

The New York Times

After Lost Season, Sabre Returns for Cup Run

By *MATT HIGGINS*

Published: April 12, 2007

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BUFFALO, April 11

In his last playoff appearance, Buffalo Sabres center Tim Connolly rushed through the neutral zone with the puck and cut toward center ice, where he was crunched by the Ottawa Senators' Peter Schaefer.

Connolly sustained the second serious concussion of his career on that play in Game 2 of the 2006 Eastern Conference semifinals. The first came in a 2003 preseason game against Chicago. Together they have caused Connolly, 25, to miss nearly two full seasons while he recovered from postconcussion symptoms.



On Thursday night, Connolly will play in his next playoff game. The Sabres begin their opening-round series against the Islanders, the team that selected Connolly with the fifth overall pick of the 1999 draft, and whose starting goaltender, Rick DiPietro, has not played since March 25 because of a concussion.

"I've been talking about it for 12 months," Connolly said about his concussions Wednesday after a Sabres practice at HSBC Arena. "Now I want to put it behind me. I want to focus on the playoffs."

The latest concussion required a nearly 10-month recovery for Connolly. After a 2005-6 season in which he set career highs in goals (16), assists (39) and points (55) in 62 games, he was signed to a three-year contract worth \$8.7 million.

Originally, the team hoped he would be free of postconcussion symptoms by training camp. But that was pushed back to early in the season. Then when symptoms like headaches persisted, the Sabres placed Connolly on long-term injured reserve Oct. 31.

Buffalo goalkeeper Ryan Miller lived at Connolly's house for five months this season while his own house was being built. Miller sustained a concussion during his rookie season, and he could relate to his teammate's concerns. To keep Connolly's spirits up, Miller would sometimes take him to dinner just to get him out of the house.

"It's a scary situation sitting on your couch thinking about where your career is headed," Miller said. "It's pretty dark times."

Some days Connolly would not leave the house because he knew someone would recognize him in public and ask about his health. Eventually Miller and others learned to stop asking Connolly how he was doing.

"This is classic in all these individuals," Dr. Barry Willer, a professor in the University of Buffalo's psychiatry department and research director at the university's Concussion Clinic, said of those who have had concussions. "They hate being asked, 'How are you doing?' To him, it's just another reminder that he's not well, so it was very disturbing for him."

Connolly, with the help of Willer, has taken an unconventional road to recovery. When it comes to postconcussion syndrome, exercise is widely believed to make symptoms worse. But Connolly has credited an experimental concussion treatment program that relies on working out for helping him return to the lineup after almost a year off.

“It put me over the edge and got me back in the flow of things,” he said.

For eight months after Connolly was hurt last season, he followed standard protocol concerning concussions and rested, waiting for symptoms, like headaches, to subside. But when they did not, he began an innovative program at the Concussion Clinic. There he was given a personalized training regimen and began working out six days a week for six weeks under the supervision of the clinic’s staff.

He was impressed by the swift results. “If you’ve been out six or eight months, a six-week period is a fairly rapid recovery,” said Connolly, who scored a goal last week in his season debut, a 2-0 victory against the Washington Capitals. For most athletes who sustain a concussion, symptoms disappear within a few weeks, according to Willer. During this time, he said, rest is a sound and effective response.

But when symptoms persist, continued rest will actually do more harm than good, he said.

“We see it most distinctly with athletes,” Willer said about negative results from prolonged inactivity. “So much rest and so much withdrawal from society, a person deconditions. It exacerbates symptoms and causes fatigue.”

Willer said about Connolly, “By the time he got to us, he was starting to get worse.”

Treatment for Connolly began by creating a personalized exercise routine stressing aerobic activity that would not aggravate his symptoms.

“We are exercising them as much as we can without causing them difficulty,” Willer said. “We’re increasing their conditioning, but not much. We’re mostly increasing their autoregulatory control. We think that when somebody has a concussion, their autoregulatory system gets screwed up.”

Willer said a person’s autoregulatory system manages blood flow and pressure. And when people improve their conditioning, they in turn improve autoregulatory control, which acts as a kind of shield for the brain.

“To our knowledge we’re the only ones doing this,” Willer said of the clinic’s approach.

Teammates also noted an improvement in Connolly’s mood once he began working out.

“When he went to U.B. there, you could tell his demeanor completely changed,” Sabres defenseman Brian Campbell said. “When he started working out a little bit light and getting back on the bike, you could see progress and that will make anybody feel happier and more outgoing that way.”

Connolly credited teammates with keeping his spirits up.

“It’s not easy to go through, but I had a great group of guys on the team supporting me,” he said. “Family and friends all helped out through it. It makes recovery a lot easier.”