Baptiste, Justin Bailey and Hudson Fasching.

The Sabres finally get to see what their young guys can do during the postseason.

"Each and every one of the guys who came here after the season ended in Buffalo knows that they need to have a very strong playoff to continue to make their case to be in Buffalo on a full-time basis," said Amerks General Manager and Sabres Assistant GM Randy Sexton. "The regular season in Buffalo was a bit of an audition. This is audition No. 2 for them.

"They need to have a strong playoff to solidify in our minds that they're players we can count on next year in Buffalo."

Baptiste is among those who will be a restricted free agent this summer. The winger feels this is his time. He had 12 goals and 23 points in 20 games during his last playoff appearance with Erie of the Ontario Hockey League in 2015. He's ready to show he can do it again.

"It's what I've wanted to do all season," Baptiste said. "It's exciting for all of us, especially since we haven't had our full group."

Injuries in Buffalo led to a steady dismantling of the Amerks. Sabres regulars such as Baptiste, Guhle, Bailey, Casey Nelson and Linus Ullmark are back for a team that started 23-8-7 and finished 37-22-17 after callups took a toll.

"You saw in the beginning of the year just how hot this team was when we had most of our team," Bailey said. "Our team success is going to help all of us in our careers whether it's next year, in two years. You win and show that you can win in the playoffs, that sticks with you."

The absence of a winning attitude was evident from the drop of the puck in Buffalo. The problem multiplied on locker-cleanout day when veterans admitted they were OK with losing.

The hope is that wins in Rochester will contribute to a better attitude in Buffalo.

"We've talked about the playoffs right from the start of the summer, and they've embraced it," Amerks coach Chris Taylor said. "They've worked hard, and look where we're at today. It's a great feeling for everybody."

Syracuse enters the series as the favorite. It finished second in the AHL's North Division with 100 points from a 46-22-8 record. Rochester was third with 91 points.

While key Amerks are making their playoff debuts, the Crunch are back in the postseason after advancing to the Calder Cup final last year. They're used to the playoff spotlight.

The Amerks have been craving it.

"There's a lot of different opportunities that can come from a good playoff run, and everyone knows that," Guhle said. "Everyone is going to be trying to show the Sabres what they can do."

5 keys to the Rochester Amerks beating the Syracuse Crunch in the Calder Cup playoffs *Democrat & Chronicle*

By: Leo Roth

The six-time champion Rochester Americans will make their first Calder Cup playoff appearance since 2013-14 when they face the rival Syracuse Crunch in a five-game series that starts Friday at the Syracuse War Memorial.

Here are five keys to Rochester winning its first playoff round since 2004-05:

1. Goalie Linus Ullmark shines

The Amerks got their All-Star netminder back from recall and injury just in time for the playoffs. With Adam Wilcox playing well, Ullmark didn't need to be overworked this year and enters his first professional postseason with a 21-12-10 record, 2.44 goals against average, .922 save percentage and a fresh body and mind. This should be his last minor-league hurrah before becoming Buffalo's No. 1 goalie. The Crunch are also backstopped well with rookie Connor Ingram (20-11-2, 2.33, .914) earning 35 starts.

2. Match the Crunch crunch for crunch

Syracuse was second in penalty minutes in the AHL with a whopping 1,225 and had to kill a league-high 376 power plays. It's critical the Amerks have the same physical intensity. "For us, it's about eliminating turnovers, which is true for everyone, but it's also establishing the aggressive side of our game so they know it's not going to be easy," All-Star defenseman Zach Redmond said. "We need to make them dread coming to the rink, even coming out for the next period."

3. Age wins over beauty

Syracuse boasts some of the AHL's top rookies, including six players who scored in double figures, led by Mathieu Joseph with 15-38 – 53 and Alexander Volkov at 23-22 – 45. Rochester counters with solid veteran leadership in Redmond, 29, Kevin Porter, 31, Taylor Fedun, 29, Matt Tennyson, 27, and Nathan Paetsch, 34. The Crunch lost in last year's finals but the Amerks' roster is loaded with playoff experience, too.

4. Special teams remain special

The season series between the Amerks and Crunch was incredibly close (Rochester lost four times by one goal and won in overtime and by shootout). That means special teams could very well be the difference, especially in a short series. Both clubs were virtually even in killing penalties, but Rochester had the better power play, led by Redmond with eight goals, C.J. Smith with six and Seth Griffith with six.

5. Rookie coach Taylor makes the right moves

Rochester American's head coach Chris Taylor yells

The Amerks made a 24-point jump in the standings under rookie coach Chris Taylor and showed a special grit by playing 29 extra-period games. His counterpart, Benoit Groulx, coached the Amerks in 2008-09 and 2009-10, losing one playoff round. Groulx's club lost in the finals in six games to Grand Rapids last season and that memory will serve as great motivation.

Amerks thrived in Year 1 of Chris Taylor

Rochester First

By: Prescott Rossi

As the Rochester Americans boarded the team bus for Syracuse, the consensus was that the team is "happy, but not satisfied" with reaching the playoffs.

There are many responsible for that feeling, perhaps none more than Amerks head coach Chris Taylor.

"He's demanding and holds everybody accountable on and off the ice," said general manager Randy Sexton. "He's actively involved in the community, with everyone in the organization, he's done a phenomenal job."

The Amerks legend returned to his old home last summer when he landed the first head coaching job of his career. Along with an influx of talented veterans and developing prospects, Taylor guided the Amerks to its first playoff appearance in four seasons.

"There's not many things you can say negative about the guy off the ice or on the ice," said Amerks forward Nick Baptiste. "He's been so great with our whole group and he gets the best out of his players. That's the biggest asset that guys want to play for him and win for him."

The last three seasons have been lean years for the Amerks, with three consecutive 6th placed finishes. Taylor's Amerks ended this season 3rd in North, and with 238 goals scored, the most since 2009-10.

"I don't want guys to change [because of the playoffs,]" said Taylor. "I want them to go in there being confident in what they're doing, how they're doing it, and be ready."

During his 19-year pro career, Taylor went to the postseason 14 times. Even at 46-years old, he still gets butterflies.

"Just like a player when I was 38 or 39, I was nervous to go out there, and I'm nervous again," said Taylor. "It's a good nervous."

Amerks Ready for Calder Cup Playoff Run

The Hockey Writers

By: Jeff Seide

The Buffalo Sabres may have missed the playoffs for the seventh consecutive year, but their American Hockey League farm team, the Rochester Americans, ended their three-year playoff drought. It's a silver lining for the organization in an otherwise disappointing season.

Baby steps.

The Amerks first-round, best-of-five series starts Friday, April 20, against their I-90 rival, the Syracuse Crunch. Games 1, 2 and 5 (if necessary) of the series will take place at the War Memorial Arena in Syracuse. Games 3 and 4 (if necessary) will be held at The Blue Cross Arena in Rochester. All game times are 7:05. The remaining rounds are best of seven.

Goal No. 1: Make the Playoffs

This is the Amerks' first playoff action since 2014, when they lost in the first round against Chicago. They finished the regular season with a record of 37-22-11 (overtime losses)-6 (shootout losses), good for 91 points and third place in the AHL's North Division. The Amerks finished tied for fourth in fewest regulation losses with Syracuse and Wilkes-Barre/Scranton. The Crunch finished with a record of 46-22-3-5 for 100 points, slotting them as the No. 2 seed in the North Division.

"Developing and getting to the playoffs at the same time is great. That's what we wanted. That's what we wanted to create around here. That makes everybody better," said Amerks coach Chris Taylor. "The biggest thing for me is the players have done a great job. We can give them structure, but ultimately they have to go out and do it [on the ice] and they've done a great job."

The five-game series makes every game mean that much more. "You don't have time to make mistakes. You don't have time to come back. You've got to be ready for Game 1," said Taylor.

Amerks vs. Crunch, In-State Rivals

The Amerks finished the 2017-18 regular season with a 4-2 win on the road in Syracuse. All told, the two teams faced one another ten times this season, so they're very familiar with one another. The Crunch took the series, 6-2-1-1.

Historically, the last time Rochester and Syracuse went head to head in the playoffs was back in 2004 when the Amerks won in Game 7 of the first round. That year, the Amerks advanced to the Conference Finals where they lost to Milwaukee. Rochester hasn't won a playoff series since 2005.

The Crunch lost to the Grand Rapids Griffins in the Calder Cup Finals last year. They are the Tampa Bay Lightning's AHL affiliate.

The Amerks had a strong first half of the season, going 23-8-4-3 (53 points). Their second half, 14-14-7-3 (38 points), was more of a struggle, as they dealt with injuries and call-ups to Buffalo. It may be a good omen finishing in third place, with more losses than wins. The last time it happened was in 1995-96. That year, John Tortorella coached the team to a Calder Cup championship. Torts now coaches the NHL's Columbus Blue Jackets.

Ironically, the last time the Amerks finished with 91 points was the 2009-10 season, their head coach was Benoit Groulx, who is the current coach of the Syracuse Crunch.

Preparing for the Playoffs

The Amerks, led by head coach Taylor, finished the season with a record of 7-2-1-0 in their last 10 contests. This week, Taylor's working the team hard to prepare them for the playoffs, where every shift will have more intensity.

"It's gonna be intense, so we gotta practice [with] intensity," said coach Taylor. These guys want to get dialed in. You just can't turn it on on Friday. We gotta it all week and get our intensity going. Everything ramps up. It's high energy. The shifts are shorter because you're going out there hard. It's tough. These guys know that. That's why we need to practice that way."

"He told us the next few days would be tough. And then we're going to prepare for the game," said Amerks captain, Kevin Porter. "I think it's going to be a great series. It's obviously a cross-town rivalry of sorts. They're a great skilled team and it's going to be a good battle."

Being in the postseason will be a new experience for most of the Amerks roster. "It feels good [to be in the playoffs]. We still get to play hockey—that's the best part about it," said Porter with a smile. "It's a good opportunity for some of the young guys to show that they can play in the NHL. If they play well here, there's a good chance they'll get an opportunity next year. Everyone's going to be fired up and ready to go."

"A lot of people look at players at the end of the year for next year," said Taylor. "And those are the type of players that need to have a really good playoff to help our team and stand out and do some special things to get their kick start off for the NHL. We want everyone to do well and move on up."

Key Season Stats

The Amerks were led in points by defenseman Zach Redmond (15 goals, 32 assists for 47 points). He finished fourth in scoring among AHL defensemen. Forward Sahir Gill, day-to-day an injury, played his first season with the Amerks and led the team with 18 goals. Previously he spent time in the Pittsburgh Penguins farm system, playing for Wilkes-Barre. C.J. Smith, Kevin Porter and Colin Blackwell all had 17 goals.

It was only the second time in franchise history that not one player reached the 20-goal plateau. Had C.J. Smith not been sidelined with a lower body injury for 19 of the final 26 games of the regular season, he likely would have cracked the mark. Smith finished with 44 points (17 goals,

27 assists) in 57 games which was tenth best among AHL rookies. The 23-year-old Iowa native was named MVP of the 2018 AHL All-Star Challenge.

Forward Seth Griffith registered 41 points in 46 games, for a .89 points-per-game average, the highest on the team.

Netminder Linus Ullmark finished the season with a record of 21-12-10 and two shutouts. He finished the regular season third in the AHL in saves (1,242) and seventh in minutes played (2,579) while tying for ninth with 21 wins, his second straight season with 20 or more victories. He was recently named the team MVP and Most Popular Player for the second straight year.

Grooming Future Sabres Talent

Getting the organization's farm team in order was a priority of Sabres rookie general manager Jason Botterill. He's stated on numerous occasions how important it is to have a pipeline for development and success.

There are currently 18 players on the Amerks roster going into the playoffs that have NHL contracts. For the most part, Sabres general manager Jason Botterill has not dipped into the Amerks lineup too much this season. The following lists each Amerks player and the number of games he appeared in:

Goaltenders – Linus Ullmark (5) and Adam Wilcox (1)

Defensemen – Casey Nelson (37), Brendan Guhle (18), Matt Tennyson (15), Taylor Fedun (7), and Zach Redmond (3)

Sabres defenseman Casey Nelson

Defenseman Casey Nelson has made great strides this year. (Timothy T. Ludwig-USA TODAY Sports)

Forwards – Nick Baptiste (33), Seth Griffith (21), Justin Bailey (12), Kyle Criscuolo (9), Hudson Fasching (5), Alex Nylander (3), and Danny O'Regan (2)

Only Sean Malone, C.J. Smith, Kevin Porter (called up but did not see playing time) and Eric Cornel did not appear in a game for the Sabres this year.

Coaches for Syracuse Crunch, Rochester Amerks dished career assists to each other *Syracuse.com*

By: Lindsay Kramer

The rival coaches in the upcoming Syracuse Crunch-Rochester Amerks North Division semifinals benefited from a short but important career intersection.

Syracuse coach Ben Groulx got his first taste of leading an AHL team with the Amerks from 2008-10. It was a bumpy tenure, a time in which Rochester was locked into a disastrous affiliation with the Florida Panthers.

But during Groulx's second season there, one of his Amerks veterans was Chris Taylor. Taylor is now the first-year head coach of the Amerks.

"I learned a lot from Tails," Groulx said earlier this week. "He was a veteran back then. I'm not surprised that he's coaching. He was almost an assistant coach for me back then. When I look back at Chris Taylor, it's easy for me to relate to our captain this year, Erik Condra. Tails was a good player, a smart player, competitor, knew how to win.

"I remember myself, coming from junior, and I think when you come from junior to pro hockey there's a big adjustment. And I was watching him. He was a veteran in that league. The way he was doing things, the way he was carrying himself, the way he was practicing every day. You could tell that he was a pro and he was different than many guys that are younger guys. His work ethic, his professionalism, his composure in big moments, I think he was a special player."

The Amerks went 29-43 during Groulx's first year there and missed the playoffs. They made the postseason in his second season but flopped in a first-round playoff series, blowing a 3-1 series lead to Abbotsford while dropping the final two games on home ice.

Last playoff showdown with Rochester Amerks is a painful memory for the Syracuse Crunch

The Amerks took an overtime Game 7 in 2004.

Groulx, in his second year running the Crunch, doesn't like to talk much about his Rochester days other than to say he was going through some personal issues and in retrospect wasn't fully ready to be an AHL head coach.

Taylor, though, defended Groulx's effort and dispelled speculation that Groulx lost the respect of the team's veterans.

"I learned a lot from Ben for sure. He was very smart on the bench," Taylor said. "He made sure you worked. That's one thing I got out of him, details and work ethic. He's always been a guy that gets the most out of his players. He demanded a lot. That's good as a player. I have total respect for Ben."

Much of that ability to draw out the best in players is now evident in the Amerks, a squad that Taylor has helped return to the postseason as a rookie boss.

"You try and create a good culture around here," Taylor said. "For me, the players do all the work on the ice. It's rewarding for me to see them in the playoffs."

Amerks ready to roll four lines against Syracuse

Sabres.com

By: Brian Duff

Depth, balance, and options.

Chris Taylor has a lot of that at his disposal as he enters his first playoff game as head coach of the Rochester Americans on Friday night.

And because of that he's already delivered a strong message to his expanded spring roster.

"It is going to be a short leash. We've relied on our depth and relied on every guy this year and we'll probably have to rely on every guy in the playoffs too," he said. "Everybody has to take care of their own game to make our team better and if you don't...we have guys that will step right into the lineup. So don't make it easy for me."

A stern warning to all, and especially the group of 17 up front, where the Amerks are almost at full health. Taylor ramped up their playoff preparations on Monday and Tuesday with a pair of grueling, intense practices and liked what he saw as far as their buy-in, their readiness and their maturity.

And he also showed what could be the Game One configurations versus the Syracuse Crunch, a team they went 4-5-1 against during the regular season.

Some late season experimentation placed trade deadline acquisition Danny O'Regan in the middle between Kevin Porter and Justin Bailey.

O'Regan (6+9 in 18 games with Rochester) seemed to thrive, with his best game since the trade happening last Friday when he contributed one goal and two assists in a comeback win versus Belleville.

"We are going to use him at center," Taylor confirmed Tuesday. "He played center in San Jose and with Porter it actually compliments Kevin with his shot going down the wing and we found that it gave O'Regan a little more room for creativity and he's a good passer and can make plays.

"I like his details and he's pretty good at face-offs so that's where we're going to use him. I think that's his natural position too, so he feels more comfortable there."

While that trio combined for 97 points on the season, the most prolific line - at least statistically speaking - would be C.J. Smith, Kyle Crisculo and Seth Griffith, which totaled 119.

Smith lost 19 games due to injury but still ranked fifth among AHL rookies with .77 points per game.

Crisculo hopes to bounce back from a late-season injury while in Buffalo. He's appeared in just one game over the past six weeks.

Griffith led the team in points per game at .89.

It wouldn't be a stretch to suggest that fans of both the Sabres and Amerks might be most keenly interested in the line of Alexander Nylander, Colin Blackwell and Nicholas Baptiste.

And Taylor sounded like he agreed.

"I think all three of them are pretty intriguing," he said. "Blackwell has had an outstanding second half point-wise and he's just a hard worker. He just gives it every shift he has. He's been very good, at both ends of the ice. He does everything."

Blackwell quadrupled his point totals in his second year as a pro, producing 17 goals and 45 points in 61 games. The 25-year-old forward was most dominant in the final month with 22 points over the final 15 games.

The hope is that some of that rubs off on Nylander.

"Alex is playing very well. His compete level to me is a hundred times better than it was at the start of the year," Taylor said. "Even though he was coming back from an injury and all of that, his compete level to me is finally getting on the inside, making plays, taking a big hit to make a play, and understanding that points don't matter."

Nylander (8-19-27 in 51 games) enters professional playoffs for the first time.

"You have to play on the walls, play defense, you have to play neutral zone - all those things add up to his offense," Taylor said. "So, I think those three guys combined together are going to make a good line.

"You've got a little grit from Baptiste, and a good two-way center with Blackwell and you've got a guy that's figuring out his offensive game by getting on the inside with Nylander that can score those goals if they get it out of the corner for him."

The last time Buffalo's first round pick (eighth overall in 2016), was in a playoff series was his draft year with Mississauga (OHL) when he produced six goals and 12 points in a six-game series.

Taylor is excited to see what he can do.

"He is 20, but he's got to understand, and we tell him all the time, he needs to be driving through guys hands, using his speed, challenge their D. Not only are you gonna beat them, but you're probably going to draw a penalty," he said.

"For him to get to the next level, that's what he's got to do. In the playoffs, we can't have him pull up. We need him driving all the time, and we will keep stressing that to him all the time."

West Seneca native and first-year pro Sean Malone showed tremendous growth this year. He's expected to center Garret Ross and Hudson Fasching and continue to see big-time pressure moments according to Coach Taylor.

"I use Sean all the time at the end of games. If it's a big faceoff or in the defensive zone, I'll bring one of those guys off and usually use Sean," Taylor explained. "He's been really reliable for us and to me, that's his job and it's going to be his future outlook, hopefully for the Buffalo Sabres.

"I want to put him in every position that he has to succeed at. And no better way of doing that - especially now - than in the playoffs for him. I have a lot of trust and faith in Sean when it comes to those situations."

His wingers may be at their best as well.

Fasching tallied five goals and 11 points in the final 14 games, while Ross was a noticeable presence as the regular season wound down.

Taylor agreed.

"Yes, for sure. We signed [Ross] in the summer to be a playoff-type of guy, to get underneath people's skin forechecking, and we rely on guys like that to chip in some goals. Same with Fasching," he said.

"And I really believe it's not a fourth line. We're going to play all four lines. We're a four-line team and we have been all year. Everybody gets minutes 5-on-5. I don't go down to three lines, I don't go down to two lines. I play all four lines all the way through and I make sure that everybody gets a lot of ice time."

While those lines have been drawn, they are subject to change.

Sahir Gill, the Americans' leading goal scorer (18 goals and 39 points in 74 games), is sidelined day-to-day. While Eric Cornel, Adam Krause, Dalton Smith, and Justin Danforth all made meaningful contributions to this group throughout the season and are ready to do so again.

And given the nature of a best-of-five series, change can come quick.

Last playoff showdown with Rochester Amerks is a painful memory for the Syracuse Crunch *Syracuse.com*

By: Lindsay Kramer

Playoff revenge has been 14 years in the making for the Syracuse Crunch when it comes to their long rivalry with the Rochester Amerks.

Heading into the start of a North Division semifinal series this weekend, that's how long it's been since Syracuse and Rochester have battled in the post-season.

And what a meeting it was.

If you're an Amerks fan, that is.

Rochester won a dramatic Game 7 in overtime to take the 2004 North Division semis. Norm Milley won it by beating Crunch goalie Karl Goehring -- now Syracuse's goalie coach -- with 2 minutes, 7 seconds left in the extra period.

That tally came after Syracuse's Kent McDonell missed a great opportunity at the other end on Amerks goalie Ryan Miller that would have won the series for the Crunch.

At the time, Syracuse became the 12th team in AHL history to blow a 3-1 series and the fourth to lose the seventh game on home ice.

Goehring made 42 saves in a brilliant losing effort, although on Wednesday the precise details of the game were a little fuzzy.

"I just remember a great atmosphere, a back-and-forth close game," Goehring said. "That's part of the fun of playing those guys, the rivalry. Hopefully we'll see something like that here."

Current Amerks head coach Chris Taylor would enjoy that. He was a linemate of Milley's in that 2004 playoff game.

"I just think that whole series was great," Taylor said. "Any time you win, you always have good memories of those ones."

Syracuse and Rochester have met just three times in the playoffs. In 1996, the Amerks took the South Conference finals four games to one. In 1997, Rochester grabbed the Empire State Division semifinals three games to none.

During the Crunch's 24-season history the franchises have often iced good teams at different times, reducing the chances of postseason opportunities. And at one point, AHL re-alignment put the two teams in different conferences. That meant their only playoff showdown could have come in the Calder Cup Finals.

But, of course, the long-standing franchises (the Amerks joined the AHL in 1956-57, the Crunch in 1994-95) have been frequent regular-season foes.

They have played 258 times in that span, with Rochester holding a 130-115-13 edge. In the last five years, Crunch has a 25-15-3-3 advantage over Rochester.

"It's just fun because it's only one hour, 15 minutes away," Taylor said. "It was fun and loud. We had a lot of good games against them."

Amerks' Zach Redmond, a medical miracle on skates, sure to savor playoff experience
Democrat & Chronicle

By: Leo Roth

I believe it was the great sports philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson who stated, "Success in hockey is not the destination, it's the journey."

Or something like that.

Rochester Americans defenseman Zach Redmond learned a long time ago to enjoy the ride.

To savor every shift like it could be his last. To sit sweat-soaked in a locker room with teammates after each practice and game and think, "Wow, it doesn't get better than this."

Twice doctors told Redmond his hockey playing days were over. Finished. Kaput.

The first time, he was only 15 years old and had suffered a stroke during a tournament in Toronto while playing midget hockey for Compuware, a powerhouse program out of Detroit.

The second time he was 24 and playing for the Winnipeg Jets of the NHL when a teammate's skate blade rode up his right pant leg, slicing his femoral artery and vein while also damaging his groin, hamstring and quadriceps muscle.

Maybe it was the innocence of youth that got Redmond back on the ice after his stroke, a medical fluke in which the inside wall of an artery in his brain was torn. He had to learn to walk and talk again but in three months was back to normal.

Maybe it was just raw strength and determination that got him to resume his professional career after losing half the blood in his body and needing 200 stitches to sew up his leg after his freak injury during a practice on Feb. 21, 2013.

A team doctor said it was "nothing short of a miracle" that Redmond lived and returned to the ice less than two months later.

There's no question the role expert medical care and family support played.

And there's no question a man gains a lot of perspective when faced with living or dying. When your slap shot accuracy and your next contract truly become secondary concerns.

"I definitely look at things a bit differently," said Redmond, 29, after a brisk morning workout at Blue Cross Arena. "When something like that happens and life becomes more a living experience, it puts things in perspective about what's important.

"There was a point where I might have taken the game very seriously, and it is your job. But I've also found out through those experiences that you have to let it be fun, too. You don't know how long it's going to last and if you're out there just grinding and not enjoying the ride, you're going

to wish you laughed a little more and done some stuff differently because at the end of the day, it's just a game.”

Good advice for a professional athlete. Good advice for us all.

After leading the Amerks in scoring, the first defenseman to do so since Mike Kostka in 2010-11, Redmond leads Rochester into its first Calder Cup playoff appearance in four seasons against the Syracuse Crunch.

Games 1 and 2 of the five-game series between the Thruway rivals are Friday and Saturday in Syracuse. Game 3 is Wednesday, April 25 in Rochester.

Redmond, who joined the Buffalo Sabres organization last October in a trade with Montreal for Nick Deslauriers, was one of the veteran additions so critical in the Amerks' success this season. A season in which the organization put some shine back on “the shield.”

Redmond's contributions can't be overstated.

In playing 66 games, his most in the AHL since playing 72 for St. John's during his rookie season of 2011-12, the Traverse City, Michigan native notched career highs for goals (15), assists (32) and points (47).

He led the team in shots with 180 and power-play goals with eight. He finished just three goals shy of breaking the franchise record for goals by a defenseman, 18, set by Amerks Hall of Famer Rick Pagnutti some 45 years ago.

Redmond's reputation as a consummate pro enters a room before he does.

He has always had a bit of an offensive touch — he had five goals and 15 assists in 59 games for the Colorado Avalanche of the NHL in 2014-15. But this season's explosion was still a pleasant surprise for rookie coach Chris Taylor. Like finding money in an old pair of pants.

“I didn't know he had this much offense,” Taylor said. “It was a great surprise and he also contributes defensively; he's one of our hardest guys to play against. And you know, he could have more points. He's hit a lot of crossbars. He just knows when to jump into the play and when to stay back, he's creative with the puck and he's got a great shot. He's a guy who gets pucks through. A lot of guys get their shots blocked, but he gets them through or he sees guys at the side of the net, just a high hockey IQ.”

Having played for eight teams during his seven-year pro career, Redmond attributed his personal-best point production to simply being able to unpack his suitcase for a change.

Ever humble, you could mount a bicycle horn on his stick and he wouldn't toot it.

Rochester American's defenseman Zach Redmond hits the

“I didn’t have a good gauge on what I could do with a full season with one team and more experience under my belt,” he said. “It’s much easier to get into the flow of the game and it went well. A big reason was the coaches trusting me and, face it, we have a good team and things just got rolling.”

He and his teammates hope to keep it rolling against a very good Syracuse club that notched 100 points and compiled the AHL’s second-most penalty minutes at 1,225.

Redmond, a star at Ferris State where he was a Hobey Baker candidate and captain, helped St. John’s reach the Calder Cup finals in 2013-14, notching 14 points in 21 playoff games. He parlayed that into a solid two-year NHL stint with the Avalanche, proof that good things do happen to good guys.

Rochester American's defenseman Zach Redmond keeps

Of course, hockey is a cold, tough business. He could not have predicted a return to the minors. Or that Rochester, past home to hockey legends, would be in his future.

“There’s no predicting,” he said. “You have to catch a break somewhere and just make sure you’re on it every day, especially in the NHL, you’re replaceable up there and it can go the other way very fast. For my career, I feel I’ve done all I can. I work hard and do the little stuff but it’s going to go the way it goes.”

That’s why it’s not about the destination that matters, it’s the journey.

While a deep playoff run would enhance opportunities for young prospects in the Sabres’ organization, Zach Redmond has not kicked the can for the last time.

“He’s thought of very highly in this organization, as a leader and a player,” Taylor said. “We want everyone to get to the NHL and we want him to do well these playoffs also, because it will help him achieve his goals.”

Redmond, a triplet with brother Alex and sister Meaghan, said he inherited his everything-happens-for-a-reason philosophy on life from his mother, Kim.

The stroke influenced his decision to play in college and get an education rather than jump to the Ontario Hockey League, where the club he was going to join was hesitant about providing him with medical coverage.

The skate blade injury with Winnipeg led him to three other NHL organizations where he was able to experience different people, places and things.

Like a Rochester Americans squad that is tighter knit than a hockey sock.

“I can speak for the whole team, everyone enjoys coming to the rink, grabbing their coffee and sitting around telling stories,” Redmond said.

And his stories of medical miracles serve to inspire those around him. When he can say, “Boys, it’s not the destination, it’s the journey” and really mean it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, can we get a fist pump?

Amerks provide silver lining for Sabres down year

Rochester First:

By: Dan Fetes

When Jason Botterill was hired as the Sabres general manager he said he wanted to build two teams. One in Buffalo and one in Rochester that, 'would be highly competitive year in and year out.'

He got one out of two.

Eleven months later the Sabres finished dead last in the NHL and Botterill didn't hold back his frustrations at his end of the year press conference.

"I guess I could be articulate but I'll just say. It sucks."

In a season that was a nothing of a total failure there was a silver lining, and it was in Rochester.

The Amerks finished the season with 91 points, the most since 2010 and made the playoffs for the first time in four years.

"[Botterill] has been uplifting about what we've been here and the opportunity we've had to be a bright-spot," said Justin Bailey.

"Developing and getting to the playoffs at the same time is great. That's what we want and that's what we want to create around here," smiled first-year head coach, Chris Taylor.

With all eyes solely focused on Rochester, the Amerks know that team success can lead to individual opportunities.

"Guys are playing for contracts," said Nick Baptiste. "I'm a guy trying to solidify my spot for next season in buffalo. I think that's something I've obviously look forward to doing and I think if I can help lead this team and be a big part of this team moving forward in this playoff run, it bodes well for me come next season."

"That's the benefit of making the playoffs. There's going to be a lot of different people watching these guys play and it benefits them in the long run," added Taylor.

"They definitely put a lot of stock in the playoffs for sure. The farther we go the better chance a lot of us have of being there full-time next year," said Brendan Guhle.

"Guys can up there stock wherever that may be. At the same time it will help our team the better everyone plays," said Bailey.

Everyone in Rochester is proud to carry the flag for the organization in April, and hopefully deep into May. Taylor knows that a long playoff run can energize an entire franchise.

"It starts here. You build from the bottom up. That's how all the great organizations do it. Like the Pittsburgh Penguins and Scranton-Wilkes Barre."

The Syracuse Crunch gets set for the Calder Cup Playoffs

Local Syr.com:

By: Mario Sacco

The Crunch ended the 2017-18 regular season with two wins in their final three games in Week 28. Those wins propelled the Crunch to their third 100 point season in franchise history, finishing with a 46-22-3-5 record. Their 46 wins tied for second-most in franchise history and their 0.658 points percentage is the best mark in team history.

The Crunch head into the playoffs as the number two seed in the North Division, finishing fourth overall in the AHL. They will host the Rochester Americans in the North Division Semifinals beginning Friday in Syracuse.

Syracuse began the week with a 1-0 win over the Amerks Wednesday. The Crunch played their final road game Friday in Utica, claiming the Galaxy Cup with a 2-1 overtime win against the Comets. Rochester beat the Crunch, 4-2, in the regular season finale in Syracuse Saturday night.

Top Performers

Goaltender Connor Ingram closed out his regular season Wednesday in Rochester with a 1-0 shutout victory over the Amerks. Ingram, 21, made a career-high 38 saves to earn his 20th win of the season, tying Andrew Penner for the second-most by a Crunch rookie goaltender in franchise history.

Ingram ended with a 20-11-2 record in 35 appearances. His 2.33 goals-against average ranked eighth in the AHL and was tied for the best among rookie goalies. After starting the season 1-4-1, Ingram went 19-7-1 with a 2.11 goals-against average and a .923 save percentage from Nov. 25 through the rest of the season.

* * *

Carter Verhaeghe closed out the regular season with a point in all three games in Week 28, pushing his scoring streak to four games (1g, 4a). He had at least one point in 11 of the final 15 regular season games, totaling 14 points (6g, 8a) to lead the Crunch in that span.

The 22-year-old's final month pushed him to second on the Crunch in scoring, closing the season with 48 points in 58 games. His overtime game-winning goal Friday in Utica gave him a new career-high 17 tallies.

* * *

Rookie forward Alexander Volkov scored the final two goals of the regular season for the Crunch, recording his sixth multi-goal game of the season. The 20-year-old finished fourth on the Crunch with 45 points (23g, 22a) in 75 games.

Volkov's 23 goals were the most by a Crunch rookie since Cedric Paquette's 20 in 2013-14. He finishes tied with Peter Holland for the sixth-most by a Crunch rookie in a season.

Team notes

Mathieu Joseph became the second Crunch rookie to lead the team in regular season scoring, ending the season with 53 points (15g, 38a). He is the first to do so since Boris Protsenko, who led the Crunch with 48 points in 1998-99.

In addition to setting a new points percentage franchise record (0.658), the Crunch's 22 regulation losses were tied for the fewest in franchise history (2012-13).

This season was only the second time the Crunch allowed fewer than 200 goals in a season, allowing 189 goals, which tied a franchise-best.

Upcoming: North Division Semifinals vs. Rochester

The Crunch will face the Rochester Americans in the North Division Semifinals. The best-of-five series begins with two home games Friday, April 20 and Saturday, April 21. The series shifts to Rochester for games three and four; Game 5 would be back in Syracuse April 28 if necessary.

The Crunch won the regular season series over the Amerks, holding a 6-2-1-1 record against Rochester. The Amerks won the first two games of the regular season against the Crunch, including an overtime win in the Crunch's home opener. Syracuse then won five straight head-to-head matches. The Crunch went 3-1-1-0 at home against the Amerks and were 3-1-0-1 in Rochester.

It's the fourth ever Calder Cup Playoffs series between the Crunch and Amerks. Rochester has won the previous three playoff series, most recently winning a seven-game series in the 2004 North Division Semifinals. Rochester also swept the Crunch 3-0 in the 1997 Empire State Division Semifinals and captured a 4-1 series win in the 1996 Southern Conference Finals, en route to their most recent Calder Cup.

Amerks prepare for the postseason for the first time since 2014

Rochester First

By: Dan Fetes

It's been 1,443 days since the last time the Rochester Americans were in the AHL playoffs.

"Today is a good day," smiled head coach Chris Taylor.

Monday, the Amerks held their first of three practices this week as they prepare to face the Syracuse Crunch in the opening round.

"There hasn't been a ton of playoffs around here the last few years so I think everyone is pretty excited to get back," said captain Kevin Porter.

Rochester will begin their best-of-five series Friday night in Syracuse.

Porter, a ten-year veteran of the AHL, is entering his sixth postseason and is trying to tell his younger teammates to treat it like it's just another game. Even though he knows it's not.

"It's a little different," smirked Porter. "It's a little more intense and it's going to a lot more hardwork."

The Crunch won the season series against the Amerks. Syracuse winning six out of the ten meetings between the two teams.

"The big message today was yeah we've made it here, we're in a good spot. We like where we are but they're not just going to roll over," said Nick Baptiste.

The Amerks closed out the regular season in style winning six out of their last eight games.

"They're a great team over there in Syracuse and they're going to play real hard. We're going to have to play out best if we want to get out of that round," added Baptiste.

Rochester seeks reversal of fortunes vs. Syracuse Crunch: 'I'd love to knock them out' *Syracuse.com*

By: Lindsay Kramer

The Syracuse Crunch dominated the Rochester Amerks to the tune of a 6-2-1-1 mark in the regular season this year.

That guarantees the Crunch exactly one thing in their upcoming North Division semifinal series: if there is a decisive Game 5, it will be played on the Crunch's home ice.

Beyond that, Syracuse's success against Rochester this season foretells very little. The Amerks are confident about their chances when facing a clean slate against Syracuse in the playoffs, a sentiment expressed by the Amerks after their 4-2 win over Syracuse on Saturday night.

"Obviously there will be a lot of emotion. But I think as a team, for us, I think we're looking forward to the challenge," said Amerks forward Justin Bailey.

"I'd love to knock them out. Obviously, coming back to this barn and playing a team that I used to play for, knowing a group of guys, it's exciting," said Rochester goalie Adam Wilcox, who played for the Crunch last season.

This will be just the third playoff meeting in history between these two teams and the first since 2004. The Crunch finished this season second in the North Division with 100 points, nine more than third-place Rochester.

"They've got some quick players, and physical. So, we've just got to be ready for that. And they're pretty aggressive, so we're going to try and exploit that," said Amerks defenseman Brendan Guhle.

The two teams finished in a dead heat on offense this season, both potting 234 goals. But the Crunch had a big advantage in goals allowed, giving up 189 to the Amerks' 221.

"They're a very hard-working team. I know that from being here," Wilcox said. "The coaches are on them. They want them hunting the puck. So that's the biggest thing that our team notices is how hard they track the puck. It's good for playoff hockey. We've really got to prepare for them, get ready this week. It's a skilled team. I'm looking forward to playing them in the playoffs, for sure."

But playoff success in the AHL comes down to player availability, and that's where Rochester hopes to make a pivot from the regular season.

With parent club Buffalo not in the AHL playoffs, Rochester has as primed a roster as possible. End-of-the-season send-downs from the Sabres include Wilcox and fellow netminder Linus Ullmark, forwards Nicholas Baptiste, Kevin Porter and Alexander Nylander and blueliner Guhle.

"Everyone starts over. Every team, if you look at the regular season, come playoffs their roster is totally different," Wilcox said. "Everyone's a really good team. That's one thing that is exciting about playoffs. You're going to get your best players going head to head."

Well maybe, maybe not.

The Crunch lineup for now remains very much a puzzle. Parent club Tampa Bay looks like a strong playoff factor and two potential Crunch forwards, Adam Erne and Anthony Cirelli, will likely remain with the Lightning until their season is over.

A third forward, Matthew Peca, was promoted under emergency conditions on Sunday. Once Tampa Bay is assured of returning to 12 fully healthy forwards he can be sent back down.

Two key Syracuse veterans, defenseman Jamie McBain and forward Gabriel Dumont, have been day-to-day with undisclosed injuries. Another forward, Olivier Archambault, was hurt Saturday and his status remains up in the air as well. Monday, the Crunch added some depth of its own by signing veteran forward David Dziurzynski to a tryout deal.

Those variables could make the rivals' postseason showdown a lot more competitive than the regular-season results.

"When we've playing these guys, we've been missing a lot of guys too, to callups and whatnot," Guhle said. "It goes both ways. I don't think we need to change anything. We just need to keep playing like we did (Saturday) and we'll be OK."