



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*Thursday, March 21, 2013*

## **Ott is making a name for himself with Sabres**

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

March 21, 2013

Minutes after the Sabres' worst loss of the season, Steve Ott took a leading role in the Buffalo dressing room. He's followed that by commanding attention on the ice.

The Sabres welcome Toronto to First Niagara Center tonight with one of the NHL's prime agitators excelling in several areas. Ott has nine points in the last 10 games, is winning faceoffs at a league-leading rate and continues to infuriate opponents. It's what folks expected when the Sabres acquired Ott from Dallas for Derek Roy last summer, but it took a little while.

Ott's season turned in mid-February. After the 2-1 loss to Winnipeg on Feb. 19, a no-show debacle that cost Lindy Ruff his coaching job the next day, Ott noticed a pack of television cameras heading toward captain Jason Pominville in the neighboring stall. The forward stood up and said Pominville had spoken enough about the team's struggles. Ott said plenty of other players were responsible for the early season slide and urged those with microphones to find someone else to question.

"It was probably 15 consecutive days that the poor guy was getting hounded," Ott said Wednesday. "There's 20 guys that have accountability in this dressing room, and every single guy deserves an interview. You don't always have to go to your top leader on your team, your captain, for the simple fact we all lead in our own ways. We're all in this together."

Pominville appreciated the gesture.

"For him on that night to take my spot, it was nice of him to do that, for sure," Pominville said. "I expect I'll get asked a lot of questions. I'm not complaining about it. For me what's frustrating is when other guys aren't in the room."

Ott's been conspicuous since that day. His approach turned the spotlight on him, and it hasn't turned off. His game under interim coach Ron Rolston has a lot to do with it.

Rolston, who took over against the Maple Leafs on Feb. 21, has used Ott an average of 19:51 per night. That's a three-minute bump from the 16:49 of ice time Ott got under Ruff.

"He's earned that because he's played consistently well and done the same things, so you know what you're getting every night," Rolston said.

Ott has done more in the minutes, too. He has nine points in Rolston's 13 games after recording seven points in the opening 17 outings. Moved to the first line with Pominville and Cody Hodgson against Montreal on Tuesday, Ott responded with two goals, including the winner in overtime.

“It’s a treat because those guys are so highly skilled,” Ott said. “When you get those opportunities, you try to make the best of them.”

Rolston has also given the left winger more responsibilities in the faceoff circle. Ott took 8.1 draws per game under Ruff and won 53.6 percent. Ott is taking 11.3 faceoffs per night under Rolston and is winning 62.7 percent.

Boston’s Patrice Bergeron leads the NHL at 61.9, and Ott is tied for seventh at 58.4.

“It’s just more or less of earning your keep and earning your ice time,” Ott said. “We all want to go out there and perform and get the opportunities to do your certain role and excel at it.”

Though Ott says he was comfortable upon his arrival in Buffalo after nine seasons in Dallas, his play and attitude suggest he’s really grown into his new jersey lately.

“It’s putting the sweat and tears into that thing and the battles,” he said. “Until you get a mark on your jersey, you can say you haven’t really earned the respect from your teammates in this dressing room or earned it from your community and your fans.”

Despite their 13th place standing, Ott is not giving up on the Sabres.

“Our last game of the year, that will be the judge,” Ott said. “If we’re a playoff team, that’s my expectations of this team. That hasn’t changed. We’ve got some work cut out ahead of us, but by all means it’s in our grasp.

“Since the changes have occurred, I think we’ve continued to get better. ... By the end of all this stuff, if we continue to grow and continue to get better, I like the success of this team.”

## **Sabres notebook: Rochester planning winter classic**

By John Vogl  
Buffalo News  
March 21, 2013

The Winter Classic held in Buffalo was an unquestioned success. It appears the Sabres' minor-league club will follow its parent by playing outside.

The Rochester Americans have called a news conference for this morning in Frontier Field, the home of the city's minor-league baseball team. The Amerks are expected to announce they will play a game there next season.

Ted Black, president of the Sabres and Amerks, will be part of the news conference, as will the men's and women's hockey coaches from Rochester Institute of Technology. RIT is expected to be part of the outdoor event, which will be held in December, according to the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle.

The Sabres hosted the inaugural Winter Classic in 2008 in Ralph Wilson Stadium.

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There was no sign of hobbled Thomas Vanek on Wednesday, but interim coach Ron Rolston wouldn't rule out the Sabres' leading scorer for tonight's home game against Toronto.

Vanek left a 3-2 overtime victory in Montreal on Tuesday after getting drilled near the hip by a slap shot from teammate Christian Ehrhoff.

"He's a little bit better, but it's still going to be day-to-day and what he can tolerate," Rolston said in First Niagara Center. "It's certainly a possibility, but we'll have to see how he is in the morning and how he's moving."

Vanek has missed three of the Sabres' 30 games but remains the team leader with 14 goals and 31 points.

"We're trying to keep things simpler on the power play, and he happens to block one of the ones that gets through that's got some heat on it from the point," Rolston said. "He wants to be around that area. Usually when you're around that area you get some lumps."

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Mark Pysyk will play his third NHL game in place of injured defenseman Andrej Sekera, who is not ready to return from an upper-body injury suffered Saturday.

"It's still weak and in pain," Sekera said. "Not quite there yet. I can skate, it's no problem. The trouble is shooting, battling and stuff like that."

Pysyk, the Sabres' first-round pick in 2010, has two shots and a minus-1 rating while averaging 15:06 of ice time in his opening two games.

"I'm just thankful every day that I'm up here and just trying to stay as long as I can," Pysyk said. "Who knows how long that may be, but another game will keep the fun going."

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The Toronto hype machine has been in overdrive for defenseman Jake Gardiner, who was recalled from the minors this week. Gardiner, a first-round pick by Anaheim in 2008, played for the Leafs nearly all of last season and had seven goals and 30 points in 75 games.

He was recovering from a concussion when the lockout ended and has spent most of this season with the Marlies, putting up 10 goals and 31 points in 43 games. He had two goals and three assists against the Amerks while Rolston was the coach.

"He's just an offensive talent," Rolston said. "He skates extremely well, and he's similar to what P.K. Subban does for Montreal."

Toronto waived 31-year-old defenseman Mike Komisarek with one year left on his five-year, \$22.5 million contract.

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The Sabres have won consecutive games on just three occasions this season. They started the season 2-0, beat Montreal and the New York Islanders back-to-back in early February and had a three-game run Feb. 26 to March 2. They have another opportunity tonight, and the 13th-place club knows it needs to string together wins to have any chance of contending for a playoff spot.

"They're fully aware of that," Rolston said.

## **Vanek misses practice for Sabres but not ruled out against Leafs; Sekera will sit again**

By John Vogl  
Buffalo News  
March 20, 2013

Thomas Vanek was too hobbled to skate with his Sabres teammates today, but interim coach Ron Rolston is holding on to a glimmer of hope that Buffalo's leading scorer can play Thursday when Toronto visits First Niagara Center.

Vanek got plunked on the hip by teammate Christian Erhoff's slap shot Tuesday night and left the 3-2 overtime victory in Montreal.

"He's a little bit better, but he's still going to be day-to-day in what he can tolerate," Rolston said. "He's certainly a possibility, but we'll have to see how he is in the morning, how he's moving more than anything."

Andrej Sekera (upper body) practiced today but ruled himself out for the game against the Leafs.

"It's still weak and in pain," Sekera said. "Not quite there yet. I can skate, it's no problem. The trouble is shooting, battling and stuff like that. I can keep my legs, which is pretty good."

Rookie Mark Pysyk will play his third NHL game in place of Sekera.

"I'm just thankful every day that I'm up here and just trying to stay as long as I can," Pysyk said. "Who knows how long that may be, but another game tomorrow night, keep the fun going."

## **Sabres' Vanek a possibility vs. Leafs**

By Joe Buscaglia

WGR 550

March 20, 2013

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- After the Buffalo Sabres' most recent win over Montreal, their leading scorer was nowhere to be found on the ice for practice the following morning. Suffering a lower-body injury against the Canadiens that forced him to leave the game prematurely, Thomas Vanek did not participate in Wednesday's skate.

When asked about Vanek's availability for Thursday night at home against Toronto, interim coach Ron Rolston said it would be a possibility for their top forward, but they have to see how he feels in the morning. The forward still holds the 'day-to-day' designation from the coach.

Other than Vanek, practice resumed with 13 forwards and 7 defensemen on the ice. Former first-round pick Mark Pysyk was on the ice with the team, as was the injured Andrej Sekera.

Sekera hasn't totally been ruled out for Thursday's contest, however Rolston said the weekend seems more likely. The defenseman was the extra man on the blue line throughout the Sabres' shortened session that lasted around 30 minutes.

Steve Ott remained with Cody Hodgson and Jason Pominville as part of the top line after his two goal effort. Without Vanek, Drew Stafford was bumped up to the second line with Tyler Ennis and Ville Leino.

The Sabres take on the Maple Leafs at First Niagara Center on Thursday night.

## **Attitude Adjustment**

WGR 550

March 20, 2013

Put your ear to the ice and you'll hear something coming to the NHL. Hall of Fame goaltender Patrick Roy is getting more attention each year and appears to be intent on coaching at the top level. He says he's ready. Jeremy White asks: Could that be Darcy Regier's big move?

It's hard to know what Roy has in mind for his NHL coaching career. There are some suggesting that he's destined to take a front office job. Some think he's going to be a dynamic coach that will energize a team in need of a boost.

Roy has been closely linked to NHL gigs before. He was offered the job in Colorado, and he was the favorite to get Montreal's job before the Canadiens went with Michel Therrien (and they'll probably keep him for a while).

Patrick Roy represents exactly what the Buffalo Sabres need. This franchise is in desperate need of a fresh pair of eyes. The Sabres need some sort of identity as well. Patrick Roy would immediately give the Sabres locker room a level of credibility that it doesn't have, and hasn't had in approximately six years.

Roy has Stanley Cups. The Buffalo Sabres, to a man, do not.

Roy has had plenty of success coaching in the QMJHL, and oh-by-the-way is the coach currently in charge of your young wonder-kid that you hope develops into a top tier NHL player. This isn't to say that you hire a coach just for Mikhail Grigorenko, but it's in the mix.

The move would make sense for Grigorenko's future.

The move would make sense for Ryan Miller's as well. I don't know whether or not Regier has plans on bringing Miller back after next season, but perhaps a Hall of Fame goaltender as the coach could help get that done. Who better to understand what Miller goes through than a goaltender that once removed himself from a team because he'd been hung out to dry?

The move would make sense for the franchise image.

Success. Credibility. Attitude.

Patrick Roy might not be the nicest guy in a room of NHL coaches (He did send his son to go fight another goaltender). It will be suggested that he might not be quite ready to deal with the media or fans NHL level expectations (But he did have the best smack-talk line of all time).

What kind of coach might he be? ESPN's Scott Burnside filed this piece about Roy, surprising his friends and critics.

Highlight:

"Explosively passionate about winning (he once destroyed a television and VCR unit in Anaheim after a game in which then-Colorado coach Bob Hartley, now a close friend, had the temerity to briefly pull Roy even though the Avs went on to win the game), many believed Roy simply did not have the proper emotional makeup to coach junior hockey. Yet he has embraced the role, channeling that passion into a completely different space, in a way that continues to surprise friends and critics alike."

He says he's ready for an NHL job, and the Sabres need a guy like this more than ever.

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I'm trying to figure out why the Sabres have labeled Ron Rolston as the INTERIM Head Coach. Rolston has worked with a number of the players through their development in Rochester and now he's calling the shots for the parent club. Is it a foregone conclusion that he'll head back to Rochester next year?

There's a question that I've been struggling with since Rolston was named interim coach of the Buffalo Sabres: What's the goal?

Make the playoffs?

Look respectable?

Develop some kids?

I can't seem to figure out whether or not Rolston is coaching to keep this job, or to get it lined up for someone else. It's entirely possible that Rolston is minding the store in the interim, and would head back to Rochester with some NHL experience and good standing within the organization.

To some that may seem unfair, but the truth is that a quick stint in the NHL and then back to the AHL is nothing unusual - players do it all the time.

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This brings us to embattled General Manager Darcy Regier. Armed with a contract extension (and seemingly full support of ownership) it'll likely be Regier picking the next coach of the Buffalo Sabres.

He installs Rolston as the interim coach with eyes on getting a new head man to start next season. He may have decided to ride out this season and get some "development" for the kids, and then hand the keys to the big rig over to someone he feels more deserving of the gig. The Sabres haven't ruled Rolston out as head coach going forward,

but why hold back the title? The Sabres could remove that “interim” tag and fire him the next day. Does the GM possibly have the mindset that the coach of the team has to “earn it” the way that the players do?

They’re holding back that title for a reason, right?

Regier calls Roy a “terrific coach”, and freely admits that he’s “had a number of conversations with Patrick over the last few weeks.”

Regier and Roy have a working relationship. Regier frequently mentions conversations that he has with Patrick Roy. He has had reason to talk with Roy for the better part of the last year, as the organization set its sights on Mikhail Grigorenko.

In short - the Sabres GM has had frequent conversations with one of the NHL’s hottest coaching candidates, in a season where he’s rolling out an interim coach and quite possibly looking to reinvent the Sabres brand.

The biggest roadblock may be the GM himself. Would Darcy Regier hire this "terrific coach" that's known to be a huge personality and might clash with people more than Lindy Ruff or Ron Rolston would?

We’ll have to wait and see whether or not the GM keeps his job, and then what the future brings at head coach.

My guess is that if they wanted Ron Rolston as the coach, they’d take off that interim tag.

Leaving tags on? Isn’t that the easiest way to return something?

## **Ott's fearless, team-first approach earning respect from Sabres teammates and fans**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
March 21, 2013

BUFFALO – Not surprisingly, Steve Ott jelled with his new Sabres teammates immediately after nine seasons with the Dallas Stars. Having Mike Weber, a friend so close he calls him a brother, helped the transition. And Ott's infectious personality would probably make the 30-year-old fit in quickly anywhere.

Still, back in January, Ott felt a bit like an outsider. In his mind, he had to earn his Sabres jersey following the offseason trade. The versatile winger felt he hadn't proven anything to his new team or city yet.

"It's putting the sweat and tears into that thing and the battles," Ott said Wednesday inside the First Niagara Center after the Sabres prepared for tonight's tilt against the Toronto Maple Leafs. "Until you get a mark on your jersey, I guess you can say you really haven't earned the respect from your teammates in this dressing room, earned it from your community and your fans. ...

"You have to have that mindset of going in there earning everything that you deserve."

After only 30 games, Ott has earned the respect of his new teammates and fans, becoming arguably the Sabres' hardest-working and grittiest presence.

Ron Rolston promoted him to the top line beside Cody Hodgson and Jason Pominville on Tuesday in Montreal, and Ott rewarded the interim coach with two goals, including the power-play winner in the Sabres' 3-2 overtime victory against the Canadiens.

"He was rewarded for his play," Rolston said. "He had two real nice goals for us in big, key situations, and he's earned that because he's played consistently well and done the same things. You know what you're getting every night."

That's a talented agitator. Ott's a supreme pest, constantly chirping at, thumping and even fighting opponents. He plays on the power play, kills penalties and possesses enough skill to skate on any line. He's also one of the league's top faceoff men, a skill Rolston has utilized more than former coach Lindy Ruff.

With the NHL getting tougher by the day, players of Ott's ilk are in high demand. Under Rolston, Ott, a 22-goal scorer in 2009-10, has been playing a few extra minutes each game. He's averaging 18:07 a game.

"He's a skill player. He's a team-first type of guy, so he'll do whatever it takes to win," Weber said. "So I think ... guys don't want to have to compete every shift like that with him, whether he's just shooting his mouth off or running you over and then shooting his mouth off. With that, I think he creates a little extra space out there."

But, as his teammates quickly learned, Ott's value extends beyond the ice.

"I think he's one of the leaders in the room," Weber said. "He's one of the guys that has stepped up at different points of the season and challenged some guys and challenged himself. That's what he's all about. That's the background (military) he comes from that he has to earn things. Obviously, he's earned it."

Ott displayed his sense of accountability following a tough home loss last month. When cameras and reporters descended on Pominville again, Ott spoke up, telling media members they go to the captain "for all the problems in here" and 20 other guys "have accountability in this dressing room."

Ott then fielded questions.

"We're all in this together, and ... give him a break after 15 interviews and the same questions," Ott said Wednesday.

Pominville, who graciously answers questions nearly every day, appreciated Ott's gesture.

"I'm not complaining about it. I think I respect it," Pominville said about speaking to the media. "I'll get asked a lot of questions. I think, for me, what's frustrating is when other guys aren't in the room and you guys come in. It makes your job a little harder. You guys have to come and see me.

"I think it's good for the public to hear different guys speak, hear what they have to say as well. On that night ... it was nice of him to do that."

Ott's actions on and off the ice have already made him a fan favorite. His style meshes perfectly with blue collar Buffalo. No. 9 Ott jerseys can be spotted all over during home games.

Interactions with fans on Twitter make Ott feel welcome and appreciated.

"I've gotten a lot of positive, great messages from the fans (from) the local area, the community," Ott said. "I read every single one of them. ... It makes you feel good knowing that you have support from your fans, your community. All in all, I just want to show them a hard work ethic and compete every night. Hopefully, they enjoy that style of game."

## **Sabres' Vanek questionable for Leafs; Sekera likely out**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
March 21, 2013

BUFFALO – Sabres winger Thomas Vanek, who took a lethal Christian Ehrhoff point shot off the hip early in Tuesday's 3-2 overtime win in Montreal, missed practice Wednesday and is questionable for tonight's tilt against the Toronto Maple Leafs.

"He's a little bit better but still going to be day-to-day, what he can tolerate," interim Sabres coach Ron Rolston said Wednesday inside the First Niagara Center. "He's certainly a possibility."

Meanwhile, defenseman Andrej Sekera practiced Wednesday but will likely miss his third straight game.

What happened to Sekera on Saturday?

"Got tangled up and something snapped in my body," Sekera said. "Something didn't feel very right."

Ouch!

Vanek always seems to be beaten up, partly because he constantly goes to net, especially on the power play. Injuries have already shelved him three games this year.

Ehrhoff's shot ranks among the NHL's hardest.

"We were trying to keep things simpler on the power play and get shots through, and he happens to block one of the ones that gets through that's got some heat on it from the point," Rolston said. "But he wants to be around that area, and usually when you're around that area you got some lumps."

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After Rochester's 6-1 loss Saturday in Toronto, interim Americans coach Chadd Cassidy called Mark Pysyk into his office and told the defenseman, "You're playing tomorrow night against the Washington Capitals."

The team bus dropped Pysyk off in Buffalo on the way home. The 21-year-old then flew to Baltimore on Sunday morning before taking a cab to Washington.

Through two games, the Sabres' 2010 first-round pick has played well, averaging 15:06 on the ice.

So far, Pysyk's first taste of the NHL has been surreal.

“I just sort of took a step back and look, just think where you are at the time and realize you’re achieving one of your goals and you’re on your way,” Pysyk said. “I just want to do everything I can to stay up here.”

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Sabres winger Steve Ott on Rolston, who took over for Lindy Ruff a month ago Wednesday: “I really like his structure. His details of coaching are exceptionally well. He’s very mindful in the way that he kind of explains everything. Every single day our video sessions are very crisp and sharp. Those teaching aspects of Ron’s qualities I think are very, very high.

“As he adjusts to being an NHL coach, I’m sure he’s continuing to get better just like we are.”

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According to the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, the Amerks and the Rochester Institute of Technology’s men’s and women’s hockey teams will each play an outdoor game at Rochester’s Frontier Field, home of the AAA Red Wings, next season.

## **Sabres showing signs of improvement under Rolston**

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

March 20, 2013

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) -- Ron Rolston has little time to worry that his job title with the Buffalo Sabres is no different than his current place of residence: They're both temporary.

Having left his wife and two kids behind at home in Rochester, N.Y., the Sabres interim coach has spent the past month living out of a Buffalo hotel room. And the only way Rolston knows how to bring his life stability is by continuing to address the challenge of turning around a high-priced, underachieving team.

"That's something I can't control what's going to happen, whether I'm here or not at the end of the day," Rolston said Wednesday. "Every job I've been at, my sole goal in each of those is make it better than it was before I got there. And that's all I can do right now."

So far, so-so.

One full month since Rolston took over after Lindy Ruff was fired Feb. 20, the Sabres are showing inconsistent signs of shedding their inconsistent reputation. In preparing to host the Toronto Maple Leafs on Thursday, the Sabres (11-15-4) are 7-5-3 under Rolston, which is an improvement from Buffalo's 4-10-1 start under Ruff.

And yet, Rolston will acknowledge, there is still much more room for improvement for a team that continues to have difficulty holding third-period leads; ranks 13th in the Eastern Conference standings; and with 18 games left, is in jeopardy of missing the playoffs for a second straight year.

"It's getting there in how we play. We're getting closer," Rolston said. "But it's still the consistency of things."

That was no more evident than at Montreal on Tuesday, when the Sabres squandered a 2-0, third-period lead before pulling out a 3-2 win in overtime.

At least, Rolston noted, the Sabres won.

"The process of changing the habits and the details is going to take time, and right now in those situations, we tend to resort back to what we're used to," Rolston explained. "What I do like is that we're much more resilient as a team. I mean, early, when I first got here, that would've crushed us at that point in terms of team psyche."

The Sabres' troubles have been numerous.

Their power play is anemic, having converted just 13 of 108 opportunities to rank last in the NHL, while allowing a league-worst five short-handed goals. Buffalo's allowed a

league-worst 40 goals in the second period, and ranks 28th in the NHL in having allowed 95 overall.

The Sabres have squandered two-goal leads five times this season - that's tied for the second-most behind Montreal, which has done that six times, according to STATS LLC. And they've squandered third-period leads seven times this season, losing five of those games, including two in regulation, according to STATS.

"I think confidence might be an issue," captain Jason Pominville said. "Losing is going to affect your confidence. I think just winning will get it back. Playing better will get it back. And that's what we're slowly starting to head toward."

Rolston had spent the past two seasons coaching the Sabres' AHL affiliate in Rochester. He previously spent seven seasons coaching USA Hockey's National Team development program, where he became the first coach to lead the U.S. Under-18 team to win three gold medals.

Though this is Rolston's first job at the NHL level, he's credited by the Sabres for his attention to detail and teaching methods.

The challenge for Rolston has been getting his message across during a condensed 48-game season, in which there is little room for extended practices. And the timing of his hiring didn't help, with Rolston's first players meeting occurring in a hotel in Toronto, a day before a game against the Maple Leafs.

"Obviously, he wasn't put in an easy situation coming in," Pominville said. "It would be interesting to see what he can do throughout a training camp, where he can have three weeks to get us ready."

Rolston will finish the season in Buffalo, and is a candidate to take over the coaching job on a full-time basis.

General manager Darcy Regier likes what Rolston has done so far.

"He's a teacher, and the team is making some progress," Regier said last week. "I like what we've seen so far."

Rolston, who can always return to his former job in Rochester, is taking a one-day-at-a-time approach.

"If you look at the grand picture, you can just get overwhelmed by it," Rolston said. "I just try to live in the moment, enjoy where I'm at, enjoy the challenge, and just try to make it better."

So far, so-so.

## **Sabres LW Vanek day to day with hip injury**

Associated Press

March 20, 2013

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) -- Buffalo Sabres leading scorer Thomas Vanek has missed practice because of a hip injury, and it's uncertain if he'll play against the Toronto Maple Leafs on Thursday.

Interim coach Ron Rolston listed Vanek as day to day on Wednesday, a day after the player was hurt in a 3-2 overtime win at Montreal. Vanek did not return after being struck by a shot taken by teammate Christian Ehrhoff midway through the second period.

Rolston said Vanek was feeling little bit better, but his playing status will depend on how much pain he can tolerate. Vanek was spotted walking with a noticeable limp in a players' area outside the locker room Wednesday.

He leads Buffalo with 14 goals, 17 assists and 31 points.

## **Toronto at Buffalo**

Associated Press

March 20, 2013

The Toronto Maple Leafs have their budding star to thank for pulling them out of their season-worst slump. Now, they look for him to keep pushing the club toward its first playoff appearance in nearly a decade.

Toronto hopes Nazem Kadri can continue his stellar play on Thursday night as the Maple Leafs visit the Buffalo Sabres, a team who may be without its own top scorer as it still searches for more consistency.

The Maple Leafs (16-12-2) were stuck in a season-long five-game losing streak prior to Wednesday's 4-2 home victory over Tampa Bay - and it was the 22-year-old Kadri stealing the show as he matched a career best with three assists.

Kadri, who leads the team with 30 points on 11 goals and 19 assists, has left coach Randy Carlyle with little choice but to pit his line against the opponent's top unit each night.

"We're going to test Kadri against the best players," Carlyle said. "He wants that, he cherishes it and tonight it worked for him."

It doesn't get much better than Tampa Bay's trio of Steven Stamkos, Martin St. Louis and Cory Conacher, but it was Kadri - along with linemates Joffrey Lupul and Nikolai Kulemin - looking impressive as Kulemin and Lupul each scored a goal.

It was only Lupul's second game back after he missed 25 with a fractured forearm, but Kadri believes the three are finding a rhythm together. Kulemin has 15 points in 30 games.

"We knew we had to come out with our foot on the gas pedal," Kadri said. "We're pretty much on the same page offensively. We know where each other are going to be before we're there."

The Sabres (11-15-4) have had difficulty all season establishing a rhythm and fired Lindy Ruff on Feb. 20 after the team started 4-10-1. Buffalo has been better under interim coach Ron Rolston, going 7-5-3, but still not quite good enough with 18 games left and the Sabres currently on the outside of the playoff picture, trying to avoid missing out for the second straight year.

Making the postseason could be even more difficult if leading scorer Thomas Vanek misses time. Vanek did not practice Wednesday and is day-to-day with a hip injury he suffered in a 3-2 overtime win at Montreal on Tuesday.

Rolston said Vanek's playing status will depend on how much pain he can tolerate, though he was seen walking with a limp outside the team's locker room on Wednesday.

"It's certainly a possibility, but we'll have to see how he is in the morning," Rolston said of Vanek's chances of playing Thursday. "How he's moving, more than anything."

Meanwhile, Buffalo still ranks last in power-play percentage (12.0) and has surrendered five two-goal leads in the third period this season - including a 2-0 edge on Tuesday before recovering for the victory.

"It's getting there in how we play," Rolston said. "We're getting closer. But it's still the consistency of things."

Toronto has won two of three meetings this season, but the Sabres have won three straight and 10 of 11 at home in this series.

Phil Kessel has 11 points over his last seven games and seven in his last five contests against Buffalo.