



Buffalo Sabres

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Ex-Sabres captain Brian Gionta retires after 16 NHL seasons

By John Warwov

Associated Press

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BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — At a mere 5-foot-7, Brian Gionta knew the odds would be long at getting an opportunity to play in the NHL some 20 years ago after being drafted by the New Jersey Devils.

"I never thought it would have lasted as long as it did," Gionta said. "I went into it hoping I could play one NHL game."

Little did Gionta know how far off he'd be in his initial expectations regarding his lack of size.

At 39, Gionta formally announced his retirement on Monday in closing a 16-year NHL career in which he played 1,026 regular-season games, plus another 113 in the playoffs.

The highlights included him winning a Stanley Cup with the 2003 Devils, captaining the Montreal Canadiens and Buffalo Sabres, as well as representing the United States at two Winter Olympics.

Gionta isn't leaving hockey entirely.

Though he intends to spend more time with his family, Gionta said he has accepted a yet-to-be-defined role as a developmental coach with the Sabres on a part-time basis.

Gionta is from nearby Rochester, New York, and has made his home in Buffalo since spending the 2014-15 to 2016-17 seasons with the Sabres.

"I still wanted to be a part of the game and wanted to be a part of the organization," he said. "I'm fortunate that I'm walking away from the game into something even better, and that's being part of my kids growing up, coaching them and being there for them."

The role as father and part-time coach isn't unfamiliar to Gionta after he got a taste of it last year.

In committing to represent the United States at the Pyeongchang Games, he spent time practicing with Buffalo's American Hockey League affiliate in Rochester. The Sabres also had him take part in their rookie development camp this past summer.

Gionta is retiring after giving the NHL one last try following the Olympics. In February, he signed with Boston, where he had two goals and seven assists in 21 games, including one in the playoffs.

Overall, he finishes a career in which he had 291 goals and 595 points. He ranks 38th among American-born players in games played, and 41st in points.

Gionta also earned the respect of many of his former teammates in Buffalo, with a number of them attending the news conference.

He described winning a championship as "a dream come true."

Captaining the Canadiens was significant in knowing the franchise hasn't always offered the C to an American, who doesn't speak French.

And then there was the opportunity to play for the Sabres, the team he grew up following, and end his career in Boston, where he played college.

Gionta was particularly grateful to current New York Islanders general manager Lou Lamoriello, who held the same role in New Jersey, when the Devils selected him in the third round of the 1998 draft out of Boston College.

"The game was so much different back then, and a lot of people needed to believe in me," Gionta said. "So I appreciate the Devils, Lou Lamoriello, for his belief in me and giving me a chance to break into the league."

Mike Harrington: Gionta beat the odds, earned proper Sabres sendoff

By Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
September 24, 2018

Brian Gionta sat down Monday at the front of the cramped media room in KeyBank Center and seemed surprised. He eyed the crowd of reporters, the bank of television cameras and many of his former teammates standing in the back of the room and said sheepishly that he didn't feel the end of his NHL career warranted any sort of formal announcement like this.

He could not have been more wrong.

Consistency and class have been Gionta's hallmarks since he started in the NHL way back in 2001. Playing 1,000-plus games, scoring 20 goals seven times, winning a Stanley Cup and serving as captain of two teams merited a proper sendoff.

Gionta was cool and composed during his 14-minute chat with reporters. He spoke with no notes, flawlessly handling opening remarks where he thanked his parents, brothers, wife and three children for allowing him to chase his dream.

He moved on to acknowledge longtime agent Steve Bartlett, then offered big thanks to former New Jersey GM Lou Lamoriello for taking a chance on a 5-foot-7 Rochester kid out of Boston College with a third-round pick in the 1998 draft that was held in the same building. He gave more kudos, to the Montreal Canadiens and Boston Bruins, as well as the Sabres ("my childhood team").

"I went into it hoping I could play one NHL game," Gionta said. "And from there it was play as long as you could, as long as you were having fun, enjoying the game and as long as your body would hold up. I would have never thought it lasted as long as it did but I'm super appreciative for the people along the way that supported me and gave me that chance."

At age 39, Gionta revealed he didn't pursue an NHL job for this season. Instead, he'll take what will initially be a small role in development work for the Sabres. It actually started last year in Rochester, where he skated with the Amerks in preparation for the Olympics, and continued in June, when he served as an on-ice coach at Sabres development camp.

"It was amazing how he interacted with our young players," said Sabres GM Jason Botterill. "You talk about work ethic, you talk about professionalism. That's what he brought to our players on the ice and off the ice. The role moving forward is a little undefined right now because he takes his role as a father very serious. He's had to sacrifice a lot being a player so, especially this first year out, he needs to enjoy being a father."

Gionta is one of just 18 players to be a permanent captain for the Sabres in their 49-year history (several others wore the "C" when coaches opted to share the role or rotate it monthly). Admittedly, the Sabres didn't win many games during Gionta's three seasons here. In fact, after signing as a free agent in 2014, his first season as Buffalo's captain was the infamous 2014-15 tank campaign.

Nevertheless, Gionta left quite an impact on his former teammates.

"I was lucky enough to call him my captain for a couple of years here and it was a pleasure to play with him and learn from him," said defenseman Jake McCabe. "The way he carried himself every day was amazing."

"There's no coincidence that a guy who reached 1,000 games got there for a reason. You watched how he took care of himself on and off the ice. Each day he brought the professionalism."

Jack Eichel, who seems to be next in line to wear the "C" Gionta left behind following the 2016-17 season, said he will never forget the impact Gionta had during his formative years in the NHL.

"He's somebody I grew up watching and all of a sudden I'm sitting a few stalls away from him my first years in the NHL," Eichel recalled. "That was cool. You can never find something bad to say about him. I've never heard anybody say anything bad about him. It speaks to his character as a player, a person, a husband, a father."

Gionta scored 291 goals during his 1,026 NHL games. He added 32 more while playing 113 playoff games. His best season was a 48-goal, 89-point campaign with the Devils in 2005-06. His most memorable was winning the Cup with the Devils in 2003 as a 24-year-old.

When Gionta was awarded the "C" in Montreal in 2010, it was big news as he became only the second American to earn that mantle.

"If there was anyone cut out for it, it would be 'Gio,' " said Sabres defenseman Nathan Beaulieu, who joined the Habs as a rookie in 2013. "He's so soft spoken, always would say the right things. Real professional. You don't really recognize he's an American guy. ... Wearing the 'C' is an honor anywhere but that storied franchise is pretty crazy and I thought he handled it very well."

The Sabres didn't have a captain last year in the wake of Gionta's departure and join a few other teams in that decision. Las Vegas went to the Stanley Cup final last year without one. Even Gionta admits the role is not as singular as it used to be.

"From the outside, a lot is put on the idea of a captain," he said. "But in today's game it's leadership by committee. It's about your core group of 7-10 guys that are leading in that room. Is there a figurehead at times that has to come and face the likes of you guys joyfully after games? That does happen, but it's a group that leads a room. It doesn't fall on a single guy."

While that may be true, the Sabres made sure to show one guy loads of respect on Monday. For a 5-7 player to persevere in the NHL that long, it was well deserved. When it was over, the room filled with applause.

"It goes to show there's really no boundaries and a guy like him can make the NHL," Eichel said. "It's great for younger players who are undersized. To play 1,000 games at Gio's size is remarkable. It's an unbelievable career and I'm just happy I was able to be a part of it."

"When he came out, smaller players basically weren't a part of the league," Botterill said. "It was just a select few. He had to be a part of overcoming the odds. He didn't just play. The fact he was so consistent, scored 48 goals one year, won a Stanley Cup, was captain of two franchises is just so impressive."

Sabres Notebook: Team takes the big time to a small town

By Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
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The Buffalo Sabres' preseason takes an unusual detour Tuesday. No big city, big arena or bright lights. It's going to be a day for grassroots hockey.

The team starts with a morning flight through the state to Griffiss Air Force base in Rome, notable as the site of Woodstock '99. Then it's a brief bus trip to the Village of Clinton, population 2,000.

The Sabres will head to 65-year-old Clinton Arena for their morning skate at 11:30 and then meet the Columbus Blue Jackets there in a nationally televised game in the evening (7 p.m., NBCSN, Radio 550 AM).

It's part of the Kraft Hockeyville USA series, where one town wins an online vote and gets \$150,000 for arena upgrades as well as the right to host a preseason game.

Clinton Arena, which was used for some scenes in the iconic '70s hockey movie "Slap Shot," is on the National Register of Historic Places and was named the winner of the contest in April. It was the home of the Eastern League's Clinton Comets from 1954-73 and currently hosts high school and youth hockey as well as figure skating.

"We're very excited to be in the game," coach Phil Housley said Monday. "Just talking to our guys, it's going to be a great atmosphere and we want to enjoy it. We have business to take care of but I told the guys to enjoy the moment. It's great to be part of a big occasion."

The Clinton area has been celebrating the game all weekend. Events have included a visit by the Stanley Cup to Hamilton College and a hockey festival featuring NHL alumni like former Sabres standout Brad May and current Columbus broadcaster Jody Shelley.

The Sabres were in this game two years ago, facing Carolina in Marquette, Mich. While he was with Pittsburgh, General Manager Jason Botterill attended the Pens' game with Tampa Bay in Johnstown, Pa.

"It's a different day and there's a seriousness to the game because there are guys trying to find their role and make the team," Botterill said. "But hopefully you can take a step back and actually enjoy the atmosphere too. Sometimes the atmosphere in preseason games is pretty quiet, sort of mundane. It certainly won't be here."

Indeed, both the morning skates and the game itself will fill the 2,000-seat arena.

The Sabres are expected to bring a strong lineup. Housley said he made sure top American players like Jake Eichel, Jake McCabe, Kyle Okposo and Casey Mittelstadt would be on the roster and No. 1 overall pick Rasmus Dahlin is expected to play.

"People are going to be so excited that we're there, we need to be excited going into it," Eichel said. "It's a bit hectic, the day is all over the place, in and out in one day. It's not what you're used to. I'm sure it will be a bit chaotic. You just try to have fun with it."

The arena has received taller glass, new netting and lighting and other upgrades for the game. The ice surface is going to be similar to Memorial Auditorium, a couple of feet shorter than the standard 200-foot NHL sheet.

"You're getting ready for the game but at the same time, put a smile on your face, shake as many hands as you want, take as many pictures as you can," McCabe said. "It's a quick two seconds for us but it's going to last a lifetime for those fans there."

"It's exciting for an event like that because it's a hockey-rich community that watches all these games from afar. Now they get the game in their own building."

NBCSN is bringing a top crew to the Hockeyville game. Brendan Burke, the New York Islanders voice who called games of the nearby AHL Utica Comets, will do play-by-play. Analysts Pierre McGuire and Jeremy Roenick will be on hand, as well as host Kathryn Tappen.

Housley said the Sabres have not made a load of roster cuts yet because they have three games in four days this week to close the preseason. Buffalo plays Wednesday at Pittsburgh and likely will cut the roster after that game, leaving the regular-season lineup to play Friday's preseason finale in Oshawa, Ont., against the New York Islanders.

Sam Reinhart skated on the wing Monday with Eichel and Jeff Skinner, and Housley said that line will be intact Tuesday. Patrik Berglund was centering Okposo and Alexander Nylander while Mittelstadt, who has struggled in his preseason games thus far, was between C.J. Smith and Andrew Oglevie.

Columbus will have standouts Artemi Panarin and Seth Jones in its lineup. Wheatfield native Adam Clendening will be on the Blue Jackets' defense.

Jack Eichel on retirement of Brian Gionta: 'It's an unbelievable career'

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

September 24, 2018

Count Jack Eichel among the hundreds of NHL players past and present who have felt major impact from playing alongside former Sabres captain Brian Gionta.

"He's somebody I grew up watching and all of a sudden I'm sitting a few stalls away from him my first years in the NHL," Eichel told The Buffalo News after practice Monday morning. "That was cool. It's an unbelievable career and I'm just happy I was able to be a part of it."

Gionta, who wore the 'C' for both the Sabres and Montreal Canadiens, announced his retirement from the NHL during a Monday press conference in KeyBank Center. The Rochester native said he is moving into an unspecified role on the development staff of the Sabres and Rochester Amerks that he termed a "small part" in the organization.

"He's been a great pro and it was great for me to learn from him my first few years," Eichel said. "You can never find something bad to say about him. I've never heard anybody say anything bad about him. It speaks to his character as a player, a person, a husband, a father. He's such a good guy. His work ethic and ability to overcome the challenges in his career, like people always telling him he was too small, he just continued to perform."

At just 5-foot-7, Gionta played 1,026 NHL games. He scored 291 goals and won a Stanley Cup with New Jersey in 2003. Gionta captained the Sabres for all three seasons after his arrival in 2014, collecting 40 goals and 103 points in that span.

"It goes to show there's really no boundaries and a guy like him can make the NHL," Eichel said. "It's great for younger players who are undersized. To play 1,000 games in the NHL at Gio's size is remarkable."

Sabres' Smith is trying to make it difficult to send him down to Rochester

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

September 24, 2018

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Last season, C.J. Smith had a good training camp, but Jason Botterill wanted him to learn the pro game in Rochester. Injuries started piling up, but he still had enough opportunity to become an AHL All-Star.

Smith has come into training camp this season and has again performed well. He scored a skilled goal against Toronto and showed that if injuries hadn't gotten in the way in Rochester, he may have gotten a call up to the big club. Smith said the injuries were frustrating, "It was pretty tough timing with the injuries and maybe a little frustrating for me personally, for my game when I got back because I wasn't able to get back to 100 percent, so it hurt me at the end of the year."

There is a process to learning the pro game. Smith signed in Buffalo after three seasons at UMass-Lowell. He said the length of the Amerks season is what was different, "To be able to be a pro every day I think is the hardest thing.

"It's the cliché thing coming from college to pro, 30 games to 80 games, but it is so true having a clear mindset every day, trying to come in and get better every day is pretty tough during the season, but you've got to somehow be able to do it."

Smith will be 24-year-old in December, so he's ready to challenge for a job with the big club. The thing that I've been most impressed with in two training camps is how smart Smith is as a player. He said he needed to be that way to make it in college, "I was always a smaller player and I was late to develop my skills, so I always had to think the game very well and it's helped to this level and helped me grow into the player I am now."

To illustrate that, Smith was never drafted, but he scored 23 goals and 51 points in 41 games during his junior year. That put him in high demand when he decided to leave college a year early and Tim Murray convinced him to sign in Buffalo over many other NHL teams that wanted him.

When you have a much longer season and then you start missing time because of injury, things can get tough in pro hockey. Smith said what he learned was, "You've got to be there mentally to push through it, so you keep it simple when you are tired and be able to mentally push through it."

Smith is very much pushing to make the opening night roster, as are Alex Nylander and Tage Thompson. Smith said, "It's tough, you don't know really where you stand so you have to come in every day and take advantage of your opportunities when they're given and play to your ability and not try to do too much, but do something to make yourself stand out too."

Phil Housley broke the team into two groups in Monday. It's possible that the players from Session 1 could be going to Clinton on Tuesday along with one forward from Session 2.

In Session 1 on Monday, the lines were:

53 Skinner - 9 Eichel - 23 Reinhart

92 Nylander - 10 Berglund - 21 Okposo

49 Smith - 37 Mittelstadt - 52 Oglevie

71 Rodrigues - 65 O'Regan

26 Dahlin - 19 McCabe - 4 Bogosian

45 Guhle - 8 Nelson - 33 Borgen

34 Johansson

31 Wedgewood

In Session 2 on Monday, the lines were:

28 Girgensons - 17 Sobotka - 29 Pominville

20 Wilson - 22 Larsson - 95 Bailey

41 Olofsson - 74 Asplund - 72 Thompson

51 Criscuolo - 13 Baptiste

6 Scandella - 55 Ristolainen - 24 Pilut

82 Beaulieu - 5 Tennyson - 27 Fedun

40 Hutton

35 Ullmark

Former Sabres captain Brian Gionta announced his retirement

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

September 24, 2018

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - After 1,026 NHL games, Brian Gionta is calling it quits. The former Sabre announced his retirement on Monday at the arena. Gionta can't believe what things turned in to for the kid from Rochester, New York, "I went into it hoping I could play one NHL game and then from there it was play as long as you could and as long as you were having fun and your body would hold up, I would've never have thought that it lasted as long as it did, but I'm supper appreciative of the people that supported me and gave me a chance."

Gionta went on to say, "I've been very fortunate to have lasted a long time and made a career of this and I would've never had thought that would've happened, and I'm very fortunate that my parents put that time and effort in to invest in me."

Gionta played 230 games in Buffalo and was their captain throughout. He scored 40 goals and 63 assists for 103 points. He is going to help out with the development of young players, but his main focus is going to be on his family, "We're from here and we live in Rochester in the summers and you hope to build the correct relationships, so maybe further down the road, you can still be part of the game and the Sabres have been great in allowing me to feel out this first stage of retirement, but also being a part of things."

Gionta gave no thought to playing this season and said, "I'm at peace and feel great about the decision I've made."

Gionta broke in with New Jersey which is where he won his only Stanley Cup. He had his best season with the Devils netting 48 goals 89 points. The Devils are the team that took a chance on a small kid when it was a big man's game. Gionta said after winning the Cup, he thought there'd be more, "It was a dream come true and not that you take it for granted, but it happened so early on that you wish you had cherished it a little more for what it was and how special it was because it's hard to do and now looking back and the chances we've had, conference finals and good teams that you've had that fell short, you realize how special it was to be able to win it."

In addition to the Sabres and New Jersey, Gionta played with Montreal and Boston. In 16 NHL seasons, the undersized forward netted 291 goals and 304 assists for 595 points.

Gionta not only went from New Jersey to Montreal, but he was named captain of a team that is located in the hockey mecca of Canada. Gionta was humbled by the whole experience, "The best things come when they're not planned and going to Montreal was one of the biggest blessings for myself and my family, to be out of your comfort zone, going to a French speaking area where your kids are going to a different school and then to have them have the confidence in me that I was an English speaking guy and could be the captain of that team it was pretty special that they had that confidence in me and I loved my time there."

‘He’s going to be a dangerous player’: Tage Thompson continues his strong audition for the Sabres’ opening night roster

By John Vogl

The Athletic

September 25, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. – To hear Auston Matthews tell it, the Sabres are getting in on the ground floor of something special with Tage Thompson.

Matthews and Thompson spent a year together in USA Hockey’s development program. Back in 2014-15, Matthews was already the dominating force who has captured the attention of Toronto and the NHL. Thompson, meanwhile, was a 17-year-old trying to manage a body that was getting taller but not wider.

“He was kind of a late bloomer honestly,” Matthews said during a recent visit to Buffalo. “When he came in, he was just a really tall, lanky kid.”

The national team listed Thompson at 6-foot-2, 160 pounds. Not surprisingly, the rail-thin right winger had trouble competing at times. While Matthews was putting up 55 goals and 117 points in 60 games, Thompson contributed 12 goals and 26 points in 64 outings.

As Thompson’s height and weight have increased, so have his statistics and confidence. The 6-5, 205-pounder looked like a completely new man when he lined up against Matthews and the Maple Leafs over the weekend.

“He’s really come into his own,” Matthews said. “He’s come into a really good situation here in Buffalo with a lot of young guys. They’ve got a pretty good group of young, core people coming up, and I think he’s going to fit in really well and continue to get better.

“He’s going to come into his body more, and he’s going to be a dangerous player.”

Thompson already has his moments. He shined during the Sabres’ Prospects Challenge with a blistering shot and impressive poke check. He’s added slick moves in traffic and solid passing during the preseason.

He’s not surprised.

“I was coming in expecting to make the team,” said Thompson, who was acquired from St. Louis in a July blockbuster that featured Ryan O’Reilly heading to the Blues. “I’ve been creating offense, which is good. I’ve just got to get better at the D-zone, clean that up a little bit. But as far as creating offense goes and making plays, I’m pretty happy with how things are going.”

It helps that the 20-year-old has begun to grow out instead of up. Although he had an impressive two-year career at the University of Connecticut and looked good at times as a first-year pro last season, he feels more confident now that the growth spurt has stopped.

“Growing that quick, you kind of feel like Bambi a couple times,” Thompson said of the wobbly-legged Disney fawn. “But I think the past couple years I’ve stopped growing a little bit, so it’s been nice to plateau and try to put on some weight.”

As Thompson has grown accustomed to his frame, questions about his skating have lessened. He’s kept up well this month.

Forget his feet, though. His hands are what have people talking. He deftly controls the puck and unleashes a rocket whenever he gets the chance.

“That’s just kind of something I’ve been blessed with,” Thompson said of his shot. “I’m very lucky. It’s something I continue to work on, and I think I need to use that to my advantage out there and just try to shoot as much as possible.”

During his 41 games with St. Louis as a rookie, he took 55 shots. During his 30 games with the Blues' AHL affiliate in San Antonio, Thompson put 84 shots on net.

Buffalo ranks just 20th in shots per game over the last three seasons, so adding players with a shooter's mentality is important.

"He's had some really good looks," coach Phil Housley said. "He's brought a lot of great energy to our group. It's good to see him continue to develop in the right way."

As with many young players, a setback helped in the development process. Thompson made the Blues' opening night roster last year, but the excitement was short-lived. After no points and a minus-3 rating in the first four games, St. Louis sent him to San Antonio.

Instead of sulking, he scored in the first two games. He totaled eight goals and 18 points in his 30 games with the Rampage. He spent most of the final four months back in St. Louis, where he leaned heavily on goaltender Carter Hutton for advice while skating in a limited role.

"He came in obviously with high expectations from the team and himself," said Hutton, who also joined the Sabres this summer. "He was up for a little while, then he got sent down. It's one of the things where the NHL can be humbling. It's a hard league to play in every night. A lot of guys come up and have some success early, then it fades away. I think for Tagey, he took what he could from getting sent down and playing in the minors, and then came up and added a little more detail to his game."

"You can see the skills he has, right? It's pretty hard to not see them. He's a very noticeable player with his size, his speed, his skill. I think just the mental, everyday grind of coming to the rink and finding ways to get better, I think he's done a good job of adapting in that sense."

Being the son of a longtime player and coach helps. Thompson's father, Brent, played professionally for 14 seasons, totaling 121 NHL games with Los Angeles, Winnipeg and Phoenix. He's entering his fifth season as head coach of the Bridgeport Sound Tigers after spending two years as an assistant for their parent club, the New York Islanders.

"Growing up with my dad always showing me video and talking about hockey, it definitely helps coming into camp," Thompson said. "You just go in with the mindset of going to the rink and showing that you're going to be the best every day, whether that's on the ice, away from the ice."

The Sabres have certainly given Thompson the opportunity to make the opening night roster. At the Prospects Challenge, he skated with center Casey Mittlestadt. After scoring an unassisted highlight-reel goal Friday in Toronto, he started Saturday's rematch in Buffalo on the top NHL line with center Jack Eichel and left wing Jeff Skinner.

The back-to-back outings got the best of Thompson, who gave way to Sam Reinhart, but he showed a previously unseen part of his game. He absorbed a hit from behind by Andrew Nielsen and responded with his inaugural fight. It was a short one as Thompson went to the ice as soon as the duo engaged, but he threw three rights while on his back.

"I feel like I've been working pretty hard," he said. "I've just got to keep doing that. I think if you focus on your compete and your effort, everything kind of takes care of itself."

He's quickly teaching opponents that they've got to take care of the puck. With his long stick and reach, he's shown a knack for forcing turnovers on zone exits and turns the other way for breakaways.

"A lot of it is just because I'm so long," Thompson said. "I've got a long reach, and I think I'm pretty good at reading plays, just being able to anticipate things. I'd like to use my body a little more, be a little more physical at times, but I think that's something I pride myself on is disrupting plays."

The question is whether he's shown enough to make the opening night roster. With three preseason games left, there's still one right wing job open. Reinhart, Kyle Okposo and Jason Pominville have three spots. Thompson seems to have the edge on Nick Baptiste and Andrew Oglevie, but Justin Bailey is a wild card.

Bailey is a natural right winger, but he's on the left side because of an injury to Conor Sheary. If Sheary comes back soon, Bailey could shift back to the right. There's a chance Buffalo would rather have Thompson play first-line minutes in Rochester than alternate with Bailey for playing time.

No matter what happens during the next week, Thompson can take comfort knowing he's gotten an opportunity and delivered.

"It's just a really good fit for me," Thompson said. "They believe in my abilities to produce offense, and they're giving me that opportunity to slide into the top six and help create offense. I think you play better when you have confidence and just them giving me this has given me a ton more confidence."

Yerdon: Brian Gionta ends his NHL career with the same humility he showed during it

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

September 24, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Brian Gionta ended his career with the same characteristics he displayed in his 16 seasons as an NHL player: humility, conviction, and the legacy of a leader.

After a lengthy career that included one Stanley Cup championship, two Olympic Games (including a captainship in 2018) and a national championship at Boston College, the Rochester, N.Y. native announced his retirement from hockey on Monday.

Taking the podium in a room filled with not just media but also former Buffalo Sabres, Montreal Canadiens, and Rochester Americans teammates, Gionta downplayed his departure from the game.

"I don't really feel my career warrants a formal announcement, but we are here anyways. So I am announcing my retirement here today and at the same time looking forward to spending some time with the family and also taking a small part within the (Sabres) organization. I'm really looking forward to the next stage of my career," Gionta said.

Gionta gave credit to the New Jersey Devils and Lou Lamoriello for drafting him and taking a chance on a 5-foot-7, 178 pound winger out of Boston College. It was at the 1998 NHL Draft in Buffalo that his NHL path began as a third-round pick (82nd overall).

Gionta's legend grew at BC, scoring 232 points in his four years there, including 123 goals. The Eagles went 117-41-12 made the Frozen Four each season, including three national title game appearances before finally winning it in his senior year in 2001.

"For me, I just went into it hoping I would play one NHL game," Gionta said. "From there, it was to play as long as you could and as long as you had fun enjoying the game and your body would hold up. Yeah, I would've never thought it would've lasted as long as it did. But I'm super appreciative for the people along the way that supported me and gave me that chance. They weren't as readily available, the chances, for smaller guys back in the day when I was coming through, so I appreciate the people that stuck their neck out and believed in me."

Gionta then went on to play seven seasons with the Devils and helped them win the Stanley Cup in 2003 against the Ducks in his second NHL season.

"It was a dream come true," Gionta said. "It happened so early on that you wish you would have cherished it a little more for what it was and how special it was. Not that you took it for granted, but it's hard to do. Now, looking back and the chances we've had, conference finals and good teams that you've had that fall short, you realize how special it was to be able to win it. Obviously playing with some Hall of Famers in New Jersey helped pull me along and realize that dream."

In 2005-2006, the season after the lockout ended, he had a career year scoring 48 goals with 89 points. He ultimately had 291 goals and 595 points in 1,026 games with the Devils, Canadiens, Sabres, and Boston Bruins. He played his 1,000th game in Buffalo as captain of his favorite team growing up, with his family in attendance.

His size could've been a deterrent for teams, especially while the NHL was trending towards bigger players, but Gionta made it his strength like Theo Fleury and Martin St. Louis had before him. He hopes others can follow in his footsteps in the future.

"Guys had done it before, it just wasn't as commonplace," Gionta said. "For sure, you have a lot more guys that they're open to. Guys are drafted a lot higher now despite their size and they're given those looks. Hopefully, I've been a small part of that. Where I kind of get gratification is where a young kid is coming up and is undersized, that 10 or 11-year-old says, 'Hey I look up to you. If you can do it, maybe I have a shot.' That's more of a thing you get enjoyment out of is maybe letting that kid chase his dream or believe in himself a little more."

While he won the Stanley Cup with New Jersey, it was in Montreal he accomplished a feat of a different kind when he was named captain of the Habs in 2010. He was the second American to ever be named Canadiens captain after Chris Chelios did it in the 1989-90 season. Gionta was Montreal captain for four seasons until he left as a free agent in 2014 and signed with the Sabres.

"It was huge, it was a very significant moment," Gionta said. "A lot goes into my time in Montreal in that you come from New Jersey, seven or eight years in New Jersey and you think you're going to be with a team your whole career and... sometimes the best things come when they're not planned and going to Montreal was one of the biggest blessings for myself and my family to be out of your comfort zone, go into a French-speaking area where your kids are going to a different school, and then to have them have the confidence in me that I was an English-speaking guy and I could be the captain of that team was pretty special they would have the confidence in me. I loved my time there. It was some of the best years of your career because the fans are so passionate and it's such a hockey market."

As captain in Montreal, Gionta made an impression on the young players at that time.

"He was very vocal," Sabres defenseman Nathan Beaulieu, whose first two seasons were spent with Gionta in Montreal, said. "You always hear guys that lead by example or are more vocal, but Gio kind of did it both. He was the first to step up and say something and he'd be the first to step on the ice and he was a little pit bull, he'd get guys going. All around, I really enjoyed my experiences with Gio."

Gionta captained the Sabres during his three seasons in Buffalo, a homecoming at a time when things were dark. Even as he spent last season skating with the Amerks in preparation for the 2018 Olympics in Pyeongchang, he provided an example for future Sabres to follow.

"He's been in the game a long time and we had a lot of young guys coming into the league down there and he kind of showed his presence and his poise out there that even though he wasn't playing with us, he was practicing like he was one of us," Sabres goalie Linus Ullmark, who was the Amerks starter last season, said. "He was never really taking a day off or anything, he was showing by example every day. I think that was one of the reasons why we had such a good year down there."

Although a medal didn't happen in South Korea and a second Stanley Cup didn't happen in Boston, Gionta found peace through the whole process last year and was comfortable with hanging it up now. As he moves on into the next stage of his career working in a player development type of role with the Sabres, he looks to mold more young players into the kind of player that can overcome obstacles of any kind to have success and to being able to spend more time being dad.

"I was excited about the Olympics, I was excited about the prospect of signing on with a team after, but you got into that daily routine of being around the kids a little more and maybe looking forward to that next stage of your life," Gionta said. "And so after Boston, we knew that was the decision so it wasn't a hard decision. It will be hard at times because that's what you're used to, but that's the right decision."

How Jeff Skinner can one-time his way to a career high in goals playing with Jack Eichel

By Ryan Stimson

The Athletic

September 24, 2018

Jeff Skinner scores goals. Lots of them. He's never been a big proponent of one-timers, but he's also never played with someone like Jack Eichel, who's among the league leaders in generating them.

Like a great many important things, the NHL does not track which shots are one-timers. Instead, NHL play-by-play files treat all slapshots as the same, but this is a mistake. The advantage of a one-timer is obvious: it is a fast, hard shot that usually arrives at the net before the goalie is set. It was only through passing project data that we could separate this type of shot and analyze it. During the 2017 season, I looked at how one-timers predict scoring and which players take lots of them and also which players set them up. Today, we're going to look at how the Sabres can increase scoring potential by maximizing one-timers in their lineup. Let's get to it.

One-timers aren't the most common events. The league leaders in taking and/or setting them up typically only reach around three per sixty minutes of play. There are some obvious names here: Steven Stamkos, Alex Ovechkin, Nikita Kucherov, Tyler Seguin, etc. Assisting on one-timers sees that number rise a little higher, but a fair amount of those are from the point, which makes sense.

In order to maximize use of this dangerous shot (11.3 shooting percentage when on net), we'd want to focus on which forwards are best at getting open for one-timers and which forwards assist on one-timers away from the point. While the ability of a player to create one-timers doesn't replace their overall contribution, it's a way to use data to try and put players in positions to do what they excel at. All players have shortcomings, so maximizing their skills is what coaching is all about.

Here are the best forwards at generating one-timers away from the point based on Corey Sznajder's data from last season.

Steven Stamkos only shoots one-timers apparently. He led the league last season. But this is a list that makes sense. Passing the puck well enough that a player can one-time it is a skill and this list is dominated by some of the best passers in the league. Oh, hello, Nick Shore. Can a team sign him already?

Now here's the other side of it.

We see some linemates of the top passers, which makes sense. We also see some newcomers. Now, each of these skills are distinct as it takes a player to find some open ice and be able to one-time the puck as well as it takes a player to serve it up for that shot. When we look at these lists, we're looking to find who can take advantage of Eichel's dominant ability to find teammates open for one-timers in dangerous areas.

Here are the current Sabres one-timer shots and shot assists from last season.

I think we're likely going to see a better shooter in Zemgus Girgensons' place, which means more goals for this team. As you can see, Jeff Skinner didn't have much in the way of one-timer contributions. Was this his fault? Did he prefer not to shoot one-timers? Conor Sheary was able to take advantage of Sidney Crosby's passes in a way that added significantly more value than Patric Hornqvist (quadruple the rate), so you'd expect him to continue generating these plays if he gets to play with Eichel or Reinhart. Even time with Okposo might be beneficial in this area.

Considering that the talent around him hasn't been exceptional, Eichel should see an increase in points simply because he'll be generating one-timers for someone of Skinner's or Sheary's talents. How does he do it so well?

Eichel picks up the puck and is able to pick out Reinhart, who keeps moving to present as a target for one-timer. Eichel then uses his skating and puck possession to maneuver up the boards and pick out Reinhart again for a chance. To spot players open for one-timers and execute these plays takes hockey sense and not only passing

ability but skating ability as well. There's also a natural advantage to picking out one-timers from down low: Reinhart can get separation because the Flyers defenders have their backs to him.

I'm not going to harp on playing down low as I've done enough of that this summer, and Eichel, Skinner, Sheary, and Reinhart are good enough skaters that they'll create more goals off of these types of plays this coming season. So much of hockey is played in a fluid, chaotic game state that it's difficult to create set plays. Not impossible, but difficult. However, there's one area where it is easier: faceoffs.

Creating one-timers from set plays

There's one specific area that could allow teams to manufacture the open space for one-timers: faceoffs. Specific routes and running interference can manufacture open ice. Teams tend to want to know where the puck is immediately after losing the draw in their own zone, so players can "get lost" easier in this chaos.

While this isn't a one-timer, it works just as well. Ideally, you'd want to create a play that springs someone wide open like the Sabres do with Scott Wilson here. After the faceoff is a bit of tie, Wilson knocks the puck down low to Reinhart. He immediately turns and heads to the slot as all four Oilers on the strong side are caught puck-watching. Seriously, stop the video at 0:03 and marvel at these players failing to execute basic defensive zone responsibilities.

During the season, we'll revisit the Sabres faceoff plays from time to time to see which routes lead to open chances more often than not. This isn't a fancy play – it's simply playing the puck down low and then a forward recognizing where the open ice is and getting there. It's a simple "go where they aren't looking" play.

If you talk to enough people in and around hockey, you'll realize everyone has their own name for things, so we'll call things a "winger exchange" play. Once the puck is won back to Zach Bogosian, Kyle Okposo and Zemgus Girgensons swap places. Basic hockey strategy for off-the-puck movement is to fill space another teammate recently vacated, as the initial player's movement draws coverage away from that area. Also, Okposo is moving against the puck here so puck-watching defenders won't see him. He's able to easily get open. Again, we'll get into this during the season in excruciating detail, but watch the wingers on every faceoff the Sabres win and you'll start to recognize their patterns and movements.

Even on faceoff "losses" you can gain an advantage. Here it looks as though Eichel is trying to push it forward or simply take the loss, because he'll get the jump on attacking the puck in the corner. He wins his battle with Brooks Orpik and then is able to turn and find Evander Kane for the quick score. You don't always have to win the faceoff to gain an edge.

Stick tap to one of our readers to sending the above clip to me the other day.

Conclusions

During this season I'll be examining the Sabres' faceoff strategy to see which plays manufacture open teammates most often. The reason I think this is an understudied and undervalued area of the game is it's the only real set piece in hockey and teams should be extracting every ounce of analysis to gain an edge anywhere. Creating one-timers is something that can be done at 5v5, absolutely, and being mindful of which players excel at that skill can lead to, perhaps, some added value in a line's offense while on the ice.

Former Sabres captain Brian Gionta helped change hockey

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
September 24, 2018

BUFFALO – Twenty years ago, diminutive players like Brian Gionta – the ones teams list at, say, 5-foot-9 but are clearly much smaller – rarely received a chance in the NHL.

Sure, once in a while an undersized talent would break through. But for the most part, the league coveted size.

Then in the early 2000s, a few small forwards – Gionta, Daniel Briere and Martin St. Louis – started seizing their chances and morphing into stars.

Given he's generously listed at 5-foot-7, Gionta, who retired Monday, beat long odds to even get drafted by the New Jersey Devils out of Boston College in 1998. He wound up playing 1,026 NHL games over 16 seasons, winning the Stanley Cup with the New Jersey Devils in 2003, scoring 291 goals and captaining two franchises, including the Sabres.

Today, some of the NHL's most dynamic players – take Johnny Gaudreau and Patrick Kane, for example – are among its smallest. St. Louis will be inducted into the Hall of Fame later this fall.

Nearly every team has at least one diminutive player on its roster whose height is bumped up a bit. The Sabres have two: 5-foot-8 center Kyle Criscuolo and 5-foot-9 winger Conor Sheary.

Gionta, 39, helped transform the game, illustrating size was often overvalued.

"You have a lot more guys that they're open to, guys are drafted a lot higher now despite their size, and they're given those looks," Gionta said during a news conference inside KeyBank Center. "So hopefully I'm a small part of that."

The Greece native takes special pride in hearing his career inspires others. His former teammate, Tyler Ennis, once said small players were a "brotherhood."

"Where I kind of get gratification coming is a young kid coming up who's undersized, a 10-, 11-year-old who says, 'Hey, if you can do it, maybe I have a shot,'" Gionta said. "So that's maybe more what you get enjoyment out of, letting that kid chase his dream or believe in himself."

Gionta will take a job with the Sabres, possibly a part-time gig helping out youngsters. He spent one day on the ice during the team's development camp in late June.

The role seems natural for Gionta. Teammates always gravitated to him and lauded his professionalism. Several of them crowded into a cramped media room Monday to hear Gionta speak. So did Sabres general manager Jason Botterill and coach Phil Housley.

"He came to the rink and he was a pro every day," said Sabres defenseman Nathan Beaulieu, Gionta's teammate when he captained the Montreal Canadiens. "He had everything against him, he had every excuse in the book to say he wasn't big enough or he wasn't fast enough. He'd always seem to make it work.

"Consistency in this game is what keeps you around. For him to do it such a long time and him to be honored to be captain on a couple different teams is pretty special."

Gionta showcased a consistency very few NHL players possess. He scored 20 or more goals in seven straight seasons from 2003-04 to 2010-11, including a whopping 49 in 2005-06.

While Gionta won a Cup and nearly scored 50 goals with New Jersey, he might be best remembered as the English-speaking captain of the storied Canadiens.

"Going to Montreal was one of the biggest blessings for myself and my family," Gionta said. "To be out of your comfort zone, going to a French-speaking area where your kids are going to a different school, and then to have them have the confidence in me that I was an English-speaking guy, could be the captain of that team, was pretty special to me."

Gionta captained the Sabres three seasons, joining them in 2014, just months before they endured one of the worst campaigns in recent NHL history.

While he never helped the Sabres back to the playoffs, his presence always offered the club credibility. He played his 1,000th game late in 2016-17.

Last season, he captained Team USA's Olympic entry before signing with the Boston Bruins. Following his 21-game stint in Boston, he said he knew he would retire and start spending more time with his family.

"I went into it hoping I could play one NHL game, and then from there it was play as long as you could and as long as you were having fun enjoying the game and your body holds up," said Gionta, who still lives in Clarence. "Yeah, I never thought it would have lasted as long as it did. But I'm super appreciative for the people along the way that supported me and gave me that chance."

"They weren't as readily available, the chances for smaller guys back in the day when I was coming through, and so I appreciate the people who maybe stuck their neck out."

xxx

The Sabres will play a preseason game tonight against the Columbus Blue Jackets at Clinton Arena in Clinton, population 1,939.

The village in Oneida County won the right to host an exhibition game and \$150,000 in rink upgrades through the NHL's Kraft Hockeyville contest.

The rink sits 2,000 people.

"It's going to be a great atmosphere there, even at the pregame skate," Housley said. "Obviously, we have business to take care of, but I just told the guys, 'Enjoy the moment.' It's great to be part of such a big occasion, especially with U.S. hockey."

Housley wants to dress as many American players as he can. Jack Eichel, the Sabres' biggest U.S.-born star, is scheduled to play.

Eichel centered Sam Reinhart and Jeff Skinner during Monday's practice, the first glimpse of what could be the Sabres' No. 1 trio. Reinhart had been skating on other lines.

Rookie defenseman Rasmus Dahlin will also likely play.

Housley said since the Sabres have three preseason games in four nights, including Wednesday in Pittsburgh, they've kept more players in training camp.

Sabres' Zemgus Girgensons settles into checking role

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
September 24, 2018

BUFFALO – Considering the Sabres drafted Zemgus Girgensons 14th overall and the scoring prowess he once showcased, the forward's last few seasons could be considered disappointing.

Girgensons scored 15 goals in 61 games in 2014-15, the same season rabid fans in his native Latvia voted him into the NHL All-Star Game.

But that career-high goal total is deceiving. Girgensons, 24, skated on the first line much of his second NHL campaign. In an otherwise dreary year – the Sabres tanked and finished dead last – he looked like one of the franchise's building blocks.

In reality, Girgensons is a third-or fourth-line checker and a strong penalty killer capable of playing center or the wing. Tenacity is possibly his greatest asset.

Girgensons has scored seven goals in each of the past three seasons, often going long stretches without producing any offense. Last year, he endured a 25-game drought.

Six seasons into his career, Girgensons understands his role.

"Forecheck, creating space, banging some bodies," Girgensons said Thursday inside HarborCenter. "That's kind of my role. At the same time, I do have to make some plays and finish some chances."

He added: "Just whatever role I have to play on the team, I'm probably going to be able to do it. I'm that type of guy if a coach tells me to do something, I'll do it."

Girgensons thrived in his role as last season progressed. After starting sluggishly – he was a healthy scratch for the first time ever in December – his teammates voted him the Sabres' Unsung Hero.

Still, Girgensons isn't guaranteed a roster spot. While the Sabres will likely keep him given his experience and versatility, general manager Jason Botterill increased the depth over the summer, adding a slew of new forwards.

Sabres coach Phil Housley said Girgensons' focus has been evident throughout training camp.

"You can see in every practice and every game he's bringing that physical aspect that we need, he's hard on (the) forecheck," Housley said. "I think the new acquisitions ... brought some internal competition. But Zemgus has been one of our most consistent guys day in and day out at the start of this camp."

Internal competition has been scarce over the last several seasons. The Sabres' tank seasons destroyed their depth. In the ensuing years, they struggled rebuilding it.

Right now, however, they have a surfeit of forwards. A veteran could get squeezed out.

"There's more competition, there's battles for a spot," Girgensons said. "I got to battle for a spot. I'm leaving it out there every practice, other guys are doing the same. I think better competition for the guys, better mindset, just that approach that we want to be a winning team."

"I think everyone here has understood you have to change your mindset to be a better team."

Girgensons experienced a lot of losing over his first five seasons, including three last-place finishes. But these days, he said everything on and off the ice "feels fresh."

"Everything's a little different, just the approach, the mentality," he said. "I think ... guys are going all out, everyone's taking care of themselves. Practices are looking high-pace, the guys are really battling. You can see there's some competition.

"That's a good thing for a team to have. It pushes each other, no one can take a day off or you'll be kind of out. So it's definitely looking on the bright side here."

He added: "If you don't work, you're probably not going to be here."

Roth: Brian Gionta opened doors for others by the way he played the game

By Leo Roth

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle

September 24, 2018

BUFFALO – Brian Gionta said he didn't feel his career warranted a formal announcement that he was retiring.

And Galileo's astronomy career didn't need official recognition that his telescope-peering days were over.

But that's Brian Gionta.

Humble to the end, classy to a fault.

Monday's announcement wasn't a bombshell.

At age 39, Gionta had spent the last year in a unique and wonderful way, dipping his toes into retirement as Mr. Dad while also training with his hometown Rochester Americans in preparation for the Winter Olympic Games in PyeongChang, South Korea.

He then played 20 games with the Boston Bruins, in the city where he starred in college, making his circle complete.

That's why Monday's news conference inside a jampacked media room at KeyBank Center was an upbeat affair for the former Buffalo Sabres captain, who absolutely deserved a chance to say goodbye with the TV cameras, former teammates and family present.

Who, unlike many professional athletes at the end of the cheering, could say with conviction, "I'm at peace and feel great with the decision I've made."

"It wasn't a hard decision," Gionta said. "It will be at times because that's what you're used to, but it's the right decision."

He wasn't leaving the game because of injury. He wasn't leaving it entirely because of age, because he can still step on the ice with the world's best and contribute.

It was just time.

Time to be with his wife, Harvest, and their three young children full time. Time to pursue a yet-to-be-defined role with the Sabres in scouting and player development.

Time to reflect on one of the most storied careers in hockey.

How an undersized kid from Greece, the middle of Penny and Sam Gionta's three hockey-crazed sons, went on from Aquinas Institute to win an NCAA title at Boston College, a Stanley Cup with the New Jersey Devils and to represent the United States in two Winter Olympic Games.

How he played in 1,026 NHL games over 16 seasons with New Jersey, Montreal, Buffalo and Boston, accumulating 595 points on 291 goals and 304 assists. How he became just the second American, after Chris Chelios, to captain the storied Canadiens.

How he was a trailblazer for the smaller man.

How the ultimate underdog wrote a Hollywood script.

"I've been very fortunate to last a long time and make a career of this. I would never have thought that would happen," Gionta said. "I went into it hoping I'd play one NHL game ... so I'm super-appreciative for the people along the way who supported me and gave me that chance. They weren't as readily available, the chances for

smaller guys, back in the day when I was coming through and so I appreciate the people who stuck their neck out and believed in me.”

His parents believed in him, as did his brothers Joe and Stephen, who has had a nice professional hockey career himself.

At the negotiating table, his friend and lifelong agent, Pittsford’s Steve Bartlett, believed in him, saying of Brian’s character, “He was a guy who sold himself. I didn’t have to do too much work in that area.”

His high school, junior and college coaches were all in on the kid who tapped out at 5 feet 7 and 178 pounds.

Gionta once scored 127 points in just 50 games for the Niagara Scenic. His senior year at BC, he led the nation with 33 goals as the Eagles won the national title in 2001.

And certainly, former Devils GM Lou Lamoriello believed in Brian Gionta.

He traded up to select him in the third-round (82nd) overall in the 1998 NHL draft. Five years later, Gionta was one of the young guns on a Cup-winning team featuring four future Hockey Hall of Famers: Marty Brodeur, Scott Niedermayer, Joe Nieuwendyk and Scott Stevens.

From his team at home to his teams on the ice, Gionta thanked them all from the bottom of his very big heart.

“Without all those people I wouldn’t have been able to do it and now I’m fortunate to walk away from the game and into something even better — that’s being part of my kids growing up and coaching them and being there for them. So I’m really looking forward to that stage in my life,” he said.

Gionta was 24 when his name was engraved on Lord Stanley’s chalice. He brought the Cup home to share with Rochester, taking it to his dad’s hardware store and to a rally at Greece Ridge Mall.

My boys got their picture taken with the Cup as it rested on the front lawn of Gionta's parents' house. That picture is something I cherish. What a gift from Brian.

“Obviously, winning the Stanley Cup was a dream come true,” said Gionta, who went on to break the Devils’ record with 48 goals in 2005-06. “Not that you take it for granted but it happened so early on that you wish you had cherished it a little more for how special it was. It’s hard to do and now looking back, the chances you had with good teams that fell short, you realize how special it was to win it and playing with some Hall of Famers in New Jersey who helped pull me along to realize that dream.”

There were many dreams realized.

Playing in the Olympics twice. Being an English-speaking player respected enough to be chosen captain of an NHL team in a French-speaking city.

Gionta said wearing the "C" for the Canadiens was one of the most significant achievements of his career and playing in Montreal was unforgettable “because the fans are so passionate and it’s such a hockey market.”

Of course, so is western New York.

He persevered through three losing and tumultuous seasons with the Sabres, the captain who always kept things positive and professional when dealing with the media on behalf of his teammates.

It’s no wonder Sabres general manager Jason Botterill wanted Gionta to work in some capacity with the organization’s young players. That will evolve over time at the pace Gionta is comfortable with as he transitions into this next phase of his personal and professional life.

"Everything we talk about with Brian, his work ethic, his character, these are attributes we really value in our organization which is why we want to do something with him moving forward," Botterill said. "We saw last year his interaction with our young players in Rochester was amazing, how he showed how to conduct yourself on and off the ice. We felt he was a big part of helping change the culture in Rochester last year."

Gionta will be exposed to many facets of the development and scouting side so he can decide where he wants his future in the game to go.

"Being a two-time captain in the national league, his commitment to fitness and being the kind of person he is on and off the ice, he sets the bar very high," Bartlett said. "He's going to be a real asset however they decide to use him."

Just like last season, Gionta will get the best of all worlds. Helping coach his kids. Helping out the Sabres "kids."

"He's ready for this," Harvest Gionta said. "Last year gave him the opportunity to have one foot on each side of the hockey world. It gave him a unique perspective that a lot of players who are finishing up don't get to have. Usually when they're done, they're done."

Playing full time for the Amerks this season wasn't in the cards. He joked that his soon-to-be 40-year-old body couldn't take the bus rides.

So he retires with an Amerks memory that is right up there on his list.

On Feb. 2, he signed a one-day contract and scored on a breakaway in a 4-2 loss to Toronto. In one of the top moments in Rochester sports history, 10,000 fans went bonkers, chanting, "USA, USA." His mom cried.

"You grow up going to games at the War Memorial back in the day and playing knee hockey with your hockey buddies in that rink, so to have that game ... with your hometown team, it was pretty cool," Gionta said.

With the likes of Marty St. Louis and Theo Fleury, Gionta helped open the eyes of GMs and coaches who felt the NHL had passed the smaller-sized player by for good.

Reminding them not to judge a book by its cover. That you can't judge the size of man's heart by the size of his shin guards.

"You had (smaller) guys who had done it before but it wasn't as commonplace," Gionta said. "You have a lot more guys (today) they're open to. Guys are drafted a lot higher now despite their size and given those looks. Hopefully I've been a small part of that. Where I get gratification, if there's a young kid coming up who is undersized, 10 or 11 years old, who says, 'Hey, I look up to you. If you can do it, maybe I have a shot.' That's more of the thing you get enjoyment out of, helping that kid chase his dream and believing in himself a little more."

That's the inspirational legacy Brian Gionta skates into the sunset with. And yes, it sure did deserve a formal announcement.

Brian Gionta confirms retirement at Monday news conference

WHAM

September 24, 2018

Buffalo, N.Y. (WHAM) - Greece native and Aquinas alumnus Brian Gionta made his retirement from professional hockey official on Monday.

Gionta made the announcement at a news conference hosted by the Buffalo Sabres on Monday afternoon. The team is expected to bring Gionta in for a role off the ice.

Gionta, 39, played in the NHL for 16 seasons. Three of those seasons were spent with the Sabres.

Gionta won a Stanley Cup championship in 2003 with the New Jersey Devils and trained with the Rochester Americans last season before playing on the U.S. Olympic team.

The Boston Bruins signed Gionta to a one-year deal in 2018, during which he played 20 games.

Former Sabres Captain Brian Gionta announces retirement from NHL

By Nick Filipowski

WIVB

September 23, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) - Former Sabres Captain Brian Gionta announced his retirement from the NHL on Monday afternoon.

Gionta, who is from Rochester, New York, broke into the league with New Jersey and won a Stanley Cup with the Devils in 2003.

After spending the first eight years in his pro career in the Garden State, Gionta would sign a five year contract with the Montreal Canadiens in 2009. He'd spend five seasons with the club and would become just the second American-born player to serve as captain.

Prior to the 2014-2015 season, Gionta returned home to Western New York signing a free agent contract with the Buffalo Sabres. He captained the team all three years with the Blue & Gold.

"A lot of people needed to believe in me. I appreciate the Devils and Lou Lamoriello for his belief in me and giving me a chance to break into the league," Gionta said Monday. "I'm fortunate enough to play for the Montreal Canadiens, one of the best, most storied franchises in the league. What an experience it was to be a part of that for many years. To cap it off and come back to Western New York and be able to play for your childhood team, the Sabres, was also a highlight of my career."

After deciding not to re-sign him for the start of the 2017-2018 season, as a free agent, Gionta played one game with his hometown Rochester Americans and scored a goal, before serving as Captain for Team USA at the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang.

When he returned, he signed to play with the Boston Bruins but would only suit up in 20 games.

In total, Gionta played in 1,026 games and scored 595 career points, so small feat for a player that was considered undersized standing at 5-feet, 7-inches.

"For me I went into it just hoping to play one NHL game. Then from there, it was play as long as you could and as long as you were having fun, enjoying the game with your body holding up," Gionta added.

"I would have never thought it would have lasted as long as it did. I'm super appreciative of the people that supported me and giving me that chance. They weren't as readily available, the chances, for smaller guys like me coming through. So, I appreciate the people who stuck their neck out and believed in me."

Former Sabres captain and Rochester native Brian Gionta hangs up his skates, retires from NHL

WKBW

September 24, 2018

(WKBW) - Rochester native and former Buffalo Sabres player Brian Gionta is hanging up his NHL skates for good.

Gionta was named captain of the U.S. Men's Hockey Team this past year. He played for both the New Jersey Devils and Montreal Canadiens for most of his career.

Gionta signed a contract with the Sabres in 2014 and played four seasons for the team.

The Olympian played a total of 1,026 games in the NHL. He scored a total of 291 goals and 595 points over his 16-year NHL career.

Gionta announced that he will join the Sabres organization. It's unclear as in what capacity and role Gionta will play.

Brian Gionta announces retirement after 16 NHL seasons

By Kirstie Chiappelli

Sporting News

September 24, 2018

Brian Gionta is ready to move on to the next chapter.

The veteran winger announced his retirement Monday after playing 16 seasons in the NHL.

Gionta added that he will take on a "small part" in Sabres organization, though he didn't mention the specifics of his position.

"I'm announcing my retirement today," Gionta said. "Looking forward to spending more time with my family and also playing a small part with the organization. Looking forward to that next step of my career."

The Associated Press first reported the news earlier Monday. The report noted that Gionta, who lives in Buffalo, had discussions with the Sabres about a part-time off-ice role with the team.

Gionta, 39, was selected by the Devils with the 82nd overall pick in the 1998 draft and began his career in New Jersey in 2001, helping the team win the Stanley Cup in 2003.

He went on to serve as captain of the Canadiens and Sabres before landing with the Bruins in February.

Gionta finishes his career with 291 goals and 595 points in 1,026 career games.

Brian Gionta retires after 16-year NHL career

By Adam Gretz

Pro Hockey Talk

September 24, 2018

Brian Gionta announced his retirement from the NHL on Monday, officially putting an end to an incredibly successful 16-year career.

The 39-year-old Gionta made the announcement in Buffalo, where he will be taking on a small, unspecified role with the team that will allow him to remain involved with the sport.

Gionta spent three of his 16 NHL seasons in Buffalo (he was born in Rochester, New York) and was the captain of the team each year. Along with his time in Buffalo, Gionta also spent a significant portion of his career with the New Jersey Devils (the team that drafted him) and Montreal Canadiens.

He did not open the 2017-18 season on an NHL roster and instead spent time preparing to play for the United States Olympic team. Even though he did not record a single point in his five games, he was able to land a contract with the Boston Bruins to close out the regular season where he appeared in 20 regular season games, scoring two goals and adding five assists before appearing in just one playoff game.

For his career, Gionta scored 291 goals and 595 total points in 1,026 games. He was a member of a Stanley Cup winning team with the Devils in 2003 and represented the United States at the Olympics two different times (2006 and 2018).

Gionta announces retirement from NHL

NHL.com

September 24th, 2018

Brian Gionta retired from the NHL on Monday after 16 seasons.

Gionta, a former captain of the Montreal Canadiens and Buffalo Sabres, accepted a role with the Sabres organization.

"I'm announcing my retirement today," Gionta said. "Looking forward to spending more time with my family and also playing a small part with the organization. Looking forward to that next step of my career."

A native of Rochester, New York, who lives in Buffalo, Gionta, 39, was chosen by the New Jersey Devils in the third round (No. 82) of 1998 NHL Draft. He won the Stanley Cup with New Jersey in 2003 and scored 48 goals in 2005-06, breaking the Devils record set by Pat Verbeek (46) in 1987-88.

Gionta spent three seasons with the Sabres (2014-17) and played for the United States at the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics. He had seven points (two goals, five assists) in 20 regular-season games with the Boston Bruins after signing as a free agent Feb. 25.

"Playing with my childhood team, the Sabres, was a highlight of my career," Gionta said.

Gionta finishes with 595 points (291 goals, 304) in 1,026 NHL games.

"He's somebody I grew up watching and all of a sudden I'm sitting a few stalls away from him my first years in the NHL," Sabres center Jack Eichel told The Buffalo News. "That was cool. It's an unbelievable career and I'm just happy I was able to be a part of it."

Gionta announces retirement after 16 seasons

By Cory Wilkins

The Score

September 24, 2018

After 16 seasons, the 39-year-old announced his retirement from the NHL on Monday at a press conference hosted by the Buffalo Sabres.

"I'm announcing my retirement today. (I am) looking forward to spending more time with my family and also playing a small part with the organization," Gionta said. "(I am) looking forward to that next step of my career."

Gionta served as captain during his three seasons with the Sabres. He'll now be taking on a player development role with the organization. The native of Rochester, N.Y., called playing in nearby Buffalo a "highlight" of his career.

Gionta began his NHL career in 2001 with the New Jersey Devils, where he won the Stanley Cup in 2003. His 48-goal output with the Devils in 2005-06 still stands as a franchise record.

In all, Gionta posted 595 points across 1,026 career games with the Devils, Montreal Canadiens, Sabres, and Boston Bruins.