



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres lack balance in scoring

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

February 4, 2013

OTTAWA – Lindy Ruff and assistant coaches James Patrick and Kevyn Adams had solid, lengthy NHL careers. They were not snipers, however. They combined for 313 goals in 2,511 games, which works out to a goal every eight outings or so.

That didn't stop Ruff from joking the trio might provide scoring punch to the struggling Buffalo Sabres.

Ruff, Patrick and Adams spent much of Monday's practice in First Niagara Center anchoring a power play. So after the extended workout, is the trio ready to play on the road against the Ottawa Senators tonight?

"We might have to," Ruff said.

There are plenty of "secondary scorers" who would be candidates to come out. Drew Stafford, Jochen Hecht and Nathan Gerbe are among the Sabres still looking for their first goal. Marcus Foligno, Steve Ott and Mikhail Grigorenko head another lengthy list of players who have only one.

"That's our biggest issue right now," Ott said. "Our second, third and fourth line have not produced at all."

The Sabres will enter Scotiabank Place having won just one of their last seven games. Though they've also been a mess defensively, the inability to complement the torrid scoring pace set by Thomas Vanek, Jason Pominville and Cody Hodgson is the main reason for their losing skid.

Buffalo needs more scorers, plain and simple.

"It needs to happen, and it needs to happen right now," Stafford said before flying to Canada's capital.

Ruff had a one-on-one chat with Stafford and showed video to other players. The message was about scoring and burying chances.

"If you look at some of the point-blank opportunities, I would shake my head," Ruff said. "I'm a little in disbelief."

He's not alone. Most of the Sabres have shown the ability to score in the past, but they're all in a drought. Of Buffalo's 27 goals, 18 have come from Vanek, Pominville and Hodgson.

“You do well and you lose games, it doesn’t feel good,” said Vanek, who was named the NHL’s First Star of the Week for putting up five goals and 10 points in four games.

Advancements in technology have allowed coaches to chart and map out scoring areas. Ruff doesn’t see his players getting there, particularly Stafford.

“You’ve got to get in that prime area, that little square area in front of the net,” Ruff said. “You can’t go by the net. You’ve got to stop around the net, and there’s a few situations where the puck’s gone to the net and he’s watching and going wide where we’ve got to go inside.

“We have something special that we have a line that, as they say in Spanish, en fuego [on fire]. Everybody else would be jealous of that line right now. But now we don’t have the secondary, so we’re jealous of the secondary around the league.”

The inability to stop opponents is another cause for concern.

The Sabres have allowed 18 goals in the last four games, including the final three Sunday as Florida rallied for a 4-3 victory.

“We have some things to clean up,” defenseman Tyler Myers said. “A 3-1 lead, there’s a way you have to play, and we gave up too much to let them get back in the game.”

The Sabres likely will alter their defense tonight. They have recalled Adam Pardy from Rochester, though it’s unclear who will come out of the lineup.

Pardy, acquired from Dallas over the summer and waived at the end of training camp, had one goal, three points and a plus-3 rating in five games with the Amerks.

The 6-foot-4, 226-pounder has played in 183 NHL games with Calgary and the Stars.

There’s a chance defenseman Christian Ehrhoff could miss the game. Five players skipped Monday’s optional practice – Pominville, Hodgson, Hecht, Ott and Ehrhoff – and Ruff said there are “a couple guys that are nicked up that may be doubtful.”

Only Ott missed time Sunday, sitting for the final seven minutes.

Whoever plays needs to help the Vanek line at both end of the ice.

“We’ve got to start winning some games,” Hecht said. “We can’t rely on Thomas, Pommer and Cody scoring every night. We need all four lines to contribute.

“So far, it’s only that line that’s done the damage in the games. It’s up to the other lines to come forward.”

Ruff: 'I'm a little above disbelief'

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News (blog)

February 4, 2013

There's no real practice time in the NHL this season. Not with this bottleneck of a schedule. So the Sabres were on the ice less than 45 minutes today in First Niagara Center before heading to Ottawa for tomorrow's game against the Senators.

And they were still shaking their heads over the way Sunday's 3-1 lead against Florida -- which hit town last in the Eastern Conference -- turned into a 4-3 loss.

"We have some things to clean up," said defenseman Tyler Myers. "A 3-1 lead, we didn't bury a lot of chances in the second period ... There's a way you have to play and we gave up too much and let them back in the game."

Of course, there's little scoring from anyone other than the top line right now. Drew Stafford, a former 31-goal scorer stuck at zero for his \$4 million contract, said more scoring and more awareness in games is needed.

"It needs to happen and it needs to happen right now," Stafford said. "We don't have a lot of time to turn it back around. If you do lose a couple in a row, that hurts. That's something we're doing our best to address but we need to be even better."

Ruff said the Sabres had enough chances to have a 5-1 or 6-1 lead after two periods but didn't convert.

"If you look at some of the point-blank opportunities, I would shake my head last night. And I didn't sleep well," he said. "This building could have been rocking and the building turned the other direction by the end of the night. I'm a little above disbelief."

Ruff said a couple players he refused to name are nicked up and may be doubtful for tomorrow's game. The missing today included the likes of Jason Pominville, Cody Hodgson, Christian Ehrhoff and Steve Ott. Yikes. (Ott has not played over 14 minutes the last two games after going at least 19:44 in the previous three).

As far as other injuries go, Ruff said Patrick Kaleta (neck) is progressing and might start skating on his own Tuesday. Ville Leino (hip) is not improving and Ruff said for the first time he's worried about Leino playing at all this season unless another treatment option the team is working on can have an impact.

"This latest treatment option we hope will work," Ruff said. "Surgery is always the the end of the line. You go to a surgeon, he's going to recommend surgery. That's just the way it goes."

Are the Sabres not learning?

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 4, 2013

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- Not only are the Sabres playing bad hockey with two losses to Carolina and one each to Toronto, Washington and Florida, but the players feel that they haven't progressed.

Ryan Miller said after the Sabres blew a 3-1 lead to lose to the Panthers that they didn't learn their lessons from last year.

He's not the only one that feels that way. The NHL's leading scorer Thomas Vanek said, "It's really shocking that game got away. I think the start that we had, the goals that we got put ourselves in the exact situation that we wanted to be in then it disappeared." Vanek added, "In a 3-1 game, you've just got to be smarter, especially coming off a back to back." Tyler Myers said, "We went through some tough stretches last year where we weren't getting many wins and what he said (Miller) is absolutely right, we should've learned from that and learned how to work our way out and I think a lot of it is just knowing the situation of the game, 3-1 lead, there's a way we have to play. We don't want to sit back, but we don't want to give them rush opportunities to get back in the game."

So if they didn't learn from last year, exactly how does this group get through to each other? Vanek said, "Every guy has to look at himself it's not up to me or Ryan to tell or Lindy to tell everyone. I think at this level you have to know it or you don't know it." Myers knows they have to start winning now and he wants to see how they respond, "They're still a really good team with Spezza out of the lineup and we're going to have to work that much harder to get back on track. Going on the road, in Ottawa, it's going to be a tough game and it's going to be a perfect test for us to see what we're made of."

Lindy Ruff looks at it a little differently, "We had 15 opportunities to score last night on Florida. That's 15 mistakes that that team made. You've got to take advantage of some of those. I think that's been our biggest downfall. The mistakes that Boston made, although we gave up a lot of chances, we took advantage. Even at 3-1, to make the mistake that we made, that isn't a mistake that we should make or decision we should make." Ruff thinks they have improved somewhat, "We've cleaned up our game from Boston, the chances are way down. The key opportunities were way down. We're going to work on it, a lot of it through video. We can't do much of it through practice. We're talking a lot about the mentality of a 3-1 game, we don't need that play (stepping up on Florida's second goal) just make them make a smart play and make them come through you."

Sabres summon Pardy from Rochester to help ailing, struggling defense

By John Vogl

Buffalo News (blog)

February 4, 2013

OTTAWA -- Adam Pardy, who has played 183 NHL games, hoped to start the season with the Sabres. There wasn't room then, but there is now.

With Buffalo's defense corps ailing and struggling, the Sabres have recalled Pardy from Rochester. He had a goal, three points and plus-3 rating in five games with the Amerks.

The 6-foot-4, 226-pounder likely will play Tuesday when the Sabres visit the Ottawa Senators. It's unclear who will come out of the lineup.

Pardy will provide reinforcement for a blue line that is missing Robyn Regehr and Andrej Sekera. There's a chance Christian Ehrhoff is also banged up. Coach Lindy Ruff said two of the five players who skipped the optional practice today in Buffalo -- Jason Pominville, Cody Hodgson, Steve Ott, Jochen Hecht and Ehrhoff-- are doubtful for Tuesday.

Ehrhoff, though, played the entire game Sunday against Florida, including the last shift of the game.

The Sabres have given up 33 goals in their nine games, so they could use defensive help.**Sabres Vanek Underappreciated**

By Howard Simon

WGR 550

February 3, 2013

I'm not quite sure why, but Thomas Vanek doesn't seem to get enough credit from Sabres fans. He's a hot topic after his beast-like performance and five point night in Thursday's win over Boston.

15 points in the first six games of the season is Vanek's best start ever. He had 15 at the ten game mark last season.

Vanek already is one of the best goal scorers in Sabres history and if he plays his entire career in Blue and Gold, he could pass Gilbert Perreault for number one all time.

But Vanek has evolved a great deal over his previous seven seasons, becoming more reliable in the defensive zone and improving on his playmaking skills.

First and foremost though, the Sabres first round pick in the 2003 draft has a gifted pair of hands and can score goals in many different ways.

That was on display as Vanek recorded his 8th career hat trick and singlehandedly led the Sabres to a slump busting win over the arch rival Bruins.

Vanek's first goal came as he ripped a one timer past Tuukka Rask. Goal Number two came on a re-direct off a shot/pass from Christian Ehrhoff, a Vanek specialty on the power play. The hat trick goal was a nice display of stickhandling by Vanek in front of Rask.

Going into the weekend games, Vanek had 236 goals in his Sabres career which places him 7th all- time behind Perreault, Rick Martin, Dave Andreychuk, Danny Gare, Craig Ramsay and Mike Foligno. Vanek is 11 goals behind Foligno and 16 in back of Ramsay so he could finish the season in 5th place.

Perreault is the gold standard for Sabres skaters. He scored a goal once every 2.32 games on the average. Granted Vanek has played in about half the games Perreault did but Vanek scores a goal once every 2.34 games.

If you look at Vanek from a league perspective, his 236 goals are the 7th most by any player since his rookie season of 2005-2006. The only players who have scored more goals than the native of Austria over the last seven plus seasons are: Alexander Ovechkin, Ilya Kovalchuk, Dany Heatley, Jarome Iginla, Eric Staal and Patrick Marleau.

Yet another reason to appreciate Vanek is his ability to come up big against one of the best teams on the Sabres schedule, year after year. In 46 career games against the Bruins, Vanek is averaging more than a point game with 28 goals and 26 assists for 54 points.

Pardy Earned Call-Up With Attitude, Strong Play in Rochester

By Matthew Collier

WGR 550

February 4, 2013

It would have been easy for Adam Pardy to be bitter about his situation after he was waived by the Buffalo Sabres. He had played 183 NHL games with the Stars and Flames and, with a short training camp, hadn't gotten the chance to show his new club what he can do.

But the 6-foot-4, 220-pound defenseman did not let any frustration slip into his game or his attitude about playing in the American Hockey League. Now with two blue liners out, Pardy has been called up to Buffalo.

Pardy dominated in his first game, on the same day he was waived and didn't even have a proper pre-game meal. Since then, that's all the Amerks have come to expect from their D-man.

" You see it, his physical presence out there, he's a man," goalie David Leggio joked after seeing Pardy play for the first time. Since his arrival, the Amerks have won four of five games and he has three points.

"He's quite a player," forward Kevin Sundher said, talking about a goal that was created by a nifty play in Rochester's end by Pardy. "He can move the puck, make plays, he's an NHL-caliber defenseman. It's nice to have him down here."

Pardy was so strong his first night that general manager Darcy Regier came down to the locker room after the Amerks' 4-1 win to shake his new defenseman's hand.

"I have to work my way back to the NHL," Pardy said after his first game. "Whether it's going to be here or in Buffalo or wherever else. Nobody knows what's going to happen so I just have to keep working. It was tough coming in here tonight but it was good to get the win."

Hear Pardy's full interview after his first game here:

There's no question he did work his way back.

The Sabres next face the Ottawa Senators on Tuesday. Pardy's time in Rochester might not be over for the year. He is exempt from waivers again for 9 games or 30 days.

Stats Say Poor Faceoff Percentage Should Not Be Among Top Concerns For Sabres

By Matthew Collier

WGR 550

February 4, 2013

The Buffalo Sabres are in serious trouble.

They've dropped to 3-5-1 in a 48 game season and the team – Thomas Vanek and Jason Pominville not withstanding – has looked abysmal. Defensively, they are one of the worst in the NHL so far and their No.1 defenseman Tyler Myers has struggled. They have also lacked scoring outside of Vanek.

But of all the concerns to have about the Sabres – and there are MANY – fans should not be worried about the team ranking last in the NHL in faceoffs after eight games.

The Sabres are only winning 42.5 percent of their faceoffs. The team has also allowed three goals this season directly following a draw, including one on Sunday against the Florida Panthers.

When analyzing the Sabres' struggles, we need to consider what certain stats are really telling us about the team.

For example, Ryan Miller allowed four goals against the Boston Bruins and finished the night with a terrible Goals Against Average of 4.00. Was he terrible? No. He faced 42 shots and stopped 38, putting his save percentage at .904, which is slightly below league average. Which is closer to the truth about his game? Obviously the latter.

We need to look at which stats say the most about the club in order to spot the holes.

What does the league's worst save percentage really say about the Sabres? It tells us that their drawmen are allowing the other team to get the puck first around 6 of every 10 times. It says that when they are taking a faceoff in their own zone, it is slightly more likely the other team will get the puck first.

It doesn't say anything about how good the Sabres are defensively. It doesn't say anything about how many defensive zone starts they'll have – which a good team will have fewer. And it doesn't say anything about how many goals will ultimately be scored for and against or where the team will finish in the standings.

It simply says that approximately one time per game in the D-zone more than the league average, the other team will get the puck first. The Sabres have had 182 defensive zone faceoffs this season. They've lost 108. If they continue at that pace, they'll lose 57 more than an average team or just over one per game.

Is one faceoff loss per game in the defensive zone the difference between a win and a loss? You might respond, "it was on Sunday!" Which is true to some extent since the

Panthers scored, but with a more defensively sound team, it won't have any long-term effect.

Let's look at the play. This screen capture shows three Sabres players in Mathias's shooting lane. The second capture shows the Sabres' players not tracking the puck and absolutely nobody heading toward the shooter. It also shows Ryan Miller being a tick late to move over. Miller himself said he didn't get a good "jump" on tracking the puck.

What can we conclude from this? The team's goalie admits he could have stopped it. There was a mistake in communication in checking the shooter and there were three potential candidates to block the shot.

If we're answering the question, "what's wrong with the Sabres?" with this play, you'd answer goaltending, communication and shot blocking, before you made your way to the faceoff. Why? Because no matter how good a team is at faceoffs, there will always be situations like this one, where the other team gets a shot off the draw.

In fact, Hockey Prospectus research showed that teams winning a defensive faceoff take more shots in the first 15 seconds. So if every team loses about the same amount of draws – 23 teams were within 48 and 52 percent last season including the Sabres – isn't it more logical to say that the concern should be how a team reacts defensively within those first 15 seconds?

Here's more proof:

There's no correlation between faceoff percentage and the things that cause losing. Two examples are puck possession and goal differential.

Take a look at some of the teams from 2011-12 whose possession statistics didn't come close to matching up with their faceoff percentage:

Faceoff % vs. Possession

Minnesota:

FO%: 8th

Possession: 30th

Toronto:

FO: 4th,

Poss: 27th

Columbus

FO: 9th

Poss: 24th

St Louis

FO:14th

Poss: 1st

Carolina

FO:10th

Poss: 20th

NJ:

FO: 29th

Poss:10th

Pittsburgh

FO 13th

Poss: 2nd

Notice the league's No. 1 and No. 2 best possession teams – two top playoff seeds – were just average faceoff teams. Also notice the league's worst possession team and second worst overall record finished eighth in the circle.

FO% vs. Goal Differential

Pittsburgh:

FO%: 13th

Differential: 2nd

Minnesota:

FO: 8th

Diff: 28th

Toronto

FO: 4th

Differential: 26th

New Jersey:

FO: 29th

Diff: 9th

Nashville

FO: 22th

Diff: 8th

Colorado:

FO: 5th

Diff: 18th

Columbus

FO: 9th

Diff: 30th

Carolina

FO: 10th

Diff: 25th

Note the league's worst team in differential ranks ninth in the circle and the Cup finalists Devils finished 29th in faceoffs, but ninth in differential. All of the Top 15 in differential ALL made the playoffs.

How about shots allowing shots? That's bad too.

Top 15 shots for: 11 made playoffs (Phx 0.1 out of top 15)

Top 15 shots vs.: 10 made playoffs (Was 0.1 out of top 15)

Is it caused by faceoff losses? No. Six of the 7 worst teams in shots against were above 50 percent in FO percentage.

Is it better to win a faceoff than lose? Absolutely. Would you rather have a group of centers who dominate the circle? Yes. But if the Sabres started winning faceoffs, it wouldn't come close to guarantee they'd get any better.

Right now the team is 26th in possession and 23rd in goal differential. Now if those numbers improved, it's a lock they will get better. Those will improve if their defense improves.

That's what the Sabres really need to worry about.

Sabres star Vanek content with ice time he's given

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 5, 2013

BUFFALO – It's a fair question that won't stop being asked until Sabres coach Lindy Ruff ups his minutes.

Why the heck is slick winger Thomas Vanek, the NHL's most dynamic presence through two weeks with eight goals and a league-high 19 points, only playing 19:13 a game?

That time ranks 56th among NHL forwards. It's second among Sabres forwards to linemate Jason Pominville's 20:51 and sixth on the team.

"I'm happy with whatever I get," Vanek said Monday inside the First Niagara Center after the Sabres, losers of six of the last seven, prepared for tonight's contest in Ottawa against the Senators. "I think my ice time this year has been fine. I'm not going to demand more."

Vanek, the NHL's First Star of the Week, played 19:15 in Sunday's 4-3 loss to Florida, less than Tyler Ennis, Marcus Foligno and Jochen Hecht. The Austrian had a goal and three points. The other three didn't make the score sheet.

Foligno and Hecht had 24 shifts, as many as Vanek. Ennis had 23.

Ruff said some lines extended their shifts Sunday by getting caught in their own zone. Meanwhile, Vanek and linemates Pominville and Cody Hodgson are playing so well they're keeping their shifts short.

"If they still look fresh, I keep trying to send them," Ruff said.

But give Vanek more, right? Right now, the Sabres possess no secondary scoring. Vanek has a point on 70.4 percent of the Sabres' goals (19 of 27). His line has combined for 18 scores and 41 points.

Hecht and Drew Stafford, a 31-goal scorer in 2010-11, have zero goals. Foligno, Mikhail Grigorenko and Steve Ott each have one. Ennis has two. Five other forwards have zero in 28 combined games.

"We have something special that we have a line that's, as they say in Spanish, 'en fuego,'" Ruff said. "Everybody else would be jealous of that line right now. But now we don't have the secondary. So now we're jealous of the secondary around the league when the league's looking around going, 'Holy man, they got a line as hot as any line in the league.'"

Ennis said about the secondary scoring: "It's going to come. We just got to keep doing the little things. We can't expect the top line to continue this pace. It's got to change."

But why not run Vanek ragged and squeeze every last bit of production from him?

It's not quite that simple.

"I think we're getting plenty of ice time," Vanek said about his line. "We're getting plenty of chances. I think by upping the ice doesn't mean more production."

Here's some of what goes into Vanek's ice time:

Vanek rarely kills penalties, although he received 1:11 Sunday. In fact, Vanek turned down more kill time, Ruff said after the game.

Why?

"He wanted me to go double-shift but our line was up next," Vanek explained. "I said, 'Maybe let's hold on. I think our line's going good.' I think ... he understood that. I think the two of us didn't have a problem."

Ruff, who wants to know how players are feeling, might let Vanek start killing more penalties beside Foligno. The coach has been trying to make up some of his time lost on the kill by giving him a shift with another line as Hodgson and Pominville, PK partners, rest.

Vanek has killed penalties in the past a bit, although never consistently. He scored a short-handed goal Saturday in Montreal.

The 29-year-old isn't going to beg Ruff for kill time, however.

"I'm over it. I think maybe five, six years ago I was pressing more to get on it," said Vanek, who averaged a career-high 17:21 a game in 2010-11. "But I think Lindy's been using (me). If not PK, the shift after (I'm) with a different line. So I'm getting my ice time up. So that's not something I'm overly concerned about."

Ruff also has to be cognizant about overusing players during the compacted 48-game season. The Sabres have little time to rest.

"You got to be careful ... there's a lot of games. If you overplay, sure, you can probably get injured easier," Vanek said. "You got to use four lines. Obviously, there's times you have to ramp it up to three lines, some guys more often. But overall I like the idea of having four lines that can play."

Ruff said there's "no optimal amount" for Vanek and his linemates. He shut them down late during Saturday's 6-1 loss.

Vanek played 23:01 on Tuesday against Toronto, the only time he's gone over 20 minutes this season. A muscle strain had sidelined him the previous game.

“When I talk about matchups, I try real hard to put him in some situations that I think would really be to their advantage,” Ruff said. “I think that line has done a hell of a job. In Montreal, I just told them, ‘I’m shutting you guys down because we’re playing back-to-back.’”

Five goals and 10 points, including a three-goal, five-point performance in Thursday’s 7-4 win in Boston, earned Vanek First Star honors.

“I think our line’s going well but we’re not producing wins,” Vanek said about the honor. “That’s about it.”

Pittsburgh winger Chris Kunitz (five goals, eight points) and Vancouver goalie Roberto Luongo (2-0-1, 0.95 goals-against average, .944 save percentage) were the other stars.

Sabres recall defenseman Pardy

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 4, 2013

BUFFALO – This morning, five Sabres who played in Sunday's 4-3 loss to Florida – Christian Ehrhoff, Marcus Foligno, Cody Hodgson, Steve Ott and Jason Pominville – didn't skate during an optional workout inside the First Niagara Center.

"We got a couple guys that are nicked up that may be doubtful (for the Senators)," coach Lindy Ruff said after the Sabres prepared for Tuesday's tilt in Ottawa.

Well, at least one probably won't be playing Tuesday, possibly Ehrhoff. The Sabres recalled defenseman Adam Pardy from the Rochester Americans tonight.

Pardy, an offseason acquisition from Dallas, was waived last month during training camp.

The 28-year-old had one goal, three points, four penalty minutes and a plus-3 rating in five AHL appearances. He's played 183 NHL games, including 36 last season with the Stars.

The Sabres are already missing defensemen Robyn Regehr (lower body) and Andrej Sekera (bruised foot, one game).

In other injury news, Ruff said winger Patrick Kaleta (neck, three games) is "progressing."

"I'd say he's close to getting back on the ice," Ruff said. "He may even skate on his own tomorrow. So he's on the road to recovery."

Meanwhile, Ruff acknowledged he fears winger Ville Leino (hip) could miss the season. The Finn hasn't played yet this year after going down late in training camp.

"We're trying a different type of treatment again for what he has," Ruff said. "You hope you can gain some traction with it. The answer is I don't know right now."

Ruff said surgery hasn't been discussed. That's the end of the line.

"You go to a surgeon he's going to recommend surgery," he said.

Right now, Matt Ellis is the Sabres' only extra healthy forward.

Buffalo Sabres' Thomas Vanek rejuvenated for hot start

By Kevin Allen

USA Today

February 4, 2013

A number of NHL players became disillusioned about hockey during the lockout. Buffalo Sabres forward Thomas Vanek became re-energized.

Vanek decided to play five weeks for his hometown team of Graz EC in the Austrian league and says that experience restored his love of the game. "Not that I didn't love the game before," Vanek says. "But it made me realize how big the game has gotten over there and how much fun it still is."

Since the NHL relaunched on Jan. 19, Vanek has been among the NHL's most dynamic performers. He leads the NHL scoring race with 19 points. "I think rejuvenated is a pretty good word for Thomas," says Sabres general manager Darcy Regier.

Vanek had five goals and 10 assists in 11 games in Austria, but mostly what he had was an enjoyable time playing in front of his friends and family. Vanek lives in the U.S. year-round, but his parents still live in Austria.

"It's a different game over there," Vanek says. "The NHL is the best league in the world, but it's a grind. You sometimes forget, especially if you are losing, or missing the playoffs like we did last year, how fun this game can be. Being back over there, and seeing how the game has grown, takes you back to your roots even as a 28-year-old."

Vanek has three young children and decided to limit himself to five weeks in Austria. But it turned out to be an experience he will never forget. "It was his hometown and it was huge for him to go," says his agent, Steve Bartlett. "They went from so-so crowds to filling the arena."

Buffalo defenseman Tyler Myers also played in Austria, and Austrian player Michael Grabner (New York Islanders) also went back. The presence of nine NHLers in the league cranked up the excitement level for fans.

"It was a nice backdrop story to an unfortunate lockout," Bartlett says.

Vanek has always played with Jason Pominville, but late last season, coach Lindy Ruff played that twosome with center Cody Hodgson, who was obtained in a trade with the Vancouver Canucks for Zack Kassian. Ruff kept them together this season, and with 18 goals in nine games, that trio has been among the league's most dangerous lines.

"He and Jason have always had good chemistry," Regier says. "Now the chemistry is building among the three of them. If you have two guys with chemistry, it's great. If you have three, it's very unusual."

Hodgson's ability to set a table has aided both Vanek and Pominville.

“His best asset is that he can move the puck both left and right,” Vanek says. “A lot of centermen if they are left-handed they prefer to stay on the forehand side. Cody is right-handed, but he’s almost as good on his backhand as he is his forehand. He reads the game the well.”

Like most hockey players, Vanek doesn’t want to over-analyze why the unit works well together. “We are passing and shooting, and it’s going in,” he said. “Is that going to change? I’m sure it is. But it’s nice for now.”

The sweet new lives of Cody Hodgson and Zack Kassian

By Allan Muir
Sports Illustrated
February 4, 2013

Everyone knows that the true impact of a trade can only be determined down the road. Time, after all, reveals more truth than does a gut reaction.

But even if we're scarcely out of the driveway on the Feb. 27, 2012 deal that saw the Buffalo Sabres send Zack Kassian and Marc-Andre Gragnani to Vancouver for Cody Hodgson and Alex Sulzer, that trade has the look of a winner for both sides, doesn't it?

It was a nervy deal for both Vancouver's Mike Gillis and Buffalo's Darcy Regier, which explains why it came down to the last possible minute at the trade deadline. It was a swap of untapped potential, one that easily could have blown up spectacularly in the face of either team's front office.

The Canucks were shipping off their top prospect in Hodgson, the 10th overall pick in the 2008 draft, a creative playmaker and finisher with clear top-six potential. However, there were questions about his character after a series of injuries and rumors that swirled about demands he'd made to Vancouver's front office.

Ultimately though, the bigger issue for the Canucks was one of fit. Hodgson was the third-best offensive center on a team that wanted to use two, and his effectiveness suffered when he moved to the wing. He also did nothing to make up for the team's deficiency of grit that had been exposed during its 2011 Stanley Cup Final loss to the Bruins.

When the Sabres drafted Kassian 14th overall in 2009, they hoped they'd found a counterpoint to Boston's Milan Lucic, an inelegant bruiser with a decent set of mitts. They seemed happy with his development and had high hopes, but decided they could let him go in order to address their primary need: top line offense.

The Sabres hoped Hodgson could step onto their top line and boost an offense that ranked 13th in the Eastern Conference at the time of the swap. He finished the season strong, but has really come into his own this year while skating mostly alongside Thomas Vanek and Jason Pominville. Hodgson has never been a volume shooter, but he's getting more pucks on net off feeds from his linemates. He's playing at a point-per-game pace (5-4-9) as a result.

"I'm playing with amazing players," Hodgson told The Canadian Press. "That's pretty much it. We're always looking for plays and they're really creative. They've got so much speed and talent and I just try to fit in with them as best as possible."

While Kassian might not be a natural in front of the camera, he's found his own happy place skating alongside the Sedins on Vancouver's top line.

“I think I’m just finding my game at the pro level,” Kassian told the Vancouver Sun. “Obviously last year was just my first year of professional and I was getting my feet under me. Right now, my confidence level is pretty high and I’m doing the things I think, and know, I can do.”

What he can do is drive that 6-foot-3, 214-pound frame hard into the corner or to the net where, once planted, he’s impossible to move. He brings an element the twins have never had before: a legitimately intimidating physical presence with a bit of scoring touch.

Kassian, who came into the year with four goals for his career, already has five in just eight games this season.

Evidence of a player on the verge of a significant breakthrough? Maybe, but it’s more likely that Kassian’s success, like that of Hodgson, is a product of his environment — at least to this point. While he would provide value to the Canucks as a consistent physical presence who can wear down defenses with an aggressive forecheck, he’s putting up good numbers because he’s playing with the Sedins. Not just as a result of their sweet passes (which have led to two of his early goals), but the space they provide him with their puck possession skills.

That’s not a knock on Kassian. In time, he’ll be able to create more on his own, as will Hodgson. But both are young players who are only beginning to tap into their potential. The right opportunity wasn’t there for them with their original teams, but the deal, and some smart player management, put them in a position to succeed.

It’s early, but it looks like both teams can feel pretty good about this trade.

Sabres are ready for formal presentation of HarborCenter plans

By James Fink

Business First

February 4, 2013

In one of the last steps before construction can begin, representatives of the Buffalo Sabres will formally present plans for the proposed \$123 million HarborCenter project to the Buffalo Planning Board during its Feb. 12 meeting.

Planning board approval is one the final municipal approvals needed before ground can be broken for the Webster Block project.

Also needed is final approval from Erie Canal Harbor Development Corp. because the two-acre parcel sits inside the 20-acre Canalside footprint controlled by the agency. The ECHDC board is expected to review and sign off on the development later this month.

“We have all of these parallel roads we are going on,” said Michael Gilbert, Buffalo Sabres vice president. “So far, everything has been moving along quite well.”

The planning board had an informal review of the project in late November. The Feb. 12 hearing is designed as a follow-up to that meeting and as a formal vote on the project.

A site review committee, put together by Mayor Byron Brown, last summer designated the Sabres as the preferred developer for the Webster Block parcel. The Sabres were one of three proposals submitted for review.

The Sabres’ plan, championed by team owner Terry Pegula and his wife, Kim, calls for HarborCenter to be anchored by a pair of hockey rinks along with a hotel that could have as many as 200 rooms. The complex will peak at 12 stories and include nearly 1,000 parking spaces.

Other aspects of the project include retail and at least one restaurant, along with a Tim Hortons Cafe & Coffee shop.

With construction expected to start in March, the first phase of the project -- the twin hockey rinks -- should be ready by September 2014, with the hotel pegged to open by spring 2015. The rinks are designed for youth, amateur and collegiate-level hockey and figure skating games and tournaments. The Sabres will only use the facility when the ice at First Niagara Center is covered and being used for such events as indoor lacrosse games or concerts. Sabres officials estimate they may use one of the two rinks “maybe 10 or 15 days” per season.

“We’re doing this to help change the city,” said Cliff Benson, Sabres’ chief development officer.

The Webster Block, currently used as a 300-car surface parking lot, sits between First Niagara Center, HSBC Atrium and One Canalside, which is also under development and due to open later this year.

Back in lineup, Vanek continues on torrid pace

By John Kreiser

NHL.com

February 4, 2013

The only thing that's been able to slow down Thomas Vanek is injury. Opposing checkers haven't figured out a way to cool him off.

Vanek begins the third full week of the NHL season on top of the League scoring race with 19 points -- 10 of them in Buffalo's four games last week. There have been three five-point games in the NHL this season and Vanek has two of them -- the second one came Thursday night when he had a hat trick and added a pair of assists in a 7-4 win at Boston.

Vanek's big week came after he was forced to sit out last Sunday's game at Washington with a lower-body injury. He has points in all eight games he's played in, and he's on a pace that would put him well over 100 points in this season's abbreviated 48-game schedule.

Five up -- Five other players who had a good week:

Roberto Luongo -- Remember when Luongo was supposed to be headed for the trade market after Vancouver gave the starting job in goal to Cory Schneider? The Canucks are glad they held on to him -- all Luongo did last week was go 2-0-1 while allowing just three goals in 190 minutes and post his 61st career shutout. He owns a 1.46 goals-against average and a .944 save percentage -- and for the moment, has relegated Schneider to the bench.

Steven Stamkos -- Stamkos won't repeat last season's 60-goal performance -- only because this season will last only 48 games. The Tampa Bay star has goals in five consecutive games, including a pair against the New York Rangers on Saturday, and has points in all eight games the Lightning have played this season.

Henrik Zetterberg -- Detroit's new captain owns the other five-point game this season -- he had a hat trick and two assists in the Red Wings' 5-3 victory against St. Louis on Friday night. On a team in transition, Zetterberg has raised his game.

Sidney Crosby -- Crosby has been flying under the radar in Pittsburgh's up-and-down early-season performance, but the points have been coming faster. He put up back-to-back three-point games this weekend against New Jersey and Washington and has 13 points in nine games. He's also a big reason linemate Chris Kunitz had five goals and seven points in the two games, including a four goals on Sunday.

Carey Price -- After losing 2-1 to Toronto on opening night, Price has won all six of his starts for Montreal, including all three last week for the surprising Canadiens. His 1.70 goals-against average a .938 save percentage are a big reason that Montreal is one of this season's early surprises.

Five down -- Five players who didn't:

Kyle Okposo -- The 2007 first-round pick is playing on the New York Islanders' top line with emerging star John Tavares, but while Tavares and linemate Matt Moulson are producing, Okposo isn't. He went without a point last week and has just one assist in New York's last six games.

Jarome Iginla -- The greatest goal-scorer in the history of the Calgary Flames has yet to turn on the red light this season. Iginla has managed only four assists -- a big reason the Flames are just 1-3-2 after six games.

Daniel Sedin -- Neither of the Sedin twins is off to a good start offensively. But after getting six points in the Canucks' first four games, Daniel has gone pointless in four straight games, a major reason that Vancouver is struggling to score.

Ondrej Pavelec -- Talk about a nightmarish week: Pavelec started in goal for all three of Winnipeg's games last week but was lit up for 14 goals on 73 shots in just over seven periods as the Jets lost all three.

Martin Brodeur -- The winningest goaltender in NHL history won his first three starts, allowing only three goals. Since then, he's 0-1-2 and allowed five goals each in back-to-back losses to the Islanders and Penguins last week -- while backup Johan Hedberg went 1-0-1 and allowed just one goal on 50 shots.

The week ahead -- Both Southern California teams hit the road this week after Anaheim hosts San Jose on Monday. Both Florida teams also spend the week on the road -- Tampa Bay plays four games away from home, while the Panthers play three. Calgary, Carolina and Chicago (for the second straight week) are also on the road all week -- each plays three times. Nine teams have four games this week and only Colorado has as few as two, both at home. Ottawa and Philadelphia also spend the week at home.

Six of the seven Canadian teams pair off Saturday on "Hockey Day in Canada" -- only the Edmonton Oilers play a U.S.-based team.

Games to watch:

Dallas at Colorado (Feb. 4; NBCSN/TSN) -- The Avs try to keep their perfect record at home intact as the struggling Stars come to town.

Tampa Bay at Philadelphia (Feb. 5; NBCSN/TSN/RDS) -- The high-scoring Lightning have thrived at home, where they've played six of their eight games. The Flyers spent most of the first two weeks of the season on the road and hope a week at home will help them improve their 3-6-0 record.

Boston at Montreal (Feb. 6; NBCSN/TSN/RDS) -- NBC Sports Network bills Wednesday as "Rivalry Night," and there's no rivalry more intense than this one.

Washington at Pittsburgh (Feb. 7; NHLN-US) -- The Capitals will be looking for some revenge after a 6-3 loss in Washington on Sunday continued their early-season struggles.

Anaheim at Minnesota (Feb. 8; NHLN-US and Canada) -- In one of the real scheduling oddities of the season, Friday has only this one game -- sandwiched between 12-game days on Thursday and Saturday.

New Jersey at Pittsburgh (Feb. 9; NHLN-US) -- The Devils and Penguins play the opener of a home-and-home weekend series in the first half of an NHL Network tripleheader that also includes Phoenix at San Jose and Montreal at Toronto.

Los Angeles at Detroit (Feb. 10; NBC/TSN) -- It's an early call for the Kings, who visit Joe Louis Arena for a 12:30 p.m. ET start in the third of four games on their Midwest road trip.

Senators, Sabres both looking to get back in win column

By Mike Morreale

NHL.com

February 4, 2013

SABRES (3-5-1) at SENATORS (5-3-1)

TV: MSG-B, SNET-E, TVA

Season series: This is the first of four meetings between the Northeast Division foes. The teams split the six-game series in 2011-12, with the Sabres scoring a 4-3 shootout victory in the series finale behind a 36-save performance from goalie Ryan Miller.

Big story: Both teams are coming off consecutive losses, but Ottawa has yet to lose in regulation (3-0-1) on home ice this season. The Senators, who will open a four-game homestand beginning with the Sabres, are sixth in the Eastern Conference standings with 11 points and the Sabres are currently 11th with seven points. The Senators have obviously had to adjust to life without top center Jason Spezza, who was diagnosed with a herniated disk late last month and remains out indefinitely.

Team Scope:

Sabres: The Sabres yielded three unanswered goals to the Panthers on Sunday in a 4-3 loss at First Niagara Center. Forwards Thomas Vanek and Cody Hodgson each had a goal and two assists in the loss, and Jason Pominville also connected as the Sabres opened a 3-1 edge. The Vanek-Hodgson-Pominville line has produced 18 of the 27 goals scored by Buffalo this season.

"That line has played really well," coach Lindy Ruff said. "They've got great chemistry and played well, made great plays, but we do need other people to get on the scoreboard."

Senators: The Senators put 33 shots on Canadiens goalie Carey Price on Sunday but could only find the back of the cage once in a 2-1 loss at Bell Centre. Jakob Silfverberg scored the only goal for Ottawa, which suffered its third straight loss on the road. Goalie Craig Anderson (5-2-1, 1.12 goals-against average, .964 save percentage) still has not allowed a single goal after the first intermission in any of his eight appearances in 2012-13.

Who's hot: Vanek has eight goals and a League-leading 19 points in eight games for the Sabres, including four multi-point games. ... Anderson, who leads the NHL in save percentage (.964) and goals-against average, has stopped 242 of 251 shots in regulation and overtime for the Senators.

Injury report: Sabres defensemen Andrej Sekera (lower body) and Robyn Regehr (foot) are both questionable. ... Ottawa defenseman Sergei Gonchar and forward Guillaume Latendresse are each battling the flu and listed as questionable. Defenseman Mike Lundin (thumb) is expected to miss the next three weeks.

Buffalo at Ottawa

Associated Press

February 4, 2013

Ottawa Senators coach Paul MacLean doesn't seem to be overly concerned about his team's faltering offense.

Perhaps returning home has given him some extra confidence.

The Senators go for their first season-opening five-game home point streak since the 2000-01 season when they renew their Northeast Division rivalry with the struggling Buffalo Sabres on Tuesday night.

With top-line center Jason Spezza out the last four games - and sidelined indefinitely - with a herniated disk, the Senators (5-3-1) are going to need Kyle Turriss, Erik Karlsson, Milan Michalek, captain Daniel Alfredsson and others to step up. That hasn't happened in the last two games, with the club notching one total goal in back-to-back road losses to Carolina and Montreal.

"You are going to go through times like this," MacLean said Monday, a day after a 2-1 loss to the Canadiens. "Are we worried about it? We're scared to death each day about playing the next game. But at the same time I think offensively we've created opportunities. But I think we're a little bit tight in that department. ... We just need to relax and play our game and the goals will come."

The Senators are hoping to get a spark from center Stephane Da Costa, who was called up Sunday after registering 24 points in 31 games for AHL Binghamton. MacLean said he expects him to make his season debut as Ottawa begins a four-game homestand that ends next Tuesday against Buffalo (3-5-1).

The Senators have outscored their opponents 13-4 while posting a 3-0-1 home record. Ottawa hasn't opened with points in its first five on home ice since going 4-0-0 with two ties in 2000-01.

Buffalo has won six of seven at Ottawa but arrives with one victory in its last seven games. The Sabres are trying to regroup after giving up the final three goals in a 4-3 home loss to Florida on Sunday.

"If you look at some of the point-blank opportunities, I would shake my head last night and I didn't sleep well," coach Lindy Ruff said after Monday's practice. "... I'm a little above disbelief."

The Sabres' power play needs plenty of work - the club is 3 for 26 since going 3 for 6 opening night - and former Vezina Trophy winner Ryan Miller has given up four goals in each of the last four games.

One positive has been the play of left wing Thomas Vanek, who was named the NHL's first star Monday. He's scored in all eight games he's played in and is among the league's best with eight goals and 11 assists after he and center Cody Hodgson both scored and set up two goals Sunday.

"(My quick start) adds up to a losing record, so I have to do more too," Vanek said.

Vanek had no goals and two assists in five games against Ottawa last season.

The Sabres will face goaltender Craig Anderson, who will make a sixth consecutive start. Anderson, 5-2-1 with a 1.12 goals-against average, posted a 1.62 GAA while winning his last three starts versus Buffalo in 2011-12.

Ottawa is trying to extend its point streak in this matchup to five.

SABRES PROSPECTS REPORT

By Kris Baker

Sabres.com

February 4, 2013

Saskatoon goaltender Andrey Makarov continued his late-season excellence last week, stopping 107 of the 109 shots he faced to earn wins in all three starts, including a history-making shutout on Friday.

After a 38-save performance in Wednesday's win over Brandon, the Russian backstop kept his momentum going with 42 stops and a second consecutive number one star of the game honor in Friday's 6-0 blanking of Calgary. The shutout, Makarov's sixth of the season and eighth of his WHL career, earned him the Blades all-time franchise record previously held by current Washington Capitals netminder Braden Holtby.

Makarov completed the week Saturday with 27 saves to guide Saskatoon to a 4-1 triumph over Swift Current. Makarov, who has collected wins in his last four starts, improves to 21-16-0-3 with a 2.57 GAA (8th in WHL) and .919 save% (5th).

OHL

Dan Catenacci (2011, third round) cut to the net and scored the game-winning goal with less than two minutes remaining in regulation Friday as Owen Sound edged Kitchener 2-1. The power-play marker ups Catenacci's season totals to 28 goals and 62 points (9th in OHL) through 51 games.

Justin Kea (2012, third round) went without a point for the fourth straight game as Saginaw lost a Saturday evening shootout to Sault Ste. Marie 5-4. Despite the quiet week, the defensive-minded Kea enters February fourth in team scoring with 17 goals and 38 points.

Barrie defenseman Alex Lepkowski (2011, fifth round) was a cumulative minus-two as the Colts split a pair of contests. The 6-foot-4 defender has recorded six assists this season, while going without a point in his last 19 games.

On Sunday, Brady Austin (2012, seventh round) scored his fourth goal of the year as Belleville was crushed by Oshawa 8-2. The mobile defender has 16 points and a plus-six rating through 46 games for the Bulls, who trail Lepkowski's Colts by four points for the top spot in the Eastern Conference standings.

WHL

Colin Jacobs (2011, fourth round) scored on a penalty shot Friday as Prince George posted a 6-2 victory over Victoria. The tally, Jacobs' first shorthanded conversion of his four-year WHL career, was his team-leading 18th goal for the next-to-last place Cougars.

NCAA

Jake McCabe (2012, second round) did not return Saturday after being helped to the dressing room in the third period with an apparent ankle injury as No. 19 Wisconsin saw their WCHA unbeaten streak end at 11 games with a 4-1 loss at No. 7 North Dakota. McCabe currently leads all Wisconsin defensemen with 10 points (2+8). Brad Navin (2011, seventh round) played checking line minutes for the Badgers, who return to action Friday versus Bemidji State.

USHL

Judd Peterson (2012, seventh round) potted his ninth goal of the year into an empty net as Cedar Rapids defeated Youngstown 5-2. The Saturday night victory snaps the RoughRiders' seven-game skid, leaving them three points behind the Phantoms for the final Eastern Conference playoff spot. Cedar Rapids hosts league front-runner Dubuque on Friday.

European Leagues

Joel Armia (2011, first round) recorded five shots on goal Saturday as Assat extended their winning streak to four games with a 5-1 win over HPK. Armia has 13 goals and 20 points through 36 appearances while averaging 16:21 of work per contest. The Aces enter a 10-day Euro Hockey Tour break tied for the final SM-liiga playoff spot with just a dozen regular season dates remaining.

In the Swedish Elite League, Linus Ullmark (2012, sixth round) made 45 saves Thursday as MODO claimed a 2-1 overtime victory over Lulea. Ullmark, who was a perfect 7-0 in January while shuttling between MODO's J20 squad and the top club, is unbeaten in three SEL starts this season, amassing an impressive 1.12 GAA and .966 save% along the way.