

# Block Party

## Antti Raanta And The Forty Thieves

A long way from his home in Finland, Antti Raanta led the Rockford IceHogs onto the ice at AT&T Center in San Antonio last month. Outside, it was just another steamy October Saturday in south Texas. Inside, the IceHogs were opening the 2013-14 season. And for Raanta, it was the beginning of the next stage in his pursuit of realizing his dream of becoming an NHL goaltender.

But Raanta was met with setback just three minutes into that contest. During a scramble around Rockford's net, Raanta lost sight of the puck temporarily while the puck was dished out from behind the net to San Antonio's Eric Selleck. What happened next was more like Raanta's nightmare.

"Of course it was like – 'Oh my god. This can't be happening in the first game!'"

Selleck's hard one-time shot from 12 feet out found its way through an unprotected area of Raanta's left leg pad. And the puck hit Raanta square on the inside of his left knee.

"I was first thinking that I hope it's not too bad of an injury," Raanta recounted the minutes after the injury in which he tried to stay in the game but struggled to put weight on his left leg. "It was kind of funny to come here and prepare to play the first game and four minutes in - one shot straight to the knee, and that's it."

Luckily for all parties involved, x-rays determined no serious damage to Raanta's knee. He had some bruising and "a little scratch in the knee" as Raanta told us a few weeks later.

A year ago this time, Antti Raanta was entering his second season as a number one goalie in Finland's top pro league, SM-liiga. He had been a prospect over there as a 20-year old coming out of his country's junior league. However, he struggled in his first full pro season for Lukko and ultimately lost out on the starter's job due to injury. Prior to the 2011-12 season, Raanta moved on to Assat Pori, and a second chance to be a number one goalie.

In his first season in Pori, Raanta posted solid numbers. Over 38 games, he netted a 93.3% save percentage and a 2.23 GAA. Assat Pori, and Raanta, however, flamed out quickly in the playoffs.

Coming to North America was something Raanta admits wasn't really on his radar as he began the 2012-13 season. It's something, he says, he spoke with about his agent, but both recognized then really wasn't the time.

But Raanta went on to steal the show and solidify himself as the top goaltender in Finland last season. Over 45 regular season contests, Raanta backstopped Assat Pori with a 1.85 GAA and 94.3% save percentage. He went on to do even better in the playoffs, shutting down the opponents to the tune of a 1.33 GAA and 95.5 save % over 16 games.

Raanta led Pori to the SM-liiga championship and was named both the league's regular season and playoff MVP.

For an encore, he was appointed as the starting goalie for Finland's national team at the IIHF World Championships, held jointly last May in Stockholm, Sweden and in Helsinki, Finland.

At the World's, Raanta played in seven games against some of the world's best, posting a 2.09 GAA and 92.8 save %. He helped Finland to a Bronze Medal game against the United States, which Finland lost in a shootout.

By May, Raanta already knew his future was in North America. His stellar season had drawn the attention of several NHL teams, the Blackhawks being one.

"Of course the Blackhawks was the best organization who were wanting me," said Raanta.

Though being courted by the Blackhawks was flattering in itself, it was an in-person meeting with his future potential goalie coach that impressed Raanta the most.

"When I first met (Rockford IceHogs goaltending coach) Andrew Allen was in the finals in Finland," Raanta said. "I was like, 'Wow! That was pretty nice that somebody has come to watch the games in Finland from North America.' When I was talking with him I realized he wants to do the same kind of things as what I have done. I wouldn't have to change too many things."

Soon after, Raanta became a Blackhawk. And six weeks after losing the bronze to the U.S. team, Raanta was in Chicago, getting his first taste of life as a Blackhawk.

"When I came in July (for the Blackhawks prospect camp), after the first day I knew that this was good for me."

Raanta missed just one full IceHogs game with the knee bruise he suffered in the season opener. By the following weekend, he was back between the pipes in Cleveland, where Rockford split a pair of games with the Lake Erie Monsters. Raanta played both games and had his ups and downs.

"My game is the angles," Raanta told us last week. "There were a couple in my first game - too many goals to the short side. So that was the biggest thing I was trying to get better at."

Raanta approved on the scouting reports that list him as a reflex goalie who approaches shooters aggressively to compensate for his lack of size.

"Yes. Of course. I'm not too tall, so I have to move my legs and try to get the first pucks. After that, you just have to get to the posts."

His coach likes what he sees thus far.

"He's just getting used to the league, and our team as well," said Rockford head coach Ted Dent. "I think the more he plays the more comfortable he looks. And he's getting more confidence every game. And, it's good to see."

In transitioning to the North American style of play, Raanta says the biggest adjustments for him are finding pucks through traffic and getting accustomed to a higher temp north-south style of play.

"Guys don't go too much to the corners and start rolling around like some teams in Europe," Raanta explained. "But it's pretty fun. You can't start sleeping in any situation."

"Of course you just have to move your legs and see the puck (or) try to find the puck," he continued. "And if you don't see it, then you just hope that some defenseman makes the save."

IceHogs second-year defenseman Adam Clendening also appreciates Raanta for his ability to come out of his crease and

handle the puck.

"It's very nice for us, not having to go back and get smashed every time," Clendening says. "He's very good at it, and makes the right decisions."

Raanta has started eight games since returning from that brief opening night setback.

On the season he's won 5 of 8 decisions. His goals against is a modest 2.68, but his save percentage has steadily improved to 91.9%.

"He's done a great job for us," Jimmy Hayes said of Raanta's play so far. "Simmer's (Kent Simpson) done a great job for us as well. It gives your team a lot of confidence when the goalie is going to show up every night and keep you in the game. And sometimes he'll win games for us."

"In my eyes right now, he's probably one of the better ones we've seen," stated Clendening.

While his obvious goal is to be on the ice in the NHL, Raanta isn't down on his place in the organization.

He's embracing the opportunity.

"I'm pretty happy to be here now," Raanta last week.

"Of course you want to go to the NHL and play in those games. But, it's a process. You have to first get in games here and get to know the smaller rink. And get lots of shots."

"Every day you have to be a little bit better. And just battling – just battling all the time."



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