



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*March 30, 2015*

## **Sabres-Avalanche preview**

By Noey Kupchan

Associated Press

March 27, 2015

It's not looking good for the Colorado Avalanche, but they haven't given up hope just yet.

The Avalanche continue their desperate playoff push Saturday night as they go for a ninth consecutive win over the NHL-worst Buffalo Sabres, who could be looking forward to hitting the road following a controversial reaction from their fans.

Colorado (34-28-12) is tied with San Jose for 11th place in the Western Conference, 10 points behind Winnipeg for the second wild-card spot with eight games remaining.

"This team has shown enough character and perseverance that we are not going to quit," forward Gabriel Landeskog said. "It doesn't matter where we are in the standings. We play for pride and we play for each other and we play for the crest on our jersey."

The Avalanche had lost three in a row before closing a 2-2-1 trip with Thursday's 4-1 win over Vancouver as Landeskog and Alex Tanguay each had goal and an assist. Landeskog has 23 points over the last 20 games, and Tanguay has a goal in three straight and six of 10.

Reto Berra also came up big with 33 saves to earn his first win since Nov. 6.

"We are desperate, we know where the standings are and we would have to win out to give ourselves a chance," forward Jarome Iginla said. "But guys came into this game and we talked and said just try to win this game. Don't think about the big picture or what are the odds, just enjoy this game."

Colorado has enjoyed itself against the Sabres of late. The Avalanche have averaged 3.9 goals in winning eight straight in the series, including a 5-1 victory Dec. 20. Tanguay had two goals and an assist while Iginla had a season-high three assists.

Buffalo (20-46-8) has lost four straight and 11 of 12 after falling 4-3 in overtime to Arizona on Thursday. After Matt Hackett allowed the winning goal, Sabres fans cheered as their team inched closer to securing the best odds for the No. 1 overall pick in next year's draft.

"I don't even know if disappointed is the word," defenseman Mike Weber told the team's official website. "I've never been a part of something like that where the away team comes into a home building and they're cheering for them."

"This is extremely frustrating for us. We don't want to be here. We understand where we are. We understand what this team's doing, what the organization's doing, the place we put ourselves in."

Though the lottery distractions won't go away, the Sabres' focus remains on the ice. Buffalo is six points below Arizona for the league's worst record.

"It's real tough. We're doing a good job of keeping it out of the room and that's why losses like this are so tough," captain Brian Gionta said. "We play the game for each other in this room. We have great fans so I'm not going to say anything further."

Gionta had a goal and an assist Thursday, giving him seven points in the last six games.

Anders Lindback, 1-7-2 in his last 10 starts, will make his ninth start for Buffalo since being acquired from Dallas. His only appearance against the Avalanche this season was a bad one while with the Stars, losing 5-2 on Nov. 29.

Lindback will need to be wary of Ryan O'Reilly, who has four goals and seven assists during a six-game point streak. O'Reilly has totaled seven points during a five-game run against Buffalo.

The Sabres will likely have to get by without Tyler Ennis due to an upper-body injury suffered Thursday.

## **Duchene, Iginla have 3 points each as Avs defeat Sabres 5-3**

Associated Press

March 28, 2015

DENVER (AP) — Playoffs or not, the Colorado Avalanche are trying to finish the season strong.

Matt Duchene had a goal and two assists, Jarome Iginla had three assists and the Avalanche kept their slim postseason hopes alive with a 5-3 win over the Buffalo Sabres on Saturday night.

John Mitchell scored for the second straight game, and Marc-Andre Cliche, Tyson Barrie and Brad Stuart also had goals as the Avalanche won their second in a row.

Colorado is 12-6-1 since losing four straight in early February, but the surge might not be enough. The Avalanche trail Winnipeg by eight points for the last wild-card slot with seven games remaining.

"All we can do is enjoy playing these games, try to win them, play hard and try to do our part," Iginla said. "Right now, they still mean a lot in the standings. We know it'll take some great breaks and nice bounces to get in, but we're going to try to do our part."

Colorado was playing its fourth game in five nights — and it showed with a shaky third period. Buffalo outshot the Avalanche 18-7 and made it close before holding on.

"It's not the type of third period we'd like to see," coach Patrick Roy said, "but if you look at the schedule, I'm not surprised to see that."

Semyon Varlamov had 35 saves for the Avalanche, who have won nine straight against Buffalo.

Andrej Meszaros had two goals and fellow defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen had a goal and an assist for the Sabres.

The Sabres have scored the fewest goals in the NHL this season, and the loss of leading scorer Tyler Ennis to a left shoulder injury further depleted a struggling offense. Ennis was injured in Thursday's loss against Arizona.

Still, the Sabres found their scoring touch in the third period when Meszaros had his two goals and Ristolainen also scored in the first 8:43 of the third period to make it interesting.

"Nobody threw in the towel after the second," Meszaros said. "We picked ourselves up and battled hard, but it wasn't enough."

Colorado struck first with two goals in a span of 32 seconds in the first. Cliche scored his second of the season at 10:47, and Mitchell made it 2-0 with his 10th.

Matt Hackett replaced Anders Lindback in goal to start the second period, but he gave up goals to Barrie and Duchene to make it 4-0.

"It's one of those nights where things finally went into the net," said Duchene, who got his first goal in five games. "Tonight, our line was rolling a little bit. I wish we could have had that production on the road trip. It would have made the difference, especially in the Edmonton and Calgary games. It's a little disappointing that we weren't able to find that earlier, but we'll take it tonight."

Lindback finished with 10 saves, while Hackett had seven.

The goals came quickly in the third. Meszaros broke up the shutout at 3:09, but Stuart scored at 4:48 to make it 5-2. Meszaros struck again 41 seconds later with his fifth of the season.

Ristolainen made it 5-3 with his seventh.

"We played well in the last 20 minutes," forward Marcus Foligno said. "It would have been a different game if we had played that way for all 60 minutes."

NOTES: The Sabres' last win against Colorado was Dec. 4, 2005, in Denver. ... Iginla's three assists gave him 1,222 career points. He moved past Jean Beliveau for 40th in scoring. ... Buffalo C Tim Schaller was recalled from Rochester of the AHL. ... Barrie's goal was the 100th point of his career.

## **Sabres-Coyotes preview**

Associated Press

March 29, 2015

Last week's matchup between the NHL's two worst teams ended in unusual fashion when Buffalo Sabres fans cheered the Arizona Coyotes' winning goal.

Now it's time to see if Arizona fans will be similarly rooting for the visiting team Monday night since they haven't had much to cheer about lately.

These organizations have their eyes on positioning themselves in the draft for star prospects Connor McDavid and Jack Eichel, and the Coyotes have won once in their last 17 home games as they get ready to face the Sabres.

Buffalo (20-47-8) has 48 points and Arizona has 54 as they vie for draft position that could be critical to their futures. Consensus top picks McDavid and Eichel are viewed as potential franchise cornerstones, and Sabres fans have been clear they want to finish with the worst record to improve their chances of picking first.

That was evident Thursday in the Coyotes' 4-3 overtime road win when Sam Gagner's winning goal was cheered by numerous Buffalo fans.

"I've always spoken extremely high of our fans," Sabres defenseman Mike Weber said. "I don't even know if disappointed is the word.

"They scored the first one, our fans are cheering. Late penalty, they cheer. They cheer when they score to win the game. I don't even know what to say. It's extremely frustrating for us."

How the response will be Monday is uncertain. While Buffalo ranks in the top half of the NHL in average home attendance, Arizona (23-45-8) is third-worst in the league.

The Coyotes are 1-14-2 in their last 17 home games, including 0-6-1 in the last seven. They've also lost their last four to Buffalo in Arizona and return home after capping a 2-1-0 trip with Saturday's 3-2 loss to Pittsburgh.

Arizona's Tye McGinn broke a scoreless tie early in the third period but the Coyotes were eventually overpowered as they were outshot 46-24.

"We hung around, but unfortunately we couldn't do enough to get the win," coach Dave Tippett said.

Buffalo fell to 0-4-1 in its last five games with Saturday's 5-3 defeat at Colorado. Andrej Meszaros scored twice in the third period for the Sabres, who fell behind by four goals after two and finished with a 38-22 edge in shots on goal including 18-7 in the third.

"We played well in the last 20 minutes," forward Marcus Foligno said. "It would have been a different game if we had played that way for all 60 minutes."

Tyler Ennis, who leads the Sabres with 42 points, sat out after suffering an upper body injury last week against the Coyotes. He is reportedly feeling better and could return Monday.

Coach Ted Nolan started winless Matt Hackett on Thursday, and Hackett replaced Anders Lindback to start the second period Saturday.

"I just felt the way the game was going, we had no life, we had no jump, there was nothing going on," Nolan said. "Sometimes when you change the goaltender, it changes things a little bit."

The beleaguered Mike Smith has started Arizona's last five games, and he's 4-0-1 with a 1.77 goals-against average in his last five starts versus Buffalo. Smith's 38 regulation defeats are the most in the NHL since Marc Denis had 41 for Columbus in 2002-03.

## **Sabres find tank talk wearing**

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

March 27, 2015

Perhaps the best thing about the Buffalo Sabres' season is that the visit from the Arizona Coyotes is over.

The three-day buildup to the TankFest seemed to wear on players and coaches from both sides. And although there was some thought Buffalo fans would prefer to see the Sabres lose, there was real surprise from many observers in First Niagara Center about the circus atmosphere that transpired during the Coyotes' 4-3 overtime win Thursday night.

Sabres defenseman Mike Weber was indignant about the cheers for the visitors and the subject of fans rooting against the Sabres in the name of a draft pick continued to be a hot topic Friday. There was repeated coverage on ESPN's "SportsCenter" and ESPN Radio, as well as discussion in places like Deadspin, CBS Sports' Eye on Hockey, Yahoo and the websites of Sports Illustrated and the Hockey News.

"It's just one of those things," coach Ted Nolan said after his team's optional practice on Friday. "People marked that on their calendars as a special thing, and I'm not too sure how special it is to battle for where we are in the standings. I think when you're battling for first place, that's when your team and fans should get really excited. Not about a draft lottery.

"But it is what it is right now. Hopefully someday, there will be something you can really mark your calendar for."

The Sabres' calendar for this year, meanwhile, continues with Saturday's game in Colorado against the Avalanche, with Buffalo six points behind Arizona. The party line in the dressing room Friday was to move on from Thursday's game.

"We come to the rink every day trying to get wins no matter what place we're in," said winger Matt Moulson, who returned on a five-year contract last summer. "With the record that we have, I don't think anyone's job is safe. That's another reason to bring it every night.

"I've enjoyed my time with this organization. Sometimes you go through the hardest times before the best times arrive. We have to make sure we're working and getting better and improving."

Captain Brian Gionta simply was not going to go down the road of criticism of his fans.

"Our fans were cheering for us," Gionta said. "We have great fans. We have a great city with passionate fans."

Asked if he really believed the fans were behind the Sabres in the wake of Arizona goals, Gionta said, "It happens. A lot of teams have support here, whether it's Montreal, New York, teams like that. You get opposing teams in the building. You're always going to have them cheering."

But when asked if he really believed those were Arizona Coyotes fans, a stern-looking Gionta said only, "Our fans were cheering for us last night."

"I don't think you can let anything outside of the dressing room and off the ice affect how you approach the game," Moulson said. "We are professionals. A lot of people have different things to play for. There's a lot of different reasons to bring it every night."

As for Weber, Nolan said he understood where the veteran defenseman's thoughts came from.

"Mike's one of those guys who wears his heart on his sleeve," Nolan said. "You can never ever question his remarks because they come from a good place. When players hear that, it's a little bit frustrating and some guys voice their opinion. Mike's not afraid to voice his."

Sabres President Ted Black did not respond to an email inquiry from The News regarding the events of the game, clearly one of the most bizarre contests in franchise history.

The Sabres are 1-7-3 since the trade deadline and Arizona was in a 1-17-1 slump until back-to-back overtime wins this week in Detroit and Buffalo.

Responding to a similar inquiry from The News, NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly said discussion of the teams tanking for the best chance at Connor McDavid was "overblown and exaggerated."

"I am quite certain that there was not a single participant in last night's contest that wasn't trying to win the game," Daly wrote. "The fact that fans may be looking longer term and bigger picture is not surprising, and ultimately, is really up to them."

Daly reiterated the league is comfortable with the changes to the odds for the draft lottery this year that dropped the odds for the No. 1 pick to 20 percent for the team that finishes in 30th place.

"That means there is an 80 percent chance they won't get that pick," Daly wrote. "I'm not sure how those odds could possibly be argued to incentivize a club to finish last in the League, or lose games on a nightly basis."

Daly did not mention how teams are apparently incentivized this year by the fact they're guaranteed the No. 2 pick and a shot at Boston University's Jack Eichel. That loophole is closed for 2016, when the 30th place team could drop to No. 4

Daly said he believed the major media scrutiny is unique to this draft, without specifically naming Eichel or McDavid. He said the league is also happy with the changes made for the 2016 Draft in Buffalo, when the lottery will choose the top three slots.

"Ultimately, it was the decision that our Managers and ultimately our Board felt most comfortable with," Daly said.

## **Injured Ennis may only miss one game**

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

March 27, 2015

Tyler Ennis won't play for the Buffalo Sabres Saturday in Colorado but he will be making the team's road trip, and his injury is not considered serious.

The team's leading scorer had a goal and an assist in Thursday's 4-3 overtime loss to Arizona but missed the third-period with a lower-body injury. Coach Ted Nolan said Ennis will miss the game against the Avalanche but could play in Monday's rematch against the Coyotes.

"We'll make double sure he's OK, but he's a lot better," Nolan said Friday.

Ennis leads the Sabres with 19 goals and 42 points. He has four points in the last four games.

"A lot of people lose sight he's still young in his career," said captain Brian Gionta. "He's going to develop and grow into that. You look at the way he plays, he's pretty slick. He darts in and out with the puck. It's amazing what he can do at times with that. He's tough to defend.

"You get more confident as you grow and play more games in the league to find what works and what doesn't. He continues to find that edge where he's continually challenging D-men to be at their best every night."

Tim Schaller returned to practice Friday after being recalled from Rochester and will play Saturday. Gionta moved up to the top line in the third period Thursday with Johan Larsson and Matt Moulson and is likely to play there against the Avs.

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Defenseman Nikita Zadorov played just 9 minutes, 46 seconds in Thursday's game, his lowest ice-time total since his season debut Oct. 23 in Los Angeles. Nolan wouldn't commit to it ,but it sounds like Zadorov will be a healthy scratch Saturday.

"It was maybe 10 minutes too much, but he had 10 minutes," Nolan said. "We'll deal with that."

Asked if Zadorov could use some time in the AHL next year, when he becomes eligible to go to Rochester, Nolan said cryptically, "It won't hurt."

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Nolan said Anders Lindback will start Saturday's game in goal but Matt Hackett is having no issues after Thursday's game. The Sabres continue to nurse Hackett's surgically repaired knee and he took a hard hit to his neck and shoulder late in regulation.

Meanwhile, goaltender Chad Johnson skated before Friday's workout and said he hasn't ruled out the possibility of returning for a game or two prior to the end of the season.

Johnson, acquired from the New York Islanders at the trade deadline for Michal Neuvirth, suffered a right ankle injury during the morning skate March 6 in Ottawa and has yet to make his Buffalo debut.

"It was frustrating," Johnson said. "I wanted to come here, play in games, make a good impression and help this team win games. It was the last shot, I felt a pop in my ankle and I knew it wasn't good."

## **Avs' fast start does in Sabres**

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

March 28, 2015

DENVER – The Sabres walked into Colorado's arena Saturday with a chance to gain ground on 29th-place Arizona. A slow start kept them exactly where they were when the day started.

Colorado scored four times in the opening 27 minutes and held on for a 5-3 victory over Buffalo. The Sabres fell to 0-4-1 in their last five games. Once again, their next one is a big one.

The rematch with Arizona is set for Monday night in Gila River Arena. The Coyotes, who lost in Pittsburgh on Saturday, lead the Sabres by six points. Arizona has six games remaining, while Buffalo has seven. A regulation victory by the Coyotes would all but guarantee a 30th-place finish for the Sabres and a top-two draft pick.

The Sabres failed to pick up points by falling in a rollicking Pepsi Center. As the Avs celebrated "Star Wars Night," their players skated like the Millennium Falcon on hyperdrive and struck with the precision of a lightsaber on the scoring plays.

The Force was with them as they got to Anders Lindback twice in the opening period and scored on their first two shots against Matt Hackett during the second.

The Sabres outshot Colorado, 38-22, but the good bounces and quality chances belonged to the Avs early. Buffalo outshot an opponent for just the seventh time in its 75 games.

Cody Hodgson led the Sabres with five shots through 40 minutes, but the attempts surprisingly came from the fourth line. He took part in the morning skate as the third-line right wing with center Phil Varone and left wing Nicolas Deslauriers, but Patrick Kaleta assumed the role for the game. Hodgson skated with Tim Schaller and Matt Ellis.

Colorado, which improved to 22-10-2 when finding the net first, opened the scoring when Marc-Andre Cliche's point-blank shot glanced off Matt Moulson with 10:47 gone. With the fans still cheering 32 seconds later, the Avs made it 2-0.

After Matt Duchene sped into the Sabres' zone on a give-and-go with Jarome Iginla, he found John Mitchell for a tip-in at the top of the crease. With the assist, Iginla (1,220) passed Jean Beliveau (1,219) for 40th on the NHL's all-time points list.

Hackett, who can become an unrestricted free agent if he fails to play at least 30 minutes in 28 career games, entered at the start of the second period. He went the rest of the way to give him 23 such appearances, according to the yearly game log on NHL.com.

His finish was better than his start, though he could do nothing on the first goal. Buffalo defenseman Andrej Meszaros turned the puck over in his own zone, with Tyson Barrie eventually scoring alone from the slot.

Hackett looked skyward three minutes later when Duchene's high shot found the net.

The Sabres made it interesting during the third period with three goals by their defense corps.

Meszaros ended the shutout bid of Semyon Varlamov with a dazzling goal 3:09 in. The blue-liner faked a slap shot, skated through the Avs' defense and deked the goaltender out of the crease.

After Colorado made it 5-1, Meszaros scored his second of the night. His slap shot from the blue line zipped through the pads of Varlamov.

Rasmus Ristolainen scored his second goal in as many games with 11:17 left, fighting off Avalanche defenders to pull the Sabres within 5-3.

Right wing Tyler Ennis, who leads the Sabres with 19 goals and 42 points, walked through Pepsi Center with his left shoulder wrapped. It's uncertain whether he'll be able to play Monday.

"There's been a number of guys missing this year, but when you miss a guy like him, that one definitely hurts," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said after the morning skate. "No disrespect to the rest, but he's by far our most dynamic player, probably our MVP this year. It's certainly tough without him."

As expected, Nikita Zadorov was the Sabres' healthy scratch on defense.

While still boasting offensive weaponry, the Avs were missing a couple of forwards. Old friend Daniel Briere has been out since blocking a shot with his foot Monday, while Nathan MacKinnon has been out since fracturing his foot early this month.

## **Grigorenko thinks he's making progress**

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

March 28, 2015

DENVER – Patrick Roy has seen Mikhail Grigorenko at his best.

When the two were together in Quebec – Roy as the coach of the junior team, Grigorenko as the star player – the center was nearly unstoppable.

The success hasn't carried over to Grigorenko's professional career, but Roy has little doubt the 20-year-old will blossom.

"I'm not nervous for him," Roy said Saturday. "I'm confident that eventually he'll find his way with the Sabres."

Roy, in his second season as coach of Colorado, got a good look at Grigorenko on Saturday when Buffalo visited Pepsi Center. Grigorenko remained the second-line center of a shuffled lineup, skating in the middle of left wing Marcus Foligno and right wing Zac Dalpe in a game that ended too late for this edition.

"I think he's learning," Roy said. "Some players develop faster than others. I'm sure the expectations are very high for him in Buffalo, but Grigo has a lot of skills, has a lot of hockey sense."

With only a few games left on his entry-level contract, Grigorenko is finally comfortable with the Sabres. After yo-yoing between Buffalo, Rochester and Quebec during the past three years, Grigorenko feels wanted.

"I know that everyone wants me to succeed in this organization," he said.

The mutual respect has come at a good time. Even though the Kontinental Hockey League is struggling with money problems, the specter of Grigorenko returning to Russia when his contract expires has always lingered in the background. The pending restricted free agent will be more willing to shun any advances and stay if he sees a future in Buffalo.

That's a question for the summer, however, because the 2012 first-round pick is focused solely on taking advantage of his latest chance.

"It's a really good opportunity for me," he said of the second-line role, which arrived after routine appearances on a checking line.

"This is an extremely hard league to learn at," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "That's what the American League is for and other leagues and junior leagues."

Nolan has taken a hard-line approach to Grigorenko's development. The center is punished with benchings or demotions for most mistakes, with the lessons meant to build Grigorenko's character.

"Teddy, he thinks being hard on me is only going to help me," Grigorenko said. "Since I've been back, I've probably been playing the best I've played this year. I guess it works, so I'm glad he was hard on me."

After being a poster boy for mismanaged talent during the first two years of his career, at least Grigorenko knows what to expect with Nolan. He even smiles at the treatment.

"Teddy, he's a really honest guy," Grigorenko said. "Even if you agree or disagree with what he says, it's still exactly what he thinks."

"He's the head coach, and my goal is to come in here and prove him wrong and show him that I can play here."

## **Tippett, Nolan living on teachable moments**

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

March 28, 2015

DENVER – Coaches usually join the profession as a way to stay in the game they love. They get to pass on knowledge to the next generation of players and become part of a long line of teachers who are vital to a sport's history and future.

Somewhere along the way, the altruism fades to the background. A single-minded obsession takes over.

"When you're in this business, especially as long as I've been around, your emotions really go with winning and losing," Arizona coach Dave Tippett said. "Your whole life revolves around it."

Having been around coaches on a daily basis for 13 seasons, one thing is obvious: The pain of losing trumps the joy of winning. The losses stick with the guys through sleepless nights and into the next restless day. Wins are forgotten by the time they leave the arena. The thought process has turned toward winning the next game.

Even short losing streaks can turn the jolliest of coaches into snarling souls. Imagine, then, what Tippett and Buffalo's Ted Nolan are going through with the two worst teams in the NHL.

"It's just miserable," Tippett said. "Miserable. You never want to be in this situation."

To avoid going crazy, the coaches have had to change their thinking. With a combined 106 losses in 149 games entering Saturday, they've had to accept that victories won't be the defining moments of their season (and their lives).

"Everybody thinks you're going to get in the playoffs and go a long ways and win the Stanley Cup," Nolan said. "A dream and reality are two different things."

The losses have forced them to go back to their roots. They're teachers again, guys trying to pass along knowledge.

"We all know the situation that we're in, but we expect guys to show up and put the work in, be dedicated to playing like a team," Tippett said. "Right now it's about trying to push players and evaluate players. ... Are you part of the solution moving forward or are you part of the problem?"

Said Nolan: "It's been a message for as long as I can breathe: You compete and you work and you battle. If you do that, you'll get what you deserve at the end.

"If I'm not getting what I've got out of these guys, then I'd be very disappointed in myself. But from what I see, these guys are giving it everything they have. There's some guys that aren't capable of doing certain things at the moment, but that doesn't mean they're not trying.

"Am I frustrated? Not so much. I can go to sleep at night knowing these guys are coming to work every day and I'm trying to give them solutions to some of the problems they're going through."

Since the scoreboard is the enemy, the coaches have to get their winning fix elsewhere. For Nolan, a victory came last week when flu-ridden forward Tyler Ennis climbed out of bed to play in Dallas.

"When I see Tyler Ennis wanting to play when he shouldn't even have attempted to play, that shows their attention to doing what we're asking," Nolan said.

Unlike the fans, the coaches can't take solace in the fact a potential superstar might be on the horizon. While the thought of Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel can bring smiles in Buffalo and Arizona, it doesn't ease the troubles of the coaches.

"On the day-to-day operations of a coach or a player, that's not in your thoughts," Tippett said. "That's an ownership, a management thing. That's not a coach thing."

The coaches will get a chance to decompress when the season ends in two weeks. Someday, thoughts of winning will return if their teaching takes hold.

"It's very frustrating," Nolan said, "but it is what it is, and you've just got to stay mentally strong, keep fighting through it."

### **Leafs are laughing stock**

The Sabres may be in last place, but the biggest disaster in the NHL at the moment is just up the QEW.

The Toronto Maple Leafs team coming to Buffalo on Wednesday is a train wreck. The Leafs had lost seven straight entering Saturday night's game against Ottawa. Worse, they hadn't led in any of them. It's the first time that had happened to Toronto since October 2009, according to Elias Sports Bureau.

It's hard to believe the Leafs were once a playoff team. After beating Anaheim on Dec. 16, the Leafs were 10th overall in the NHL with a 19-9-3 record. They had outscored opponents, 109-86, for a goal differential of plus-23.

Since then, the Leafs' record is 8-31-3. They've fallen to 27th overall and could drop below Edmonton to 28th before the season ends. They've been outscored, 155-85, in the 42 games, a differential of minus-70.

During practice Friday, forwards Phil Kessel and David Booth had a skirmish during a battle drill. Teammates had to intervene.

"Great," interim coach Peter Horachek said with sincerity to Toronto reporters. "Guys are going to compete in practice. I think that's a good thing. It used to happen all the time. Teams need to compete in practice, and that's just the way it is. Part of the game."

Kessel and captain Dion Phaneuf are likely in their final games with Toronto. Kessel has a limited no-trade clause (he reportedly can submit a list of eight teams to which he'd accept a trade), but a forward combination in Buffalo of left wing Evander Kane, center Sam Reinhart, McDavid or Eichel with Kessel on the right would be a legitimate No. 1 line.

### **On the fly**

- Panthers General Manager Dale Tallon was reportedly scheduled to meet with Jaromir Jagr's agent Saturday to discuss a contract extension. The 43-year-old Jagr, who had nine points in his first 12 games with Florida after being acquired via trade, will be an unrestricted free agent.

- With at least 20 wins each, Henrik Lundqvist and Cam Talbot became the third Rangers goaltending duo to accomplish the feat, according to Elias. Mike Richter and John Vanbiesbrouck (1991-92) and Ed Giacomin and Gilles Villemure (1970-71 to '72-73) also did it.

- Winnipeg's Drew Stafford will carry a career-best eight-game points streak into Sunday's game against Chicago. The former Buffalo right winger has four goals and 10 points during the run, bringing his totals with the Jets to seven goals and 16 points in 19 games.

## **Dreams of McDavid occupy Sabres' Murray**

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

March 29, 2015

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. – Tim Murray has never hidden his infatuation with Connor McDavid. The Sabres' general manager admits it's turned into an obsession.

Murray's team can bring him 6.5 percent closer to the potential superstar Monday night.

Buffalo is set for its rematch with Arizona, and a regulation loss would all but cement a 30th-place finish for the Sabres. The Coyotes are six points ahead of Buffalo, with seven games left for the Sabres and six to go for Arizona.

The 30th-place team gets a 20 percent chance of winning the NHL Draft Lottery, while 29th gets a 13.5 percent shot.

It sounds like even a 1 percent boost at drafting McDavid would make Murray grin.

"I watch him too much and I think too much about him," Murray told the New York Times. "I wish I could help myself."

It's no secret the Sabres' general manager covets the NHL's next great prospect. Murray regularly makes the 90-minute drive from Buffalo to Erie, Pa., to watch McDavid play. Murray attended the Otters' playoff opener Thursday rather than watch the Sabres lose to Arizona in the opening showdown of No. 30 versus No. 29.

"You go through a year like this, it's tough," Murray told the Times in a story published Sunday. "I feel bad for our players, I really do. It's been a tough year. I'm the type of GM, as everybody can see, I've traded away a lot of good players for the simple fact we have to get better.

"Our time's the future. This guy I call our franchise-changing player."

While McDavid and fellow prospect Jack Eichel remain on the minds of folks in Buffalo, the talk in Arizona is hot weather, spring training and sunshine. The word "tank" never came up Sunday. No one asked the Sabres if they'll try to win.

The day before the final meeting with the Coyotes, the Sabres simply prepared for a game instead of a sideshow.

"We can just think about coming and playing our game," right wing Cody Hodgson said in Gila River Arena in Glendale. "It's definitely something people are talking about back home, but we can't worry about it in here."

While Monday's meeting with the Coyotes is just as important as last week's game in Buffalo, the atmosphere surrounding it is decidedly laid-back.

Only seven Sabres took a light skate Sunday, including injured leading scorer Tyler Ennis, who is unlikely to play.

The rest met for a short video session before putting on their shorts or sunglasses.

As expected, no Phoenix-area media came to check in on the Sabres.

There were no Connor McDavid placards to be seen amidst the Cactus League baseball caps.

"I don't think you'll have the opposition crowd cheering for us when we score," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "I think it's just the hype of the situation that people get caught up into, but we'll forget about that one."

Though the Sabres have been dismayed by the distractions surrounding the two games against Arizona, it's helped to galvanize their game.

They took the Coyotes to overtime and outshot Colorado, 38-22, Saturday in a 5-3 loss.

"The main focus now is to work hard," right wing Patrick Kaleta said. "Seven games left, give it everything you've got, honest effort, finish it off the right way."

Finishing a check nearly got the Coyotes' Shane Doan benched for this game. He concussed Pittsburgh's Kris Letang with a borderline hit Saturday, but the NHL reviewed the incident and decided not to suspend the captain.

"We have decided not to assess any supplemental discipline to Shane Doan," the NHL Department of Player Safety said in a statement to the Arizona Republic. "After reviewing the play carefully and from all angles, we have determined that this was an unfortunate result from a hockey play. It is not boarding, it is not charging, he doesn't hit him in the head. He finishes his check by shoving Letang and unfortunately he falls awkwardly. It wasn't really even a violent hit, although it resulted in an unfortunate injury."

## **Sabres notebook: Offense had big night, even without Ennis**

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

March 29, 2015

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. – The team with the worst offense in the NHL loses its top scorer ... and actually gets better? Weird, but true.

The Sabres will go into Monday's showdown against Arizona with a rare dose of offensive confidence. Buffalo outshot Colorado, 38-22, Saturday night to set season highs in shots and shot differential. They tested Avalanche goaltender Semyon Varlamov with 18 shots during the third period while trying to rally from a 4-0 deficit.

"We had a video session to talk about some of the things we did," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said Sunday. "That was one of the lowest chances" against "games we've played all season long and one of the first times we outshot a team by that large of a margin. Outside of that first little bit where we made a couple costly mistakes, I thought it was a pretty good effort."

The Sabres will likely have to duplicate it without Ennis. He skated for the first time since suffering an injury to his left shoulder Thursday, but he didn't attempt any shots or battle drills.

"We'll make sure he's 100 percent before we even consider putting him back in," Nolan said in Gila River Arena in Glendale.

Ennis was just happy to be on the ice while the majority of his teammates stayed off it to enjoy the weather.

"We'll see what tomorrow brings, but I just wanted to get out there, feel the ice, skate around and work on some skills," said Ennis, who lightheartedly detailed the play that caused the injury. "I just went to go hit this bigger guy, and it wasn't a good idea. He saw me coming. Maybe I'll have to stay away from the hitting for a little bit.

"Sometimes you get a little mad and I want to hit, then I realize that I'm not built for that."

The absence of Ennis forced Nolan to shuffle his lines.

The combinations worked as three of the four lines - Matt Moulson-Johan Larsson-Brian Gionta, Marcus Foligno-Mikhail Grigorenko-Zac Dalpe and Matt Ellis-Tim Schaller-Cody Hodgson - totaled at least eight shots each.

"All lines were clicking and creating offense," Hodgson said. "It was fun to be a part of."

Hodgson led the Sabres with six shots despite playing on the fourth line.

"Schaller and Ellis are a little bit more defensively oriented guys, and Cody could just kind of concentrate on offense, which he did," Nolan said. "I thought that was one of his better offensive attacks all season."

Hodgson skated on the third line with Nicolas Deslauriers and Phil Varone during the morning skate but gave way to Patrick Kaleta for the game. He enjoyed the linemates.

"I love playing with Ellis," Hodgson said. "He works so hard, creates so many loose pucks out there. He's smart and plays on the right side of the puck, backchecks harder than anyone I've played with. He's always in the right position and it makes the game easy to play.

"It's definitely encouraging. It obviously would have been nice to score a couple of them."

The only goals came from Sabres defensemen. Andrej Meszaros scored twice, while Rasmus Ristolainen found the net for the second straight game.

Colorado scored four times in the opening 27 minutes to put the Sabres in the insurmountable hole.

"Nobody threw in the towel after the second," Meszaros said. "We picked ourselves up and we battled hard. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough."

...

The Sabres have outshot their opponent in just seven of their 75 games.

Despite the three goals in the final 20 minutes, they fell to 2-34-2 when trailing after two periods.

"It was a good learning point for us," Deslauriers said. "Usually in the third we get a little beat up, and I think we took advantage of the way we were playing. We were playing pretty good."

## **Roth: Fans want Sabres to lose, but it's not personal**

By Leo Roth

Rochester Democrat & Chronicle

March 27, 2015

After Thursday's night's 4-3 loss in overtime to the Arizona Coyotes, the Buffalo Sabres lead the McEichel Challenge Cup 1-0 heading into Monday's rematch at Arizona.

Remember, in this competition to finish last in the NHL's standings and land the best possible odds of drafting franchise-altering prospects Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel, losing is winning. Yes, it goes against every fiber of your being, but roll with it.

That the Sabres and Coyotes, now separated by six points for 30th place, would face each other twice in the span of five days with the season winding down fast is more proof the hockey gods have a sick sense of humor.

The atmosphere created inside First Niagara Center on Thursday was described as "surreal" in most reports, where some Sabres fans — frustrated by not one, but two seasons of last-place losing — cheered robustly after Arizona's four goals and released audible groans for anything positive achieved by the home team.

When I say "some" I mean a lot in the announced sellout crowd of 19,070.

When Sam Gagner rifled home the winning goal on the power play past goalie Matt Hackett, many Sabres fans, pleased that their team lost to give Arizona another point in the standings, weren't being shy, some leaping from their seats. That miffed some Sabres' players, particularly defenseman Mike Weber, who was in the penalty box.

"I've always spoken extremely high of our fans," he said. "I don't even know what to say. ... A whole new low right now."

Greece native Brian Gionta was a bit more diplomatic, which is why he's captain.

"We play the game for each other in this room," he said. "We have great fans, so I'm not going to say anything further."

The notion that players and coaches would intentionally lose so their team could land the No. 1 pick is absurd, of course. These guys couldn't care less about the Sabres or Coyotes franchises one, two, three years down the road. Their jobs are on the line now.

Thursday's game was fun to watch, and to me left no doubt nobody's tanking, they're just playing as hard as they can under the bizarre circumstances where many paying, frustrated fans are using gallows humor to cope.

The Sabres and Coyotes combined for 77 shots, 29 hits, 20 penalty minutes and 26 blocked shots. Does that sound like tanking?

Was the ear-to-ear smile on Sabres' defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen when he scored his sixth goal of the season tanking? Or when Hackett made 38 saves and stayed in the game with an arm injury, when Zach Bogosian and Arizona goalie Mike Smith stared each other down on a breakaway try, when Gionta scored the game-tying goal with 3:37 to go in regulation?

I'm suspecting that the unnerving cheers that Sabres players heard in their building will be repaid Monday in Glendale, Ariz. It is surreal. But it's not that fans don't appreciate the effort of their teams in their current states of struggle, it's just that rooting for the promise of a savior-type player has taken over their allegiances.

And when you focus on the future, the present becomes collateral damage.

The fans, players and coaches didn't ask for any of this. Management and ownership did when rosters were gutted at the trade deadline in the name of "doing business," in the Sabres' case, two years in a row. Mike Weber has a right to be upset. But it should be with owner Terry Pegula and GM Tim Murray, not the fans.

## **Avalanche host Sabres, who won't have Ennis**

By Rick Sadowski

NHL.com

March 27, 2015

**SABRES (20-46-8) at AVALANCHE (34-28-12)**

**TV: MSG-B, BELL TV, ALT2**

**DENVER** -- The Colorado Avalanche know the odds are long, but they plan to play as if they still have a chance to make the Stanley Cup Playoffs, an approach they'll take against the Buffalo Sabres at Pepsi Center on Saturday (9 p.m. ET; MSG-B, BELL TV, ALT2).

The Avalanche (34-28-12) have eight games remaining and are 10 points behind the Winnipeg Jets for the second wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs from the Western Conference.

The Sabres (20-46-8) have the worst record in the NHL and have no chance at a playoff position. They've gone 1-8-3 in the past 12 games and will be without leading scorer Tyler Ennis, who sustained a left shoulder injury Thursday in a 4-3 overtime home loss against the Arizona Coyotes.

Sabres coach Ted Nolan said he's hopeful that Ennis, who has 19 goals and 23 assists, will be available Monday against the Coyotes when Buffalo completes a two-game road trip.

"There's been a number of guys missing this year, but when you miss a guy like him, that definitely hurts," Nolan said. "He's by far our most dynamic player, probably our MVP this year, so it's certainly tough without him."

Brian Gionta will take Ennis' place at right wing on the Sabres' top line with left wing Matt Moulson and center Johan Larsson.

"His enthusiastic approach to the game the way he plays and competes should make all the young kids who get opportunities play even harder because of that," Nolan said of Gionta, 36, who has 10 goals and 16 assists. "I've been very impressed with Brian's overall approach."

The Avalanche are coming off a 1-2-0 road trip in which they lost one-goal games to the Calgary Flames and Edmonton Oilers before defeating the Vancouver Canucks 4-1 Thursday. They went 6-1-1 in the eight previous games.

"We want to continue to do what we've been doing lately," Avalanche coach Patrick Roy said. "I really feel we should have won those three games on that road trip. We played really well in Calgary and Edmonton and came up short. It's been a great learning process for our team. We're not where we wanted to be at this time, but I think the group learned a lot and it's certainly going to help us along the way."

Center Matt Duchene said one of the biggest lessons is how important it is to have a good start to a season. The Avalanche didn't climb above .500 until Jan. 8 at 17-16-8.

"Last year we had such a good one we could pretty much go .500 the rest of the year and make the playoffs and we did better than that," he said. "This year was a complete opposite. You put yourself behind the eight-ball like that, this League is too good. We're not giving up, we're just going to try to win our games and see what happens."

"Last year at this time you walk in the room and the energy's so high from just knowing you're going to play for the Stanley Cup. Chances are slim for us right now and it's tough, but we're professionals and we get paid very well to do what we do and we have to come as professionals every night. We have to put a good product on the

ice for the fans. They pay their money and we have to be loyal to them and play for them. We're not out of it and we're not acting like we're out of it."

Here are the projected lineups:

### **SABRES**

Matt Moulson - Johan Larsson - Brian Gionta

Marcus Foligno - Mikhail Grigorenko - Zac Dalpe

Nicolas Deslauriers - Philip Varone - Cody Hodgson

Matt Ellis - Tim Schaller - Patrick Kaleta

Mike Weber - Rasmus Ristolainen

Andre Benoit - Zach Bogosian

Tyson Strachan - Andrej Meszaros

Anders Lindback

Matt Hackett

Scratched: Nikita Zadorov

Injured: Jerry D'Amigo (facial surgery), Tyler Ennis (shoulder), Zemgus Girgensons (lower body), Josh Gorges (lower body), Chad Johnson (lower body), Evander Kane (shoulder surgery), Cody McCormick (blood clots)

### **AVALANCHE**

Gabriel Landeskog - Ryan O'Reilly - Alex Tanguay

John Mitchell - Matt Duchene - Jarome Iginla

Cody McLeod - Marc-Andre Cliche - Dennis Everberg

Jordan Caron - Joey Hishon - Freddie Hamilton

Jan Hejda - Zach Redmond

Nate Guenin - Tyson Barrie

Nick Holden - Brad Stuart

Semyon Varlamov

Reto Berra

Scratched: None

Injured: Patrick Bordeleau (fractured kneecap), Daniel Briere (foot), Erik Johnson (knee), Jamie McGinn (back surgery), Nathan MacKinnon (broken foot), Borna Rendulic (broken leg), Ryan Wilson (shoulder), Jesse Winchester (concussion)

**Status report:** Johnson, who had knee surgery Jan. 26, took part in the Avalanche's morning skate but will miss his 27th consecutive game. "He's getting very close," Roy said. It's possible Johnson could be available Monday against the Edmonton Oilers.

**Who's hot:** Gionta has three goals and one assist in a two-game streak. ... O'Reilly has four goals and seven assists in a six-game streak. ... Tanguay has three goals and two assists in a three-game streak. ... Landeskog has two goals and three assists in a three-game streak.

## **Avalanche build big lead, hold on to defeat Sabres**

By Rick Sadowski

NHL.com

March 28, 2015

**DENVER** -- Determined to remain in the hunt for the Stanley Cup Playoffs despite long odds, the Colorado Avalanche got goals from five players and hung on to defeat the Buffalo Sabres 5-3 at Pepsi Center on Saturday.

Marc-Andre Cliche, John Mitchell, Tyson Barrie, Matt Duchene and Brad Stuart scored to support goalie Semyon Varlamov, who stopped all 20 shots he faced through two periods before giving up three goals in the third, two to Andrej Meszaros.

The Avalanche (35-28-12) have seven games left and are eight points behind the Winnipeg Jets for the second wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs from the Western Conference.

The Sabres (20-47-8) are 1-9-3 in their past 13 games. They lost to the Avalanche for the ninth consecutive time since a 6-4 win Dec. 4, 2005.

"There was no need to have the meltdown that we did a little bit there," said Duchene, who had two assists and scored his 19th goal at 6:56 of the second period for a 4-0 Avalanche lead. "It's a good lesson going into the next game and something to keep in mind. You never know what can happen, and we need to win every game so we need every goal we can get."

Duchene was upset at himself for taking a shot at the empty net with 2:03 remaining in regulation -- he hit the right goal post -- rather than passing to Jarome Iginla, who had three assists to pass Jean Beliveau into 40th place on the NHL's all-time points list with 1,222 but needs four goals for 30 this season.

"It's pretty awesome," Duchene said of Iginla's achievement. "I didn't see him over to my right on that empty-netter. I'm kicking myself right now because I want him to get 30 this year and I would have definitely dished it off to him. I wish I had seen him. I'm pretty upset right now. He'll get there, but that would have been one step closer. I've apologized four or five times. I had no idea he was there."

The Mitchell-Duchene-Iginla line accounted for two goals, five assists and six shots. Each player was plus-3.

"I think it's cool," Iginla said of passing Beliveau. "Maybe in the summer you look, but I do think that's cool. It's a great honor. I keep saying when I first started I wasn't dreaming that. It's fun to play this long, and I'm still enjoying it as much as ever."

The Avalanche killed two first-period penalties and grabbed a 2-0 lead on goals by Cliche and Mitchell, who scored on consecutive shots 32 seconds apart.

Sabres coach Ted Nolan replaced goalie Anders Lindback (two goals, 12 shots) with Matt Hackett to begin the second period, but the Avalanche continued to press and scored on their first two shots to build a 4-0 lead.

"I felt the way the game was going we had no life, we had no jump, we had nothing going on," Nolan said of the goalie change. "We didn't start the way we wanted to, and they caught us a little flat-footed. They have high-end skill guys on their team. We found a way to fight back towards the latter part of the game."

Barrie drove to the net and beat Hackett to the glove side at 3:29 for his 12th goal, one short of his NHL high set last season, and his 100th NHL point. Ryan O'Reilly was between the faceoff circles when he spun around to feed Barrie and stretch his point streak to seven games (four goals, eight assists).

Duchene increased the lead to 4-0 when he took a pass from Iginla, accelerated into the Sabres end and overpowered Hackett with a shot.

"I played no different than I have been," Duchene said. "It's one of those nights where things finally went into the net."

The Sabres made a game of it in the third period.

Meszaros scored his first goal of the night at 3:09 when he came from behind the net and poked the puck behind Varlamov.

Stuart got that one back for Colorado at 4:48 with a shot from the right point, but Meszaros scored his fifth goal at 5:29 with a long shot from near the left-wing boards after an Avalanche turnover.

Rasmus Ristolainen cut the deficit to 5-3 by scoring into an open net at 8:43 after Varlamov and defenseman Nate Guenin collided outside the crease.

"We were working hard," Meszaros said. "We kept pushing and tried to put pucks in the net. We knew we could score goals. We battled hard. Nobody threw in the towel after the second. We picked ourselves up and battled hard, but it wasn't enough."

The Sabres outshot the Avalanche 18-7 in the third period and 38-22 for the game.

"I thought we were solid in the first 40 (minutes) and I think at the end we were a little tired and had a bit of lack of focus after we were up by four goals," Avalanche coach Patrick Roy said. "You look at the schedule we've been through, four games in six nights, the last three on the road, I have to say I'm not surprised to see that happening."

## **Sabres aim to end skid against Coyotes**

NHL.com

March 29, 2015

**SABRES (20-47-8) at COYOTES (23-45-8)**

**TV: MSG-B, BELL TV, FS-A+**

**Season series:** Sam Gagner's power-play goal 56 seconds into overtime gave the Coyotes a victory against the Sabres at First Niagara Center this past Thursday.

**Sabres team scope:** Buffalo is 0-4-1 in its past five games, including a 5-3 road loss to the Colorado Avalanche on Saturday, a game in which the Sabres had a 38-22 advantage in shots and scored three times in the third period. "We had a video session here today to talk about some of the things we did (Saturday) night. I think that was one of the most chances-per games that we played almost all season long," coach Ted Nolan told the Sabres website after an optional skate on Sunday. Leading scorer Tyler Ennis skated Sunday after sitting out the game in Denver with an upper-body injury.

**Coyotes team scope:** Arizona is back home after going 2-1-0 on a three-game trip against Eastern Conference opponents that ended with a 3-2 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Saturday. The Coyotes are 1-14-2 in their past 17 home games, including 0-6-1 in the past seven. They've also lost their past four home games to Buffalo. Mike Smith has started each of the Coyotes' past five games, and he is 4-0-1 in his past five decisions against the Sabres. Coyotes captain Shane Doan will be available after the NHL Department of Player Safety said he will not face supplemental discipline for a hit on Penguins defenseman Kris Letang, who left the game with what was diagnosed as a concussion.

## **Hockey's next great one draws a crowd**

By Matt Higgins

New York Times

March 28, 2015

ERIE, Pa. — For Connor McDavid, an 18-year-old center for the Erie Otters of the Ontario Hockey League and the most anticipated N.H.L. prospect in decades, compliments accrue as steadily as goals and assists.

The Otters' assistant coach Jay McKee, who played 13 seasons as an N.H.L. defenseman, has been known to pull out his phone on the bench during games to record a clip of McDavid's dazzling play.

Tim Murray, general manager of the Buffalo Sabres, a self-described "glass-half-empty guy" not given to giddy appraisals, said he has not seen a better junior player. "I watch him too much and I think too much about him," said Murray, who has been scouting teenage N.H.L. prospects for 23 seasons. "I wish I could help myself."

Sherry Bassin, the Otters' 75-year-old owner who possesses a lifetime of hockey memories and a voice like an old record, scratchy and faint, recalled that the Hockey Hall of Famer Dale Hawerchuk, who coaches the O.H.L. rival Barrie Colts, said of McDavid: "He skates like Bobby Orr. He has the vision of Wayne Gretzky. And he handles the puck like Mario Lemieux."

Yet the oddest and perhaps highest form of praise concerns the N.H.L. teams presumed to be giving something less than their best effort late in the season in order to finish last in the standings and improve their chances of selecting McDavid first in the N.H.L. draft in June.

According to the odds of an N.H.L. draft lottery, the team finishing last will have the greatest chance (20 percent) of receiving the No. 1 pick, but will select no worse than second, a slot most likely reserved for the standout Boston University center Jack Eichel, another so-called generational talent.

Murray's Sabres occupy the inside track to the top prospects after losing, 4-3, in overtime to the Arizona Coyotes on Thursday. With 48 points entering the weekend, and eight games left in the season, Buffalo ranks 30th in the N.H.L., while Arizona sits in 29th place with 54 points. The teams play one another again Monday night.

The bizarre race to the bottom has riveted and divided fans at First Niagara Center in Buffalo, where a sign in the upper deck Thursday read "# Pray for McDavid," and many in attendance actually cheered the Sabres' loss. Meanwhile, The Buffalo News has been running a graphic in its sports section each day called "McEichel Derby," featuring the bottom-of-the-league standings, accompanied by the statistics of McDavid and Eichel.

Murray, architect of an inferior roster, has made no secret of his desire to add the 6-foot-1, 187-pound McDavid to the Sabres.

"You go through a year like this, it's tough," Murray said. "I feel bad for our players, I really do. It's been a tough year. I'm the type of G.M., as everybody can see, I've traded away a lot of good players for the simple fact we have to get better. Our time's the future. This guy I call our franchise-changing player."

For his part, McDavid has handled the attention and expectations with equanimity, steady offensive production and characteristic reserve.

Despite missing six weeks with a broken hand, injured during a November fight, he finished third in scoring in the O.H.L. with 120 points, including 44 goals in 47 games. In January, he helped Canada win the world junior championship in Toronto, tying for the tournament lead with 11 points in seven games.

"It was an unbelievable feeling," McDavid said in a voice so low and flat that reporters had to lean in close to capture his words. He added: "If anything, it drives you more to try to get back to that feeling and experience it. For myself, personally, that was the greatest moment of my life, for sure."

As the Otters' team captain, McDavid will try to duplicate the euphoria in pursuit of a championship for Erie, which lost, 3-2, to the Sarnia Sting on Thursday in the first round of the best-of-five playoff series. Erie won Game 2 on Friday, 3-1.

Since the world junior triumph, McDavid has been catapulted to national hero status in Canada, and the Otters have consistently sold out arenas across Ontario for road games. Afterward, hordes of fans have routinely waited outside in subzero temperatures for an autograph or a photo.

Eventually, the Otters had to hire more security while on the road to escort McDavid to the team bus.

"He cannot sign for hundreds of people while the bus is waiting and we need to get to the next city," said McKee, the assistant coach.

Given the unwavering hype and attention McDavid faces, his teammates and coaches have been quick to point out that his personal qualities remain underappreciated.

"People don't really see that he's a regular kid," said Dylan Strome, a center on the Otters who is expected to be selected in the first round of the draft, and McDavid's best friend. "We like to have fun, too. We play mini-sticks all the time. We play poker pretty much every day, play video games, hang out, go out to eat. We just have fun."

McDavid would seem well suited to poker. He keeps his emotions mainly in check.

"In the room, he will show emotion," said Erie's head coach, Kris Knoblauch. "He will call his teammates out. He'll ask for them to be better, and also pat them on the butt and say, 'Good job.' "

The ice is another matter.

A practice this month provided a study in contrasting styles. During a drill, McDavid dashed up the ice, his legs whirring like electric mixers. Handling the puck as if shuffling a deck of cards, he twice put it beneath the stick of Kurtis MacDermid, a 6-5, 222-pound defenseman, then streaked in on goalie Devin Williams, who saved his high shot.

MacDermid, 21, bellowed obscenities that echoed through the empty arena before swatting a water bottle off the half boards in a rage.

Having failed to score, McDavid shook his head and muttered to himself. He circled back to the bench for a squirt of water and a few minutes of quiet contemplation, a routine he repeated throughout the 90-minute practice.

He was operating on the principle espoused by Theodore Roosevelt, speaking softly and carrying a big stick.

## **Jones: For Buffalo Sabres, it's just lose, baby**

By Tom Jones

Tampa Bay Times

March 28, 2015

The crowd went nuts Thursday night when Sam Gagner scored in overtime to give the Coyotes a victory over the Sabres. What was unusual about that? The game was in Buffalo.

Sabres fans cheered the Sabres' loss, which meant Buffalo's odds of winning the draft lottery improved. The Sabres are last in the NHL, and Arizona's victory Thursday moved the next-to-last Coyotes six points ahead of Buffalo. Connor McDavid, a center for Erie of the junior Ontario league, is expected to be the top pick in June.

The Sabres didn't intentionally lose the game. After all, it did go to overtime. But would it be wrong if the Sabres didn't exactly try their hardest in order to better their lottery odds? This season we've seen several NBA teams, including the Knicks and 76ers, appear to be playing with the draft in mind. In 1984, before there was a lottery in the NHL, the Penguins seemed to tank the season's final couple of weeks in order to draft Mario Lemieux No. 1.

And here in Tampa Bay, some might look at the final Bucs game of 2014, especially the second half, and ask if they were trying their best to win.

It goes against the integrity of the game, but it's hard to blame a team for give up a meaningless victory to improve its draft status. And it's hard to blame fans, such as the ones in Buffalo, for occasionally rooting for their team to lose.

## **Buffalo Sabres fans do the right thing by cheering a loss to Arizona Coyotes**

By Dave Lozo

Bleacher Report

March 28, 2015

The Buffalo Sabres have the smartest fans in sports. There's no denying it now.

During Thursday night's game in Buffalo, the home fans were actively, loudly rooting for their favorite team to lose. When the Arizona Coyotes scored the winner in overtime, the crowd cheered as though Pat LaFontaine had just sent the Sabres to the franchise's first Stanley Cup.

There's an even better reaction from the stands:

When your team spends an entire season invested in a tank battle, and that battle comes down to two games with the Coyotes, well, fans will be invested in the outcome of that game. The franchise wants the team to lose, so the fans are going to hop on board with that notion, especially with less than 10 games to play.

To paraphrase the kid from that anti-drug ad, "they learned it by watching you."

And really, that Sam Gagner blast may indirectly result in a Stanley Cup for the Sabres, as the Coyotes are now six points back in the chase for 30th, which means Buffalo is just about guaranteed to land either Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel in the upcoming draft.

The fans get this. It's a beautiful and rare thing.

It's also a little mean. Just a tad. You can be both correct and a jerk if you're not careful.

You see, the players on the ice spent two hours having their home fans root against them. That's not nice or fun. This gets lost sometimes, but hockey players—and trust me, this was crazy when I learned this too—are people. Like most humans, they are in search of emotional connections with other humans, and as an athlete, many feel one with fans.

Mike Harrington of [The Buffalo News](#) was on the scene Thursday, and let's just say players were simply devastated by the two-hour vocal knife in the back, especially Mike Weber, who was in the penalty box for the winning goal. While Weber is angry, those cheers were indirectly for him, as his infraction allowed for Gagner to score the winner.

Strangely enough, he didn't take it that way. Weber explained:

It's tough to get momentum when your fans are rooting against you. That's the unfortunate part. I've never seen that before. I've always spoken extremely high of our fans. I don't even know if disappointed is the word. They scored that first one, our fans are cheering. Delayed penalty, they cheer. They cheer when they score to win the game. I don't know. I don't even know what to say.

Weber lost me at momentum. The Sabres are the worst non-expansion NHL team in a very long time. All the momentum in the world isn't changing the fact this team will go down as one of the worst in history.

But here's where Weber needs to open his eyes: These fans get it and know losing now will help win later, and since Weber is only 27 years old, he has a chance to be part of that future winning. If Weber has a problem with fan morale, maybe he should direct his frustration toward management, or even the players in the locker room, as there is a reason fans have reached the point where they are wisely cheering for losses.

Think of the Sabres as a sick grandmother that isn't suffering from anything fatal, but she needs to take her medicine to get better. The medicine tastes like a cross between sour milk and unwashed feet, so she hates it even though it's making her better. She grimaces with every spoonful. Her family (the fans) are really happy she's swallowing her medicine not because they are mean-spirited, joyless idiots; it's because they know she will feel better.

This entire season, especially Thursday night, is the Sabres taking their medicine. It will make them better.

Weber had more to say:

This is extremely frustrating for us. We don't want to be here. We understand where we are. We understand what this team is doing, what the organization is doing, the place we've put ourselves in. I've never been a part of something like that where the away team comes into a home building and they're cheering for them.

For a quote that has "understand" in it twice, Weber doesn't seem to understand what's happening.

And cry me a river, but sports has become a cold, sanitized business over the years—years that not coincidentally include three NHL lockouts. If you want to passive-aggressively question fans' loyalty, it's best if you're not an NHL player when doing so, questioning fans that return in droves every time, fans that fill that building in Buffalo game after game to watch a glorified AHL team.

Fans now have a cold-blooded perspective about the sport of hockey? Man, where did they learn that, I wonder?

If you have a problem with the NHL's lottery system that allows for this to happen when there are two potentially franchise-changing players available in a draft, that's another issue.

If you have a problem with fans with eyes wide-open cheering their team's loss like the geniuses they are, then much like Mike Weber, you need to grow up.

## **Sabres focused on future, not fan support**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
March 27, 2015

BUFFALO – Brian Gionta wouldn't go there. The Sabres captain knows his words carry weight.

Gionta played almost 25 minutes in the Sabres' 4-3 overtime loss Thursday, a game in which many hometown fans rooted for the Arizona Coyotes, creating a bizarre scene inside the First Niagara Center.

Surely, the veteran heard the loud cheering for the opposition.

"No, our fans were cheering for us," Gionta insisted Friday after the Sabres prepared for tonight's road tilt against the Colorado Avalanche. "We have great fans. We have a great city, passionate fans, and our fans were cheering for us last night."

Well, OK then, Brian.

When pressed again, Gionta said, "Our true fans were cheering for us."

Coach Ted Nolan said he was too focused on the game and couldn't hear the crowd, which wanted the 30<sup>th</sup>-place Sabres to lose so they could cement the first or second pick in June.

"People marked that on their calendars as a special day," Nolan said. "I'm not too sure how special it is to battle for where we are in the standings."

But for many Sabres fans, Thursday's loss, the 54<sup>th</sup> this trying season, was something special. The 29<sup>th</sup>-ranked Coyotes moved six points up, virtually guaranteeing the Sabres either Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel.

The crowd's behavior – when was the last time home fans openly rooted for the opposition? – has garnered some unwanted national attention from major outlets.

ESPN, which normally devotes very little time to the NHL, showed highlights early during "SportsCenter." Deadspin.com, SI.com and Yahoo! also picked up on it.

So far, only Sabres defenseman Mike Weber, who called the crowd's behavior a "whole new low," has spoken ill of the fans.

"I don't think you can let anything outside the dressing room and off the ice affect how you approach the game," Sabres winger Matt Moulson said. "We are professionals. A lot of people have things to play for. There's a lot of different reasons to bring it every night."

Thursday might reverberate around the league. Could free agents pass on signing with the Sabres? Most players, of course, love Buffalo once they get here. Still, the city doesn't have the best reputation around the league.

Gionta and Moulson, two respected veterans, picked the Sabres in free agency on July 1, buying into a vision for the future.

"I've nothing but enjoyed my time with the organization," Moulson said. "Sometimes you go through the hardest time before the best times arrive."

Nine months ago, Gionta talked about competing for the Stanley Cup down the road.

"It's been a long, frustrating year, for sure," Gionta said. "The position that we're in, no one wants to be here and obviously no one anticipated that. For sure, it was tough to swallow all year and be in the position we're in. But you got to continue to look forward."

Gionta still envisions a bright future. Right now, the Sabres have to keep laying the groundwork. The final eight games matter.

"That's why you continue to do what you need to do," Gionta said. "You continue to be a professional and go about your business. It's about, at this point, making sure you're not taking any steps backwards into next year. You got to try to instill that culture of winning, that losing's not acceptable."

Somehow, despite the constant losing, the Sabres have kept giving strong efforts. Naturally, the losses wear on them. But they also seem happy.

That's no coincidence to Nolan.

"When I first got here, we talked about changing the culture a little bit and changing the attitudes around here, and not just giving things to people and making them work for it," Nolan said earlier this week. "I think they feel good because they're going home at night knowing they give what they have to give and come here."

"You should enjoy what you do for a living. These guys are in a very special place in their lives right now. They're playing in the National Hockey League. They're getting well compensated for it. The only thing we ask is they come to practice and work and give what they have to, and you do that, you're usually a happy soul."

## **Sabres' Tyler Ennis enjoying special season**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
March 27, 2015

BUFFALO – Sometimes you focus so much on the future, Sabres coach Ted Nolan said, the present can easily be forgotten about.

When the rebuilding Sabres surround Tyler Ennis with better talent in the coming years, the slick winger could become one of the NHL's elite talents.

But right now, the 25-year-old, who will likely miss tonight's game with an upper-body injury, is a special player. The former first-round pick is often the Sabres' only offensive threat.

"He's certainly a gift to watch," Nolan said Friday inside the First Niagara Center.

Ennis has 19 goals of the Sabres' 133 goals (14.3 percent) and 42 points in 72 games.

"I think he's been having a sensational year," Nolan said. "In particular, the last 10 games or so, his play has gone up another level. Somebody asked me, 'What's the ceiling on this kid?' I'm not too sure what it is, but it's going to be magnificent to watch. ...

"He's going to get better and better. When I first got here last year, you could tell what kind of player he was. He got a little bit better. This year, he's even taken it to another level, so the future looks very, very bright."

Ennis left Thursday's 4-3 overtime loss to the Coyotes after the second period. Nolan sounded concerned after game, but Ennis accompanied the Sabres to Colorado, where they play the Avalanche tonight. He could return Monday when they face Arizona again.

"He's feeling a lot better," Nolan said.

Sabres captain Brian Gionta moved up and replaced Ennis on the right wing beside center Johan Larsson and Matt Moulson.

"A lot of people lose sight that he's still a young player in his career and he's going to develop and grow into that," Gionta said about Ennis. "You look at the way he plays, he's pretty slick. He darts in and out with the puck. He's pretty elusive. It's tough to defend."

The Sabres recalled forward Tim Schaller before they left Friday.

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In Thursday's 4-3 loss, Sabres defenseman Nikita Zadorov was benched, skating only nine minutes, 46 seconds.

"Maybe 10 minutes too much," Nolan said.

Yikes!

Expect the 19-year-old rookie to be scratched tonight. Nolan has clearly grown tired of the Russian's poor work habits.

"When you're going for certain things, the expectations and what you have to do has to be a certain level, and if you don't do it, you're not going to get better, I don't care who you are," Nolan said. "You look at Tyler Ennis,

why he's getting better, because he works at it. (Brian) Gionta, why he's lasted 14 years and why he's played the way he's been, because he's works at it.

"This is a perfect example for a young kid like Nikita. He's got to work on his game to get better. He just can't hope and rely on talent to get there."

Zadorov, the No. 16 pick in 2013, has showcased some glimpses of future stardom in between bouts of immaturity this season.

He was suspended in January for missing a flight back from the Dominican Republic following the NHL All-Star break and benched in February for oversleeping and missing a team meeting.

Nolan and his staff worked with Zadorov to develop strong habits as he sat out early in the season. He was often the first player on the ice then. When Zadorov finally earned regular duty, he formed a strong tandem with Rasmus Ristolainen, the youngster picked eight spots before him.

"His was working for it, then all of a sudden his play took off," Nolan said. "Then all of a sudden you get to play and you forget what got you there."

Nolan wants Zadorov to practice better.

"He just has to learn to do that," he said. "By no means do you say he's not going to get there. But sometimes it takes a little while."

Zadorov can play in the AHL next season, something Nolan believes "won't hurt" him.

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Sabres goalie Chad Johnson, out since hurting his ankle hours before his scheduled debut March 6, skated Friday and hopes to play again this season.

Johnson, who was acquired March 2 from the New York Islanders, felt a pop in his ankle after facing his last shot that morning.

"It was frustrating," he said. "I wanted to come here and make an impression and play in games and help this team win. ... I knew it wasn't good."

Goalie Anders Lindback will start tonight, Nolan said. Matt Hackett, who made 38 saves on Thursday, feels fine. Hackett, less than a year removed from major knee surgery, has been feeling sore after games. He also hurt his arm against Arizona, although he stayed in the game.

## **Lots has gone wrong for Sabres in awful season**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
March 29, 2015

BUFFALO – Given the Sabres' sorry state these days, it's almost difficult to remember now. But for a brief stretch earlier this season, they morphed into a young team on the rise, winning a string of exciting games in dramatic fashion.

The rebuilding club triumphed 10 times in 13 games – they have only 20 victories in 75 outings *all season* – during a rollicking run in November and December, roaring back night after night.

The Sabres were never out of any contest. They were scoring goals, having fun and even developing some swagger. The talk about finishing last and drafting either Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel calmed down a bit.

The First Niagara Center started to buzz again. After a dramatic 5-4 shootout win Dec. 15 against Ottawa, the Sabres crept to within four points of a playoff spot.

The Sabres, of course, had no margin for error. They won eight one-goal games – four in overtime or a shootout. To win, they needed *everyone* on board.

So when injuries started ravaging the Sabres, they fell apart.

The Sabres' season officially imploded Dec. 21 in Boston, about 14 minutes into their 4-3 overtime loss to the Bruins, when Marcus Foligno passed the puck to Brian Gionta just inside the Buffalo blue line.

Boston's Matt Bartkowski hit the Sabres captain high, flipping him on his face. Foligno, who was playing perhaps the best hockey of his four-year career, then broke his hand fighting Bartkowski.

Gionta missed 13 games. Foligno missed 19 games. Several other regulars were injured then, including former ace defenseman Tyler Myers, who was traded to Winnipeg on Feb. 11.

The Sabres mustered one more thrilling win, a 4-3 shootout against the New York Islanders on Dec. 27, but their season was essentially over. They lost a stunning 14 games in a row with a patchwork lineup.

Clearly, with Gionta and Foligno, the Sabres would've won some games. A few wins during that epic skid would've dramatically changed their season.

If the lineup had stayed healthy, they might be in, say, 25<sup>th</sup> or 26<sup>th</sup> place today, not 30<sup>th</sup>, a spot they will almost certainly cement tonight with another loss to the 29<sup>th</sup>-ranked Arizona Coyotes.

Yes, the Sabres are bad. But with a little luck and some different personnel choices, they wouldn't be in this spot.

Here are some happenings that influenced this season.

**Playing No. 2 pick Sam Reinhart instead of Brian Flynn:** Yes, Reinhart's one of hockey's biggest prospects. But the teenage center wasn't ready for the NHL. He did little during his nine-game trial in October, managing only one assist as the Sabres lost seven times.

Flynn, who was dealt to Montreal on March 2, isn't an elite talent. Still, he's a versatile, stabilizing presence. Flynn played regularly after the Sabres sent Reinhart back to junior. Not coincidentally, they won seven of the next 14 games.

**Nikita Zadorov's maturity:** Sabres coach Ted Nolan, probably rightfully so, wouldn't play the defenseman early, scratching him 11 of the first 12 games as the staff worked with the Russian to develop better habits.

The Sabres took off once Zadorov earned regular duty in early November, beginning their hot streak two weeks later.

Zadorov showcased stretches of future stardom when the Sabres caught fire. But the rookie's sitting again now, his maturity still the major issue. Nolan believes the 19-year-old has developed poor habits. He benched him for chunks of Thursday's 4-3 loss to Arizona before scratching him outright for Saturday's 5-3 loss in Colorado.

If Zadorov had stayed near the top of his game, the Sabres would have a few more wins.

**Sending Mark Pysyk down Jan. 1:** Some observers think keeping Pysyk, who's proven he's ready for regular NHL duty, in Rochester was the Sabres' "tankiest" move.

With Pysyk in the AHL, Nolan had to keep playing Andre Benoit and Andrej Meszaros, two of the NHL's worst defensemen. Pysyk, the 23<sup>rd</sup> pick in 2010, is efficient and smooth. He was often the Sabres' best defenseman last season, when he played 44 games.

It can be argued letting Pysyk perfect his game in the minors and "overcook" a bit was OK. But stashing him with the Americans almost all season looks fishy. The 23-year-old, who's likely done for the season after collapsing Feb. 28, played only six NHL games.

Nolan wanted Pysyk up badly. A day before the Sabres sent him down, Nolan said Pysyk was "ready for primetime."

General manager Tim Murray disagreed. Would the Sabres have lost 14 straight games with Pysyk playing?

## **Mroziak: When Hockey Heaven became hockey hypocrisy**

By Michael Mroziak

Niagara Gazette

March 27, 2015

Perhaps several years from now, if the Buffalo Sabres are entering a new heyday and are celebrating a championship, you'll see some familiar faces in the crowd.

You may not know their names, but you'll swear that you've seen them somewhere before, in the same head-to-toe Sabres apparel. It's very likely that you saw many of them in the crowd Thursday night at First Niagara Center. They were openly cheering for the Arizona Coyotes. Yes, this is the new state of Hockey Heaven. Openly cheering for your hometown team to lose. While still wearing their colors.

I totally get the logic. It's futility for the future's sake. It's savoring the increased chance that Buffalo will win the NHL Draft Lottery next month.

But it just feels so... unethical. Listening to the game on WGR Radio while working in the office Thursday night, you could hear a similar tone of disappointment in the journalists who cover the Sabres regularly. These are the same folks who have been sometimes harshly critical of this franchise in their own right.

It says a lot about how low things have sunk when even they look at it and seem disgusted. I'll readily admit, I couldn't be any more wrong about how this season would go for the Sabres. Back in the early stages of the season, I predicted while the Sabres would continue to struggle, they wouldn't possibly be this bad.

Thankfully, I'm still allowed to eat those words on a Lenten Friday.

No, I didn't foresee the franchise taking this deep of a plunge. But to take pleasure in it? That's just wrong.

In fact, if there are such things as hockey gods, perhaps it would be fitting to see them bite Hockey Heaven with some serious hockey karma next month. Seeing Connor McDavid donning a Toronto Maple Leafs jersey in June would do the trick.

If you've been scanning through our classifieds over the past couple of days, you've probably noticed the big ad advertising for, well, my position.

I guess it's time to let the cat out of the bag. I am indeed moving on. I recently accepted a very exciting (and infrequent) opportunity to return to local radio news. Beginning April 1, I will be joining the news department at WBFO 88.7 FM Radio in Buffalo.

Those who have known me over the years recognize I come from a radio background. When I was recently offered a chance to join WBFO, it was — to borrow from the Godfather films — an offer I couldn't refuse.

I will have plenty of thank you messages to offer in my next Leading Off column, which will run next Wednesday.

## **Punch Shots: Sabres fans have really taken to tanking**

By Pete Schnatz

Delaware County Daily Times

March 27, 2015

I realize it's not easy being a Buffalo sports fan.

Major League Baseball is nothing more than a curiosity.

The Braves left town in 1978 after eight largely uneventful seasons, and you get the feeling that current NBA suits couldn't find the town without an atlas.

The Sabres lost both of their Stanley Cup Finals appearances, including the 1999 series on a controversial triple-overtime-winning goal that still has the locals seething.

The Bills made four consecutive Super Bowls in the early 1990s, lost all four in excruciating fashion, and the franchise's most identifiable athlete is O.J. Simpson.

On top of all that, they live in Buffalo.

And you thought Cubs fans defined the term "long suffering."

But whatever trials and tribulations the denizens of Western New York have been through during their snow-filled lifetimes, there's no excuse for how the hometown hockey fans behaved during Thursday night's 4-3 overtime loss to Arizona.

Rooting for the Sabres to maintain their stronghold on the worst record in the NHL — and thus preserving the club's odds of getting a savior in this year's draft — Buffalo fans cheered every goal by the nearly-equally abysmal Coyotes. Even as Sabres goalie Matt Hackett stopped 38 shots, the folks who reside along the shore of Lake Erie booed when one of their own players tied the game late in regulation.

Tanking may be all the rage in pro sports these days, but it shouldn't be applauded by the fans.

That's better left to the front-office types.

## **Sabres' Ennis won't miss too many games**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 27, 2015

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- The Sabres got a little good news on Friday. Ted Nolan said Tyler Ennis is going to the trip out west and could play Monday in Arizona.

Friday's practice was optional and Matt Hackett did not participate. Nolan said Hackett is sore, but said he'll be fine. Hackett will backup Anders Lindback Saturday in Colorado.

Chad Johnson also got his first skate in with his equipment. Johnson was supposed to start the March 6<sup>th</sup> game in Ottawa, but got injured on the last shot of the morning skate, "It was frustrating, I wanted to come here and make a good impression and then the last shot there I felt a pop in my ankle and I knew it wasn't good."

"It was disappointing, but I was back on the ice today which was a positive for me, so it feels good and I'm on the right track."

The question is will Johnson be able to get some games by the end of the year? He said, "I hope so, there's still two weeks left and I've progressed really well, so I think it'll be close, I'm hoping to get back for the last week and get a couple of games in."

After the Arizona game Nolan said some guys weren't ready to play and they were benched. Zac Dalpe and Phil Varone were two that hardly played along with Nikita Zadorov. He played 9:46 and will likely be scratched Saturday. Nolan said, "Maybe he played 10 minutes too much and we'll deal with that."

Nolan said his rookie defenseman put in very hard work in October and November and he earned a place in the lineup. Nolan said his work ethic has gone down a lot, "When you're going for certain things and your expectations have to be a certain level and if you don't do it, you're not going to get better, I don't care who you are. You look at Tyler Ennis and why he gets better, because he works at it. Nikita has to work on his game, he can't just hope and rely on talent." Nolan added, "He was working extremely hard in practice. We got him here early, he was the first one on the ice, we pushed him extra hard and all of a sudden his play took off. He then got to play and then he forgot what got him there, so this is a reminder to him that he has to get back fundamentals and get back to work."

Mike Weber expressed how upset he was that the fans cheered against the Sabres on Thursday. He of course his getting attacked by some that have no clue that over the past one to two months, he's been Buffalo's second best defenseman behind Rasmus Ristolainen. He's been much steadier and consistent, but some fans don't let facts get in their way. Nolan said, "Mike's one of those guys where he wears his heart on his sleeve and you never, ever question his remarks because they come from a good place. When players hear that (cheering for Arizona goals), they want to voice their opinion and Mike's not afraid to voice his."

The Sabres packed up after practice and flew to Denver.

## **Sabres fans cheer Coyotes – A view from the stands**

By Matthew Coller

WGR 550

March 27, 2015

It took me a few minutes of hard blinking to get my sight back. The red flash took me by surprise. Inside 716 Food and Sport, it was hard to hear friends standing feet away – and if you wanted a table, the earliest reservation was for nine o'clock. It took several minutes to cross the restaurant to get to the bar area where WGR's Joe Buscaglia was celebrating wrapping up his final day at the station. He was accepting handshakes and advice on his new TV career – but you had to get close to his ear to have sage words heard. If you haven't been to 716, it's the Xanadu of sports bars, with two stories and television screens so big you can't believe aren't some sort of fire hazard. And red lights that flash when the Sabres score.

Three deep at the bar, many were staring up at a replay of a hockey game. The sounds of hockey announcers and hockey pucks hitting hockey sticks reverberated throughout the place beautifully over the noise. As I got closer to the big screen, the teams overhead came into focus. It was the Arizona Coyotes' triumphant victory over the Detroit Red Wings from two nights before. The game was in overtime. Like a seeing a re-run of Jeopardy, where you say the answer before Alex Trebek is done reading the question, I said to myself, "Arcobello goal," as No. 36 in maroon skated down the wing toward Detroit goalie Jimmy Howard.

Red lights flashed. People cheered. You already know why. Buffalo has become Snowy Arizona since the Coyotes encroached on territory the Sabres have defended valiantly for months like a militia hired to defend ground with oil underneath. The Southwest Army beefed up at the trade deadline by selling off parts, including star defenseman Keith Yandle. Nobody has been this strong – the Sabres ran away with 30<sup>th</sup> place last year and have had a comfortable lead for most of the season. But recently the 'Yotes came within three points.

And that oil well is a guarantee at one of two elite prospects, Connor McDavid and Jack Eichel. They have been just as pure as our initial tests. McDavid blew away the OHL, finishing third in scoring despite missing time with injury and the World Juniors and Eichel has scored the most points in the NCAA in 20 years. McDavid is being compared to Crosby, Eichel to other elite players like Tyler Seguin and Steven Stamkos.

The buzz around 716 was about what things were about to sound in First Niagara Center. For most of the year, fans have cheered loudly when the Sabres scored, while onlookers from home gnashed their teeth at Buffalo's few wins. But this time around, people were wandering around the bar with Coyotes' logos taped over the Sabres' emblem.

Back out in the cold and walking toward the arena, I walked by a guy in a Geoff Sanderson Goat Head jersey.

The first few minutes of the game were the most awkward. As the two teams batted the puck back and forth between the bluelines like a ping pong game at a frat house, fans looked around to see what everyone else was doing.

"This is the quietest I've ever heard it in here and I've heard it really quiet in here," a middle-aged man whispered to a friend.

You could hear other fans shifting in their seats, waiting for the first goal. Waiting to see whether there would be a booming cheer or a murmur.

Arizona struck first. Someone named Jordan Szwarc scored his first goal of the season. A man in a Keith Tkachuk jersey revealed himself in the first row of section 320, standing and clapping. Everyone else stayed in their seats. Some clapping. Some fist pumping. Around the arena, there was a rise in the crowd, but it wasn't anything compared to when the Toronto Maple Leafs come to town. If you were against cheering for the other team, you weren't upset by the reaction.

"I can't root against my team, man," the guy next to me in a Taro Tsujimoto (seriously) jersey said. "But...if I'd

be OK with a few more Arizona goals."

A few blunders on the ice and penalties by the Coyotes brought out jokes from 320.

"That wasn't a trip! McDavid, ref, McDavid!"

"Good save Mike Smith, good save!"

Nobody laughed too loud. Nobody told the guy to shut up either.

When Tyler Ennis got the puck in front of Smith, the crowd gasped the same gasp they would normally gasp during a scoring chance. When he shoveled the puck into the goal, well, if we went by the "Noise Meter" it would have gone about half way.

The back and forth of three-out-of-10 Arizona cheers vs. six-out-of-10 cheers for Buffalo goals continued, even when Brian Gionta tied the game on a Shane Doan turnover.

But after Gionta's goal, there was a shift in the building. When Mike Weber took a penalty with 30 seconds remaining and the score tied at three, there was a noticeable rise in volume – but not in the way you would expect.

"Thank you, Weber," the guy behind me said. "Thank you."

One person in a Ryan Miller jersey stood up, waived his hand toward the ice and yelled, "that's not a trip!" He looked around for others to get behind him, then shrugged and sat down.

In overtime, I thought about Fred Jackson. During the Snowvember storm, Jackson took a video of his family playing in the snow. He tossed his kids in snow banks as they laughed. It was soul-meltingly cute. It made you think about how much Fred Jackson loves Buffalo. How other NFL players from Texas probably talk about Buffalo as if the weather makes the city an armpit of the nation - how they probably roll their eyes when they get drafted here and make jokes about being sent to Alaska (sorry, Alaska). Fred is a Buffalonian and that is what Buffalonians do. They make the best out of situations that aren't always ideal. Snow stinks. We sled and build igloos.

Buffalo Sabres fans have been sledding and building igloos thinking of Connor McDavid and Jack Eichel. They found a way to make a game against the 29<sup>th</sup> best team in the NHL into a true must-see event. They found a way to find some entertainment within a hideous hockey game that featured more turnovers than a bakery and more fouls than a DIII basketball game.

If there is no way to have fun and no future to focus on, there is nothing. There sure aren't tape-to-tape passes - except for ones to the other team. And you might say, "don't go then!" except there isn't much else to do when it's 25 degrees.

When Sam Gagner ended the game with a power play goal, the crowd erupted. Many in section 320 stood up, many others shrugged. A little girl two seats down just kept licking her ice cream, totally unaware of what had happened or who everyone was cheering on. The noise meter moved into Sabres goal range – probably a four or five. But it was enough to grab attention around sports, including making ESPN's SportsCenter.

Some have said that we won't remember this a few years from now. Some have said we should feel dirty. Some say Buffalo is being dirty. I say Buffalo is being Buffalo. They are making the best of a bad situation. Like two guys sitting at a Week 17 Bills game in a snow storm, making a snowman and putting a Bills hat on it. Sure, they'd rather be at a playoff game, but ya gotta do something to make it fun.]

As I walked out, a guy in a Satan jersey smacked his buddy on the back.

"Only a few more games, buddy," he said.

Only a few more games, indeed.

## **Avs hold off Sabres 5-3**

By Dan Cave

WGR 550

March 28, 2015

The Sabres found the net three times in the final period on Saturday, but it was too little, too late in a 5-3 loss in Colorado. Andrej Meszaros scored two of the 3rd period goals and Buffalo outshot the Avs 38-22.

Marc-Andre Cliche and John Mitchell opened the scoring for Colorado, finding the net within 32 seconds of each other. Cliche's shot from in front of the net fluttered over Anders Lindback and into the Buffalo net for the 1-0 Avalanche lead. Mitchell made it 2-0 on the following shift, deflecting a Matt Duchene pass off the shaft of his stick.

Lindback stopped 10 out of 12 shots in the opening period, but was replaced by Matt Hackett to start the second. Hackett surrendered goals on the first two shots he faced, upping Colorado's lead to 4-0. Taking a nice backhand pass from Ryan O'Reilly, Tyson Barrie walked in and lifted the puck over Hackett's glove for the third goal of the evening. Matt Duchene added his 19th about 90 seconds later, a hard wrist shot from the slot that sailed into the top corner of the net. From that point on, Colorado would manage only eight more shots on Hackett for the rest of the game, leading to a Sabres rally in the third.

Meszaros found the net twice as part of a wild start to the final period. A little over three minutes in, the Buffalo defenseman pulled Semyon Varlamov out of position and tucked the puck into the Colorado net for the Sabres' first goal of the evening. Following Brad Stuart's third, Meszaros struck again with a blast from the blueline making it 5-2. Rasmus Ristolainen pulled the Sabres to within two a little over three and a half minutes later, but Varlamov kept Buffalo out of the net the rest of the way.

The Avalanche netminder stopped 35 shots, including 15 in the third period alone. Hackett gave up three goals on only 10 Colorado shots after replacing Lindback.

The Sabres stay on the road visiting Arizona on Monday. They'll head into that game sitting six points behind the Coyotes for 29th place in the NHL. Hear the 10 p.m. faceoff on WGR 550 and the Buffalo Sabres Radio Network.

### **First Period**

#### **Goals**

10:47 - COL - Marc-Andre Cliche (2) (Cody McLeod, Nick Holden)

11:19 - COL - John Mitchell (10) (Matt Duchene, Jarome Iginla)

#### **Penalties**

3:52 - COL - Zach Redmon (2 min., hooking)

14:44 - COL - Nick Holden (2 min., interference)

20:00 - COL - Cody McLeod (2 min., roughing)

20:00 - BUF - Patrick Kaleta (2 min., roughing)

### **2nd Period**

#### **Goals**

3:29 - COL - Tyson Barrie (12) (Ryan O'Reilly, Gabriel Landeskog)

6:56 - COL - Matt Duchene (19) (Jarome Iginla, Zach Redmond)

#### **Penalties**

13:36 - COL - Gabriel Landeskog (2 min., charging)

### **3rd Period**

#### **Goals**

3:09 - BUF - Andrej Meszaros (4) (Rasmus Ristolainen, Johan Larsson)

4:48 - COL - Brad Stuart (3) (Matt Duchene, Jarome Iginla)

5:29 - BUF - Andrej Meszaros (5) (Unassisted)

8:43 - BUF - Rasmus Ristolainen (7) (Marcus Foligno, Zac Dalpe)

### **Penalties**

14:05 - BUF - Zach Bogosian (2 min., interference)

### **Goaltending**

BUF - Matt Hackett (7 saves, 10 shots)

BUF - Anders Lindback (10 saves, 12 shots)

COL - Semyon Varlamov (35 saves, 38 shots)

### **Power Plays**

BUF - 0 of 3

COL - 0 of 1

### **Three Stars**

1.) COL - Matt Duchene (1 G, 2 A)

2.) COL - Jarome Iginla (0 G, 3 A)

3.) BUF - Andrej Meszaros (2 G, 0 A)

## **Hamilton: Sabres don't tend to match up well against the Avalanche**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 28, 2015

Denver, CO (WGR 550) -- The Sabres opened the first period missing some great chances, but outshooting the Avalanche 7-3. Despite the gap, Buffalo also gave up some good opportunities thanks to some dandy giveaways. Things really started tilting Colorado's way and they took complete advantage scoring two goals in 32 seconds.

On the first goal, Cody McLeod won the battle behind the net setting up an open Marc-Andre Cliche. His shot hit Matt Moulson's stick and floated by Anders Lindback. The second goal had Matt Duchene taking the puck to the net and John Mitchell outworking Mikhail Grigorenko in front. Duchene's pass deflected off the shaft of Mitchell's stick for the 2-0 Colorado lead.

Zach Bogosian struggled with a couple of bad turnovers. One came on the power play, handing it right to Ryan O'Reilly. He dropped it to Alex Tanguay who tried to give it back to O'Reilly, but the tip went over the net. The other turnover came at the Buffalo blue line. Joey Hishon stole the puck and walked in through the left circle, but was stopped by Lindback.

Buffalo's chances came on rebounds. Marcus Foligno was on the doorstep on a power play but Semyon Varlamov made the pad save. Varlamov made 12 saves through 20 minutes while Lindback had 10.

Ted Nolan tried to shake things up putting Matt Hackett in goal to start the second period.

"I just felt the way the game was going, we had no life, we had no jump," said Nolan. "There was nothing going on. I thought sometimes by changing goaltenders, it changes things a little bit."

Andrej Meszaros turned to puck over to Gabriel Landeskog and by the time they were done, Tyson Barrie had jumped in and made it one shot and one goal on Hackett. The second shot also went in when Duchene came down the slot with speed and beat Hackett stick side.

The Sabres were on their heels to start the second period and Hackett's first save finally came when Hishon broke through the left circle and shot it in his pad. Honestly, the goals seemed to be the only real good scoring chances of the period. Hackett had one save in the 20 minutes while Varlamov had eight.

To start the third period, Meszaros came open down the slot but couldn't get it by Varlamov. He came in again through the left circle and deked Varlamov out of his jock, dragged his stick in front and slid it into the unattended cage.

Just 1:39 later, Colorado had its four-goal lead back when Brad Stuart's screen shot eluded Hackett, but Meszaros struck again just 41 seconds later to make it 5-2. That was three goals in 2:20.

Buffalo made it 5-3 when Rasmus Ristolainen came in from the point and got in front. He outmuscled his man and shoveled his seventh goal past Varlamov who was down.

"I'm a two-way guy," said Ristolainen. "I like to play both ends. I really enjoy playing an offensive role and try to keep it going at both ends."

Right before that goal, Zac Dalpe just missed converting a Bogosian rebound. With eight minutes left, Dalpe missed converting a play from Foligno just to the left of Varlamov. The faceoff came and Schaller somehow missed what appeared to be a wide open backhand.

Bogosian took down Landeskog for a silly interference penalty away from the play at 14:05, taking more time away from Buffalo's attempted comeback.

The Sabres really moved their feet in the third period and skated very well to holes. It makes you wonder where that was in the first 40 minutes.

"We just didn't start the way we wanted to and they caught us a little bit flat-footed," said Nolan. "They got some high-end skill guys on their team...but we found a way to fight back towards the latter part of the game."

"Nobody threw in the towel after the second," Meszaros said. "We picked ourselves up and battled hard. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough."

## **Sabres' Ennis is improving**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 29, 2015

Glendale, AZ (WGR 550) -- After a few days of treatment, Tyler Ennis appears to be progressing. Ennis skated for about an hour pretty much by himself and really didn't do much. Ted Nolan said, "We'll make sure he's 100 percent before we would even consider putting him back in."

Ennis did some passing and stick handling drills with the coaches and a little bit of skating. Ennis said, "It was good to get out there, it felt nice and I'm feeling better each day."

Ennis sustained a shoulder injury and did not shoot while he was out there. I was thinking that would pretty much eliminate playing Monday. Ennis said, "I'll see what tomorrow brings, but I wanted to get out there and feel the ice, skate around and work on some skills."

The injury came after Ennis got upset at one of the Coyotes on Thursday and went after him, "I just went to go hit this bigger guy (Klas Dahlbeck) and it wasn't a good idea, he saw me coming so maybe I have to stay away from the hitting for a little bit." Ennis added, "Sometimes you get a little mad and want to hit, but then I realized I'm not built for that, so got to stick to my game."

The Sabres have just seven more games and Ennis says they need to approach it the right way, "We just want to continue to play with good habits, you don't want any bad habits creeping in, you want to play better each game, you want to win each game and if we're going to win, I have to score, the line has to contribute."

Ennis scored 20 goals in 2010-11, 15 in 48 games the next season which projects to 26, 10 in the strike shortened season which projects to 17, 21 in 2013-14 and 19 this season. All that averages out to 21 goals per season. Ennis would like to hit 20 again this year, "It would be nice to get, every milestone is important. When a season hasn't gone your way it's nice to come up with a couple of moral victories and I think if I can achieve some of those, then you can find a little bit of solace in that."

Ennis will only be 26 next month. If Buffalo drafts Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel to go with Sam Reinhart and Zemgus Girgensons, I can see Ennis' numbers going up considerably, especially with Evander Kane a possibility on the other wing.

## **Is Rasmus Ristolainen untouchable?**

By Matthew Coller

WGR 550

March 29, 2015

On draft day 2013, Sabres scouting director Kevin Devine was pretty excited. A video produced by the Sabres showed Devine celebrating when the Nashville Predators selected Seth Jones. When the Sabres picked eighth, we found out why: Because Buffalo's brass wanted Finnish D-man Rasmus Ristolainen.

On that day, the reaction was mixed. Ristolainen was known as a mature player who had played against men in Finland and been very good. But many couldn't help but point out Buffalo's lack of scoring and two-way centers in the system.

It didn't take very long for the young Fin to show off his high-end talent. Ristolainen scored the golden goal in the World Juniors and led the Rochester Amerks in goals by defensemen despite only playing 34 games in the minors.

What caught the eye of the organization was his drive, work ethic and willingness to learn from the coaching staff. Ristolainen was frustrated and disappointed when the Sabres elected to move him to Rochester midway through the 2013-14 season, but demanded coach Chadd Cassidy work with him as much as possible to prepare him for the next level.

Cassidy instructed the top prospect to conserve his energy, make simple plays and choose his spots for physical play. At first, the young D-man tried to carry the puck by defenders like he was playing in the World Juniors. Within two weeks, he had made the proper adjustments. For most prospects, altering their game takes months.

Rochester gave him an opportunity to get big power play minutes, where he was the main shooter. It also allowed him playoff experience. In Game 1 against the Chicago Wolves, a puck skipped over his stick for a turnover. It led to a goal. After the game, Ristolainen was infuriated. Before being asked a question, he said, "I had a s--- turnover. That won't happen again."

By the end of the season, the Sabres' organization was excited. After summer prospect camp, they started to view him as the future No. 1 defenseman. Ristolainen lost 20 pounds by getting on the team's nutrition program and transformed his body from looking like a kid to an NHL player.

This season hasn't been fun for many in Buffalo, but the 6-foot-4 defenseman has been everything they hoped. The only thing that has held him back from having a more statistically impressive season is having had to play with such poor teammates. When on the ice with Mike Weber, his Corsi Percentage is 30.6%. However, when he received time with fellow 2013 first rounder Nikita Zadorov, it was 40.0%. It is puzzling why Ted Nolan split them up. But we digress...

Outside of his drive and willingness to learn and buy into what it takes to be an NHL player, Ristolainen's raw tools are on par with many of the NHL's elite defensemen. The most used comparison of what he could be is Tampa Bay's Victor Hedman, who has become one of the top all-around D-men in the league.

### **Goal scoring**

At age 20, Risto's seven goals puts him in a pretty special category. Only 26 current defensemen scored seven or more goals in their first season, including several of the top up-and-coming blueliners in Olli Maata, Jacob Trouba and Morgan Reilly along with proven stars Erik Karlsson (13) and Oliver Ekman-Larsson (13). He isn't quite in the elite offensive-defenseman category as Drew Doughty scored 16 as a 19-year-old.

His goal scoring comes from a big shot as well as solid offensive instincts and the ability to recognize when to step up into the play.

### **Passing**

While Ristolainen has not racked up a huge total in assists (likely because of poor teammates), he has great passing ability both in exiting the defensive zone and finding teammates in the offensive zone

### **Physical play**

Being big is nice, but being big and having the willingness to be a physical intimidator are two different things.

Opponents need to know where Ristolainen is on the ice at all times because he can step up into a hit at the blueline or eliminate a player from the puck.

His physical play also goes for consistent 1-on-1 battles in corners and behind the net, but these hits are more sexy to Vine.

Everyone loves him, his tools are exceptional as is his work ethic. But is he untouchable? What if the Sabres needed to trade him to move up from the No. 2 draft slot to No. 1 to pick Connor McDavid?

It would be premature to anoint Ristolainen one of the elite defensemen in the NHL, but a top-level No. 1 D is required to win the Stanley Cup – and they are darn hard to find.

Over the past three years, Drew Doughty is No. 2 in the NHL in Corsi Percentage amongst defensemen. Duncan Keith is sixth, the Rangers' top defender last season Anton Stralman is third, Zdeno Chara ranks eighth.

In the playoffs last season, Doughty played 28:45 per game, Keith was on ice for 27:49 per contest. Former fourth overall pick Alex Pietrangelo – another comparison to Ristolainen – played over 30 minutes per game in the Blues' opening round series against Chicago.

Since March 1, the Sabres' top pick in 2013 has averaged 24 minutes per game and has a mere 26.3% Offensive Zone Start percentage – which would be about 20% lower than even the top "shutdown" defensemen. He also has three goals and two assists this month.

The continued progress of Ristolainen – no matter how bad the team has been – has the organization thinking the sky is the limit. Even if it meant moving from No. 2 to No. 1, it would not be wise to trade a player who could be every bit as valuable as an elite center.

Yes, Ristolainen should be considered untouchable.

## **Sabres likely to be without Ennis against Colorado**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 27, 2015

Before the Buffalo Sabres embarked for Denver, they held an optional practice Friday morning at First Niagara Center. Tyler Ennis, who left Thursday night's game after the second period due to an upper-body injury, did not skate and is unlikely to play Saturday against the Colorado Avalanche.

Sabres coach Ted Nolan said that Ennis will make the two-game road trip and hopes that Buffalo's leading scorer will be able to play Monday night in Arizona.

Ennis had a goal and an assist against the Coyotes on Thursday and his presence in the lineup will certainly be missed.

"It's a big loss. He's a big key to our offense, to our power play," captain Brian Gionta, who filled in on the top line, said. "Since he moved back to the point, we've been doing well on the power play, too. So hopefully it comes around quick and we'll see what happens."

Last week, Nolan called Ennis the team's most valuable player and reaffirmed that stance on Friday. In 72 games this season, the 25-year-old right wing has 19 goals and 42 points.

"With all the distractions – if you want to call it that – quietly and very efficiently, Tyler Ennis, I think he's been having a sensational year," Nolan said. "In particular, the last 10 games or so, his play has gone up another level.

"Somebody asked me, 'What's the ceiling on this kid?' I'm not too sure what it is, but it's going to be magnificent to watch. You look so much at the future sometimes that you forget about the present. Right now, he's certainly a gift to watch."

In the meantime, center Tim Schaller has been recalled from the Rochester Americans of the American Hockey League.

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### **CREASE WATCH**

One of the first players on the ice Friday was goaltender Chad Johnson, who has been sidelined due to a lower-body injury since the morning skate in Ottawa on March 6.

Johnson was scheduled to start that night, but on the last shot he faced, he took a puck off the ankle and was later ruled out. It was supposed to be his first game as a Sabre.

Buffalo acquired Johnson and a third-round pick in the 2016 NHL Draft from the New York Islanders on March 2 for goaltender Michal Neuvirth.

"It was frustrating," Johnson said on Friday. "I wanted to come here and make a good impression by playing in games and helping this team win. And then just the last shot there, I felt a pop in my ankle and I knew it wasn't good."

He's optimistic that he can return before the season ends on April 11, but the coaching and medical staffs will err on the side of caution. He did not take any shots on Friday but hopes to on Saturday.

Regarding the healthy goaltenders on the roster, Nolan said that Anders Lindback will likely start in net against Colorado.

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**DEFENSIVE CHANGES?**

With seven defensemen ready to go, Nolan has a decision to make every game as to which six blue liners will play. Nikita Zadorov played 9:46 on Thursday and Nolan said it's a possibility the 19 year old could be the odd-man out in Denver.

Nolan would like to see Zadorov's work habits improve and the coaches have been working with him every day to help him succeed on at the NHL level.

"You just watch the habits of guys who practice and that's why they get better," he said. "Nikita, he just has to learn to do that. And by no means do you say he's not going to get there but sometimes it takes a little while."

## **Ennis out against Avalanche**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 28, 2015

**DENVER** – The Buffalo Sabres will be without their leading scorer Saturday night in the Mile High City.

Tyler Ennis, who sustained an upper-body injury during the team's game on Thursday, will not play against the Colorado Avalanche at Pepsi Center. The Tops Game Night pregame show begins at 8:30 p.m. EST on MSG-B and Bell with faceoff set for the 9 p.m. EST. The game can also be heard live on WGR 550.

Sabres coach Ted Nolan hopes that Ennis will be ready for Monday's game in Arizona. Ennis has 19 goals and 42 points in 72 games this season.

"There were a number of guys missing this year, but when you miss a guy like him, that one definitely, definitely hurts," Nolan said. "No disrespect to the rest, but he's by far our most dynamic player, probably our MVP this year. It's certainly tough without him."

For now, captain Brian Gionta will step up and play on the top line with center Johan Larsson and left wing Matt Moulson.

Gionta has elevated his game in the past month and just over the past six games, he has three goals and four assists. He's coming off back-to-back multi-point games and will look to make it three in a row for the first time since Nov. 20 to 23, 2008.

His ice time has also jumped up. He's played at least 21:30 in nine of the past 10 games since March 6. He skated a season-high 24:50 on Thursday.

"The more touches you get and the more ice time and minutes you get, you feel more comfortable with the puck and in different situations. But things have just been going in for whatever reason. You're getting the bounces.

He's also made a concerted effort to shoot the puck more. He's recorded seven shots in each of the past two games and has at least four shots on net in five of the past six.

"Shots per game is something I've been trying to focus on too," he said. "You get that opportunity, you make sure you take advantage and get a shot on net and not passing it up."

Nolan has been impressed not only with Gionta's recent play but with how he prepares himself for every game.

"He's played 14 seasons and it looks like it's his first," Nolan said. "His enthusiastic approach to the game, the way he plays, the way he competes should make all the young kids who were given opportunities play even harder because of that."

Anders Lindback will start in goal for the Sabres and Nikita Zadorov will serve as a healthy scratch on defense.

Nolan and the coaching staff continue to work with Zadorov to make sure he's developing the right habits as a professional.

"We have to get him to a certain point and he has to make sure he knows that this is the National Hockey League and it's not just given to him because," Nolan said. "He was to work for it."

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**PROJECTED LINEUP**

26 Matt Moulson – 22 Johan Larsson – 12 Brian Gionta  
82 Marcus Foligno – 25 Mikhail Grigorenko – 20 Zac Dalpe  
44 Nicolas Deslauriers – 84 Philip Varone – 19 Cody Hodgson  
37 Matt Ellis – 59 Tim Schaller – 36 Patrick Kaleta

61 Andre Benoit – 47 Zach Bogosian  
6 Mike Weber – 55 Rasmus Ristolainen  
41 Andrej Meszaros – 24 Tyson Strachan

35 Anders Lindback  
31 Matt Hackett

**POWER PLAY**First Unit

Moulson-Larsson-Gionta  
Bogosian-Ristolainen

Second Unit

Foligno-Grigorenko-Hodgson  
Benoit-Meszaros

## **Rally in 3rd can't push Sabres past Avalanche**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 29, 2015

**DENVER** – Down four goals heading into the third period, the Buffalo Sabres were able to generate some scoring chances and get back into their game Saturday night against the Colorado Avalanche.

However, the late surge wasn't enough as the Avalanche won 5-3 at Pepsi Center. Sabres defenseman Andrej Meszaros exploded for two goals and Rasmus Ristolainen also legally potted one.

Marc-Andre Cliche, John Mitchell, Tyson Barrie, Matt Duchene and Brad Stuart tallied for Colorado. Semyon Varlamov made 35 saves.

"Even when it was 4-0 after the second, we didn't throw in the towel," Meszaros said. "We battled hard. We have to play like that for 60 minutes, not just 20 or 25."

It was the first multi-goal game by a Sabres defenseman this season.

"We just weren't to play in the first period and a good team like Colorado, they get those goals with those mistakes," Ristolainen said. "We had a good 20 minutes. Hopefully we can take that one and be better in Arizona."

To try and spark the team, Sabres coach Ted Nolan switched his goaltender after the first period. Anders Lindback, the starter, allowed two goals on 12 shots in the first and was replaced by Matt Hackett to start the second. Hackett allowed goals on the first two shots he faced and the Avalanche increased their lead to 4-0.

Colorado only mustered one more shot on goal the rest of the period. Hackett finished with seven saves.

"I just felt they way the game was going, we had no life, we had no jump," Nolan said. "There was nothing going on and I thought sometimes by changing the goaltenders, it changes things a little bit."

Buffalo ended up outshooting the Avalanche 38-22 and had chances to get back into the game throughout the third.

"We were jumping and we were moving and we were skating. We were working," Nolan said. "And when you don't do it, things ain't going to be pretty for us. We found a way to at least battle back and fight. These guys, one thing about them, they never quit."

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### **MOVING FORWARDS**

Without their leading scorer in the lineup, the Sabres struggled to find the back of the net early in the game.

Tyler Ennis, who missed the game due to an upper-body injury sustained on Thursday, could return for the team's game against Arizona on Monday.

The Sabres mixed up some of their lines to prior to the game with captain Brian Gionta taking Ennis' spot on the top line. Zac Dalpe jumped in on the second line, Patrick Kaleta played with Nicolas Deslauriers and Philip Varone on the third line and Cody Hodgson joined Matt Ellis and Tim Schaller on the fourth line.

Hodgson ended up with six shots on goal in 14:38.

"Schaller and Ellis are a little bit more defensive-orientated guys and Cody can just concentrate on the offense, which he did," Nolan said. "I thought that was one of his better offensive attacks all season long. He had a number of chances."

It was the defensemen, however, that ended up netting all of Buffalo's goals.

"For the first goal, I tried to shoot it but Gio was right there and I didn't want to hit him so I just tried to go around him. The second, I just shot it and it went in. That's what you have to do if you want to score goals," Meszaros said.

"You have to shoot the puck and the rebounds are going to be there. You just have to get dirty and get in front of the net and score on the rebounds."

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### **COMING UP**

Buffalo's two-game road trip concludes on Monday when the Sabres travel to Arizona to take on the Coyotes at 10 p.m. EST. The Tops Game Night pregame show begins at 9:30 p.m. EST on MSG-B and Bell. The game can also be heard live on WGR 550.

Arizona defeated the Sabres 4-3 in overtime on Thursday.

## **Sabres look to build on Saturday's 3rd period**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 29, 2015

**GLENDALE, ARIZONA** – The Buffalo Sabres came away pleased with their third-period effort Saturday night against the Colorado Avalanche, but disappointed that they weren't able to generate that energy sooner. Buffalo fell behind 4-0 after two and scored three goals in the third, ultimately losing 5-3 at Pepsi Center. They outshot the Avalanche 38-22.

The Sabres held a team meeting and an optional skate at Gila River Arena on Sunday to prepare for their game Monday night against the Arizona Coyotes and hope for an effort that spans 60 minutes.

The Tops Game Night pregame show will begin at 9:30 p.m. EST with faceoff scheduled for 10 p.m. EST on MSG-B and Bell. The game can also be heard live on WGR 550.

"We had a video session here today to talk about some of the things we did last night. I think that was one of the most chances per games that we played almost all season long," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said.

"It's one of the first times we've outshot a team by that large of a margin. Overall, outside of that first little bit where we made a couple costly mistakes, I thought it was a pretty good effort."

Leading scorer Tyler Ennis missed Saturday's game due to an upper-body injury sustained Thursday and while he made the trip, his status for Monday remains up in the air. He did take the ice on Sunday.

"I'm feeling better each day," Ennis said. "We'll see what tomorrow brings. I just wanted to get out there, feel the ice skate around, work on some skills."

Nolan said they'll make sure Ennis is 100 percent ready before putting him back in the lineup.

With Ennis out against Colorado, the defensive corps picked up the offensive slack. Andrej Meszaros scored twice and Rasmus Ristolainen also tallied.

With a goal and an assist Saturday, Ristolainen has now scored in back-to-back games for the first time in his career and has five points (3+2) in his past seven games.

In addition to playing big minutes against the opposing team's top lines, Buffalo's top pick (eighth overall) in the 2013 NHL Draft has taken a fancy to jumping into the play and generating offense.

"I'm a two-way guy. I like to play both ends and I really enjoy playing an offensive role," he said after the game. "I'll try to keep going on both ends."

This season, he has seven goals and nine assists in 72 games. Among healthy players still on the team, he's second on the team in ice time, averaging 20:25 per game, although his minutes have increased as his role continues to expand.

"His overall maturity, his confidence with the puck, the toe drag that he's doing, the patience he's having with the puck, especially on the power play," Nolan said. "He set up Matty Moulson a couple of games ago in overtime in 4-on-4 where I thought it was a very experienced play by a young guy. He came down and made a great play. So his growth is going [up] by leaps and bounds right now which is a great sign going into next season."