



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres-Lightning preview

By Jeff Bartl

Associated Press

December 3, 2014

The Buffalo Sabres weren't just losing over the first five weeks of the season, they were being beaten handily on a consistent basis while struggling in every facet of the game.

Suddenly, they're one of the NHL's hottest teams.

Buffalo looks to sweep a four-game stretch against the Atlantic Division's top two clubs as they visit the Tampa Bay Lightning on Thursday night to complete a home-and-home set.

The Sabres (9-14-2) opened the season by dropping 15 of 18, suffering nine defeats by at least three goals and scoring fewer than three before the shootout 16 times in that stretch.

Things have changed drastically since, as Buffalo has won six of seven and is on the verge of its first four-game winning streak since winning five in a row from March 19-27, 2012.

After beating Montreal 2-1 at home Friday, the Sabres defeated the Canadiens 4-3 in a shootout the following night before Tuesday's 2-1 shootout victory over the Lightning.

Zemgus Girgensons has scored in back-to-back games, as his goal with less than four minutes left forced overtime against Tampa Bay. In an odd story, the second-year center has an NHL-high 399,356 votes for the All-Star Game, nearly double Sidney Crosby.

"It's just fun to play, you know?" Girgensons said. "We come into the locker room before the game, we come in thinking about winning. That's a habit to win and we hope to keep it going."

Jhonas Enroth is 5-1-0 with a 1.55 goals-against average during the Sabres' hot stretch, though it's unclear if he'll be in net again for this contest. He improved to 4-0-1 with a 1.56 GAA in his career against the Lightning after stopping 26 shots Tuesday.

Defenseman Josh Gorges returned from a knee injury that caused him to miss seven games and recorded his 100th NHL point with an assist on Girgensons' goal.

"Obviously the confidence is a little bit higher now," Enroth said. "We've beaten a couple of great teams here the last couple of games so we know we can beat every team in the league, especially beating Montreal back to back there. We're just going to try to build on that momentum and stay positive and take it day by day."

Tampa Bay (17-6-3) scored 16 goals during a four-game winning streak before failing to generate much offense in Tuesday's defeat. Ondrej Palat scored for the second straight contest.

"Did we put ourselves in positions for some Grade-A scoring chances? We did, and we passed them up every time," coach Jon Cooper said. "That was tough. You look at our shots attempted, it wasn't that bad. We just passed up all our Grade-As. For us to have two shots in (the first) period, it doesn't give you a big-time chance to have success."

The Lightning now begin a four-game stretch at home, where they've won four straight and eight of nine. Struggling clubs Columbus, Washington and Carolina are the other three opponents on the homestand.

Evgeni Nabokov made 21 saves in Tuesday's matchup, but Ben Bishop is likely to be back in goal for this contest. Bishop is 10-1-1 with a 2.07 GAA in 12 home starts and 4-0-1 with a 2.31 GAA in his career against the Sabres.

It's unclear if rookie Jonathan Drouin, who hasn't scored since recording his first NHL goal Oct. 24, will be back in the lineup after being a healthy scratch Tuesday.

Sabres' Hodgson gets a shot of confidence

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

December 3, 2014

When you look at the numbers, it's hard not to think of Cody Hodgson as this year's version of Ville Leino.

There's often been nothing happening when Hodgson has been on the ice for the Buffalo Sabres, just like when Leino went without a goal in 58 games last season. So it was a surprising hunch coach Ted Nolan played Tuesday, putting Hodgson out as the Sabres' first participant in a shootout against Tampa Bay. Hodgson burned Evgeni Nabokov on a neat backhand, getting credit for the game-winning goal in Buffalo's 2-1 win.

When the Sabres and Lightning meet again tonight in Amalie Arena, Hodgson is hoping he can get a tiny boost from that moment to do something with his season.

Hodgson has two points all year. There's an assist Oct. 14 at Carolina and a goal Oct. 25 at San Jose. He has no points for 16 straight games even though he has pretty much played a regular shift in all of them.

"You can drive yourself nuts if you just stare at the stat sheet every day," Hodgson said after practice Wednesday in First Niagara Center. "At the end of the day, what will help your stats is playing well. That's helped me recently. I'm feeling better out there with a little more confidence carrying it through."

Hodgson, who is minus-10 for the season, has been better of late. He has seven shots on goal and an even rating the last five games while averaging nearly 15½ minutes per contest. That came after he narrowly averted being a healthy scratch a couple of times, especially after he played a season-low 7:53 in the Nov. 13 loss at Minnesota.

Nolan has stuck with him.

"You have to be optimistic at all times," Nolan said. "He scored 20 goals for us last year. What's the difference this year? Those areas goal scorers have to go into. ... Cody is getting closer to going into those areas and he's getting some chances. Hopefully that goal last night will give him a good taste of what it's like to score goals again."

Hodgson, remember, had 20 goals and 44 points for the Sabres just last year. He's averaged 18 goals and 40 points over the last three seasons with Vancouver and Buffalo.

When he was a standout for Team Canada at the World Championships last spring in Belarus (six goals and eight points in seven games), it stood to reason Hodgson would carry that momentum into this season.

It hasn't happened, as year two of his six-year, \$25.5 million contract stands as a major bust to date. There have been switches between wing and center, shifts in lines, lax play in the defensive zone and limited touch on the offensive end. Maybe some bad luck too as he's scored on just 1 of 33 shots this season, a shooting percentage of 3 percent, far below his career average of 11.4.

Nolan was initially going with Matt Moulson to start the shootout but Moulson said he felt sluggish during the game and Nolan went in another direction. Hodgson said the quick conversation on the bench went like this:

"He said, 'I thought you were going to score tonight' and I said, 'Yeah, so did I,'" Hodgson said. "And he goes, 'Well, you're first in the shootout.' It was great. It's nice to help the team contribute to a win."

Hodgson burned Nabokov with a series of dekes capped by a neat backhand.

"I tried to change the angle a few times on him just to see how he would move," Hodgson said. "And when I was able to pull it to my backhand, I had a lot of net to shoot at."

Hodgson said early in the year he would fret about missed chances. Now he's trying to take each game on its own and is hoping to see some results. He said the Sabres are doing the same thing, not fretting or reveling over the previous result. Buffalo has won six of its last seven heading into tonight's game, including three straight over Montreal and Tampa Bay.

"You want to have a fresh start each night and just go play," he said. "And as a team we can't look back. Those are nice wins but you can't look at those, just like you couldn't do that when we were losing. We just have to bring another top game against Tampa."

Sabres notebook: Gionta, Gorges pay tribute to Beliveau

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

December 3, 2014

Josh Gorges said one reason he picked the No. 4 to wear in Buffalo was because of Jean Beliveau. Brian Gionta cherishes the meetings he had with the Montreal legend, discussing the legacy of being the Canadiens' captain.

Gionta and Gorges, ex-Habs who joined the Sabres this year, spoke glowingly after practice Wednesday of Beliveau, who died Tuesday at age 83. Both players have also tweeted messages of support for Beliveau's legacy.

"The talks that I've had with him, the private one-on-ones, he's just the nicest guy ever," Gionta said. "He'd sit down with you, really engage with you. I really enjoyed my time learning from him, talking to him and just being around him.

"He had that presence about him. But at the same time, he was the biggest gentleman. Down to earth, knew your name, took time for you. Engaged with you. Didn't blow you off. He was really connected when you talked to him. The times we spent with him and his wife behind the scenes were pretty special."

Gorges wore No. 26 in Montreal but said he felt it was time to go to a single-digit number here and went with No. 4 because of Beliveau.

"He is what every hockey player should strive to be," Gorges said. "Top-end talented hockey player, a winner, champion. But he did it all with class and respect. I think that's why he's such a role model and such an icon not just in that city and province, but in all the hockey world.

"He was a good man. Everything he did was the right way. I was lucky enough to be there, watch him and see how he holds himself. It's a sad day in hockey."

Gorges said he was talking with some Sabres about Beliveau on Wednesday morning and recounted how a chat with him was interrupted by a fan seeking an autograph and picture.

"He opened up his suit jacket, pulled out a Sharpie, signed the autograph and told me, 'When you play in Montreal, make sure you never leave home without a Sharpie.'" Gorges said. "I was like, 'What are you talking about?' and he said, 'People always want to have autographs and you need to be able to sign their autographs because they might not have a pen.'

"Here's a guy that didn't have to do that, take his time out of his day to do that for people but he made the extra effort to make sure he was always prepared to give back to the city."

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Zemgus Girgensons' runaway lead in the NHL All-Star Game balloting, clearly created from fanatical voting in his native Latvia, is likely to draw criticism from media on both sides of the border if it continues. NBC Sports Network analyst Mike Milbury snickered about it heading to a commercial on the pregame show for the Sabres game Tuesday night.

Coach Ted Nolan said that is unfair to the 20-year-old.

"His play supports it enough that he probably doesn't necessarily need his country for the support," Nolan said. "He's got seven goals, he's our No. 1 center, he plays the power play, he plays penalty kill. You show me another 20-year-old that has that much responsibility on their team in this league.

"I don't think there should be any kind of criticism whatsoever. I think it should be, 'Who is this kid? Let's watch him. Let's see him.' He's the type of kid that brings people to our game."

Nolan, who coached Latvia in the Sochi Olympics, said it's no surprise to him to see how much backing is coming to Girgensons.

"They're really supportive of their athletes, especially hockey players," he said. "To see that support that Zemgus is getting from his homeland is not surprising at all. They're very supportive and passionate people and I'm quite sure this thing has taken a life of its own over there."

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Nolan said Cody McCormick has been cleared from his concussion protocol and should play tonight in Tampa Bay. The Sabres are hopeful Drew Stafford will be available for Saturday's game in Florida. With McCormick ready, Tim Schaller has been returned to Rochester.

Nolan said red-hot Jhonas Enroth will make his sixth straight start tonight in goal and there's no concern about him wearing out at this point. "That will show itself. Right now he feels good," Nolan said. "When you feel good, nobody gets tired."

Enroth could have the net to himself for a while. The Sabres don't have another back-to-back until Dec. 15-16, when they host Ottawa and then travel to Winnipeg.

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In Rochester, Amerks winger Joel Armia is expected to continue to be out of the lineup this weekend due to an upper-body injury. Armia, 21, has already missed two games and is likely to be out for Friday night's home game against Binghamton in Blue Cross Arena as well as Saturday's contest at Syracuse and Sunday's game in Toronto.

Armia, Buffalo's No. 1 draft pick in 2011, is tied for fourth on the Amerks in scoring with 15 points (six goals, nine assists). Also at 15 are Mikhail Grigorenko (7-8) and Schaller (6-9).

Phil Varone leads the Amerks with 22 points (6-16) while Grigorenko and Luke Adam are tied for the team lead in goals. Rochester enters the weekend 9-11-1 and in 11th place in the AHL's Western Conference, currently three points out of a playoff spot.

Surging Sabres try for back-to-back wins vs. Lightning

By Louie Korac

NHL.com

December 3, 2014

SABRES (9-14-2) at LIGHTNING (17-6-3)

TV: MSG-B, BELL TV, SUN

Season series: The Buffalo Sabres and Tampa Bay Lightning meet for the second time in three days. Buffalo won 2-1 in a shootout on Tuesday at First Niagara Center, getting goals from Cody Hodgson and Tyler Ennis in the tiebreaker. Jhonas Enroth stopped 26 shots in regulation and overtime and denied both shootout attempts.

Sabres team scope: After starting the season winning three of their first 18 games, the Sabres have won six of seven and climbed to 13th in the Eastern Conference. "The one thing we are doing is we're getting better and we're working on certain things," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "Part of getting better is that resiliency, to keep going and keep going. Enroth has stopped 183 of 192 shots in his past six appearances. "Obviously the confidence is a little bit higher now," Enroth said after the win Tuesday. "We beat a couple of great teams the last couple of games, so we know we can beat every team in the League and we just are going to try to build on that momentum and stay positive and take it day by day."

Lightning team scope: The Lightning moved past the Montreal Canadiens in the Atlantic Division by getting a point Tuesday, but the Canadiens played at the Minnesota Wild on Wednesday. The shootout loss snapped a four-game winning streak. "We were shorthanded early a couple times, so we were kind of on our heels a bit," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said after the game. "Did we put ourselves in positions for some quality, Grade A early scoring chances? We did and we passed them up every time. That was tough. You look at our shots attempted, it wasn't that bad, we just gave up our Grade As. Give Buffalo credit, they were in lanes and blocking shots and doing everything they had to do. But for us to have two shots in a period, [it] doesn't give you a big-time chance to have success." The Lightning assigned forward Vladislav Namestnikov the Syracuse Crunch of the American Hockey League on Wednesday.

Sabres' Tyler Myers playing big minutes, looking like star again

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
December 3, 2014

BUFFALO – A little more than two minutes into overtime Tuesday, Tyler Myers grabbed the puck in his own zone and freewheeled through the neutral zone. The Sabres defenseman then slickly undressed Radko Gudas above the left circle and roared to the net before goalie Evgeni Nabokov thwarted him.

Minutes later, Myers raced back and stymied Lightning sniper Steven Stamkos' scoring chance as overtime expired in the Sabres' 2-1 shootout win.

Sequences like Tuesday's have become a regular occurrence again. Less than two years after hitting rock bottom – Myers reported to an abbreviated training camp out of shape and later got scratched – the 2009-10 Calder Trophy winner might be as good as ever.

"I think the last year and a half I've really figured out how to approach different situations," Myers said Wednesday inside the First Niagara Center. "The big thing is just getting on an even keel. I think it's helped out a lot."

The Sabres have won three straight games and six of the last seven entering tonight's rematch in Tampa Bay. Myers missed the only loss, a 2-1 setback to Winnipeg eight days ago, because of a lower-body injury.

The 24-year-old has morphed into the Sabres' most important skater, averaging a team-high 25 minutes, four seconds of ice time each game, the NHL's 10th-highest total.

"I think he's in a real good place as far as his maturity, his career," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "Instead of just being a good player, now he's taken it on to be a real good player, special player for us.

"He's making those strides, and he's getting better and better all the time."

Myers' confidence has reached its highest level in years.

"I've been really happy with where my confidence has been this year," Myers said. "It's just a matter of building even more. I think the way our team's going right now, our team confidence is allowing individuals to hold onto the puck, more puck possession time. I think it's working really well for everyone."

Myers works well when he's moving all over the ice. That's the easiest way to tell whether he's on his game.

"I think a big part of my game is skating, obviously," he said. "I try to focus on making sure my legs are moving each and every game. I find if I have my legs going, that's usually when I'm able to play at my best."

Josh Gorges, Myers' partner, added: "I said this all along, his ability to skate, separate himself from the forecheck is unbelievable. He can make things happen. He makes my job real easy out there."

Myers has played big minutes all season, skating at least 20 in all but one game. He has 12 games of 25 minutes or more already. He played a season-high 31 minutes, 34 seconds in Saturday's 4-3 shootout win in Montreal.

Nolan often matches Myers and Gorges against the opposition's top line, so the tandem has no margin for error.

"It feels good," Myers said about the playing time. "I feel very engaged in the game with that many minutes. It's tough sometimes shutting down their top guys, but it's challenges like that that I think get you even more prepared and even more engaged coming into a game.

"It's been fun. I enjoy playing those minutes like that. Any way I can help the team, however many minutes they want to play I'll play."

Nolan might take Myers up on his offer.

"Those minutes, it seems like he could probably handle another five to seven minutes attached to that," Nolan said.

Of course, given the Sabres' sorry state much of this season and their league-worst offense, Myers' statistics look pretty pedestrian. He has only one goal and six points in 24 games.

"That's the least of my worries right now," Myers said about his numbers. "I've been very happy with the way I've been playing. I know it'll come. It's a matter of the way our team's starting to go, I think more guys will see some numbers come into play. With more puck possession time, we're going to have more opportunities. When that happens, great."

Jean Beliveau still greatly influences Sabres' Josh Gorges

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
December 3, 2014

BUFFALO – Josh Gorges considers himself old school. He believes defensemen should wear single-digit numbers. So after sporting No. 26 with the Montreal Canadiens for years, the veteran wanted a low number when the Sabres acquired him.

Gorges had a couple of choices. He settled on No. 4, partly because iconic Canadiens legend Jean Beliveau, who died Tuesday at age 83, wore it during his illustrious Hall of Fame career.

Beliveau is hockey royalty.

"What a great number to wear," Gorges said Wednesday. "I got to meet him, and of all the guys I met in Montreal, he was always the one that stood out in my mind as, 'This is who you should strive to be, this guy right here.' I thought it would be something that could remind me every day when I come in, you see that No. 4. 'Oh yeah, that's right, Mr. Jean Beliveau, and he did things this way.' So it's a good reminder for myself every day."

Sabres captain Brian Gionta wore the 'C' with Montreal for four seasons. Having both captained hockey's most storied franchise, they shared a special bond.

Gionta cherishes the time he spent with Beliveau.

"The talks that I've had with him, the private one-on-ones, (he was) the nicest guy ever," he said. "He'd sit down with you, really engage with you. So I really enjoyed my time learning from him, talking to him, just being around him."

Gionta said Beliveau "had that presence about him."

"But at the same time was the biggest gentleman, down-to-earth, knew your name, took time for you ... didn't blow you off," he said. "He was really connected when he talked to you."

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With forwards Cody McCormick (concussion protocol) and Drew Stafford (lower body) available, the Sabres sent center Tim Schaller back to Rochester on Wednesday.

The rookie played his second NHL game Tuesday.

McCormick has been cleared and will likely return tonight in Tampa Bay. Goalie Jhonas Enroth will make his sixth straight start.

The Sabres also play Saturday in Florida.

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Sabres coach Ted Nolan doesn't think center Zemgus Girgensons, the No. 1 vote-getter for the NHL All-Star Game, should face any criticism because fans in his native Latvia are so rabid and supportive of the 20-year-old.

If Girgensons is voted into the game, he would be a worthy choice, said Nolan, who's also Latvia's national team coach.

"I think it's very supportive of his country," he said. "But his play's supportive enough that he probably doesn't necessarily need his country for his support. ... He's our No. 1 center. He plays on power play. He plays on penalty killing. You show me another 20-year-old that has that much responsibility on their team in this league.

"I think it should be, 'Who is this kid? Let's see him. Let's watch him.' He's the type of kid that brings people to our game."

Sabres' Schaller fit right in before being sent down

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

December 3, 2014

Tampa, FL (WGR 550) -- Tim Schaller got his first practice in with the Sabres after playing two games, but it didn't last long after. Cody McCormick has been cleared by the doctor to play, so Schaller is headed back down the Thruway.

The center isn't your typical rookie. He spent four years at Providence before signing as a free agent. That makes him 24 and he was ready for his opportunity when it came up in Montreal, "I wasn't that nervous I had the two preseason games, so I had all the nerves out of the way there, so it wasn't too nerve wracking at all."

Schaller didn't have a morning skate for either game he played. I would've thought that would've been tough, but he said, "I thought it was going to be tough, but the adrenaline was running pretty high, so I really didn't think of it too much. It was actually a lot of fun and it was easy to play."

Many feel Schaller was the Amerks best player before his call-up. He knew he was playing well and had faith he'd get the call eventually, "Yes, when you're playing well it's always in the back of your mind. I tried not to think of it too much, but it's the reality that it could happen, so I'm happy it did."

Schaller took the same route to Buffalo had Brian Flynn did. Flynn wasn't drafted out of Maine, signed as a free agent, played in Rochester and now has 121 NHL games in. Schaller said he has always kept Flynn's journey in mind, "Yes, absolutely. Flynn's a good guy and he's worked hard to get here and hopefully I can do the same thing."

Watching Schaller play he probably looks like he's more apt to be that good bottom six forward than Johan Larsson. The centerman knows how he can stay in the NHL, "Yes, I know my role here and I think if I keep playing it, I'll get a chance to play for this team fulltime hopefully." As far as how he's played, Schaller has been happy with his first two NHL games, "It's been a lot of fun, I thought I played well and we have two wins, so I can't complain."

Schaller had played 92 games in the AHL scoring 17 goals and 16 assists.

Sabres on the warpath? What happened?

By Mike Schopp

WGR 550

December 3, 2014

The Sabres' first 10 games this season were astonishingly bad, even for a team with these low expectations. Called a "Pee-Wee team" by their own coach, publicly. Deadfish home losses to Anaheim and Boston. *Ten shots on goal against Toronto.*

The conversation seemed over almost as soon as it had begun: The Buffalo Sabres *will finish last.*

But it isn't, on balance, those 10 games we should have thought would define this Sabres season, and team.

It's the last 10.

It began with lopsided losses to league powers Pittsburgh and St. Louis. It's included jewel heists against Washington, San Jose and Montreal. And, a couple of shootouts.

When the Sabres win you want to rub your chin, tilt your head and take a smoke, then maybe talk like Groucho Marx. "You don't say," said Marx maybe, after the Sabres scored late, dodged a last-second direct hit of a goal post and won a shootout Tuesday night against Tampa Bay.

"Very interesting."

So now, the season still less than one-third old, fans braced for last place even perhaps to the point of wanting it are being tested. The Sabres are not, by the standings, last, to say nothing of being last by a lot.

But they are the league's worst team.

"McEichel"-minded fans will just have to hope that's good enough.

I still think it should be.

But there are concerns.

** Edmonton's goaltending is poor, and its goalies aren't players you can look at and expect to jump up. If the Oilers don't add a goalie they could fall to the floor. And the longer they stay at the bottom, as a franchise that's long been near the bottom, hope wanes and players surrender. We don't want that.

** Columbus' incredible bad injury luck causes that organization to turn the car around. A (rare) playoff appearance last season positioned the Blue Jackets this summer as a plucky contender. But several top players are or have been hurt for long stretches, and their goaltending has dipped, which is not a colossal surprise. Columbus may think it risky after, say, another 10 games to start thinking about the cellar, in terms of their fan base. On the other hand, their general manager is said to be quite smart. (Yes, to me those are basically opposites.)

** Philadelphia, Carolina, Ottawa, Colorado, and even Calgary with its lofty record are poor enough possession teams to not be ruled out for very high draft picks. A look at league leaders in PDO -- #your team's even-strength shooting percentage plus save percentage when #you're on the ice -- is, let's say, Flame-intensive.

Not on this list of concerns: the Sabres' play.

You're hearing it all right now: how determined and competitive the Sabres are, how unified they've become, how focused. I think, while perhaps true to varying extents, it's all mostly a distraction.

We're in the business of talking. Gotta say somethin'.

This kind of season, the one the Sabres have fashioned recently, is what was right to expect. It's hockey -- you *can't* lose them all. Bounces, posts, deflections, etc. It's very hard to score! Hockey isn't basketball. The Philadelphia 76ers, the Sabres' thinclad alter-ego, might be the worst NBA team ever. They are 0-17. Basketball is an easier "tanking sport", if you will. Much less luck.

The Sabres, like it or not, will win games.

Will they win too many?

They could, but I'm not too worried.

Yet.

Sabres streaking up the standings

By Jon Scott

TWC Sports

December 3, 2014

BUFFALO, NEW YORK - Do not look now, but the Sabres are digging themselves out of the bottom of the NHL standings thanks to their best stretch of hockey since the end of the 2012-2013 regular season.

"I'm a strong believer in perseverance," head coach Ted Nolan said. "There's moments in everybody's life when you just feel like packing in. It's not going to turn. It's not going to get better. But if you have that little belief factor. If you continue to do the right things, eventually you'll work yourself out of it."

The players credit better fundamentals for the improved play.

"Paying attention to details," captain Brian Gionta said. "Making sure we take it out of our own end. We've cleaned up our D zone and it's leading to more offense and we're able to shut teams down a little more."

"The game was easier," defenseman Josh Gorges said. "You weren't chasing the puck around and chaotic. Guys were more in position. They're competing for loose pucks so when we do that, we have possession of it and we can go play. It was great to see. It was great to be apart of it finally. And hopefully we can keep that going."

While the team is happy with their improved play, some fans are not. They continue to hope the team finish with the worst record in the NHL to draft Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel.

The players, though, will not let that mindset enter the locker room.

"We don't care," said forward Drew Stafford. "That's not something that's effecting us in here. We've been hearing that for a long time. It's one of those things, it's just outside noise. You got to do your best to block it out and focus on what's most important and that's us in here."

"Guys in this room, we're focused on playing hockey," Gionta said. "We're focused on winning. Changing the culture here. Pretty much the outside noise is what it is. It's outside noise. The guys in this room believe in us and we're going to continue to play hard."

The Sabres go for four-straight wins on the back end of their home-and-home series down in Tampa Bay Thursday night.

Soaring Sabres take off for 2-game Florida road trip

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

December 3, 2014

The Buffalo Sabres are flying high right now, so it's only appropriate that they took off Wednesday on a flight bound for Tampa Bay after a short practice at First Niagara Center.

Buffalo defeated the Lightning 2-1 in the shootout on Tuesday and will square off with them again Thursday night at Amalie Arena. The Sabres have won three games in a row and six of their past seven.

After a rough start to the season, it's taken a lot of work for them to get to this point and the team knows there is still much more to be accomplished.

"This team has persevered through a lot of stuff," coach Ted Nolan said. "We got booed off the ice a couple times. It didn't feel too good. They just worked and worked and it's great to see them have some rewards for it."

Cody McCormick is set to be back in the lineup after missing the past four games while going through concussion protocol procedures. He was almost cleared to play on Tuesday, but was ruled out shortly after the morning skate.

While McCormick will be back on Thursday, Drew Stafford will have to wait until Saturday before he's ready to play again. He's been sidelined the past two games with a lower-body injury but Nolan said he should be ready when the team plays the Panthers over the weekend.

With those two players ready to return, Buffalo sent rookie center Tim Schaller back to the American Hockey League after practice.

Jhonas Enroth is slated to start once again against the Lightning. He's 5-1-0 with a .953 save percentage and a 1.55 goals-against average in his past six appearances.

FAMILY MATTERS

Several players were able to invite family members on the current two-game road trip that sees the Sabres play in Tampa Bay on Wednesday and against the Florida Panthers on Saturday.

Stafford and his parents have been able to experience a few of these trips over the years. He brought his mom on the trip to Phoenix and Denver last year, so this year, it was Dad's turn.

"Growing up with the support we had from our parents and family members, you kind of get to pay them back in some sort of way here by showing them what we do for a living," he said. "It's pretty cool and the Pegulas are extremely hospitable. It's really good."

REMEMBERING JEAN BELIVEAU

The hockey world is mourning the passing of Jean Beliveau, who won 17 Stanley Cups in his career (10 as a player and seven as an executive with the Montreal Canadiens). He was 83 when he died Tuesday night.

Beliveau's on-ice accomplishments are vast – 1,219 points (507+712) in 1,125 games, 14 All-Star appearances and the winner of two Hart Trophies, an Art Ross Trophy and the inaugural Conn Smythe Trophy.

But Sabres defenseman Josh Gorges, who had the chance to meet him a few times when he played for the Canadiens, was always blown away by the way Beliveau presented himself in the community, especially long after his playing days were over.

"He is what every hockey player should strive to be: A top-end, talented hockey player, a winner, a champion," Gorges said. "But he did it all with class and respect. I think that's why he's such a role model and such an icon in that city, the province, all the hockey world because he was a good man.

"Everything he did was the right way. I was lucky enough to be there and watch him and see how he holds himself. It's a sad day in the hockey world."

Gorges recounted one time he was walking with Beliveau and a fan stopped them to ask for a photo and an autograph. After they had taken the photo, Beliveau pulled a Sharpie out of his suit jacket to sign the autograph.

"When you play in Montreal, make sure you never leave home without a Sharpie," he told Gorges, who was a little confused.

Beliveau told him, "People always want to have autographs and you need to be ready. You need to be able to sign their autographs because they might not have a pen."

"Here's a guy that didn't have to do that," Gorges said. "He didn't have to take his time out of his day to do that for people, but he made the extra effort to make sure he was always prepared to give back to his city."

Gorges said he chose to wear No. 4 in Buffalo as a tribute to Beliveau.

"He's just a true gentleman of the game and he's a guy that every hockey player should look to," he said.

Beliveau was part of the ceremonial faceoff prior to the first regular-season home game in Buffalo Sabres franchise history. He lined up against Sabres captain Floyd Smith as owner Seymour H. Knox III dropped the puck on Oct. 15, 1970 at the Aud.

WEDNESDAY'S PRACTICE

26 Matt Moulson – 28 Zemgus Girgensons – 63 Tyler Ennis
65 Brian Flynn – 17 Torrey Mitchell – 12 Brian Gionta
82 Marcus Foligno – 19 Cody Hodgson – 80 Chris Stewart
44 Nicolas Deslauriers – 59 Tim Schaller – 8 Cody McCormick – 36 Patrick Kaleta
21 Drew Stafford

4 Josh Gorges – 57 Tyler Myers
51 Nikita Zadorov – 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
6 Mike Weber – 24 Tyson Strachan
61 Andre Benoit

1 Jhonas Enroth
34 Michal Neuvirth

Did Not Practice: 31 Matt Hackett (injured reserve, knee), 41 Andrej Meszaros (concussion protocol)