



Buffalo Sabres

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Preview: Wild at Sabres

By Staff Report

Associated Press

January 14, 2015

The Minnesota Wild have one win this month and are at the bottom of their division. Things are even worse for the Buffalo Sabres, who have yet to win in 2015 and also are looking up at the rest of the teams in their division.

The weight of expectations, however, weighs far more heavily on one team.

Minnesota could have a new face in net as it tries to end a six-game losing streak Thursday night against a Sabres team mired in an eight-game skid.

Big things were expected from the Wild (18-19-5) after they finished the 2013-14 regular season strong and advanced to the second round of the playoffs. After giving huge contracts to forward Zach Parise and defenseman Ryan Suter in 2012, the Wild dipped into the free-agent market again last summer and signed 10-time 20-goal scorer Thomas Vanek to a three-year, \$19.5 million deal.

Those moves had many pegging Minnesota to be a legitimate contender, but the team isn't even in the playoff picture, sitting 12th in the Western Conference.

Perhaps the Wild's biggest problem has been in net where Darcy Kuemper, Niklas Backstrom and John Curry have combined for an .889 save percentage to rank 29th in the league.

Backstrom started Tuesday in a 7-2 loss at Pittsburgh and Curry took over midway through the third period. Kuemper is out with a lower-body injury.

The Wild added another name to the mix Wednesday when they acquired Devan Dubnyk from Arizona for a third-round draft pick. Dubnyk was 9-5-2 with a 2.72 goals-against average in 19 games this season for the Coyotes.

Tuesday's loss was the 12th in 14 games for Minnesota, which held a lengthy players-only meeting after the contest.

"We're so easy to play against," Parise said. "We lose battles. The details of our game are terrible. We don't make it hard on the other team."

The offense also has to shoulder some blame, averaging 2.29 goals during the 2-8-4 stretch. Forward Nino Niederreiter is tied for second on the Wild with 14 goals but has gone 13 games without one, while Vanek has been a big disappointment with seven goals.

"Unfortunately, this is Minnesota Wild hockey right now and we have to get it back to where it was," coach Mike Yeo told the team's official website. "It's about our play. Talent is one thing, but we've got to play together and we've got to play with purpose in every little detail in our game."

Yeo will not have Suter available Thursday after he was suspended two games for elbowing Pittsburgh's Steve Downie. That leaves Minnesota's blueline thin after defensemen Marco Scandella and Justin Falk were placed on injured reserve Wednesday.

While the Wild were expected to at least be a playoff team, most predicted the Sabres (14-27-3) would again be among the NHL's worst clubs after they finished with a league-low 52 points last season.

Buffalo had a brief resurgence with a 10-3-0 stretch, but has since been outscored 55-20 while losing 12 of 13. The Sabres suffered their eighth consecutive loss - all in regulation - 3-1 to Detroit on Tuesday and remained winless since a 4-3 shootout victory over the New York Islanders on Dec. 27.

Their last regulation win was over a month ago, 4-3 against visiting Calgary on Dec. 11.

Minnesota's offensive woes pale in comparison to Buffalo, which has scored nine times during the eight-game skid and averages a league-worst 1.73 goals.

"We're just not generating enough offensive chances and enough shots," defenseman Mike Weber told the team's official website.

The Sabres haven't dropped nine in a row since a 10-game slide Dec. 26, 2007-Jan. 16, 2008.

Minnesota got a hat trick from Niederreiter in a 6-3 win over Buffalo on Nov. 13, its third straight victory in the series.

Myers moving up front to get power play going

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

January 14, 2015

With their power play sputtering at historically abysmal levels, the Buffalo Sabres have entered the Must Try Something Different Department of their season.

At practice Wednesday was an unmistakable sight parked in front of the net and practicing deflections. Defenseman Tyler Myers, all 6-foot-8 of him, was at a new spot on the power play to try to create some traffic in front of the goalie and some open space elsewhere.

Look for the Sabres to have Myers to attempt his impression of Boston behemoth Zdeno Chara for Thursday night's game against the Minnesota Wild in First Niagara Center.

The power play, of course, has been a season-long sore spot for Buffalo, with an NHL-low 11 goals – and an NHL-high seven short-handed goals against. It is converting at a league-worst 9.0 percent.

Myers said he was getting some pointers from teammate Chris Stewart for the role, a place he's never occupied in his hockey career. He understands moving from the point comes under the realm of the Sabres needing to do absolutely anything to create offense with the man advantage.

"I feel like it needed to come. It was the right decision by the coaches," Myers said. "We needed to shake things up somehow, get it going somehow. Guys in new positions will be a little more desperate, a little bit more motivated to get the job done."

"If you look at the success of Chara in front of the net on the Boston power play, he's a big man," said coach Ted Nolan. "You put a big man there, it could draw a little bit more attention than trying to cover him on the point. It takes two guys to cover in front of the net. Maybe that will help spark the power play a little bit."

The Sabres have never finished below 10 percent for a season on the power play and the last NHL team to do it is the 2000-01 expansion Wild, at 9.6.

But Buffalo's futility gets worse: A Buffalo News analysis of league records since the Sabres entered the NHL in 1970 shows that the team's current 9.0 percent would be the lowest in the league for any team in those 45 years.

The Sabres move the puck slowly, pass it worse, don't create much traffic in front of the net and lately seem to suffer from ill-advised decisions on the back end that create odd-man rushes and scoring chances against them.

Other than that, everything is fine.

"We need to calm down," said winger Tyler Ennis. "With the power play, you need poise and at the same time you need urgency to get the puck to the net. So it's a fine line. When you're nervous with the puck, that's when you're going to turn the puck over and bobble it."

Ennis is, however, intrigued by the Myers idea.

"I'm excited about that," said Ennis. "He was working really hard at the end of practice tipping pucks and he did a really good job. He looked really good out there. Boston does it with Chara and they're pretty much the same size. That's kind of the emphasis right now. If it's not working, get the puck to the net, bang a few home."

The Sabres are 0 for 9 on the power play the last three games and just 2 for 21 in losing eight straight in regulation for the first time in franchise history.

"Obviously we're all pretty frustrated with the power play," Myers said. "We have higher expectations for ourselves than that. We've got to try something new."

The power play futility is a key reason the Sabres are last in the NHL in scoring with just 76 goals. Their average of 1.73 per game is actually below's last year 1.83 that was the worst figure in the NHL's expansion era since 1967.

The Sabres have suffered since injuries wiped out their entire second line (Brian Gionta-Torrey Mitchell-Marcus Foligno) and opposing defenses were able to heavily key on their top line.

Ennis has no goals in his last 16 games, center Zemgus Girgensons has no goals in his last seven games and Matt Moulson has none in his last nine games after returning from a bout with the flu.

"I've just got to bear down. I'm getting chances," Ennis said. "It's not going in. I have to give it that extra effort and get the pucks to the net and really fight my way to get a couple more goals."

"Right now, he's the lone guy they really key on," Nolan said. "He's got to move the puck a little bit quicker, dart himself in the hole a little bit quicker and use his hockey intelligence to spring himself free."

Sabres notebook: Wild struggling much like last season

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

January 14, 2015

It was just over a year ago, on Jan. 2, 2014, that the Sabres faced a Minnesota Wild team in turmoil after 42 games. The Wild were on a six-game losing streak and it seemed coach Mike Yeo would get fired if they didn't win the game in St. Paul.

Minnesota did, 4-1, and somehow turned its season around, getting all the way to the second round of the playoffs before losing to Chicago.

It's awfully bizarre to consider how the Wild hit town for Thursday's game in First Niagara Center in almost identical chaos: They're again losers of six straight (0-5-1) and Yeo's status is again blowing in the arctic breeze.

With the funeral of beloved Minnesota hockey figure J.P. Parise set for Friday, it seems unlikely the Wild would fire their coach on that day. But a loss to the Sabres certainly won't help the fourth-year coach's status going forward.

"I'm a realist. I know what's going on," Yeo said after practice here Thursday. "I'm not going to sit around and mope, feel sorry for myself. I've got a job to do and now is when I have to do it better than ever."

The Wild had a players-only meeting after Tuesday's 7-2 loss in Pittsburgh and shut the doors here Wednesday prior to practice for a private video session with the coaching staff to discuss their 4-10-4 mark the last 18 games. Minnesota is now eight points out of the final wild-card in the Western Conference.

"It's an awareness of unfortunately this is what Minnesota Wild hockey is right now and we have to get it back to what it was," Yeo said. "It's just work. It's not about trying to embarrass anybody. It's just recognition of where we're at."

"If we think we're competing hard enough to win games right now, we're kidding ourselves," said Wild winger and former Sabres captain Jason Pominville. "We'd be cheating ourselves to say that. Our compete has to go up. That's where it starts."

Pominville leads the Wild in assists (24) and points (33). Fellow former Buffalo star Thomas Vanek has struggled in the first year back in the state that made him a college star with just seven goals and a minus-10 rating in 42 games.

"Obviously, it's been a tough stretch," Vanek said. "I still believe this is a team that we can be in the playoffs. Yes, there's time, but obviously there's only so much time. I think that's the one thing I've learned in the past. Forty games sounds like a lot, but making up points is hard."

The Wild have had brutal goaltending much of the year with an NHL-worst .889 save percentage. So they made a move to shore that up late Wednesday by acquiring Devin Dubnyk from Arizona for a third-round pick.

"The goaltending is always an easy thing to point out when things aren't going well, but it's what's done before that in every zone," Pominville said. "We can pressure harder in our end and spend a little less time there."

Added forward Zach Parise: "We give up one, two goals and mentally right now we quit. We've been fragile. There's been a lot of talking around here the last four weeks. At some point, we have to start to deliver. The coaches can only do so much."

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Former Sabres winger Matthew Barnaby criticized the team for Tuesday's Dominik Hasek jersey retirement ceremony during an appearance early Wednesday night on SiriusXM's NHL Network Radio.

"I think I've seen better ceremonies for players that have won Player of the Month for the Montreal Canadiens," said Barnaby, who made his comments even though he and Hasek have not been friendly for many years.

Barnaby's view was that Hasek and Gilbert Perreault are the top two players in franchise history and the ceremony did not give Hasek his due. The ceremony lasted less than 20 minutes and featured a brief video presentation and no speakers other than Hasek.

"This was embarrassing," Barnaby said. "There was no one. There wasn't a former teammate on the ice. And yes, I wouldn't have been there, but there's a lot of players that did like him, respected him and are in good graces with him. There was no fanfare for that. There was no family there.

"I love Rene Robert and I love Danny Gare ,but to see two guys just skate out with a little banner and raise it and it was over. It was just weird. It was awkward. It was weird."

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Sabres winger Chris Stewart practiced fully Wednesday and should be back for the game against the Wild after missing the last two with the flu. Buffalo coach Ted Nolan said defenseman Nikita Zadorov, a healthy scratch the last two games, will also return to the lineup tonight. Jhonas Enroth will start in goal.

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The Wild will be without workhorse defenseman Ryan Suter for Thursday's game and Saturday's contest against Arizona after he was given a two-game suspension Wednesday night by the NHL for an elbow on Pittsburgh's Steve Downie on Tuesday.

It's a big loss because Suter, who has one goal and 22 assists, is the league's ice time leader at 29 minutes, 36 seconds per game.

The low-key Hasek ceremony: Where was the pomp and reverence?

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

January 14, 2015

I watched the Dominik Hasek retirement ceremony Tuesday night from the press box and when it ended quietly after around 20 minutes, I was left with a nagging question: That's it?

Still, I saw how genuinely happy Hasek was during his press conference earlier in the day and shook off the notion, turning attention to the game. I was just being grumpy, get-off-my-lawn guy and moved on. Or so I thought.

Then my Twitter feed started to blow up. And so did my replies. Not that Twitter can regularly be used as a focus group for opinions, but this time it sure snapped me back to reality.

Bottom line: That ceremony was flat-out lame.

Two long-time NHL observers I really respect were shaking their heads. One told me after the game, "That's the worst jersey retirement I've ever seen."

Now, a couple caveats here. I didn't expect the Sabres to put on a New York Yankees-style event or the 90-minute Hollywood extravaganza the Ducks did Sunday night for Teemu Selanne. This ain't Disneyland after all. Nor could they have done so even if they wanted to. The NHL sent out a memo over the summer that ceremonies can't interfere too much with the game.

The Ducks started the Selanne ceremony at 4:30 local time so the game went off as scheduled at 6. And it was on a Sunday. If the Sabres wanted 90 minutes for Hasek, how many people would they have in the building at 5:30 on a Tuesday?

Secondly, it was a good call to have the Red Wings as the opponent. Coach Mike Babcock and the Detroit players were genuinely thrilled to be a part of the day. They were all on the bench watching. This was the only Detroit home game after Hasek's induction to the Hockey Hall of Fame so the date made sense.

And I don't know if this was the only way Hasek would agree to do a ceremony but so many weird aspects to it. No family? (Yes, I know he lives in Prague). No Sabres ownership or management on the ice? None of his former teammates from Detroit or Buffalo? No presentations from either side? No one else speaking? Nothing?

When Hasek was done with his speech, there was an awkward silence. The ceremony was stilted and seemed thrown together at the last minute with little thought. This was one of the two greatest players in franchise history. Where was the reverence?

The Sabres may as well have put Hasek's number in the rafters in March as part of his team Hall of Fame ceremony, which was actually pretty decent as he was awarded his Sabre and made a triumphant return.

The Rafters Club is small and Rick Martin and Tim Horton are obviously no longer with us. But Gilbert Perreault wasn't there. And we know, of course, that Pat LaFontaine -- the one Rafters Club member who played with Hasek -- is now persona non grata. So a guy who had a big part in Hasek's Hockey Hall of Fame video presentation was no part of this one. Such a shame.

Plenty of '99-era Cup finalist guys were in the building. There was big applause when Gare and Rene Robert skated the Hasek banner out. I bet the likes of Michael Peca, Alexei Zhitnik and Jason Woolley would have been warmly received too. Can't put jerseys on them and trot them out there? Can't put the current team all in No. 39s for warmup?

The video montage was dull. Seemed like pretty much the same one we got last season when Hasek was inducted into the Sabres Hall. If the Sabres idea of snazzy presentation was painting "39" on the ice and putting a patch on the jerseys, their staff has clearly watched no ceremonies from other teams inside or outside the NHL at all.

In-game arena host Lauren Hall couldn't even pronounce the guest of honor's name right until someone clearly got to her in the second period to change the "Haa-sick" to "Haa-shick." Come on. Amateur hour. (And don't get me started about the uselessness of in-game hosts around the NHL either.)

The game was usual-Sabres-brutal and fans were left trying to play Where's Waldo to see if Rex Ryan was in a suite. And he was.

Hey Sabres, you own both teams now. Why in the world didn't Rex's face get plastered on the Jumbotron to get some wild applause and buzz into the building at some point?

Lame-o all around.

Leo Roth: No. 39 forever a Buffalo Sabre

By Leo Roth

Rochester Democrat & Chronicle

January 14, 2015

You know an athlete is really something special when the word "great" doesn't even do him justice. When I think of Buffalo Sabres and Detroit Red Wings goaltender Dominik Hasek, "otherworldly" is an adjective best suited.

Hasek had his No. 39 retired by the Sabres Tuesday night, with the Red Wings the opponent, at First Niagara Center. The spine-tingling honor came after the Dominator was inducted into the Sabres Hall of Fame and the Hockey Hall of Fame during the past 11 months.

I love when teams retire numbers. There is something mystical about it.

And now when fans attend Sabres games, they can see No. 39 hang alongside 11 (Gil Perreault), 7 (Rick Martin), 14 (Rene Robert), 2 (Tim Horton), 18 (Danny Gare) and 16 (Pat LaFontaine) high above the ice.

Gare and Robert had the privilege of presenting Hasek with his banner before it found its place in the heavens.

"It's a great feeling for me to be back in Buffalo, where I spent the best parts of my hockey career," Hasek said during a Tuesday morning news conference. "I cannot be more thankful for what this city and this organization has done for me. I was trying to do the best on the ice."

His best left shooters shaking their heads and fans awestruck — a .2.20 goals-against average and a .922 save percentage in 491 regular season games, numbers he lowered to 2.04 and .930 in 68 playoff games. If you want to know why Buffalo nearly won the Cup in 1998-99, just look at Hasek's season: career-best 1.87 GAA and .937 save percentage.

For his career, he allowed two or fewer goals 64 percent of the time he played and one goal or fewer 38 percent of the time. The Czech Republic native wasn't from another country. He was from another world.

So why No. 39? Hasek explained where the odd choice came from: 9 he wore while playing in the Czech Republic, 3 was derived from numbers 34 and 31, which the Chicago Blackhawks assigned him before he was traded to Buffalo in the summer of 1992. When he arrived in Buffalo, the equipment manager, Rip Simonik, asked him what number he wanted, the first time Hasek was ever asked that.

"I was like 'Whoa, maybe the Sabres, they mean seriously about me.' "

Buffalo Sabres GM Tim Murray showing refreshing grasp of analytics

By Jonathan Willis

Bleacher Report

January 14, 2015

The Buffalo Sabres are not a good hockey team, and general manager Tim Murray knows it. He's so convinced of that, in fact, that even a stretch in which the club won 10 games out of a possible 13 wasn't enough to shake his outlook.

Murray talked to NHL.com's Dan Rosen on Tuesday and was frank in his assessment of the team. He talked about the necessity of evaluating individuals against the bigger picture, finding guys who were going to be useful for years down the road. He mentioned his belief that defenceman Tyler Myers, a fixture in trade rumours, would have better results "when we're a good team."

And he told Rosen that even during an unlikely 7-3-0 run last month he wasn't really convinced that the team had turned a corner, because the numbers strongly suggested it couldn't possibly last:

I think that we played well. I think that we played hard. But the analytics were basically all the same. Our shooting percentage got higher in those wins. I don't want to think completely on that, but the numbers were pretty close to the same as when we lost other than save percentage and shooting percentage. So if you follow that at all you understand, and is that sustainable is the question you have to ask yourself. I answered it to myself and the people in my office, but that didn't change my outlook on this year, no.

Murray doesn't come out and say that the Sabres got lucky—it's hard to imagine that any general manager would—but it's pretty heavily implied. Refreshingly, he acknowledges those spikes in shooting and save percentage as the aberrations they are, something which should be encouraging to fans in Buffalo. It suggests that Murray isn't going to be taken in by an illusion of competitiveness; he'll believe that the team is good when it's actually good.

What does he mean when he mentions analytics? Undoubtedly he's referring to shot metrics such as Corsi (a plus/minus of all shot attempts) and Fenwick (the same, but excluding blocked shots). The following chart should illustrate his point nicely:

Buffalo Sabres: Selected five-on-five statistics

Segment	Record (Win%)	Corsi%	Shot%	SH%	SV%
Oct. 9 - Nov. 13	3-13-2 (16.7%)	37.0	37.1	5.9	0.917
Nov. 14 - Dec. 15	10-3-0 (76.9%)	38.7	42.7	10.5	0.936
Dec. 16 - Jan. 14	1-11-1 (7.7%)	36.9	39.5	5.6	0.910

War-on-Ice.com

Over all three segments of the Sabres' season to date, Buffalo has done a terrible job of spending more time in the opposition's zone than their own. The Corsi rate doesn't move much from the 37 percent range, meaning that their opponents were taking nearly two-thirds of all shot attempts in a given game; this is broadly true even during the Sabres' brief winning streak.

There were three key differences separating the winning streak from the terrible runs before and afterward:

- A tiny uptick in the number of shot attempts that were getting through to the opposition's net
- Shooting percentage almost doubling
- Save percentage improving dramatically

Shooting and save percentages tend to be fickle. Commentators talk a lot about how goal scorers tend to be streaky, and primarily that's because goals are rare events; on average a shooter is going to score less than once for every 10 shots he takes.

This applies at the team level, too. Bad teams can look good when the shooters make their shots for a stretch, and good teams can look bad when their opponents manage the trick.

Over time, however, it evens out; the same scorer who goes 10 games without a goal will notch five in five games. That's why it's important to look at the long-term record when a player or team suddenly starts (or stops) scoring—percentages tend to be fickle but balance out over time, and if a team is doing a good job of controlling shots for or against, generally the goals will come around to reflect that reality.

This isn't just hindsight talking with respect to the Sabres. From my previous piece on December 18, one game after that successful stretch came to an end (though we couldn't know it was over at the time):

Their underlying numbers are brutal, and that hasn't changed over this winning streak. ... Over Buffalo's lovely 13-game run, the team has surrendered 484 shots against; that ranks 28th in the league. Meanwhile, the Sabres have taken an NHL-low 337 shots; that's 17 fewer than the 29th-ranked Rangers, a team which has played one less game in that span. At this, the high point of its season, Buffalo is the worst offensive team in the NHL married to almost the very worst defensive team.

It can be easy for someone close to the team to be taken in by the wins and losses over a short stretch, to believe that whatever the underlying numbers say, his club's record is a truer indication of its ability. Murray wasn't, and asked about it a month later by Rosen, he was able to put that run into an exact context.

He's evaluating the Sabres with clear eyes, and in the long run that's only going to be good for the team.

Anemic Sabres offense on pace to set another mark for futility

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 14, 2015

BUFFALO – The joke all season has been the Sabres have one first line and three fourth lines. Right now, even that's a stretch. No one can score.

The Sabres have only scored nine goals during their eight-game losing streak. They have 76 goals all season entering tonight's game against the Minnesota Wild, a stunning 1.7 a game.

At that anemic pace, the Sabres would score 141 goals in 82 games, nine fewer than they had last season, when they set the all-time modern record for fewest goals scored in a full campaign.

"It's never good to break records like that," Sabres winger Matt Moulson said Wednesday inside the First Niagara Center.

The Sabres might shatter it.

Their NHL-worst power play has converted only 11 of 122 attempts this season, just 9 percent. No other team is below 13 percent. The league average has only dipped below 16 percent five times since 1963-64.

Assistant coach Bryan Trottier, who scored 524 goals and 1,425 points during an illustrious Hall of Fame career, runs the power play. The Sabres practice it almost daily, perhaps more than any other team.

Still, nothing has changed.

"We need to calm down," Sabres winger Tyler Ennis said. "I think (on the) power play you need poise. At the same time, you need urgency to get the puck ... so it's a fine line. But when you're nervous with the puck, that's when you're going to turn the puck over, that's when you're going to bobble pucks."

They bobble a lot of pucks. Opponents have scored seven short-handed goals this season.

The Sabres added a new wrinkle during Wednesday's 90-minute practice, putting 6-foot-8 defenseman Tyler Myers, who usually mans a point, in front for the power-play drills. Boston often uses hulking defenseman Zdeno Chara to create traffic near the net.

Try anything, right?

"You put a big man there, you can draw a little bit more attention than trying to cover him on the point," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "It takes two guys to cover him in front of the net. So maybe that'll spark our power play a little bit."

The Sabres haven't created any sparks during five-on-five play recently. Their top offensive threats are all in huge slumps.

The No. 1 line of Ennis, Moulson and center Zemgus Girgensons has generated little offense in recent weeks. Moulson has zero goals in the last 10 games. Ennis has one score in 16 contests. Girgensons has two goals in 15 contests.

"When they're going, they're going pretty well, though," Nolan said.

The line, which Nolan briefly broke up recently, racked up points in late November and early December as the Sabres won 10 of 13 games. As a team, the Sabres scored 31 goals on 248 shots in those wins, a healthy 12.5 shooting percentage.

These days, since the Sabres have no secondary scoring, opponents key on Girgensons' line.

"You look at the line, you have 18, 19 minutes a game on a regular basis, that's tough to do, and the opposition throws their top defensive pair against them all the time," Nolan said.

Girgensons, the Sabres' leading goal scorer with 11, is only 21 years old and 114 games into his career. His slump is easier to explain. Ennis and Moulson are proven scorers, however.

Ennis was scorching before this recent stretch, earning NHL first star honors for his one-goal, five-point week in early December. He has just three points since then.

"He has a high hockey IQ," Nolan said. "What he was doing before, he could do it because he had other people there to go along with. Right now, he's kind of the lone guy they can key on. He's got to move the puck a little bit quicker, dart himself in the hole a little bit quicker and use his hockey intelligence to spread himself free."

The long slump has worn on Ennis. He looked stunned sitting in his stall following Tuesday's 3-1 loss to Detroit.

"It's frustrating when your job is to score," Ennis said. "I got to score."

Moulson, meanwhile, has only seven goals and is on pace for a career-low 13. He misfired on a breakaway Tuesday, his best chance in weeks.

"We have to continue to work," Moulson said about his line. "We have to get back to what we're good at, being around that net and getting those dirty goals that we were getting before. I think maybe at times (we try to be) a little bit too fancy."

Reeling Wild not taking struggling Sabres lightly

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 14, 2015

BUFFALO – A year ago, a meeting with the Sabres changed the Minnesota Wild's season.

The Wild had lost six straight games before beating the hapless club 4-1 on Jan. 2 in Minnesota. The team then ran off three more victories, saving its season and perhaps coach Mike Yeo's job. The Wild later advanced to the second round of the playoffs, giving Chicago a tough series.

Fast forward to today, and Minnesota, having lost six straight games, is reeling again. Pittsburgh thumped the Wild 7-2 on Tuesday. Yeo's status, once again, is iffy.

Yeo doesn't believe tonight's tilt against the struggling Sabres, losers of eight straight games, will be déjà vu for the Wild.

"Buffalo doesn't mean anything to me right now," Yeo said Wednesday inside the First Niagara Center. "I know that they're going to work hard ... and it's going to be a hard game. My focus is only on us, that's it, and getting our game back.

"We can't hope for any kind of results until we start playing the type of game that's going to give us them."

Minnesota, with its collection of high-priced free agents, has become perhaps the NHL's most disappointing team. It has only 41 points and has dropped 12 of the last 14 games.

Former Sabres star Thomas Vanek has been a gigantic bust so far, scoring only seven times in 42 games. The Austrian winger signed a three-year, \$19.5 million contract in July.

"It's not about roster, it's not about anything – it's about our play," Yeo said. "Talent is one thing, but we've got to play together and we've got to play with purpose on every little detail of our game."

Former Sabres captain Jason Pominville knows the clock is ticking on the Wild's season.

"It's going to be tough and teams are going to be waiting for us knowing we're going through a tough stretch," Pominville said. "Hopefully it just in the long run makes us better. ... We still have a lot of games. ... But we're going to have to start doing it soon."

Minnesota addressed one glaring need Wednesday, acquiring goalie Devan Dubnyk from Phoenix for a third-round pick.

The Wild will play without star defenseman Ryan Suter tonight. The American was suspended two games for elbowing Wednesday.

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Sabres coach Ted Nolan said defenseman Nikita Zadorov will return tonight after sitting two games as a healthy scratch.

"Sometimes it's good to sit back and watch and observe," Nolan said.

Nolan also said winger Chris Stewart (flu) will play after missing one game. Nolan said a couple of other players aren't feeling well. The Sabres haven't sent anyone down yet.

Goalie Jhonas Enroth will start tonight, Nolan said.

Myers sets up in front on power play

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

January 14, 2015

Taking a cue from the Boston Bruins, the Buffalo Sabres are going to put their 6-foot-8 defenseman in front of the net on the power play.

Tyler Myers will assume a role Bruins captain Zdeno Chara has often filled – that of the primary screen on special teams.

Myers practiced there for the first time on Wednesday, working on his positioning at the top of the blue paint and tipping pucks into the net.

“If you look at the success of Chara, maybe, in front of the net on the Boston power play, he’s a big man. If you put a big man there, it could draw a little bit more attention than trying to cover him on the point,” Sabres coach Ted Nolan said after practice at First Niagara Center. “It takes two guys to cover him in front of the net so maybe that’ll help spark our power play a little bit.”

The Sabres power play could use a boost. Buffalo is 0-for-9 in their past three games and during the team’s current eight-game losing streak, they are 2-for-21 with the man advantage. On the season, Buffalo is clicking at only 9 percent.

“Obviously we’re all pretty frustrated with the power play given the position we’re in. We have higher expectations for ourselves in that,” Myers said. “Given the position that we are, I feel like this change is quite necessary to get things going. We’ve got to try something. We keep doing the same thing; it’s not working. Hopefully something new will get things going.”

Myers skated with the second unit featuring forwards Matt Moulson and Brian Flynn and defensemen Josh Gorges and Andrej Meszaros. He said he’s never really been used down low on the power play before and will take any advice and tips along the way.

Tyler Ennis said the team needs to find a way to have a strong sense of urgency but also to be calm with the puck so that they can make the right plays.

“Right now, the important thing is to take that extra second, take a look and get it to the net and be committed to get bodies to the front,” he said. “Get some greasy ones and then get that confidence back.”

GOALS FOR AND AGAINST

In addition to not being able to put one home on the power play, they’ve also allowed a League-high seven shorthanded goals, including one Tuesday night in their 3-1 loss to the Detroit Red Wings. Turnovers at the blue line have been one of the biggest reasons for the opposition’s chances.

“When you’re worried about something happening, that’s when it usually happens. We need to be better. That’s the bottom line,” Ennis said.

“We can’t have shorthanded goals kill us. That’s killing us lately so you’ve got to man up. You’ve got to man up and make plays. When you have that puck, make a good play with it. We’ve got to do a better job of getting it to the net and get guys in front.”

Buffalo's scoring troubles aren't just on the power play, but in even-strength situations as well. During the losing streak, they've been shutout once and have scored two goals only twice. The last time they scored four goals in regulation was back on Dec. 15 against Ottawa.

"We have to get hungrier around that net," alternate captain Matt Moulson said. "When pucks aren't going in, you have to get those dirty goals and jump on opportunities when there are rebounds and pucks lying around there. We haven't been doing a good job of that."

A BOOST TO THE LINEUP

The Sabres are getting a bit healthier as Chris Stewart practiced for the second day in a row. He's recovering from the flu and Nolan said he should be good to go for Thursday night against the Minnesota Wild.

However, the team will wait to see how he feels in the morning before deciding on whether to send down one of their recalls, whether it's Zac Dalpe, Philip Varone or Matt Ellis.

Captain Brian Gionta will not play as he recovers from an upper-body injury.

Gionta as part of a line with Brian Flynn and Torrey Mitchell that was able to provide some secondary scoring. However, injuries to Gionta and Mitchell put that on hold and Buffalo has been searching for more offense ever since. Mitchell returned to the lineup for the first time in 12 games on Tuesday.

The team's top line of Moulson, Ennis and Zemgus Girgensons has been stymied by the opposition as of late.

"We lost our whole second line and when you lost your whole second line, it's easy to defend one line that was scoring for us – that was Girgensons' line," Nolan said. "Especially on the road, it's tough to get the matchups that you wanted and it's tough to win with one line that's scoring."

Defenseman Nikita Zadorov will be back in after sitting out as a healthy scratch the past two games. Jhonas Enroth will start in goal.

'I DON'T THINK IT WAS LUCKY'

Prior to their current 13-game slump, they had won 10 of 13 games. Nolan doesn't believe that winning streak is an aberration and that it's possible they can replicate that success.

"I don't think it was lucky," he said. "When you have a group of healthy guys doing the right thing and doing it to the best of their abilities, anybody can beat anybody on a given night."

WEDNESDAY'S PRACTICE

26 Matt Moulson – 28 Zemgus Girgensons – 63 Tyler Ennis
65 Brian Flynn – 17 Torrey Mitchell – 21 Drew Stafford – 12 Brian Gionta
19 Cody Hodgson – 84 Philip Varone – 80 Chris Stewart
44 Nicolas Deslauriers – 20 Zac Dalpe – 37 Matt Ellis – 36 Patrick Kaleta

4 Josh Gorges – 57 Tyler Myers
51 Nikita Zadorov – 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
6 Mike Weber – 41 Andrej Meszaros
61 Andre Benoit – 24 Tyson Strachan

1 Jhonas Enroth
34 Michal Neuvirth

POWER PLAY

First Unit

Stewart-Girgensons-Ennis
Ristolainen-Zadorov

Second Unit

Moulson-Flynn-Myers
Gorges-Meszaros