



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Sabres-Panthers Preview

By Jeff Mezydlo
Associated Press
March 28, 2013

If the Buffalo Sabres are to make a serious push into playoff position, they likely can't afford losing to the few teams below them in the Eastern Conference standings.

The visiting Sabres try to bounce back from a frustrating defeat by handing the lowly Florida Panthers a fourth consecutive loss Thursday night.

Buffalo (13-16-4) was riding a three-game winning streak when it recorded a season-low 14 shots on goal in Tuesday's 2-1 road loss to a Tampa Bay team that dropped its previous three and reeling after the firing of coach Guy Boucher.

One point ahead of the Lightning, the Sabres are 12th in the East and four points behind the New York Rangers for the eighth and final playoff spot.

"No one's going to help us," said Buffalo's Ryan Miller, who made 21 saves. "We've got to get two points every night, and (the) first two periods didn't speak to what we've been trying to do lately."

Miller yielded a goal on two shots in the first period. Buffalo managed four shots over the first 20 minutes and didn't score until defenseman Jordan Leopold's second of the year came late in the third.

The Sabres have three goals in two games since scoring at least three in each of the previous five.

"We weren't prepared enough, but the bottom line is we're in a race right now and we desperately needed those points," Leopold said. "We were on a roll there, too. You look at it, three games without a loss. We get something rolling there and go out and have that."

It would seem Buffalo has a good chance to rebound against the Panthers (9-19-6), whose nine wins and 24 points are the fewest in the NHL.

The teams split the previous two 2013 meetings that were both decided by 4-3 scores. Buffalo, which won in a shootout at Florida on Feb. 28, has earned at least one point in its last four (3-0-1) at the BB&T Center as part of a 9-2-1 stretch there.

Florida returns from a 2-3-0 trip looking to avoid its second five-game home losing streak of the season.

The Panthers outscored Carolina and the New York Rangers 7-2 to win the first two on the trip, but were outscored 8-3 in losses at New Jersey, the New York Islanders and Toronto.

Florida had 42 shots Tuesday, but allowed two third-period goals to fall for the ninth time in 11 games, 3-2 to the Maple Leafs.

"I thought we deserved a better outcome than this," said Florida goaltender Jacob Markstrom, who has stopped 62 of 66 shots in the last two losses. "I thought we played a good game and we had a lot of shots on net. We've just got to continue to do that and good things will happen. It's not fun to lose and let three goals in. I felt good but you don't want to lose."

Florida failed on its only power-play chance Tuesday and is 3 for 27 in 13 games. However, Buffalo's last 11 opponents have gone 12 of 38 with the man advantage.

Panthers rookie Jonathan Huberdeau is tied for the team lead with 12 goals - which also leads all rookies - but has none in nine games. He has only one assist against the Sabres.

Sabres give Stafford another shot *Team needs winger to generate offense*

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

March 28, 2013

SUNRISE, Fla. — The offense has gone cold and Thomas Vanek is injured again. Whatever reason you want to pick, Drew Stafford is going to get another chance in the Buffalo Sabres' lineup.

A healthy scratch the last two games whose name is on every NHL trade deadline rumor list, Stafford will play in the game tonight against the Florida Panthers. He has just four goals and a minus-12 rating in 31 games but interim coach Ron Rolston is taking a stab in the dark that Stafford can help revive an offense that has mustered just three goals and 32 shots on goal over the last two outings.

"We just want him to go out there and make things happen for our team and lead the way for us," Rolston said of Stafford, one of his alternate captains, Wednesday after practice in the BB&T Center. "He's in that position because he earned it and that's what he's got to do.

"Lately, it's been a reminder about the things he's got to get back to more than anything. All of our guys just can't take for granted they're going to be in the lineup. We need them to play a certain way."

It's pretty much assumed just about no one played that way Tuesday in Tampa as the Sabres mustered just seven shots in the first 40 minutes. They finished with a season-low 14 in their 2-1 loss to the Lightning.

"You shouldn't wait until the third period to turn it up a notch," center Cody Hodgson said. "We needed to be in that mode the whole game. They had a pretty good collapse going down low and they take away all your routes so you've got to make sure you use your points to get some offense going. That was part of our strategy but getting only 14 shots isn't nearly enough."

Buffalo forwards managed just 10 shots on goal in the game and Vanek left with none in 13½ minutes after suffering what Rolston termed a muscle strain in his upper body. Vanek did not skate Wednesday and was gimpy as he was seen walking around the locker room area; Rolston has not yet ruled him out for tonight.

Stafford went the first 14 games this season without a goal and hasn't scored in seven of his last eight outings. Still, the former No. 1 draft pick remains a desirable commodity and Western Conference clubs like Los Angeles, Detroit and Edmonton are all rumored to be interested in acquiring him prior to next Wednesday's NHL trade deadline.

"That's not something I'm thinking about," Stafford said. "I need to ignore the noise, focus on getting better and improving myself. Being out of the lineup, my No. 1 priority

is focusing on coming back, playing strong and playing hard and helping this team win games. That's all about where my head is at."

Stafford was in Vanek's place on a line Wednesday with Ville Leino and Tyler Ennis and it's a good bet that's where he would play tonight. Prior to his scratch, he had been exiled to the fourth line.

"It's obvious when you're watching the game it's a lot easier compared to being in on ice level," he said. "There's not really anything new there that I was able to pick up. You see mistakes that we're making. We just have to be better putting pucks on the net, winning battles and dealing with teams' back pressure when we're rushing."

The only forward with four shots over the last two games is fourth-line center Jochen Hecht. Hodgson played 18:53 Tuesday without a shot – or even a single attempt.

"We know we can't score without shooting the puck and we have to figure out more ways to get quality opportunities," Hodgson said. "We looked at it [on video] and addressed some things."

At one point during practice Wednesday, Rolston raised his voice for one of the rare times during his tenure, reminded the players about their weak performance Tuesday and implored them to shoot the puck more.

"It's real basic," he said afterward. "Same on the power play. We have a tendency to be too cute, try to make one extra pass. You don't score many goals that way. We just have to get pucks to the net."

While the point is clearly made during practice, Rolston seemed frustrated when asked why he can't get through to his team on the issue during the game.

"It's a good question," he said. "What's the saying there as far as communication? Go around the world in probably, what? Less than a second? And sometimes it takes months to get through the skull. It's part of the process. We have to have a shooter's mentality more than a passer's."

Sabres, Red Wings and realignment in my mailbag

By Brian Cazeneuve

SI.com

March 27, 2013

With the NHL deadline a week away, readers are wondering about the postseason fortunes of their favorite teams. For updates on trade bait, check out Allan Muir's rumor tracker in his Home Ice blog. Also, Sarah Kwak writes in this week's issue of Sports Illustrated that Ryan Miller of the Sabres is having a tough season, but he's still a good goalie on a bad team that may be better off trading him. And speaking of Ryan Miller...

Last season, the Sabres went through an injury bug. It roughly started when Ryan Miller was hit by Milan Lucic in November and it lasted in late January. During this time, two of their three big D-men were out (Tyler Myers, Christian Ehrhoff, Robyn Regehr). Outside of this time, for the other 55-60 games, they played at a pace equivalent to the conference leaders. They were able to make it up and have control of their playoff chances until the final weekend. What about this year?

-- DJP

There was so much promise for the Sabres when Terry Pegula came in. Here's an owner who pledged to spend money on a winner and he was in it for the right reasons. This wasn't just a fad or passing investment opportunity. He was a huge fan, a season ticket holder who had a personal interest in seeing the Sabres do well. The problem is that you still need to make good choices with your club. Scoring whiz Thomas Vanek seems to miss playing with Derek Roy. Christian Ehrhoff was a key player during the Canucks' run to the Stanley Cup Final two years ago, but he wasn't worth a stifling ten-year, \$40 million contract. Ryan Miller hasn't been anything close to the world-beating goaltender who nearly led the U.S. to the Olympic gold medal in Vancouver, but Buffalo's mistake-prone defense is partly to blame for that. When Miller criticized his team's work ethic earlier this year, the writing was on the wall for coach Lindy Ruff. Rumbblings of discontent had been building for some time and the Ruff era -- by pro sports standards, more like several eras, at 15 years -- had run its course. The Sabres have played better hockey under Ron Rolston during a more recent stretch, but this is a club that overestimated its capacity to win now when it should have been planning for the future, which may be the best approach for the next couple of seasons. Trading Miller may be a means to that end.

Buffalo GM Regier could shuffle deck before deadline

By Dan Rosen

NHL.com

March 28, 2013

Odds are the Buffalo Sabres' curve in the 2012-13 NHL season still goes from reeling to at least some dealing by April 3, but amid the early-season chaos and trade-deadline rumors, general manager Darcy Regier's up-and-down team has found a way back into the discussion for a berth in the Stanley Cup Playoffs.

"We have to climb, and it's going to take a lot of work," Sabres captain Jason Pominville told NHL.com Monday. "But if there is a group that can do it, we'd be it."

Confidence is good and it usually helps, but the Sabres hurt their chances Tuesday with a regulation loss at the Tampa Bay Lightning. Buffalo was 12th in the Eastern Conference, five points out of eighth with 16 games to play, so thinking about the playoffs may seem farfetched with one week to go before the April 3 trade deadline.

However, so much could change in the next week, when the Sabres have eight points up for grabs in games against the Florida Panthers, Washington Capitals, Boston Bruins and Pittsburgh Penguins before Regier would be forced to make any deal.

If the loss to the Lightning turns out to be a minor blip (Buffalo is 4-2-1 in its past seven games), Regier may have re-evaluate his team before pulling the trigger.

"Darcy is going to have to make decisions, think about what he has to do, and it's a tough task because we're making a push," Pominville said before the loss to Tampa Bay. "But those are decisions he is going to have to make. The only thing we can control is trying to work as hard as we can to keep on the right track."

Pominville, Ryan Miller, Thomas Vanek, Steve Ott, Drew Stafford, Jordan Leopold, Robyn Regehr and Tyler Myers have been included in various trade rumors over the past couple of weeks.

Pominville, Miller, Vanek and Ott each has one more year remaining on his contract. Regehr and Leopold are unrestricted free agents after this season. Stafford has two more years on his deal, and Myers, the most surprising name on the rumor list, is signed for six more seasons.

Pominville said Regier has not asked him to waive his no-movement clause.

"If Darcy has to come up and ask me for something then I'll deal with it, but for now it's just about doing what is best for our team," Pominville said. "I want to be here. I want to help the team. I'm sure the other guys feel the same way. We've had a lot of good years in Buffalo and we want to win here, so hopefully we can get that done."

The question is, how many more games will Regier give them to prove they can do it this season? He said last week that being honest and realistic about his club is the most important part of his job now because it will help guide him through April 3.

"It's still formulating," Regier told NHL.com.

The loss to the Lightning aside, Regier's team has been trying to convince him that a playoff berth is still an honest and realistic goal. It's a tough sell considering just a couple of weeks ago it seemed the Sabres were heading for a guaranteed roster explosion, but a good run could convince Regier it's not impossible after all.

"If this was an 82-game schedule, after 30 games nobody would be talking about all these things, but now that it's a 48-game schedule there is less time and everybody brings it up," Pominville said. "Everyone knows that time is coming, but we have a job to do and our job is to win games. We've been focusing on that."

Rolston not worried about potential changes

Sabres interim coach Ron Rolston could be the guy in Buffalo with the most riding on the last four-plus weeks of the season, considering he's trying to become the full-time coach and winning games is the surest way to job security.

It would be understandable if Rolston was concerned about Regier potentially blowing up his roster over the next week, or at least taking a key player or two away to build for the future but harm Buffalo's playoff chances now. Rolston said that's not at all how he's feeling or thinking.

"I have really tried to keep things pretty focused as one step at a time for what I'm doing," Rolston told NHL.com. "We're just trying to make the team better on a daily basis and we just worry about our next opponent and keep moving forward from there. I was given a great opportunity from the organization to coach the team for the rest of the year and I have to make sure that I'm doing that job."

Panthers return home, play host to Sabres

By Tal Pinchevsky

NHL.com

March 28, 2013

SABRES (13-16-4) at PANTHERS (9-19-6)

TV: MSG-B, FS-F

Last 10: Buffalo 4-4-2; Florida 2-7-1

Season series: This is the third and final meeting between these clubs, which split their previous two matchups, including a 4-3 shootout win for the Sabres on Feb. 28.

Big story: Injuries have played a large role in a difficult Panthers season that looks as if it will end with the team missing the postseason just one year after winning the Southeast Division. Things didn't look much better for the Sabres when they fired coach Lindy Ruff on Feb. 20. But with a 7-6-3 record under interim coach Ron Rolston, Buffalo is back in the playoff hunt.

Team Scope:

Sabres: Since losing their first two games under Rolston, the Sabres appeared to be finding their form, running off three straight wins, including two at the Bell Centre against division rival Montreal. They hoped to carry that momentum into Tampa on Tuesday night when they faced off against the Lightning, with Jon Cooper coaching his first game following the weekend dismissal of Guy Boucher.

In a slow-paced, penalty-filled opening period, the two teams combined for eight shots, with Steven Stamkos getting the only goal, his League-leading 23rd. Tampa Bay dominated the middle period, outshooting the Sabres 16-5 and earning a power-play marker from Martin St. Louis to double the lead. Jordan Leopold halved the Lightning lead with 3:08 remaining in regulation, but Buffalo mustered just 14 total shots in falling 2-1.

Panthers: March hasn't been particularly kind to Florida. The Panthers have seen a number of their top players placed on injured reserve, including goaltender Jose Theodore and forwards Kris Versteeg and Stephen Weiss. It's contributed to their 3-10-1 record in March entering Thursday's matchup at BB&T Center, their first home game following a season-long five-game road swing that wrapped up Tuesday in Toronto.

Against the Leafs, the Panthers came out firing, outshooting Toronto 16-7 in the opening period and opening the scoring when Tomas Fleischmann's soft shot deflected off Toronto defenseman Mark Fraser's leg and beat James Reimer. Dion Phaneuf tied the game in the middle period before Joffrey Lupul redirected a perfect Tyler Bozak pass past Jacob Markstrom just 22 seconds into the third period. Shawn Matthias replied just 23 seconds later and appeared to give Florida new life, but Lupul earned his second of

the night just 2:27 later and Reimer finished the game with 40 saves to backstop the 3-2 Maple Leafs win.

"We looked like different teams in different sections of the game," coach Kevin Dineen said. "We had a fairly strong finish, but not enough to get the job done."

Who's hot: Sabres defenseman Christian Ehrhoff has three points in his past three games while centers Tyler Ennis and Cody Hodgson both have six points in their past five games. ... For the Panthers, Markstrom has allowed one goal or less in three of his past four starts and boasts a .959 save percentage in those games. Fleischmann has four points in his past six games.

Injury report: Thomas Vanek left Tuesday's game with an upper-body injury and his status is uncertain for Thursday. The Sabres' blue line could be thin, with Andrej Sekera (upper body) questionable) and Alex Sulzer (knee) on IR. ... The Panthers' infirmary has been a busy place much of the season, with Mike Weaver (lower body), Theodore (groin), Michael Caruso (wrist), Weiss (wrist), Versteeg (knee), George Parros (upper body), Jack Skille (upper body) and Ed Jovanovski (lower body) all on IR, while Sean Bergenheim (hip) is still out with an injury sustained during the lockout.

Former Sabres prospect Brennan feeling comfortable with Panthers

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 28, 2013

BUFFALO – Ron Rolston’s Feb. 20 promotion to the Sabres as interim coach meant more comfort for T.J. Brennan, who was playing sparingly under Lindy Ruff. The 23-year-old had just spent almost two seasons thriving under Rolston in Rochester, developing into one of the AHL’s slickest defenseman.

“(Rolston) knew my style and knew my type of play,” Brennan said by phone Wednesday. “I think that was a good change for me. But, I guess, at the end of the day there were other plans.”

The day was March 15, when the Sabres traded Brennan, their seventh or eighth defenseman most of the season, to the Florida Panthers for a fifth-round draft pick.

“It’s obviously a bit of a surprise,” Brennan said about getting dealt. “Leaving the Buffalo organization after seven years now, (it felt) a little, I don’t know, hard to swallow at first. You don’t really know any better. You don’t know anyone else. ... It’s definitely a little bittersweet.”

Luckily for Brennan, he knows at least one person in Florida, the passionate Kevin Dineen, an influential presence in his rise to the NHL. Dineen coached Brennan two seasons with the Portland Pirates before taking over the Panthers, who host the Sabres tonight.

Dineen taught Brennan how to act professionally and find the confidence to play at any level.

“That’s taken me through the minors and getting me started here in the NHL,” Brennan said. “So I owe lots of thanks. Hopefully, things can click again here with him.”

So far, Brennan has played five times with the Panthers. They scratched him for the first time Tuesday, although he’s still receiving more action than with the Sabres, who dressed him only 10 times in 27 games.

Brennan acclimated to the Panthers quickly, scoring his third NHL goal while playing a career-high 23:42 in his March 16 debut.

“Everything’s been pretty good so far,” Brennan said. “All the guys, they’ve made me feel really comfortable here. From what I’ve seen so far it’s a really good, high-class organization. Obviously, being with Kevin Dineen before made things a little easier. So it definitely helps the transition being thrown into the fire.”

Still, leaving the Sabres, who selected Brennan 31st overall in 2007, wasn’t easy.

“For myself, I always try to look at the positive of things,” Brennan said. “There’s a lot more really good guys I can meet here in Florida.”

Brennan kept improving during his four AHL seasons as a Sabres prospect. He compiled 15 goals and 39 points under Dineen in 2010-11. He had 16 goals and 30 points with Rolston’s Americans last season, when he played his first 11 NHL games.

The New Jersey native reached another level this season in Rochester, scoring 13 goals and 35 points in 36 games before getting summoned for training camp in January.

If Brennan didn’t have to clear waivers, the Sabres likely would’ve returned him to the AHL. Rather than risk losing him, they kept him as an extra defenseman.

As Brennan kept sitting – he played only four of the 10 games after Rolston took over – he wasn’t sure what would happen.

“It’s kind of out of my control,” he said. “When (general manager) Darcy (Regier) gave me the call I was traded, he was very professional about everything. He wished me all the best. I have nothing but respect for Darcy.”

Brennan also respects the process of becoming an NHL player. He knows he must earn his time.

“I’m confident in myself that this ... learning process right now in the NHL is going to come through,” Brennan said. “Obviously, I’m not where I want to be right now in terms of playing. But it’s definitely great for me here in Florida, a team that wants me and seems like wants me to be a part of their success moving forward.”

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Slick winger Thomas Vanek, the Sabres’ leading scorer, could play tonight after a muscle strain forced him out of Tuesday’s 2-1 loss in Tampa Bay, Rolston told reporters in Florida.

Vanek missed practice Wednesday.

Meanwhile, struggling winger Drew Stafford, a healthy scratch the last two games, will definitely play, Rolston said.

What does Rolston expect from the assistant captain, who has only four goals?

“Hopefully,” Rolston said, “leadership, competing and playing hard.”

Sabres back to regrouping

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 28, 2013

Sunrise, FL (WGR 550) -- Almost as shocking as the players showing a low level of compete in Tampa was nobody including Ron Rolston had any answers. Rolston said, "I was just frustrated, because we had been playing fairly good hockey and we wanted to continue to build on that and we hit another speed bump, so you're frustrated with it, but we're back this morning, short meeting, short message and we have to be better tomorrow night."

In practice on Wednesday, Rolston insisted shots be taken and there be a level of compete. The head coach said, "It's real basic, same on the power play. We have a tendency to be too cute and try to make one extra pass and you don't score many goals that way so we've just got to get pucks to the net. We have to have that shooters mentality instead of a passers."

Anytime a player move was considered by the Sabres, Darcy Regier would always talk to his coach Lindy Ruff about it. The trade deadline is only a week away and Ron Rolston in an interim coach. Does he also get consulted with that in mind, "We talk about it, everybody is in on it organizationally. They get as much information as possible from every side and then make decisions from there."

Jordan Leopold scored very late for the Sabres, but Mathieu Garon had a very easy night in goal. Cody Hodgson said, "We can't wait until the end of the third period to generate offense. We didn't get enough pucks at the goalie to get those bang in rebounds."

Pat Kaleta says every person in that room has to bring more if this team is to avoid what happened last night, "We know yesterday wasn't good enough, we're battling for our lives and we need to get back to work. In the room we need to figure out what we need to do and what we're willing to do to take that next step." Kaleta added, "It all starts with people doing their own jobs, hard work and the most simple things in the world can make the difference. It comes down to effort, it comes down to sacrifice, it comes down to all those little things and if each guy does their own job, the team as a whole will be better."

Sabres may not have Vanek. Stafford is back

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 28, 2013

Sunrise, FL (WGR 550) -- The Sabres may play the Panthers without Thomas Vanek on Thursday. Ron Rolston said, "He didn't skate today so he's got an upper body, just a muscle strain so we'll see tomorrow, we'll see how he's doing at the skate and go from there." As far as if it's still possible Vanek will play Rolston said, "Potentially, but he's still pretty sore today."

Drew Stafford was a healthy scratch for two games, but he'll be back in the lineup Thursday at Florida.

It would only make sense to put him back in after the offensive no-show the team had in Tampa. On Wednesday Stafford skated with Tyler Ennis and Ville Leino. As far as what Rolston expects he said, "Leadership, competing and playing hard. For Drew we just want him to go out there and make things happen for the team and lead the way for us. He's in that position because he earned it and that's what he's got to do and it's just lately it's been a reminder of the things he's got to get back to more than anything and that's for all of our guys, they can't take for granted that they're just going to be in the lineup. We need them to play a certain way and for Drew a large part of that is just leading the way. I expect he'll come back and play really well for us."

Tropp's road to recovery continues but isn't over yet; Sabres want to manage arena with SMG

By Kevin Oklobzija

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle

March 27, 2013

Being cleared for contact and being given the green light to get back into an American Hockey League game are two very different things, as Rochester Americans right winger Corey Tropp has learned.

Tropp underwent surgery to repair the anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee on Nov. 14. He has been skating for at least six weeks and recently was given the go-ahead to take part in all practice drills.

That means Tropp is no longer required to wear the red "no contact" sweater in practice.

However, he's not ready to play a game. And, at this point, it's difficult to say whether he will return at any point this season.

"He's skating really well, but, again, he hasn't had guys leaning on him," Amerks coach Chadd Cassidy said.

The third-year right winger must still pass a series of strength tests — to determine the progress within his repaired knee, and also comparing one leg to the other.

"There are still some hoops to go through to see if he'll be ready to play," Cassidy said.

That he's even able to take part in full contact is rather amazing. Tropp suffered his injury on opening night, Oct. 12, when Syracuse Crunch defenseman Radko Gudas slammed into him with a hip check along the left-wing boards in the third period. He had already scored two goals in the game.

Before he could undergo surgery, he needed to strengthen the medial collateral ligament (also damaged by the check). That's why he didn't have his ACL repaired until mid-November.

"I think we all just assumed there was no chance he could come back," Cassidy said.

Tropp, however, said he is actually right on schedule in terms of what his medical team mapped out.

"The progress has been going really well but there's still a lot of steps to be taken," he said. "There's a big thanks to all the people in this organization that helped me get to this point."

The most important factor: Tropp needs to know there won't be any risk — even the slimmest of chances — that he could re-injure the ligaments by playing this spring. Yes,

the Amerks could use him in the Calder Cup playoffs. But if there's any chance that his ACL could be hurt again, it would be foolish for him to attempt a comeback. He can't afford to undergo another surgery and lengthy rehab and miss half of next season, not when he'll very likely be in the NHL.

He isn't worried about his future, however.

"There's no doubt in my mind that I'll be back to where I was and even better than I was before the surgery," he said.

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Thursday is deadline for interested parties to submit to the City of Rochester their Request for Qualifications to operate and manage Blue Cross Arena at the War Memorial.

The city already has received a RFQ from the Buffalo Sabres. They would like to be the master tenant, with the current building manager, SMG, still lending a hand in operations.

"We want to jointly manage the building with SMG," said Sabres president Ted Black. "They know this building inside and out; they are one of the worldwide leaders in managing buildings."

In Buffalo, the Sabres manage the First Niagara Center. They pay for expenses; they keep revenues. The same would very likely be true in Rochester.

"It gives us greater control of the building," Black said. The Amerks lease expires at the end of July so there would be a smooth transition into a new lease.

Once the other, if any, RFQs are received by tomorrow, the city will choose who they want to manage the arena. This is not a bid process where the city must by law take the lowest number.

The Drive for Ninth

By Andrew Kulyk and Peter Farrell

Artvoice

March 28, 2013

For third year in a row, a desperate playoff push

This is becoming the tiresome script that is the Buffalo Sabres. The season begins with high expectations and visions of a deep run into the Stanley Cup Playoffs. Then something happens like an injury or controversy in the locker room or some awful incident on the ice. Things start to unravel.

The team embarks on a lengthy losing streak. Finger-pointing begins. Closed-door team meetings. Fans calling for the coach's and general manager's heads.

Then something happens. A spark. One win becomes two, then a streak. Hope stirs anew. The team and the league run up toward the trade deadline and everyone asks: Will the Buffalo Sabres be buyers or sellers?

This was the road map back in 2011, when the Golisano era ended and the Pegula era began. This was the road map last season, when a stifling losing streak in January led to a stirring points run late that took the team just short of a playoff berth when it was all over. And that is where we are at this juncture in the season. Two weeks ago the team was flirting with being dead last in the league, and with the short schedule and teams only playing within their own conferences, they still aren't that far away from the bottom of the standings.

Playoffs or no playoffs? Season ticket holders received their invoices in the mail this week, and have until April 22, four days before the end of the regular season, to commit their dollars for postseason tickets. Here are the arguments for and against:
The Sabres will make the playoffs:

- The team is 9-5-4 since Ron Rolston took over as interim head coach, and with baby steps, the team's play continues to improve.
- Of the last 14 games, 10 will be played at home.
- Jhonas Enroth has finally shown that he can be a consistent backup goaltender.
- Steve Ott is quickly emerging as a team leader, and his name is being bandied about as the next team captain.
- Fans are starting to get into the groove. The Sabres/Leafs game last week was one of the most electric atmospheres in the arena in a long, long time.
- The Sabres have managed to figure out their power play. Maybe.

- Anthem singer Baylee Morrison is quickly emerging as a team good luck charm.
- The young players are responding to Rolston: Marcus Foligno, Tyler Myers, Tyler Ennis, Cody Hodgson, and Mike Weber have all seen statistical improvement since the new coach took over.
- Stop the presses: an entire week without second period meltdowns.
The Sabres won't make the playoffs:
- With all teams playing within the conference, that means most teams are picking up points night after night. Every game not settled in regulation means two teams picking up points on the Sabres.
- For the third year in a row, 2-0 Sabres leads are precarious.
- Of the Sabres' four remaining road games, two will be played in Pittsburgh. The Penguins were Sabres-killers even when Sidney Crosby was concussed. With him back and the team's recent trade moves, who believes that Buffalo will return home from either trip to the Consol Energy Center with points?
- The Sabres veterans have actually encountered a decrease in output since the Rolston era began.
- The team's position in the middle of the standings will not make them clear buyers or sellers on trade deadline day, so expect the general manager's usual paralysis while others make bold moves.
- Giving up on high draft choice prospect T. J. Brennan left most scratching their heads.

The NHL trade deadline date is next Wednesday, April 3. Two huge games at home this weekend, hosting Washington and Boston, should set the table for the Sabres' moves going into the critical next week.

Keep those playoff ticket invoices handy and on your desks at home. But don't mail them in to the ticket office just yet.

Taro Sez...

- For anyone who is paying attention, is there anything more depressing than the sad and sorry performance of the 2013 Buffalo Bandits? The team won its fourth National Lacrosse League championship in 2008. In 2009, oh so close. In 2010, mediocrity. In 2011 and 2012, marginal. The current free-fall has roughed the team perilously close to rock bottom, as the Bandits are not only losing at home but getting run out of their own building. Coach Darris Kilgour's trade a year ago for aging goaltender Anthony Cosmo has been a disaster, and Buffalo can only marvel at how other teams are getting younger and faster and brighter while the Bandits' brain trust clings to the game's old guard.

The Bandits did bring in a new general manager last off-season, hiring former goalie Steve “Chugger” Dietrich. Will Dietrich make the boldest move of all and make a much needed change behind the Bandits’ bench? Parting ways with a legend, especially one whose name and number hangs from the rafters, could be the most difficult task of all.

VANEK QUESTIONABLE FOR THURSDAY, WHILE STAFFORD RETURNS

By Kevin Snow

Sabres.com

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FT. LAUDERDALE, FLA. – For the second time in a week, Thomas Vanek finds himself nursing an upper body injury that could keep him out of action. Vanek didn't take part in today's practice at the BB&T Center, and interim head coach Ron Rolston said he's "potentially" available for Thursday's game against the Florida Panthers.

"He didn't skate today. He's got an upper body (injury), just a muscle strain," explained Rolston. "We'll see tomorrow, see how he's doing at the (morning) skate and go from there. He's still pretty sore today, so we'll see how he feels if he can get out there tomorrow morning. If he can't, he'll be out."

Vanek had 13:29 of ice time during Tuesday's 2-1 loss in Tampa, and left the game after playing just one shift at the beginning of the third period. This injury comes just a week after Vanek had to miss the game against Toronto on March 21, after absorbing a slap shot in the hip from teammate Christian Ehrhoff in Montreal two nights earlier. It's not known if this injury is related to that.

Regardless of Vanek's playing status on Thursday, Rolston did confirm that winger Drew Stafford will return to the lineup after spending the last two games in the press box as a healthy scratch. Rolston hopes the two-game hiatus can serve as a wake-up call for Buffalo's assistant captain and what he can bring to this team.

"With Drew, we just want him to go out there and make things happen for our team; lead the way for us. He's in that position because he earned it, and that's what he's gotta do. Just lately it's been a reminder of the things he's gotta get back to more than anything," explained Rolston. "And that's for all of our guys. They just can't take for granted they're going to be in the lineup. We need them to play a certain way. For Drew, a large part of that is just leading the way; being a leader out there for us. I expect he'll come back and play really well for us."

The NHL's off-ice officials crew in Tampa experienced some system issues on Tuesday, and that created havoc with the in-game scoring. Shots on goal were an issue right away, at one point reading "0-0" in the first period, despite the fact the Lightning held a 1-0 lead. Several penalties and plus/minus stats were also affected, until the crew was finally able to update the system hours after the game. The official stats now list Tampa as outshooting Buffalo 25-14 on the night, including a 16-5 run in the second period.

