

Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres-Hurricanes preview

By Noey Kupchan

Associated Press

January 7, 2015

There isn't much optimism surrounding the Carolina Hurricanes and Buffalo Sabres, who sit at the bottom of their respective divisions.

These struggling clubs try to pick up two points when they meet in Raleigh on Thursday night.

The Hurricanes (1.9) and Sabres (1.8) are the only teams in the NHL averaging under 2.0 goals per game. Carolina has managed to minimize that somewhat by compiling a respectable 2.55 goals-against average, but Buffalo owns the worst mark in the league at 3.39.

The Hurricanes (12-24-4) had posted back-to-back wins for the first time in nearly two months before their woes resumed with Tuesday's 3-2 loss at Nashville. Jordan Staal assisted on brother Eric's 300th career goal as Carolina took a 1-0 lead after two periods, but the Hurricanes were dominated in the final 20 minutes.

"You've got to have the puck. You've got to make plays. You've got to want the puck, and when you get it, you have to keep it off the wall to execute," coach Bill Peters told the team's official website. "I don't think we executed very much in the second half of the game."

The Hurricanes went 2 for 3 on the power play after converting three of their previous 43 chances.

"We were battling. ... We just have to execute a little better, and we can get away with those two points," Jordan Staal said. "There are times when you work hard and don't get results and times when you do. We're going to have to learn from the mistakes we made and keep moving forward."

Eric Staal has scored in four of the last five games, giving him a team-leading 11 goals. Jordan Staal has notched three assists in four contests since debuting last Monday after breaking his leg in the preseason.

The Sabres (14-24-3) have been outscored 45-16 in non-shootout goals during a 1-8-1 slide and 22-5 in losing their last five games. Buffalo is coming off Tuesday's 4-1 defeat at New Jersey, dropping to 0-7-1 on the road since the start of last month.

The Sabres fell behind 3-0 in the first period before Mikhail Grigorenko scored his first goal in the second.

"Lately, it's not so much the opposition. Give them credit, but I think the majority of the blame is on ourselves," coach Ted Nolan told the team's official website. "It boils down to mental preparation. We've got to be mentally ready to start. We've got to be mentally ready to know our assignments. We've just got to be prepared. I mean, this is the National Hockey League."

Jhonas Enroth is 1-4-1 with a 3.68 GAA in his last seven games after stopping 24 of 27 shots Tuesday. His 3.13 GAA for the season is second worst in the league among the 29 goalies with at least 20 starts.

Enroth made 22 saves in a 4-3 shootout win over the Hurricanes on Oct. 14 as Buffalo snapped a four-game skid in Raleigh. Enroth is 1-2-0 with a 3.92 GAA in his last three appearances in the series.

Cam Ward has gone 6-1-3 with a 2.27 GAA over a 10-start stretch against Buffalo. He's 2-8-1 in his last 11 starts overall despite a 2.20 GAA.

Tyler Ennis leads the Sabres with 24 points, only two of which have come in the last 10 games.

Hurricanes score 4 in 2nd, send Sabres to 6th straight loss

By Mike Potter
Associated Press
January 8, 2015

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — Bill Peters smiled a lot after his Carolina Hurricanes routed the Buffalo Sabres on Thursday night.

That is because the rookie NHL head coach finally had the team he had expected to have on opening night.

Jeff Skinner scored one of Carolina's four goals in the second period, and the Hurricanes beat Buffalo 5-2, sending the Sabres to their sixth straight loss.

Jiri Tlustý had a goal and an assist for the Hurricanes, who have won three of four. Carolina, last in the Eastern Conference, moved within one point of Buffalo.

Tlustý, Eric Staal and Victor Rask scored in a 69-second span late in the second period. Riley Nash added a goal in the third.

"As close as we projected our lineup to be, this is the first time we've actually had everybody with (Alexander Semin) in and with Jordan Staal and everybody else," said Peters, whose team has lost 116 man-games this season.

Alternate captain Jordan Staal has missed 36 games. He returned to action on Dec. 29 after he break a leg in a collision with the Sabres' Josh Gorges in a preseason game on Sept. 23.

John-Michael Liles played after missing five games due to the flu. He completed Peters' desired lineup and had an assist for the Hurricanes. Ryan Murphy and Justin Faulk had two assists apiece.

Philip Varone scored both Buffalo goals in his second game this season.

"It's different mistakes from different people every time," Buffalo coach Ted Nolan said of the second period. "It's not like it's one occurrence. We've got to be mentally sharp. We talked about it before the game.

"We've got to be alert, we've got to make sure we're intense, and we've got to bring some urgency. That didn't happen."

Cam Ward made 18 saves for Carolina, which has gone 10 games without allowing a power-play goal. Buffalo's Jhonas Enroth stopped 26 shots.

"We know there's never an easy game in this league," Ward said. "We know they've been struggling. But we needed to pick up our game after the first period and really dictate.

"It was great to see our guys cash in some goals. Anytime you get five it's a big boost to the confidence."

Buffalo beat Carolina in a shootout on Oct. 14 in the first meeting between the teams this season.

Skinner gave the Hurricanes a 1-0 lead in the rematch at 4:42 of the second with his ninth goal. He received Semin's pass in the left circle and slid a shot past Enroth.

Varone tied it 69 seconds later, beating Ward glove side on a rush.

Carolina took advantage of a 5-on-3 power play later in the period. Tlustý beat Enroth from the doorstep at 13:50, and 53 seconds later — just three seconds after the 5-on-4 power play ended — Staal scored by sending a shot in off defenseman Mike Weber's skate to make it 3-1.

Rask added Carolina's fourth goal of the period at 15:09.

"We had puck control, and offensively were controlling the play," Jordan's older brother and Carolina captain Eric Staal said of the three quick goals. "When you're doing that, you get some penalty calls.

"We were able to capitalize with the big 5-on-3 goal and then follow that right up quickly. That kind of took the wind right out of their sails."

Varone scored his second goal at 8:17 of the third, but Nash made it 5-2 at 10:10.

NOTES: Buffalo will visit Tampa Bay on Friday. Carolina's next game is Saturday at St. Louis. ... The Hurricanes activated C Andrej Nestrasil (upper body) from the injured list and sent him to Charlotte (AHL) on a conditioning assignment. LW Zach Boychuk and D Michal Jordan were also sent to Charlotte. LW Chris Terry and D Brett Bellemore were healthy scratches. ... Buffalo captain RW Brian Gionta (upper body) missed his eighth game. D Andre Benoit and D Andrej Meszaros were healthy scratches. ... The teams' final meeting of the season is April 6 at Buffalo.

Sabres players say tanking is not part of their vocabulary

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

January 7, 2015

RALEIGH, N.C. – The second half of the Buffalo Sabres' season begins here Thursday night and the team is once again in crisis.

Or is it? Depends on your point of view.

While the Sabres are clearly discouraged by their brutal 1-8-1 slump heading into the game against the Carolina Hurricanes in PNC Arena, it's brought them back to the pack in the reverse NHL standings. No Presidents Trophy talk here. This is the "race" for last place overall and the best lottery chance to, presumably, draft Connor McDavid come June.

While Edmonton continues to hold last place with 27 points, Carolina is 29th at 28 points and the Sabres are next with 31. So this is the first of likely several games in the second half where a decent size of the Sabres' fan base will watch while working on the theory that losing is winning.

And while some think that's the direction that's been coming from the top of the franchise for months, the feeling certainly isn't shared in the dressing room.

"People have opinions and that's great. It should be talked about," defenseman Josh Gorges said after a late-afternoon practice here Wednesday. "There's different scenarios, different rumors. That's what makes professional sports great for the fan base, whatever their excuse, whatever their thing may be, to talk about sports. Our job as players and professionals is not to focus on any of that, whether it's good or bad.

"Our job is to focus on what we need to do to be successful each night. You do everything to not listen, not hear what's going on outside this room."

Gorges was clearly choosing his words carefully, but he's a prideful player who was two wins away from the Stanley Cup final a scant seven months ago with Montreal and is now minus-13 over the last eight games for a bottom feeder.

"I've said this from the start of the year and I still believe it: Our focus is not getting the top draft pick," he said. "Never in my life have I ever heard of losing on purpose. That's a joke to even think about. And I don't think anyone in this room thinks that way. That's for outside this room to discuss, not for us."

The Sabres will spend this game making a better start their first priority after they've been outscored, 9-0, in the first period of the last three games. The frustrating part of the current string is the Sabres thought they had broken away from their miserable first 18 games of the season.

Buffalo's season has clearly taken three stages – a 3-13-2 beginning and the current stretch that combines for a hideous 4-21-3 mark over 28 games, and the 10-3 burst of success marked mostly by Jhonas Enroth's spectacular goaltending.

"We need to turn this around right now," winger Tyler Ennis said. "We need to get back on that roll, the way we were playing like we were. We have to move on from what's been going on. We can't worry about what everyone else is thinking. It hurts us more when we lose. We understand people are thinking about the future, but as a human being, you never want to be in the spot where you lose and you accept losing. It hurts."

"We have lapses, mental mistakes, not enough effort, not enough of that passion, that drive to compete and a little bit of desperation," Gorges said. "The position we're in and the games we've played as of late, we should have the mentality that we've got to give everything every shift. You've got to be a little bit teed off, "a little bit embarrassed."

While there's no outright tanking on the ice, the Sabres are putting together many 30th-place numbers. They're last in the league in scoring (1.76 per game), goals against (3.39) and goal differential (minus-62), tied with Carolina for the most regulation losses (24), last on the power play (9.7 percent) and 28th on the penalty kill (75 percent).

"We're all searching for answers," Gorges said. "The biggest thing, especially for a guy like myself, is look in the mirror, find out what you have to offer the team. It's my job to make sure collectively we're ready to play. That's the job of a leader. But if I'm not doing my job, I can't expect guys to do theirs."

At one point during Wednesday's workout, coach Ted Nolan stopped a drill and gathered his players at center ice to quietly but sternly point out to them they needed to get the tempo moving.

"We were just going through drills like normal and didn't have any urgency to our game," he said. "At this point of the season, we need some urgency and they picked it up a little bit there."

Nolan is hoping players look inward at personal motivations to help the greater good of the team.

"Guys that are looking to get moved to another team in the last year of their contracts, guys that are looking to extend their contracts, there's a lot to play for," he said. "First-rounders will be well taken care of but who's going to take care of the rest of the guys when free agency comes this summer? Who's going to want players who didn't do too well in the regular season?"

The cold facts, however, are that if individuals don't do well now, the franchise may ultimately benefit in the long run.

"I realize the outside view, the outside perspective is that's going to be talked about a lot now," Ennis said. "But we just can't be worried about what's going on outside this dressing room. We want to win every game. That's our bottom line."

"Nobody wants to go into a game thinking to lose," Nolan said. "This team will not ever go into a game thinking that way. If it ends up that way, we're just not good enough."

Sabres notebook: Larsson frustrated by return to Amerks

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

January 7, 2015

RALEIGH, N.C. – Johan Larsson is back in Rochester for the sixth time in the last two years. He seems to be getting fed up with the Buffalo Sabres in general and coach Ted Nolan in particular.

Larsson, 22, was returned to the Amerks Sunday after another unproductive stay in the NHL and told the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle on Tuesday he doesn't know if he has much future in the Sabres' organization.

In 26 AHL games, Larsson has eight goals, 15 assists and 23 points. He has 10 of his points on the power play, a spot he got no chance at in Buffalo. He scored his first NHL goal in the Sabres' 5-1 loss Dec. 20 to Colorado and assisted on a goal the next night in Boston, but his minutes declined after that.

"The trust factor was not there," Larsson told the newspaper. "I felt my time was going to come, then I was right back to the fourth line."

Larsson is clearly upset to have limited top-line minutes. Multiple analytics websites show his most prominent linemates have been Cody McCormick and Patrick Kaleta – two players who have no goals in 50 combined games this season.

Asked his reaction after practice here Wednesday, Nolan was clearly annoyed that a young player would run to the media in protest of his role.

"Young players say things that maybe they shouldn't say sometimes, so you take that with a grain of salt," Nolan said. "I've been involved in this game for a long time, and you never try to look at who you played with and how much you played. It's how you played. That's the bottom line. He's got to look at himself and see what he can do next time, if there is a next time, to do it better."

Larsson, acquired from Minnesota in 2013 in the Jason Pominville trade, has one goal in 40 career games with the Sabres and feels he's being pigeon-holed as a grinder rather than a scorer.

"I've always said to the team, 'If you're pointing a finger at somebody, you're pointing three back at yourself,' " Nolan said. "He's just got to look at whoever he plays with. It's disrespectful to say, 'I only played with Cody McCormick' or 'I only played with Patty Kaleta or Nic Deslauriers.' "

"He probably has some sort of idea what kind of player I am," Larsson said of Nolan. "I don't know what you can do more to show them."

Larsson is in the last year of his contract and will be a restricted free agent after the season, which potentially leaves him even more in limbo.

"It's getting late in the season and this is my last year. It's tough to answer," he said, in response to an inquiry on his standing with Buffalo now that he's back in Rochester. "Now that I'm back here, I want to just be really focused and help this team get some wins and have fun. That's the most important thing for me."

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Nolan said he will split the goaltending duties the next two games, with Jhonas Enroth likely for Thursday's game here and Michal Neuvirth a good bet to get the call Friday in Tampa Bay.

Winger Drew Stafford missed practice Wednesday after the birth of his first child but is expected to arrive in time to play in Thursday's game.

Nolan added that captain Brian Gionta and forward Torrey Mitchell remain sidelined on a week-to-week basis but could start skating again next week when the team returns home.

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The team announced current players Mike Weber, Cody Hodgson and Chris Stewart and alumnus Martin Biron will shave their heads Feb. 14 as part of the Goin' Bald for Bucks program to raise money for Roswell Park Cancer Institute.

The four will be fundraising for the next month, and then participate in a group shave in First Niagara Center in front of cancer patients and Sabres fans. Fans can sign up to donate through a link on Sabres.com.

Sabres keep skidding with loss to Hurricanes

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

January 8, 2015

RALEIGH, N.C. – Less than a month ago, the Buffalo Sabres were on a stretch of 10 wins in 13 games. Seriously. They were 10 points up on the last-place Edmonton Oilers and seemingly on the verge of escaping the race for the NHL's worst record.

Injuries and illness have struck hard since. Puck possession numbers remain hideous and the once super-charged goaltending of Jhonas Enroth has reverted to average. The Sabres of January now look like the Sabres of October – as in one of the worst NHL teams you could possibly put on the ice.

The season's first month was filled with confusion as new players struggled against a brutal schedule of NHL heavyweights. The turn of the new year seems to have a much more serious-looking tenor.

In Thursday's 5-2 loss to the equally unimpressive Carolina Hurricanes, this looked like a Buffalo team that had plenty of quit.

Coach Ted Nolan clearly sensed it. So did his players. That's why the doors to their PNC Arena dressing room were closed for more than 15 minutes after this one while they aired some of their grievances.

"Right now, we're pretty weak mentally," said Enroth. "We need to be stronger up in our heads. There's some guys here not mentally tough enough and that's unfortunate."

"It comes down to details," said defenseman Tyler Myers. "We're just not doing the little things to give us a chance to win a game. It comes down to preparation going into a game and it's got to change if we want to turn the tide here."

The Sabres gave up four goals in the second period – three in a span of 79 seconds – and suffered their sixth straight loss. They are 1-9-1 in their last 11 games and remain in 28th place overall, although the Hurricanes have pulled within one point of them and Buffalo is now just four in front of Edmonton.

The Sabres have given up 50 goals in those 11 games with a continued string of lax defensive coverage and horrific penalty killing. Giving up four in a period to the pop-gun Carolina offense stands as one of the season's biggest embarrassments.

The Hurricanes entered the game 29th in the NHL in scoring at 1.9 goals per game (the Sabres, of course, are last). They had scored just 17 goals in their last 10 games but collected 17 of their 31 shots on goal in the middle frame, and delighted the small crowd of 9,781 that braved 20-degree weather with their best period of the season.

"We're starting to get back in our old habit of when we get scored on, you see some heads go down," Myers said. "The team gets down. That's the body language we give off. We have to be a team that plays the same way no matter what."

Phil Varone, playing his second game of the season, scored both Buffalo goals, on a Chris Stewart feed in the second period and a tip of a Tyson Strachan shot in the third. Of course, the opposite point to Varone's performance is his two goals are the same amount in two games that \$4 million man Cody Hodgson has in 41.

The top line of Matt Moulson, Zemgus Girgensons and Tyler Ennis combined for no points and just two shots on goal. Moulson has gone eight straight games without a goal, Girgensons has gone five and Ennis has just one goal in his last 14 outings.

Ennis was stopped by Cam Ward on a good scoring chance from in tight early in the second period with the game scoreless. It could have made a difference. Nolan said he's "probably maybe" going to break up the line Friday night in Tampa.

"You shouldn't have to rely on call-ups to get goals for you," Nolan said. "We need some production."

After a scoreless first period, the Sabres were in a 1-1 game in the second when they got in penalty trouble again and that was pretty much that.

The end came when Nic Deslauriers took a holding penalty at 11:52 and Strachan was nailed with a foolish cross-checking penalty on Victor Rask 48 seconds later. That left Buffalo two men short for 1:12 and Carolina went ahead at 13:50 as former Sabre Nathan Gerbe found Juri Tlusty for a quick snapshot in the slot.

Strachan had been on the ice for just three seconds when Eric Staal made it 3-1 at 14:43 by banking the puck off Mike Weber's skate with a pass from behind the net. Enroth was exasperated 26 seconds later, throwing his arms in the air when Ron Hainsey's shot from the right point hit Rask in the leg and skittered home to make it 4-1.

"There's moments in a game where it looks like as a group we don't want to get in there," Myers said. "I don't know why."

The Sabres have given up 15 goals the last three games, enduring a period of at least three goals against in each one.

"We talked before the game that we've got to be sharp, we've got to be alert and play with some urgency," Nolan said. "That didn't happen. When that doesn't happen, you take bad penalties and the game's over."

Sabres notebook: Hasek's number to be retired Tuesday

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

January 8, 2015

RALEIGH, N.C. – As announced during Thursday's game against the Carolina Hurricanes, the Sabres have finalized their plans for Tuesday's Dominik Hasek jersey retirement ceremony in First Niagara Center. It will come prior to the game against the Detroit Red Wings, the team with whom Hasek won the Stanley Cup in 2002.

Fans are encouraged to arrive early and be in their seats by 6:45 for the preliminaries to the 7 p.m. ceremony. A commemorative "39" Hasek banner will be handed out to all fans.

The Sabres will also be selling autographed limited-edition Hasek hats, pucks and lithographs with proceeds benefiting Hasek's Heroes. The items will be sold in the 100 level Pavilion area of the arena. If any unsold items remain, they will be available at the Sabres Store and on Sabres.com.

Hasek will be the seventh player in franchise history to have his number retired, joining Tim Horton (2), Richard Martin (7), Gilbert Perreault (11), Rene Robert (14), Pat LaFontaine (16) and Danny Gare (18).

Hasek was inducted into the Sabres Hall of Fame on March 29 and the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto on Nov. 17.

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Nathan Lieuwen entered the season thinking he could compete for the starting goaltender's spot in Rochester and maybe push his way deeper into the picture in Buffalo. Especially with Matt Hackett dealing with a long-term injury and the potential of a trade involving either Jhonas Enroth or Michal Neuvirth.

But Lieuwen's season in the AHL has been pretty much a wash. And now his career seems to be in limbo after the Amerks revealed Thursday that Lieuwen needs to take off significant time to recover from concussion effects.

Lieuwen suffered the concussion, the fourth of his life, while playing for the Sabres in an April 6 game at Philadelphia. He reported to training camp this year insisting he was fine but his play indicated otherwise.

Lieuwen recently revealed to Amerks officials that he has been plagued by vision issues all season. Neurologists have determined his brain still hasn't healed from the April blow and recommended he stay off the ice.

"He thought he could get through it," Amerks coach Chadd Cassidy told the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle. "He was in tears when he told me. He wasn't having the headaches but he was having trouble tracking the puck and seeing the puck."

Lieuwen's goals-against average has ballooned this year from 2.34 to 3.29 while his save percentage has dipped from .922 to .883

"He saw the neurologist and he told him: 'Your brain is not working with your eyes the right way,'" Cassidy said.

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Zemgus Girgensons is a regular interview subject on the road for reporters seeking his comments on his exploding All-Star voting totals from his native Latvia. He was the focus of attention again Thursday for more Latvia love, this time a 2½ minute rap video that was going viral throughout hockey blogs.

"I think it's pretty funny," Girgensons said. "Someone tweeted it at me and I thought it was pretty funny. I laugh about it. We played it before the skate here and we had a good laugh. It's another way to show support. It's cool and funny."

The video, a takeoff on the Beyonce song "7/11," and translated Latvian lyrics are available on the [BN] Hockey blog at Buffalonews.com.

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Winger Drew Stafford missed the game after he suffered weather-related difficulties leaving Buffalo following the birth of his first child and did not make it to Raleigh. Given the weather forecast in Buffalo, it's possible he may have similar problems making the Sabres' game Friday night at Tampa Bay.

The Sabres have no extra forwards on hand with Stafford out. Andrej Meszaros and Andre Benoit were the healthy scratches on defense for the second straight game.

Michal Neuvirth is expected to be the Sabres' starting goalie Friday night in Tampa. The Lightning are 6-1 in their last seven games and atop the Eastern Conference with 56 points. They are two points behind Anaheim in the race for the Presidents' Trophy.

Hurricanes defeat Sabres with second-period surge

By Kurt Dusterberg

NHL.com

January 8, 2015

RALEIGH, N.C. -- The Carolina Hurricanes have been searching for scoring all season. In the process, the individual goal droughts have been adding up.

After a 5-2 win against the Buffalo Sabres at PNC Arena on Thursday, a handful of players might rest a little more easily.

Carolina (13-24-4) scored three goals in a 79-second span of the second period for its third win in four games.

Eleven Hurricanes had at least one point in their second three-goal win of the season. Ryan Murphy, Jiri Tlusty and Justin Faulk each had two points, and Cam Ward made 18 saves for his 11th win.

"Sometimes you're looking for that bounce to get out of one of those slumps," said Jeff Skinner, who had a goal after going scoreless in his previous seven games. "It's nice for the confidence I think. You're sort of squeezing the stick, then you get an ugly goal or a lucky bounce and you sort of relax."

Skinner was the first to break out of a slump, scoring his ninth of the season 4:52 into the second period. He finished on the forehand after Alexander Semin made a spin move in the slot to get the puck to him.

"That's a great play," Skinner said. "He's got great vision. Him and [Riley] Nash were moving the puck well and we were getting in on the forecheck and making plays."

Buffalo (14-25-3) tied the game 59 seconds later after Carolina turned over the puck in the neutral zone. Chris Stewart sent a pass to Philip Varone, who cut through the slot and slipped a forehand to the far post. The goal was Varone's first of the season and second of his NHL career.

Carolina then scored three quick goals to take command. Skating 5-on-3, Tlusty set up in the slot and took a pass from Nathan Gerbe for a 2-1 lead at 13:50. The goal was Tlusty's first in 12 games.

Eric Staal made it 3-1 on a wraparound 53 seconds later for his fifth goal in six games. Staal's attempt went in front of goaltender Jhonas Enroth and deflected off the right skate of defenseman Mike Weber past Enroth.

"He's our best player. I'm not surprised," Ward said of Staal. "It was a matter of time. He makes everyone around him better when he's on top of his game. You can see he's getting that confidence, and when he's confident, he's one of the best."

Victor Rask gave the Hurricanes a 4-1 lead at 15:09 when he deflected Ron Hainsey's shot from the right point, ending a 15-game scoring drought.

Varone made it 4-2 at 8:17 of the third period, redirecting Tyson Strachan's high shot through Ward's legs. Nash countered for Carolina at 10:10, battling for a rebound above the crease after Faulk's shot. Nash had one goal in his previous 27 games.

"I thought our response to their second goal was important," Carolina coach Bill Peters said. "It kind of put a nail in the coffin and put the game away. The guys who needed to be on the board were."

That includes Staal, who has benefited from the return of his brother Jordan Staal. Since Jordan's return from a fractured fibula on Dec. 29, Eric has played on his brother's wing, and he attributes his scoring success to playing on the same line.

"We're a threat every time we're over the boards," Eric Staal said. "[Jordan] is a big, strong body. He controls pucks and opens up ice and makes my job a lot easier, as well as [Elias Lindholm's]. They're both puck-

possession players that can make plays. When you're playing against top pairs and good lines, you have to have that."

The Sabres have lost a season-high six straight games, when they have been outscored 27-7. A holding penalty on Nicolas Deslauriers followed by Tyson Strachan's cross-checking minor 48 seconds later proved to be their undoing Thursday.

"It's different mistakes from different people every time," Buffalo coach Ted Nolan said. "We've got to be mentally sharp. We talked about it before the game. We've got to be alert, we've got to be sure we're intense, we've got to bring some urgency. That didn't happen, and when it doesn't happen, you take bad penalties and the game's over."

Varone, playing in his 11th NHL game, was the bright spot for the Sabres. Nolan used that point to underscore Buffalo's troubles.

"Our top line, if they're not scoring, we don't have much scoring throughout," Nolan said. "Varone, just called up recently, he gets two of our goals tonight and he played a strong game for us. But you shouldn't rely on call-ups to get goals for you. You need production."

Buffalo Sabres: What can we expect in the 2nd half of the season?

By Matt Clouden

Bleacher Report

January 8, 2015

At first glance, it seems two Buffalo Sabres teams have taken the ice in the team's first 41 games this season.

There's the version that has gone 4-21-3 in two long stretches, and there's the team that went 10-3-0 and gave the fans hope that maybe this team was good enough to make the playoffs.

As it stands now, the Sabres are 14-24-3, good for 31 points and 28th in the NHL. Any realistic Sabres fan would not have expected much more out of this team to start the season, and aside from the late-November through early-December run, things could be much, much worse.

To say the Sabres have been embarrassingly bad for most of the first half of the season is an understatement. Just looking at the more commonplace statistics, the Sabres are last in the NHL in shots for per game and last in shots against per game. They also have the least amount of goals for, averaging a meager 1.76 goals per game, while allowing the most goals per game at 3.39 per contest.

Those stats alone say everything that needs to be said about the Sabres' season.

But it gets worse.

The Sabres have a Corsi differential of -1086 for the season so far. That means that the Sabres have about 26 more shots, whether they are on net, missed or blocked, directed toward their net per game than they attempt on the opposition's net.

What this means at its simplest level is the Sabres spend way too much time in their own zone, and despite all the attention of the coaching staff on this, it's really only gotten worse.

Including the Sabres' 6-2 win against the Toronto Maple Leafs on November 15, they have won 11 games. Of those wins, they have controlled possession—had a Corsi-for percentage of 50 percent or more—only once, their 4-3 shootout victory over the Florida Panthers on December 13.

In fact, including the Panthers win, the Sabres only cracked 40-percent Corsi-for four times. Four times! That in turn means that the Sabres were the beneficiaries of a high shooting percentage and a very hot goalie in Jhonas Enroth.

Well, since that win against the Panthers in December, the Sabres are 1-8-1, and Enroth has cooled off.

Granted, the Sabres have done a bit better with possession (in a relative sense) having carried possession twice in the last 10 games, but Enroth and Michal Neuvirth have combined for a .867 save percentage, a stretch that has normalized the season numbers for both.

Now, circling back to the initial premise of the article, it was said that the Sabres seem to have skated out two different teams this season, a winning one and a losing one.

In reality, the stats show that the Sabres have been the same team all along but a team that rode a hot streak—also known as luck—to a record that had them four points out of a wild card at one point.

And with that realization in mind, Sabres fans should expect a long second half of the season.

Ted Nolan can kick and scream all he wants, but until he institutes any semblance of a power play or tightens up the penalty kill—ranked 30th and 29th in the league, respectively—this team will not improve.

General manager Tim Murray also has a few players that he can likely corral for a few more future pieces. Armed with three first-round picks in June's draft, Murray likely will be hard-pressed to land another one unless the player going the opposite way is named Tyler Myers, but names like Drew Stafford and Chris Stewart may yield a second-rounder for the Sabres.

But the picks or players that may be the Sabres' is entirely speculative and not worth the time. What is worthwhile is the simple fact that this roster is going to have some potentially significant turnover in the very near future. That turnover, especially if it includes Enroth, Stafford or Myers, could make this team even worse, much like the Ryan Miller-Steve Ott trade did last year.

So while the tanking talk is understandably divisive among the Sabres fanbase, it may not be much of an issue to debate for much longer. If this current 1-8-1 stretch is indicative of the next 41 games, 30th place is a given, not a possibility.

Sabres prospect Brendan Lemieux piling up goals, getting ready for NHL

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 7, 2015

BUFFALO – Brendan Lemieux understands junior hockey is a special, once-in-a-lifetime experience. The three or four years, the Sabres prospect has been told, are “definitely the best time of your life.”

“I know why they say that,” Lemieux, the 31st pick by the Sabres in June, said by phone Tuesday. “I’m having a blast in junior. We’re on a high right now. We’re on a winning streak.”

The gritty, high-scoring winger already has 29 goals in 32 games, a torrid 57-goal pace. His first-place Barrie Colts have won seven straight games and are primed to make a run in the Ontario Hockey League playoffs.

“I definitely I want to get 50 or more,” Lemieux said. “Right now, I’m worried about our team winning. I’ve never been a big stat guy. But 50 goals is a prestigious number to hit in junior.”

Lemieux’s excited about challenging for the Memorial Cup. His voice sounds like he’s ready for the postseason to start immediately.

Still, the 18-year-old wants his three-year junior career to end.

“After the season,” Lemieux said, “my goal is to go into training camp and make the team.”

That team, of course, is the Sabres.

“There’s really nothing more I’ve been thinking about,” he said. “I don’t plan on playing another year of junior. That’s always been my goal is to play in the first two years. The AHL’s a great league, but my goal has always been to play in the NHL. So I definitely want to be able to step right in if I can. That’s what’s this year’s about.”

This has been a breakout year for Lemieux, who ranks third in OHL goal scoring despite having played six fewer games than London’s Mitchell Marner and Erie’s Alex DeBrincat. Lemieux scored 27 times in 65 appearances last season.

“To be honest, to be sitting here talking about 50 goals halfway through the season, I didn’t foresee that ... considering I had 27 last year,” Lemieux said. “I made goals 40 and 40. I wanted 40 goals and 40 assists in the beginning of the season.”

Lemieux only has 11 assists, so he likely won’t reach one goal. But he has transformed himself into an elite offensive threat.

Teams know the 6-foot-1, 210-pounder can be a physical agitator like his father, legendary NHL pest Claude Lemieux. Now, they’re seeing a different side of the younger Lemieux.

“I think it’s great that people are seeing that side of me, that I can be an agitating third-line, fourth-line forward,” he said, “but that I can also step up and play with the big guys on the first power play, play in front of the net and be a simple guy playing with skilled players. I think that’s a game that might not show early in my pro career but I want to have in the bag for later on.”

This season hasn’t been perfect. Last month, Lemieux was upset he couldn’t earn an invite to Team Canada’s world junior championship camp. In June, he was crushed when he dropped out of the first round.

Each slight has fueled Lemieux.

“I don’t think I have a chip on my shoulder, but it definitely motivates me,” he said about falling in June. “The draft year is gone and past.”

Lemieux, the first pick of the second round, has quickly developed into one of the best prospects in an organization stocked with top young talent.

The Sabres awarded Lemieux a long look during training camp, even playing him in an exhibition game. The entire experience was "incredible," he said. Lemieux shared a dressing room with Sabres center Torrey Mitchell, someone he used to play video games with when his father played in San Jose six years ago.

"It was surreal for me," Lemieux said.

Nonetheless, Lemieux "definitely left disappointed" when the Sabres sent him down.

"I definitely wanted to make that team," he said. "I felt like I wasn't that far off. I like to think everything has a purpose. I'm definitely glad I'm back in junior. ... I'm just going to be that much more ready when it's time for me to step up when the team's ready for me, not when I'm ready for them."

His coach, Hall of Famer Dale Hawerchuk, has been grooming Lemieux since 2012. Lemieux calls the Sabres legend a "second father."

"I'm a strong personality," Lemieux said, "and Dale's really been great with teaching me to be the best teammate I can be, best leader I can be. ... Dale's been incredible with me. He's brought my game to a whole new level. ... He's shown me that if you play the game the right way, you're going to have success at this level and the next. If you cheat and you do things the wrong way, you may score more goals or get points, but you're not going to have success at the next level.

"So he's never been superficial in just wanting success in junior for me, he's always wanted the big picture from me, which is being able to translate into being a good pro."

Sabres' Gorges thinks this losing streak is worse

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 7, 2015

Raleigh, NC (WGR 550) -- The Sabres started the season with one win in eight games, but the current streak is even worse. Buffalo has one win in 10 games and lately it hasn't even been close. Josh Gorges is the vocal leader of this team and he says what's going on now is worse because in between, they won 10 of 13 games, "That's why it may be even more disappointing that the start of the year. We've shown that when we want to do the right things and we want to play together, when we want to compete hard, we can play." Gorges added, "We beat some of the top teams in the east and we beat L.A. and we beat some good teams in the west, so the potential is there so when you don't have it and we don't play the way we're supposed to, that's frustrating."

Ted Nolan stopped practice on Wednesday in the middle of a drill because he didn't like what he was seeing. The head coach said, "I'm a strong believer in the way you practice is the way you compete and the way you play. We were just going through the drills like normal, we didn't have any urgency to our game, so that's what we need at this part of the season right now, we need some urgency."

Gorges has seen that same thing, but he thinks its leaked into games, ""Every night we have lapses, mental mistakes, not enough effort, not enough of that passion, that drive to compete and that little bit of desperation. The position we're in and the games we've played as of late, we should have the mentality that we've got to give everything every shift, you've got to be a little pissed off, a little bit embarrassed and to come out and have half the guys doing that and half the guys not, I mean we're hesitant and nonchalant, we can't have it."

Gorges certainly has strong opinions and he encourages fans to be the same way. Playing Carolina, which is a team right behind Buffalo for 29th in the NHL, there are fans of both teams that want their team to lose so they can draft a good player. Gorges doesn't begrudge them their opinion, but he stressed that's for the fans, "That's the thing about sports, people have opinions and that's great, it should be talked about. Different scenarios, different rumors and that's what makes professional sports great is the fan base for whatever reason to talk about sports. Our job as players and as professionals is to not focus on any of that, whether it's good or bad. Our job is to focus on what we need to do to be successful each night. You do everything you can to not listen and to not hear what's going on outside this dressing room." The defenseman added, "Our focus since the start of the year hasn't been on trying to get the top draft pick. Never in my life have I ever heard of losing on purpose. That's a joke to even think about."

Gorges always gives supreme effort in every game, but I think at times this season his play has slipped. He of course is not alone there and said, "My individual success is based on whether this team wins or loses games. I never base my season individually on my stats. My season's based on wins and losses and if we're losing games, it means I'm not doing my job."

Nolan said Drew Stafford should be back for the game on Thursday which means one of the three Amerks up would likely go back.

Nolan said he's leaning towards Jhonas Enroth playing against the Hurricanes, with Michal Neuvirth going Friday in Tampa.

Hurricanes stomp Sabres 5-2

By Dan Cave

WGR 550

January 8, 2015

The Hurricanes scored three goals in a span of 1:19 during the second period on Thursday before handing the Sabres a 5-2 loss, their sixth straight. Phil Varone scored both goals for Buffalo.

After a scoreless first period, the two teams scored within 59 seconds of each other early in the second. Jeff Skinner's tap-in gave Carolina the 1-0 lead, but Phil Varone countered less than a minute later with his first goal of the season. Varone took a backhand pass from Chris Stewart and snapped a shot past Cam Ward, who was moving in the wrong direction.

Nicolas Deslauriers and Tyson Strachan took back-to-back penalties later in the period, leading to a Hurricanes 5-on-3 and an onslaught of Carolina goals. Jiri Tlusty got the scoring started with two seconds remaining in the 5-on-3 power play with a shot that trickled between Enroth's pads. Eric Staal made it 3-1 only 53 seconds later, banking a shot off Mike Weber's skate and into the net. Moments later, Ron Hainsey's shot deflected off Victor Rask, giving the Hurricanes a 4-1 lead.

Varone's second of the night cut the Carolina lead in half at 8:17 of the third. Varone tipped a Tyson Strachan shot past Ward not long after a Sabres power play expired. The goal was allowed to stand following a review that determined Varone did not knock the puck out of the air with a high stick. Riley Nash put the Hurricanes back up by three less than two minutes later, scooping a puck around Enroth's left pad for the 5-2 lead.

The Sabres were outshot 31-20 and 17-6 in the second period on the way to their sixth consecutive defeat. The loss came in front of less than 10,000 fans at PNC Arena in Raleigh. Buffalo finishes off a four-game road trip Friday evening in Tampa Bay. The Sabres and Lightning will drop the puck at 7:30 p.m. on the Buffalo Sabres Radio Network.

1st Period

Goals

None

Penalties

3:09 - CAR - Jiri Tlusty (2 min., tripping)

2nd Period

Goals

4:52 - CAR - Jeff Skinner (9) (Alexander Semin, Ryan Murphy)

5:51 - BUF - Phil Varone (1) (Chris Stewart)

13:50 - CAR - Jiri Tlusty (11) (PPG) (Nathan Gerbe, Justin Faulk)

14:43 - CAR - Eric Staal (12) (Ryan Murphy, John-Michael Liles)

15:09 - CAR - Victor Rask (5) (Ron Hainsey)

Penalties

6:04 - CAR - Eric Staal (2 min., tripping)

11:52 - BUF - Nicolas Deslauriers (2 min., holding)

12:40 - BUF - Tyson Strachan (2 min., cross checking)

3rd Period

Goals

8:17 - BUF - Phil Varone (2) (Tyson Strachan, Chris Stewart)

10:10 - CAR - Riley Nash (6) (Justin Faulk, Jiri Tlusty)

Penalties

1:22 - BUF - Tyler Myers (2 min., cross checking)

6:12 - CAR - John-Michael Liles (2 min., holding the stick)

11:30 - CAR - Ryan Murphy (2 min., cross checking)

Goaltending

BUF - Jhonas Enroth (26 saves, 31 shots)

CAR - Cam Ward (18 saves, 20 shots)

Power Plays

BUF - 0 of 4

CAR - 1 of 3

Three Stars

1.) CAR - Justin Faulk (0 G, 2 A)

2.) CAR - Jiri Tlustý (1 G, 1 A)

3.) CAR - Eric Staal (1 G, 0 A)

Hamilton: Sabres' told to be more desperate

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 8, 2015

Raleigh, NC (WGR 550) -- The Sabres weren't great in the first period, but after giving up seven first period goals in their last two games, getting out 0-0 is progress.

Buffalo forced Cam Ward to make a good save on their first shot which was from the slot by Cody Hodgson.

There was one shift by Phil Varone's line that hemmed the Hurricanes in their end for over a minute. Varone, Chris Stewart and Brian Flynn worked very hard along the wall, but never once got a shot or a scoring chance. It was a lot of work for nothing.

After that it was all Carolina the rest of the period as Jhonas Enroth made great saves on Jeff Skinner and Pat Dwyer.

Nikita Zadorov was told in the morning skate by Ted Nolan that he was getting too comfortable. The young Russian defenseman responded with three good hits.

Enroth made 10 saves while Ward made five.

In their last 18 games Carolina had scored four goals once, two goals five times, one goal 11 times and no goals once. I bring this up because the fragile Sabres took their first two penalties in the second period which led to two goals and gave up four to the Hurricanes in one period alone.

Buffalo had the early second period pressure as Matt Moulson stole the puck and relayed it to Zemgus Girgensons who got it to Tyler Ennis in front, but Ward stoned him.

Mikhail Grigorenko won a faceoff to the right of Enroth, but nobody hustled after that. Carolina got the puck, worked it around and Skinner wound up with an uncontested tap in.

Varone showed some compete beating three Hurricanes less than a minute late ripping his first of the season past Ward to tie it.

Buffalo had not committed a penalty, but Nic Deslauriers went to the box and he was followed there by Tyson Strachan giving Carolina a lengthy 5-on-3. Buffalo did a pretty good job killing it thanks to two posts, but with two seconds left in the advantage, Jiri Tlusty was alone in front for his 11th.

Just three seconds after Strachan got out of the box, Eric Staal scored from behind the net banking it in off Mike Weber.

Right after that Weber failed to clear the puck twice and Victor Rask tipped in his fifth. That's three goals in 1:19 to a team that rarely scores three in a game.

Enroth had to look at 17 shots in the second period alone and had 23 saves after two. Cam Ward had 10 saves.

There was an opportunity right after the Varone goal as Buffalo had a power play, but Ward made great saves on Brian Flynn and Ennis.

Buffalo did make it 4-2 right after a power play ended when Varone tipped home his second of the night on a Strachan shot. It was reviewed, but allowed to stand.

Ted Nolan asked his team to be more desperate in this game. With the exception of the Varone line, He didn't get it except in a few spurts and they even got scored on when Riley Nash made it 5-2. Brian Flynn lost Nash on the back check. What he got was a team that's fragile and a team that panicked.

"We gotta be mentally sharp," said Ted Nolan. "We talked about it before the game. We gotta be alert, we gotta make sure we're intense, we gotta bring some urgency. When that doesn't happen, you take bad penalties and the game's over."

"During our run, I thought it was the best I've seen our group in a long time respond after a goal against," said Tyler Myers. "It's starting to turn the other way again. We're starting to get back into our old habit of, when we get scored on, you see some heads go down. That's the body language we give off. We have to be a team that plays the same way no matter what."

Sabres are who they thought they were

By Howard Simon

WGR 550

January 8, 2015

If you're wondering what has happened to the Buffalo Sabres over the last few weeks, the answer can be found in a famous comment from former NFL Coach Dennis Green, who once said "they are what we thought they were."

Through their first 18 games of the season, the Sabres were 3-13-2 and last in the NHL standings. The list of problems was quite long.

Then, all of a sudden, they started winning some games. In fact, the Sabres were a surprising 10-3 from November 15th through December 15th. They actually managed six wins in regulation after accomplishing that feat just once prior to that stretch.

I remember an inside the numbers I did at the time basically saying don't get too carried away because it was a false positive. The Sabres were riding a hot goalie, Jhonas Enroth was stopping pucks at a 94% clip and a hot top line of Tyler Ennis, Zemgus Girgensons and Matt Moulson.

The power play was slightly better, which didn't mean much because it had been flat out awful, and they were getting a little more secondary scoring from a handful of other forwards as well as the defensemen contributing more points.

In short, Enroth has come back down to earth, the top line has gone cold and the Sabres are still the same bad possession team they have been for the last one and a half seasons.

Buffalo is 1-8-1 in its last 10 games and have been outscored 45-19. The offense has produced a total of three goals in the last four games. They've topped one goal scored only four times in those 10 games.

Defensively, the Sabres have had two games where they gave up six goals and four games where they've yielded five.

As far as special teams, the power play is 4-26 and the penalty kill has been atrocious. The Sabres have given up a power play goal in 12 of the last 28 times they've been shorthanded.

Enroth's play has cooled considerably and it actually began during that 10-3 stretch. In his last 10 starts, the Swedish netminder is 5-4-1 with a 3.42 goals against average and an unsightly .893 save percentage but remember that includes all of the power play goals given up.

As for the top line, in the last 10 games, Ennis has just one goal and one assist while Girgensons has two goals and one assist. Moulson missed three games due to an illness but in the seven games in which he has played during this skid, Moulson doesn't have a goal and has just two helpers.

With half the season in the record books, a 41 game body of work, the Sabres are last in the NHL in scoring, goal differential and power play and tied for the most losses in regulation.

Gorges: 'We've got to give everything every shift'

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

January 7, 2015

RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA – The Buffalo Sabres will open up the second half of the season Thursday night at PNC Arena against the Carolina Hurricanes. They're looking to get back on the right foot and end their current 1-8-1 skid.

They practiced Wednesday afternoon at PNC Arena fresh off their 4-1 loss to the New Jersey Devils the night before. Buffalo surrendered three goals in the first period and the Devils were able to cruise from there.

"Every night we have lapses, mental mistakes, not enough effort, not enough of that passion, that drive to compete and a little bit of desperation," alternate captain Josh Gorges said. "The position we're in and the games we've played as of late, we should have the mentality of, 'We've got to give everything every shift.'

"You've got to be a little bit pissed off, a little bit embarrassed. And to come out and have half the guys doing that and half the guys not – and we're hesitant and we're nonchalant – whether it's the start of the game, the second period, the end of the game, we can't have it."

Sabres coach Ted Nolan stopped a few drills during practice, huddled the players up and got them refocused on the task at hand.

"I'm a strong believer in the way you practice is the way you compete and the way you play," he said. "For a little bit of the practice, we were just going through the drills like normal. We didn't have any urgency to our game so that's what we need at this point of the season right now. We need some urgency."

After the loss to the Devils, Nolan commented on how the team needs to come in with the right mindset and to be mentally prepared for games. While Gorges believes that's part of it and having a good practice can help, some of the troubles the team is having run a bit deeper.

"How many times can you reset before you say, 'Enough's enough?'" he said. "It is Xs and Os but it's this guy knowing what his job is and doing that job.

"We can come out and correct a few of the breakdowns from the game here in practice and have an upbeat practice and snapping pucks around and that's great; you need that. But when it comes to game-time, you need to know your positions, you need to know where you're going.

"But more than that, you need to know the guy lined up across from you is not going to beat you. Your matchup, he's not going to beat you. You get on the penalty kill, they're not going to score. You get on the power play, we're gonna score.

"It's getting in the mindset of how do you see this game? Not from an Xs and Os standpoint, but from a 'Don't let yourself lose' [mentality]."

BOTH ENDS OF THE SPECTRUM

Before this current losing streak – the Sabres have now lost five in a row – the team had won 10 of 13. That string of wins helped the team recover from their 2-8-1 record in the month of October.

That the team had shown they're capable of winning games against quality teams in the past has worked to rise Gorges' frustration level in particular.

"That's maybe even more disappointing than at the start of the year because we've shown that when we want to do the right things, when we want to play together, when we want to compete hard, we can play," he said. "And we're not going to win every game, but we can compete."

"We've beat some of the top teams in the East and we've beat L.A. and some good teams out West. The potential is there. So when you don't have it and we don't play the way we're supposed to, that's frustrating."

SCORING ISSUES

While the team has given up a lot of goals lately, they're also struggling to find the back of the net. Buffalo has been outscored 45-17 over the past 10 games and hasn't gotten much production from their top line.

Since Matt Moulson returned from having the flu five games ago, he has just two points (0+2), center Zemgus Girgensons has two goals and right wing Tyler Ennis has only one goal.

They're also a combined minus-16 in those five games. Buffalo has been battling some injuries to players like Brian Gionta, Marcus Foligno and Torrey Mitchell that they rely on not only for scoring depth, but to help alleviate some matchup problems from the opposition. Three callups from the American Hockey League – Phil Varone, Mikhail Grigorenko and Tim Schaller – are currently playing center ice for the Sabres.

The other lines have seen lots of personnel change lately and Nolan knows that the collective effort of the group is just as important as how any individual line may be playing.

"That's what happens when you're down a little bit. You put too much bend on one line. But the one thing they never did, they never broke," Nolan said. "They just need to get a little bit of rest and do what they do best."

Nolan had a long chat with Ennis along the boards after practice. He shed some light as to what those discussions entailed.

"[We talked about] not to try to grab this team and put it on your back and try to get those goals all the time. There's a lot of pressure when you have one line going and we just need everybody else contributing and never expect one set of defense, one goaltender and one line – or one particular guy – to do it for us," Nolan said.

"We have to do it together, so that was my message to him. To keep playing the way he's playing – he's playing great for us – and sometimes, because of his character, he wants to do more. Sometimes when you do more, you do less, but he's doing fine, what he's doing."

STAFFORD TO RETURN

The team will likely have forward Drew Stafford back for the game against the Hurricanes. He flew back to Buffalo as his wife delivered their first baby.

Buffalo also plays Friday night in Tampa Bay and Nolan said they'll likely divvy up the goaltending duties between Jhonas Enroth and Michal Neuvirth.

WEDNESDAY'S PRACTICE

26 Matt Moulson – 28 Zemgus Girgensons – 63 Tyler Ennis
65 Brian Flynn – 84 Phil Varone – 80 Chris Stewart
19 Cody Hodgson – 25 Mikhail Grigorenko – 44 Nicolas Deslauriers
8 Cody McCormick – 59 Tim Schaller – 36 Patrick Kaleta

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

1 Jhonas Enroth
34 Michal Neuvirth

Sabres reach midway point of season in Carolina

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

January 8, 2015

RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA – As the Buffalo Sabres prepare to kick off the second half of the 2014-15 season, they'll look to do so right off the hop with a good first shift after the opening faceoff.

The Sabres are set to take on the Carolina Hurricanes at 7 p.m. at PNC Arena on Thursday. The Tops Gamenight Pregame show will begin at 6:30 p.m. on MSG-B and Bell. The game can also be heard live on WGR 550.

"The key word today was we have to play with some urgency," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said after the morning skate. "Whatever you do, you can't just backcheck to backcheck. You have to backcheck with a purpose. You've got to get back in position with purpose and all those type of things. We just want to get some urgency into our game and some energy and some compete. You never know what happens if you do those things."

The Sabres are 1-8-1 in their past 10 games and have been outscored 16-4 in the first periods of those games. They've given up nine first-period goals in the past three.

"It's mental preparation. Just come to the rink and when you step on the rink, it's game on," center Zemgus Girgensons said. "You give a team those 10, 15 minutes of a slow-paced game, those many mistakes we do, they're going to score and they're going to take huge advantage of the next two periods. We just have to come out mentally prepared for tonight."

TIMES TO KILL

Buffalo has struggled on the penalty kill lately, giving up five power-play goals in the past four games. On the season, they're 28th overall at 75 percent. Their penalty kill is in last place on the road at 65.7 percent.

The team has focused on making adjustments and hopes that translates in the game.

"We worked on some video and sometimes you have ups and downs," Girgensons said. "Right now, we're probably at the lowest level on the PK in the past five games. We did some changes and we're looking forward to improve it."

The coaching staff had been looking to find ways for Nicolas Deslauriers to play more minutes. One solution to get him more involved was to have him start killing penalties. He's settled in lately in the role, a new one for him, and has embraced the camaraderie shared by those tasked with those special-teams responsibilities.

"It was weird a little bit at the beginning, but now I feel like if I'm not on it, I want to be on it," Deslauriers said. "It's more about taking pride in killing penalties. It's like a little team within a team so it gives me a little bit of a chance to be something and it's been going good."

LINEUP NOTES

Drew Stafford is traveling back from Buffalo following the birth of his first child, so while he wasn't at the morning skate, he'll be a game-time decision against Carolina. Nolan hopes he makes it in time, so until then, the lineup is "status quo."

Andrej Meszaros and Andre Benoit will once again be healthy scratches on the blue line. Jhonas Enroth will get the call in net.

CULTURAL ICON

A music video made by rappers in Latvia has been making the rounds on the Internet over the past 24 hours. The song, called "Zemgus Girgensons," explains in Latvian how the singer wants to live the kind of lavish life he thinks Girgensons leads.

The nation of Latvia helped propel Girgensons to the top of NHL All-Star voting and he'll start in the game later this month after receiving over 1.5 million votes. The music video is another example of the strong fanbase he has in his home country.

"It's another way to show support so I think it's just cool and funny," Girgensons said after practice.

PROJECTED LINEUP

26 Matt Moulson – 28 Zemgus Girgensons – 63 Tyler Ennis

80 Chris Stewart – 84 Phil Varone – 65 Brian Flynn

19 Cody Hodgson – 25 Mikhail Grigorenko – 44 Nicolas Deslauriers

8 Cody McCormick – 59 Tim Schaller – 36 Patrick Kaleta

4 Josh Gorges – 57 Tyler Myers

51 Nikita Zadorov – 55 Rasmus Ristolainen

6 Mike Weber – 24 Tyson Strachan

1 Jhonas Enroth

34 Michal Neuvirth

Game-time Decision: 21 Drew Stafford

Scratched: 12 Brian Gionta (injured, upper body), 41 Andrej Meszaros, 61 Andre Benoit

Injured Reserve: 17 Torrey Mitchell (upper body), 82 Marcus Foligno (hand)

Tuesday will be a banner night for Hasek

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

January 8, 2015

The numbers of Gilbert Perreault, Rick Martin, Rene Robert, Tim Horton, Danny Gare and Pat LaFontaine are about to receive some company in the rafters of First Niagara Center.

Dominik Hasek's No. 39 will be retired as part of a pre-game ceremony on **Tuesday, January 13**, prior to the Buffalo Sabres' game against the Detroit Red Wings at **7 p.m.** Fans are asked to be in their seats for the ceremony that will begin at **6:45 p.m.**

All fans in attendance will receive a commemorative banner presented by First Niagara, the official bank of the Buffalo Sabres. The front of the banner features Hasek's number and years of service while the back of the banner lists his career statistics and trophies he earned during his career.

Fans attending the game will also be able to purchase a piece of Sabres history. The Sabres will be selling limited-edition autographed Hasek hats, pucks and lithographs with proceeds benefitting Hasek's Heroes, an organization Hasek founded in 2001 dedicated to help bring the game of ice hockey to underprivileged inner-city youth living in Buffalo.

Items will be available for purchase in the 100 level pavilion at First Niagara Center.

Hasek's No. 39 will be featured prominently on the ice behind each net and members of Hasek's Heroes will be on-hand as well. Hasek's Heroes annually provides services and equipment to more than 500 children ages 4 to 17 free of charge.

Sabres alumni will also be present as their former teammate is honored.

Hasek became the first goaltender in NHL history to win the Hart Trophy – the NHL's most valuable player award – twice, doing so in 1997 and 1998.

He also won the Vezina Trophy six times (1994, 1995, 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2001) and the William M. Jennings Trophy (1994 and 2001) and Lester B. Pearson Award twice (1997 and 1998).

Hasek had a prolific career overseas before he entered the NHL during the 1990-91 season, but when he joined the Sabres as part of a trade with the Chicago Blackhawks on August 7, 1992, he was still a relatively unknown commodity. He quickly began to leave his mark on the game and established himself as not only the Sabres starting goaltender, but one of the best goaltenders ever, with a style and flair all his own.

Upon his departure from the Sabres in the summer of 2001, his résumé had become the most polished in the history of the franchise. He owned the Sabres records for most all-time games played (491), wins (234), shutouts (55) and lowest career goals-against average (2.22).

He appeared in a career-high 72 games during the 1997-98 season and set a team record with 13 shutouts. He won the Hart Trophy for the second time after that season, but he topped it the following year, finishing with a career-best 1.87 goals-against average, .937 save percentage and a berth in the 1999 Stanley Cup Final.

He went on to win the Stanley Cup twice with the Detroit Red Wings in 2002 and 2008 and retired from the NHL in 2008. He played for a few more seasons in Europe before retiring for good on Oct. 9, 2012.

Hasek, who will turn 50 on January 29, was the fifth and final Sabres player to wear No. 39. He was inducted into the Buffalo Sabres Hall of Fame on March 29 and into the Hockey Hall of Fame on November 17.

He also won a gold medal for the Czech Republic during the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan, which he considers to be one of the proudest moments of his career.

Varone records 1st multi-goal game in loss to Hurricanes

By Chris Ryndak

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RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA – The Buffalo Sabres are in a slump and they know they'll have to pull together if they're going to find their way out of it.

After winning 10 of 13 games, the Sabres have gone 1-9-1 in their past 11 games and have lost six straight.

A 5-2 loss Thursday to the Carolina Hurricanes at PNC Arena prompted a 10-minute closed door meeting between the players and coaches after the final horn sounded.

"During our run there, it was the best I've seen our group in a long time respond after a goal against. It's starting to turn the other way again," defenseman Tyler Myers said. "We're starting to get back in our old habit of when we get scored on, you see some heads go down and the team gets a little down – at least that's the body language we give off.

"We have to be a team that plays the same way no matter what. Goal against, goal for, down five, up five – we play the same way. It starts with the little things. It starts with details and we've got to fix that."

Philip Varone scored Buffalo's only two goals for the first multi-goal game of his career, but three quick strikes by the Hurricanes in the second period are what did the Sabres in.

Carolina scored four goals – three in a span of 1:19 – in the second period to take a 4-1 lead and really put the game out of reach.

Through the first three games of their current four-game road trip, the Sabres have been outscored 15-4. They've allowed two four-goal periods and a three-goal period on the trip that ends Friday night in Tampa Bay.

"Obviously we're not happy with the way we've been playing lately and I think we need to hold each other more accountable," goaltender Jhonas Enroth, who made 26 saves, said.

Sabres coach Ted Nolan said he addressed the team after the game and made it clear that they can't hang their heads because no opponent is going to feel sorry for them if they make a mistake.

"It's different mistakes by different people every time," he said. "We've got to be mentally sharp. We talked about it before the game. We've got to be alert. We've got to make sure we're intense. We've got to play with some urgency. That didn't happen and when that doesn't happen, you take bad penalties and the game's over."

SCORING SUMMARY

The Hurricanes opened the scoring 4:52 into the second on Jeff Skinner's goal and the Sabres quickly tied it with a goal by Varone 59 seconds later. However, with 6:10 remaining, the floodgates opened and Carolina went on their run.

While Nicolas Deslauriers was already in the box for holding, Tyson Strachan was called for cross-checking with 7:20 remaining in the period. That set up a 5-on-3 Carolina power play for 1:12.

With two seconds remaining on the two-man advantage, Jiri Tlustý put home a pass from Nathan Gerbe to give the Hurricanes the lead. Eric Staal was then credited with a goal that went off the skate of Sabres defenseman Mike Weber 53 seconds later to make it 3-1 a few seconds after the penalty to Strachan expired.

Victor Rask tipped a shot past Jhonas Enroth with 4:51 remaining in the second to put Carolina up by three.

Varone then tipped home a shot from the point by Strachan for his second of the night 8:17 into the third. The shot was headed wide and Hurricanes goaltender Cam Ward motioned as if the puck was going to head high into the corner. However, Varone, standing to Ward's left, batted it down and through his legs.

However, the Hurricanes got it right back when Riley Nash scored with 9:50 left to put Carolina ahead 5-2.

GETTING HIS FILL

Varone's goals were his first and second of the season. He was recalled by the Sabres on Sunday and had a few quality scoring chances against the New Jersey Devils in his first game on Tuesday. Being able to bear down on Thursday was a bit of a relief for him.

"Last game, not converting on those chances where I could've almost tied the game single-handedly, and then tonight getting them – it's a step in the right direction," he said. "But we need to start winning games. That's most important."

Varone leads the Rochester Americans of the American Hockey League in scoring with 29 points (8+21) in 35 games this season. He was named to the AHL All-Star Game this week.

He has three goals and an assist in 11 career NHL games and three points (2+1) in two games against Carolina.

While Nolan was happy to see Varone put the puck in the net Thursday night, he knows that his veterans need to get on the scoresheet as well. He hinted at the possibility of breaking up the team's top line of center Zemgus Girgensons and wings Matt Moulson and Tyler Ennis.

"Varone seemed to have a little bit of confidence in his stride tonight and he got the results to show for it. But we need to make sure we just get mentally tough," Nolan said. "He played a strong game for us, but you shouldn't rely on call-ups to get your goals for you. We need some production."

The Sabres were without Drew Stafford, their second-leading scorer, who could not make the trip from Buffalo due to inclement weather. He left before Tuesday's game to celebrate the birth of his first son and planned to be back for the game against Carolina. Nolan said Stafford's status for Friday night will depend on weather conditions.