



Buffalo Sabres

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It's a work in progress, but Sabres finally seeing results on power play

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

April 26, 2021

Lots of chances and finally some measure of success.

That's the latest rundown on the Buffalo Sabres' power play, which has been a major talking point of the season, both pro and con. It was sizzling over the first 17 games, then slumped and went into a complete nose dive when Jack Eichel exited the lineup. But now that his team's 5-on-5 approach has become more consistent, interim coach Don Granato has been pushing for better results with the man advantage.

The Sabres still need to shoot pucks more, but at least the ones they are firing are starting to find the net.

When Victor Olofsson scored in Sunday's 6-3 loss to the New York Rangers, it gave Buffalo a power-play goal for the fourth time in six games. The Sabres are 5 for 23 in that stretch, a far cry from the 3-for-52 disaster of the previous 26 games. They scored on the power play in only three of those contests and won only five.

"We're just shooting the puck a little bit more and winning pucks back," Olofsson said after Sunday's game. "We're not scoring on the first opportunity, it's kind of the second and third shot. That's what we have to do. Keep shooting, retrieve the puck after that and shoot it back."

The Sabres were off Monday and have their final meeting of the season with the Rangers on Tuesday night in Madison Square Garden. Rookie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen is expected to get his second NHL start in goal.

Sabres' power play during in 2021

Game #s	PP	Record
1-17	19-55 (34.5%)	6-8-3
18-37	1-36 (2.8%)	2-15-3
38-49	7-39 (17.9%)	5-6-1
All	27-130 (20.8%)	13-29-7

Source: NHL.com

Granato was the assistant in charge of the power play when Ralph Krueger was the head coach, and the Sabres led the league at a 34.5% clip through the first 17 games. They entered Monday's action 13th overall at 20.8%.

Granato doesn't want his power-play units to get jittery. He wants more shots, but they have to be good ones, too.

"You saw our power play with success earlier in the year when we had more patience than the penalty kill and we put the penalty kill in situations where they got impatient," Granato said after Sunday's game. "They felt they had to cover more ice and then we executed in and attacked at the right point. We've lost that. ... I don't want to say just shoot for the complete fact of shooting because you're going to have to get that puck back. It's more than just shooting. Yes, I would like more shots, but tactically."

The two recent games when they were shut out with the man-advantage cost the Sabres in last week's losses to Boston. They went 0 for 11 in those contests, including an 0 for 6 showing in a 2-0 loss April 20 that included a wipeout on a 6-on-3 chance late in the game.

But one definite bright light to those numbers is the number of opportunities the team is getting. Under Granato, there is much more of an offensive bent to the team's style, and players are moving their feet to draw opponents into more penalties.

In fact, since April 8, the Sabres lead the NHL in power-play chances over an 11-game span with 37. The problem is that they have only six goals, a 16.2% rate that leaves them 20th during that span.

Granato keeps tweaking things. Dylan Cozens is on the top unit now, and Olofsson, who should have been paying rent for hanging out so much in the right circle looking for one-timers the last two seasons, is starting to move around more. His goal Sunday came from the middle of the ice off a Sam Reinhart feed.

Olofsson initially got a clean one-timer from his normal spot on a Casey Mittelstadt feed, but Igor Shesterkin made the save. Instead of staying put in the circle, Olofsson pursued the puck and helped the Sabres keep it in the zone. He circled to the middle while Mittelstadt filled his spot, and Reinhart found Olofsson for the slapshot from the slot for his 13th goal of the season.

Granato said he felt the Sabres' power play had become too formulaic, with players heading to predetermined spots no matter how plays developed. That's easy to defend. More movement and flow, as Olofsson showed on his goal, can help.

"It's a challenge on the power play when you go right to your position and you go to set up before your break pressure and put the penalty kill back in their positions," Granato said. "We encourage them to set up where you're at. Read a play and react to a play. We're trying to move toward that direction as opposed to guys moving robotically to their setup."

Olofsson had 11 power-play goals last season, a number that's down to seven this year. Especially with Eichel out, teams have keyed on Olofsson's one-timers as the main focus when defending the Sabres.

"A lot of teams are putting one guy kind of close to me and I don't get as many one timers from my usual spot," Olofsson said. "You have to find some other looks. Today was kind of a broken play and I think their guy lost his place and it opened up a lot of ice in the middle. Definitely, I'm trying to find some other looks other than just staying in that circle."

The curse of Ville Leino? Ten years ago today was Sabres' last playoff game

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

April 26, 2011

Now it really has been a decade since the Sabres' last appearance in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

Monday marks 10 years since the club skated in a postseason game. On April 26, 2011, the Sabres suffered a 5-2 loss at Philadelphia in Game 7 of the Eastern Conference quarterfinals. They have never gone back to the playoffs since, and this season's collapse has tied the all-time NHL record of 10 straight misses set by Florida (2001-11, including the lockout year) and equaled by Edmonton (2007-2016).

The series against Philadelphia was one of the more bizarre ones in Sabres history.

The Flyers used three goalies to survive, becoming the first NHL team since 1964 to win a postseason series using a trio of players in net. The group consisted of current NBC analyst Brian Boucher, veteran Michael Leighton and then-rookie Sergei Bobrovsky. Boucher got all four of the Philly wins and outplayed Buffalo's Ryan Miller by posting a 2.10 goals-against average and .934 save percentage.

Boucher also became the first NHL goalie since 1969 with two wins in relief in a series, coming on for Bobrovsky in Game 2 and Leighton in Game 6 as the Flyers rallied to win both games, 5-4. Nobody covering the series could ever really figure out what Philly coach Peter Laviolette was doing starting the other guys in the first place.

Miller was utterly hit or miss as he posted a 2.93/.917 in the seven games. He earned 1-0 shutouts in Game 1 and Game 4 (goals by Patrick Kaleta and Jason Pominville, respectively, won the games). But he also gave up five goals in losses in Games 2 and 6, and four before getting yanked in favor of Jhonas Enroth in Game 7.

Miller kept the Sabres afloat in the first period of the finale as the game remained scoreless into the final minute even though the Flyers had outshot Buffalo, 14-2. But Paul Gaustad lost a defensive zone faceoff in the final 30 seconds and Braydon Coburn's point shot deflected off the glove off Mike Grier past Miller to give the Flyers a lead they would not relinquish.

Miller got pulled two minutes into the third period after Buffalo fell into a 4-0 hole on a goal by Ville Leino, who scored three times in the series. That's how Leino infamously earned his way into the heart – and wallet – of owner Terry Pegula to become one of the worst free agent signings in NHL history less than three months later.

Current Philly captain Claude Giroux, then a 23-year-old in his second full NHL season, led the Flyers with eight assists and nine points in the series. Philly's top goal scorer? It was former Sabres co-captain Daniel Briere, who scored six times in the series and burned Buffalo with a power-play goal at 4:45 of the second period in Game 7 to put the Sabres in a 2-0 hole.

Thomas Vanek led the Sabres with five goals in the series but you'll never guess Buffalo's scoring leader: It was defenseman Marc-Andre Gragnani, who had a seven points with a goal and six assists.

The Sabres took a 3-2 lead in the series with a Game 5 overtime win in Philly on a Tyler Ennis goal and looked set during the Game 6 Eastern Sunday matinee. Buffalo had a 3-1 lead after the first period, but Laviolette put Boucher back in goal and Briere scored two goals as the Flyers twice battled back to tie and force overtime. Leino won it in OT, banging home a loose puck in front of Buffalo defenseman Chris Butler at 4:43.

It's easy to forget Leino had 19 goals and 53 points for the Flyers that season to set career highs, and had 10 goals and 26 points in the playoffs for Philly over the 2010 and 2011 postseasons. He was one of their key guys, so it didn't seem crazy at the time when the Sabres signed Leino on July 1, 2011. The term of six years and \$27 million was what had observers shaking their heads.

It never worked for Leino in Buffalo, as he scored just 10 goals in 137 games and the team bought him out in 2014 after he scored no goals in 58 games during the 2013-14 campaign. He never appeared in the NHL again.

Just like the Sabres have never appeared in the playoffs since Leino beat them in Game 6 of 2011 and then joined them that summer.

Travis Yost's Sabre Metrics: What the numbers show about Casey Mittelstadt's recent surge

By Travis Yost
The Buffalo News
April 26, 2021

Amid another lost season, attention has again turned to player development and a longer-term outlook for the Buffalo Sabres. And one player under the spotlight is Casey Mittelstadt.

The 22-year-old Mittelstadt, taken eighth overall in the 2017 NHL Draft, has had an up-and-down start to his professional career. The creativity and playmaking ability in tight spaces – the attributes that made him a flashy prospect as a collegiate player at the University of Minnesota – are still innate to Mittelstadt's game, but he has found life against NHL defenses to be substantially more difficult.

Considering the circumstances, it's hard to imagine any player would look good in the Sabres lineup right now. But concerns remain over offensive consistency and the ease in which these defenses can push Mittelstadt out toward the perimeter and away from the dangerous areas of the attacking zone. Add that Mittelstadt's never been a great individual shooter or a strong defensive forward, and you can see why he's struggled to find regular time in the lineup.

That's recently changed. Helped in part by hollowed-out depth post-trade deadline, the Sabres have looked for a chance to give Mittelstadt more latitude in the lineup. Whether spearheaded by interim head coach Don Granato or as part of a collective organizational push, Mittelstadt has had a significantly scaled-up role.

With just a few weeks left in the season, Mittelstadt is averaging career highs in ice time and has seen a nice scoring uptick:

Most of that scoring uptick is being driven by Mittelstadt himself – he has eight goals in his last 14 games, a scoring surge unseen during the earlier parts of his career. He's also doing it with relatively limited teammate quality. This season, Mittelstadt has spent most of his minutes with notorious nonscorers in Tage Thompson and Curtis Lazar, a slumping Jeff Skinner and the young Rasmus Asplund.

Now some of this is a feedback loop – if Mittelstadt wants better teammate quality, he has to work his way into such a premium role. And playing further down the lineup does have some residual benefit, like generally seeing second- and third-pairing defensive talent and bottom-six forwards as the regular opposition. It's been in those minutes that Mittelstadt has struggled to show the same offensive flair that made him a first-round pick.

In many ways, that's what makes the end of this season a really fascinating tryout for the player and the team as they prepare for an offseason in which Mittelstadt will need a new contract.

The bearish case for Mittelstadt is easy to make. The bullish case, at least until the scoring uptick over the last few weeks, less so. But I will end this piece on what might be a bit of an interesting uptrend. If you look at Buffalo's shot profile over the last three seasons with Mittelstadt on the ice, it's been ghastly perimeter play with exceptionally little opportunity to threaten opposing goaltenders. But this season, we are starting to see progression. (HockeyViz). Mittelstadt's surge is coming when his draft peers (such as Carolina's Martin Necas and Montreal's Nick Suzuki) are putting together very strong seasons.

Mittelstadt's career has gotten off to a disappointing start. But here the Sabres have given him an opportunity to carry more of the offensive burden down the stretch, and Mittelstadt has risen to the occasion. It's a majorly positive and encouraging first step, but the organization is going to need to see this for longer than a month before they commit to Mittelstadt for the long term.

What does the Sabres' impressive youth movement mean for the Kraken and the expansion draft?

By John Vogl
The Athletic
April 26, 2021

The Sabres' youth movement during the past month has been a revelation. Prospects left for dead have been reborn, establishing themselves as potential core pieces.

The drawback is one could become a cornerstone for the Kraken.

As recently as March 25, the Sabres were one of the least attractive options for Seattle in the July 21 expansion draft. The conversation included Colin Miller, Cody Eakin and Zemgus Girgensons, skaters who would be depth players on the NHL's newest team.

Things have changed. The Kraken could pluck a goal-scoring, two-way forward. They might get a top-four defenseman.

They'll have legitimate choices, and Buffalo will be worse off because of it.

On the plus side, the Sabres' youth will serve them well. All players in the first or second year of their contracts are exempt from the draft. That includes some of Buffalo's best young players.

The exempt list features forwards Dylan Cozens, Arttu Ruotsalainen, Jack Quinn, Brett Murray, Matej Pekar, Brandon Biro, Dawson DiPietro, Lukas Rousek and Linus Weissbach; defensemen Mattias Samuelsson, Jacob Bryson, Oskari Laaksonen and Casey Fitzgerald; and goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen.

That's a solid list of keepers.

Here's who is left to be protected by Buffalo or exposed to Seattle.

Forwards (12): Jack Eichel, Jeff Skinner, Kyle Okposo, Sam Reinhart, Victor Olofsson, Cody Eakin, Anders Bjork, Tage Thompson, Casey Mittelstadt, Rasmus Asplund, Zemgus Girgensons and Andrew Oglevie.

Defensemen (5): Rasmus Dahlin, Rasmus Ristolainen, Colin Miller, Henri Jokiharju and Will Borgen.

Goalies (1): Dustin Tokarski.

The Kraken will also have an exclusive negotiating window with pending unrestricted free agents. If they sign one, that counts as their pick.

The Sabres' UFAs will be forwards Tobias Rieder, Drake Caggiula, Riley Sheahan, C.J. Smith, Steven Fogarty and Jean-Sebastien Dea; defensemen Jake McCabe, Matt Irwin and Brandon Davidson; and goalies Linus Ullmark, Carter Hutton and Michael Houser. Ullmark is the only candidate, and Buffalo hopes to re-sign him before that.

All teams will have two protection options. They can either keep seven forwards, three defensemen and one goalie, or eight skaters and one goalie. Like 25 of the 30 teams in the Vegas expansion draft in 2017, the Sabres should opt to protect seven forwards, three defensemen and one goalie.

We'll start with the seven forwards.

Jeff Skinner

The Sabres are required to protect Skinner because of his no-movement clause. It prohibits Buffalo from trading, waiving or loaning him out without his permission.

That caveat has drawn increased attention. If Skinner knew Seattle wouldn't claim him (and the six years on his contract at \$9 million per season), would he waive his protection rights so that Buffalo could protect someone else?

He'd need to be absolutely, positively, 100 percent certain for that to happen. And, at the moment, it's not 100 percent certain. Seattle general manager Ron Francis was a Carolina executive when Skinner topped 30 goals three times. Kraken assistant GM Jason Botterill watched Skinner score 40 goals and rewarded him with the \$72 million contract.

Would Seattle pick Skinner? Probably not. But he would add name recognition to the club. He's only 28. Until recently, he was one of the NHL's best goal scorers.

Unless it's announced otherwise, write Skinner's name on the protection list in permanent ink.

Jack Eichel
Next.

Sam Reinhart
The forward is a top-15 goal scorer this season.

Victor Olofsson
He's a top-six winger under team control for at least two more years. If this were an 82-game season, Olofsson would be on pace for 20-plus for the second straight year.

Casey Mittelstadt
The 22-year-old is blossoming. With Eichel out, Mittelstadt has stepped in and up. The center has eight goals in the last 15 games, an outburst that followed eight goals in 66 games.

Anders Bjork
The Sabres just acquired the winger, making him the centerpiece of their Taylor Hall deal. Buffalo believes the 24-year-old will grow into a point producer. There's no reason to let that growth happen in Seattle.

The final spot comes down to two players. They've been given enhanced roles under interim coach Don Granato, and they've both shown to be worthy of keeping.

Thompson was a healthy scratch under Ralph Krueger, a spot the 6-foot-7 winger earned with questionable puck decisions. But he has five goals and eight points in 16 games. He also leads the team during that span with 50 shots, an average of more than three per game.

The 23-year-old has two years left on his contract at a relatively low \$1.4 million per season.

Asplund, meanwhile, has gone from taxi squad to bottom-six regular. The 23-year-old is one of Buffalo's most effective penalty killers. He has also added six goals and eight points in 21 games.

Asplund is a pending restricted free agent who's due a qualifying offer of \$874,125.

The pick here is ...

Tage Thompson
It comes down to potential. Asplund should remain a valuable third- or fourth-line contributor and penalty killer. Thompson has the skills to climb into the top six. He's not there yet, but he could become a scoring-line threat if he continues to refine his game.

That leaves Asplund, Girgensons, Eakin, Okposo and Oglevie unprotected and available for Seattle.

On to the defense.

Rasmus Dahlin
Next.

Henri Jokiharju
The 21-year-old looked lost and soft with Krueger on the bench and Steve Smith running the defense. He's benefited from the coaches' departure. Paired with Dahlin, Jokiharju has resumed his role as a puck-moving blue liner with a respectable defensive game.

The final spot, once again, comes down to two players. Both have a case.

The Sabres have used Ristolainen as their workhorse No. 1 defenseman for seven years. They've turned down numerous trade offers they felt were unreasonable. They've repeatedly referred to the 26-year-old as part of the core.

But Ristolainen has just one season left on his six-year deal that averages \$5.4 million. He becomes an unrestricted free agent in 2022. After being part of nothing but losses, it's easy to assume he'll be eager to head elsewhere.

Borgen, meanwhile, has extremely limited experience with just 10 NHL games. But he's looked good in those 10 outings. He plays a physical game that trails only Ristolainen. Borgen lacks offensive upside, but the Sabres possess that elsewhere on the back end with Dahlin, Jokiharju and Bryson.

The biggest benefit to Borgen is his age and contract status. The 24-year-old will be a restricted free agent this summer and due a qualifying offer of \$874,125.

For this exercise ...

Will Borgen

He's shown enough to warrant keeping. Borgen could join with Dahlin, Jokiharju, Bryson and Samuelsson to provide a youthful defensive core with a nice mix of skill and brawn.

This leaves Ristolainen and Miller available to the Kraken.

But after investing all these years and dollars into Ristolainen, would the Sabres really just give the defenseman away? Probably not. And they don't have to.

The Sabres still don't have a goalie to protect. Tokarski will be exposed to the Kraken. While general manager Kevyn Adams hopes to re-sign Ullmark, it's not a given. If he can't, the GM should find a way to trade Ristolainen for a goalie. He can throw in Asplund, too, to sweeten the deal.

Rather than just lose those worthy players for nothing, Adams can try to fill a glaring hole through a trade.

That's for the GM to figure out. For now, here's what our protection, exposed and exempt lists look like for the Sabres.

Expansion draft

FORWARDS	DEFENSEMEN	GOALIES
Jeff Skinner	Rasmus Dahlin	Dustin Tokarski
Jack Eichel	Henri Jokiharju	Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen
Sam Reinhart	Will Borgen	
Victor Olofinson	Rasmus Ristolainen	
Casey Mittlelsaedl	Colin Miller	
Anders Bjork	Mattias Samuelsson	
Tage Thompson	Jacob Bryson	
Rasmus Asplund	Oskari Laaksanen	
Zemgus Girgensons	Casey Fitzgerald	
Kyle Okposo		
Cody Eakin		
Andrew Oglevie		
Dylan Cozens		
Arttu Ruuska		
Jack Quinn		
Brody Murray		
Matt Pelech		
Brandon Bero		
Dawson DiPietro		Protected
Lukas Rousek		Available
Linus Weiszbach		Exempt

The Kraken will have their choice of Asplund, Girgensons, Okposo, Eakin, Oglevie, Ristolainen, Miller and Tokarski. It's a four-man race.

The appeal of Asplund is obvious. Ristolainen would play the same first-pair, power-play, penalty-kill role in Seattle that he does in Buffalo. Though Girgensons sat out this season with an injury, he's an established 27-year-old with two years left on his contract at \$2.2 million per season. Miller is experienced and has just one year left at \$3.875 million before becoming a UFA, giving the Kraken a transitional player and cap flexibility.

The pick would likely be Asplund or Ristolainen ... unless Adams can turn one or both of them into a goalie.

Sabres rookie Arttu Ruotsalainen scoring, earning keep in NHL

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 26, 2021

When Don Granato arrived in Buffalo as an assistant in 2019, the idea of someday coaching a relatively unknown Sabres prospect named Arttu Ruotsalainen intrigued him.

Granato, now Buffalo's interim coach, only watched Ruotsalainen, 23, up close for a few weeks in training camp. The Finn's contract stipulated he had to return to Ilves, his Liiga team, if he did not make the Sabres last season.

Still, Granato's brief time around the 5-foot-9, 185-pound forward left a positive impression.

"Being familiar with young players and the growth rate development, I was really excited with him," Granato said on a Zoom call prior to Sunday's 6-3 road loss to the New York Rangers. "He's ... ultra-competitive and he has enough hockey sense."

Those assets have helped Ruotsalainen, who was recalled for the first time three weeks ago, quickly acclimate to North American hockey.

"He's evolved his game fast," Granato said.

After a 13-game stint with the Rochester Americans, Ruotsalainen has enjoyed regular NHL duty, scoring four goals in his first 10 outings entering Tuesday's contest against the Rangers at Madison Square Garden.

Ruotsalainen's "base of competitiveness," as Granato called it, and six years of European pro experience make him an interesting young asset.

"He's strong on pucks even though he's small, he's hard on pucks and his second effort on a puck, if you beat him with strength, you usually don't knock him off his edges and he hits you with quickness," Granato said. "Half a second later, he'll steal the puck back or make a play on you."

Ruotsalainen said he has learned "there is much more space than you think" on the smaller North American ice surface.

"You have to be confident with the puck and make some plays with the puck and you have a little bit more time," said Ruotsalainen, a free agent the Sabres signed in 2019.

When Ruotsalainen left Ilves in December to attend Buffalo's training camp, he had scored a league-high 16 goals in only 19 games. The rookie compiled five goals and 13 points during his two-month run in the AHL.

"He has a knack for scoring," Granato said.

So far, Ruotsalainen's goal-scoring prowess has carried over to the NHL.

In Friday's 6-4 win over the Boston Bruins, Ruotsalainen, who possesses a lethal shot, beat goalie Tuukka Rask on the glove side from high in the slot.

"He put it to a spot that Tuukka Rask absolutely had to make a save," Granato said. "Great goalies put themselves in spots where pucks can hit them. Great shooters make the goalie have to move and make the save. That's what Arty has a real good knack for. He makes the goalies make saves. They've got to adjust to him and his shot and he's shown that."

Ruotsalainen has also shown his versatility. While he has played center throughout his career, he has mostly skated as a winger this year. He recently moved to the right side beside rookie center Dylan Cozens and newcomer Anders Bjork.

"It doesn't matter, really," Ruotsalainen said of his position preference. "I like to play both. I think it's a good thing for me that I'm able to play both center and wing. I don't know, it's been a new thing for me in this season but I like it so far."

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Victor Olofsson's ability to score from the circle during power plays – his release ranks among the NHL's quickest – means opponents often key on him.

"I feel like a lot of teams are putting one guy kind of close to me and I don't get as many one-timers from my usual spot, so I've got to find some other looks," Olofsson said.

On Sunday, for example, Olofsson scored a power-play goal from high in the slot.

"It was kind of a broken play and their guy lost his stick, which opened up a lot of ice in the middle," he said. "Definitely I'm trying to find some other looks other than just that circle for the one-timer."

Granato said the Sabres have stressed "more movement and flow and interchange" on the man advantage.

"It's a challenge on the power play when you just go right to your position and you go to set up before you break pressure, before you pull the penalty kill back into their position," he said. "So we've encouraged and we will encourage, set up where you're at. Read a play, react to the play. We're trying to move toward that direction as opposed to guys just moving robotically to their setup. Read the play that's in front of you."

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How much has Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, 21, improved this month?

Dahlin has registered three goals, 11 points and an even rating in the last 13 games.

The Swede compiled two goals, 12 points and a ghastly, league-worst minus-34 rating in the first 36 games this season.

Notes: Sabres goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen is expected to make his second NHL start Tuesday. ... The Sabres had Monday off. ... The Sabres' season finale May 8 against the Pittsburgh Penguins has been moved from 7 p.m. to 3 p.m. ... On Sunday, winger Tobias Rieder was whistled for his first penalty, a hooking call, in his 41st game this season.

Cincinnati Cyclones Alum Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen Shines in NHL Debut

By Allison Babka

City Beat

April 26, 2021

A former Cincinnati Cyclones goalie made his debut in the NHL on Friday, and he made it count.

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen made 36 saves for the Buffalo Sabres in the team's 6-4 win against the Boston Bruins. It was the first time the Sabres beat Boston since Dec. 16, 2018.

"Ukko has worked very hard for this opportunity and we are excited to see him fulfill his dream of playing in the NHL," Matt Thomas, Cyclones head coach, said in a press release. "His dedication and commitment to excellence was evident in his time in Cincinnati. He is deserving of the first step in what we know will be a long productive career."

Luukkonen, originally from Finland, played for the Cincinnati Cyclones during the 2019-2020 season after recovering from hip surgery. The Cyclones opted out of the 2020-2021 season due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

During his time with Cincinnati, Luukkonen, 22, appeared in 23 games and had a 12-7-3 record, 2.24 goals against average and 91.2% save percentage, according to a statement from the team. He was named ECHL Goaltender of the Month for November 2019 after stopping 22 and 23 shots in back-to-back shutouts.

During his April 23 debut with the Buffalo Sabres, Luukkonen was hit for a goal in the first period when Sabres defense left Bruins' Steven Kampfer uncovered. But the young goalie rebounded and denied 28 consecutive shots after that.

"That wasn't the way I imagined the start would be," Luukkonen told reporters Friday. "But I think we played really well today as a team. Huge thanks to the boys today. We played a really solid game."

According to a release, Luukkonen is the 25th former Cyclones player to move to the NHL.

As CityBeat reported in March, the Cyclones will host its first home game of the season on October 30 against the Indy (Indianapolis) Fuel at Heritage Bank Center. It will be the Cyclones' first game in about a year and a half, as the coronavirus pandemic canceled the end of the 2019-2020 season and the Cyclones opted out of the 2020-2021 season.

Cincinnati's pro hockey team last played March 11, 2020, in Toledo. The Cyclones' last home game was March 7 of last year.