



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Coyotes-Sabres Preview

By Nicolino DiBenedetto

Associated Press

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The Phoenix Coyotes would prefer to go into their Christmas break on a winning streak. The Buffalo Sabres just snapped only their second of the season.

The Coyotes look to conclude their four-game road trip with a second straight victory over a struggling opponent when they visit the NHL-worst Sabres on Monday night.

Phoenix (19-10-6) broke out of an offensive slump and snapped a three-game slide with a 4-3 overtime win over Ottawa in overtime Saturday.

The Coyotes had been limited to one goal in each game of the losing streak, but Antoine Vermette matched those three goals on his own against the Senators, scoring at 2:23 of OT to complete a hat trick.

The former Ottawa player's power-play goal with 2:13 left in regulation forced the extra session.

"It was huge," Vermette said. "They were crucial points because the standings are so tight in the (Western Conference). It was a good performance and we found a way to get the two points."

Phoenix has a good chance to keep it going against the Sabres (9-24-3) before the league takes a short break for the holiday. Buffalo has won back-to-back games only twice this season, the second streak ending with Saturday's 4-1 road loss that closed a home-and-home set with Boston.

The Coyotes resume play against Pacific Division-rival San Jose next Friday, while the Sabres return to the ice the same night in Toronto.

Phoenix could use another strong road performance from Vermette. The center is tied with Shane Doan for the team lead with 12 goals, nine of which have come away from home. Vermette has six points in his past eight in Buffalo, but this will be his first game there with Phoenix.

Doan, meanwhile, will miss his eighth straight with what the team called a "form of Rocky Mountain fever," a bacterial disease that affects cells in the lining of blood vessels.

"Our medical team is on top of it," said Phoenix general manager Don Maloney. "Every day he seems like he's getting a little better and a little more energy and has started to exercise a little more."

Mike Smith was the star during the team's most recent trip to Buffalo, making 43 saves in a 4-2 victory on Nov. 19, 2011. He's won three straight against Sabres with a 1.33 goals-against average.

Smith, who stopped 37 shots against Ottawa, could get the nod against a Sabres team averaging a league-low 1.67 goals.

"It's tough to win in this league if you only have one line going and a couple of other guys and a goaltender," interim Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "Especially with us, we need a little bit more."

Buffalo, however, has recently shown some improvement by going 3-1-1 at home in December, including a pair of 4-2 victories in its last two.

A win over Phoenix would give the Sabres their longest home winning streak since a five-game run from Feb. 19-March 12, 2012.

Ryan Miller will likely be back in net after winning three straight home starts behind a 1.62 GAA. He's also won all four of his meetings with the Coyotes, compiling a 0.99 GAA and one shutout, though he hasn't faced them since Jan. 8, 2011.

Jhonas Enroth, who made 35 saves Saturday, started opposite Smith in the most recent matchup with Phoenix and stopped 25 of 28 shots.

Marcus Foligno has two goals and one assist over his past two home games. He scored a goal, recorded an assist and got into a fight against the Bruins on Thursday for the Gordie Howe hat trick.

Sabres need holiday gifts that keep on giving

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

December 23, 2013

The last-minute Christmas rush is on. Gifts will be flying off the shelves and hurriedly wrapped for presenting.

There are a few things the Sabres should have on their shopping list if they want to be a jollier team in the future, starting with tonight's home game against the Phoenix Coyotes.

- A No. 1 center.

The most glaring hole in the Sabres' lineup continues to be their lack of a top-notch, all-around center. They've needed one since the summer of 2007.

Despite the six-year contract Cody Hodgson signed prior to the season, he isn't suited for the role, at least not yet. The 23-year-old has eight goals and 19 points in 33 games. Florida is the only team whose top center has fewer points (Jonathan Huberdeau, 15).

Despite the low numbers, offense is Hodgson's high point. During the newest "Beyond Blue & Gold" video series produced by the team, Hodgson reveals during an on-ice chat with coach Ted Nolan, "I play much better when I have the puck." It's comical in its truthfulness.

For those who prefer traditional stats, Hodgson is minus-10. Advanced stats show that during close games he has been outscored, 18-6, by opponents who have a 350-229 edge in shot attempts. The Sabres need a star two-way center.

- Skilled forwards with a scoring touch.

With the exception of Matt Moulson, who put up nearly half his stats with the Islanders, no Sabres rank in the top 130 in scoring.

Further proof Buffalo can't find the net comes in the form of its shooting percentages. The Sabres are last in the NHL at 6.3 percent. Ville Leino hasn't scored on 20 shots in 23 games. Drew Stafford has scored on just 3.5 percent of his team-high 86 shots. The only regulars above 10 percent are Marcus Foligno (13.5 percent) and Moulson (10.7 percent).

- Desperate trade partners.

One way to hasten the rebuild is to flip the marketable commodities into something more. That means aggressively investigating the trade value of Ryan

Miller, Moulson and Steve Ott, three players who will be unrestricted free agents following the season.

There's no doubt the Sabres are a better team with Miller in the crease. With the Olympics in his sights, he has a save percentage of .922. Jhonas Enroth is at .909.

Still, historical data shows goalies suffer a drop-off starting at age 34. The 33-year-old could put together a late-career run like Dominik Hasek or Martin Brodeur, but it makes little sense to bet on that in the form of a long-term contract.

Ott wants to stay, but he is aware UFAs are big business. Besides, there's no rule against the Sabres trading him at the deadline and then re-signing him in the summer. St. Louis did it with Keith Tkachuk in 2007, getting a player and first-, second- and third-round drafts picks for a guy who was gone after just 22 games.

- Patience.

The Sabres have potential building blocks in place. They just happen to be several years away from being reliable contributors.

Zemgus Girgensons, 19, has the makings of a hard-working leader. Rasmus Ristolainen and Nikita Zadorov, this year's first-round draft picks, might mature into defensive stalwarts. Mark Pysyk, 21, has the mind-set to be a shutdown blue-liner. It will take time, though.

The Sabres will skate into First Niagara Center tonight as an improved team, one that has points in four of its last six games. They still will enter the three-day Christmas break Tuesday as one of the NHL's neediest clubs.

Coyotes after important two points against Sabres

By Brian Hunter

NHL.com

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COYOTES (19-10-6) at SABRES (9-24-3)

TV: FS-A PLUS, MSG-B, BELL TV

Last 10: Phoenix 4-4-2; Buffalo 4-4-2

Season series: This is the first of two games between the Phoenix Coyotes and Buffalo Sabres. They face off for the first time since Nov. 19, 2011, when Mike Smith stopped 43 shots, Radim Vrbata scored a pair of goals and Paul Bissonnette had the game-winner as Phoenix won 4-2 in Buffalo.

Big story: Currently the No. 9 seed in the Western Conference, the Coyotes are after an important two points Monday and can't afford to overlook a Sabres team that despite having the fewest points in the NHL has made strides of late and won consecutive games before dropping the back end of a home-and-home Saturday to the Boston Bruins.

Team Scope:

Coyotes: This is the finale of a four-game road trip for Phoenix, which snapped a three-game losing streak Saturday afternoon with a come-from-behind 4-3 overtime win against the Ottawa Senators. The Coyotes had scored just a single goal in each of those defeats, but found an offensive spark in the form of Antoine Vermette.

The veteran forward, a longtime Senator, recorded a hat trick as the Coyotes erased a two-goal deficit. Vermette's power-play goal with 2:13 left in regulation knotted the score and he struck again at 2:23 of the extra period. Vrbata also scored and Smith made 37 saves.

"When you're in a little bit of a slide it's a character win when you're down," defenseman Keith Yandle said. "Everyone did a good job getting into it and trying to get the win. There was a lot of desperation in the third when we were trying to find ourselves a goal and get back into the game. When it's crunch time it amps up a little bit but it's fun."

Sabres: Not only did Buffalo's 4-2 win against Boston at First Niagara Center on Thursday give the Sabres consecutive victories for only the second time this season, it was a huge statement knocking off the top team in the Atlantic Division.

Going for the sweep Saturday in Boston and a three-game winning streak, the Sabres were undone by an inability to convert on six power-play opportunities, including a 5-on-3 for 1:49 midway through the second period and another two-man advantage in the third negated by a Buffalo penalty.

"It's disappointing," forward Ville Leino told the Buffalo News, "because we've been playing so good and we didn't give our best."

Who's hot: Mikkel Boedker has three goals and three assists in the past six games for the Coyotes. ... Matt Moulson has two goals and one assist in the past four games for the Sabres.

Injury report: Phoenix defenseman Zbynek Michalek (lower body) and forward Shane Doan (illness) are on injured reserve. ... Buffalo forward Cody Hodgson (upper body) is day-to-day. Forward Cody McCormick (upper body) is on injured reserve.

South Buffalo native Tim Kennedy playing regularly with Coyotes, ready to face Sabres

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 23, 2013

BUFFALO – Finally, more than three years after the leaving the Sabres, Tim Kennedy's career appears to be on an upswing again.

The South Buffalo native has spent the last month as a Phoenix Coyotes regular, mostly playing left wing on a top line beside Radim Vrbata and Martin Hanzal. Kennedy skated 19:05 on Thursday, just 11 seconds less than his career high.

It's been a long, arduous journey for Kennedy since the Sabres unexpectedly waived him in August 2010 following a large arbitration award. The Coyotes are already the 27-year-old's fifth NHL team.

"It's been a struggle here the last few years ever since I left here," Kennedy said Sunday inside the First Niagara Center after the Coyotes prepared for tonight's tilt against the Sabres. "But I'm just trying to find my niche on a team. This month's been good here."

Kennedy's already on his third recall this season. Of course, by now he's used to going up and down and moving around. He's played for eight AHL and NHL teams over the last four years.

"It's tough," said Kennedy, who's also played for the New York Rangers, Florida Panthers and San Jose Sharks. "When you leave the team you get drafted (to), the next team doesn't have stock in you. So you reprove yourself to a different set of staff, scouts, coaches. So it just takes a while.

"I think if you would've told me when I'm 18, 19 that I'd be doing this for a living, I would take that."

Kennedy finally stuck in the NHL again last season, spending the final four months with San Jose after playing well in Worcester during the lockout.

Why did he choose Phoenix?

"Just after talking to their GM and assistant GM I thought this was the best opportunity to play most of the year up here," Kennedy said. "I didn't have the best camp I wanted to. I had to go down to Portland, work hard."

Kennedy, however, didn't last long in Portland, a place he starred with the Pirates as an AHL rookie with the Sabres in 2008-09. He has one goal and six points in 20 games with Phoenix.

Coyotes coach Dave Tippett, who believes Kennedy had a good camp, called him “a real good find for us.”

“We fell into injuries and we started using him, and he’s kind of earned his ice time,” Tippett said. “He’s a player that can play quick. His tenacity on the puck is really good. He’s fit in pretty well with Hanzal (and) Vrbata because he can make a good play. He’s fearless going to the net.”

That quickness and fearlessness, along with some versatility – attributes that helped Kennedy compile 10 goals and 26 points in 78 games here in 2009-10, his only full NHL season – has helped Kennedy stay up most of 2013.

“I can play wing or I can play center,” Kennedy said. “The league today, it’s just getting faster and faster. So you have to play with speed, and I think that’s what I bring to the table. I play with speed, skill and just grit.”

The Sabres’ recent changes – general manager Darcy Regier was fired last month after 16 years and Ted Nolan’s their third coach in less than a year – surprised Kennedy.

“It’s unfortunate what happened here,” he said. “The staff that was here, they gave me my chance and they gave me my break. ... Things were going rough here for a while, and they really changed it really quick. I was actually shocked when it happened. I didn’t think it would happen that quick in season. But it did. They seem to be turning things around here.”

Tonight will be Kennedy’s fourth game against the Sabres and his third here as an opponent. He still makes his offseason home in West Seneca.

“It’s still special playing here,” he said. “It’s just another game on the road.”

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The Sabres had Sunday off.