



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*April 22, 2021*

## **Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen on cusp of Sabres' most anticipated goalie debut since Ryan Miller**

By Lance Lysowski  
The Buffalo News  
April 21, 2021

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen sat in a corner seat on the Buffalo Sabres' bench Tuesday night, his first up-close look of the speed at which the game is played in the National Hockey League.

Luukkonen's first experience as the Sabres' backup goalie also provided a front-row seat to watching his fellow countryman, Tuukka Rask, one of the most accomplished Finnish goaltenders in NHL history, stifle the Sabres for three periods in KeyBank Center.

Rask, a 34-year-old with 554 regular-season games on his résumé, stopped all 32 shots he faced for the Boston Bruins, most notably a sprawling, highlight-reel save on Sabres rookie Dylan Cozens.

"He played really well, and he showed what it takes to be a goalie on this level for a long time," said Luukkonen, the Sabres' top goaltending prospect. "I have a lot to learn from him."

As the backup goalie for the 2-0 loss to Boston, Luukkonen did not receive his official introduction to the NHL. Luukkonen, a second-round draft pick in 2017, only faced shots in warmups and had the occasional chat with starter Dustin Tokarski.

However, a spot on the bench was part of the Sabres' plan to prepare Luukkonen for his long-awaited NHL debut, which is expected to happen either Thursday or Friday against Boston. Interim coach Don Granato said the goaltending plan for the series will be decided Thursday morning.

This will be the most anticipated goaltending debut since Ryan Miller, the franchise's all-time leader in wins, first donned the Sabres crest in a regular-season game on Nov. 19, 2002. Hockey fans in Buffalo have watched Luukkonen's ascent from afar, from his gold-medal winning performance for Finland at the IIHF World Junior Championship to earning Ontario Hockey League Most Valuable Player honors with a .920 save percentage for Sudbury in 2019.

The fan base that's dreamed of the next Miller or Dominik Hasek will receive at least a preview of the goaltending prospect labeled a possible catalyst for change.

"First of all, as a young, top prospect coming in, just to be humble and work so hard," Tokarski said when asked what he's observed from Luukkonen. "When I was in Roch with him, there was a lot of practices, obviously, with the long training camp there. Just every day putting in the reps, not complaining. Obviously, it's no secret he's got the talent to be elite, he's shown it throughout his whole young career. So, I think when you put the talent in with the work ethic and being humble I think can go a long way."

Tempering expectations will be important. Luukkonen will need more time in the American Hockey League before he's a full-time option for the Sabres. Most organizations prefer to wait to permanently promote a goaltending prospect until he has logged approximately 100 professional games between overseas and the minors.

Luukkonen has played a combined 62 games between Finland's Liiga, the ECHL and the American Hockey League, including only 25 with the Rochester Americans. This latest promotion only occurred because the Sabres' top two goalies, Linus Ullmark and Carter Hutton, are out with lower-body injuries. Jonas Johansson, the team's No. 3 to start the season, was traded to Colorado last month.

Luukkonen is only two years removed from double-hip surgery, a procedure that required a six-month recovery and impacted his ability to properly train for the 2019-20 season. Realistically, Luukkonen should not be penciled in for a roster spot in Buffalo until 2022.

This opportunity, and any that follow before the season finale May 8, is invaluable, even though it hasn't arrived under ideal circumstances. Luukkonen recently recovered from a minor lower-body injury and has not appeared in a game for the Amerks since April 10, when he was pulled early after allowing five goals on 27 shots.

Luukkonen, like many athletes, hasn't performed to his standard since the Amerks returned from their Covid-19 pause, totaling a .863 save percentage in six games while playing behind a patchwork lineup. He had a .903 save percentage in eight starts prior to the temporary shutdown.

"He's ready. No goalie is totally ready at the age that he's at," said Amerks coach Seth Appert. "It's a lot easier to play at that age as a defenseman or a forward, but I feel confident that he's going to handle the opportunity very well."

An inability to train properly in the summer of 2019 led to some technical issues in Luukkonen's game last season. He managed to get by on pure athleticism in the ECHL, but deficiencies were exposed in 10 appearances with Rochester.

The long offseason provided Luukkonen with ample time to build lower-body strength to support his 6-foot-4-inch, 220-pound frame. He also continued his work with Sabres goalie development coach Seamus Kotyk and his offseason position coach, Jan Lundell.

Growth on and off the ice led to a promising start to this season with TPS of Finland's Liiga. Luukkonen had a .908 save percentage in 13 appearances before his loan agreement ended in December, but he was not among the goaltenders invited to Sabres training camp.

"What I noticed when I saw him play, even when he was in Finland, is I think he's moving better," Kotyk told The Buffalo News in February. "He's more fluid on his feet. He's getting into and out of his goal post in those technical positions. Those look more fluid to me. And just the way his moving around the net, it's a little quicker, a little faster."

While Luukkonen's debut will come sooner than anticipated, it's not unprecedented. Five other goalies selected in the 2017 draft have played at least one NHL game, most notably the only one selected before Luukkonen: Jake Oettinger of the Dallas Stars. Entering Wednesday, Oettinger, 22, had a .919 save percentage in 23 NHL games this season.

Spencer Knight, who was drafted 13th overall in 2019, won his NHL debut by making 33 saves for the Florida Panthers on Tuesday night.

"It's always cool to see young guys get their chance and play well," Luukkonen said. "Kind of knowing you've faced off against them and they're doing well and playing well, it's one of the things that makes you want it even more. You want to get your chance to play on that level."

Luukkonen's debut is an encouraging next step for an organization in desperate need for goaltending. Ullmark has established himself as a reliable starter, but he's missed time with separate lower-body injuries the past two seasons. The 27-year-old is also a pending unrestricted free agent.

Since Miller was traded to St. Louis on Feb. 28, 2014, the Sabres have used 15 goalies, none of whom produced consistent results, while allowing the second-most goals in the NHL and registering the fewest points as a team during that span.

Among the 14 goalies drafted by the Sabres since Miller joined the organization in 1999, only two other than Miller have played more than 19 games in the NHL: Jhonas Enroth and Ullmark.

Luukkonen may someday provide stability at what's been a position of need throughout the franchise's 10-year playoff drought.

"He has a real nice calm presence to him, but he has a presence to him," Granato said of Luukkonen. "You notice it. He has some unique qualities to him in regard to that. So, as all the guys, I'm excited to see him with this opportunity coming for him. He's worked hard for it."

## **Goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen thrilled for first opportunity with Sabres**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 21, 2021

**BUFFALO** – Not since Ryan Miller arrived here in 2002 has a goaltender's debut been so highly anticipated. After less than two seasons in the minors, top Sabres goalie prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen is verge of starting his first NHL game.

Luukkonen, of course, likely won't stick in the big leagues for long. Most goalies take years to mature, and the Finn, 22, has only played 25 AHL games.

Just look at Miller, the Sabres' all-time wins leader and the 2009-10 Vezina Trophy recipient. While he made his NHL debut Nov. 19, 2002, it took him another three years to crack the Sabres for good. He played 170 games with the Rochester Americans.

But some exposure to the NHL can certainly buoy Luukkonen's development. So for the time being, one of hockey's best goalie prospects has a roster spot.

The 6-foot-4, 220-pound Luukkonen backed up veteran Dustin Tokarski on Tuesday, the first time he dressed for an NHL game. From the end of the bench, he watched Boston Bruins goalie Tuukka Rask, a fellow Finn, record a 32-save shutout.

Interim coach Don Granato said following Wednesday's practice the Sabres, who host the Bruins Thursday and Friday, hadn't set their goaltending schedule yet. He said Tuesday that Luukkonen was "in consideration" for Thursday's contest.

"He's gotten himself to a situation where he's had the time to observe, obviously from the bench, think about it and immerse in it," Granato said on a Zoom call following Wednesday's practice inside KeyBank Center.

Luukkonen, a second-round pick in 2017, 54th overall, said simply watching the action up close benefited him.

"It helps to see what the pace of the game is and how the level in the NHL looks like," he said. "You just try to soak up as much as you can and learn how the play falls and what the speed is like. Also it helps to be with the team here and get to know the guys."

Tokarski knows Luukkonen, having spent AHL training camp and the early portion of the season in Rochester as his goalie partner. During their first stint together, Tokarski learned Luukkonen possesses the personality and work ethic to enjoy a successful NHL career.

"It wasn't a ton of time in Rochester but definitely enough to get to know him," Tokarski said. "I think he's a super good kid, down to earth, humble, works his butt off in practice. So I think he's got all the traits to be an elite goalie."

Granato said Luukkonen, who was recalled Saturday, has "a real nice calm presence to him."

"But he has a presence to him," he said. "You notice it. He has some unique qualities to him in regard to that. So, as all the guys, I'm excited to see him with this opportunity coming for him. He's worked hard for it."

The unpredictability of this season has taught Luukkonen how hard he must work. After starting the campaign on loan with HC TPS, a Liiga team in Finland, he joined the Amerks for training camp in January.

Then after Luukkonen played just eight games, the Amerks started a three-week COVID-19 pause in March.

"It brings up the importance of daily work and kind of being ready," Luukkonen said of the odd season. "If anything happens, you have to be ready. This year, for me, there have been a couple breaks of hockey and then it picks up. The times you had before the break, if you haven't done your exercises or extra work you're not going to be ready after two weeks."

"It shows how important the daily work is kind of being prepared for anything. It kind of builds you up and you try to learn what it takes to be a professional. I think this has been a really good year for that."

Luukkonen will likely be the second elite goalie prospect to make his NHL debut this week. On Tuesday, Spencer Knight, the 13th pick in 2019, started for the Florida Panthers. Knight, 20, recently left Boston College after his sophomore season.

Seeing prospects like Knight earn an opportunity helps fuel Luukkonen.

"It's always cool to see young guys get their chance and play well," he said. "Kind of knowing you've faced off against them and they're doing well and playing well, it's one of the things that makes you want it even more. You want to get your chance to play on that level."

—

Granato said Sabres defenseman Will Borgen, who has missed the last 32 games after fracturing his right forearm, will likely return Thursday or Friday.

Borgen practiced again Wednesday.

## **Hamilton Take 2: Is Granato the man for the job?**

By Paul Hamilton

WGRZ

April 21, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — If I had to pick a coach for the Buffalo Sabres right now yes, it would be Don Granato, but since I don't, I would still like to let this play out through the rest of the season.

Granato isn't the sexy choice. People go gaga over Bruce Boudreau and Gerard Gallant, but don't forget where Sean McDermott came from. He was a defensive coordinator with the Carolina Panthers with no NFL head coaching experience, but the Pegula's handed him the keys to the kingdom and looked what happened.

Granato did win the Kelly Cup while coaching the Peoria Rivermen and he has been a head coach in the AHL with the Worcester IceCats and the Chicago Wolves.

The things I like about Granato are he's gotten the best out of the young core that's been drafted. He hasn't coached Jack Eichel, but the kids like Dylan Cozens, Casey Mittelstadt, Tage Thompson, Rasmus Dahlin, Henri Jokiharju, Rasmus Asplund and Jacob Bryson have all thrived.

Granato gets all the credit for that, but don't sell the contributions of Matt Ellis and Dan Girardi short. I think both have had a huge effect on this team. Ellis was the ultimate pro as a player. If he didn't work hard on and off the ice, he never would've played one game in the NHL. Instead, he played 356 games.

Girardi was last on the ice as a player in 2019 and he knows how to relate to the defensemen. He is always telling them how to handle certain situations using the skills they do well with.

The coaching staff also knows how to adapt. I can't tell you how many times Granato was very honest in saying we wanted to try something and it didn't work. I love that attitude, especially now to get a gauge for the future. If it doesn't work, fine! Junk it.

In the two-game series against the Pittsburgh Penguins, the Pens defense was stepping up and forcing the Sabres into turnovers before they could even get over the red line. For the next game, Granato decided to attack the Pittsburgh defense and it worked, they backed off and the Sabres attacked the zone with speed and won the game.

A few games ago in overtime Granato used numerous combinations during the five minute 3-on-3. He wanted to see what might work and what wouldn't.

I saved the best for last. There was a game here against the Philadelphia Flyers where Granato put out the line of Mittelstadt, Thompson and Taylor Hall to defend a late one-goal lead. The Flyers had pulled their goalie and Thompson just missed putting the game away into the empty net.

Sean Couturier tied the game a few seconds later with 1:29 left and Ivan Provorov won it in overtime.

Of course all the Twitter coaches thought Granato was the village idiot for having Mittelstadt and Thompson out there in such a crucial situations, but guess what? Mittelstadt and Thompson learned from it and along with Asplund, are out there quite often to try to get the victory to the garage.

All three have scored empty net goals to clinch games and it was the last time they gave up the late lead.

I had one fan just livid that Granato was trying things at the expense of maybe losing a game that meant nothing because after all, this fan invested his time into that game. I would think he'd want to see how the kids react in certain situations because maybe, just maybe Mittelstadt is becoming a top six center who can be counted on in all situations right before our eyes.

That's going to be very important if Eichel decides that he wants out of Buffalo, which by the way, he hasn't.

Don't get me wrong, even with all the improvement this team isn't even close to the top teams in the NHL, but at least they don't need 15 new players. What Kevyn Adams does need to do is make sure Granato is the right coach and they guys that are performing are really performing.

## **Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen on track for NHL debut**

By Ted Goldberg

Spectrum News

April 21, 2021

BUFFALO N.Y. — It's a question of when, not if, for Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen to make his NHL debut. The Sabres 2nd-round pick (2017 Draft) hasn't been told if he'll start on Thursday or Friday during the Sabres' back-to-back against Boston, but it's likely he plays in one of those games while Dustin Tokarski plays in the other.

### What You Need To Know

- Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen will likely make his NHL debut Thursday or Friday against Boston
- Luukkonen, a 2nd-round pick from the 2017 NHL Draft, developed in Cincinnati and Rochester over the past two years
- Luukkonen is the Sabres top goalie prospect and turned 22 in March

"If anything happens, you have to be ready," he says.

With 10 games left in the regular season, the Sabres are bringing up more prospects and seeing how they fare against NHL competition. Luukkonen would become the fourth Sabre developed in Rochester to make his NHL debut this season, following Mattias Samuelsson, Arttu Ruotsalainen, and Jacob Bryson.

"He has a real nice calm presence to him," says Granato. "He has a presence to him, you notice it. He has some unique qualities to him, in regard to that. I'm as, like all the guys, excited to see him."

Luukkonen has credited Tokarski with helping him adjust to a turbulent season; Luukkonen and Tokarski were Rochester's goalies to begin the year, until injuries and trades forced the Sabres to bring them up to the NHL.

"He has done a really good job. Getting to know him this season has helped me a lot," says Luukkonen. "It builds up my confidence if the chance comes to me to play."

Granato says he'll reveal his goalie plan on Thursday after speaking with Luukkonen and Tokarski.

## **Luukkonen acclimating to Sabres with debut approaching**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

April 21, 2021

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen spent his first game on an NHL bench Tuesday, watching while his countryman Tuukka Rask posted a 32-save shutout against the Sabres.

Luukkonen paid close attention to the intricacies of the game - the pace, the habits of both Rask and Sabres goaltender Dustin Tokarski - knowing he might find himself in the crease sooner rather than later. His NHL debut could come as soon as Thursday, though no plan has been announced.

"As long as I'm skating with the team and in the lineup and all that, I have to be ready," Luukkonen said.

Sabres interim coach Don Granato said he would inform his goaltenders on Thursday regarding the team's plans for back-to-back games against the Bruins. If Tokarski gets the nod in the first game, it stands to reason that Luukkonen could make his debut Friday.

Luukkonen was reassigned to the taxi squad from Rochester on Saturday in the wake of an injury to Linus Ullmark, who is considered week-to-week. Granato said the team wanted to give him time with the NHL club before thrusting him into the lineup, allowing Tokarski to start the last four games.

Luukkonen participated in Buffalo's morning skate prior to backing up Tokarski on Tuesday and followed it with a full practice on Wednesday. Granato said the team is prepping him on the details of the system, from where to expect shots to defensive pressure points.

"Those are things you just want to make sure he has a feel for," Granato said. "Just obvious preparation for him. But when the game's on, it's a read-and-react (situation). So, he's on his own in that to internalize all that. That's why he's a talented guy. He'll figure it out in due time."

The Sabres drafted Luukkonen during the second round in 2017. He spent a year in Finland before coming to North America and turning heads with a dominant, MVP season for Sudbury of the Ontario Hockey League in 2018-19. He won a gold medal at the World Junior Championship that same year.

The organization has been patient with his pro development during the two years since. Luukkonen spent the majority of his first pro season with ECHL Cincinnati, where he was selected to the All-Star Game. He assumed No. 1 duties in Rochester this season with Tokarski spending much of his time in Buffalo.

Tokarski said Luukkonen has the tools to develop into an elite goaltender, citing intangibles beyond the 22-year-old's 6-foot-4 frame.

"First of all, as a young, top prospect coming in, just to be humble and work so hard," Tokarski said. "When I was in Roch with him, there was a lot of practices, obviously, with the long training camp there. Just every day putting in the reps, not complaining.

"Obviously, it's no secret he's got the talent to be elite, he's shown it throughout his whole young career. So, I think when you put the talent in with the work ethic and being humble I think can go a long way."

Whether it comes Thursday, Friday, or beyond, Granato has been open about the team's plans to reward Luukkonen with a look at the NHL level this season.

"I'm excited to see him with this opportunity coming for him," Granato said. "He's worked hard for it. I have watched that and have seen that so I'm looking forward to him being in there."

Tokarski "honored" by First Star of the Week

Tokarski was selected as the NHL's First Star of the Week on Monday, earning recognition for a stretch that saw the goaltender win two of four appearances while posting a .934 save percentage.

New York Rangers left wing Artemi Panarin and Vegas right wing Mark Stone were named Second and Third Stars, respectively.

"I was surprised," Tokarski said. "I was honored. It was an off day, so I was just excited. But the guys played unbelievable to even give me a chance to be in the bracket. I saw the other guys who had huge weeks, so it could've been any of them, too.

"So, yeah, other guys had some huge weeks, so it's just an honor to be in that grouping. It's pretty cool, for sure, to look back on it down the road, to say you had that honor that week will pretty cool."

The recognition was particularly meaningful given Tokarski's journey to Buffalo. He had not played in the NHL since 2016 before making his Sabres debut on March 22. His win over Washington on April 15 was his first in the NHL since Dec. 12, 2015 - a span of five years and 124 days. It was the 16th-longest wait between wins by a goaltender in NHL history.

"It's just the belief in that if do the right things, you put in the work that good things will come of it," Tokarski said. "You never know if the opportunity will come in different scenarios. But at least if you're doing what you can, controlling what you can, you'll have no regrets. You get lackadaisical and take time off and kind of put it on yourself, you'll just never know.

"So, when the opportunity came this year, I was happy to feel that I did belong and I can play. The credit goes to family, friends, trainers, coaches that have just kept believing in me along the way. It's been a good month here, but it's what have you done lately? So, I look forward to just continuously working hard and helping the Buffalo Sabres, just going day to day doing that."

#### Wednesday's practice

William Borgen skated with the team for the second straight day and is probable to play one - if not both - of the games against Boston, Granato said. Borgen has been out since having surgery to repair a fracture in his right arm in February.

Here's how the team lined up:

53 Jeff Skinner - 23 Sam Reinhart - 68 Victor Olofsson  
74 Rasmus Asplund - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 72 Tage Thompson  
96 Anders Bjork - 24 Dylan Cozens - 25 Arttu Ruotsalainen  
13 Tobias Rieder - 15 Riley Sheahan - 91 Drake Caggiula

54 Mattias Samuelsson - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen  
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 10 Henri Jokiharju  
78 Jacob Bryson - 33 Colin Miller  
44 Matt Irwin - 3 William Borgen

31 Dustin Tokarski  
1 Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen  
34 Michael Houser