



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Buffalo at Toronto

Associated Press

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The Buffalo Sabres are undefeated. Under interim coach Ted Nolan, that is.

The Sabres will try to continue a fresh start on a thus-far disappointing season Saturday night in Toronto as they go for a home-and-home sweep against the Maple Leafs.

After Friday's 3-1 home win over the Leafs, Buffalo (5-15-1) has won back-to-back games for the first time this season.

"It was one of those games where you didn't ever know that this type of day would ever happen again," said Nolan, who coached in Buffalo from 1995-97. "It was very emotional, so I'll have a good cry after everybody leaves."

Friday call-up Trevor Smith gave the Maple Leafs a 1-0 second-period lead, but Steve Ott and Marcus Foligno scored to pull the Sabres ahead entering the third.

Sabres goaltender Ryan Miller turned aside 13 shots in the final period, while defenseman Christian Ehrhoff added an empty-netter to seal the win under the newly-appointed regime of Nolan and president of hockey operations Pat LaFontaine.

"It's a new start," Ehrhoff said. "A lot of guys have been down, and confidence hasn't been high. When there's a big change like that, it's a fresh start for everybody."

New beginnings aside, they're still last in the league with a 1.71 scoring average and are one of seven teams allowing over 3.00 goals per game (3.05).

Toronto has been the team with a list of more recent struggles. The Maple Leafs (11-7-1) are 10-0-0 when they score at least three goals and 1-7-1 when they don't.

With four regulation goals in their last five games, what they need to improve on is quite obvious if they want to salvage a split in the home-and-home.

"We're just not getting the results," coach Randy Carlyle told the team's official website. "We've had chances, we had glorious opportunities. It's just that right now we're squeezing the sticks or we're getting hit in the shaft or players making a big stop."

Toronto has gone winless in three straight for the first time this season. The Leafs are 1-3-1 in their last five and haven't won in regulation since Oct. 30. That 4-2 win at Calgary was the last time they scored more than a goal.

"It's a long season, there's ebbs and flows a bit," forward James van Riemsdyk said. "We're going to keep with the same approach: just getting a lot of pucks to the net. We're getting some good chances, we've just got to start burying them."

Prior to their 33-27 shots-on-goal advantage against Buffalo, they hadn't outshot an opponent since their third game of the season.

Jonathan Bernier stopped 24 of 26 shots as Toronto continues to rely on goaltending. He fell to 0-3-0 in his career against the Sabres.

In need of offense, the Maple Leafs will again be without forward Nazem Kadri, who was suspended for three games Thursday for a hit to Minnesota goalie Niklas Backstrom's head in Wednesday's 2-1 shootout loss. Kadri is second on team with 14 points.

The Sabres have won two straight against the Maple Leafs.

Sabres beat Leafs 3-1 in Nolan's return as coach

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

November 15, 2013

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Sabres coach Ted Nolan had difficulty putting his emotions into words after going 16 years between wins behind the Buffalo bench.

"It was one of those games where you didn't ever know that this type of day would ever happen again," Nolan said on Friday night following a 3-1 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs in his return to Buffalo. "It was very emotional, so I'll have a good cry after everybody leaves."

Sabres captain Steve Ott had no trouble explaining the difference he saw in a team that played its most complete game of the season two days after coach Ron Rolston and general manager Darcy Regier were fired.

Ott didn't disagree when asked whether the win and Buffalo's performance reflected an indictment of the previous regime.

"Guys have been playing heavy for a long time. I think this was a full rejuvenation of guys' careers," Ott told The Associated Press. "It's game on. It's time to start fresh. It's like you're a rookie again."

Ott led the way with a goal and assist in helping Buffalo (5-15-1) win its second consecutive game for the first time since closing last season with two victories. The Sabres also won their second straight at home after opening the season 0-8-1.

Marcus Foligno scored the go-ahead goal, Ryan Miller stopped 32 shots, and defenseman Christian Ehrhoff made two key plays to secure the win in the final minute.

With Miller looking the other way, Ehrhoff got down to block James van Riemsdyk's shot directed at an open left side of the net. Seconds later, Ehrhoff got to a loose puck and fired it the length of the ice into the empty net.

"It's a new start," Ehrhoff said. "A lot of guys have been down, and confidence hasn't been high. When there's a big change like that, it's a fresh start for everybody."

What a difference two days made for a team that got off to its worst start ever.

Nolan was back after he previously spent two seasons coaching the Sabres before leaving over a contract dispute in 1997, after he was named NHL coach of the year. This shake-up also featured the return of former Sabres captain Pat

LaFontaine, who made his debut in a newly created role as president of hockey operations.

Trevor Smith scored for the Maple Leafs (11-7-1) who, by comparison, continued a troubling trend. They dropped to 0-2-1 in their past three — their longest losing streak since going 0-3-2 from March 7-16. Toronto has gone 0-3-1 in its past four road games.

The Maple Leafs offense sputtered again. They have scored just four goals in regulation in five games.

Van Riemsdyk was left shaking his head after being robbed by Ehrhoff.

"That was a heck of a play by him," van Riemsdyk said. "We're not getting those bounces right now, but we've got to keep pushing forward."

It doesn't help that the Leafs are down three centers after Nazem Kadri began serving a three-game suspension for a hit to the head of Minnesota goalie Niklas Backstrom in a 2-1 shootout loss on Wednesday. With centers Dave Bolland (ankle) and Tyler Bozak (hamstring) on the injured list, Toronto was forced to recall Smith from the minors.

Smith opened the scoring 6:25 in with a shot that deflected in off Ehrhoff's knee.

After giving up the first goal for the 19th time this season, the Sabres scored three.

Ott netted a power-play goal midway through the second by converting a rebound at the right post after goalie Jonathan Bernier got a piece of Tyler Myers' blast from the left point.

Ott then had a hand in Foligno's go-ahead goal 5:53 later. Drew Stafford, from his blue line, created a 2-on-1 break by sending a cross-ice pass that hit Ott in stride up the left wing. Driving to the net, Ott slipped the puck through the middle, and Foligno slapped it in before crashing into the net.

LaFontaine received a huge ovation when the Sabres introduced him by first shining a spotlight on his No. 16 that hangs from the rafters. Nolan had fans standing and cheering when he first stepped behind the bench.

This was a major switch for a Sabres fan base that had spent much of the season's first two months chanting "Fire Darcy!"

"It was really fun for me to look up once in a while and see how much fans enjoyed this game," Nolan said. "Hopefully, it's a sign of good things to come."

NOTES: The Leafs were outshot 33-27, the 16th straight time they have failed to have the edge. ... The Sabres led after two periods for only the third time this season. ... The teams will meet again at Toronto on Saturday.

Nolan makes a fine first impression

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

November 15, 2013

Ted Nolan won't be spending his Saturday on Broadway but he will be under the bright lights for the second straight night with Pat LaFontaine as one of his new bosses. And it's just about perfect.

The Sabres will be in Toronto tonight, playing in the revered Saturday slot on "Hockey Night in Canada." And for the last three days, they've been one of the big stories in the NHL. Pretty hard to imagine that, given the way things have gone in Pegulaville this year.

It was one thing for Terry Pegula to give LaFontaine some keys to the ship. It was another thing entirely for LaFontaine to come up with the Nolan idea.

How did he execute it? Pretty amazing anecdote he shared Friday.

LaFontaine, naturally, has a lot of connections in the New York City area and he sheepishly admitted one of them is pretty good in coming up with hard-to-find show tickets.

Nolan was heading back from his work in Latvia with that nation's national team to see his son, Jordan, in a game on Long Island. Then he was going to take his wife to "The Book of Mormon," the highly acclaimed religious satire musical from the creators of the bawdy animated comedy "South Park."

LaFontaine couldn't get ahold of Nolan until Nolan landed in Germany; he gave him some good news and some bad news.

"I said, 'Teddy, it doesn't look like you're going to be going to the show on Saturday,'" LaFontaine recalled. "He said, 'Really?' And I said, 'Yeah, I don't even think you're going to be coming to New York.'"

At that point, Nolan was baffled. Why was LaFontaine calling him in Germany about show tickets – especially ones he couldn't get?

"I said, 'Well I think you're going to be in Toronto on that Saturday night coaching the Buffalo Sabres,'" LaFontaine said. "There was just total silence."

LaFontaine said Nolan got emotional. The coach is a heart-on-his-sleeve guy. We've already seen that a couple of times this week. He joked after Friday's 3-1 win over the Leafs he would have a good celebratory cry when he left the press conference room.

It was LaFontaine's idea to give Nolan this chance.

What a brilliant thought to right a wrong.

First impressions are just that. And any team usually plays a little better when a coach and/or GM is fired. But off one night – and I know it's only one – what a difference.

The Sabres skated well. There was passion and purpose. Steve Ott was a pest again, and dived headlong late in the game to beat Dion Phaneuf to a puck and clear the zone on a penalty kill.

Christian Ehrhoff literally saved the day in the final 40 seconds, taking over for Ryan Miller and blocking what looked like a sure tying goal for James van Riemsdyk.

It all made them look like a Nolan team.

“We need more of that moving forward,” Ehrhoff said. “It can't be just a one-night thing. We need some consistency and if we do that, we'll have a chance in a lot of games. Competing is fun.”

The fans' cheers were strong for Nolan. They even seemed a little louder when a video was played to welcome back LaFontaine and he was then shown sitting in a private box with Pegula. LaFontaine waved, the crowd got louder and the owner playfully tapped his new president of hockey operations on the back of the head.

The biggest press box cynics joked that was a better hit than most of the ones we saw the first 20 games under Ron Rolston.

Sabres players have been good soldiers, refusing to publicly bash a coach who was very worthy of getting crushed. As it turns out, they really needed to say nothing.

The way they've been hooting and skating in practice the last two days, they may as well have been singing bars of “Ding Dong, Darcy Junior is Dead.”

It carried into the game. You think you were jolted by the arrival of LaFontaine and Nolan? Imagine what went through minds in that locker room.

“It's always going to be a little bit of a shock,” said veteran defenseman Henrik Tallinder. “But when you hear it was Nolan and LaFontaine, that's pretty remarkable. Those guys are heroes here. They can build this organization the right way.”

“It just seemed like this is right,” LaFontaine said. “This is what it's supposed to be right now.”

There's plenty of work ahead. I'm thinking Nikita Zadorov gets to play his final two games and is shipped back to junior. Nolan has already made a couple of references to London coach Dale Hunter, who would be a terrific mentor for the Sabres' prized prospect.

Luke Adam is on fire in Rochester and deserves another chance now that the R&R show is done. I'd call up defenseman Brayden McNabb, too. You wonder if they'll send Rasmus Ristolainen to the AHL to try to get him 20 minutes a night.

The big news is LaFontaine's work on getting a new GM. He said that starts in earnest on Monday, once he gets some permissions from other teams about their employees and makes some trips to start interviewing. His first big decision – getting a real coach in here – has energized a franchise. More please.

My favorite statty point of the team's sacrifice to start its new era? It comes from the Ehrhoff block – which was No. 16 on the night for Buffalo.

Same number the new president of hockey has hanging in the rafters. Spooky. And appropriate.

Sabres notebook: Ott translates fun into point production

By Amy Moritz

Buffalo News

November 15, 2013

There was a definite get-up-and-go in Steve Ott's game.

The forward was all over the ice, making contributions in all situations.

He had a power-play goal to tie the game and a beautiful assist for the game-winning goal in the Buffalo Sabres' 3-1 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs at First Niagara Center on Friday night.

Oh, and he made two key plays diving after loose pucks along the blue line during third period penalty kills.

Yep. Ott was having fun. Finally.

"He was one of the first guys I spoke to when I got here," interim coach Ted Nolan said. "And he was a little bit frustrated on how the season was going. He's a very competitive type of guy and he didn't like the way the group was competing. I'm quite sure he was really happy tonight."

Indeed, Ott was happy.

"That was a fun team game," Ott said. "Our compete, our work ethic right from the drop of the puck was pretty contagious on the bench throughout our lineup. It's been a pretty awesome 48 hours in the sense of renewed energy and that clean slate. You've seen a lot of weight off a lot of guys' shoulders out there."

There's a bit of weight off Ott's shoulders, who had two points on the night after having just one assist in his last six games.

But for Ott it was about a team game with players sacrificing, taking hits, driving to the net and making plays.

The energy came not just from the regime change but from the approach Nolan is taking with the team. "Fresh slate" may have been the most overused phrase in the Sabres dressing room after the game, but it was the reason why players had jump, energy and a focused effort.

"It's just wiping the slate clean," Ott said. Nolan "to a man told everybody, 'I'm not watching video on you guys. I'm not looking at your stat pack. I really don't care. I want to see what you're going to do for me and I'll figure everyone out as we go here.' And that made a lot of guys realize that Game One is basically tonight. Throw those other 20 away. Honestly it felt like a completely different room in here."

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Before the game, Nolan joked that he had rosters and line charts complete with players' photos. "I'm still learning their names, so I might say 'hey you, you're up,'" Nolan he said after the team's morning skate.

By the end of the game, he knew everyone's name and had juggled some lines.

The line shifts moved guys back into natural positions. Zemgus Girgenson, who had played wing all last year in Rochester and through 19 games this season, went back to center between Marcus Foligno and Brian Flynn.

"I played there pretty much my whole career," Girgenson said. "Last year was the first year playing wing. Yesterday and today I said I was fine playing both positions but I'm going to use the opportunity."

Ville Leino also moved back to center between Ott and Tyler Ennis. While Ennis has played all three forward positions, the wing is where he's most comfortable, although he's ready to make a contribution wherever he's slotted.

"I just said I've played every forward position this year. I'm kind of used to all of them," Ennis said. "There's been a lot of different line combinations. It's going to be up to him to make those combinations. He's still got to get used to us as individual players."

"You could see in young Tyler Ennis, it seemed like a bit 50-pound weight got lifted off his back," Nolan said. "He seems to be smiling here today. Let's see this young kid play the way he's capable of playing."

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Unless there is a Freaky Friday moment where Nikita Zadorov turns into Sidney Crosby, the 18-year old defenseman will likely play only two more games with Buffalo before returning to his junior team.

"The big picture is how are we going to develop this kid," Nolan said. "We put 18 year-olds against 26-year-olds. It's kind of unfair unless you're Sidney Crosby or something like that. We'll monitor. We'll talk about it and hopefully make the best decision for what's best for him."

Zadorov was a first-round pick, 16th overall, by the Sabres in last June's draft. Last year, he had 25 points in 56 games for London of the Ontario Hockey League.

He missed the first nine games this season with a finger injury and made his NHL debut against Colorado on Oct. 19.

In seven games he has one goal and is a minus-four.

The Sabres can return him to his junior team after he's played nine games without triggering the start of his three-year contract.

He was a scratch Friday along with Johan Larsson and Mikhail Grigorenko.

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Eight years ago tonight, Pat LaFontaine was inducted to the Buffalo Sabres Hall of Fame.

Also on this date in Sabres history, the team retired the numbers of Rick Martin and Rene Robert in a pregame ceremony on Nov. 15, 1995. And who scored the game-winning goal in a 2-1 win over the Dallas Stars? That's right. Pat LaFontaine.

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The Buffalo Sabres have only lost the home portion of a home-and-home series with Toronto once – a 4-2 loss on Dec. 20, 1970.

The Sabres are 10-1-2 all-time in the home portion of their previous 13 home-and-home series with the Leafs.

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The Buffalo Sabres will have three more Fan Food Drive Games to benefit the Food Bank of Western New York.

Fans who donate non-perishable food items or give cash donations to the Nov. 19, Nov. 24 or Nov. 27 games will receive a voucher for \$25 off 300 Level II tickets to select Sabres games.

Sabres turn over new Leaf in Nolan's debut

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

November 15, 2013

Ted Nolan will remember every moment from Friday, starting with the morning drive to Buffalo's arena and ending with a victory lap to Toronto. He'll treasure walking to the Sabres' bench for the first time in more than 16 years. He'll relive the goals and big saves.

He'll remember his joy and the smiles he and his team provided.

"It was really fun for me to look up once in a while and see how much fans enjoyed this game," Nolan said after a 3-1 victory over the Maple Leafs. "We're in the entertainment business, so I'm hoping they had an entertaining night. It was fun for us, for sure."

Everyone who walked into First Niagara Center knew Nolan and Pat LaFontaine were back. Something just as important returned, too.

Excitement.

Hope, fun and noise filled the Sabres' arena, a hat trick that was desperately needed in Buffalo. The joy was topped by a victory, the Sabres' second straight for their first back-to-back wins this year.

"It was one of those games where you didn't ever know this type of day would ever happen again," said Nolan, who coached Buffalo for the first time since May 11, 1997. "It was really very emotional, so I'll have a good cry after everybody leaves."

They'd be tears of joy, which is a change from a season previously filled with sadness, disappointment and discontent.

"I love the way we came out in our first game with the big changes," defenseman Tyler Myers said. "It was definitely our most fun game to play."

It was fun to watch. The Maple Leafs' border-crossing brigade took up a large portion of the crowd of 19,070, but Buffalonians and backers of the Blue and Gold also brought the energy. It was a welcome departure from the morgue-like atmosphere that had become common.

The buzz began early with a pregame video presentation highlighting the prior Buffalo accomplishments of LaFontaine and Nolan. The team and fans paid tribute to the coach during the first commercial break. LaFontaine, the freshly minted president of hockey operations, received a partial standing ovation during the second commercial.

Signs of progress on the ice were immediate:

- The only booing of the Sabres came from Leafs fans.
- The Sabres outshot Toronto, 10-5, in the first period. It was the first time all season Buffalo outshot anyone in the first.
- The score was 0-0 after one, only the fourth time in 21 games the Sabres didn't trail entering the opening intermission.
- Buffalo carried a 2-1 lead into the third, just the third time this year they led after 40 minutes.

"I'm happy to have a nice, full game where we can all be proud," said goaltender Ryan Miller, who made 32 saves.

Although the Sabres allowed the opening goal for the 19th time in 21 games, they didn't sulk.

They answered.

Buffalo scored twice in the second as captain Steve Ott connected on the power play and set up Marcus Foligno during an odd-man rush.

While Miller's 13 saves in the final period put the Sabres in position to win, Christian Ehrhoff made sure they did.

He stepped in front of a wide-open net to block a shot with 43 seconds left, then found the Leafs' empty net on a clearing shot with 28 seconds to go.

"He saved our butts, then he put it away," Miller said. "It was a great turn of events."

It was a great night, filled with feelings the Sabres hope to duplicate tonight when they face the Leafs in Toronto.

"It was just a great finish to a fun game," Ehrhoff said. "I think the fans enjoyed it. We came out good. We competed for 60 minutes, and it was very positive to see that. We need more of that moving forward."

Sabres can sweep home-and-home vs. Maple Leafs

By Sean McCullen

NHL.com

November 16, 2013

SABRES (5-15-1) at MAPLE LEAFS (11-7-1)

TV: CBC, MSG-B

Last 10: Buffalo 4-6-0; Toronto 4-5-1

Season series: The Buffalo Sabres defeated the Toronto Maple Leafs 3-1 Friday in the first game of a home-and-home. It was the first of five regular-season games between the teams. Buffalo and Toronto play three times in November and again Dec. 27.

Big story: Buffalo's win against Toronto came in its first game under Ted Nolan, who was named interim coach Wednesday when Ron Rolston was fired after 20 games. Nolan coached the Sabres from 1995-97.

"You know what? I can't even put it into words," Nolan said of his first win as an NHL coach since 2008. "It was one of those games where you didn't know where this type of day would ever happen again. It was really very emotional. I'll have a good cry after everybody leaves."

Team Scope:

Sabres: Back-to-back wins against the Los Angeles Kings and Toronto gave Buffalo consecutive victories for the first time this season.

Ryan Miller has a lot to do with the modest winning streak. Miller made 43 saves and stopped both shooters he faced in the shootout of the 3-2 win Tuesday against the Kings, then stopped 32 of 33 shots against Toronto.

Miller credited defenseman Christian Ehrhoff with the best save Friday. Ehrhoff stopped James van Riemsdyk from point-blank range with less than a minute to play in the third after Miller found himself out of the crease.

"Christian Ehrhoff had the play of the game and saved our butts, and then he put it away (with an empty-net goal)," Miller said. "It was a great turn of events there to watch him make that play on the back side, have great awareness to find it and help me out."

Maple Leafs: Toronto has struggled since a 6-1-0 start, going 5-6-1 in its past 12 games, including three straight losses in which they have three goals total.

The Maple Leafs are giving up a lot of shots, ranking 28th in the League at 35.9 per game. Toronto allowed 27 to Buffalo, which came into the game Friday averaging an NHL-worst 24.8.

Solid goaltending from Jonathan Bernier (2.05 goals-against average, .938 save percentage) and James Reimer (2.30, .942) has allowed the Maple Leafs to stay in the top half of the Atlantic Division.

"You're going to go through those kinds of situations in a year that you've got to stand on your head, and sometimes you'll play a bad game and guys will score five, six for you," Bernier said. "We've just got to find that touch again. It's a big game in our building [Saturday], and we've got to come out strong and get [those] two points."

Center Nazem Kadri is serving a three-game suspension for a hit Wednesday on Minnesota Wild goalie Niklas Backstrom. Kadri can return for the Maple Leafs' game Nov. 21 against the Nashville Predators.

Who's hot: Sabres forward Steve Ott scored a goal and assisted on Marcus Foligno's game-winner Friday. Ott has three points in his past two games after going without a point the five prior. ... Bernier has stopped 87 of 91 shots in his past three starts but is 1-1-1.

Injury report: Sabres defenseman Mike Weber (thumb) is on injured reserve. ... Maple Leafs forwards Dave Bolland (ankle) and Tyler Bozak (lower body) are on IR.

Sabres top Maple Leafs in Nolan's debut

By Joe Yerdon

NHL.com

November 16, 2013

BUFFALO -- Marcus Foligno's second-period goal proved to be the game-winner and made interim coach Ted Nolan's return a successful one as the Buffalo Sabres beat the Toronto Maple Leafs 3-1 at First Niagara Center on Friday night.

Foligno scored on a backhand shot at 15:22 of the middle period off a pass from Sabres captain Steve Ott on a 2-on-1 break. Maple Leafs defenseman Mark Fraser got turned around on the play and the two Sabres broke in against Paul Ranger. Ott passed across to Foligno, who crashed through the net and scored.

While Foligno's goal was the game-winner, Christian Ehrhoff's defensive play late in the game made it stand up.

In the final minute of the third period, Ryan Miller was spun out of position by the Maple Leafs' attack on his net. The puck bounced free to James van Riemsdyk who appeared to have an open net, but Ehrhoff scrambled in front of the goal and blocked his shot.

Moments later, Ehrhoff gathered and fired the puck down the ice for an empty-net goal with 28 seconds left to play to seal the victory for Buffalo (5-15-1).

"It was just desperation," Ehrhoff said. "I know [Miller] was just on the other side of the net and the puck came out to van Riemsdyk, and I just tried to make myself as big as I can and I got the save."

The goal was Ehrhoff's first of the season and gave the Sabres their second straight win.

"Christian Ehrhoff had the play of the game and saved our butts, and then he put it away," Miller said. "It was a great turn of events there to watch him make that play on the back side, have great awareness to find it and help me out, then get it down the ice and split the uprights."

"That was a heck of a play by [Ehrhoff]," van Riemsdyk said. "He made a good read and sacrificed his body for it. I guess we are not getting those bounces right now, but we've got to keep fighting for it."

The win was Nolan's first as a Sabres coach since May 9, 1997, and his first regular-season win behind Buffalo's bench since April 10, 1997.

"You know what? I can't even put it into words," Nolan said. "It was one of those games where you didn't know where this type of day would ever happen again. It was really very emotional. I'll have a good cry after everybody leaves."

The Sabres got off to a positive start by outshooting the Maple Leafs 10-5 in the first period. It was only the fourth time this season the Sabres had more shots than their opponent after the first 20 minutes.

Despite the good start, the Maple Leafs struck first. Trevor Smith, who was called up from the American Hockey League on Friday, made it 1-0 at 6:25 of the second period when his shot from the slot deflected off Ehrhoff and past Miller (32 saves). The goal was the second of the season for Smith, who played on a line with Mason Raymond and David Clarkson.

"Smitty comes up and scores a goal, he hits a crossbar," Maple Leafs coach Randy Carlyle said. "He fit in there, and that's what we said: We're going to have to play people to their strengths. I've got no qualms about putting him in the lineup and giving him an opportunity to play with better players."

Just 3:20 later, however, Ott capitalized on the power play with his third goal of the season to tie the game at 1-1. Ott put home a rebound of a Tyler Myers shot from the point to beat Toronto goalie Jonathan Bernier (24 saves).

"Our compete, our work ethic right from the drop of that puck I thought was pretty contagious on the bench for our lineup," Ott said. "It's been a pretty awesome 48 hours in the sense of renewed energy and that clean slate. You've seen a lot of weight off a lot of guys' shoulders out there."

The Maple Leafs (11-7-1) have lost three games in a row and have scored a total of three goals in those losses.

"We didn't have, I think, the great number of second opportunities," Carlyle said. "The puck was bouncing away from us, but yet we had our chances in the hockey game. You've got to look at the difference in the game: power play. They get a power-play goal and we don't get one."

These two teams face off against each other again Saturday night at Air Canada Centre.

"You're going to go through those kinds of situations in a year that you've got to stand on your head, and sometimes you'll play a bad game and guys will score five, six for you," Bernier said. "We've just got to find that touch again. It's a big game in our building [Saturday], and we've got to come out strong and get [those] two points."

Bitterness Is Gone as Nolan and the Sabres Reunite

By Matt Higgins

New York Times

November 15, 2013

BUFFALO — Ted Nolan was traveling to Latvia last week when one of his former players, the Hall of Famer Pat LaFontaine, reached him by phone.

Nolan did not know that LaFontaine had been hired as president of hockey operations for the Buffalo Sabres, never mind that LaFontaine needed a head coach. He assumed the call was about tickets LaFontaine had promised to get for the Broadway musical “The Book of Mormon.” And that’s what LaFontaine wanted him to think.

“I’m a little bit of a prankster, from my playing days,” LaFontaine said on Friday. “I said, ‘Teddy, it doesn’t look like you’re going to be going to the show on Saturday.’” Then he told Nolan he could coach the Sabres instead, if he wanted the job.

At first, Nolan was silent. Then he asked: Was LaFontaine kidding? Finally, Nolan began to cry.

Nolan returned to First Niagara Center on Friday night, and the inspired Sabres beat the Toronto Maple Leafs, 3-1. During a stop in play at 7 minutes 28 seconds of the first period, a video montage from Nolan’s days with the Sabres played on the scoreboard monitor to a rousing cheer. Nolan rocked nervously behind the bench and bit his lip.

“I really had to hold it in tight,” he said afterward, “because it was one of those games where you never know if this type of day would ever happen again.”

Nolan’s return as the interim coach might seem improbable. He left the organization 16 years ago during a bitter time that was filled with feuds between coaches, management and some players. Nolan’s contract expired after he won the Jack Adams Award as coach of the year following the 1996-97 season. When General Manager Darcy Regier offered a one-year extension, Nolan felt insulted by the deal. A rally by fans on his behalf outside the team’s arena failed to sway management.

“Coach of the year, and then doesn’t have a job the following year,” LaFontaine said. “I don’t think it’s ever happened in sports.”

When Nolan left Buffalo speculation circulated that he was blackballed by N.H.L. general managers. General Manager John Muckler was fired following the 1997 playoffs; he had been feuding with Nolan. In a July 1997 article in Sports Illustrated, Nolan said he might be perceived as a “G.M. killer.” Frank DeFord, in

a 2006 NPR commentary, cited possible racism based on his conversations with Nolan, an Ojibway from the Garden River First Nation Reserve, Ontario.

Nolan does not dwell on the past.

“Maturity and history is a great teacher,” he said. “Somebody asked me the last couple days, do you have something to prove? I have nothing to prove. I stopped that when I was 23 years old, coming from where I came from.”

Much has changed since 1997. None of the players remain. There have been three owners, the latest the billionaire Terry Pegula, who fired Regier and coach Ron Rolston after a 4-15-1 start that left Buffalo in last place in the N.H.L., with the fewest goals scored per game (1.65).

Nolan has inherited a tough but inexperienced team, with four teenagers taking regular shifts. Yet teams coached by Nolan have a reputation for working hard, and he is known to have a good rapport with players, a theme LaFontaine stressed on Friday.

“I had some great coaches. Al Arbour is a Hall of Famer, and I have the greatest respect for him,” LaFontaine said about the Islanders coach who won four Stanley Cup titles. “Ted Nolan would be right up there in motivating and knowing players.”

Nolan’s path meandered when he left Buffalo. He said he declined an offer to coach the Tampa Bay Lightning over concerns that his sons’ hockey development would have been stunted in Florida. Brandon played for the Carolina Hurricanes, and Jordan Nolan is a forward with the Los Angeles Kings.

Nolan went on to coach the Moncton Wildcats of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League, a leading development league of the N.H.L. for teenage players. He coached the Islanders for the 2006-07 and the 2007-08 seasons, compiling a 74-68-21 record. He left in the summer of 2008, citing “philosophical differences” in a team statement.

In 2011, Nolan was hired as coach of Latvia’s national men’s team. He will coach Latvia at the Olympic Games in Sochi, in February.

Nolan said the interim tag does not bother him.

“I got sidetracked somewhere along the line, like we all do,” he said. “I grew up in our First Nation teachings, and one thing we learned to focus on is now. So coming back this time, who knows what’s going to happen tomorrow? It’s not here yet.

“I’m not focused on how long I’m going to be here.”

Sabres win second straight, defeat Leafs

By Mark Ludwiczak
The Sports Xchange
November 15, 2013

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- After months of self-imposed suffering, the Buffalo Sabres are out to have fun again under new interim coach Ted Nolan.

The Sabres defeated the Toronto Maple Leafs 3-1 Friday night in Nolan's first game in Buffalo in almost 17 years, showing the hustle and desire that was prominent during Nolan's first stint in Buffalo.

"It did feel completely different," Buffalo captain Steve Ott said. "It was for a lot of reasons. The biggest reason is that slate's been wiped clean."

The Sabres were counting on Nolan to provide a jumpstart for a team that had stumbled out of the gates to one of its worst starts in franchise history. Buffalo fired general manager Darcy Regier -- who infamously said there would be "suffering" this year as part of a lengthy Sabres rebuild -- and coach Ron Rolston on Wednesday.

A boost is exactly what the Sabres got. Buffalo (5-15-1) responded with its most inspired effort of the season and has now won back-to-back games for the first time this year.

"Those 20 games or so have been thrown out the window," Ott said. "They came in and to a man they told every guy it's time to work for your ice time or work for your chances and tonight I thought every guy did as a man. It was a lot of fun to go out there and feel like the weight is off our shoulders. For the last little while, we've been playing with some pretty heavy backs for the last few months and it hasn't been fun at all. Tonight we brought that fun."

Ott, left winger Marcus Foligno and defenseman Christian Ehrhoff scored for Buffalo. Goaltender Ryan Miller made 32 saves.

The biggest save of the night came for Buffalo from Ehrhoff, who put his body on the line to stop Toronto left winger James van Riemsdyk from hitting an open net with 44 seconds remaining. With the Sabres clinging to a 2-1 advantage, Ehrhoff blocked van Rimesdyk's shot from inside the left circle.

Ehrhoff then iced the game for Buffalo moments later by scoring an empty-net goal with 28 seconds remaining.

"It's a new start," Ehrhoff said. "A lot of guys have been down and confidence hasn't been high and when there's a change, a big change like that, it's a fresh start for everybody."

Center Trevor Smith scored for the Maple Leafs (11-7-1), who played a sound road game but were unable to find the back of the net more than once. Goaltender Jonathan Bernier made 24 saves.

"I thought we played a very good road game," Toronto coach Randy Carlyle said. "We had our chances in the hockey game and you look at the difference of the game, the power play. They get a power-play goal and we don't get one."

Said Bernier: "I thought we deserved a better fate. We played really hard tonight. Bottom line is they scored a PP goal and we didn't."

Foligno scored the winning goal with 4:38 left in the second by finishing a blistering rush up ice. Right winger Drew Stafford's cross-ice pass found Ott streaking down the left side of the ice, and Foligno deftly finished the 2-on-1 opportunity with a backhand past Bernier.

Ott got Buffalo on the board just under halfway through the second period on the power play. The Sabres captain pounced on a rebound from a defenseman Tyler Myers blast and deposited it into the net 9:45 into the second to tie the game at 1.

It was only the third time this season Buffalo entered the third period with a lead.

Smith opened the scoring 6:25 into the second period after his slap shot deflected off Ehrhoff and into the net to give Toronto a 1-0 lead.

Nolan first coached the Sabres from 1995-97. Nolan won the Jack Adams Award as the league's best coach during his first stint in Buffalo but left the team under acrimonious circumstances. He originally left the Sabres after being offered only a one-year deal from Regier, Buffalo's long-time general manager.

The new interim coach received a rousing welcome from the Sabres faithful when he was introduced prior to the start of the game.

That moment -- along with the rest of the day -- is something Nolan won't forget any time soon.

"I can't even put it into words," Nolan said. "I remembered every part of today, though. When I first came here a number of years ago, I still remember saying how hard we're going to work, and we got waxed by Detroit, 6-1. So tonight was a lot different, and hopefully it's a sign of good things to come."

NOTES: Eight years ago to the day, Pat LaFontaine was inducted into the Sabres Hall of Fame. LaFontaine was named Buffalo's president of hockey operations on Wednesday. ... LW Johan Larsson, C Mikhail Grigorenko and D Nikita Zadorov were scratched for the Sabres. ... RW Troy Bodie, C Nazem Kadri and D Morgan Rielly were scratched for the Maple Leafs. ... Heading into Friday night's game,

the Sabres had not lost the home portion of a home-and-home series with Toronto since the first home-and-home series ever between the two teams (a 4-2 defeat on Dec. 20, 1970). ... This was the first of five meetings between the teams this season and the 189th game all time between Buffalo and Toronto. Heading into Friday night, Buffalo led the series with a 104-61-23 record

LaFontaine hardly in position to succeed with Sabres

By Chris Johnston

Sportsnet

November 15, 2013

BUFFALO, N.Y. – You're driving down Interstate-190 on the first day in the rest of the life of the Buffalo Sabres and the billboard comes into view: "Welcome Back Pat and Ted!"

Then you turn the radio dial to WGR-550 – usually the hyper-critical epicentre of Buffalo sports – and hear the host describe the Sabres decision to hire Pat LaFontaine as "a dream come true." The Thursday headline across A1 of the Buffalo News enthusiastically trumpets "Back to the Future" and as an outsider looking in on the NHL's 30th-place team you can't help but wonder:

What in the name of Dominik Hasek is going on here? Which version of history is being revised and celebrated? Who is actually running this organization?

The last question looms as an essential one for every GM candidate to get answered when LaFontaine comes calling. With the folks in Buffalo still buzzing about the Hockey Hall of Famer's appointment as president of hockey operations, executives around the league were quietly chatting about the obvious complications that could arise from the Sabres new power structure.

LaFontaine, himself, had been offered the GM job by owner Terry Pegula last week and wisely turned it down due to lack of experience. He mentioned during Wednesday's introductory press conference that it might be the kind of role he can grow into – a statement that jumped out given that you wouldn't expect someone to groom himself for a job while also overseeing it (not to mention hiring for it).

As popular as the return of LaFontaine and interim coach Ted Nolan seem to be from a public relations standpoint, it's hard to ignore that this particular gambit seems ill-advised and more than a little desperate from an organizational one. The Sabres are in the midst of a full-on rebuild and the former GM, Darcy Regier, was doing a fine job of tearing down the wallpaper. Just look at the boatload of picks and prospects he received in the trades that sent Jason Pominville, Robyn Regehr, Jordan Leopold and Thomas Vanek out of town.

Sure, the on-ice performance this season has been among the worst seen in the NHL's salary cap era, but what did people really expect? Regier was being completely forthright when he said earlier this year that there would be some "suffering" during the dismantling and yet somehow that comment offended a fanbase that has suffered through 42 seasons without a Stanley Cup.

The losses are sure to continue no matter who is in charge and that is by design.

Do you want to know about suffering? Look back at the Pittsburgh Penguins teams from 2001-05, a period where the franchise very nearly left town and was only saved by a slew of top-notch draft picks. Or what about the 2002-06 Chicago Blackhawks, who played to about half capacity at United Center and had become totally irrelevant in a good hockey market.

The price of getting good is being bad.

It has been a decade since Buffalo had a truly bad hockey team like the one they have now. Despite making only two playoff appearances in the last six seasons, the Sabres fell just short with 89, 90 and 91 points in three of those years and even finished at .500 during the 2013 lockout-shortened campaign.

Now that the rebuilding effort is in full swing, it won't be long before an 89-point season looks awfully good. And rather than having an experienced executive like Regier at the helm to navigate the choppy waters ahead, the Sabres have been turned over to a man who spent six weeks in the New York Islanders front office and a couple months working for deputy commissioner Bill Daly.

LaFontaine seems like a bright guy and he may have a bright future, but he's hardly been put in a position to succeed here. It almost certainly would have been more beneficial to first give him a chance to get comfortable in a lower-profile role like Joe Sakic, Steve Yzerman and a slew of other former players did.

The timing of the move is also hard to understand and Pegula didn't offer up much in the way of an explanation when he made it this week. There is little doubt that he was at least somewhat influenced by the fans who had taken to chanting "Fire Darcy!" while watching the Sabres lose all but one of their opening 10 games at First Niagara Center this season.

The locals seem much happier now. Nolan has returned promising a much more entertaining brand of hockey than what was played under Ron Rolston and it won't be hard to deliver immediate results with Toronto visiting for a raucous blue-collar Friday night matchup.

"It's going to be fun," Nolan said.

Yes, the glory days are here again – although it seems there's a collective bout of amnesia involved for those painting the Sabres shakeup in that light. Even though Nolan won a Jack Adams Trophy during his first stint in Buffalo and LaFontaine piled up all kinds of points during six seasons here as a player, neither man was part of a Sabres squad that got past the second round of the playoffs.

All Regier did during his tenure in Buffalo was put together four teams that made it as far as the conference final, including one that came within two wins of the Stanley Cup.

Sabres beat Leafs in Ted Nolan's debut, look like new team

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

November 16, 2013

BUFFALO – It might as well have been opening night again inside the First Niagara Center. Twenty-one games into the season, the Sabres started over Friday, performing like a new, refreshed team in their first game under interim coach Ted Nolan, an exciting 3-1 triumph against the hated Toronto Maple Leafs.

Nolan told the Sabres he was wiping the slate clean and didn't care about their awful start under Ron Rolston, who was fired Wednesday in a major shakeup.

They responded with arguably their best effort this trying campaign.

“That made a lot of guys realize that game one is basically tonight and you throw those other 20 away,” said captain Steve Ott, who had a goal and two points in only the Sabres' fifth win. “Honestly, it felt like a completely different room in there.”

The Sabres often looked like a different club, dictating the pace early and taking a lead into the third period for only the third time this season.

“Tonight we played like the Buffalo Sabres,” said winger Marcus Foligno, who scored the go-ahead goal 15:22 into the second period.

Sabres defenseman Christian Ehrhoff added: “Some guys have been down and missing some confidence. For them, it's a new start. We had everybody going tonight.”

This one wasn't decided until late.

Ehrhoff bailed out goalie Ryan Miller with 43 seconds left in the third period, blocking James van Riemsdyk's shot from hitting the open net.

“Nice finally to make a save for Millsie,” Ehrhoff said. “He's got so many saves for us. That's just a lot of desperation at the end.”

Moments later, Ehrhoff scored a long empty-net goal, securing the win before a noisy sellout crowd.

“Christian Ehrhoff had the play of the game and saved our butts and then he put it away,” Sabres goalie Ryan Miller said.

Ehrhoff added: “It was just a great finish to a fun game tonight. I think the fans enjoyed it. We came out good today. We competed for 60 minutes.”

Nolan noticed that excitement from the bipartisan crowd.

“It was really fun for me to look up once in a while and see how much fans enjoyed this game,” he said.

Many of those fans gave Nolan a warm ovation as he stepped onto the Sabres’ bench for the first time since May 11, 1997. The special moment left the 55-year-old emotional.

“I really had to hold them in tight,” Nolan said. “It was one of those games where you didn’t know where this type of day would ever happen again. It was really very emotional. I’ll have a good cry after everybody leaves.”

What does it feel like going more than 16 years between wins?

“You know what?” Nolan said. “I can’t even put it into words.”

The Sabres honored Nolan and Pat LaFontaine, the new president of hockey operations, with video tributes. As the crowd roared for the legendary LaFontaine on the video boards, owner Terry Pegula gave him a playful tap on the head.

Clearly, everyone associated with the Sabres enjoyed Friday’s win.

“It was a lot of fun,” Sabres defenseman Tyler Myers said. “I’ve said it a few times, but it’s important we don’t let this be a game where we only do it because there were changes made. But I love the way we came out tonight. I loved our compete level. In the last day and a half, that’s what Ted has stressed the most since he came in, just to see a compete level.

“He knows mistakes are going to be made. He just wants us to go play and play hard.”

The first meeting between the longtime rivals since the wild Sept. 22 preseason brawl didn’t produce any fireworks.

Still, Nolan, who loves tough guys, played John Scott regularly.

“If you’re not good enough to play in this league, you shouldn’t be in this league,” said Nolan, who relied on assistant Joe Sacco for bench help. “But if you’re on the team, you should be able to play.”

The Sabres face the Leafs again tonight in Toronto.

Pat LaFontaine's phone call to Ted Nolan left Sabres' interim coach speechless

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

November 16, 2013

BUFFALO – It was going to be a special weekend trip to New York. Ted Nolan and his wife, Sandra, would celebrate her birthday and watch their son, Jordan, play for the Los Angeles Kings.

Nolan also wanted to see “The Book of Mormon” musical on Broadway. So he recently called Pat LaFontaine, a close friend with a ticket connection.

“I said, ‘Teddy, you better get ready for the show. It’s a pretty interesting show,’” LaFontaine joked Friday prior to Nolan’s debut as the Sabres’ interim coach, a 3-1 win against the Toronto Maple Leafs inside the First Niagara Center. “I said, ‘Yeah, no worries. I’ll get them.’”

At that point, LaFontaine was working with Sabres owner Terry Pegula to create his new role with the team, president of hockey operations.

Eventually, LaFontaine, who said “he had talked about things one day” with Nolan, reached his former coach in Germany.

“I said, ‘Teddy, it doesn’t look like you’re going to be going to the show on Saturday,’” LaFontaine said.

Nolan asked LaFontaine if he could get tickets to another show. LaFontaine told Nolan he wouldn’t even be going to New York.

Nolan then asked LaFontaine what he would be doing. LaFontaine informed Nolan he would be coaching the Sabres in Toronto that night.

“It was total silence,” LaFontaine said. “He said, ‘You’re kidding me?’ I said, ‘Well, you got to take the job first for this year,’ and he said, ‘Are you kidding me?’”

Nolan then said “a couple of other things” LaFontaine joked he couldn’t repeat.

“He was emotional on the phone,” LaFontaine said. “What you see in Ted Nolan is real and genuine. So I was pretty moved by that, and I know Sandra was. He’s a great coach. He’s done a lot for the game and kids, and I’m glad he has a chance to do it here.”

Nolan called LaFontaine’s call a moment “in your life that you always remember.”

“When called Patty to inform me it was one of those moments, I did get very emotional like I am right now,” Nolan said Friday morning, hours before coaching his first Sabres game since May 11, 1997.

LaFontaine believes given everything he and Nolan have gone through, “It just seemed like there are no coincidences in life.”

“It just seemed like this is right,” LaFontaine said. “This is what it’s supposed to be right now. I said, ‘Everything you’ve learned – good and bad, ups and downs, struggles – is going to prepare you for this year, and then we’ll see what happens going forward.’ But he deserved this opportunity, and I think he’s the right guy.”

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LaFontaine said he’ll start asking for permission to interview general manager candidates next week.

“It’s right in the forefront,” LaFontaine said. “I’ll be traveling and meeting with some candidates.”

What’s LaFontaine’s timetable?

“I know it’s not going to happen next week,” he said.

LaFontaine hasn’t spoken to Jason Botterill, Pittsburgh’s assistant general manager. The Penguins will grant the Sabres permission if they want to interview him, according to the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review.

Darcy Regier was fired Wednesday with Ron Rolston, the coach he had hired in May.

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As the Latvian national team’s coach, Nolan had one center on his roster for the 2013 world championship.

“We a hand a bunch of players, but no natural center ice men,” Nolan said.

So when Sabres rookie Zemgus Girgensons finished his first professional season in Rochester last year, a campaign he spent playing wing, Nolan put the 19-year-old Latvian at center, his natural position.

Nolan put Girgensons, a winger all season, back at center Friday between Marcus Foligno and Brian Flynn. Foligno had played center recently.

“He one was one of our better players playing against some of the best teams in the world,” Nolan said. “We’ll watch him grow, and the fans of Buffalo are going to really appreciate him when he gets his maturity going.”

Nolan added: “He can skate. He’s a powerful kid.”

Girgensons, who had one goal and five points in his first 19 games, doesn’t mind moving to the middle.

“I already know everything about that,” he said. “It’s not that complicated.”

Girgensons wasn’t the only player Nolan moved. Ville Leino, a winger the Sabres tried making a center two years ago, switched back. Leino played center early during his professional career in Finland.

“We want to put these players where they feel comfortable so there’s no excuses,” Nolan said.

Nolan’s other lines Friday: Matt Moulson, Cody Hodgson and Drew Stafford; Tyler Ennis, Leino and Steve Ott; John Scott, Cody McCormick and Corey Tropp.

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The Sabres scratched rookies Mikhail Grigorenko, Johan Larsson and Nikita Zadorov (all healthy) and defenseman Mike Weber (broken thumb).

It's not hard to be enthused about Sabres

By Chuck Pollock
Olean Times Herald
November 15, 2013

It was a typical Wednesday morning during Bills' season for me, driving to Orchard Park for media day, listening to ESPN's Colin Cowherd on Sirius.

Came the 10:30 Sports Center update, and the last item caught my attention.

Pat LaFontaine had been hired as the Sabres' Director of Hockey Operations.

"Great move," I thought, but it seemed to me Buffalo's upper management was now even more crowded.

But, a half hour later, as the cliched "hastily-called press conference" was unfolding at the First Niagara Center, the next update noted that not only had LaFontaine been hired, but also that GM Darcy Regier and coach Ron Rolston had been fired with Ted Nolan being hired for the latter position.

My first thought was that it was one of the most extraordinary days in Sabres history. My second was about Christine Lisi.

The Olean native, whose married name is Popolizio, is one of four update anchors at ESPN Radio, and would have loved to deliver that particular bit of news. She now lives in Connecticut, but is a Bills and Sabres fan, through and through, chafing at the recent bottoming out of the NHL franchise.

BUT, MOST OF ALL, I pondered the brilliance of the move.

Sabres owner Terry Pegula, a friend for 35 years mostly because of racquetball, finally got it right.

His decision to ax the arrogant Regier and the overmatched Rolston and replace them with LaFontaine and Nolan was a public relations coup.

And that for a franchise which, in recent years, has viewed PR as two meaningless letters.

If you doubt it, consider Regier's ridiculous word choice when telling fans, before this season, the Sabres were in rebuilding mode and to expect more "suffering."

LaFontaine, on Wednesday, had the media savvy to admit that he would never use such a characterization, but rather would opt for "patience."

IN MY MIND, trying not to be a Pegula apologist, his two biggest flaws, in most cases, are viewed as strengths.

There's no question about his love for the franchise and his willingness to generously spend from his fortune to make it the best it can be.

But Terry wouldn't be a billionaire three times over without trusted advisers.

He loves hockey — the Sabres above all else — but is very aware of what he doesn't know about the machinations and inner workings of the NHL.

He had to trust others who seemed to have that knowledge ... one of them being Regier.

And as the GM's "skills" were debunked before his eyes, Terry was betrayed by his second "flaw" ... loyalty.

Even he admitted at Wednesday's press conference that he was probably too slow to make the move.

I'D BE INTERESTED to know what triggered him to act after he bumped into LaFontaine at a concussion seminar in Florida less than two weeks ago.

Terry and I haven't talked in a long time, so I have no knowledge of his thought process, but my guess is when fans started chanting "Fire Regier" at home games and showed up bearing signs expressing the same sentiment, that, and the number of empty seats, got his attention.

Plus, as the extent of the GM's failure became a matter of record, Pegula began to be viewed as a stubborn boss ... the figurative captain of the Titanic, defiant even in the face of guaranteed disaster.

It's not hard to imagine that Terry, beloved by his employees at East Resources before its landmark sale, was distressed at being seen as ultimately responsible for his team's ongoing malaise.

WHAT'S CERTAIN is this.

The hiring of LaFontaine was inspired.

And the fact he turned down the original offer to be general manager speaks to his comfort with who he is.

LaFontaine told Pegula he wasn't qualified to be GM, but felt he could hire the right man for that job.

And when he said "I can promise you the hard work and passion that's here (in Buffalo), I'll give that same effort in my new job," it wasn't mere rhetoric.

If LaFontaine makes mistakes, there will be errors of enthusiasm, not lack of effort.

He's determined to learn — and quickly — what he doesn't know.

In any case, as one of the most beloved athletes in Western New York history, he will benefit from every bit of patience needed ... and on merit.

Allegany's Jennifer Frey, a former TH intern now with the Washington Post, covered him for the New York Times in his one season with the Rangers before concussions forced retirement.

She once told me, "Of all the people I've dealt with in sports, I've never met a nicer person than Pat LaFontaine."

THEN THERE'S Nolan, whose tough-minded, "hardest working team in hockey" philosophy endeared him to Buffalo fans who never understood how the NHL Coach of the Year a season earlier was pushed from the Sabres by Regier's insulting one-year contract offer.

And many felt he was black-balled by the league as Nolan waited nine years for his next NHL job and it's been five seasons since he was fired following a two-year stint with the Islanders.

Is the game beginning to pass him by?

Will his tough, hard-nosed physical style resonate with the current Sabres?

Might continued losing alienate Buffalo fans' loyalty to him?

Possibly, but the job is interim for now.

What's certain is that Nolan has 62 games to prove to whoever becomes the new GM that he deserves to remain as coach.

And, no matter what, his team will play hard, even if it doesn't win ... and, given the circumstances, is enough for most Sabre fans. And any floaters on the Buffalo roster will quickly be gone.

From my perspective, I'm excited about the changes.

It's embarrassing to admit that Regier's continued employment left me wishing the Sabres would lose every game, in hopes that would elicit a firing ... or two.

Now it's hard not to be enthused.

Sabres Begin New Era With 'Fun' Win

By Matt Spielman
Jamestown Post Journal
November 16, 2013

BUFFALO - The stage was set for a dramatic start to a new era in Buffalo Sabres hockey Friday night.

A spotlight lit up Pat LaFontaine's No. 16 banner hanging in the First Niagara Center rafters.

Another spotlight took hold of the red-and-black 1997 Northeast Division Champions banner at the other end of the arena signifying interim head coach Ted Nolan's final season with the team the first time around.

The arena was rocking when Nolan stepped behind the home bench.

And a couple of Ted Nolan-type players and plays were major reasons for the win when the new coach left the bench at the end of the night.

Steve Ott, the Sabres full-time captain since the Thomas Vanek trade, tied the game, set up the eventual game winner and made the little plays a captain should to help the Sabres hold on to a 3-1 victory and the first win on their self-proclaimed "clean slate."

"It's been a pretty awesome 48 hours," Ott said. "(Nolan) came in here and told every guy to a man, everything is wiped clean. We are starting fresh, starting to build from this day on."

Ott cleaned up a rebound off a Tyler Myers' point shot for his power-play goal and then hit a driving Marcus Foligno at the far post for the eventual game winner.

"Our older guys lead by example and that's what us young guys have to do, just follow those guys," Foligno said. "I thought the young guys played great tonight, too. We have no excuse. We are young guys and we should bring energy every night."

All that was left for the Sabres was to protect a third-period lead, something they've only been asked to do twice this season.

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From Page B1

"(Nolan) told us just play hockey and have a lot of fun," Foligno said. "There are a lot of little battles that we have to win. We are all focusing on that and not thinking about anything else."

When Henrik Tallinder went off for interference with less than five minutes remaining, the Sabres were backed into a corner. But this wasn't the Ron Rolston-led Buffalo team that lacked fire and rarely had a lead in the third period. Ott showed how the Nolan-led Sabres are different as he dove for a loose puck near the blueline midway through the penalty.

"Steve was one of the first guys I spoke to when I got here, and he was a little bit frustrated with how the season was going; didn't like how the group was competing," Nolan said. "This is a very tough league. You have to compete to have a chance to win."

Later in the kill, Zemgus Girgensons and Rasmus Ristolainen, two of the Sabres' teenagers, were on the ice in crunch time and didn't disappoint.

"You've got to play who you have," Nolan said. "Girgensons, for a young 19-year-old kid, he did pretty well for himself."

And Christian Ehrhoff competed until the end with one of his grittiest shifts as a Sabre late in the third period, making a miraculous save with Ryan Miller out of his crease and the Maple Leafs pouring on the pressure.

"You have to still defend," Ehrhoff said. "You have to know your position and protect the goalie's backside."

Later in the shift, Ehrhoff made sure the First Niagara Center's third sellout crowd of the season would go home happy when his clearing pass trickled all the way down the ice into the Toronto goal.

It was the type of win Terry Pegula, Ted Black and the rest of the Sabres' management team had in mind when they brought in the heart of LaFontaine and the tenacity of Nolan.

"It was one of those games when you don't ever know if this type of game will ever happen again," Nolan said. "It was fun to look up once in a while and see how much fans enjoy this game."

It was just one win, but on the Sabres' clean slate, they are undefeated.

Sabres Beat Leafs 3-1 in Nolan's Return

By Dan Dave

WGR 550

November 15, 2013

Playing for the first time under Pat LaFontaine and Ted Nolan, the energized Sabres earned their second regulation win of the year on Friday 3-1 over the Maple Leafs. Steve Ott collected two points and Ryan Miller made 32 saves in the victory.

Neither team found the net during the first period, but — unlike most games this season — the Sabres came out full of energy. Buffalo had several scoring opportunities on Jonathan Bernier, including a Corey Tropp rocket that rang off the post. Later in the period, Bernier stopped a Christian Ehrhoff shot and then stoned Tyler Ennis on a rebound chance.

The Leafs jumped out to a 1-0 lead 6:25 into the second period on Trevor Smith's second goal of the season, whipping the Toronto faithful in attendance into a frenzy. Buffalo tied it up just 3:20 later on the power play. Tyler Myers ripped a point shot and Ott slammed the rebound into the Toronto net. Later in the second, Ott contributed again, this time finding Marcus Foligno on a 2-on-1 break. Foligno one-timed the feed past Bernier, putting Buffalo ahead 2-1.

Christian Ehrhoff made it 3-1 on an empty net goal, sending the puck the length of the ice, with 29 seconds to play. Just prior to the insurance tally, Ehrhoff came up with a save for the out-of-position Miller on James van Riemsdyk.

The win marks Buffalo's second in a row, marking the Sabres' first back-to-back victories this season. Buffalo and Toronto are right back at it on Saturday at Air Canada Centre, finishing off a home-and-home series. Hear the call on WGR 550 at 7 p.m.

1st Period

Goals

None

Penalties

2:56 - TOR - Paul Ranger (2 min., tripping)

18:51 - TOR - Phil Kessel (2 min., delay of game)

2nd Period

Goals

6:25 - TOR - Trevor Smith (2) (David Clarkson, Mason Raymond)

9:45 - BUF - Steve Ott (3) (PPG) (Tyler Myers, Mark Pysyk)

15:22 - BUF - Marcus Foligno (3) (Steve Ott, Drew Stafford)

Penalties

8:04 - TOR - Mark Fraser (2 min., cross checking)
12:56 - BUF - Marcus Foligno (2 min., tripping)

3rd Period

Goals

19:31 - BUF - Christian Ehrhoff (1) (EN) (Mark Pysyk)

Penalties

5:43 - BUF - Drew Stafford (2 min., slashing)

15:25 - BUF - Henrik Tallinder (2 min., interference)

Goaltending

TOR - Jonathan Bernier (24 saves, 26 shots)

BUF - Ryan Miller (32 saves, 33 shots)

Power Plays

TOR - 0 of 3

BUF - 1 of 3

Three Stars

1.) BUF - Steve Ott (1 G, 1 A)

2.) BUF - Ryan Miller (32 saves)

3.) BUF - Drew Stafford (0 G, 1 A)

HAMILTON: Sabres compete for Nolan

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

November 15, 2013

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- After the first 20 minutes of the Sabres' 3-1 win over the Maple Leafs, my initial impression of the Ted Nolan era was a good one. The team came out and worked and had one of their best periods of the season.

The biggest change I see is that Nolan had them trapping in the neutral zone. All five guys were back and there was very little forechecking. This is what bad teams do to stay in games. The Florida Panthers under the late Roger Neilson were masters at it.

Buffalo did it well on Friday, limiting the shots and good scoring chances on Ryan Miller. Miller only had to make five saves in the first period.

The compete was very noticeable. Rasmus Ristolainen hammered David Clarkson in the crease after a Miller save and Steve Ott showed up to take over. Great to see the captain back after the uninspired year he's had so far.

"It was a lot of fun to go out there and feel like the weight is off our shoulders," Ott said. "We've been playing with some pretty heavy backs for the last few months and it hasn't been fun at all. Tonight brought that fun and great atmosphere back."

Corey Tropp was taking hits, but made plays too. After getting knocked down at his own blue line, Tropp got up and took off down the right wing. He beat Jonathan Bernier, but the puck hit the post.

Right after that on a power play, Tyler Ennis went to the net following a Christian Ehrhoff shot. Matt Moulson was stopped on the first rebound, but Ennis was hard on the puck and dug it out. He quickly pulled the puck to his right, but Bernier somehow got his glove on it.

Ennis won battles all period. I guess Nolan was right this morning when he said Ennis appeared so much more relaxed.

John Scott was out four times against Colton Orr and Frazer McLaren, but nothing even close to a fight materialized. After Tropp hit the post there was a big scrum and Orr grabbed Scott. Neither player was interested in fighting. Buffalo fired 10 shots Bernier's way in the first 20 minutes.

I'm going to go out of order in the second period because the new theme of this team is hard work and nothing showed that more than the Sabres second goal to make it 2-1. Marcus Foligno came out of the penalty box upset that he took a tripping penalty. Drew Stafford sent a streaking Steve Ott down the left wing side.

Foligno was absolutely flying coming down the slot and Ott found him with a perfect pass. Foligno tipped home his 3rd of the season by outhustling Mark Fraser. He took the net with him and decked Fraser on the way to the celebration. THAT is what Ted Nolan wants to see.

On Buffalo's first goal, it was so simple. Pysyk gave Tyler Myers a pass at the point right in his wheelhouse and instead of getting it blocked or having it slip off his stick, he ripped a shot right on goal. The puck got whacked around, but guess what? Steve Ott went hard to the net and scored on the wide open rebound.

Is it perfect? No. The Leafs broke through on a long shot by Trevor Smith which went in off Christian Ehrhoff. The thing that will make Nolan upset is that Moulson didn't go all out to get to Smith, who was out near the blue line. That will be corrected.

The passing was better in this game, but Buffalo missed a golden opportunity on the power play when Hodgson had a wide open Moulson in the slot and missed him badly sending the puck all the way down ice.

The Sabres tried to keep it quiet in the third. Miller had to make a huge save on Clarkson early on, but there were only four Leaf shots in the first 10:45 of the period and that included a power play.

Toronto tried to score with two around Miller, but the Sabres took down both Leafs players. Henrik Tallinder got an interference penalty that others like Zdeno Chara never would gotten.

The result on the scoreboard really doesn't matter in this game. I saw a totally different team against Toronto.

"It was really fun for me to look up once in a while and see how much fans enjoyed this game," Nolan said. "We're in the entertainment business, so I'm hoping they had a good night. It was fun for us, for sure."

If this is the hockey we see most nights, I think Sabre fans will stick with Pat Lafontaine and Ted Nolan through this growing period.

"We need more of that moving forward," Ehrhoff said of his team's effort. "It can't be just a one-night thing. We need some consistency and if we do that, we'll have a good chance in a lot of the games."

Sabres begin the Nolan and LaFontaine era against the Leafs

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

November 15, 2013

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- The atmosphere has been quite a bit different at the Center since the introductions of Pat LaFontaine and Ted Nolan. There were very few smiles before and many knew this organization was in deep trouble until Wednesday hit.

Cody Hodgson has noticed the difference. He said, "We have a new chance with a couple of new guys coming in. Everyone knows about Pat LaFontaine and every person I've talked to says great things about Ted Nolan, so I think everyone in the room is excited for a new start." Hodgson added, "It's different, there's a new energy and I think guys were crisp working hard and hopefully that translates into tonight." John Scott loves the atmosphere leading up to this game, "It's like the perfect storm coming, after the Kessel thing and now the new coaching and the GM, so it's going to be fun."

Scott has been on more NHL teams than Hodgson has. He has noticed a big difference, "It's been refreshing. Coming into the season with the overhang of the trades and stuff, Darcy and Ron, everyone calling for them to get fired, it was just a bad atmosphere for the first month of the season, but I think now that Ted and Pat have taken over, it's given everyone new life and a lot more energy, you could see it out there the last few days so hopefully that continues."

If there hadn't been any changes this game still would've been a big one. First it's home against the Leafs who's fans overrun the building every time they're here and it's the first game since John Scott went after Phil Kessel in the preseason.

Chances are pretty good Scott would've fought Colton Orr or Frazer McLaren without the incident because staged fights between the fighters usually happen in those situations, so my question to Scott was, how can we tell? "I don't think anything too insane is going to happen. I think everyone knows there's too much on the line and all the eyes are on this game too, so I think it's going to be a normal game and if we happen to fight, it's just going to be another fight."

Scott was very hurt by many of the things that were being said about him in the U.S. and Canada after his was suspended for a high hit on Loui Eriksson. This will be his first game back from a seven game suspension and he said, "It was tough, I just shut everything off after the first two days because it was getting pretty nasty. It's going to always affect me what happened with the hit to Loui, so it's something I have to keep in mind and be a little more careful sometimes if someone's in a vulnerable position, but I'm not going to change how I play. I'm going to skate, I'm going to hit, I'm going to be aggressive and I'm going to be in your face, so that's not going to change who I am."

The Leafs come in third in the Atlantic Division with an 11-6-1 record. Lately Totonto has won just one of four games.

A big reason for Toronto doing well is new goaltender Jonathan Bernier who had been backing up Jonathan Quick in Los Angeles for a lot longer than he would've liked. Bernier is 7-4-1 with a 2.05 goals against and .939 save percentage.

Getting back to Kessel he has 10 goals and nine assists for 19 points in 18 games.

Sabres LaFontaine will speak to Botterill

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

November 15, 2013

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- Pat LaFontaine confirmed he has asked permission from the Penguins to speak with Jason Botterill about the Sabres vacant General Manager position.

When I asked if he's spoken to Botterill, LaFontaine said hadn't and he will start traveling to meet with candidates on Monday.

LaFontaine also addressed the team Friday morning. He wants the players to embrace change and told them they can only grow through change. He also told them he will be watching closely.

He had lunch and has met the people all throughout the organization. His message is clear. It's a new day and a new direction and every single person will be given the chance to embrace the change and get on board.

Sabres fans have hope again

By Howard Simon

WGR 550

November 15, 2013

It didn't happen that often but every now and then, over the last 16 years, we would get a call from a frustrated Sabres fan who would bring up the idea of getting Ted Nolan back as head coach. I would then proceed to get upset and strongly advise the caller to "stop living in the past" and "get over it because he's never coming back". Oops!

So maybe the Sabres will win a Stanley Cup in my lifetime and the Bills will win a Super Bowl. If asked, I might have said we'd have a better chance of that happening than Nolan ever stepping behind the Sabres bench again.

Yet that's exactly where the winner of the 1997 Jack Adams Trophy for NHL Coach of the Year, will be tonight. 16 years, six months and four days after his last game behind the Sabres bench. For the record it was May 11, 1997 and the Sabres were just eliminated from the playoffs by the Philadelphia Flyers.

I have no idea how the return of Nolan and the hiring of Sabres and NHL Hall of Famer Pat Lafontaine as President of Hockey Operations will turn out but I do know I feel good about the Sabres again. Tonight marks the first time all season I've been excited about a Sabres game.

I think you've probably gotten to the point where you could handle the losing, or the suffering if you will, as long as the rebuilding plan paid off but you could never get to the point where you could believe Ron Rolston was the right coach to lead the way and Darcy Regier was the best General Manager to fix this mess. BIG problem solved in one fell swoop.

The moves are being greeted with some skepticism, that perhaps this is just about public relations and winning a fan base back. First off, there's nothing wrong with winning a fan base back. From a PR standpoint, I don't know how the Sabres could have done any better than bring back a beloved player whose number hangs in the rafters of the First Niagara Center and an incredibly popular coach who fans felt was done wrong by the organization.

It remains to be seen who Lafontaine will entrust with the GM job but he brings instant credibility back to the organization at a time when national observers keep saying the Sabres have become an embarrassment. This is exactly what they did in Boston when the Bruins brought back Cam Neely and gave him the title of Team President.

If you're looking for someone who can convince free agents to come to Buffalo or get agents to convince their clients to play for the Sabres, the Lafontaine name will certainly carry weight.

As far as Nolan goes, I don't think you should expect to see the brawling bunch of Sabres who played under Nolan during his first stint in town. He doesn't have Rob Ray, Bob Boughner, Brad May and Mathew Barnaby on the roster. But we should expect to see a team that lays it all out on the ice instead of the team that looks like it sleepwalks through the first period every game.

There's no question Nolan's greatest strength is his ability to motivate players but don't forget his roots in coaching were in the junior ranks so he knows what its like to work with young players. It sure seemed the veteran players had checked out on Rolston and the young players were looking around at the older guys and wondering whose lead should they follow. Nolan should be able to solve all of that and effectively pull the room back together.

The bottom line is the Sabres have given you some hope. You can absolutely make the argument that giving us hope as opposed to wins and championships is what the Sabres and Bills do all the time but having hope with the Sabres now, is a lot better than where we were three days ago.

Sabres top Maple Leafs in Nolan's debut

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

November 16, 2013

The Buffalo Sabres talked a lot about starting fresh Friday night. That talk finally resulted in results on the ice.

With new interim coach Ted Nolan behind the bench for his first game, they were able to play their most complete game of the season and skate away with not only two points, but a sense of pride in their effort.

Goaltender Ryan Miller stopped 32 shots to lead Buffalo to a 3-1 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs at First Niagara Center. The teams will meet again for the second half of the home-and-home Saturday night in Toronto.

Captain Steve Ott and Marcus Foligno scored for the Sabres, who picked up their second straight win at home.

It was apparent that Nolan's message to instill a hard-working mentality was taken to heart right away.

"He told everybody, 'I'm not watching video on you guys. I'm not looking at your stat packs, I really don't care. I want to see what you're going to do for me now and I'll figure everybody out as we go as we go here,'" Ott said. "It made a lot of guys, I think, realize that Game One is basically tonight and throw those other 20 away and honestly, it felt like a completely different room in here."

On Wednesday, Sabres owner Terry Pegula announced that former captain Pat LaFontaine would assume the role of President of Hockey Operations and that Nolan would take over behind the bench on an interim basis.

Friday marked Nolan's first game coaching the Sabres since May 11, 1997. Nolan's last win in the NHL came on April 4, 2008 when he coached the New York Islanders to a 4-3 win over the Rangers.

Nolan said after the game that his emotions were running high when he first stepped out of the tunnel from the locker room.

"I really had to hold them in tight because it was one of those games where you didn't ever know that this type of day would ever happen again. So it was really very emotional. I'll have a good cry after everyone leaves," he said with a laugh.

When asked what it felt like to step up on that bench again for the first time in 16 years, Nolan reflected back on his early coaching days.

“I can’t even put it into words. It was just one of those – I remember when I first came here a number of years ago, I still remember saying how hard we were going to work and then we got waxed by Detroit 6-1. So tonight was a lot different and hopefully it’s a good sign of things to come.”

Toronto had a golden opportunity to tie the game 2-2 with just about 30 seconds remaining in regulation with the extra attacker out on the ice. Miller got turned around in goal and James van Riemsdyk looked to put the puck into an empty net on the backside.

Defenseman Christian Ehrhoff stepped up and blocked the shot to preserve the lead. Seconds later, he was able to flip the puck down the ice and into the empty net to secure the victory.

“It was nice to finally make a save for [Miller]. He’s got so many saves for us, so it’s just a lot of desperation at the end and I’m glad I made that save,” Ehrhoff said. “It was just a great finish to a fun game tonight. I think the fans enjoyed it and we came out good today. We competed for all 60 minutes and it was very positive to see that.”

Miller looks now at how the team can build off this win and the energy some players seemed to gain from the changes that have overwhelmed the team off the ice.

“For myself, I tried to keep it in a good place. I think a couple of these guys might’ve been looking for something. I’m glad it seemed to work tonight,” he said. “Our biggest thing is going to have to be consistency now. We had good energy a game in a game we were supposed to have good energy so let’s see if we can keep it up.”

Trevor Smith gave Toronto an initial lead in the game. Jonathan Bernier made 24 saves in the losing effort. Toronto took the lead 6:25 into the second period on Smith’s goal. His shot from the point deflected off Ehrhoff and past Miller.

Ott tied the game 3:20 later on the power play. With Drew Stafford battling in front, Bernier turned aside a Tyler Myers slap shot from the blue line. The puck ended up to the left of Bernier, where Ott was waiting. He cashed in for his third goal of the season.

The Sabres took the lead with 4:38 remaining in the second period. As the Sabres killed off a penalty to Foligno, Stafford fired a puck across the ice up to Ott on the left wing. Going down the ice with Foligno on a 2-on-1, Ott wired a pass to Foligno, who backhanded a pass into the net.

Ott had a multi-point game (1+1) for the fourth time as a Sabre. His last multi-point game came on March 19, 2013 in Montreal when he scored two goals.

The Sabres played one of their strongest first periods of the season, out-shooting the Maple Leafs 10-5.

“It was a tremendous team effort to a man,” Ott said. “That’s what a team’s about tonight and that’s what it felt like. It really truly felt like a complete team effort. Talk about fun, that was a fun game to play in.”

Miller made a pair of great saves on van Riemsdyk throughout the game, even before he was ultimately foiled by Ehrhoff. Midway through the second period, Miller stopped a backhand attempt that van Riemsdyk batted out of the air. Then 55 seconds into the third, he made a paddle save to deny the Maple Leafs forward.

Nolan was impressed with not only the performance of his players, but the jobs his assistant coaches did as well. He was quick to compliment Joe Sacco and Teppo Numminen, his assistants on the bench.

“We want to develop a team concept and who cares who gets the credit as long as the result is what we’re looking for,” Nolan said. “And everybody’s part of this thing, so the coaching staff did a great job tonight.”

The Sabres and Maple Leafs meet again at Air Canada Centre on Saturday at 7 p.m.

POST-GAME NOTEBOOK: "LIGHTER" SABRES TALK ABOUT THE CLEAN SLATE

By Kevin Snow

Sabres.com

November 15, 2013

When Pat LaFontaine spoke to the media on Friday morning, he described the Buffalo Sabres locker room as being "lighter." But the team's new President of Hockey Operations wasn't talking about a bunch of guys cracking jokes. With just four wins in their first 20 games, LaFontaine was referring to the pianos that had been lifted off the backs of every player in the room.

Steve Ott was one of the players who had been carrying the burden of the difficult start, and it was starting to reflect in his play. Interim coach Ted Nolan said it was obvious to him based on their early conversations.

"[Steve] was frustrated at how the season was going. And he was frustrated at how the group was competing."

The reenergized Ott paced the Sabres with two points in their 3-1 win over Toronto on Friday, including his first goal in seven games dating back to October 28 against Dallas. He also chipped in an assist for his first multipoint game of the season.

The Sabres captain said there's no denying what his new Hall of Fame boss had said earlier in the day.

"It's the simple fact that the room has been wiped clean. When they came in here, they told every guy to a man in their personal meetings that everything has been wiped clean," explained Ott. "I don't care if you haven't had a point or you're minus-15, everything is out the window from the last 20 games. We're starting fresh, and we're starting to build from this day on. I really like that a lot of guys played with light shoulders rather than heavy backs."

Another player that seemed to benefit from the leadership change was Tyler Myers. The young defenseman has been a lightning rod for the team's struggles so far this season, but he looked like a new player on Friday. Myers picked up the primary assist on Ott's goal, dished out four hits and blocked a pair of shots. He also jumped into the rush on several occasions, making his towering presence felt at both ends of the ice.

"It was definitely a lighter feeling. When a big change like that is made, it's normal for guys to come out like we did tonight," said Myers. "The most important thing moving forward is not losing that feeling, or losing that compete level. It's a consistency that we have to stick with."

Marcus Foligno scored the eventual game winner at 15:22 of the second period, literally crashing the Toronto net to cash in feed through the slot from Ott for his first goal in 11 games.

Just like Myers, Foligno said that carrying this new feeling forward is far more important than simply just being happy with a win.

“It’s simple; you forget about this one and move on. We get the same team again (on Saturday) and we have to be able to bring that same effort. There were some great shifts out there, and we hemmed their defense a lot. Our transition was also very good tonight. We didn’t cough up too many pucks, and that was the biggest thing they stressed. From blueline to blueline, you’ve gotta get it in and get it out.”

The fresh start under Nolan and LaFontaine also hasn’t been lost on Foligno. The 22-year-old has shown flashes of being the power forward that many expect him to be, but he’s also vanished at times. With 61 more games to play, Foligno believes this new environment is what the entire room needed – and apparently the fanbase too.

“There’s no disrespect to what happened early in the season, but it’s a clean slate. This is what we’re here to do, and this is what we want to do. We want to be a winning team, and we need everyone on board. Tonight was the loudest that our bench has been in a while, not to mention the fans.”

It took 21 games, but Buffalo’s 10-5 shot lead through the opening 20 minutes was the first time they’ve outshot an opponent in the first period this season. It was also just the fifth time the Sabres have registered double-digit shots in the first period. The Sabres took the first five shots of the game, before James van Riemsdyk registered Toronto’s first shot on a wraparound attempt at 7:06.

Buffalo came into the game having been outshot 214-157 in first periods, and outscored 27-3.

Friday was Brian Flynn’s 47th career NHL game, and he’s now played in each of them without taking a penalty. This is the longest such streak since Mason Raymond (then with Vancouver) played his first 47 games without taking a penalty in 2007-08.

Mike Weber missed his ninth game with a hand injury suffered in Florida on October 25. It was originally thought that Weber would return in one or both

games this weekend, but Nolan ruled him out following Friday's morning skate. Mikhail Grigorenko, Nikita Zadorov and Johan Larsson were Buffalo's healthy scratches. This was the sixth scratch of the season for Grigorenko, and his fourth in the last six games.

NOLAN PREPARES FOR FIRST GAME, LaFONTAINE TO BEGIN GM SEARCH

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

November 15, 2013

After a few hectic days off the ice, the Buffalo Sabres will be back to work on it Friday night.

They host the Toronto Maple Leafs at 7 p.m. in the first game of a home-and-home series and it'll be the first game behind the bench for new interim head coach Ted Nolan.

Nolan took over Wednesday morning and the game against Toronto will be his first coaching the Sabres since the end of the 1996-97 season. As he looks to the matchup, he talked about how he's tried to get the team ready in a such a short amount of time.

"A few things change, but overall, not too many things really do change," Nolan said after the skate at First Niagara Center. "It's game day. We've gotta get ready and our preparation and our focus on the process and not worrying about the result. We just want to make sure we go out there and play the way we're capable of playing and we'll see what happens at the end of it."

Sabres center Cody McCormick told Sabres.com that the changes have brought some new excitement to the locker room. He'll likely skate on a line with John Scott and Corey Tropp that will look to transfer some of that excitement into the game.

"[It's been] positive, upbeat. We just have a lot of energy is the best way to put it," McCormick said. "Ted just wants compete and I think that's what our line can bring first and foremost. We're on the same page. We're kind of the same players and we know where we're going to be on the ice, so we want to work well together and accomplish things on the ice."

In addition to the news that Nolan had been brought on and former captain Pat LaFontaine had been hired as President of Hockey Operations, the Maple Leafs being in town adds an extra level of intrigue to the game Friday night.

"The city's buzzing right now," McCormick said. "The people I've talked to around town are excited and they deserve this excitement going into the game. We just have to come out and produce for them."

With the team's recent struggles, defenseman Henrik Tallinder said he wasn't necessarily surprised that changes were made. He likes the direction the franchise is looking to move in.

“Eventually something will happen, it always does. I think history has shown that. You don’t realize when it’s going to happen so when it happens, it’s always going to be a little bit of a shock,” he said. “But when you hear it’s Nolan and LaFontaine, it’s pretty remarkable. Those guys are heroes here and I think they can build this organization the right way.”

The Sabres did not skate line rushes in practice, but Nolan did offer some hints as to what the lineup could look like up top.

“[Ville Leino] was really good at center ice so we’ll probably put him there and see what happens. And [Zemgus] Girgensons always played center his whole life, so we’ll put him there. [Marcus] Foligno hasn’t really played center until he got to pros, so we put him back on the wing,” he said. “We want to put these players in a position where they feel comfortable so there are no excuses.”

With Girgensons staying at center – but on a different line – according to Nolan, he could be between Foligno and Brian Flynn. Leino could then possibly center Steve Ott and Tyler Ennis on Girgensons’ line from practice Thursday.

Nolan said that defenseman Mike Weber will likely not be available to return from his thumb injury until next week.

Ryan Miller was the first goaltender off the ice and is expected to start in goal.

LaFontaine also talked to the media Friday about where the quest for a new general manager stands. After spending the past few days meeting with various people throughout the organization, he said he’ll really dive into the search next week.

“I’ll be traveling and meeting with some candidates and we’ll see how those go. It’s obviously a priority,” LaFontaine said. “It has to be that right person that’s a fit for this organization going forward. I just don’t want to put somebody in there. I want to put somebody in there that’s ready to do a lot of great things for a long time.”

Leafs Fall to Sabres in Ted Nolan's Return

Canadian Press

November 15, 2013

BUFFALO, N.Y. - James van Riemsdyk had at least one point on his stick with 44 seconds left.

With plenty of net to shoot at, the Toronto Maple Leafs winger-turned-centre would've scored had it not been for Buffalo Sabres defenceman Christian Ehrhoff getting in the way. Van Riemsdyk was left to shake his head as offensive production continued to desert the Leafs in a 3-1 loss Friday night at First Niagara Center.

"That was a heck of a play by him. He made a good read and sacrificed his body for it," van Riemsdyk said. "I guess we are not getting those bounces right now, but we've got to keep fighting for it."

The Leafs did plenty of fighting on an emotional night in Buffalo that marked the start of the Pat LaFontaine era as president of hockey operations and Ted Nolan's return as coach after a 16-year break. They outshot an opponent for just the third time all season and the first time since Oct. 5, but Marcus Foligno's goal stood up as the game-winner.

Coach Randy Carlyle and goaltender Jonathan Bernier pointed to losing the special-teams battle as the reason for the loss. Steve Ott scored on the power play for the Sabres, while the Leafs went 0-for-3 to fall to 2-for-12 on the power play in their past five games.

It's no coincidence they're 1-3 in that time and that the one victory came in a shootout, but there's more to these offensive woes. The Leafs have just four goals in their past four games, and just two at even strength after Trevor Smith scored in Buffalo.

"We're just not getting the results," Carlyle said. "We've had chances, we had glorious opportunities. It's just that right now we're squeezing the sticks or we're getting hit in the shaft or players making a big stop."

The biggest stop came when Ehrhoff got in the way of van Riemsdyk's shot, which could've been his first since moving to centre after Dave Bolland's injury in Vancouver on Nov. 2. Tyler Bozak's long-standing hamstring injury already tested the Leafs' depth down the middle, and Nazem Kadri's three-game suspension for elbowing Minnesota Wild goaltender Niklas Backstrom compounded the problem.

Smith, called up from the AHL's Marlies to replace Kadri in the lineup, scored his second goal of the season on his fifth shot in the second period. It wasn't the prettiest goal, but it was something.

"I just tried to get it off as quick as I can," Smith said. "I think it hit a D-man in front and went in, but we'll take 'em where we can get 'em."

The Leafs will take it, but they'd also benefit from their top offensive players scoring. Joffrey Lupul, Mason Raymond and Phil Kessel each scored once in the previous three games, but it has proven to be not nearly enough.

"It's a long season, there's ebbs and flows a bit," van Riemsdyk said. "We're going to keep with the same approach: just getting a lot of pucks to the net. We're getting some good chances, we've just got to start burying them."

Meanwhile, the Leafs have been counting on their goaltending to keep them in games. The crossbar helped Bernier a bit as he struggled to track the puck.

"It was a tough game for me," said Bernier, who made 24 saves on 26 shots. "They tipped a lot of pucks, especially in the first, and they had a lot of presence up front. They played well. They worked really hard and they kept it simple."

Perhaps that could serve as a blueprint for the Leafs, starting Saturday when they host the Sabres at Air Canada Centre. Carlyle liked his team's effort and worth ethic on the road, but he lamented a lack of second opportunities.

"The one thing that we could do is we could shoot the puck," Carlyle said. "Put the puck towards the net and drive people towards the net. Shoot the puck. Don't try to be so fine. It seems like we're trying to pick the top corners, they're trying to pick spots where we should be just concentrating on quicker release, get pucks directed at the net, have that second and third opportunity. And I think we'd be rewarded."

Van Riemsdyk should've been rewarded in the game's final minute. With Bernier off for an extra attacker, the Leafs got their best chance of the night with goaltender Ryan Miller likely unable to get over in time.

Foligno called Ehrhoff's block "something special."

"It was just desperation," Ehrhoff said. "I know (Miller) was just on the other side of the net and the puck came out to van Riemsdyk and I just tried to make myself as big as I can, and I got the save."

Just 12 seconds later Ehrhoff iced the game by scoring an empty-netter from his own goal line.

"It brings a smile to my face," Miller said. "Christian Ehrhoff had the play of the game and saved our butts and then he put it away. It was a great turn of events there to watch him make that play on the back side, have great awareness to find it and help me out then get it down the ice and split the uprights."

The Sabres gave Nolan his first NHL head-coaching victory since 2008 and first behind the bench for Buffalo since 1997.

"You know what? I can't even put it into words," he said. "It was one of those games where you didn't know where this type of day would ever happen again. It was really very emotional. I'll have a good cry after everybody leaves."

Bernier believed the Leafs deserved "a better fate" than a regulation loss, but Carlyle doesn't want his players crying about falling short against the Sabres.

"We can't get down on what happened tonight," Carlyle said. "They don't feel very good about themselves, but it's about results-oriented and that's what happens. But I thought our work ethic was strong, we did a lot of good things in the hockey game and we're going to have to continue to work on that."

Notes - Rookie defenceman Morgan Rielly was a healthy scratch for the second time in three games and fourth time this season. When he played Wednesday at the Minnesota Wild, the Leafs dressed seven defencemen. ... Foligno's goal was his seventh point in seven career games against Toronto.

Sixteen years later, coach Ted Nolan welcomes fresh start with Sabres

By Stephen Whyno

Canadian Press

November 16, 2013

BUFFALO, N.Y. - Ted Nolan really wanted tickets to see "Book of Mormon" on Broadway.

Pat LaFontaine has a guy who can make that happen, so he assured his former coach it wasn't a problem. Then, after learning he'd be taking over as the Buffalo Sabres' president of hockey operations, LaFontaine revived his role as a prankster from his playing days and told Nolan the theatre tickets for him and his family weren't happening.

Instead, he wanted Nolan to come back to the NHL and coach the Sabres.

"It was just total silence," LaFontaine recalled. "And he said, 'You're kidding me.'"

LaFontaine wasn't kidding. As part of an organizational change on the fly that saw general manager Darcy Regier and Ron Rolston fired, Nolan took the job as coach for at least the rest of the season, which began Friday night with a 3-1 victory over the Toronto Maple Leafs.

When LaFontaine called, Nolan felt similar emotions to his wedding day, the birth of his first child and his first game as an NHL head coach. He last coached in North America in 2008, so this was a special occasion.

"There are certain moments in your life that you'll always remember, and when Patty called me to inform me, that was one of those moments," Nolan said. "I did get very emotional."

Nolan fought back tears at the press conference commencing the LaFontaine era Wednesday, but since then he hasn't had time to be nervous. The Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., native was more worried about going through the crash course of learning his players' names.

Hired and commended for his communication skills, that's a nice first step.

"What I think he's going to be able to do is be able to get an identity on the team because he was really good at that," said former Sabres goaltender Marty Biron, who played under Nolan in 1995-96. "He's such a strong motivator."

Motivating and teaching are two of Nolan's key duties for a Sabres team that is looking toward the future after a 4-15-1 start. LaFontaine will hire a new GM in the coming weeks and spend the rest of the year evaluating talent for the rebuild that is already under way.

LaFontaine chose Nolan to oversee the final 62 games from behind the bench because of what he showed in four seasons as an NHL head coach with Buffalo and the New York Islanders.

"He can relate to players. He's been through this," LaFontaine said. "You have to truly care about the players and connect with players and then find out what's the best way to get those players to perform individually and then collectively and then raise their standard."

The standard was set low early this season for the league-worst Sabres. Nolan knows it's impossible to erase the horrendous start, but a new voice is a good place to begin to turn things around.

"I'm not really too concerned of what they've done. I've never been. It's what we're going to do," Nolan said. "It's a new day, a new beginning. Let's start fresh."

So far, players are buying what Nolan's selling. The mood around the locker-room Friday morning was positive after an up-tempo morning skate, and captain Steve Ott said it felt like everyone had a "legitimate clean slate" under Nolan.

"Right away he's got a lot of respect for all the guys, and I think the guys have grabbed his respect right off the bat as well," Ott said. "He's preaching the work ethic and that's something that we all know in here and hold each other accountable for."

The last time Nolan worked for the Sabres, he won the Jack Adams Award as coach of the year. Even though he had a tumultuous exit from the team in 1997, that earns him some respect.

Nolan's only other stint in the league came from 2006 to 2008 with the Islanders. He spent time in the front office of the AHL's Rochester Americans from 2009 to 2011 and has coached the Latvian national team since then.

Biron has fond memories of Nolan, who allowed him to start his first career NHL game and play at the Montreal Forum. But Biron doesn't know for sure if this experiment will have positive results.

"Do I think it's a hundred per cent slam dunk? No, I don't," Biron said in a phone interview. "Patty, I think it's a hundred per cent slam dunk. Ted I'm not sure. But it's no disrespect to him or anything, it's just he's been away from the game for a while, he's had a stint in the Island and that went away again. There's a lot that he will need to kind of prove to the organization, to the players themselves, to be able to do that."

The initial returns are good. Forward Zemgus Girgensons, who played for Latvia under Nolan at the world championships, likes his consistency.

"He wants all the guys to work hard and just give all they got," Girgensons said. "Same as with national team."

After what LaFontaine described as a "culture of fear and uncertainty" around the organization, Nolan is the clean slate. As such, his direction to players has been simple.

"That's, I think, what Nolan wanted when he got here: Just to get the energy back," veteran defenceman Henrik Tallinder said. "'Don't worry about making mistakes, don't worry about anything. Just as long as you compete, you'll be fine.' That was basically the message."

Nolan understands that plenty has changed about coaching in the NHL since his last gig. But he believes that the foundation of success is the same.

"It's the best league in the world. If you don't compete you don't have no chance to win," Nolan said. "If you do compete, even if you have the most skilled team in the world, if they don't compete they don't win."

That's pretty simply, but it's a powerful enough philosophy that it led to LaFontaine calling to make sure Nolan was willing to return to Buffalo 16 years after coaching him with the Sabres.

"It just seemed like this is right, this is what it's supposed to be right now," LaFontaine said. "I said: 'Everything you've learned, good and bad, ups and downs, struggles, is going to prepare you for what you're going to do this year.' And then we'll see what happens going forward. He deserved this opportunity, and I think he's the right guy."

Maple Leafs fall short against Sabres

By Lance Hornby

Toronto Sun

November 15, 2013

BUFFALO - 'Christmas comes early' was a sign being waved at rinkside as the last-place Buffalo Sabres met the Maple Leafs after some fan-friendly hockey office changes.

But the only thing Toronto shooters are feeling these days is cold, as in their scoring touch. Opening an opportune home-and-home series against the struggling Sabres, despite three Leafs centres on the shelf, the visitors had one goal on 33 shots in a 3-1 loss.

Certainly the shake-up inspired Buffalo, as did a vintage game by Leafs killer Ryan Miller, who beat them for the 30th time in his career. But the Leafs have now been held to four even-strength goals in their past six games and eight overall, despite the presence of an army of supporters which crossed the border for Friday's game.

Analysing the most recent result, Toronto coach Randy Carlyle pointed to the Sabres getting a power-play goal when it counted and the Leafs missing on all their man-advantages, including one late in the third period. As for the larger slump, Carlyle went back to an old theme of his team being too cute on offence.

"The one thing we could do is simplify - put the puck toward the net and drive it. Don't try to be so fine. It seems like we're trying to pick corners. We need quicker releases and to get pucks on net, to get that second and third opportunity. And I think we'd be rewarded.

"We had some point-blank (chances), but we didn't have a lot of second opportunities."

Carlyle's comments summed up the night of the ad hoc starting line of Marlies call-up Trevor Smith between David Clarkson and Mason Raymond. Smith one-timed the first goal with no hesitation with the goal-hungry Clarkson getting his second assist in nine games.

But emergency first-line centre James van Riemsdyk was foiled once by Miller, after he got all of a mid-air swing on a Phil Kessel rebound. In the last minute, when van Riemsdyk had Miller down and out, defenceman Christian Ehrhoff slid through the crease to cover the short side.

"That was a heckuva play, a good read and he sacrificed his body," van Riemsdyk conceded of Ehrhoff, who also drained an empty netter. "We're not getting the bounces right now. But you have to stick with it."

Smith, dropped off the night before by bus after the Marlies played in Cleveland, also hit the crossbar.

"As I've said, we'll have to play people to their strengths," Carlyle said of plugging Smith in at centre. "We have no qualms putting him in the lineup and letting him play with better players."

As for keeping van Riemsdyk between Kessel and Joffrey Lupul, with the latter taking some faceoffs, Carlyle said: "I don't have anyone else."

At least the Leafs reversed a string of games where they were outshot. Yet for just the third time in 21 games, the Sabres led after two periods.

As expected, there was no repeat of the exhibition game antics that led to Clarkson's 10-game suspension and his sputtering start so far. There were just a handful of minors, despite predictions new coach Ted Nolan was going to use muscle to regain respect in the NHL. The big men on both teams stuck to hockey, albeit without much scoring

The top line and Clarkson must get on the board between now and next week when Nazem Kadri's three-game suspension will be up and Tyler Bozak returns from a hamstring injury.

The Leafs almost killed a third straight penalty before Jonathan Bernier had a rare rebound escape him. It must have surprised teammate Cory Franson, too, as he fumbled it to Steve Ott, the fourth time in five games the highly ranked Leaf penalty killers have been burned.

Buffalo moved ahead when Paul Ranger was caught a little flat-footed and Marcus Foligno buried the ensuing 2-on-1 pass from Ott as the former exited the penalty box.

Bernier's best stop was on a stunned Tyler Ennis, who was parked at the side. That kept Buffalo at an incredible three first-period goals this season, compared to 27 against, so the 0-0 score after one was a victory of sorts. The Leafs were knocking on Miller's door a couple of times, with Clarkson and Lupul getting in close for a couple of extra whacks at semi-loose rebounds.

The teams are back in it on Saturday in Toronto.

Leafs, Sabres play tame game in first meeting since rough pre-season tilt

By Mike Zeisberger

Toronto Sun

November 15, 2013

BUFFALO - David Clarkson admits that the Maple Leafs wanted to beat up the Buffalo Sabres.

On the scoreboard, that is.

As far as seeking retribution for that Sept. 22 pre-season brawl in the previous meeting between these two teams, Clarkson said there were far more important things on the mind of his team.

“Sometimes, when games are hyped like this, stuff does happen,” he said after the Leafs’ 3-1 loss at the First Niagara Center on Friday night.

“But tonight we were more focused on trying to get two points. That was our priority.”

Unlike the exhibition game seven weeks earlier that featured more than 100 minutes in penalties, this game was a mild affair. In the end, there were only six minors called — three to each team.

Coming in to the game, the spotlight, of course, was on John Scott, the Sabres pugilist who was at the centre of controversy in that September tilt. His dropping of the gloves and pursuit of Phil Kessel at that time resulted in:

a) Kessel taking a series of huge hacks at him, earning a three-game suspension in the process.

b) An enraged Clarkson, seeing Scott going after Toronto’s most skilled forward, hopping off the bench, resulting in an automatic 10-game suspension.

Give Clarkson credit. He kept his emotions in check this time around, although the composure of he and his teammates did not translate to the win they were seeking.

As for Scott, new Sabres head coach Ted Nolan immediately pulled him off the ice a handful of times upon seeing Randy Carlyle send out his own tough guys in Colton Orr and Frazer McLaren. The boisterous crowd, obviously wanting to see some fisticuffs, booed loudly each time Scott was beckoned back to the bench.

Orr did get a solid hit on Scott in the first period, but that was about the only meeting between tough guys on the two teams.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

How pumped is this city to see Nolan and Pat Lafontaine return to the Sabres organization? An electronic billboard adjoining one of the local interstates was seen flashing the message: "Welcome back Pat and Ted" ... Of course, with Lafontaine overseeing his first game in his new role as the Sabres director of hockey operations, you knew during the pre-game video tribute to him that Hall of Fame Sabres announcer Rick Jeanneret would be featured. Sure enough, one of Lafontaine's goals as a Sabre was shown on the scoreboard accompanied by Jeanneret's famous call of "He scores — La la la la La-fon-taine!" ... Sabres forward Marcus Foligno, who scored the winning goal in the second period, was happy for Nolan. "This being the first game for Ted, to welcome him back like this was awesome," Foligno said. "It was a game that was fun and everyone was into it."

THE NUMBERS GAME

The Sabres are 8-1-1 in their past 10 home games versus the Leafs ... Sabres goalie Ryan Miller now has more victories against the Leafs (30) than he does against any other NHL team ... The Sabres are 63-25-8 at home against the Maple Leafs all-time ... Buffalo has not lost the home portion of a home-and-home series with Toronto since the first such series (a 4-2 loss on Dec. 20, 1970).

X'S AND WOES

Say this for the Leafs: They actually were getting traffic in front of the Buffalo goal at times, something they haven't been doing effectively all season ... Clarkson did an outstanding job of it in the first period, including having five whacks at Miller's pads after the Buffalo goalie had swallowed up a point shot ... Mason Raymond also deserves kudos for his screen on Trevor Smith's goal in the second period ... After the Leafs registered just two shots in the first 11 minutes of play, reporter in the press box suggested that Toronto should hire ex-Leaf Sergei Berezin to be their "shooting coach" ... Berezin, of course, used to shoot from anywhere and everywhere. Colleague Lance Hornby pointed out that Berezin was once asked why he didn't pass more. "To who?" he replied ... To be fair, the Leafs did come out and fire 15 shots at Miller in the second period after registering just five in the first ... In honour of the baseball meetings going on down in Orlando, the Leafs and Sabres took turns swatting at pucks that were fluttering in the air. In fact, both Kessel and James van Riemsdyk took turns making Big Papi-like contact only to be robbed by Miller, who made outstanding stops on each.

Maple Leafs fall to new-look Sabres

By Mark Zwolinski

Toronto Star

November 15, 2013

BUFFALO—The Leafs' past caught up to them here Friday night.

The present is also causing mounting concern.

Minus their top three centres, the Leafs showed signs of wear and tear in a 3-1 loss to the new-look Buffalo Sabres. Toronto has only two goals in five-on-five play over the last six games.

Centres Tyler Bozak — who might return to practice Saturday, but can't come off injured reserve until Nov. 21 — and Dave Bolland have been out for more than a week with long-term injuries, while Nazem Kadri was starting a three-game suspension for colliding with Wild goalie Niklas Backstrom.

Coach Randy Carlyle made a shrewd move, placing freshly called up Marlie Trevor Smith in the middle on the second line. Smith responded with the Leafs' only goal. The Leafs have also shifted winger James van Riemsdyk to centre from the wing for the past four games, but while he has put in an admirable effort while playing the position for the first time in his NHL career, his production has dropped off dramatically — no goals since the switch.

Granted, Sabres defenceman Christian Ehrhoff robbed him of one by jumping into the crease, after a great Ryan Miller save, to take away a sure goal. Ehrhoff then potted an empty-netter to seal the victory with 28 seconds left.

Asked if he might rethink playing van Riemsdyk in the middle, Carlyle replied: "I don't have anything else."

Said van Riemsdyk: "That's not for me to decide."

The Leafs have built a solid record at 11-7-1, but have lost three of their last four in part because the power play has been dismal of late.

"You look at the difference in the game and it was the power play. They got a goal and we didn't get one," said Carlyle. "What we could do is shoot the puck more, plain and simple. Don't try to be so fine. It seems like we're trying to pick the top corner, pick out spots too much. We should be quicker and get the puck on net and we'd be rewarded more. We felt we played well, but we weren't rewarded for it."

Toronto has lost 12 of its last 14 visits to Buffalo. Miller has now beaten the Leafs 30 times, his personal high against any team.

And then there's this: in home-and-home series against the Leafs — the teams meet again Saturday night at the Air Canada Centre — Buffalo hasn't lost its home game since 1970.

It was a banner debut for Buffalo coach Ted Nolan and president of hockey operations Pat LaFontaine, who were introduced Wednesday after ownership whisked out coach Ron Rolston and longtime GM Darcy Regier in the wake of a 4-15-1 start.

How Ted Nolan found himself coaching the Buffalo Sabres, again

By Mike Traikos

National Post

November 15, 2013

BUFFALO — From the beginning, it seemed like a joke.

At least, that is what Ted Nolan thought when he received the phone call from Pat LaFontaine this week. The two go back to when they had a player-coach relationship with the Buffalo Sabres in the late-1990s and have remained friends ever since. When Nolan was planning a trip to New York this month, he asked LaFontaine, who lives there, if he could help him out with theatre tickets.

Coaching merry-go-round alive and well as Buffalo Sabres hire Ted Nolan

Instead, LaFontaine offered a ticket back to the NHL.

“I said, ‘It doesn’t look like you’ll be going to the show. I don’t even think you’ll even be coming to New York,’” LaFontaine said. “And [Nolan] said, ‘Well what will I be doing?’”

LaFontaine, who on Wednesday was hired as the Sabres president of hockey operations, told Nolan he would be back behind the bench of the team where he began as an NHL head coach in 1995, which didn’t end well.

“There was total silence,” LaFontaine said, “and he said ‘You’re kidding me.’”

Even now, it looks like one big prank. Did the Sabres really fire Darcy Regier and replace him with LaFontaine, whose jersey hangs in the rafters? Did they really bring back Nolan from the coaching grave 16 years after he was coach of the year for them? Was nostalgia for the past really the answer for a better future?

Maybe not. But it is not like it can get any worse.

The Sabres, who headed into Friday night’s game against the Toronto Maple Leafs in last place overall in the NHL standings, are in the beginning stages of a long rebuild. In the last seven months, they have traded their captain (Jason Pominville) and their leading scorer (Thomas Vanek). By the end of the season, they are expected to part ways with goaltender Ryan Miller and recently acquired winger Matt Moulson and anything else that is not bolted to the ground.

“We’re going to have some bumps along the road,” said LaFontaine, who needs to hire a general manager to replace Regier. “We’ll handle them together. What I said to the players is I’ll be focusing now on every shift, how they come to prepare every shift and how they come to perform each and every period and each and every game. At the end of the day, the teams that are at the top are consistent. They have a high level of play that comes out on a consistent basis.”

As much as LaFontaine and Nolan represent a bridge to the past, they represent a clean slate. From 1997 to 2013, it was Regier and Lindy Ruff running the show in Buffalo. Now that they are gone, Buffalo is trying to forge a new identity based on old principles.

For now, LaFontaine and Nolan are a distraction from what has previously gone on. Neither has promised any miracles. They do not expect to turn the Sabres around this season. But they expect the players to compete and to play with passion. If they do that, the rest will eventually fall into place.

And while they have only been here a few days, they appear to have breathed new life into a dressing room that had grown stale.

“You can see young Tyler Ennis, it looked like a 50-pound weight had gotten off his back,” said Nolan, whose lack of familiarity is such that he is relying on profile pictures to devise line combinations. “When you go through a very tough situation like they have, it’s a little bit refreshing to have a new beginning. We’ll see what happens.”

No one knows how long Nolan will be here. He lasted just two years in each of his previous coaching gigs with the Islanders and Sabres, and he arrives this time with the interim title. For now, Nolan is here to get the most out of an underperforming team and instill the proper work ethic into one of the youngest rosters in the NHL.

We have a young team and there’s no reason why you can’t play with passion and excitement and energy

“We have a young team and there’s no reason why you can’t play with passion and excitement and energy. And if there’s a commitment with the coach and in what we’re trying to do, the results will come,” LaFontaine said. “But right now it’s a clean slate with these guys and some of these things that happened before. I want to see what they can do with a new direction.”

This team has the potential for growth. Top-line centre Cody Hodgson and defenceman Tyler Myers are both 23 years old; Marcus Foligno is 22; Rasmus Ristolainen, Zemgus Girgensons and Mikhail Grigorenko are 19; and Nikita Zadorov is only 18.

Add a potential No. 1 pick in the 2014 draft — along with the Islanders’ first-rounder and whatever they might get in exchange for Miller and Moulson — and perhaps the Sabres are not far from turning this thing around.

“It’s never that easy,” said Myers, who has regressed since he was the NHL’s rookie of the year in 2009-10. “It takes a lot of hard work and it’s going to take some time to establish that belief system in our room, but it’s a new beginning.

“Whatever happened in the past, a week ago, yesterday, a year ago, it’s done with.
It’s a new beginning.”

Maple Leafs' slide continues in loss to Sabres

By Michael Traikos

National Post

November 15, 2013

BUFFALO, N.Y. — All Randy Carlyle could do was shake his head and smile.

The Toronto Maple Leafs coach has seen a lot during his playing days and years behind the bench. This season alone, he has watched one of his forwards receive a 10-game suspension for leaving the bench to join a fight and his goaltender accidentally redirect a clearing attempt into his own net.

How Ted Nolan found himself coaching the Buffalo Sabres, again

But he had to admit, “this was a new one.”

Carlyle was talking about the gaping hole in the middle of Toronto's roster. With Nazem Kadri serving the first game of a three-game suspension and Tyler Bozak and Dave Bolland out with injuries, the Leafs were missing their top-three centres for Friday night's game against the Buffalo Sabres. It was a scenario that the Leafs coach never expected he would have to prepare for.

“Coaching brings you experiences and you can never predict [what's going to happen],” said Carlyle. “You have Plan A, B, C and D in the drawer and we're at E and F right now.”

Plan F was more or less a failure on Friday night, as the Leafs lost 3-1 loss to the Sabres. With the teams playing again on Saturday night in Toronto, Carlyle was asked if it was time to shake up the lineup again and go to a Plan G?

“I don't have anybody else,” he said after the loss, in which a reporter wondered if moving James van Riemsdyk from centre back to the wing was a possibility moving forward. “You're a smart enough guy to figure that out. What else do you want me to do, put a defenceman at forward? Is that what you suggest I do?”

Indeed, with Kadri out for two more games and Bozak potentially available at the same time, the only thing Carlyle and the Leafs can do is ride this out. That means relying on their goaltending and hope that they get enough scoring from unlikely sources like minor-league call-up Trevor Smith.

“One thing we could do is shoot the puck and try not to be so fine,” said Carlyle. “It seems like we're trying to pick the top corner or trying to pick spots where we should be concentrating on getting a quicker release and getting pucks to the net and get that second or third opportunity.”

It was an emotional win for the last-place Sabres, who were playing their first game in 16 years with head coach Ted Nolan behind the bench and with Pat LaFontaine effectively replacing GM Darcy Regier.

From the beginning, Nolan seemed to push all the right buttons, as Buffalo outshot Toronto 10-to-5 in the first period. No goals were scored, but for a team that had entered the game outscored 27-to-3 in the first period, it was a minor victory.

Toronto, despite outshooting Buffalo 33 to 27 — the first time the Leafs had outshot an opponent since Oct. 5 — seemed out of synch offensively. Playing against a team that entered the game with just four wins and had allowed the fourth-most goals per game, the Leafs struggled to manufacture scoring chances. And when they did, Ryan Miller was there for the save.

It was not until the second period, when Toronto took a 1-0 lead with a long-range goal from Smith. But the Sabres responded less than three minutes later on a power-play goal from Steve Ott and then took a 2-1 lead on a two-on-one rush, with Ott feeding Marcus Foligno for the game-winner.

With Kadri out, Smith was called up from the minors and put into a more prominent role on the second line. And though he scored on a pass in the deep slot from David Clarkson and had another shot ring off the crossbar in the second period, the rest of Toronto's offence struggled to get anything going.

Van Riemsdyk had chances to tie the game. He batted a rebound out of mid-air that Miller made an incredible save on and with Toronto's net empty in the third period had a goal stolen when Christian Ehrhoff slid across and blocked the shot and then scored on the other end. But for the Leafs, it was a game in which the lack of depth at centre stood out.

The Leafs, who had been averaging 3.46 goals per game, have scored just five goals in the last five games. During that span, winger-turned-centre van Riemsdyk — the team's third-highest scorer with 13 points — has gone without a point. And with no other options, Toronto has no choice but to sweat it out.

"I definitely feel more comfortable," van Riemsdyk said of playing centre. "Obviously it's still a work-in progress. Again, I don't think I'm anywhere near as good as I can be as a centreman, but that'll come."

Hickey on Hockey: Desperate times in Buffalo

By Pat Hickey

Montreal Gazette

November 15, 2013

MONTREAL - Ted Nolan has lowered his expectations.

Nolan walked out on the Buffalo Sabres back in 1997, feeling insulted after newly hired general manager Darcy Regier only offered him a one-year contract.

On Tuesday, Nolan agreed to rejoin the Sabres as the interim head coach.

The hiring smacks of desperation on the part of both Nolan and the Sabres.

Nolan was willing to accept what might be a temporary gig with a bad team because, at age 55, he knows there aren't going to be too many more opportunities to coach in the National Hockey League. Nolan spent nearly a decade in exile after bolting from Buffalo and hasn't coached in the NHL since wrapping up a two-season stint with the New York Islanders in 2008. When the Sabres came calling, Nolan was preparing to coach Latvia at the Sochi Olympics.

Sabres owner Terry Pegula was desperate because the natives are getting restless in Buffalo and fans were starting to blame the deep-pocketed oilman for the team's demise. Pegula appeased them by firing head coach Ron Rolston and Regier, who had been the longest-serving GM in the NHL.

The good news for the Sabres is that Nolan is a very good — if not great — coach. He has shown a talent for turning teams around and working with young players.

Consider these lines from Nolan's resumé:

He took the Sault Ste. Marie Greyhounds to three consecutive Memorial Cup finals, winning twice.

He won NHL coach-of-the-year honours in Buffalo in 1997, although he did have Dominik Hasek in goal.

He took the Moncton Wildcats to the Memorial Cup final in 2006.

He turned the Islanders around in the 2006-07 season.

He guided Latvia to a berth in the upcoming Olympics.

Part of Nolan's deal with the Sabres is that he will fulfill his obligation to Latvia by coaching the team in Sochi.

But Nolan won't be able to do it alone in Buffalo. The Sabres are short on talent, and while Pegula has thrown his financial weight behind the team, the key is to find a general manager who knows how to spend that money wisely.

Hall of Famer Pat LaFontaine, who played for Nolan in his first go-round in Buffalo, has joined the Sabres as the president of hockey operations and is currently hunting for Regier's replacement. If Lafontaine was paying attention in 1997 and again in 2006, when he and Nolan were both employed by the Islanders, he knows it is important that the new GM and Nolan can work together.

Nolan feuded with GM John Muckler in Buffalo. Nolan won that battle when Muckler was fired, but he couldn't get the deal he wanted from Regier.

The Islanders situation was messy in 2006 when owner Charles Wang hired Nolan to coach at the same time he was introducing Neil Smith as his new GM. Smith was fired a month later after complaining he didn't have the control he needed to run the team. LaFontaine, who had been hired by the Islanders as an adviser, resigned in support of Smith.

It's early enough in the season that the Sabres can turn things around, but if they expect Nolan to be a miracle worker they might have to give him that long-term deal he didn't get in 1997.