

## Sabres' Connolly battles lengthy injury jinx

### Playoff return. Forward has missed most of two seasons

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Echoes of his profanity were still lingering near the rafters as Lindy Ruff skated to the corner boards. The Buffalo Sabres coach had been barking and shepherding his team up and down the ice yesterday, but he grew quiet in the corner, where he had to send one of his players to the dressing room.

Forward Tim Connolly had been preparing to join another drill when Ruff arrived to talk about a tightened hamstring. It was a brief conversation, followed by Connolly making a long skate across the ice, returning to the very sidelines he has fought to escape for the better part of four years.

"There's going to be bumps along the road," Connolly said. "It's not going to be all smooth sailing, I'll tell you that much."

Few National Hockey League players would know better.

Connolly played in every game of Buffalo's Eastern Conference quarterfinal win over the New York Islanders, but only after fighting through post-concussion symptoms that dogged him for almost a year. They kept the 25-year-old centre on the sidelines for all but the final two games of the regular season - just as a similar injury had forced him to miss the entire 2003-04 campaign.

His rehabilitation was gruelling, and not just because of its length or intensity or innovative treatment. It was the questions about his health that got to him.

"In a small community like Buffalo, everybody means well, but when it's the 10th, 12th, 300th time you hear it, it's going to start wearing on you," Sabres goaltender Ryan Miller said. "And it's not that you don't appreciate the gesture, but it reminds you every time you step outside that you're not doing what you want to do."

Connolly suffered his first serious concussion during a preseason game against the Chicago Blackhawks in 2003. He missed the whole season and couldn't return to action the following year because the NHL had locked out its players.

He returned to the lineup last year and seemed to hit his stride with his talented corps of teammates. Connolly scored 16 goals and added 39 assists in 63 games, but he suffered his second serious concussion in Game 2 of Buffalo's conference semifinal win over the Ottawa Senators and could not return to the lineup again until this month.

There didn't seem to be any indication his tightened hamstring would keep him from



CREDIT: DAVID DUPREY, AP

Tim Connolly celebrates Sabres' goal against the Isles in playoffs.

playing tomorrow night, when the Sabres host Game 1 of their Eastern Conference semifinal against the New York Rangers.

"It's not something that I wish anybody to go through," Connolly said. "You don't want to see anybody have to go through something like that. It's not a lot of fun. It's a lot of being patient. As a hockey player, you want to train and work toward being in top condition, and when you're in that situation, you can't really do that much at all."

After spending eight months doing little more than resting, though, Connolly did begin to do something. He took part in a new approach to concussion rehabilitation through the University of Buffalo's Sports Medicine Institute.

The New York Times reported Connolly adopted a regimented conditioning program administered by the clinic that focused on aerobic activity six days a week for six weeks.

Rest is often prescribed as the best treatment for concussion, though it can leave a player feeling isolated.

"We see it most distinctly with athletes," Dr. Barry Willer, the clinic's research director, told the Times. "So much rest and so much withdrawal from society, a person deconditions. It exacerbates symptoms and causes fatigue."

Connolly returned to the ice on April 7 and scored in his first game back. He averaged more than 13 minutes a game against the Islanders.

"Every game, I see a great improvement in his game," Buffalo forward Adam Mair said. "Obviously, his hands are never in question. His ability to make plays is never in question. I think he's getting a lot more confident going into different areas on the ice, and his feet are moving faster every day. He's slowly but surely making his way forward to the form we saw last year in the playoffs."

"It's been no easy task for him to get where he's at right now, physically or mentally," Ruff said. "To spend that much time out, on two separate occasions, I've never gone through it and I can't say I know what it's like. None of us can, I don't think, unless you actually go through it. It was a hard road for him to get through."

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