



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres-Senators Preview

By Nicolino DiBenedetto

Associated Press

February 6, 2014

The Ottawa Senators have two players headed to the Olympics, but Kyle Turris isn't one of them.

Turris looks to continue his impressive scoring stretch and help the Senators to another victory against the league-worst Buffalo Sabres on Thursday night.

Star defenseman Erik Karlsson will be part of Team Sweden in Sochi and left wing Milan Michalek is on the Czech Republic's Olympic roster.

Turris may not be on Canada's team, but he's certainly proving to be valuable for Ottawa (25-21-11).

He ranks second on the team with career highs of 19 goals and 43 points, while his plus-18 rating leads the Senators. He's scored 12 of those goals - including three game-winners - during an 11-4-5 stretch.

Turris came up big again Tuesday, scoring the equalizer in a three-goal third period before netting the decisive tally in the shootout of a 5-4 victory at St. Louis. That performance helped Ottawa become the first Eastern Conference team this season to leave St. Louis with a point.

"To have the type of response we had in the third, to tie it up, to get the two points in a tough building against a very good team is huge," Turris said.

He has 10 points in his last 10 meetings with the Sabres (15-33-8), including assists on goals by Bobby Ryan and Zack Smith in a 2-1 home victory Dec. 12.

Karlsson was held without a point in that meeting, after tallying five goals and one assist in his previous four at home.

The Senators are 8-1-2 in their last 11 meetings with Buffalo, including 4-0-1 at home.

Craig Anderson has played a big part in that success, winning seven straight starts against the Sabres with a 1.27 goals-against average. He made 40 saves opposite Ryan Miller in the December win.

Anderson could get the call after Robin Lehner stopped 46 shots in Tuesday's victory.

It's unclear if Miller will start on back-to-back nights after he had 29 saves in a 5-1 loss to Pittsburgh on Wednesday. This would be Miller's last chance to make a

case to be the United States' starting goalie at the Olympics since this is Buffalo's final contest before the break.

Miller has allowed five goals in each of his last two starts, losing both.

"That had nothing to do with Ryan," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "It was the guys in front of him. Our team, we need everyone. We had a couple of guys no-show."

Miller has lost three of his last four starts in Ottawa despite a 2.47 GAA, while backup Jhonas Enroth is 3-1-1 with a 2.52 GAA in five career meetings.

Enroth, who will be teammates with Karlsson in Sochi, is 0-9-4 with a 3.07 GAA in 15 games since his only win at Florida on Oct. 25.

Drew Stafford has scored in back-to-back games after missing four with an upper-body injury. The right wing has only two goals in 18 career games at Ottawa, and none in 11 straight.

The Senators visit Boston on Saturday before the extended layoff.

Crosby leads Penguins to 5-1 win over Sabres

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

February 5, 2014

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) -- Sidney Crosby still has Ryan Miller's number after scoring a highlight-reel go-ahead goal in Pittsburgh's 5-1 victory over the Buffalo Sabres on Wednesday night.

That's fine with Penguins coach Dan Bylsma, so long as that trend doesn't continue once the Winter Games open next week.

"I was cheering the goal this time," said Bylsma, who will be switching hats in Sochi, where he will be coaching Miller on the U.S. team. "It did dawn on me as Sid was going in and he scores that goal."

Crosby, Canada's captain, had a goal and assist in a pre-Olympic tuneup in which the Eastern Conference-leading Penguins (40-15-2) set a franchise record by reaching 40 wins in 57 games. That eclipsed the previous mark of 40 wins in 65 games in 1995-96.

Evgeni Malkin, James Neal, Brian Gibbons and minor-league call-up Harry Zolnierczyk also scored in a game the Penguins overcame a 1-0 deficit.

Drew Stafford scored for the NHL's worst team, and Miller finished with 29 saves. Buffalo (15-33-8) dropped to 4-9-4 in its past 17 and winless in its last eight home games (0-5-3). That's the Sabres' worst home stretch since opening the season 0-8-1.

For Crosby, he scored his first goal in six games and also ended a two-game point drought.

That it happened against Buffalo and Miller shouldn't come as a surprise. Crosby has at least a point in all 14 trips to Buffalo (9 goals and 13 assists). And he has been particularly sharp at beating Miller, including the gold-medal winning overtime goal in Canada's 3-2 victory at the Vancouver Games four years ago.

"He made some big saves tonight," Crosby said in defense of Miller. "Can't blame him. He held his team in it. And we scored some nice goals."

The performance didn't sit well with Miller, but he doesn't think it will carry over to the Olympics.

"It's game-by-game. Stuff happens out there and you reset," Miller said.

Sabres coach Ted Nolan had his goalie's back.

"That had nothing to do with Ryan tonight," Nolan said. "It was the guys in front of him. Our team, we need everyone. We had a couple of guys no-show tonight."

That was evident on Crosby's goal, which came on the power play 2:08 into the second period, and put the Penguins up 2-1.

Immediately after Marc-Andre Fleury stopped Buffalo's Brian Flynn in close, Crosby circled his own net and built up a head of steam by driving up the left wing. Accepting Matt Niskanen's pass while crossing center, Crosby didn't break stride in cutting between Flynn and Mike Weber. He then drove toward the net and snapped a shot just inside the top right corner.

Neal joked that he's seen Crosby score goals like that so many times that he didn't even celebrate, but instead simply headed to the bench.

Miller had no chance some 17 minutes later, when Malkin scored on the breakaway.

Pouncing on Marcus Foligno's turnover inside the Penguins' blue line, Malkin streaked past flat-footed defender Jamie McBain. Driving in alone on Miller, he faked going right and went left to deposit the puck in the open side.

Miller is one of the three U.S. goalies selected to play at Sochi, and the game against the Penguins was regarded his last chance to make a firsthand impression on Bylsma.

Bylsma has yet to name his starter, and maintained that Miller's performance on Wednesday would have no influence on his decision.

Miller was coming off his worst outing of the season. He was benched after giving up five goals on 27 shots through two periods in a 7-1 loss at Colorado on Saturday.

He allowed three goals on 28 shots through two periods before the floodgates opened in the third. Gibbons scored off a face off, and Neal on a transition break.

"The first period we weren't very sharp," Crosby said. "Yeah, we took a little bit of time to get going, but once we did, I felt like we did grab a lot of momentum there."

NOTES: The Sabres played without D Tyler Myers, who hurt his right leg in a 3-2 loss to Edmonton on Monday. Coach Ted Nolan has not ruled out Myers from playing in their pre-Olympic break finale at Ottawa on Thursday. ... Zolnierczyk stepped into the lineup a day after being recalled from AHL Wilkes-Barre/Scranton. He replaced Taylor Pyatt (lower body), who was hurt in a 2-1 overtime win over Ottawa on Monday. ... The Penguins completed a three-game series sweep of the Sabres, and improved to 12-4 in their past 16 meetings.

Miller, Sabres feel the burn against Penguins

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

February 5, 2014

If Ryan Miller is fortunate enough to face Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin in the Olympics, he'll have a lot more backup than he had Wednesday. It's not a fair fight when he's wearing a Buffalo jersey instead of a USA Hockey sweater.

Crosby and Malkin scored dazzling, breakaway goals Wednesday night against Miller, leading Pittsburgh to a 5-1 victory over the Sabres. It was the goaltender's last game in Buffalo before the Olympic break – and possibly his last with the Sabres if he's dealt before Friday's trade freeze – and he didn't have much of a chance to stop the team's free fall.

“Obviously, we gave up some chances where we kind of left him out to dry a little bit,” Sabres defenseman Jamie McBain said. “Olympics is only a couple days away for him, so obviously it was a big game for him, one of the last ones for him to kind of get a feel for the game before he heads out. It's a tough game.”

For the first time this season, Miller was short on answers. It was understandable since his Olympic coach, Pittsburgh's Dan Bylsma, had a front-row seat as goals filled Miller's net.

“Stuff happens out there, and you reset, learn from it and move on,” Miller said.

The goalie has worked hard the last few years on improving his mind-set. He doesn't let slumps or setbacks weigh on him like they once did, but his flight to Sochi this weekend could be a long one.

Coupled with Saturday's 7-1 loss in Colorado, in which he was pulled after 40 minutes, Miller has allowed 10 goals in two starts for his worst stretch of the season. It comes as he vies with Los Angeles' Jonathan Quick for America's starting job.

“That had nothing to do with Ryan tonight,” Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. “Our team, we need everyone. We had a couple guys no-show tonight. Playing one of the better teams in the league, you think they would be excited to play, and a couple weren't.”

While Miller might be on his way out of town, Nolan is expecting more from the guys who are set to stay. Buffalo fell for the 10th time in 12 games.

“You find out about people through difficult times,” Nolan said. “When things are going OK, you camouflage certain traits. Things like this, you find out who really wants to compete and who doesn't.”

“These are two different teams out there. This is one of the premier teams in the league, and they’re running for a Stanley Cup. Ours is in the early stages of trying to re-establish something here. You re-establish with the right attitudes, and with things like this you find out who’s in for the long haul and who wants to battle through difficult times.

“That’s a good team. I give them that. But that doesn’t stop you from trying to compete against them.”

Buffalo’s Drew Stafford scored the opening goal in First Niagara Center, but Pittsburgh steadily and impressively took control as the Sabres’ slump stretched to 2-7-3.

Crosby, Miller’s nemesis on the Canadian Olympic team, turned the game in Pittsburgh’s direction early in the second. Crosby sent viewers scrambling for replays, dancing between Brian Flynn and Mike Weber near the blue line for a breakaway.

Crosby stared down Miller, then put a pinpoint laser over the goalie’s glove into the top corner to awe the announced crowd of 18,408.

Malkin, a Russian Olympian, also beat Miller with a second-period breakaway. He picked up a loose puck at center ice, slipped around McBain then fought off the defenseman’s hook. Malkin deked right, went left and easily deposited the goal to make it 3-1.

The Sabres merely watched as the rest of the game unfolded.

“They got loose a few times and I didn’t set it up very well,” Miller said. “I got a lefty coming down across the center of the ice in Malkin, and he went the other way. I can’t give him room to come back. I missed two chip checks on the first and third goal, and they score on them. I don’t get all of it, that’s how it goes. In-tight plays I’ve got to disrupt that.

“They spent some time in our zone, and that was kind of the difference.”

Goalie Miller poised to lead USA hockey

By Jerry Sullivan

Buffalo News

February 6, 2014

SOCHI, Russia — Four years ago, for a few magical days in February, he was “America’s goalie.” Ryan Miller carried the U.S. to within an eyelash of an Olympic gold medal, inspiring even casual hockey fans to gather in patriotic thrall in front of their TVs.

Back in Buffalo, people bonded in civic pride, watching Miller occupy the world spotlight and lift the American team. It was crushing when he lost, but still a rare fine moment for Sabres fans, who welcomed him like a conquering hero when he returned home as the Olympic MVP.

So it’s amazing to think that, just a few months ago, the men in charge of selecting this year’s U.S. team were wondering whether Miller was good enough for the Olympics this time around.

“I think I was on the outside looking in,” Miller said. “The way people were talking, yeah, it did kind of sting. I think it was more a testament to the way USA goaltending has developed the last few years. It’s great for U.S. hockey, but at the same time, you don’t want to be pushed out of the equation.”

Miller, who had been fairly average since his Vezina season in 2010, did the same thing he had before those Games: He played some of the best hockey of his life, making a persuasive case that he is still one of the best goalies in the game, surely one of the top three in the U.S.

As the Sabres staggered to the worst record in the NHL, Miller became the league’s busiest, and maybe its best, goaltender. As of last Friday, he was 14-20-3, with an ordinary 2.59 goals-against. But his save percentage (.927) was fifth in the NHL, career-wise second only to his .929 in 2010.

The USA hockey folks must have noticed that the closer he gets to another Olympics, the better Miller plays. Over a 16-game stretch from Dec. 10 to last Thursday’s win in Phoenix, Miller was 9-4-3 with a .940 save percentage. Considering the talent around him, that’s astonishing.

Jonathan Quick, who led the Kings to the Stanley Cup in 2012, is a strong contender to start in goal for the U.S. But he’s coming back from a groin injury and doesn’t have Miller’s international experience. Jimmy Howard of the Red Wings is the other goalie.

Amherst native Brooks Orpik, 33, is back for another Olympics and joins Miller as one of the elder statesmen. The Penguins defenseman gained a deepened regard for Miller in Vancouver.

“I definitely appreciated his skill level a lot more and the things behind the scenes you don’t see,” Orpik said. “Of any goalie I’ve played with, he’s been the most prepared before the games, mentally and physically. He’s definitely a pretty intense guy, and on the flip side he’s also a really nice person and a soft-spoken guy.”

“But when it comes to hockey, not just goalies, he’s one of the most prepared athletes you’ll find.”

Dan Bylsma, the U.S. coach, hasn’t picked a No. 1 goalie. Historically, the Americans have used more than one goalie to find which one is hot. Bylsma, head coach of the Penguins, will want to see if Miller has retained the magic of four years ago.

Miller is rising to the challenge, as he did in Vancouver. He’s not afraid to say he wants that moment again. He wants the pressure of the big stage.

It’s clear that he feels he has earned it.

“It’s all about going out and establishing yourself,” Miller said. “I like both those guys as people, and I think they’re great goaltenders. But I want the opportunity, and if I don’t have it, I’ll wish them the best and be a good teammate.”

“But if you’re competitive, you want to be the guy in the moment.”

Miller, at 33 the oldest U.S. player (two months older than Orpik), says he has matured since 2010. He’s married now and says he has more balance in his life. He said certain aspects of hockey don’t loom as large as before.

“I hope in the last four years I’ve grown as a person and as a player,” he said, “calmed myself down to the point where emotionally I can be in any game and I can be effective. It’s just a matter of getting the opportunity.”

The U.S. team is older and more mature, with 13 players back from the silver medalists of 2010. They won’t surprise anyone this time. They’re expected to contend. Of course, the field is deeper and more talented than ever. There are 150 current NHL players on the 12 rosters.

It’s Miller’s last shot at gold. It might be the last shot for the NHL players, at least for the time being. NHL officials feel shutting down their sport in midseason is a needless interruption and bad for business. The league isn’t likely to take part in the 2018 Games in South Korea.

“February is a big month for the NHL,” said Sabres defenseman Henrik Tallinder, who will play for Sweden. “It’s basically all that’s going on, except basketball. It’s a huge profit month.”

The NHL was reluctant to take part this time, but eventually relented, in part because superstars Alex Ovechkin and Evgeni Malkin said they would play for Russia regardless.

There is enormous pressure on Russia to win on home soil. They haven't taken gold since 1992, when the "Unified Team" won in the wake of the Soviet Union's breakup. The Soviets had won gold in seven of eight Games before that.

These are seen as President Vladimir Putin's Olympics, an attempt to show the world the Russians are still a thriving culture. They're expected to win.

Igor Larionov, who won two golds in the 1980s while playing for the Soviets, said if Russia wins gold in hockey and no other medals, the Olympics will be a success.

Russia certainly has talent. It has Ovechkin, Malkin and Pavel Datsyuk. Ilya Kovalchuk, now in the KHL, will play. They have six solid defensemen and the reigning Vezina winner, Sergei Bobrovsky, in goal.

In recent years, the Russians have been criticized for selfish, undisciplined play, a stark change from the Soviet era. They hired coach Zinetula Bilyaletdinov, renowned for his conservative methods, to make 16 NHL and 9 KHL stars function as a team.

The competition will be fierce. Canada, the defending champion, has an embarrassment of riches at center: Sidney Crosby, Jonathan Toews, Ryan Getzlaf, John Tavares. But there are questions about the Canadians' goaltending and their speed.

Sweden, which won the '06 gold, has 24 NHL players on its 25-man roster. The "Tre Kronor" has the Sedin twins, Henrik Zetterberg and Erik Karlsson. They have an elite goalie in Henrik Lundqvist. The Sabres' Jhonas Enroth will be a backup.

"I think expectations are pretty high," Tallinder said. "Yeah, we have way more depth. The depth chart we have is way bigger this year than it's ever been. I think there's four or five teams that can win this thing. Anyone can have a good day and beat a good team."

It promises to be a thrilling tournament. The difference between gold and sixth could come down to goaltending. Russia and the U.S., who are in the A group, meet in a Feb. 15 preliminary. Will Bylsma use Miller against Russia to find out if his MVP aura carries over from 2010?

The men's gold-medal game is on Feb. 23, the culminating moment of the Games. Russia desperately wants to be there. It was a perfect ending four years ago, when

Canada and the U.S. met for the title in the climactic moment of an Olympics in North America.

It would be a gripping finale if Russia played for gold. That final would be almost too perfect. There's no telling whether the Americans can recapture what they had four years ago. But the world is ready. So is Ryan Miller.

"It's pretty amazing it's gone so fast," Miller said, "but it's another good opportunity. I'm the kind of player who wants to be in that situation. When you start to feel a lot of pressure and expectation, you have to look in the mirror and say, 'Don't hide from it. It's what you wanted.'"

Bylsma faces tough call on Olympic goalie

By Bucky Gleason

Buffalo News

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Dan Bylsma comes across as an ordinary guy, so it wasn't surprising to hear he was among the people during the 2010 Olympics. He was in a crowded restaurant, Primanti Bros., on the North Side of Pittsburgh, huddled around the television for the epic gold-medal game between the United States and Canada.

"I watched the overtime in a chair, a folding chair in the corner of that bar," Bylsma said before the Penguins' 5-1 victory over the Sabres in First Niagara Center. "I was sitting in the corner. It was a packed house. When Sid got the puck on the other side of the dot, I stood up and walked back to my table."

Of course he did.

Bylsma knew the outcome before the puck left Sidney Crosby's stick. He had watched Crosby up close for a year and won a Stanley Cup with him the previous season. Ryan Miller was criticized for giving up a soft winner in OT after getting caught with his stick out of position.

I'll go to my grave saying it wasn't a bad goal when you consider the source. Crosby was one of the few players in the world who had the quick and accurate release needed to beat Miller in that situation. He made a very good play look easy, and a very good goaltender look silly, on a world stage.

Crosby made the Sabres look silly Wednesday when he split Mike Weber and Brian Flynn in the second period and roofed a wrist shot into the top corner. Miller must have nightmares about Crosby, who has abused the Sabres with a point in each of his 14 career games in Buffalo and 17 straight overall. Many have come with Miller in net.

None was more memorable than the goal in Vancouver.

Bylsma had a unique perspective. He was an American who hailed from Michigan, Miller's home state, and was Crosby's boss. Rather than sympathize with Miller or cheer for Crosby, he examined the Olympics through the long lens of a coach. He imagined what decisions he would have made if he ran the show.

"You watch a game in the Olympics, and you have to make adjustments on the fly," Bylsma said. "I asked myself those questions. Was it preparation for eventually? That's the way I was treating it. I did think about it. I did dream about it. I did prepare for it. I didn't know if I would ever get the opportunity."

Four years later, it's here.

Bylsma will be opposite Crosby and alongside Miller when he coaches the U.S. team in the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi. Bylsma has proved to be a very good NHL coach. He was a gritty fourth-line winger over nine seasons, one who stayed in the league because he played with energy and intelligence.

His first major decision with Team USA will be determining his top goaltender. Good luck.

Miller was the best player in Vancouver. He carried the Americans to the final game, became the name and face of USA Hockey and won the Vezina Trophy. Jonathan Quick emerged two years later when he took home the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP after leading the Kings to the Stanley Cup.

Some wondered if there was a changing of the guard among U.S. goalies, and many expected the younger Quick to take over for Miller.

Bylsma was trying to not tip his hand Wednesday. Perhaps I read him wrong, or maybe he still hadn't decided, but it sounded like he was leaning toward Miller. Bylsma could give each a turn in the first two matchups and see what happens. We'll know more after the second game, against host Russia.

"I've been asked a lot of different ways, and I was asked a little differently in L.A.," Bylsma said with a laugh. "There's no question that Ryan Miller, by all accounts, was the best player maybe in the tournament in Vancouver. He backstopped the U.S. team to a gold-medal game. He was the biggest reason for that.

"Heck, I'm a Miller family fan. I grew up in Michigan. It's not just Ryan's face or name in USA or American hockey. Ryan certainly has been that. He's had more than one USA mask on his face, and he certainly was that in 2010."

What to do? Take Ted Nolan's advice, and flip a coin.

It's hard to make heads or tails of the situation. I'm not sure about Quick, but I know Miller. Some players are motivated by money, others by respect. Miller, in a season he would otherwise rather forget, has been motivated by the Olympics. He's been gearing up for them all year, which is one reason he maintained his sanity.

Bylsma said Miller's performance Wednesday against the Penguins would have no bearing on his decision. Miller has been terrific on a poor team. He fell to 14-22-3 this season even though he was tied for sixth in save percentage (.925) among goalies who had played at least 20 games this season.

Save percentage is the most telling statistic on a bad team. Quick had a 15-13-2 record and a .907 save percentage in 31 games. He has lost four straight and was

pulled after giving up three goals on seven shots last week against Pittsburgh. Miller has allowed 10 goals on 61 shots in his past two games.

Bylsma doesn't know how either will respond in Sochi any more than someone sitting at the bar. He'll follow his instincts knowing people will be watching on television, just like he was four years ago when Crosby fulfilled a dream. Bylsma's job in Sochi is figuring out a way to turn the tables.

"We all have dreams," Bylsma said. "My earliest memory was 1980, when Eric Heiden was speedskating around the track and the U.S. team won the gold medal. I wanted to win a goal medal way before I wanted to win a Stanley Cup. How did a kid from Grand Haven, Mich., get this opportunity? I don't know.

"It's been one of my goals for seven years. I've worked for this opportunity. And now I have it. It's my biggest honor and my biggest responsibility of my career."

Nolan has Latvian team riding high hopes

By Jerry Sullivan

Buffalo News

February 6, 2014

SOCHI, Russia — Ted Nolan admits he wasn't the most attentive observer when he began scouting Latvian pro hockey games after becoming the national coach in the summer of 2011.

"I was more excited watching the fans than the players," Nolan said. "It was interesting for me, as a First Nation" Ojibway Indian, "to see people in the stands with headdresses and war paint on their face. I've never met a native over there. I don't know where it started, but they wear regalia.

"It's a hockey-crazed country. They just love the game. If the players played with as much energy as the fans, they would be a world power."

Latvia, a Baltic nation of 2 million, is no world power. But no team does more with less, or has such a devoted following. The Latvian fans flock to the games in their maroon-and-gold, chanting and blaring horns, pounding drums, then heading out to celebrate peaceably in the streets afterward, win or lose.

Next week, Latvia will compete in its fourth straight Olympics. They're a huge underdog. Latvia's most renowned player is Sandis Ozolinsh, a former NHL star defenseman. He's 41. Their best current NHL player is Sabres rookie Zemgus Girgensons, who is 19. They have a handful of players who had brief careers in the NHL. Most are in the KHL, the pro league based in Russia.

Latvia has never reached the quarterfinals of an Olympics. They won a ninth-place game in 2002 and went winless in '06 and '10. Four years ago, they were outscored, 19-4, in three preliminary games, then lost in overtime in the qualifications to finish 10th out of 12 teams.

But Nolan is no stranger to challenge. This is a guy who grew up poor on a reservation in Canada, without running water, convinced he would one day play in the NHL. As a kid, he pumped well water in minus-20 degree weather to make his own ice rink.

So when Latvia came calling, Nolan was all ears. He still had coaching in his blood. But that poor kid from the reservation had one driving motivation:

"To go the Olympics is every kid's dream," Nolan said last week. "That was the main reason why I went there. That was the drawing card for me."

First, they had to qualify. Latvia wasn't among the top nine in the world rankings, the automatic qualifiers. They had to win a four-team tournament (with Great

Britain, France and Kazakhstan) to get in, which was held in the Latvian capital of Riga.

They won the first two and needed only a tie against France in the final game to make it. They fell behind, 2-0, but rallied to force OT and earn the bid. It was bedlam at the end, with people waving flags and weeping and chanting "Lat-via!" as a joyous Nolan hugged his coaches and players along the bench.

"I know the celebrations they had over there because of what the hockey team did," said Pat LaFontaine, the Sabres' president. "Teddy was a big part of that. He's looked upon in Latvia like Bobby Valentine was in Japan when he won the championship. They had a parade and honored Ted."

Nolan was in Germany in November, returning from an exhibition series against Russia, when he got a call from LaFontaine asking him to coach the Sabres. He was so excited, he could barely speak. After saying yes, Nolan mentioned Latvia, how they'd worked two and a half years to get to the Olympics.

"You got them to this point, you should be there to see it through," LaFontaine said. "The league is shutting down. What a great experience for you."

"That would be great," Nolan said. "I'd love to do that."

So Nolan will be behind the bench next Wednesday when Latvia plays Switzerland in a Group C preliminary. The Swiss are the lowest-ranked of the automatic qualifiers. The other teams in Group C are the Czechs and Sweden, ranked third and fourth in the world.

"I believe in miracles, I really do," Nolan said, smiling. "If you look at the '80 Olympics ..."

The U.S. win over the Soviets was the "Miracle on Ice," the inspiration for movies and books. But those were simpler times, before the tournament was open to the actual pros. Many of today's rosters are stacked with NHL stars. Latvian winning would be a true fairy tale.

"It would probably be bigger than (1980)," Nolan said. "But we don't have a bad team. We actually have a pretty good team."

"If we go far, it's definitely a miracle," said Girgensons, expected to be on Nolan's top line. "But tournaments like this, anything can happen. It's not an 82-game season. Every game we've got to think we're going to win. Maybe we need a little bit of luck. A goalie gets hot."

Latvia has a hot goalie. Kristers Gudlevskis, 21, was the 124th pick in last year's NHL draft by Tampa Bay. Gudlevskis, the second-ever Latvian goalie draftee

after Arturs Irbe, has four shutouts for the Syracuse Crunch of the AHL. He was AHL player of the week on Jan. 12.

Nolan hadn't announced a starter as of last week. Edgar Masalskis, 33, is a two-time Olympian. But Gudlevskis went 2-2 in last year's World championships, and Nolan said he's a goalie on the rise.

"I don't expect anything," Gudlevskis said by phone from Syracuse. "I just want to be in shape and ready, then we will see how it goes. It goes game by game. You never know what happens in Olympics. It's about opportunities and what you make of them."

Latvia has a fair chance to reach the quarterfinals for the first time. Their fans will travel south, from the Baltic to the Black Sea, ready to cheer their every move, thrilled to be part of it all.

"The odds aren't with them," LaFontaine said. "The fact they're there is a great testament to Latvia. There are some high-powered nations that should handle them pretty easily. But I know that Teddy as a coach will get everything out of those players, and they will play for him."

"You can never underestimate the heart of a Latvian, as we found with Girgensons. If they all have that same fire and passion for the game, watch out."

Sabres notebook: Crosby retains the upper hand

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

February 6, 2014

With the hockey tournament at the Sochi Olympics set to start in a week, Pittsburgh superstar and NHL scoring leader Sidney Crosby sent his usual messages to Ryan Miller on Wednesday night.

Crosby flat-out owns the Sabres and he's dogged Miller his entire career. No. 87 scored a highlight-reel goal and added an assist to continue his red-hot play against Buffalo in an easy 5-1 victory for the Penguins at First Niagara Center.

"It's nice to score. You try to go out there and do the same thing every night," said Crosby, who has 28 goals and 77 points this season. "Work hard and hope you get rewarded. It's nice when they go in."

Crosby extended his personal point streak against the Sabres dating to 2007 to 17 games (10 goals, 18 assists). And he has points in all 14 of his career games in the FNC (9-13-22).

Crosby entered the game pointless in back-to-back contests for just the second time this year. That little issue ended with his assist on Harry Zolnierczyk's goal at 4:59 left in the first period.

Crosby had no goals in his previous five games, his second-longest run of the year, and that ended at 2:08 of the second with a power-play laser under the crossbar. Crosby took a pass from defenseman Matt Niskanen and busted between the flat-footed duo of Mike Weber and Brian Flynn on the play to get a clear shot at Miller, who had no chance.

"I was able to come back and get some speed," Crosby said. "Nisky made a nice hard pass and gave me a lot of time to get through there. It's not always pretty sometimes on those breakouts but that one worked out well. You can't blame Miller, he held his team in it. We scored some nice goals tonight."

Crosby and Miller, of course, will be connected forever by Crosby's Golden Goal in overtime that won the gold-medal match for Canada against Team USA in the 2010 Vancouver Games, and for his shootout winner at Ralph Wilson Stadium in the 2008 Winter Classic.

"Both those players are going to be on opposite sides again in a couple weeks," said Pens coach and Team USA boss Dan Bylsma. "So it did dawn on me as Sid was going in. He scores the goal and I was cheering the goal this time."

Oddly enough, Crosby and Miller have been among a group of players working out in California the last two summers and had several talks during the lockout last year at players association meetings.

“The games are not something I’ve every really talked about with him,” Crosby said. “I’ve skated with him for a couple summers now. He’s a good guy, works hard. He loves to play and loves to compete. As far as the situations we’ve been in, it’s not a hot discussion topic but everybody tries to link those situations together.

“It’s in the past. We’re days away from the Olympics in Russia. Maybe after our careers, it’s something we talk about. There are other things we both want to accomplish.”

...

With the Olympic roster freeze coming Friday at 3 and creating a pseudo trade deadline, Sabres General Manager Tim Murray said his phone is ringing pretty steadily these days. And he confirmed Miller is one of the main topics.

“His status at this point is that he’s a Buffalo Sabre,” Murray said Wednesday during his weekly appearance on WGR Radio. “I’ve had talks with a couple of teams. They’ve showed some interest. They haven’t done anything yet to change that scenario. Talks are going on for a lot of players. There’s a lot of ideas being thrown about here the last few days. As of right now, nothing has changed with Ryan.”

Scouts from 16 teams were on hand in the press box Wednesday. Many of them are Southern Ontario residents who are regulars in the building but Detroit had two representatives who are not. The Red Wings are believed to be interested in Steve Ott and Henrik Tallinder.

...

The Sabres staged a pregame tribute for players and coaches from both teams heading to the Olympics. Miller, Tallinder, Jhonas Enroth and Zemgus Girgensons were honored in a video and were presented with their jerseys by children.

The Pittsburgh contingent, including Bylsma, was honored on the public-address system and Jumbotron. Miller, Crosby and East Amherst native Brooks Orpik got the biggest cheers.

...

The Sabres are 0-5-3 in their last eight home games – after going 6-0-1 in the seven before this skid. They don’t have a win downtown since beating New

Jersey, 2-1, on Jan. 4. The next home game is Feb. 25 against Carolina in a makeup of the Jan. 7 postponement. ... Tyler Myers' lower-body injury suffered Monday against Edmonton, believed to be to his knee, kept him out of the lineup. Chad Ruhwedel played in place of Myers, who Nolan said could play tonight.

Senators face must-win game vs. slumping Sabres

by John Kreiser

NHL.com

February 5, 2014

SABRES (15-33-8) at SENATORS (25-21-11)

TV: MSG-B, BELL TV, SNET-E

Last 10: Buffalo 2-6-2; Ottawa 4-3-3

Season series: The Ottawa Senators have earned five of a possible six points against the Buffalo Sabres this season. Ottawa won the last meeting, 2-1 at Canadian Tire Centre on Dec. 12.

Big story: The Senators enter the game one point out of a playoff berth in the Eastern Conference and can't afford to lose to the 30th-place Sabres at home. They're back home and trying to build on one of their best wins of the season, a come-from-behind 5-4 shootout victory against the St. Louis Blues on Tuesday.

Team Scope:

Sabres: Coach Ted Nolan knows his team isn't going to the Stanley Cup Playoffs. The Sabres are last in the overall standings and were beaten soundly by the Pittsburgh Penguins on Wednesday, allowing five unanswered goals in a 5-1 home loss.

But Nolan said games like the one against the Penguins will help the Sabres find out which players they want to keep going forward.

"You find out who's in for the long haul and who wants to battle through difficult times," he said. "That's a good team. Give them that. But that doesn't stop you from trying to compete against them."

Senators: Ottawa is looking for a better result than the last time it beat the Blues; an emotional 3-2 overtime win on Dec. 16 was followed by three straight losses. Coach Paul MacLean, who gave his team the day off on Wednesday, certainly expects a solid effort in the final two games before the Olympic break.

"This is a big game when you can come into a building like this and win on the road," MacLean said after his young team overcame a 3-1 third-period deficit.

"It certainly should give us a lot of confidence heading home to play Buffalo with two games left before the break."

Who's hot: Drew Stafford has goals in each of Buffalo's past two games and six points in the past five. ... Senators' captain Jason Spezza has seven points in Ottawa's past five games, including a goal and two assists in St. Louis.

Injury report: Buffalo defenseman Tyler Myers (lower body) sat out Wednesday. Forwards Cody McCormick (upper body) and Matt Moulson (upper body) are on injured reserve. ... Sabres defenseman Chris Phillips (undisclosed) and forward Mark Stone (upper body) didn't play Tuesday.

Crosby and Penguins roll over Sabres

By Joe Yerdon

NHL.com

February 5, 2014

BUFFALO -- This time, Dan Bylsma was happy to see Sidney Crosby score against Ryan Miller.

Crosby had the go-ahead goal in the second period and added an assist to lead the Pittsburgh Penguins to a 5-1 victory against the Buffalo Sabres at First Niagara Center on Wednesday night.

Crosby gave the Penguins a 2-1 lead 2:08 into the second period when he beat Miller during a power play. He took a pass from Matt Niskanen, split the Buffalo defense and then fired a wrist shot over Miller's shoulder for his 28th goal of the season.

Bylsma enjoyed Crosby's goal from behind the Penguins' bench. But he'll be coaching Miller, not Crosby, beginning next week when he leads the United States into the 2014 Sochi Olympics. Crosby beat Miller in overtime to give Canada the gold medal in Vancouver four years ago.

"It did dawn on me that both those players are going to be on opposite teams again in a couple of weeks," Bylsma said. "So it did dawn on me as Sid was going in and he scores the goal. I was cheering the goal this time."

Miller and the Sabres haven't had much success keeping Crosby off the scoresheet. Pittsburgh's captain has at least one point in 17 consecutive games against the Sabres, a streak that began on Dec. 29, 2007, and has 37 points in 25 career games against Buffalo, including an assist on Harry Zolnierczyk's first-period goal.

"I don't have a great explanation for it," Crosby said of his success against Buffalo. "I don't think about anything different when I play them... I've been involved in games where they have four guys in your zone buzzing around and that's not fun to play against either. So I think it's being opportunistic, and maybe some bounces too, but I don't try to change anything."

Buffalo (15-33-8) is last in the overall standings and has lost three in a row.

"Two different teams out there," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "This is one of the premier teams in the League. They're running for a Stanley Cup, and ours is in the early stages of trying to re-establish something here, and you establish with the right attitudes. ... You find out who's in for the long haul and who wants to battle through difficult times. That's a good team. Give them that. But that doesn't stop you from trying to compete against them."

The Sabres came out revved up and grabbed the lead 5:58 into the game when Drew Stafford stuffed a loose puck in the crease past goalie Marc-Andre Fleury. Stafford picked off a clearing attempt by Fleury along the boards and fired it on net. The rebound went to Tyler Ennis, whose wraparound attempt was stopped but rolled through the crease before Stafford jabbed it underneath Fleury for his ninth goal of the season.

"I thought Buffalo came out hard in the first with a hard forecheck," Bylsma said. "They gave us some problems with it. We turned over a couple pucks that led to the first goal, but I liked how we responded after that."

The Penguins (40-15-2) tied the game at 15:01 when Zolnierczyk, who was called up from the American Hockey League on Tuesday by the Penguins, took a pass from Craig Adams and fired a wrist shot past Miller for his second goal of the season.

"I thought it was a big goal by Harry Z.," Bylsma said. "Our first goal on a forecheck, physical up ice, and someone mentioned it looked like he knows what he's doing around the cage and a nice play from Adams. He goes backhand to forehand and puts it home. It's a big goal for us."

Pittsburgh's superstars took over in the second period.

After Crosby put the Penguins ahead to stay, Evgeni Malkin made it 3-1 at 17:48 when he beat Miller on a breakaway. Malkin poked the puck past defenseman Jamie McBain to create the 1-on-1 situation against Miller, then deked and slid the puck into the net for his 17th goal of the season.

"The [third] goal was really a killer," Nolan said. "They're a very good team. When you have a soft dump-in and Malkin gets the puck, he was looking for a breakaway. That's just bad, bad playing on our part."

The Penguins outshot the Sabres 15-9 in the second period and 34-25 overall

"I thought our second and third, that was more how we need to play and did play and played real well," Bylsma said. "We got our opportunities, and we got several on breakaways, but we got them from good defense. We were good positionally and that turned into the Malkin goal."

Brian Gibbons made it 4-1 at 5:22 of the third period with his fourth of the season when he beat Miller from the right circle after Brandon Sutter won a faceoff against Cody Hodgson straight back to him.

"It's nice to see [Gibbons] invented and created a new faceoff play for himself," Bylsma said. "I think he even celebrated on that goal."

Malkin added an assist on James Neal's 19th goal of the season with 7:48 left in regulation.

Sabres captain Steve Ott said his team continues to work hard despite being last in the overall standings.

"That's a good team over there that's obviously playing extremely well," Ott said. "We shot ourselves in the foot with a couple of turnovers in the second. But there's no lack of passion. Every guy's out there working hard trying to compete. ... Let's be honest, that's a good team."

Penguins-Sabres matchup offers several subplots

By Kevin Weekes

NHL.com

February 5, 2014

This week's Wednesday Night Rivalry features two teams in very different places as the Pittsburgh Penguins, who sit atop the Eastern Conference standings, visit the last-place Buffalo Sabres (7:30 p.m. ET, NBCSN, TSN2, RDS2). But there are plenty of compelling subplots to this game that we could still be discussing as the season plays out.

Starting with Pittsburgh, I'm definitely impressed by defenseman Matt Niskanen. He is having a hell of a year. He is a guy who is definitely playing above expectations and he's a pending unrestricted free agent, so he's going to get a lot of money either from Pittsburgh or someone else. Another young defenseman, Olli Maatta, has also been very impressive, especially for a 19-year-old. Both of these players found their game as the Penguins dealt with some major injuries on the back end.

Kris Letang has been injured and hasn't played at the same level, Paul Martin has been banged-up. Add that to injuries to Rob Scuderi and Brooks Orpik and there has been a great opportunity for Niskanen and Maatta to come in and play at the level they have.

Pittsburgh has a lot of talent on its roster but it's been goaltender Marc-Andre Fleury who has led the way. He's the first goalie to 30 wins this year, which says a lot to me. He worked on a couple of things in the offseason and has been awesome this year. How crucial is Fleury to this team? Just look at the constants for the Penguins in the last four regular seasons.

Pretty much everyone in that lineup has been injured at some point. Evgeni Malkin has been injured, Sidney Crosby has been injured, James Neal has been injured. You go up and down that roster, a lot of their main guys have been injured, especially this year. But Marc-Andre Fleury has been a constant for them.

The player we should be talking about more with the Penguins has been Jussi Jokinen, who is sitting on 41 points and is having a heck of a year as an important complementary player. Not the fastest player on that team, but very skilled and sees the game very well. He can also play every forward position, so he's a very versatile player who can play in any situation and has been a real nice acquisition for them.

As far as Buffalo goes, they are in a "wait and see" situation right now. Ryan Miller has been awesome and will likely be playing in net against Pittsburgh. He's been a standout in the crease but he's an impending free agent and it doesn't look like he's decided if he wants to remain in Buffalo or not. A lot of the direction of

this franchise hinges on how they handle this situation. I've also been told that a lot of teams have been inquiring about Steve Ott as well as Tyler Ennis. Matt Moulson is also a pending UFA, so he could be on the move as well.

So what will this Buffalo Sabres team look like between the roster freeze and the NHL Trade Deadline? A lot of it is predicated on those players.

On the other end, there are some players in Buffalo they can build around for the future. Zemgus Girgensons has been really impressive since he came back. He's played a lot better and he's only a young kid. He's a guy that has been making some great plays, especially in the offensive end. A lot of these potential moves could open up more ice and opportunities for players like Girgensons and Cody Hodgson, who has played better in this past stretch.

Buffalo definitely has pieces it can build around, but I'd like to see a lot more out of Marcus Foligno. I think this guy can be a very good player. He's strong and can play, but I don't think he's anywhere near where he could be based on his skill set.

With so many storylines swirling around their team, the young Sabres could look to send a message against one of the NHL's best teams.

A work in progress: A month into his new job, Tim Murray blunt in assessment of Buffalo roster

By Ken Warren

Ottawa Citizen

February 5, 2014

As Buffalo Sabres general manager Tim Murray was driving home to Shawville, he didn't mince words about the current state of his bottom-of-the-barrel NHL franchise, which plays the Ottawa Senators here Thursday.

"We need a lot more depth than we have, we need better people in every position," said Murray, now a month into his new post after leaving his former job as Senators assistant general manager.

Indeed, the Sabres sit 30th and dead last in the NHL standings – with just 15 wins in 55 games before Wednesday's game against Pittsburgh – and have averaged fewer than two goals per game, among the worst offensive outputs in league history.

There is, however, a present for the present ugliness.

If he were so inclined, Murray might even allow himself a slight smile before he goes back on the road to scout the minors and the junior hockey ranks during the NHL's Olympic break.

He's in the unique position of being the chief architect of the future of the franchise, his pockets full with six selections in the first two rounds of the next two NHL Drafts. The Sabres have the best odds of landing either Aaron Ekblad or Sam Reinhart with the first overall choice in June (as part of the Thomas Vanek trade, the New York Islanders hold the option on whether to trade away their first-round pick to Buffalo in 2014 or 2015).

Murray will also be an NHL power broker during the next few weeks, playing his rival general managers against each other in the quest for all-star goaltender Ryan Miller and scoring winger Matt Moulson in advance of the March 5 trade deadline. For Miller, the rumoured landing spots include Minnesota, Washington and St. Louis (after the Senators' 5-4 shootout win over St. Louis Tuesday, the Blues should be having second thoughts about current No. 1 goaltender Jaroslav Halak being good enough to carry them to the Stanley Cup). Don't rule out the Senators in the trade talks, either, as they're possibly looking for a taste of Moulson as a finisher for captain Jason Spezza in the run to the playoffs.

Regardless of where Miller and Moulson end up, it's safe to assume the Sabres will get even more prospects and high draft picks in return.

Murray is all ears, waiting for his phone to ring.

“Not a lot of teams want to trade their best young prospects,” Murray says. “But there could be some young guys stuck on good teams who aren’t happy.”

For all the headaches owner Terry Pegula has endured since buying the team in 2011 -- including the overspending by former general manager Darcy Regier on free agents Christian Ehrhoff and Ville Leino, the well-documented struggles of 24-year-old defenceman Tyler Myers after re-signing his long-term deal, the pre-season black cloud surrounding disgraced former coach Ron Rolston and heavyweight John Scott, and the atrocious start to the current season – there is plenty of talent within the system.

There’s the looming presence of a pair of twin towers on the Buffalo horizon: Defencemen Rasmus Ristolainen and Nikita Zadorov. Ristolainen, 6-4 and 219 pounds, chosen eighth overall in the 2012 draft, scored the gold medal-winning goal for Finland at the world junior tournament, and is now playing for Rochester in the American Hockey League. Zadorov, 6-5 and 221 pounds, and the 16th overall choice last summer, is scoring at a point per game pace for London of the Ontario Hockey League after starting the year in Buffalo. Mark Pysyk, another first rounder from 2010, is also on the cusp of being an NHL regular.

In addition, the talented but enigmatic Mikhail Grigorenko, the Sabres’ 12th overall selection in 2012, is currently playing with Quebec in the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League after being on a yo-yo ride between the NHL and junior for the past couple of seasons.

Murray has spent the first month of his tenure trying to get a read on all of the above.

“I think I knew the big team pretty well (before joining Buffalo), but I now have a better impression of a couple of guys,” he says.

As the owner of so many draft picks and so many prospects, Murray can afford to pick and choose which to keep and which he could possibly deal for veterans. The Sabres currently have only nine players signed to NHL contracts next season and Murray acknowledges there will be an effort at “changing the culture, a little bit.”

Murray, like the rest of the NHL, has also watched closely as the the Edmonton Oilers have provided the NHL with a living example of the failed experiment of throwing together talented young players -- Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, Taylor Hall, Nail Yakupov and Jordan Eberle -- expecting them to have instant success without surrounding them with some quality veterans who can show them the way.

Before Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin emerged as champions in Pittsburgh, their role models included Gary Roberts and Sergei Gonchar.

It's all a great challenge to put the puzzle together, but Murray isn't starting completely from scratch. He has some pieces, even if they're not all in the proper places just yet.

He knows better than to get ahead of himself.

While he offers praise for the work of interim coach Ted Nolan -- "the team has played well for him, I think the team likes playing for him and (his status) is certainly something we need to address here in the near future," Murray says -- the Sabres general manager isn't putting any time frames on when he feels the Sabres might be able to rise to the top of the NHL standings from the bottom.

"It depends on so many things," he says. "I'm not about to go there now."

Reeling Sabres blown out by Penguins, can't help goalie Ryan Miller

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 6, 2014

BUFFALO – Wednesday wasn't an Olympic audition for goalie Ryan Miller, Pittsburgh coach Dan Bylsma said hours before his potent Penguins throttled the hapless Sabres 5-1. He's judging Miller on his body of work, not one game.

Bylsma, Team USA's coach for the upcoming Sochi Games, knows what most NHL observers know: Miller's played splendidly most of the season under the most trying of circumstances.

The Sabres' third straight loss illustrated that. Once again, they couldn't support Miller, an unrestricted free agent following the season who might've been playing his last home game.

Following a slow start, the slick, superstar-laden Penguins dominated the Sabres before 18,408 fans, sending the league's worst team to its 10th loss in the last 12 games (2-7-3).

"It had nothing to do with Ryan tonight," interim Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "It was the guys in front of him. Our team, we need everyone in front him. We had a couple guys no-show tonight. Playing one of the better teams in the league, you think they would be excited to play, and a couple weren't."

Not long ago, Sabres became a strong home team, compiling a 6-0-1 stretch inside the First Niagara Center. Now, they're 0-5-3 in their last eight games here.

This stretch, the roughest in months, is a test of character, Nolan said.

"You find out about people in difficult times," he said. "When things are going OK, you camouflage certain traits. Things like this, you find out who really wants to compete and who doesn't."

The Sabres started well enough. Drew Stafford's fifth goal in six games put them up 1-0 5:58 in.

But Harry Zolnierczyk tied it later. Then the Penguins' stars dominated during the second period.

Sidney Crosby zoomed down the left wing and scored on the power play at 2:08, scorching Brian Flynn and Mike Weber, who endured a rough night with defense partner Jamie McBain.

Evgeni Malkin scored a breakaway goal 17:48, blowing by McBain. At that point, the game was over.

“We kind of left him out to dry a little bit,” McBain said about Miller.

Nolan called the goal “killer.”

“When you have a soft dump-in and Malkin gets the puck, he was looking for a breakaway,” he said. “That’s just bad, bad playing on our part.”

Miller, who had little to say following the game, said he didn’t set up well for Malkin.

Steve Ott bristled at a question about the Sabres losing their passion during the third period, when Brian Gibbons and James Neal scored.

“It’s not passion,” the captain said.

Then what is it?

“That’s a good team over there that’s obviously playing extremely well,” Ott said. “We shot ourselves in the foot with a couple of turnovers in the second. But there’s no lack of passion. Every guy’s out there working hard trying to compete.”

Of course, Miller, who made 29 saves, has bailed the Sabres out all season when they’ve had duds like Wednesday’s.

Bylsma’s noticed.

“He’s played really well in some different circumstances,” he said. “He doesn’t have a lot of wins to go with how well he’s played, but his save percentage and saves he’s made, he’s played maybe some of his best hockey.”

Bylsma wouldn’t say much about his Olympic goaltending. He said he wished he could play all three on the roster. He joked other countries have offered to trade for one. He wouldn’t even say Miller and Los Angeles’ Jonathan Quick would split the first two games, a common theory.

Clearly, having brilliantly backstopped the U.S. to a silver medal in 2010 while earning tournament MVP honors, Miller’s the sentimental favorite to start.

But Bylsma doesn’t want to pick on emotions.

“Sentiment, emotion, it won’t play into the decision,” he said. “We’re real strong in net.”

Don’t forget, Bylsma’s a Michigan native, where the Miller family is hockey royalty.

“I’m a Miller family fan,” Bylsma said. “I grew up in Michigan. It’s not just Ryan that’s a face or a name in USA and American hockey, and Ryan has certainly been that.”

The Sabres play tonight in Ottawa, their final game before the Olympic break. Miller doesn’t know if he’ll start.

The team presented its five Olympians, including Nolan, who’s coaching Latvia, with their country’s jersey before the game.

Instinctive game allows Sabres' Tyler Ennis to showcase more offense and grit

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 6, 2014

BUFFALO – Tyler Ennis said he recently stopped thinking on the ice. That isn't a bad thing, though. The slick Sabres center has just been playing more instinctively under interim coach Ted Nolan, allowing his natural talents to take over these past few months.

It's showing on the score sheet. With an assist on Drew Stafford's first-period goal in Wednesday's 5-1 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins, Ennis has four goals and 12 points in the last 13 games.

"That's the biggest thing. I don't have to think," Ennis said earlier this week inside the First Niagara Center. "I'm a little more instinctive. When I start thinking about Xs and Os, that's when I start to stop moving my feet and stop making plays. I need to play my game and want the puck and make plays with the puck."

Nolan said you can't harness someone as talented as Ennis.

"To ... say, 'You have to be at this place' is limiting his ability," he said. "We kind of took the reins off and said, 'You just have to make sure you're aware defensively.'"

Ennis has made no secret he wants to be a No. 1 center badly, a goal he believes he's working toward.

"I think recently it's just confidence," Ennis said. "Yeah, I have that desire in my game I want to take it to an extra level. I feel like I'm working my way up there."

Letting Ennis loose has unleashed a physical side the 5-foot-9, 169-pound speedster rarely showcased earlier in his career.

Hits can be a questionable stat, but Ennis had 51 in 35 games under Nolan entering Wednesday. He recorded 18 in 20 under former coach Ron Rolston.

Clearly, he's playing a grittier game these days.

Everything's a domino effect, Ennis said. With more confidence, he started "playing extra hard." Then "you start rolling and the game just starts flowing a lot more," he said.

"When you're around the puck a little more, you're able to hit," Ennis said. "You get the puck back and make plays. The important thing is just keeping your feet

moving. When your feet are moving at all times, you're always around the puck and then it gives you chances to hit, get the puck and make passes, make plays, get to the net."

Nolan said Ennis' ability to finish his checks – even if he's just separating his man from the puck – has helped buoy him.

"Tyler's been doing that real well, and I think that's why he's getting the pucks and he's getting his chances because he's playing with a little bit more tenacity, a little bit more grit combined with his skill set," Nolan said. "That's why he's playing effectively."

To Nolan, Ennis is a better player today than when he replaced Rolston on Nov. 13.

"I think he is," Nolan said. "I think he's always been a good player, whether I was here or not. He's just one of those dynamic players. He's just starting to feel his groove and he's starting to feel a little bit more comfortable, and when you feel comfortable, you get a little bit more confidence."

Ennis said a tenacious style has "been branded in me my whole life." His father taught him to have a chip on his shoulder. So did getting cut from a few teams, most notably a bantam club in his native Edmonton 10 years ago.

Believe it or not, that team also cut 5-foot-9 Minnesota defenseman Jared Spurgeon.

Why? Both were very small.

"We were pretty good, though," Ennis said. "It was extra rattling. That's kind of where the chip on the shoulder comes from."

He added: "I've always been the small guy. I've kind of been forced to play extra hard and prove people wrong."

xxx

Speaking on his weekly appearance on WGR, Sabres general manager Tim Murray said he's "had talks with a couple teams" about franchise goalie Ryan Miller.

"They've showed some interest," Murray said. "They haven't done anything yet to change that scenario. Talks are going on for a lot of players. There's a lot of ideas being thrown about here the last few days. As of right now, nothing has changed with Ryan."

He also said: "I'm willing to listen on every single player, so I'm certainly listening on Ryan."

xxx

Sabres defenseman Tyler Myers (lower body) sat out Wednesday.

The 24-year-old could play tonight in Ottawa, Nolan said.

Defenseman Chad Ruhwedel, a healthy scratch Monday, returned. Center Zenon Konopka and winger Ville Leino were scratched again.

xxx

Penguins superstar Sidney Crosby has a history of besting Miller. The slick center's shootout goal won the 2008 Winter Classic. Then Crosby's overtime goal clinched Olympic gold for the Canadians against Miller's American squad at the 2010 Vancouver Games.

The two could face each other again soon at the Sochi Games.

Naturally, Crosby, who works out with Miller sometimes during the summer, doesn't talk about the past exploits.

"It's the past," Crosby said. "We're days away from the Olympics in Russia. Maybe after our careers it's something we can talk about. ... We have to move on and try to accomplish other things."

Crosby, Malkin Lead the Way; Pens Trounce Sabres 5-1

By Dan Cave

WGR 550

February 5, 2014

Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin each had a goal and an assist during the Penguins' 5-1 rout over the Sabres at First Niagara Center on Wednesday. Drew Stafford scored the lone goal for Buffalo. Head inside for more.

The Sabres grabbed the early 1-0 lead on a Stafford goal, his ninth of the season. After Tyler Ennis' wraparound attempt was stopped by Marc-Andre Fleury, Stafford was there to jam home the loose puck, putting Buffalo ahead at 5:58 of the opening period. Harry Zolnierczyk tied it at 15:01, beating Mike Weber and snapping a shot past Miller. Crosby got the play started in the corner, working the puck away from Stafford and out to Adams, who then whipped a pass toward Zolnierczyk in front of the crease. The assist extended Crosby's point streak against the Sabres to 17 straight games.

Zolnierczyk scored after being shaken up earlier in the period following a Steve Ott hit. The physical play continued later when John Scott and Deryk Engelland went at it right off a faceoff, capped by a stiff right from Scott.

Crosby put Pittsburgh ahead with a sparkling power play goal at 2:08 of the second. The Penguins captain sliced through Mike Weber and Brian Flynn, wristing a beautiful shot into the top corner of the net. Pittsburgh went up by two goals later in the second thanks solely to Malkin. The Pens' forward stole the puck near his own blue line, bulled his way past Jamie McBain and put a nifty deke on Miller for the 3-1 lead.

Brian Gibbons made it 4-1 in the third immediately off a faceoff to Miller's left. Brandon Sutter won the draw and Gibbons snuck in from the right wing, blasting a shot into the Buffalo net. James Neal poured it on later in the third with his 19th, putting Pittsburgh up 5-1. Malkin dropped a pass behind him for Neal who then sidestepped his way into the slot before ripping a shot past Miller.

The Buffalo netminder stopped 29 shots in the loss compared to 24 for Fleury. The Sabres visit the Senators on Thursday for their final game before the Olympic break. Hear the play by play of Buffalo and Ottawa on WGR 550 and the Buffalo Sabres Radio Network.

1st Period

Goals

5:58 - BUF - Drew Stafford (9) (Tyler Ennis)

15:01 - PIT - Harry Zolnierczyk (2) (Craig Adams, Sidney Crosby)

Penalties

3:14 - BUF - Alexander Sulzer (2 min., tripping)

12:17 - BUF - John Scott (5 min., fighting)
12:17 - PIT - Deryk Engelland (5 min., fighting)
17:38 - PIT - Matt Niskanen (2 min., high sticking)

2nd Period

Goals

2:08 - PIT - Sidney Crosby (PPG) (28) (Matt Niskanen)
17:48 - PIT - Evgeni Malkin (17) (Unassisted)

Penalties

1:41 - BUF - Jamie McBain (2 min., tripping)
4:08 - BUF - Mike Weber (2 min., holding)
19:24 - BUF - John Scott (2 min., unsportsmanlike conduct)
19:24 - PIT - Tanner Glass (2 min., unsportsmanlike conduct)

3rd Period

Goals

5:22 - PIT - Brian Gibbons (4) (Brandon Sutter)
12:12 - PIT - James Neal (19) (Evgeni Malkin, Brooks Orpik)

Penalties

19:13 - BUF - Matt Ellis (2 min., boarding)

Goaltending

PIT - Marc-Andre Fleury (24 saves, 25 shots)
BUF - Ryan Miller (29 saves, 34 shots)

Power Plays

PIT - 1 of 4
BUF - 0 of 1

Three Stars

- 1.) PIT - Sidney Crosby (1 G, 1 A)
- 2.) PIT - Evgeni Malkin (1 G, 1 A)
- 3.) PIT - Paul Martin (0 G, 0 A)

HAMILTON: Sabres try to stay with one of the best

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 5, 2014

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- It's kind of funny. The Sabres scored three or more goals in eight of nine games, but only have three goals in their last four periods firing 55 shots on net. Drew Stafford stayed hot with his fifth goal in six games. It was nice work by Tyler Ennis who circled out from behind the net to get the puck to the paint. Ennis now has 13 points in 15 games.

Buffalo put pressure on Marc-Andre Fleury right away with Matt D'Agostini being stopped in front and Matt Ellis in front trying to battle for a loose puck.

Alex Sulzer took a bad tripping penalty and a bad clearing pass by Mike Weber on the kill forced Ryan Miller into a huge save on Chris Kunitz. Weber was slow on coverage coming out from the wall and it cost him a goal. Harry Zolnierczyk kept going to the net with Weber trailing. The defenseman is now -30 on the season.

Steve Ott had shaken Zolnierczyk up with a hard check at the bench. Of course Deryk Engelland tried to make Ott fight after a clean check, but Ott said no. John Scott accepted the challenge on the next shift and landed a bomb late in the fight to stun Engelland.

Miller and the other Olympians were honored before the game. He made 12 first period saves while Fleury got in front of 10 pucks.

Fleury's best save came when Zemgus Girgensons cut in from the right circle. Fleury spun onto his back and reached back with the right arm to make the save. The second period looked like Colorado where the Avalanche made the Sabres defense look silly and won 7-1. Tonight, Miller is keeping it close.

Jamie McBain took a tripping penalty and Sidney Crosby came flying through center ice. Weber and Brian Flynn waved at him on the way by and he buried a phenomenal shot under the bar.

Jussi Jokinen got one behind Miller, but he scooped it out before it crossed the line. James Neal walked in alone from the left side, but missed the net. As the period wore down, Evgeni Malkin undressed McBain and then deked Miller for his 17th of the season.

Stafford had a chance to make it 3-2, but Fleury anticipated a pass by Linus Omark on a 2-on-1 and came sailing across the crease to make the save.

Miller made 25 saves through two periods and watched his team get totally outclassed in that frame.

"That had nothing to do with Ryan tonight," said Ted Nolan. "It was the guys in front of him. For our team, we need everyone. We had a couple of guys no-show tonight. They're one of the better teams in the league. You'd think they would be excited to play and a couple weren't."

There wasn't too much hope of a third period comeback, but it ended at 5:22 when Brandon Sutter won a faceoff to Brain Gibbons who ripped a shot high past Miller who did not appear to be screened. Later, Malkin dropped a puck to Neal and then went straight to the net, screening Miller, as Neal wristed his 19th.

There was no energy at all either in the Sabres or the building in the third period. The team just looked totally beaten.

"It's not passion," Ott told me after the game. "That's a good team over there that obviously played extremely well. We shot ourselves in the foot with a couple of turnovers in the second. There's no lack of passion. Every guy's out there working hard and trying to compete and all that stuff. Let's be honest, [Pittsburgh] is a good team."

"Things like this, you find out who really wants to compete and who doesn't," added Nolan.

Sabres Ennis improving under Nolan

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 5, 2014

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- The Sabres paid Pittsburgh too much respect on January 27th losing there 3-0.

Buffalo gets another chance at home where the Sabres haven't won in six games. For a while things were going good here, but New Jersey on January 4th is the last home win.

Pittsburgh comes in with three wins in four games

Sidney Crosby is pointless in two straight games and in three of his last five.

It was Tanner Glass that hurt Buffalo in Pittsburgh picking up a goal and an assist.

Since shutting out the Sabres, Marc-Andre Fleury gave up three in a loss at Phoenix and one in a win over Ottawa.

Ever since Ted Nolan arrived, it seems like he took on Tyler Ennis as a project. Number 63 has points in nine out of 12 games. He has four goals and seven assists for 11 points in that stretch. Nolan thinks Ennis is a better player now than when he walked in the door, "I think he is. I've always felt he's a good player whether I was here or not, he's just one of those dynamic players, he's just starting to feel his groove and starting to feel a little more confident and comfortable and when you feel comfortable, you have a little more confidence, so right now he's playing well."

His last game against Edmonton wasn't his best as he was shutout and was minus two. They lost 7-1 at Colorado, but he was even for that game and did assist on the only goal. Overall in 55 games Ennis has 12 goals and 15 assists for 27 points. He is also minus 14. Ron Rolston used to have him come back to a spot in the defensive zone, but Nolan thinks his defensive play has improved, "The game of hockey is not programmed like a lot of sports where there's dots. Our game dots move all over the ice so you have to make adjustments and read and react to certain things and Tyler's one of those gifted players that has some natural abilities, so to harness a guy like him and to say you have to be at this place is limiting his ability so we took the reins off." So has he been good defensively? Nolan said, "Yes, as well as can be expected, but we can all get better defensively."

Ennis thinks his defensive game has been better and he gives credit to Joe Sacco, "I think Joe's been good with me defensively, showing me some clips, where I need to be, but overall Teddy's just told me or given me a little freedom to play my game and that's where I'm at my best wheeling the puck and playing hard."

When you get that confidence back, you're around the puck more, your physical play is better, defensively you're better and you demand it. It can still be better, but it's starting to go in."

As far as Ennis is concerned, he thinks Nolan taking over has made him a better player, "Ever since Teddy took over, my game's been a bit on the up and I've been playing better, had more confidence every game, just having fun again and making plays." The forward added, "I needed a little change to get my game back. The start of the year wasn't anywhere near where I needed to be and now I've got that confidence back and feel like I'm starting to be the player I was in the past and having fun again."

SABRES UNABLE TO HOLD BACK PENGUINS ATTACK

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

February 6, 2014

The Pittsburgh Penguins showed why they're one of the elite teams in the NHL on Wednesday.

The Buffalo Sabres drew first blood as Drew Stafford scored 5:58 into the contest but the Penguins stepped on the gas and scored the next five. Pittsburgh rolled to a 5-1 win at First Niagara Center.

Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, Harry Zolnierczyk, Brian Gibbons and James Neal scored for the Penguins. Crosby, the NHL's leading scorer, and Malkin each scored on breakaways against Sabres netminder Ryan Miller.

Miller finished the night with 29 saves. His counterpart, Marc-Andre Fleury, turned aside 24 shots.

Pittsburgh sits atop the Eastern Conference standings and heading in, Buffalo knew they were in for a tough test.

"That's a good team over that that obviously played extremely well and we shot ourselves in the foot there with a couple of turnovers in the second. But there's no lack of passion," Sabres captain Steve Ott said. "Every guy's working hard and trying to compete and all that stuff. Let's be honest, that's a good team."

The Sabres are now winless in three straight and interim coach Ted Nolan hoped to see a better effort from a lot of his players.

"You find out about people through difficult times," he said. "When things are going OK, you camouflage certain traits. Things like this, you find out who really wants to compete and who doesn't."

Buffalo currently sits in 30th place and with a roster freeze coming on Friday due to the Olympic break and the NHL Trade Deadline looming on March, 5, changes to the roster could very well be on the way.

"You look at two different teams out there. This is one of the premier teams in the League and they're running for a Stanley Cup. And ours is in the early stages of trying to re-establish something here – and establish it with the right attitude," Nolan said. "When things like this [happen], you find out who's in for the long haul and who wants to battle through difficult times. That's a good team, give them that, but it doesn't stop you from trying to compete against them."

Stafford notched his ninth goal of the season early in the first and now has seven points (5+2) in his past six games. He also has 10 points (7+3) in his last nine games at home.

Zolnierczyk tied the game with 4:59 to play in the period, but the Sabres felt good about about the next 40 minutes as they skated into the first intermission in a 1-1 tie, However, things quickly turned in the Penguins' favor.

“We felt good about our first period. We felt good about our jump and our compete level,” Sabres defenseman Jamie McBain said. “We were feeling good going into the second period and then obviously, you give their big offensive guys enough chances and enough room, they’re going to make you pay for it and that’s what happened.”

Crosby tallied 2:08 into the second period on the power play. He broke loose from the Buffalo defense and wristed a shot over Miller’s glove.

With a goal and an assist in the game, Crosby extended his point streak against Buffalo to 17 games, a streak that streak dates back to Dec. 29, 2007.

He’s collected at least one point in 23 of 25 games against Buffalo and has has 10 goals and 18 assists over that span. He’s also recorded points in each of his 14 visits to Buffalo (9+13).

The Penguins went ahead 3-1 when Malkin walked in alone on Miller and scored a highlight reel goal unassisted.

Gibbons scored 5:22 into the third and Neal tallied with 8:48 remaining in regulation.

Before the game, Nolan said there might be a chance Miller would play both Wednesday night in Pittsburgh and Thursday night in Ottawa against the Senators. While that is still up in the air, Nolan did not blame his goaltender for the loss.

“That had nothing to do with Ryan tonight. It was the guys in front of him. For our team, we need everyone,” he said. “We had a couple guys no-show tonight and playing one of the better teams in the League, you’d think they’d be excited to play. A couple weren’t.”

The Sabres and Senators face off on Thursday at 7:30 p.m. at Canadian Tire Center.

MYERS OUT FOR BUFFALO'S OLYMPIC SENDOFF AGAINST PENGUINS

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

February 5, 2014

Ryan Miller will start in goal for the Buffalo Sabres in their final home game before the Olympic break Wednesday night but Tyler Myers will not play due to injury.

The game at First Niagara Center against the Pittsburgh Penguins can be seen nationally on NBCSN at 7:30 p.m. and will feature 11 athletes headed to Sochi, Russia for the Olympic Games.

Miller (United States), Zemgus Girgensons (Latvia), Jhonas Enroth (Sweden) and Henrik Tallidner (Sweden) will represent the Sabres in Sochi as well as interim coach Ted Nolan, who will be behind the bench for Team Latvia.

The Pittsburgh Penguins are sending seven players to compete in the games including captain Sidney Crosby (Canada), who will also serve as the captain of Team Canada; Chris Kunitz (Canada); Evgeni Malkin (Russia); Jussi Jokinen (Finland); Olli Maatta (Finland); Paul Martin (U.S.) and Brooks Orpik (U.S.).

Penguins coach Dan Bylsma is the head coach for Team USA and Penguins assistant coach Tony Granato is on his Olympic staff.

Miller is vying for a starting role with Team USA and has another opportunity to show Bylsma first-hand what he can do.

However, he'll be without Myers, one of the Sabres ice-time leaders, in front of him.

Myers will miss the game with a lower-body injury he sustained in the second period Monday night against the Edmonton Oilers.

"It doesn't look very good for tonight," Nolan said. "We'll see. Hopefully he'll be ready tomorrow."

Nolan said he won't make any changes at forward, so Zenon Konopka and Ville Leino will be healthy scratches for the second straight game.

Chad Ruhwedel, a healthy scratch against the Oilers, will be back in on defense. Against Pittsburgh, which leads the Eastern Conference, Ruhwedel is going to try and simplify his game.

“Stay within yourself. Stay within your own game,” he said. “For me, it’s being sound defensively and getting the puck out of the zone, making a good first pass. That’s what I’m going to try to do tonight.”

Crosby enters the game having been held scoreless in back-to-back contests for only the second time all season and for just the third time in 92 games dating back to the beginning of last season.

The Sabres would like to keep Crosby off the scoresheet, but historically, have had a lot of trouble doing so. He’s collected at least one point in 22 of 24 games against Buffalo and is currently on a 16-game point streak against the Sabres that dates back to Dec. 29, 2007.

He has nine goals and 17 assists over that span. He’s also recorded points in each of his 13 visits to Buffalo (8+12).

Crosby leads the League with 75 points (27+48) and the Penguins are the highest scoring team in the East. Nolan will look to bring the battle to them.

“I think sometimes, if we’re too careful, that’s when you get hurt,” he said. “If you want to sit back and try to play a strong defensive game against a pretty potent team, you’re playing a little bit afraid, you’re sitting back a little too much versus you have nothing to lose.

“Let’s just try to attack them as hard as we can and force them and take our chances in the offensive zone. We still have 100-something feet to make up for that one mistake.”

After the game, the Sabres travel to Ottawa for a game Thursday night against the Senators. Then the team is off until they play again on Feb. 25 against Carolina.

Some players nursing injuries will take the break to heal up and Drew Stafford, who has missed time with an upper-body injury, hopes the team can go into the break on a high note.

“Coming back from Colorado, we wanted to have a little bit of a response against Edmonton. Unfortunately it didn’t work out the way we wanted, but I thought the effort was there,” he said. “We’re just going to try and carry that battle, compete, into tonight against one of the top teams in the League and hopefully give them some sort of run for their money.”

PROJECTED LINEUP

17 Linus Omark – 63 Tyler Ennis – 21 Drew Stafford
9 Steve Ott – 19 Cody Hodgson – 27 Matt D'Agostini
84 Philip Varone – 28 Zengus Girgensons – 65 Brian Flynn
32 John Scott – 37 Matt Ellis – 82 Marcus Foligno

10 Christian Ehrhoff – 52 Alexander Sulzer
20 Henrik Tallinder – 5 Chad Ruhwedel
6 Mike Weber – 4 Jamie McBain

30 Ryan Miller
1 Jhonas Enroth

Crosby, Malkin lead Penguins to 5-1 win over Sabres

By Dave Molinari
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
February 5, 2014

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- Sidney Crosby insists that it's nothing personal, and it's clear he respects the way Buffalo Sabres goalie Ryan Miller goes about his work.

He just has a funny way of showing it.

Crosby, who has gotten some of the most memorable goals of his career against Miller, victimized him again Wednesday night, scoring the go-ahead goal in what became a 5-1 Penguins victory at First Niagara Center.

With the score tied, 1-1, and the Penguins on a power play early in the second period, Crosby took a feed from defenseman Matt Niskanen, burst between Sabres defensemen Mike Weber and Christian Ehrhoff and skated to the inner edge of the left circle before throwing a shot past Miller high on the glove side.

"[Niskanen] made a nice, hard pass and gave me time to get through there," Crosby said. "It's not always pretty, sometimes, on those breakouts, but that one worked out well."

Things generally do for Crosby when he's matched against Miller.

That's the goalie he beat to end a shootout in the NHL's first Winter Classic, in 2008 at Ralph Wilson Stadium, and for Canada's gold medal-winning goal at the 2010 Olympics, when Miller starred for Team USA.

On the off-chance that Crosby's goal didn't provide Miller -- who is battling Jonathan Quick of Los Angeles for the job of Team USA's go-to goalie at the 2014 Olympics, which begin next week in Sochi, Russia -- enough fodder for some pre-Games nightmares, Evgeni Malkin gave him something else over which to agonize.

With the Penguins up, 2-1, late in the second period, Malkin carried the puck through the neutral zone and pushed it past Sabres defensemen Jamie McBain before breaking in on Miller, freezing him with a series of fakes and sliding a forehand shot into the net at 17:48 for his 17th goal this season.

Penguins coach Dan Bylsma, who will run Team USA's bench in Sochi, acknowledged that "I couldn't help but think of [the Olympics] as Crosby went down on that breakaway against Miller" but said he didn't have mixed feelings about how that sequence played out.

"I was cheering the goal," he said. "This time."

The victory raised the Penguins' record to 40-15-2 in 57 games, easily the fewest they've needed to reach 40 victories. The previous record had been 65 games in 1995-96.

"It's something we talked about this morning," defenseman Brooks Orpik said. "I don't know how much it means, but it was something to keep our focus before the [Olympic] break, at least.

"Oh, and our last five losses were against non-playoff teams. Those were our two motivational points."

The Penguins swept the season series from Buffalo, which likely isn't a surprise considering that they lead the Sabres by 44 points in the standings.

How great is the difference between these teams? Consider that if the Penguins were to lose all their remaining games and the Sabres would win all theirs -- admittedly, something of a long-shot parlay -- Buffalo would finish just eight points ahead of them.

The Sabres actually took a 1-0 lead -- something they had managed only 17 times in the previous 55 games -- when Drew Stafford jammed a shot past goalie Marc-Andre Fleury at 5:58 of the opening period, but Harry Zolnierczyk countered for the Penguins at 15:01, converting a feed from Craig Adams.

The second assist went to Crosby, extending his scoring streak against the Sabres to 17 games. He has at least one point in all 14 games he has played in Buffalo.

Zolnierczyk's goal sparked a run of five in a row by the Penguins, culminating in a couple in the third period that provided the Penguins' margin of victory.

Brian Gibbons grabbed the puck after Brandon Sutter won a faceoff and threw a shot past Miller from above the right dot at 5:22 of the third for this fourth this season and second in two games.

"He ... created a new faceoff play," Bylsma said.

James Neal, who is one of the candidates to replace injured Tampa Bay forward Steven Stamkos on the Canadian Olympic team, closed out the scoring at 12:12, taking a drop pass from Malkin and beating Miller from the slot.

Miller, the subject of rampant trade speculation, was uncharacteristically terse with reporters after the game, although Crosby absolved him of responsibility for the Sabres' loss.

"You can't blame him," Crosby said. "He held his team in it. We scored some nice goals tonight."

Including one by the guy who has gotten more than his share of them against Miller.

Crosby snaps slump as Penguins rout Sabres

By Josh Yohe

Pittsburgh Tribune Review

February 5, 2014

BUFFALO, N.Y. — So much for the slump.

Sidney Crosby, mired in his biggest funk of the season, scored a highlight-reel goal that triggered a rout as the Penguins downed the Buffalo Sabres, 5-1, on Wednesday at First Niagara Center.

Crosby's recent play would be impressive for most players but has been below his standards.

Entering Wednesday's game, Crosby had gone five games without scoring a goal and had produced only eight points in 10 games, three of which came in one night against the New York Islanders.

“One game doesn't say a whole lot,” Crosby said. “But it's nice to score. You just try to work hard and hope you get rewarded. It's nice when they go in.”

Crosby rarely has trouble scoring against Buffalo and goalie Ryan Miller.

He has registered at least one point in 17 straight games against the Sabres and scored the most famous goal of his career against Miller in overtime of the gold medal game at the 2010 Olympics.

With the score tied 1-1 in the second period, the Penguins were on a power play when Crosby received a pass from defenseman Matt Niskanen. Crosby split Buffalo forward Brian Flynn and defenseman Mike Weber with a dizzying display of stick-handling.

A moment later, Crosby snapped a shot that zipped in and out of the net before Miller's glove moved.

“That was vintage Crosby,” defenseman Matt Niskanen said. “He used to do that stuff all the time earlier in his career, but the league is so much tighter checking now that those kinds of goals are harder to pull off. But that was a beautiful, beautiful goal.”

Crosby sensed that Buffalo's defenders were flat-footed during the play.

“I was able to come through with speed,” he said. “Nisky gave me a nice, hard pass.”

Crosby also provided strong work on the team's first goal. Down 1-0 following Drew Stafford's ninth goal of the season, Crosby and left wing Harry Zolnierczyk crashed into the corner to Miller's left, creating a turnover from Stafford.

Moments after Crosby set up right wing Craig Adams for a shot, Zolnierczyk was there to bang in his second goal of the season.

Crosby received an assist on that goal and leads the NHL with 77 points.

Zolnierczyk's goal not only tied the game but also instilled some life into a Penguins team that was sloppy defensively throughout the first 20 minutes.

Crosby's goal and assist put the Penguins ahead, and Evgeni Malkin gave them a comfortable lead with a goal of his own. Malkin pushed the puck past defenseman Jamie McBain, which gave him a breakaway against Miller. The Russian center faked a move to the backhand before sweeping the puck past Miller.

“I'm not sure if Sid's goal was better or if Geno's goal was,” right wing Brian Gibbons said. “Maybe I'd say Sid, but I don't know. They were both impressive.”

Gibbons scored his fourth goal of the season, and James Neal scored for a second straight game.

Endgame: Penguins 5, Sabres 1

By Sam Kasan

Penguins.com

February 5, 2014

The two-headed monster attacked, and the Sabres couldn't defend it.

Sidney Crosby and Evgeni Malkin both scored absolutely filthy goals and added assists to lead the Penguins past the Sabres 5-1 on Wednesday at First Niagara Center, their last road game heading into the Olympic break. Harry Zolnierczyk, Brian Gibbons and James Neal also scored for Pittsburgh.

There's really no other way to describe the plays Crosby and Malkin made, other than two of the best players in the world being just that. Both times, they made the Buffalo defensemen look like pylons as they split or powered around them before bearing down alone on poor Ryan Miller, who didn't have much of a chance on either goal.

"He made some big saves tonight," Crosby said. "Even the last game we played against them, he made some good saves too. So can't blame him. He held his team in it and we scored some nice goals tonight."

Remember when Crosby was scoreless in back-to-back games entering tonight for just the second time this season and third time? Yeah, we don't either. Not now, anyway.

"It's nice to score," Crosby said. "You try to go out there and do the same thing every night. Work hard and hope you get rewarded. So it's nice when they go in and obviously to get a win here with one more left before the break."

With the Penguins on a power play in the second period, Crosby received a pass from Matt Niskanen while coming up the ice with speed and split the Sabres defensemen. Team Canada captain Crosby then walked in on Team USA goaltender Miller – whom he scored the Golden Goal on four years ago – and beat him with a wicked shot top shelf, glove side.

"I was able to come back and get some speed," Crosby explained. "Nisky' made a nice hard pass and gave me a lot of time to get through there. It's not always pretty sometimes on those breakouts, but that one worked out well."

Not to be outdone, Malkin used his deceptive strength to power around Jamie McBain. And even with Mike Weber bearing down on him, Malkin created enough time for himself to deke around Miller and tuck the puck into the cage.

"Joe Micheletti asked me in my bench interview if my mind was at all thinking about maybe the next week," said Penguins head coach Dan Bylsma with a wry smile, who will be behind the bench for Team USA at the Olympics. "I couldn't help but think about that as Crosby put it down on that breakaway against Miller."

FLEURY

Down at the other end, Marc-Andre Fleury was spectacular when he needed to be. The Sabres controlled the first period, testing him early and often.

And while it was a different story the remaining 40 minutes – with the Pens having the majority of puck possession – there were a few breakdowns by Pittsburgh, but Fleury was there to come up with the big saves – including one on a Sabres 3-on-1 opportunity.

“They came out with the first goal and we responded really well. Flower was unbelievable again tonight making big saves at the right times,” Neal said.

TAKEAWAY

Overall, this was a tremendous display of skill by the talented, gifted Penguins with highlight-reel goals from their star players in Sid, Geno and Neal. But what the Pens took away from this game is that they had those opportunities because they worked for them and created them as a team.

“I thought Buffalo came out hard in the first with a hard forecheck. Gave us some problems with it,” Bylsma said. “We turned over a couple pucks, let in the first goal. But I liked how we responded after that. We get a big goal on the forecheck by Zolnierczyk, Crosby on the forecheck turning it over to tie us up there in the first.

“Then I thought our second and third, that was more how we need to play and did play and played real well. So we got our opportunities, we got several. A couple breakaways. But we got them from good defense, being good positionally. That turned into the Malkin goal for the breakaway. Turned into the Neal goal in the third on the goal as well.”

SECONDARY SCORING

In addition to big games from their top-end guys, the Pens also got secondary scoring from Zolnierczyk and Gibbons – two players who have spent a lot of time in the American Hockey League with Wilkes-Barre/Scranton.

Gibbons scored for a second straight game after netting a big power-play marker on Monday in Pittsburgh’s 2-1 win over Buffalo. The Pens lined up for an offensive-zone faceoff, and Sutter cleanly won the draw back to Gibbons coming off the wall. Gibbons took a couple of strides before lining up the puck and firing it past Miller.

“He invented a new face-off play for himself,” said Bylsma, adding – “I think he even celebrated on that goal.”

Gibbons has developed a bit of a reputation for his serious demeanor, which began with his non-existent celebration on his first-ever NHL goal earlier this season. So it was endearing to watch teammate Paul Martin playfully lift Gibbons' arm in celebration after tonight's goal.

"I think I've been getting a hard time from the guys on not celebrating on the goals," Gibbons smiled. "So (Martin) came over and threw my arm up."

Zolnierczyk, recalled yesterday from Wilkes-Barre/Scranton and penciled in on left wing of the fourth line next to Craig Adams and Deryk Engelland for tonight's game, had a rough start. After taking a hard hit from Sabres captain Steve Ott early in the first period, Zolnierczyk went to the locker room to get checked out.

Fortunately, he was able to return – and ended up scoring a big goal shortly after he returned. After receiving a pass from Adams, Zolnierczyk came off the wall, cut to the front of the net, waited patiently for Miller to commit, put it on his forehand and lifted it short side.

"I thought it was a big goal by Harry Z," Bylsma said. "Our first goal on a forecheck, physical up ice and someone mentioned it, it looked like he knew what he was doing there at the cage. A nice play from Adams, but goes backhand to forehand and puts it home for us."