



Buffalo Sabres

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On top of his solid season, Linus Ullmark has become a shootout dynamo

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

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The Buffalo Sabres and New York Rangers had battled through 65 minutes Saturday night in KeyBank Center and settled nothing.

It was off to the shootout and with Linus Ullmark in net, that's a huge advantage to the Sabres. The marquee moment came when Ullmark won a test of wills with Rangers star Artemi Panarin, one of the NHL's top wingers.

Panarin slowly broke left, approached the net with some rapid-fire dekes and some head and leg feints. Ullmark bought none of it. He stood firm and made a glove save when Panarin finally decided to shoot.

Ullmark went on to stop Mika Zibanejad and Kaapo Kakko, blanking the Rangers to improve to 3-1 in shootouts this season and 7-3 for his career.

Much like a golfer can reflect on the background of every shot on a hole, Ullmark gave a unique recitation of the Panarin moment when asked about it after practice Monday.

"When you play against these type of players like Panarin, Auston Matthews, Patrick Kane, Connor McDavid, these guys have tremendous hands," Ullmark said. "So as soon as you make the first move, you're toast. That's it. But at the same time, you have to be able to read them to a certain level that you know the shot or the deke is going to come.

"He kept on dangling for a long time. And then he puts his stick a little bit further off to the right and he shot it and I read off of that. But at the same time, if he fakes me there and he goes backhand, I made my choice to go on a catching glove save. And I fully committed to it. If he reads me doing that, I'm going to look like a fool.

"And that's what makes it interesting, because it is basically man-on-man stuff going on out there. The patience is the key, and it goes both for the player and for the goaltender."

By stopping all three shots Saturday, Ullmark improved to 33 of 38 in his career, and his .868 save percentage took over first place all-time in the NHL for goalies with at least 10 shootouts.

The previous high of .854 was set by Marc Denis of Columbus and Tampa Bay from 2005-2008. Next on the active list is Tampa Bay star Andrei Vasilevskiy at .844 and San Jose's Martin Jones at .773.

"There's still a lot of teams that I haven't been up against when it comes to shootouts, so I don't know if I'll do as well against them," Ullmark said. "That's the thing about it, the beauty of going into the shootout. You never really know what to expect out of the opponents. That's what I find actually kind of intriguing and interesting as well."

Ullmark is expected to be in goal Tuesday night when the Sabres play the New Jersey Devils in Newark. Three of the Sabres' eight wins this season are against New Jersey. Buffalo is 3-2-1 against former coach Lindy Ruff's club.

Ullmark had his best game of the season in the Sabres' 4-1 win Feb. 23 in Prudential Center, stopping 41 of 42 shots. When he was injured two nights later and played just one period of Buffalo's overtime loss to the Devils, that was essentially the end of the Sabres' season.

In his four games back off the injured list, Ullmark is 2-1-1, 2.46/.925. Against the Devils this year, Ullmark has been lights out, going 3-0, 1.76/.949 and stopping 112 of 118 shots over four appearances.

Overall, Ullmark is 7-5-3 and owns all but one of the Sabres' wins. He's at 2.44/.921 for the season and his .928 save percentage at 5-on-5 is tied for 8th in the NHL.

"His career has been on a steady incline," said coach Don Granato. "He hops in the net now and he's just in a zone. There's a calm to him, but there's also a very focused intensity to him as well. A real good balance."

Ullmark is an unrestricted free agent after the season. So while that ordinarily might make him a key target at the trade deadline, it seems unlikely that the Sabres would move him right now with the shallow organizational depth in goal.

"They're the team that drafted me. It's been my team ever since then," Ullmark said. "I still take it day by day. I wake up in the morning and I'm a Buffalo Sabre. And that's kind of what keeps me going. We have obviously had a rough season. But you've got to stick with it. You got to be able to have pride in what you're doing in your craft."

But what about the offseason? While Ullmark is in line for a raise from his \$2.6 million salary, it remains to be seen what kind of offers he will get from the Sabres and from others.

He insists his future has not been a point to ponder during his club's lost season or his time on the injured list.

"The only thing that really that enters my mind is my family when I am off on the sidelines," he said. "I'm here by myself right now. It's been a battle ever since Day One. You miss your kids and your family a tremendous amount. But that's also one of the reasons why I take it day by day. I can't think about too much in the future because then I start wishing I probably was with my kids and with my family. And you start doubting yourself, start thinking about something that's not in your control."

Sabres Notebook: Arttu Ruotsalainen gets the call, now waits for his chance

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

April 5, 2021

Don Granato wouldn't commit to Tuesday night's game in New Jersey being the one, but the Buffalo Sabres' interim coach said Arttu Ruotsalainen's day is coming.

The Finnish forward got the call from Rochester on Monday to join the Sabres' taxi squad and practiced fully with the team in KeyBank Center. He traveled to New Jersey and now it's up to the Sabres to decide if he'll make his NHL debut against the Devils there Tuesday night or perhaps when the teams play again in Buffalo on Thursday.

"We're interested in seeing him at some point. We plan on that at some point," Granato said. "He has earned it by his his work ethic, his commitment, all the intangibles. He's done a nice job down there, consistently progressed."

Kyle Okposo took Monday off for maintenance and is expected to play. If he doesn't, that would appear to be an opening for Ruotsalainen to step in.

"I've been waiting for this moment for a while now, so I think I'm ready and hopefully get some ice time here," Ruotsalainen said after practice Monday. "But I felt pretty good at Rochester and I think I was doing well in training camp also. So I think it's been a good year for me."

Ruotsalainen, a natural center, has gotten work on the wing in Rochester and on both sets of special teams. He has five goals and 13 points in 13 games in his first taste of North American hockey.

"I'm a pretty good learner, I learn pretty quick," said Ruotsalainen, who added he's felt good making the adjustment to the smaller North American ice surfaces. "It takes maybe a couple games, but after that I felt pretty good."

Ruotsalainen said he's been happy with his work in the defensive zone and on the penalty kill in Rochester as well.

"It's hard. You come over here and you obviously want to go right to the NHL, but it's a tough road," said Sabres forward Steven Fogarty, who was the Amerks' captain. "And I think he handled it well going down there and just approached every day as another day to earn an opportunity up here. So you see the numbers he's been putting up and the consistency and the amount of ice time in different situations he's playing down there. So I'm excited to see him up here."

Fogarty had several chances to play on Ruotsalainen's wing in Rochester.

"He's a good distributor. He can find little pockets," Fogarty said. "I think he generates a lot because maybe teams see he's got that lethal shot, so it opens up things for his linemates. He's not only putting up goals but putting up assists down there."

Cozens, Borgen back skating

After the team finished practice Monday, center Dylan Cozens and defenseman Will Borgen took the ice to skate. Cozens has been out three games after taking a check into the boards early in the March 29 game against Philadelphia, while Borgen has been out since suffering a fractured hand while blocking a shot Feb. 20 in New Jersey.

"We'll get information based on that skate today and know more about integrating them," Granato said. "I don't see us integrating them over the next few days."

Granato said there's some hope Cozens could return to practice within a week, while Borgen's timeline is longer.

Bedeviling Jersey on the PP

The Sabres are converting power plays at a 38.9 percent clip in their six meetings against the Devils this season, going 7 for 18. Buffalo has connected in five games and the seven goals are its most against any opponent.

New Jersey entered Monday's play 30th in the NHL in penalty killing at just 73.1 percent.

Tiny crowd

The Sabres said they sold only 302 tickets for Saturday's game against the New York Rangers, the first where paying fans were in KeyBank Center. As per New York State regulations, fans had to pay for Covid-19 testing on top of the price of the ticket. Capacity was 10 percent of the building, or about 1,900.

Many season-ticket holders have simply opted for refunds or credit for the 2021-22 season based on last season's canceled games and the current shortened season. Most did not pick up their option for this game.

The next game where fans can purchase tickets is Friday night's visit by Washington and fans can show proof of vaccination 14 days prior in lieu of the Covid-19 test.

Travis Yost's Sabre Metrics: Is there more to Rasmus Dahlin's struggles than just playing on a bad team?

By Travis Yost
The Buffalo News
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One of the biggest challenges for the Buffalo Sabres' front office: How do you generate confidence in a given player analysis when the team is struggling this mightily?

In many cases, this type of analysis isn't very nuanced. The Sabres are foundering for a variety of reasons, but at the top of the list is the skill level – or lack thereof – throughout the lineup.

The bottom six looks more prepared for AHL competition than NHL competition, the blue line has been a work in progress for what feels like a decade now, and the top line – the one obvious strength of this team – can neither buy a goal nor stay healthy. And ultimately Kevyn Adams and company are going to have to tear into this roster a bit, with the April 12 trade deadline and free agency around the corner.

But where does that leave the Sabres' core? We have talked an awful lot about captain Jack Eichel, and whether the Sabres are going to be able to convince him to work through another iteration of a rebuild. That's sucked up a lot of air time, and it's also left the Rasmus Dahlin conversation a bit wanting.

Like every other player in the lineup, Dahlin has had his performance stunted by the quality of teammates around him. But Dahlin's not the first young defender to play on a bad team. And even with heavy emphasis on the young part of that sentence – even in his third season, he is still just 20 – there have been games where Dahlin hasn't looked comfortable, at times indecisive and turnover prone.

The on-ice numbers are expectedly grim, true for just about any Sabre this season. But consider the Sabres splits with Dahlin for a moment over the first three years – none of which was played on a playoff-caliber club:

What's interesting about the splits is that at first glance, it's hard to differentiate between the two data sets – the Sabres look about as effective with Dahlin on the ice as with him off the ice. Even if you chalk up this year's horrific slide in goal percentages (the Sabres have been outscored a whopping 46 to 14, minus-32 in Dahlin's minutes) to the woeful goaltending (85.7% stop rate), there isn't a whole lot to be excited about here. For what it is worth, Dahlin's played most of his minutes this year with Colin Miller and behind the Sabres' top six.

There is precedent for a young defender to struggle partly because of the team around him – Erik Karlsson had to work through a grim Ottawa rebuild early in his career before exploding into his prime, and Aaron Ekblad had similar problems with a talent-thin lineup in Florida.

On the other hand, most blue-chip defenders tend to have positive impacts on an immediate basis, with that impact sustaining:

There isn't a one-size-fits-all type of analysis here, but the directionality of this table is rather compelling. The top half of the board – the defenders who were having major impacts earlier in their career – tended to progress favorably as they aged into their peak playing years. Whereas the bottom half of the table carries a higher number of draft busts and players who became long-term NHL skaters, but anchoring a second or third pairing.

There is one other component I've been thinking about. It's, again, difficult to hold porous defensive play and shoddy goaltending during this utterly futile season against Dahlin.

What might be a bit more concerning is that the Sabres – for the third season in a row – aren't seeing a ton of offensive pop with Dahlin on the ice, particularly at 5-on-5. The Sabres score just about as efficiently with Dahlin deployed (2.37 goals per 60 minutes) as with him resting (2.30 goals per 60 minutes), and that's with a lot of his minutes intermixed with stronger Sabres attackers.

We have more than enough data to understand the anchoring effect that Dahlin and Eichel have to deal with in these situations, playing excess minutes against strong competition with little support around them. But as the Sabres head into a critical phase of re-imagining this roster, it's imperative they understand what they have – or don't have – when it comes to Dahlin.

He is still a blue-chip prospect and well on track to become a top-four defender for the long term. The question is how high is his ceiling. And, perhaps more specifically: Are we seeing early indications of a player who might not be as elite as advertised, or are we seeing a player ready to explode in performance like Erik Karlsson in 2011-12 when the rest of the roster improved around him?

Ruotsalainen gets the call from Rochester

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

April 5, 2021

Buffalo, N.Y. (WGR 550) – With Kyle Okposo missing practice on Monday, the Buffalo Sabres added forward Arttu Ruotsalainen to the taxi squad, while J.S. Dea was sent back to the Rochester Americans.

Okposo played in Saturday's game, but was held out of the morning skate.

Don Granato said Monday was another maintenance day, and Okposo will play on Tuesday in New Jersey against the Devils.

This season is Ruotsalainen's first in North America. He's played 13 games with Rochester and has five goals and eight assists for 13 points.

You can compare that with players that have been up and down here. Dea has 12 points in nine games with the Amerks, Fogarty has eight points in 10 games and C.J. Smith has seven points in six games.

Since the Amerks' season was delayed, the 23-year-old Ruotsalainen played 19 games with Ilves-Tampere in the Finnish Liiga, netting 16 goals and 11 assists for 27 points.

The forward had signed a contract with Buffalo last season, but since he didn't make the big club, he had to go back to Finland. He played for Ilves-Tampere last season too, scoring 15 goals and 28 assists for 43 points in 44 games.

Ruotsalainen will remind you a little of Victor Olofsson. He cruises the offensive zone looking for the one-timer opportunity from the right circle. He scored many of his goals in Finland from that spot.

One of the reasons Ruotsalainen needed to start the season in Rochester was to learn the North American game. Olofsson had to do the same thing and learned a lot under Chris Taylor, but he seemed to have lost a lot of what he learned playing this season under Ralph Krueger.

"The smaller ice was a big thing, the glass is bigger in Europe and there are so many battles on the ice in the games, so those are the biggest things."

Ruotsalainen had to learn the North American game from a defensive standpoint. He said that's been what he's improved the most.

"I think I've been pretty good at it in Rochester and played pretty well in the [defensive] zone. I had a lot of ice-time on the PK also and I like to play a lot, so I liked that."

Ruotsalainen only had 13 games to learn, but the forward said that's enough time.

"I think I'm a pretty quick learner, so it took maybe a couple of games, but after that, I felt pretty good."

The 23-year-old has been a center his whole career, but in the AHL, he got to play some wing too. He really didn't think where he played was a big deal.

"I think it's good for me that I can play both," Ruotsalainen said.

Ruotsalainen won't play Tuesday unless there's a trade or an injury. He is just glad he's finally spending some time in the NHL.

"I've been waiting for this moment for a long time now, so I think I'm ready and hopefully I'll get some ice-time here."

Steven Fogarty was the captain of the Amerks before coming up to Buffalo. He said he liked what he saw from Ruotsalainen.

"I was really impressed," Fogarty said following Monday's practice. "I got to play with him for the first part of the season, but it's hard. You come over here and you want to go right to the NHL, but he handled it well going down there and you see the numbers he's putting up and the consistency he played down there."

Chances are pretty good Ruotsalainen won't play against the Devils.
Granato said that doesn't mean he doesn't want to get a look at him.

"We're interested in seeing him at some point, because he has earned it by his work ethic, his commitment and all the intangibles," said the Sabres interim head coach.

After practice, Dylan Cozens and Will Borgen practiced on their own.
Granato said the information they get from that skate will help them know how to proceed.

"If all goes well, then Cozens could be back within the next week. Borgen maybe a little longer than that," Granato added.

Monday's lines:

Forwards:

Skinner – Sheahan - Asplund
Hall – Mittelstadt – Thompson
Olofsson – Reinhart – Ruotsalainen (Smith)
Rieder – Eakin – Fogarty

Defense:

Miller - Montour
Bryson – Ristolainen
Irwin – Davidson
Dahlin – Jokiharju

There's been a slight change to the Sabres schedule. The game on Apr. 20 against the Boston Bruins will now start at 6:30 p.m. ET instead of 7 p.m. ET.

What should the Sabres do with goalie Linus Ullmark? ‘His career has been on a steady incline’

By John Vogl
The Athletic
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When Linus Ullmark's father died in January, the goalie's grief played out in public. He explained his brief absence from the Sabres in a touching yet painful way, telling Buffalo that his feeling of loss overwhelmed his ability to focus on the ice.

There's also a private pain pummeling Ullmark daily.

The 27-year-old is a family man to the core. Yet his wife, son and infant daughter stayed in Sweden this season. He's already missed his wife's birthday, his son turning 3 and his daughter's first few months of life.

"The only thing that really enters my mind is my family when I go off on the sidelines," Ullmark said Monday. "I'm here by myself right now, and it's been a battle ever since Day 1.

"It certainly has."

So, with that in mind, please forgive Ullmark for not contemplating his status as a pending unrestricted free agent.

It's understandable, however, for others to think about it. Ullmark has been Buffalo's best player and the only goalie who's been able to win. He's been fueled by his personal struggles, immersing himself in becoming a better goalie to keep his mind away from what's going on across the world.

"You miss your kids and your family a tremendous amount," he said. "But that's also one of the reasons why I take it day by day because I can't think about too much of the future because then I start wishing I probably was with my kids and with my family, and you start doubting yourself. You start thinking about something that's not in your control.

"To survive and try to be the best person that I want to be, I have to think just day by day and pound away and try to do my very best on the ice and off the ice."

The sixth-year pro has been playing his best. Ullmark's .921 save percentage ranks 12th in the NHL, but it stands out even more when compared to his Buffalo crease mates.

"He hops in the net now and he's just in the zone," interim coach Don Granato said. "There's a calm to him, but there's also a very focused intensity to him, as well. It's a real good balance.

"His energy is good energy."

There were signs heading into the year that Ullmark was ready to establish himself. Last season, his even-strength save percentage ranked seventh in the league. His overall save percentage climbed to 18th from 51st.

This year, his even-strength percentage of .928 ranks 10th while he's lifted his shorthanded save percentage from .838 to .890.















"His career has been on a steady incline," Granato said. "Linus is a No. 1 goalie."

The next step is to get paid like one.

Ullmark and the Sabres avoided arbitration in October by agreeing to a one-year, \$2.6 million deal. That cap hit is 38th on the goaltending chart, a spot below teammate Carter Hutton's \$2.75 million.

Ullmark's number will go up with the open market waiting. The No. 31 goalie spot in the 31-team NHL is Anton Khudobin's \$3.33 million. The No. 15 position belongs to Robin Lehner and his \$5 million deal.

Ullmark could land closer to Lehner than Khudobin, especially as one of the better goalies in a large class of pending UFAs. Here's the list with the average annual value listed in millions. Each column is sortable from high to low by clicking at the top.

PLAYER	W-L-OT	SAVE %	GAA	AAV
 Petr Mrazek	3-1-1	0.968	0.75	\$3.125
 Chris Driedger	11-4-2	0.931	2.05	\$850,000
 Philipp Grubauer	23-7-1	0.929	1.76	\$3.33
 Linus Ullmark	7-5-3	0.921	2.44	\$2.60
 Mike Smith	13-3-1	0.920	2.39	\$1.50
 Jonathan Bernier	8-6-0	0.918	2.78	\$3.00
 Antti Raanta	5-4-2	0.913	3.20	\$4.25
 Jaroslav Halak	9-5-3	0.910	2.44	\$2.25
 Tuukka Rask	8-4-2	0.907	2.41	\$7.00
 James Reimer	14-4-1	0.906	2.72	\$3.40
 David Rittich	4-7-1	0.904	2.90	\$2.75
 Pekka Rinne	9-11-1	0.900	3.02	\$5.00
 Devan Dubnyk	3-9-2	0.898	3.18	\$4.33
 Frederik Andersen	13-8-2	0.897	2.91	\$5.00

The Sabres are expected to be in the market for one of these guys. The only goalies under contract for next season are Dustin Tokarski, who entered this year as the No. 4 netminder, and 22-year-old Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, who has never played an NHL game.

While Ullmark has been focused on the present, general manager Kevyn Adams has been keeping an eye on the future. He can conduct extension talks with Ullmark's agent at any time. Adams can also see what Ullmark is worth at Monday's trade deadline since contenders may be interested in bolstering their tandem.

"He's the type of goalie that gives you a chance to win every night," Sabres forward Kyle Okposo said.

It's unlikely any trade would be a blockbuster. Chicago traded Lehner at last year's deadline in a three-team deal, bringing in goalie Malcolm Subban, defense prospect Slava Demin and Vegas' second-round pick.

The goalie carousel will spin well past Monday's deadline. The Seattle expansion draft is coming this summer. Teams can protect just one goalie from the Kraken. These clubs have multiple goalies worthy of selection:

- Vancouver – Thatcher Demko and Braden Holtby
- Los Angeles – Jonathan Quick and Cal Petersen
- Pittsburgh – Tristan Jarry and Casey DeSmith
- Arizona – Darcy Kuemper and Adin Hill

The Sabres could see what it takes to pry one away via trade rather than go the UFA route.

Or they could extend Ullmark. The Sabres know what they have in the improving netminder. In addition to his even-strength skills, Ullmark is one of the best shootout goalies in history. With 33 saves on 38 breakaways, his save percentage of .868 is No. 1 all time among goalies who've appeared in at least 10 shootouts.

"It's really hard to go around him," teammate Victor Olofsson said of the 6-foot-4, 215-pound goalie. "He's just so patient. It's really hard to figure him out."

The lingering question is Ullmark's durability. He missed most of March with a lower-body injury. He missed more than a month last season with a leg injury. He also had double hip surgery earlier in his career.

But when Ullmark is on the ice, he plays well. He's proving to be a keeper.

"When you start playing more and more games, you start to build up a foundation of knowledge that you use to your advantage," Ullmark said. "Every game that goes by, you have a little bit more knowledge to what you should do to feel the best of your capabilities that day. That takes a certain amount of time.

"This is my sixth year over here, and it's still a work in progress, for sure."

Sabres want to give prospect Arttu Ruotsalainen look before season ends

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 5, 2021

BUFFALO – Arttu Ruotsalainen’s pro experience belies his prospect status. The Sabres rookie played six seasons in Liiga, Finland’s top pro circuit. When he left Ilves earlier this season, he had scored a league-leading 16 goals in only 19 games.

Ruotsalainen, 23, arrived here for training camp barely three months ago close to a finished product. So it wasn’t surprising the center earned his first NHL recall after playing just 13 games with the Rochester Americans.

The Sabres on Monday summoned Ruotsalainen to the taxi squad and assigned forward Jean-Sebastien Dea from the taxi squad back to the Amerks.

“He has earned it by his work ethic, his commitment,” interim Sabres coach Don Granato said on a Zoom call of Ruotsalainen. “He’s done a nice job down there and consistently progressed.”

Granato said Ruotsalainen likely won’t play in Tuesday’s road game against the New Jersey Devils. He practiced Monday inside KeyBank Center as a sub at right wing for Kyle Okposo, who had a maintenance day.

Granato expects Okposo to face New Jersey. If he can’t play, Granato said Ruotsalainen would be considered as a replacement.

“It’s awesome,” Ruotsalainen said of being in the NHL. “I have been waiting for this moment for a long time now. I think I’m ready now and hopefully I get the chance.”

Ruotsalainen should make his NHL debut in the near future. The Sabres want to give some of their top prospects a look before the season ends May 8.

“We’re interested in seeing him at some point,” Granato said.

The 5-foot-8, 181-pound Ruotsalainen, who possesses a heavy shot he often utilizes from the circle, has quickly established himself as one of the Amerks’ top players.

After scoring two goals and five points in two weekend outings against the Syracuse Crunch, he has compiled five goals and a team-high 13 points this season.

But Ruotsalainen, who signed as a free agent with the Sabres in 2019, has evolved as a scorer in the AHL by paying a price and going to the dirty areas, Amerks coach Seth Appert said.

“Most of his goals in Finland were off the rush or on the flank on the power play, he certainly has a skill and the shot to do that, and that’s not going away,” he said. “But I do like that he’s creating a lot more offense from the hard areas of the ice, the inside areas ... you’re going to have to get to to score in the National Hockey League.”

Ruotsalainen’s playmaking abilities have impressed Sabres winger Steven Fogarty, who skated on a line with the Finn in Rochester. Fogarty kept hearing about Ruotsalainen’s shot and all the goals he has scored.

“But ... he’s a good distributor,” he said. “He can find little pockets. I think he generates a lot because maybe teams, opponents, see that he’s got that lethal shot so maybe it opens up things for his linemates.”

Ruotsalainen’s growth away from the puck and versatility – he recently played two or three games as a winger – also helped him land in Buffalo.

“He’s just been really diligent about working on things that we’ve challenged him to be better at,” Appert said.

Appert said he and his staff challenged Ruotsalainen “to become a better defensive player and a harder, more physically committed, better penalty killer.”

"When you're the leading goal scorer in the league, you're valued more for your offense than you are for your other things," he said. "It wasn't that he was devoid of those things, it just becomes less of an area of focus. To make the NHL, to be a player that can stick ... he's going to have to provide secondary offense but he's also going to have to be a good checker and an energy player and a good penalty killer and a really good guy in the faceoff circle.

"Those are things that he's really diligently worked on in the three months here."

Before the Amerks' long COVID-19 pause last month, Appert briefly switched Ruotsalainen to the side, letting him play both left and right wing.

"I simply did that for him," he said. "That did not make us a better team. I did that because I think that's really important."

He added: "There's a lot more versatility to your game and you're more useful to the organization."

Sabres rookies Dylan Cozens, Will Borgen close to returning to practice

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 5, 2021

BUFFALO – After the Sabres finished practicing today, center Dylan Cozens and defenseman Will Borgen jumped on the KeyBank Center ice and went through a rehab skate, a strong sign the rookies are progressing from their injuries.

“We need the information on how they responded on the ice before we can go to the next step there,” interim Sabres coach Don Granato said on a Zoom call. “But clearly, they’re closer and closer.”

Granato said if Cozens, 20, keeps progressing, he could return to practice within a week. He has missed the last three games battling an upper-body injury.

Meanwhile, Granato said Borgen, 24, could return to practice shortly after Cozens. Borgen has missed the last 23 contests recovering from a broken forearm.

In other injury news, Granato said he expects winger Kyle Okposo, who had a maintenance day from practice today, to play in Tuesday’s road game against the New Jersey Devils.

“We felt he’d be better prepared not skating today or tomorrow,” Granato said. “Simple as that.”

Sabres make roster moves, recall Arttu Ruotsalainen from Amerks

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 5, 2021

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Only hundreds watched Sabres beat Rangers in person on Saturday

By Evan Anstey

WIVB

April 5, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) — It's something that hasn't happened much this season. This past Saturday, the Sabres won a game.

But unfortunately, there weren't many people at the KeyBank Center to see it.

With the current COVID-19 rules, seating was limited. Being a venue that holds more than 10,000 people, it could not exceed more than 10 percent capacity.

That means 1,900 fans could have been in the stands.

With many celebrating the slow return of normal life amid the growing number of vaccinations, one would think the venue might have had at least 1,000 people watching the game.

But that wasn't the case. On Monday afternoon, the Buffalo Sabres responded to a News 4 inquiry about the game's attendance.

The number of people who were watching in person? Just 302.

It's no secret that the Sabres haven't had a great season. They're a team who, this year, broke a franchise record with 18 straight losses. But it's not clear whether that or health concerns were the reason behind so few fans in the stands.

Either way, the game was a win for this side of the state, as Buffalo beat the New York Rangers 3-2. This brought the team's record up to 8-23-6.

Tuesday night, the Sabres will be in New Jersey as they take on the Devils — the second worst team in the East Division with 13 wins, 17 losses and six overtime losses. The game begins at 7 p.m.

Ullmark's return sparking Sabres four-game point streak

By Julianne Pelusi

WGRZ

April 5, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — It's no secret anymore the Sabres are improving their game, in the middle of a four-game point streak, under Don Granato, who took over the team as the interim head coach just under three weeks ago when Buffalo parted ways with Ralph Krueger.

But Linus Ullmark's return has been a major key to the Sabres recent ascent. The Swedish netminder stopped all three shootout attempts in a win over the New York Rangers on Saturday and made 28 saves.

Ullmark ranks second all-time in career shootout save percentage at .857.

"I think he's probably one of the best goalies in the world. He's so patient. It's really hard to kind of go around him," Sabres forward Victor Olofsson said after Saturday's shootout win. "It's really hard to figure him out. We feel really confident with him in the penalty shots for sure."

"There's still a lot of teams that I haven't been up against when it comes to shootouts so I don't know if I'll do as well against them," Ullmark said after Monday's practice. "That's the beauty of going into the shootout. You never really know what to expect out of the opponents. So, that's what I find kind of intriguing and interesting, as well."

The 27-year-old was also in the net when the Sabres snapped an 18-game winless streak with a 6-1 win over Philadelphia on Wednesday, a game after Buffalo blew a third period 3-0 lead to the Flyers, losing 4-3 in overtime.

"I just knew that coming off that game before, I just had to stop one more puck than the other goalie, but for the other guys, we knew that we had the opportunity to win against Philly in the first game. We just let it slip out of our hands," Ullmark said.

"We knew going into the third that if we just do the same things we've done so far and just keep going at it, it's not going to be of any problem. We're going to be able to go at it and keep playing the way we do and we're going to come out with a win. So, it felt like we were in control of that whole game and there was no sense of stress in either of the players which was a very fun thing to do or a fun thing to see."

Ruotsalainen ready for NHL opportunity following assignment to taxi squad

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

April 5, 2021

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cozens, Borgen to skate Monday

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

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

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

Monday's practice

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

Here's how the team lined up in full:

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

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

35 Linus Ullmark
31 Dustin Tokarski
32 Michael Houser

Schedule change

UPDATE (5:02 p.m.) - The NHL announced Monday evening that Buffalo's home game against Boston on April 20 will begin at 6:30 p.m. Faceoff was originally scheduled for 7 p.m.

Sabres reassign Ruotsalainen from Amerks to taxi squad

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

April 5, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have reassigned forward Arttu Ruotsalainen from the Rochester Americans to the taxi squad, the team announced Monday. Forward Jean-Sebastien Dea has been reassigned from the taxi squad to Rochester.

Ruotsalainen leads the Amerks with 13 points (5+8) in 13 games this season, his first in North America. The 23-year-old began the season with Ilves of the Finnish Elite League, where he tallied a league-leading 27 points (16+11) in 19 contests before play paused due to the pandemic in December.

Dea has appeared in one game with Buffalo this season. He has 12 points (4+8) in nine contests with Rochester.

The Sabres visit the New Jersey Devils on Tuesday night. Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30 p.m.