



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres-Hurricanes Preview

Associated Press

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There's flickering hope for the Carolina Hurricanes' playoff chances after a strong effort in their latest game, but their overall play since the Olympic break hardly inspires confidence that more are on the way.

They might not need to be at their best to get two points against their next opponent.

The Hurricanes look to win consecutive games for the first time since January when they host the woeful Buffalo Sabres on Thursday night.

Carolina (28-28-9) went into the break as part of a cluster of six teams that were within three points of the Eastern Conference's No. 8 seed, but they're now eight points out of playoff position with five teams to leapfrog.

The Hurricanes dropped six of seven out of the break, starting with a 3-2 loss in Buffalo on Feb. 25 in which they outshot the Sabres 38-18. Coach Kirk Muller said he found no fault in Carolina's performance, giving credit to Buffalo's Ryan Miller for stealing two points for his team.

Muller and the Hurricanes won't have to worry about facing the since-traded Miller on Thursday, and they'll come in with some confidence after getting the best of another Olympic goaltender on Tuesday. Jordan Staal and Jiri Tlustý each had a goal and an assist in the second period as Carolina beat Henrik Lundqvist and the Rangers 3-1, avenging a loss to New York four days earlier.

"I think we played a really strong 60 minutes of hockey," Muller said. "There was still a lot of fighting with these guys. ... Hopefully tonight is that big win that we build on."

If the Hurricanes want to make any noise down the stretch, they could start by getting their power play going. Carolina is 1 for 31 with the man advantage since the Olympics, a league-worst 3.2 percent.

Getting some decent goaltending from Cam Ward wouldn't hurt, either. Suffering through his second straight injury-plagued and ineffective season, Ward stopped 24 shots on Tuesday - his first start since before Thanksgiving without allowing at least three goals.

"We've worked too hard to give up. It's not in our favor right now, but anything can happen," Ward told the team's official website. "It's still important to have that belief in the locker room."

With Miller, Matt Moulson and Steve Ott among the names dealt at the deadline, the Sabres (19-38-8) have leveled off after winning three of four out of the Olympic break. They've totaled two goals in three consecutive defeats, going quiet for the final 57:51 in Tuesday's 4-1 loss to Nashville after Drew Stafford's early power-play goal.

Buffalo now begins a stretch of seven of eight on the road, and it'll play 12 of its final 17 away from home.

"It's a time for us to really come together as a team," Stafford said. "We're going to be spending a lot of time together in close quarters. It's going to be up to us to drag ourselves out of this."

If the Sabres want to beat the Hurricanes again, they can start by stopping Eric Staal. Carolina's captain has four goals and five assists in his last five games against Buffalo, and he's recorded three points in each of the Hurricanes' three straight home wins in the series.

Stafford taking on leadership role

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

March 12, 2014

If you take the reality approach, the Buffalo Sabres have lost three straight games and scored a combined two goals in them. Tonight's game in Carolina starts a stretch where 12 of the final 17 are on the road — where the Sabres are just 7-19-3. The outlook isn't rosy.

Or you can take the glass is half-full approach. And that revolves around winger Drew Stafford.

Stafford is putting pucks in the net with regularity and emerging as a leader in the wake of the trade of captain Steve Ott. He played his 500th career game and scored the only goal in Tuesday's 4-1 loss to Nashville. And in the wake of the Ryan Miller trade, Stafford now owns the longest continuous service rank on the team.

"It's quite an accomplishment and I never really realized it until a few games ago," Stafford said of No. 500. "... When you kind of look back at your career a little bit, there's the ups and downs. You guys have seen it all since I've been here my whole career, some of the stuff I've been through, the good times and bad times.

"I feel pretty good about it, and I thank a lot of the guys I've played with, the training staff here, different coaches. I'm a glass half-full type of guy. I feel like I have a lot to go and I'm still ascending."

Stafford scored for the second consecutive game and now has eight goals and 14 points in his last 15 games. He has 12 goals on the season.

Stafford had just six goals in last year's lockout campaign — and had just two in his first 34 games this year. So that means he's had 10 goals in his last 22 games.

Playing on a line with Tyler Ennis and Cory Conacher, Stafford's 23:00 of ice time was the third-highest total of his career and just shy of his career-high 23:35 set on Dec. 9, 2011. He had several good chances to score Tuesday.

"I had some good ones, beat a couple guys up ice for some opportunities," Stafford said. "You'd like to have gotten a couple more."

"Maybe he didn't start the year the way he wanted to," said coach Ted Nolan. "But he persevered and he worked through it. To me, that showed good leadership on his side."

Stafford showed more leadership Wednesday when an agitated Nolan made his players do wind sprints and then left the ice during practice because he was upset with their execution. With the coach gone, Stafford and Christian Ehrhoff gathered their teammates in the corner of the rink for a chat.

“It’s not going to get any easier,” Stafford said. “... It’s a time for us to really come together as a team, spend a lot of time together in close quarters. It’s up to us to drag ourselves out of this. No one is going to do it for us.”

“I don’t really care what position you’re in or what your skill-set is or anything like that. What I care about is the work that you put in and the effort that you put in,” Nolan said. “We didn’t put the effort in at the beginning of practice and habits are easy to form, good or bad.

“We have to avoid those bad habits and get them out early. We’re still professional people here. We’ve still got a season to go, too. Attention to detail, that’s our No. 1 priority.”

There was chatter Stafford had some teams interested at the trade deadline, particularly Minnesota, but he was not moved. He has a cap-friendly \$4 million contract that runs out after next season, thus making him a potential good rental at next year’s deadline.

Stafford insisted after Tuesday’s game he wasn’t interested in being part of the Sabres simply playing out the string.

“A lot of guys are playing for jobs and want an opportunity right now,” Stafford said. “We need everyone going. We can’t have any passengers. Forget where we are in the standings. We’re playing for pride.

“We’re playing to not be embarrassed out there. We’re not going to quit or mail it in. Our fans don’t deserve that. We’re building for the future here, and we have to establish the right way to do things.”

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The Sabres were able to leave town despite the weather and their charter landed in Raleigh late in the afternoon. ... The Rochester Amerks’ game against Binghamton in Blue Cross Arena was postponed by the weather and will be played Sunday at 5:05.

Hurricanes chase another home win against Sabres

By Eric Goodman

NHL.com

March 12, 2014

SABRES (19-38-8) at HURRICANES (28-28-9)

TV: MSG-B, BELL TV, FS-CR

Last 10: Buffalo 4-6-0; Carolina 3-7-0

Season series: This is the third and final game. The Carolina Hurricanes and Buffalo Sabres split the two previous games at First Niagara Center.

Big story: The Hurricanes lost six of eight games since returning from the Olympic break on Feb. 25 and have a steep hill to climb to get back in the Stanley Cup Playoff picture. Carolina seeks to extend its home winning streak against the NHL's last-place Sabres to four as Buffalo visits in the midst of a three-game losing streak.

Team Scope:

Sabres: Interim coach Ted Nolan was reportedly frustrated with his team during a brief home practice Wednesday before boarding a plane for Raleigh, N.C. According to Paul Hamilton of WGR 550 Radio in Buffalo, Nolan put his team through intense, repetitive skating drills for about 20 minutes before saying a few words and exiting the facility.

"I don't really care what position you're in or what your skillset is, what I care about is the work that you put in, the effort that you put in, and we didn't put the effort in in the beginning of practice," Nolan said. "We've still got the season to go and attention to detail has to be our No. 1 priority."

Hurricanes: A substantial winning streak down the stretch is likely the only scenario to keep Carolina from missing the playoffs for a fifth straight season, so defeating the struggling Sabres at home is a must. After Thursday, the Hurricanes play four of their next five games on the road, where they have lost six of their past seven games.

Coach Kirk Muller had some good news following practice Wednesday, as he said defenseman Justin Faulk is close to returning from an upper-body injury that has sidelined him since he was hurt March 2 at the Anaheim Ducks.

"We pushed him around a little bit," Muller said of Faulk's practice. "We'll see how his recovery is [Thursday]."

Who's hot: Sabres right wing Drew Stafford can extend his goal streak to three games. ... Hurricanes right wing Alexander Semin is in the midst of a five-game point streak with two goals and four assists.

Injury report: Sabres right wing Chris Stewart (high ankle sprain) is expected miss the remainder of the season. Defenseman Alexander Sulzer (lower body) is day-to-day. Forwards Zemgus Girgensons (lower body) and Torrey Mitchell (foot) have missed the past three games. ... Hurricanes defenseman John-Michael Liles (concussion) missed the past two games and is out indefinitely, while Faulk (upper body) is possible to return Thursday.

Little NHL players meet Ted Nolan for lunch at annual tournament

By Ron Desmoulins

CBC.ca

March 12, 2014

First Nations hockey players from across Ontario are in Mississauga this March Break for the 43rd annual Little Native Hockey League Tournament.

Stan Beardy, the Ontario Regional Chief with the Chiefs of Ontario and political advocate for the 133 First Nations communities located in the province, said he's so happy for the dozens of teams and the hundreds of kids taking part.

"You should see the faces of those little kids at the arenas, the eyeballs are so round and they're so excited."

'It's a big thing'

Beardy said it's not only about what happens on the ice. He said one lucky team was picked to have dinner with Buffalo Sabres coach Ted Nolan.

A young team from Six Nations of the Grand River sat down with Nolan for hot dogs and hamburgers.

Beardy said it is a community effort for the First Nations that are able to take part in the Little NHL tournament.

"They fund raise all year to get ready for this, it's a big thing for these kids and parents."

On a more personal note, Beardy said it is really fun to watch young kids playing hockey again. Ten years ago his son Daniel Beardy, a Junior A goalie in Thunder Bay, was killed. Beardy said it was hard to watch hockey after his son's death.

The annual Little NHL tournament started in 1971 with 17 teams and about 200 players and has grown in popularity each year to the point where there are now thousands of participants.

For Conacher, a fresh start in Buffalo

By Steve Milton

Hamilton Spectator

March 12, 2014

BUFFALO It was game day and he'd be in the lineup that night, but Cory Conacher still stayed on the practice ice longer than any other Buffalo Sabre.

His coach, Ted Nolan, said that's what players do to make an impression on their new team, but Conacher said it had more to do with his old team.

"I did it early on in my career, and it was successful," he said of the extra work. "With Marty St. Louis being there with me in Tampa, he was the guy who showed me the little things to work on after practice."

After a rough week, the 24-year-old NHL sophomore forward knows he needs a little something extra. He needs to get off to a good start in Buffalo, after being claimed off waivers from the Ottawa Senators last Wednesday in the midst of trade deadline commotion.

It was a splash — make that a bucketful — of cold water for a guy who, only two years ago, was just the fourth rookie chosen as American Hockey League most valuable player and who, last year, got off to a great NHL start with the Lightning, and with the Senators after he was traded to Ottawa at the deadline.

After 11 goals in his first 40 NHL games, Conacher has found the net only four times this year, the last time in late December. He's always set up more goals than he's scored, but he's always scored them, too — as a minor player for the Burlington Eagles, for the Junior A Burlington Cougars, as the all-time leading scorer for Canisius College.

"Even early on in the season, it took a while to score a goal," he said. "I've had ups and downs during the season. I'm not sure if it's the bounces. I can't really explain it. There were games where I felt like I fit and I clicked with the guys and there were games when I kinda got away from it."

"I'm looking to shoot the puck more and keep the game a little simple. Coming here gives me a little more confidence. I know this team wants me, and they put me on a line that can make me successful and hopefully I can do the right things."

He's on what is arguably the Sabres' top line with Drew Stafford and Tyler Ennis, another diminutive scooter who will never be mistaken for a basketball player. In his first game, against Chicago, he drew an assist on Stafford's goal, which he could have scored himself, but that's the kind of year it's been.

Conacher, who made the NHL in just his second pro season despite never having been drafted and taking daily insulin shots to battle diabetes, concedes that being

put on waivers was difficult on him emotionally. The Senators had surrendered a starting goalie, Ben Bishop, to get him only a year earlier.

But, on further review, his arrival in Buffalo was as much a trade as anything else. Until early January, Sabres GM Tim Murray was the assistant GM in Ottawa, where his uncle, Bryan Murray, is the GM. Tim Murray always supported Conacher in Ottawa and since Buffalo, in last place, had the first right of refusal on waived players, was this waiver claim really just a trade between family members, with nothing going the other way?

Surely that analysis offers some solace to Conacher.

"A little bit, definitely," he says. "A lot of people are saying that maybe that had something to do with it. And that's what you hope for right? You think about it as this team wanting you. I can tell everyone that every team put a claim in for me because the first team with a chance got me."

While in the process of putting Canisius on the hockey map, Conacher saw a lot of Sabres' games and Ennis was one of the players he looked up to. Or, to put it literally, that he could look right in the eye.

A warm reception from his new teammates, and playing with Ennis, and for Murray, has made the transition to his third team in two years a little smoother.

The Sabres are in heavy resculpting mode, and while the playoffs have been out of the picture since Opening Night, it's not a bad time to make a good impression. This team is still being recreated, and is looking for the right building blocks of its new DNA.

Conacher wants to be part of it, and can add the sting of waivers to the list of motivations that has always helped him achieve more than anticipated.

"With all the people saying I couldn't make it, all the downers who said I wasn't big enough, that the diabetes would get in the way," he says, "I'll use all that as a fire in my belly to prove them wrong."

Top line earning big minutes, providing Sabres' only offense

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 13, 2014

BUFFALO – It was just about Ted Nolan's only option for another goal. So the interim Sabres coach kept utilizing his top line throughout Tuesday's disappointing 4-1 loss to Nashville.

Scorching winger Drew Stafford, who scored the Sabres' lone goal on the power play, skated a season-high 23 minutes. Slick center Tyler Ennis played a team-high 24:17. Winger Cory Conacher skated a season-high 19:47.

"There was only one line basically going," Nolan said following the game inside the First Niagara Center. "You're not going to win too many games doing that."

While the trio couldn't score, the players buzzed around Predators goalie Carter Hutton all night. They've been showcasing some strong chemistry during two games together.

"They moved the puck in and out," said Nolan, whose team has two goals during a three-game losing streak. "Drew's really trying to take the leadership role we lost on this team. We've lost some veteran players, so he's embraced stepping up. Tyler Ennis, he's been good every game since I've been here. ... Conacher adds a little different element to it. He's a feisty little guy also. So they had a good one."

Conacher, a waiver addition from Ottawa last week, hasn't scored since Dec. 28, a 23-game drought. But the 24-year-old looks re-energized with the Sabres. In his debut Sunday, he created Stafford's goal by deking Chicago goalie Corey Crawford out of the net.

"It makes it pretty easy for me to get confident out there," Conacher said about receiving top-line duty. "They're guys that can find you on the ice at any given time. I think as long I just make room for them that we'll make things happen."

Conacher's the same age and an inch shorter (5-foot-8) than Ennis, someone he "looked up to" while starring at Canisius.

"Small guys kind of stick together," said Conacher, who replaced the traded Matt Moulson. "It's been a great experience with him so far. We get along off the ice as well, which is good. I think as the year goes on we'll get stronger on the ice together and hopefully that chemistry builds, leads into a good summer. I want to be back here next year, so I got to show them I can play with those guys."

Stafford, Ennis' right wing much of the winter, didn't know anything about Conacher.

“We haven’t had much time to practice,” said Stafford, who has eight goals and 14 points in his last 15 games. “Just watching him, he’s a highly skilled, quick type of player just like Tyler. Both of them, like Teddy said, they play with a little bit of vinegar. They got a little bit of an edge to them. Hopefully, we can try to build some chemistry.”

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Nolan wasn’t happy with Wednesday’s practice, so he bag skated the Sabres – that’s wind sprints, no pucks involved – and left the ice so players could discuss what had just happened, according to reports.

“I don’t really care what position you’re in or what your skill set is or anything like that,” Nolan told reporters before the Sabres left for tonight’s game in Carolina. “What I care about is the work that you put in and the effort that you put in. We didn’t put the effort in at the beginning of practice and habits are easy to form, good or bad. We have to avoid those bad habits and get them out early. We’re still professional people here.”

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Starting tonight against the Hurricanes, the Sabres play seven of their next eight games on the road.

“It’s a time for us to really come together as a team,” Stafford said. “We’re going to be spending a lot of time together in close quarters. It’s going to be up to us to drag ourselves out of this.”

Sabres Nolan punishes the team in practice

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 12, 2014

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- The Sabres got about 10 minutes into practice Wednesday and Ted Nolan blew up. He bagged skated them for about 20 minutes, had his say and left.

Once Nolan was gone Drew Stafford, Matt Ellis and some others had their say.

It's the first bag skate here in over 17 years as Lindy Ruff didn't agree with them. Nolan said, "I don't really care what position you're in or what your skillset is, what I care about is the work that you put in, the effort that you put in and we didn't put the effort in in the beginning of practice. Habits are easy to form both good or bad and we've got to avoid those bad habits and get them out early. We're still professional people here and we've still got the season to go and attention to detail has to be our number one priority."

Sorry for being brief, but with the weather in Western New York the team is trying to get to the airport to fly to Carolina.

PLAYERS HOLD ON-ICE MEETING AFTER PRACTICE

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 12, 2014

Early on in practice Wednesday morning, Buffalo Sabres interim coach Ted Nolan didn't like what he was seeing.

He observed numerous missed passes and a level of effort he wasn't happy with. So he blew his whistle, met with the players on the ice at First Niagara Center and began putting them through extensive skating drills. The players gathered in groups and did laps around the rink until Nolan felt his message had resonated with them.

The veteran members of the team then led a players-only huddle in the corner near the Buffalo bench for several minutes to close out the practice.

"When things aren't going well and games aren't going well and you come out in practice and you're not overly sharp, you're going to pay the price – and [it was] well deserved," Sabres forward Matt Ellis said. "When something like that comes in, you hope the message hits home. You come together as a group and you get through it. You pick each other up because there's no way of getting through that unless you're doing it together."

Sabres alternate captain Drew Stafford was one of the players in the middle of the huddle and stressed the importance of having good, consistent practices.

"Even if we are last place, the type of transition we're going through here with this rebuild, the philosophies and the way that we want to play, it starts in practice," he said. "It starts with your work habits and attention to detail. When those things aren't there, it translates to games. That's the message that was sent."

To Nolan, the same level of energy and work ethic should be there no matter where a team is in the standings. The ability to develop good habits will then stem from that work.

"I don't really care what position you're in or what your skill set is or anything like that. What I care about is the work that you put in and the effort that you put in," he said. "We didn't put the effort in at the beginning of practice and habits are easy to form, good or bad. We have to avoid those bad habits and get them out early. We're still professional people here. We've still got a season to go, too. Attention to detail, that's our No. 1 priority."

Nolan said he was happy to see some of his older players take charge and hold that meeting. The team coming off a 4-1 loss to the Nashville Predators on Tuesday and is looking for direction within the locker room. With a two-game

road trip coming up, now is as good a time as any for the players to get together and determine the type of team they want to be moving forward.

“[With] what we’re going through now, leaders are going to emerge and the lazy ones are going to emerge, too. Who’s going to win that battle is going to be the leadership on this team. I’ve liked what Drew’s been doing here for us since I’ve been here. He’s steadily gotten better and better. His maturity’s really been coming on and right now’s a good time for him to step up and I’m glad he did.”

The players said they understood Nolan’s message and that if they want to improve and win more games, they’ll have to bond and take that message to heart.

“As a group, we have to get together. Mistakes are being made every shift out there. If you don’t have the support out there from the guy next to you, you’re not going to be successful,” alternate captain Henrik Tallinder said. “To be successful, you have to have the support. If you look at the good teams, they make maybe not as many mistakes, but they make mistakes too, but you always have someone to clean it up for them. That’s what we have to do, too.”

Stafford hopes that the team is able to take the lessons from practice on Wednesday and learn from them.

“We’re all adults here. We’re not going through juniors where you need to be scolded all the time. We need to take accountability for our own actions out there and Ted is an extremely simple guy when it comes to his philosophies. You show up, you compete.”

The Sabres next play in Carolina on Thursday for a date with the Hurricanes at 7 p.m. at PNC Arena. Nolan wants to see a much better effort than he has the past few days.

“I’m hoping they respond the way they should. And that’s coming to give us a good effort tomorrow night against Carolina,” Nolan said. “It does matter, the score. But what matters more is the effort. We have to have good effort so I’m hoping we have a good one.”