



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres starting fresh in net with Enroth, Neuvirth

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

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BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Defenseman Tyler Myers immediately sensed something was different in the Buffalo Sabres' locker room when he arrived for the start of training camp.

The welcome sight of Ryan Miller — with his ever-unshaven face, steely eyed stare and sometimes brooding presence — was missing from his familiar perch in front of the oversized goalie stall at the far end of the room.

"It's a different feeling for sure," Myers said. "He did his thing on the ice, but he was such a presence off the ice as well in the dressing room."

"Miller Time" ended in Buffalo when the star goalie was traded to St. Louis in February, and then signed with Vancouver in free agency this summer.

That leaves the Sabres preparing to open their first season since Miller took over in 2005 without an established starter. The change comes after Buffalo spent last season completing a near top-to-bottom overhaul in which they switched coaches, general managers, purged much of its veteran core and finished with an NHL-worst 21-51-10 record.

"That's what our message was to our players: It's a fresh beginning," coach Ted Nolan said. "We appreciate everything Ryan did, but now it's Jhonas and Neuvirth's time."

Nolan was referring to Jhonas Enroth, Miller's backup, and Michal Neuvirth, who was acquired in a trade with Washington in March.

Enroth earned an early preseason edge in the competition after stopping 35 shots in a 2-0 win over Carolina on Tuesday.

"It was a good first game, but just preseason still," Enroth said. "I went into the game trying to have good habits and work hard, and it paid off."

Neuvirth is a candidate to make his first preseason appearance Friday, when Buffalo hosts Toronto.

Though the two are newly united in Buffalo, they've shared a similar path to the NHL.

It began in Europe, where the 26-year-olds were born three months apart (Enroth in Sweden, and Neuvirth the Czech Republic), and grew up playing against each other in various international tournaments. It continued in the NHL draft in 2006, when they were separated by 12 picks in the second round: Neuvirth was selected 34th by Washington, and Enroth 46th by Buffalo.

Then came last spring, when both spent time visiting the same doctors to rehab season-ending injuries — Enroth a right knee, and Neuvirth a hip and groin — sustained two games apart in Buffalo.

"We kind of bonded a little bit being hurt together," Enroth recalled. "Yeah, we're good friends now."

And competitors, too, with big skates to fill.

Miller, the NHL's 2010 Vezina Trophy-winner, set franchise records with 284 wins and 540 games played, and was the team's unquestioned leader.

"This is the chance I've been wanting for pretty much my whole career," Enroth said. "But I'm not going to try to fill his shoes, I'm just going to try to be myself."

He has had an up-and-down career in Buffalo.

Enroth opened by going 9-3-2, and became the NHL's first goalie to earn his first three wins in shootouts. Then came last season, when he had an 0-10-4 skid, which ended with a 29-save performance in a 5-4 overtime win against Boston on Feb. 26, two days before Miller was traded.

Overall, he has a 25-25-12 record with three shutouts.

Neuvirth has the better numbers, with a 59-43-13 record and seven shutouts. But he proved to be the odd-man out in Washington, first behind Semyon Varlamov and then Braden Holtby.

"I put the last two years behind me, and now I'm looking forward to this season," Neuvirth said. "I think we're going to push each other. I feel like we're going to be a good tandem."

Ex-Canadiens defenceman Gorges stands by decision not to accept trade to Leafs

By Stephen Whyno
Canadian Press
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BUFFALO, N.Y. - In seven-plus seasons with the Montreal Canadiens, Josh Gorges faced the Toronto Maple Leafs 36 times. This past summer, the hatred he built up for Montreal's arch-rival over the years changed the course of his career.

When the Canadiens tried to trade the veteran defenceman to Toronto at the draft, Gorges said no. The Leafs were on his list of teams he wouldn't go to, and he wouldn't remove them.

After being dealt to the rebuilding Buffalo Sabres, Gorges stands by his decision not to go to the Leafs because his heart wasn't in it. That's what he told new team president Brendan Shanahan.

"I just said, 'I'm a heart-and-soul player. It's the only reason I can be good at this level is I have to play and commit with my heart,'" Gorges said in an interview with The Canadian Press on Wednesday after practice at First Niagara Centre. "And after playing against them for that many years of being our No. 1 rival, I just didn't think it would've been fair to them. I wouldn't have been the same player that they would've expected me to be.

"Over time I would've got there. But I just didn't think I could commit my heart to playing the right way."

A tough, defensive defenceman, Gorges was just what the Leafs were looking for. When the feeling wasn't mutual, Gorges said Shanahan "understood completely."

"What he said to me was, 'That's why we're trying to make a trade for you is you have that character where you give yourself to one team,'" Gorges recalled. "He even said to me, 'If you would've been a guy that said, 'Oh yeah, sure I'll go to Toronto,' like that, then you're obviously not the player that I thought you were. The fact that you have that built in you is why we like you as a player.'"

Toronto turned its attention to Roman Polak, getting the stay-at-home right-hander from the St. Louis Blues in exchange for Carl Gunnarsson. And as Gorges continued to ponder the possibility of being a Leaf, the Habs traded him to Buffalo for a second-round pick in next year's draft.

"Things have a way of working themselves out," Gorges said.

What the 30-year-old knew for sure was he wasn't going back to Montreal. Being asked to waive his no-trade clause was enough of a signal of the Habs' intentions to Gorges.

"Knowing that they wanted to get rid of you, it's hard to go on and play for a team that doesn't want you anymore," he said. "But I don't think that was ever going to be an option, from my understanding. I wasn't coming back."

In his conversation with Shanahan and again this week, Gorges said he respected the Leafs' organization and that it was no slight to the city of Toronto that he didn't want to play there.

His reasoning will no doubt be debated for a while, and his first regular-season game back at Air Canada Centre with the Sabres on Oct. 28 could be something of a circus. But Gorges said he's happy in Buffalo, where he's joined by former Habs captain Brian Gionta.

"Having a guy that you know, been with for a number of years, you kind of start this chapter off together," Gorges said. "Probably most importantly is our wives are great friends. ... The fact that our wives can come

together and get used to the city and figure out where to go for shopping and grocery shopping and kids and meet everyone together, it makes things a lot more comfortable for us."

Off the ice, there's a comfort level, Gionta said recently at the NHL player media tour in New York City. On the ice, Gorges and Gionta will be counted on by coach Ted Nolan to help lead a very young team.

"The attitude in training camp has been tremendous," Nolan said. "When that happens, you usually look in the room and who the players are to lead that parade. Josh Gorges is one of those guys for sure."

Pre-season is a time for boundless optimism, and Gorges is certainly part of that. After going to the Eastern Conference final with the Habs, he'll more than likely miss out on the playoffs entirely this season with the Sabres.

But Gorges isn't wired to think like that.

"The great thing about being here is the excitement level and the potential to be good," he said. "The fact that no one's giving us a chance, that's an opportunity for us to come together as a group and that's what I like about this situation is we can go and surprise some people. It'll be fun."

Notes — The Leafs reduced their training-camp roster to 41 players by sending 13 players to the AHL's Marlies. Goaltenders Christopher Gibson and Cal Heeter, defencemen Eric Knodel, Andrew MacWilliam, Brendan Mikkelson and Tom Nilsson and forwards David Broll, Connor Brown, Jamie Devane, Greg McKeeg, Carson McMillan, Brad Ross and Brady Vail were assigned to minor-league camp. Four goalies, 12 defencemen and 25 forwards remain. ... Toronto continues its pre-season schedule Friday night at the Sabres.

Buffalo Sabres don't buy last-place predictions

By Kevin Allen

USA Today

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The widely held theory that the Buffalo Sabres are the top contender to land prized 2015 draft prospect Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel does not reflect the opinions of the free agents who signed there.

"Everyone outside the room doesn't give us much of a chance," said right wing Brian Gionta. "But our hope and goal is to make the playoffs."

On one hand, the Sabres had the NHL's worst record last season and are fully invested in a rebuilding effort. On the other, they have added key veterans such as Gionta, Matt Moulson, Josh Gorges and Andrej Meszaros.

Plus, first-round pick Sam Reinhart has the potential to be an exceptional rookie and youngsters Zemgus Girgensons, Nikita Zadorov and Rasmus Ristolainen could exceed expectations.

Gionta, 35, wouldn't have signed in Buffalo if he believed rebuilding would be a lengthy endeavor. He grew up as a Sabres fan living in Rochester, N.Y., idolizing Phil Housley, Tom Barrasso, Pat LaFontaine, Rob Ray and others. Even when he played for the Montreal Canadiens, he had a summer residence in Rochester.

"Everything factored into my decision," Gionta said. "Going home was big, but being asked to help turn a team around was pretty big."

He said other teams were interested in signing him, and he came close to staying in Montreal, but term was an issue. The Sabres offered him three seasons at a \$4.25 million cap hit.

"This was the best choice for us," he said.

Gionta was Montreal's captain, and his leadership history is a major draw for a Sabres team trying to establish a winning culture. He won a Stanley Cup with the New Jersey Devils in 2003.

A case can be made that Gionta is far more valuable to the Sabres than he was to the established Canadiens. The Sabres need his scoring and experience. They are counting on him being a 20-goal scorer. He has 18 last season.

"In New Jersey and Montreal, you kind of led by a community," he said. "You had a core group of players who were a big part of a leadership group. In New Jersey, it was Scott Stevens, Scott Niedermayer, (Ken) Daneyko, (Joe) Nieuwendyk, and in Montreal, we had (Tomas) Plekanec ... Hal Gill when he was there.

"I don't foresee it being much different in Buffalo. You have a couple of new guys coming in and then some guys who have been there and seen it and we will work together to lead the way."

Although he left a contending team with a tradition of high expectations, Gionta doesn't see his working environment changing that much.

"The passion in the fans and expectations of the organizations won't be much different," he said. "This is a Buffalo team that wants to win."

He notes that the Canadiens were last in the Eastern Conference in 2011-12 and then reached the conference final last season.

"Things change quickly in the NHL with the parity," he said.

Gionta said the preseason predictions of another miserable Sabres season will "fuel" the team.

"We want to go in there and prove people wrong," he said.

Mike Grier enjoying retirement, understands Sabres' rebuild

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

September 25, 2014

BUFFALO – Retirement has been good for Mike Grier. Since leaving the NHL, the popular former Sabres winger has enjoyed the family life he couldn't experience during his playing days.

But after almost three years of helping out his wife, "I think now she's ready for me to get out of the house," Grier joked this morning inside the First Niagara Center.

Grier's beginning to get more involved in hockey again. He's about to begin a job as a Chicago Blackhawks pro scout. USA Hockey recently asked him to coach a team at tonight's All-American Prospects Game.

"I was thrilled when they asked me," Grier said. "Being in Buffalo is kind of the cherry on top. It's a special place for me, a lot of great memories here."

Grier spent parts of five seasons in Buffalo. He retired following his second stint in 2011, just as the excitement over Terry Pegula's ownership was reaching its peak.

These days, the Sabres are rebuilding. Only a few players from Grier's tenure are left.

"I think it's been a rough couple years from kind of the euphoria of Mr. Pegula taking over and kind of the free-agent spending and that year kind of not working out," Grier said. "I think they've taken the right path. I don't think there's kind of any point of being in the middle in eighth or ninth place. I think they kind of tore it down, starting over, getting younger."

Grier will be coaching one of those young prospects, slick center Jack Eichel, the Sabres want to select next year. Eichel's a freshman at Boston University, Grier's old school.

The 39-year-old has spent a lot of time around Eichel, who he called "a real humble, down-to-earth kid."

"He's got a lot of things thrown on his plate early and handled everything with ease," Grier said. "It would be pretty easy for him to have a big head, but he doesn't. So I think that's the most impressive thing about him.

"But he's got a very unique skill set. He's got long reach, great hands, sees the ice very well. But at the same time, he can snap the puck and score goals. As you guys will see tonight, he's got one of the most unique strides you'll see. He'll get through the neutral zone in a heartbeat. When he opens it up and goes, it looks like it's effortless, but he's flying. So he's an impressive player."

Malacaro: Nolan and the Sabres eye test

By Pat Malacaro

WGR 550

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Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- You can count me as one person that is in agreement with the way Buffalo Sabres head coach Ted Nolan is evaluating his players. The "eye test" is the best way to judge young talent, in my view, and should be the primary tool used to make judgments one way or the other.

One of the biggest questions heading the 2014-15 season will be whether or not Jhonas Enroth is a starting goaltender in the National Hockey League. The veteran no longer has to worry about playing in the shadow of Ryan Miller, but rather if he can handle the workload that comes with being the backbone of the Sabres.

I was disappointed when Enroth suffered what turned out to be a season ending injury after Miller was dealt to the St. Louis Blues, because it robbed us of a chance to see if Enroth was finally ready for the job. It goes beyond just the wins and losses or how many saves he makes on a given night. How does Enroth prepare himself to potentially start 8 or 9 of the first 11 games in October? How does he handle the young defensemen in front of him when they make mistakes? These are all things that you have to apply the eye test to.

Mikhail Grigorenko can be used as a great example of how the eye test can tell the story for a young player. Many fans have bemoaned the fact that the 2012 first round pick did not play on one of the top lines with the blue and gold. That somehow he was almost set up to fail by the coaches. But by watching his play it became very evident very quickly that Grigorenko was struggling to keep up with the play early in his first season.

But, instead of sending him back to junior hockey, the Sabres decided to experiment with the forward a little more. He was even mixed in on special teams, garnering power play time in an effort to help stimulate his offensive skills. But that has not been the narrative of many. My eyes told me that I was seeing a player who was a "tweener." Better than the junior ranks, but not quite ready for the NHL. From all accounts late last year, Grigorenko has turned the proverbial corner, and I hope for his and the Sabres' sake that is indeed true this season.

I want to see if Samson Reinhart and Nikita Zadorov are two players that are ready for the NHL this season. In Reinhart we have a player widely praised for his ability to diagnose a play before it happens, one aspect of his game that cannot be measured by a statistic. Is he able to carry that skill over to the pros, or will there be a learning curve before he figures it out? My eyes will be able to tell me sooner rather than later.

Zadorov was impressive in his seven-game tryout with the blue and gold last regular season. You cannot teach mean; God knows fans have been waiting for Tyler Myers to "get mean" more consistently since his Calder Trophy campaign in 2009-10. Can Zadorov consistently throw his 6-foot 5-inch frame around in a similar fashion as he did on Sunday night? My eyes will be able to tell me yes or no. And if the answer is no, then it is OK for the young defenseman to go back to the London Knights. Another aspect of this is how well he takes setbacks. How quickly does Zadorov shake off youthful mistakes? How does he handle it if he is sent back to the Ontario Hockey League by the Sabres organization? All are questions that cannot be easily quantified by statistics.

The point of me saying all of this is not to say that statistics and analytics cannot be helpful to teams. My point is very simple: the eye test is the best way I have found to evaluate the talent on the Sabres roster. Can analytics help fill in the gaps that the eye test cannot? Absolutely, the numbers help complete the story, but they should not be the first tool used to evaluate a player.

There is room for us all at the party, and I welcome that. What I do not welcome is the notion by some that we are in an analytics "revolution." This is not an "us vs. them" issue or anything like that. It is simply a difference of opinion of how we arrive at our answers. No more, and no less.

Buffalo Sabres play ball with Miracle League

By Andrea Marvin

WGRZ

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GRAND ISLAND, N.Y. - Wednesday, The Miracle League of Western New York had the opportunity to play baseball with the Buffalo Sabres.

The Buffalo Sabres and the Buffalo Sabres Alumni were the kids "buddies" for the day, helping the kids get on base while cheering them along.

The league helps disabled children and young adults fulfill their dreams of playing ball. The rubberized field with no bumps in Grand Island allows kids in a wheelchair or with mobility disabilities to get around safely.

Buffalo Sabres Defenseman Mark Pysyk said, "You know you feel pretty good when you're standing on the base with a kid and he's just glowing and so excited to be here and he's outside playing baseball. It's a pretty good feeling."

Buffalo Sabres Alumni Rob Ray said, "This is what we're put on this earth to do is help each other and help people in need and give to people that are less fortunate. In this case these kids needed a place to play and feel as a normal they can and this is what we needed to do to help these kids feel that way."

The Buffalo Sabres provided financial support for the building of the field.

Experience tells Olczyk Sabres headed in right direction

By Kevin Snow

Sabres.com

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Eddie Olczyk will be behind the bench Thursday to guide the aptly-named Team Olczyk in the third annual CCM/USA Hockey All-American Prospects Game at First Niagara Center. But it's his only stint as an NHL head coach that gives the popular NBC Sports Network analyst a unique perspective on the current state of the Buffalo Sabres.

Olczyk, who scored 794 career points in 1031 games during six NHL stops, spent parts of two seasons coaching the Pittsburgh Penguins from 2003-2005, posting a 31-64-18 record in 113 games. That was the tail end of a three-year run that saw Pittsburgh plummet from 69 points in 2001-02 (23-47-12), to last place in the NHL in 2003-04 with 59 points. Pittsburgh never scored more than 200 goals in any of those three seasons, on their way to three straight trips to the Atlantic Division basement.

Despite the presence of a highly-touted rookie named Sidney Crosby, Olczyk was fired on December 15, 2005 after the Pens got off to an 8-17-6 start.

"We were in a very similar situation (in Pittsburgh) where we pretty much hit rock bottom," explained Olczyk following Thursday's morning skate in Buffalo. "We told our fanbase 'we have a plan, we need your trust, we need your patience. This is what we're trying to do and we're in a five-year plan.' Unfortunately for me I wasn't part of the five-year plan, but that's the reality of it.

"There are no quick fixes in this league. It's proven. You've got to build through the draft, and you've got to have the trust factor of people that are making the decisions, from managers to most importantly, talent evaluators."

After sputtering their way to 56 points in 2005-06, the Penguins would go on to consecutive 100-point seasons in 2006-08, followed by a Stanley Cup in 2009. Of course, that championship team was led by a trio of number one picks named Marc-Andre Fleury (2003), Evgeni Malkin (2004) and Crosby (2005).

Building a team through the draft takes time, but Olczyk, who was drafted third overall by Chicago in 1984, believes it's a necessary evil in rebuilding a franchise.

"I know the Sabres have stockpiled draft picks, including three in the first round (in 2015). You have to do it. When you go that way, the next step to me most importantly is bringing in the right leadership. You can have leadership; you can develop it here at the time.

"But for me it has to be the right kind of leadership, it can't be the self-serving, agenda-type of leadership when you have such a young team. You're going to go through times, and it's not easy. But it's a way of preparing and understanding. 'Look, it's going to be tough, but we're going to be a competitive team and we're going to work.'

"I know the kind of coach Ted (Nolan) is. It's not going to be easy, but the plan is not necessarily tomorrow or five months from now. It's about what happens in a couple of years."

Growing a program is something Olczyk is also familiar with at the college level, as his son Tommy is entering his senior season as Penn State's team captain. The Nittany Lions are preparing to start their third year at the D-I level thanks to a \$102-million commitment from Sabres owner Terry Pegula that also resulted in the construction of a state-of-the-art, on-campus arena.

"I know Mr. Pegula fairly well. Being a part of that program and seeing what he's done there, obviously the impact he's had in the game of hockey at the collegiate level. He wants to win, and he's going to do whatever it is. When you have ownership that cares about the people that are representing him, the city and the organization, that sends messages throughout the league."

Olczyk says it's more than just wins and losses that reverberate throughout the league. The NHL fraternity is tight, and comments made within it can go a long way to accelerating a rebuild.

"People sometimes lose sight of this or don't talk about it enough, but what you are doing is not just being observed by your fans or people within your community. There are other people that are watching to see how it goes. Players talk, coaches talk and trainers talk. They know what's going on here, and people want to be part of a first-class organization that's trying to do it right.

"Yeah, it's tough right now; it's been tough for the last couple of years. But that's an important part of selling, and I lived it in Pittsburgh in a similar situation. You do need that stud or two to come down the pipe – Fleury, Malkin, Crosby. We had to hit rock bottom in order to get those guys.

"It's been pretty successful and I don't think it's going to be any different here. But you've got to have patience though, and it's hard sometimes as a fanbase to hear that. I think they're certainly on the right path and understand what they're trying to do."

Grier working his way back into the game

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

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For parts of four seasons as a forward with the Buffalo Sabres, Mike Grier was pretty much already a coach. A steady veteran presence, he served as a role model to younger players and was looked up to by his teammates. Now he'll have the chance lead from behind the home bench Thursday night.

The former NHL forward, who suited up for 1,060 games, will be one of the coaches of the CCM/USA Hockey All-American Prospects Game, which begins at 7 p.m. from First Niagara Center.

"It's a great event put on by USA Hockey so I was thrilled when they asked me to be a part of it," he said. "Being here in Buffalo is the cherry on top. It's a special place for me. I have a lot of great memories here."

Grier is now a college scout for the Chicago Blackhawks, focusing on Hockey East.

He's eager to go out on his first assignment and said it'll be a little different for him because now he'll be watching games with a purpose. He'll use these experiences to help him see if he wants to become more involved in the pro game moving forward.

Coaching a team in the Prospects Game will provide him with another opportunity to discover different avenues in the hockey world.

"I'm just trying to take it all in, have some fun and learn some things along the way," he said.

He's tried to stress to the prospects playing in the game on Thursday that they shouldn't let their best attributes fall by the wayside just because they're playing in a showcase. He wants to see physical players continue to be physical even if they may have some friends in the opposing dressing room.

"You have to have some intensity to the game and make sure there's pace to the game and you're playing hard and you're doing the things that brought you to this game. So not just playing shinny out there and treat it as an All-Star Game," he told Kevin Sylvester and Andrew Peters on Sabres Hockey Hotline.

"You have to treat it as a real game with all the scouts and the people here that are going to be watching you. You've got to try to leave your mark on the game."

One player that many scouts and fans will be paying special attention to is Jack Eichel, the 17-year-old Boston University freshman who is likely to be one of the top picks in the 2015 NHL Draft. Grier, a BU alumnus, has gotten the chance to know Eichel a little bit and will be coaching him in the Prospects Game.

Grier said on Hockey Hotline that what's most impressive about Eichel is his demeanor off the ice.

"For two years, he's been getting the first or second pick in the draft, who's better – him or [Connor] McDavid – thrown in his face and nonstop interview requests and TV requests," Grier said. "And he handles it very well. It would be real easy for him to be a cocky, braggy kid, but he's got a good head on him. But besides that, he's a real dynamic player."

Grier had a reputation for being a tremendous teammate and for taking younger players under his wing. He said he learned those things when he himself was a young player and spending time with veterans like Kelly Buchberger, Doug Weight and Bill Guerin.

"They're doing all the right things that if you see that as a young guy, you say, 'That's who I want to be.' That's something I tried to take and pass along as well," he said.

Grier retired with the Sabres in 2011, following a first-round exit in the Stanley Cup Playoffs at the hands of the Philadelphia Flyers in seven games. That marked the end of his second stint in Buffalo.

He was first acquired by the Sabres at the NHL Trade Deadline in 2004 and played the remainder of that season and the entire 2005-06 season in the black and red. He left for San Jose as an unrestricted free agent in 2006 and returned to Buffalo for the 2009-10 season.

Grier shared a close bond with former Sabres captain Chris Drury. They won a national title together with Boston University in 1994-95 and became teammates again when Grier was traded for in 2004.

Sylvester and Peters asked Grier what Drury is up to now as he's avoided the spotlight since retiring in 2011.

"He's Keyser Söze," Grier joked, referring to the elusive criminal mastermind from "The Usual Suspects." "You don't see him too much. He's happy to keep to himself and he's always been a quiet guy and has enjoyed his time with his family."

Grier figures his best chance to win a Stanley Cup came in 2005-06 when the Sabres reached Game 7 of the Eastern Conference Finals but gave up a lead in the third period to the eventual champion Carolina Hurricanes.

"That was probably the year. We just had a team that loved being around each other, worked for each other," he said. "We had a little bit of everything. We had great goaltending with [Ryan Miller], four lines who could score, good D and [coach] Lindy [Ruff] molded the group, let us find our own way and just play our own brand of hockey which was pretty fast paced.

"...That's definitely my 'What If?' moment."

Duff's notes: Two preseason games in

By Brian Duff

Sabres.com

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A day off has arrived for those that remain in Sabres training camp.

For some, it marks the end of a busy week, one that unusually featured the opening preseason game on Sunday, after just two non-scrimmage practices. For those who were in Traverse City, it's the culmination of a two-week sprint.

The Sabres are back in action Friday. The non-game group will take the ice at 9 a.m. at First Niagara Center and the game group will have a morning skate at 10:30 a.m. All on-ice practice sessions are open to the public.

Buffalo faces off against the Toronto Maple Leafs at 7 p.m.

Here are some observations of individuals to date...

GOALTENDERS

Jhonas Enroth – Confident on and off the ice. I like how he looks when it comes to positioning and posture. And how can anyone find fault in a 35-save shutout? Kudos to him for his nod to Grant Fuhr on his new mask, too.

Matt Hackett – Perhaps still a couple months from returning to game action from a serious end of season knee injury, but what a testament to his rehab and his desire to see him on the ice going through basic mechanics.

Nathan Lieuwen – Also unhealthy at season's end (concussion), he really looked in control of his game Sunday against Washington. And yet he still wasn't at all satisfied with 24 saves on 25 shots. His post game comments were strong and convincing.

Andrey Makarov – A difficult week in Traverse City, but that's behind him now through a good week of practice in Buffalo.

Michal Neuvirth – Awesome new mask that pays tribute to The Dominator, and looking very fluid in practice despite no game action yet. For whatever reason – new pads, technique, etc. – he appears larger than the 6-foot-1 goalie I recall from last year's two-game cameo with the club.

DEFENSEMEN

Andre Benoit – The only defenseman among the handful of skaters who has appeared in both preseason games to date. Averaging 22 minutes per night, he's amassed the most penalty kill time – and the Sabres are 6/6 on the PK so far. He's animated – whether in practice or games – and that should be a bonus for a team that has been mentioned as quiet in recent years.

Ironically, I had just made note of his loud communication towards Joel Armia in the first period against the Capitals, as he tried to warn the winger of an oncoming forechecker while in the Sabres zone. Armia heeded the warning, made a down-low play to Benoit, before the Sabres unfortunately ran into trouble about 8 seconds later resulting in the games' only goal.

Still, for the majority of the time, that communication will pay dividends for Benoit and his mates.

Josh Gorges – A pro. You could hear it in his words after the morning skate on Tuesday, and it was reflected in his play that night. Coach Ted Nolan was quick to compliment the 22:43 of ice time put in by Gorges in his first preseason game in Blue & Gold.

Jake McCabe – Not at 100-percent health prior to game one at the prospect tournament, McCabe fought some puck handling issues and indecision during the week in Northern Michigan. But versus Carolina on Tuesday, he delivered likely the most poised game of his eight to date at the NHL level (he appeared in the final seven of last year's regular season).

What stood out most Wednesday morning when speaking to him was his absolute relief to finally win a game in a Sabres uniform. He had gone winless in seven last season and winless in another four in Traverse City. Even though it's only preseason, you can never fault a player for wanting to win.

Andrej Meszaros – Welcome to Buffalo, here's your jersey, now go play 30 minutes. Considering his career average is 20:31 per game, I'd say Andrej handled Tuesday's unexpected dilemma with aplomb.

Tyler Myers – Just about 26 minutes of good play against the Hurricanes. Always great to see him wind up in his own zone, make a spin move to avoid the forechecker and then exit the zone with ease as he did in the second period. A turnover by Myers was negated by a quick recovery to block a shot and despite the Sabres playing the game with five defensemen instead of six, you could see – when together – just how Gorges should have a nice impact on Myers' overall game.

Mark Pysyk – 54 seconds, one blocked shot, one upper body injury. Day-to-day, says the coach.

Rasmus Ristolainen – Lauded by Amerks Coach Chadd Cassidy for the minutes he logged in Traverse, the same praise came his way from Ted Nolan after Sunday's game in D.C. The physical difference in Ristolainen is obvious (he's down roughly 20 pounds from his rookie season) but for me the maturity level was dramatically different as early as development camp in July.

He wants to do things the right way, and that's why he's already emerging as a positive influence among his peers. Keep an eye on his posture when he's in the D-zone – head always up, in great position to react to anything.

Chad Ruhwedel – A bit of a rocky start to Sunday's game in Washington evened out to a decent 18:04 on ice. The 24-year-old, smooth-skating D-man has 28 NHL games under his belt the last two seasons. Regardless of where he plays this year – Buffalo or Rochester – he remains an intriguing player to me.

Tyson Strachan – As advertised. Veteran defenseman brought in for depth on the farm, he'll do whatever it takes to help, including taking a solid punch from Tim Spencer of the Caps but kept on going.

Mike Weber – Led the team in hits and blocked shots against Washington. This is a recording...

Nikita Zadorov – The rookie tournament was not what he was hoping for, but it was a solid return to NHL preseason play on Sunday. Anxious to see his next game.

FORWARDS

Joel Armia – The points just never came for him (or his mates) in the prospect tournament. But in the practices since his game in Washington he may have found a different gear. We'll see – hopefully this weekend.

Zac Dalpe – Drafted six years ago, Dalpe still hasn't reached 100 NHL games played. But at the AHL level, he's close to 0.8 points per game. One of four forwards to have played in both preseason games, Dalpe has caught my eye a number of times in various areas of the ice, and often in practice for a good release.

Nicolas Deslauriers – Has played both games as well and has five shots and seven hits to show for it. Always like the hustle and heaviness with which he plays.

Matt Ellis – Never stops trying. A great example for anyone to follow.

Tyler Ennis – Flying in practice and it carried over to his game against the 'Canes. A lot of talk about his off-season attention to detail in all zones, face-offs, etc. Could be the start of a nice season for 63, especially if he gains confidence from some added ice-time on the penalty kill.

Brian Flynn – In a heck of a battle one would think for those bottom six spots, Sunday's uneven preseason opener for both teams wasn't the best type of game for Flynn's smart game to thrive in. He did persevere after having his face smushed into the boards late in the first period.

Brian Gionta – Serious. Committed. Responsible. Can't be anything but a good influence.

Zemgus Girgensons – My early guess is he's just a touch meaner than last year.

Mikhail Grigorenko – More mature, more muscle, more ready to be a pro. Very positive early strides taken, including in his skating. Liked his third period in particular with Brendan Lemieux and Patrick Kaleta on Tuesday, but over both games he showed more awareness in all zones, which had him in a better position to make positive plays.

Patrick Kaleta – Welcome back! The boards may still be rattling from one his attempted hits on a 'Cane, but overall, a solid 11:39 on ice after 10 months on the sidelines.

Vaclav Karabacek – Between the prospect tournament, practice, and preseason play, he's shown a really nice offensive skill set.

Johan Larsson – Three shots, three hits, tw takeaways in the game versus Washington. On a line with Dalpe and Torrey Mitchell, I liked his active stick on the forecheck.

Brendan Lemieux – From his first game in Traverse City until now, he's gotten a little bit better each day. And it seems like the coaches see that too. Did not look at all out of place against the Hurricanes.

Torrey Mitchell – Did what he does versus the Caps – blocked shots, created turnovers, used his speed.

Matt Moulson – Appears ready to be a top line player again. Hard not to like his entire line throughout the win over Carolina.

Sam Reinhart – Two games, a little bit of the same in both. Learning the ropes, and progressing as the game moves on. Even at this early stage, makes more quietly positive plays than you might think. Has done a good job of putting himself in a position to take hits and battle while protecting the puck.

Tim Schaller – No games to date but the one guy I keep doing a double-take on in practice. Hearing nothing but good things about his development. Schaller finished his first year of pro strong with the Amerks.

Drew Stafford – Aside from his obvious joy of playing with Ennis and Moulson, his patience with the puck below the hash marks against Carolina was impressive. In a game that is so frenetic now, an extra half-second can make a massive difference in creating/finishing plays.

Chris Stewart – Be it in practice or in his one game to date, Stewart looks like a different player. And he told everyone he would be. Quicker, and setting a great example in practice, he's also been making smart passes in tight areas, as well as spending ample time working on his shot.