



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres-Blue Jackets preview

Associated Press

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The Columbus Blue Jackets are finally playing well at home, though it's much too late.

They'll look to match a team record with their sixth straight home victory Friday night in their Nationwide Arena season finale against the league-worst Buffalo Sabres.

Columbus (40-35-5) moved to 10-0-1 in its last 11 games with Wednesday's 5-0 victory over Toronto. Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 35 shots and Scott Hartnell had a goal and an assist.

The Blue Jackets improved the league's fourth-worst home mark to 18-20-2, a mark that represents one of their biggest problems. They won six in a row at home from Dec. 26, 2007-Jan. 15, 2008.

"For me, it definitely comes down to our home record," said coach Todd Richards, who has matched Ken Hitchcock as the franchise's winningest coach with 125. "What we need to do is establish our game here at home and make this a tough building to play in."

Maybe the biggest issue is that Columbus has exceeded 500 man-games lost to injury. That figure is a team record and the NHL's highest total this season.

"One thing about Columbus right now, they're on a roll," Buffalo coach Ted Nolan said. "I think they've won 10 out of the last 11 games. Barring injuries, they would probably be in the playoffs right now."

The latest health issue is the wrist and hand of Cam Atkinson, who was reportedly slashed accidentally by a teammate's skate. Atkinson, fourth on the team with 20 goals, is uncertain to play the last two games.

Both teams are starting back-to-backs to close the season.

The Blue Jackets visit the New York Islanders on Saturday, so they're expected to give Bobrovsky the start in their home finale. He's gone 9-0-1 with a 2.25 goals-against average in his past 10 starts while posting a 2.16 GAA in winning his last five at home.

"He's been good but again you have to credit the guys around him too," Richards said. "He's made some big saves but I think it's some things that we expect out of Bob."

Matt Hackett has sat out the last five games due to what Buffalo (23-49-8) called "soreness," with Anders Lindback starting four times in that span. Hackett returned to practice Wednesday and may start one of the final two contests.

"We'll see how both are feeling," Nolan said. "Hackett, that was his first day on the ice yesterday. He took part of practice today so we'll see how he feels."

The Sabres have won three of five after Monday's 4-3 home victory over Carolina. Brian Gionta had a goal and an assist to give him 11 points in his last eight games.

Nick Foligno, born in Buffalo like brother and Sabres winger Marcus, has seven points in a five-game run for the Blue Jackets. Brandon Dubinsky has nine points in a six-game streak.

These teams have split two matchups by two-goal margins. The Sabres have captured three of their last four visits to Columbus.

Sabres' Ennis finds comfort on wing

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

April 9, 2015

Tyler Ennis has had the puck dangling on his stick for weeks now. There's a freedom and a better flow to his game probably than at any time in his career with the Buffalo Sabres. On a team bereft of offense for most of the season, Ennis has become a 20-goal scorer for the second straight year.

"I feel good, and confidence is such a big thing," Ennis said Thursday in First Niagara Center. "When you're confident, you want that puck at all times and that's how I'm feeling. That's how I should feel for the rest of my career. I've hit that point where you're comfortable in the league, you're getting older and it's time to take charge. I'm excited for next year."

First, of course, the Sabres have to wrap up this one. They play the Columbus Blue Jackets in Nationwide Arena on Friday night and then return home for the season finale here Saturday against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Ennis is 25 years old and has already played 343 games in his NHL career, posting a trio of 20-goal seasons. He was drafted along with Tyler Myers as Buffalo's two first-round picks at the 2008 draft in Ottawa.

"It's crazy to think about," he said. "When you first come into the league, older guys say to enjoy it because it goes by fast. It certainly does. It seems like yesterday that I was drafted even. You have to work to get better and think things are going to turn around. And I'm excited for them to turn around in this city."

"I think he's a special player. I really do," said coach Ted Nolan. "When he's free to do what he's naturally gifted to do, you're going to see that come out of him and right now he feels very comfortable."

Ennis signed a five-year, \$23-million contract extension last summer and many observers wondered if he was playing under the weight of that deal when scored nine goals in his first 45 games this season. But he has been more consistent in the second half, including nine points in 11 games in March.

"I think I was more struggling at center, not so much the contract," he said. "It was finding my game in the middle, getting scored on, losing faceoffs. Those things were frustrating me, and it kind of showed. When I went back to the wing, I felt loose, got the confidence back and I was feeling better."

Ennis said he's benefitted greatly from being on a line with Matt Moulson, and from the center play of Zemgus Girgensons and Johan Larsson. And there's a mental relief from knowing he's set for the future in the NHL at wing.

"I'm happy I was able to play both positions. And I'm happy to play left wing and right wing too," he said. "I had never played right wing until this year and in some ways I like it better than left. We have to build through the middle. Zemgus did a great job this year. He was excellent. We've found Larsson making a name for himself and then whatever happens through the draft, we have to build through the middle."

Ennis was quick to give credit to Nolan for his play this season. Perhaps more than any forward on the team, Ennis' career has taken off under the Sabres coach, who is not expected to return next season.

"He's been great for me. He's really kind of let me do my thing," Ennis said. "We'll see what happens. No one knows what's going to happen, but we know when you have a losing record, anything can and I know that."

"He lets guys do what they can, play to their strengths. If you're a hitter, he says to go hit. If you're a creative guy, it's 'go create, go score.' He's not too focused on exactly where you have to be on the ice at every given point. So that was great for my game."

Thursday was the Sabres' final practice of the season and likely Nolan's final practice as coach. Still, he was philosophical about his situation.

"Over my time I've really learned to embrace now and today," Nolan said. "You never know what's going to happen tomorrow. No one does. You certainly work with what you have control over today. You try to bring your best, enjoy the guys. It's our last trip."

Sabres notebook: Red-hot Jackets will be a challenge

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

April 9, 2015

The Buffalo Sabres will be facing the hottest team in the NHL Friday night in Nationwide Arena, but a fabulous finish is not going to get the Columbus Blue Jackets into the playoffs.

An incredible run of injuries conspired to ruin the Jackets' hopes of back-to-back postseason berths. They have lost an astonishing 502 man-games to injury this season and suffered another freak injury Wednesday as Cam Atkinson suffered a 10-stitch cut on the wrist when it was sliced by teammate Alex Wennberg's skate as the players left the bench.

But in the season's final month, Columbus started to get healthier and the results have quickly been obvious.

The Blue Jackets are 10-0-1 in their last 11 games and one game shy of tying the franchise mark for the longest point streak. Since March 1, they are 13-1-1 and behind only the New York Rangers in points among NHL teams. The Rangers are 14-4-1 for 29 points.

Columbus is a notoriously fast finisher, going 58-24-7 in March and April the last four seasons – and 47-16-7 in the last three.

When the Sabres beat Columbus, 4-2, on Feb. 24, they burned AHL callup Anton Forsberg for a pair of weak goals. They won't have such a luxury Friday night because red-hot starter Sergei Bobrovsky will play for the Blue Jackets.

Bobrovsky posted a 35-save shutout over Toronto on Wednesday and is 9-0-1 with a .934 save percentage and 2.25 goals-against average in his last 10 starts.

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Buffalo defenseman Andre Benoit (upper body) did not practice Thursday and is not likely to play in the final two games. The Sabres will be calling up a defenseman from Rochester, either Chad Ruhwedel or Jake McCabe, to replace him. The decision will be made after the Amerks' game vs. Lake Erie Thursday night in Cleveland.

As expected, the Sabres assigned center Sam Reinhart to Rochester after the end of his junior season with Kootenay of the Western Hockey League. Reinhart was seen walking through the hallways of First Niagara Center after practice Thursday, presumably headed for a physical and a meeting with General Manager Tim Murray. The Sabres did not make him available to the media.

Reinhart is expected to join the Amerks for their morning skate Friday and for the final five games of the regular season. Rochester hosts Toronto Friday night at 7 in Blue Cross Arena. Playing with the Amerks after his junior season does not impact Reinhart's entry-level contract; that has yet to start, because the Sabres sent him back to junior after nine NHL games.

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Matt Hackett and Chad Johnson both joined Anders Lindback in goal at practice. Nolan said Hackett is improving, but it is uncertain if he will play this weekend. Johnson, who has yet to play for the Sabres after suffering an ankle injury during the morning skate March 6 in Ottawa, is not expected to get into a game. It's presumed that Lindback will be the starter in Columbus.

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The Sabres will be taking part in the launch of a scholarship fund in memory of former Buffalo defenseman Steve Montador, who died suddenly in February at age 35.

Dubbed The Steve Montador "Dream Big" Scholarship Fund, it has been formed with an initial \$10,000 donation furnished by the Sabres, the Sabres Foundation, the Sabres Alumni Association, current Sabres players and former Sabres managing partner/minority owner Larry Quinn. The "Dream Big" moniker stems from a favorite phrase of Montador's, one that he used when signing autographs for fans.

The fund will be overseen by a board that includes Montador's father, Paul. It remains in the planning stages and donations can be made at Sabres.com/dreambig.

"Steve had such an uplifting personality, always trying to help others around him and encourage them to achieve their best," Paul Montador said in a release issued by the Sabres. "This fund is the exact way Steve would want to be remembered, as a way to support people and inspire them to achieve their dreams. I am very grateful that the Sabres have gotten the ball rolling in terms of fundraising, and we know this is just the beginning of a tremendous program that will honor Steve's legacy."

Sabres must wait yet again

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

April 9, 2015

There was no help on the West Coast again Thursday night and the McEichel Derby presses on for at least another day.

The Arizona Coyotes lost to the Vancouver Canucks, 5-0, in Rogers Arena to remain two points ahead of the Buffalo Sabres in the battle for 30th place in the NHL's overall standing. The Canucks scored three goals in the second period, two on the power play by Yannick Weber, to clinch home-ice advantage in their first-round playoff series against the Calgary Flames.

Arizona remains at 56 points while the Sabres are at 54. After sitting idle since Monday, the Sabres play Friday in Columbus and must get at least one point to avoid clinching last. In Saturday's season finales, the Sabres host Pittsburgh while Arizona hosts Anaheim.

The Sabres and Coyotes will have an unexpected participant joining them in the April 18 draft lottery as the defending Stanley Cup champion Los Angeles Kings were eliminated from the playoffs Thursday with a 3-1 loss in Calgary.

Both big prizes in the draft had huge games Thursday night. Connor McDavid had two goals and two assists as Erie overcame a 2-0 deficit to beat visiting London, 5-2, in Game One of their Ontario Hockey League second-round playoff series. Meanwhile, Jack Eichel's two goals included an empty-netter with 18.5 seconds left as Boston University beat North Dakota, 5-3, in an NCAA Frozen Four semifinal.

The Terriers play Providence, a 4-1 winner over Nebraska-Omaha, in the final Saturday night at TD Garden, home of the Boston Bruins. Eichel is the favorite Friday to be named winner of the Hobey Baker Award as college hockey's top player. No freshman has won it since Maine's Paul Kariya in 1993.

A Sabres fan's lament: They can't lose them all

By Dave Seminara

New York Times

April 9, 2015

As a native Buffalonian, consigned by geographic fate to root for the Bills and the Sabres for four decades and counting, I've had more than a few occasions to taste the agony of defeat.

I barricaded the door of my dorm room after Scott Norwood's kick and the Bills' Super Bowl hopes sailed wide right in 1991. In the wake of the three subsequent Super Bowl blowouts, the so-called Music City Miracle and the Sabres' "no goal" debacle in the 1999 Stanley Cup finals, among many others heartbreaks, I have damaged furniture, broken remote controls, stomped holes into the floor, cursed, spat and exhibited other antisocial behavior commonly observed in asylums.

The one thing I haven't done, until now, is actively root against my teams.

The Sabres' train wreck of a season — they've lost an N.H.L.-worst 49 games and (hopefully) counting — has been tolerable, even enjoyable in a subversive way, thanks to the tantalizing prospect that they might land one of the phenoms available in the draft, Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel.

The Sabres finished with the league's worst record last season, too, but I felt no need to root against them because the competition for the cellar was meek. Despite Buffalo's peerless futility, though, the Florida Panthers, who finished 14 points ahead of the Sabres, snared the first overall pick in the lottery. This season, the stakes are higher because of the McEichel Derby. Buffalo sports teams have often been bad in recent years, but they have not been bad enough — or lucky enough — to secure the first overall pick in an N.F.L. or N.H.L. draft since the Sabres landed Pierre Turgeon in 1987.

Before this season, the N.H.L. reconfigured the lottery system to reduce the incentive for teams to tank — no doubt anticipating that plenty of teams might do just that to improve their odds of landing McDavid or Eichel, who are considered franchise-changing talents. Now the last-place team has a 20 percent chance of getting the first pick, down from 25 percent, but even if it does not win the lottery, the last-place team is guaranteed to pick second.

For most of the season, save for a disturbingly fruitful stretch last winter when the Sabres went 10-3, they have been as dreadful as fans hoped.

Buffalo, the N.H.L.'s lowest-scoring team, failed to win a single game in January, then dropped 12 of 13 in late February into March. It seemed that a dead-last finish and a top-two pick were locked up.

But tensions between the players and the fans have mounted.

"It's tough to get momentum when your fans are rooting against you," defenseman Mike Weber told The Buffalo News on March 26, after the Sabres lost at home to Arizona, their primary rival in the race to the bottom. Many Sabres fans cheered the Coyotes' overtime winner.

That embarrassment seemed to motivate the team. Four days later, the Sabres trounced the Coyotes in Arizona, outscoring them by 4-1 andouthitting them by 41-21, probably Buffalo's most spirited effort of the season. Instead of going up (down) by 8 points in the standings with six games to play, the Sabres saw their McEichel margin cut to 4.

Sabres fans, myself included, took to Twitter to denounce the team for having the audacity to win this must-lose game. The team, according to The Buffalo News, "partied hard in their Gila River Arena dressing room, gleefully shouting, singing and dancing."

Singing and dancing? This atrocious team, which has always found a way to lose — except now, when its fans really wanted it to — danced and sang, delirious after prevailing in a meaningless game that could cost the franchise the next Wayne Gretzky or Mario Lemieux?

After the win, left wing Nicolas Deslauriers said: "We've got one win. We'll try to get six other ones."

The swagger was befitting a team trying to clinch a playoff spot. Are our spiteful players now trying to win at all costs just to get back at us for turning on them?

Things went from bad to worse when the Sabres beat the Maple Leafs on April 1, cutting their McEichel Derby cushion to 2 points. On Friday night, the Sabres carried an improbable 3-2 lead into the final two minutes of a home contest against the Chicago Blackhawks, but Jonathan Toews — bless him — scored twice in 47 seconds to keep Buffalo in sole possession of 30th place.

Sabres fans, who had been hurling abuse at the team in the stands and on Twitter for playing well, exulted. "Do you believe in miracles? YES!" was among the heartfelt tributes.

The Sabres had a chance Monday to clinch last place, but they could not close the deal. They had the nerve to jump to a 4-0 lead against the Hurricanes and hold on to win, 4-3, behind 49 saves by goalie Anders Lindback.

With two games left, the Sabres have a 2-point cushion and the tiebreaker edge over the Coyotes, who lost, 4-0, on Thursday night to the Vancouver Canucks. Buffalo can clinch 30th place with a loss Friday night against the Columbus Blue Jackets, the hottest team in the league.

But I'm not getting cocky. Buffalo sports teams have a habit of abusing their fans — losing when it matters, but perhaps in this case winning when it doesn't.

Losing out on the McEichel Derby to the moribund Coyotes, a team that has finished no better than 22nd in league attendance in a decade, would be one of the most painful injustices in Buffalo's notorious sporting history. McDavid or Eichel belongs in a hockey town like Buffalo, not in a sweltering limbo with an ambivalent fan base.

Let's assume for a moment that McDavid and Eichel are the next Great One and Super Mario. Imagine losing out on such a player because your team won a few throwaway games near the end of a catastrophic season.

Players change uniforms all too frequently, but if you're from Buffalo, you support the Bills and the Sabres and pass these allegiances down to your children, cruel as that may be. It's a curse, but it's also an integral part of our culture, our identity, more important than wings, lake-effect snow and beef on weck sandwiches.

My sons, James, 5, and Leo, 7, have never lived in Buffalo, but they support the Bills and the Sabres. In 2011, Leo got an autographed football bearing the inscription "Never Give Up" from the former Bills quarterback Ryan Fitzpatrick after being punched at school for supporting the Bills. So last week he couldn't understand why I was so angry that the Sabres were beating the Blackhawks.

"Why are you rooting against our team?" he asked.

I tried to explain that we were fighting for last place and needed to keep losing to get a really good player, but he wasn't buying it.

"Fitzpatrick said never give up, Dad," Leo said.

I took his point, but as this ignominious season winds down, I will be rooting hard for a fitting conclusion: another loss. I believe in you, Sabres. I know you can do it.

Surging Blue Jackets host Sabres in home finale

By Evan Sporer

NHL.com

April 9, 2015

SABRES (23-49-8) AT BLUE JACKETS (40-35-5)

TV: MSG-B, BELL TV, FS-O

Season series: The Buffalo Sabres and Columbus Blue Jackets have split their two games, with each winning on the road. The Blue Jackets have outshot the Sabres 87-53 in the two games. Columbus forward Scott Hartnell leads all skaters with nine shots on goal.

Sabres team scope: Buffalo defenseman Andre Benoit (lower body) was absent from practice Thursday and coach Ted Nolan said the Sabres will call up a defenseman from Rochester of the American Hockey League. Goalie Chad Johnson (lower body), out since being acquired prior to the NHL Trade Deadline, skated Thursday. Goalie Matt Hackett, who has missed the past five games with a lower-body injury, also practiced but Nolan is unsure if he'll play in the Sabres' final two games. The Sabres are bracing for a Blue Jackets team that's gone 11 straight games without a regulation loss (10-0-1). "The one thing with Columbus right now is that they're on a roll, and barring injuries they would probably be in the playoffs right now," Nolan told the Sabres website. "They're a very good team." Buffalo finishes its season Saturday at home against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Blue Jackets team scope: Columbus forward Cam Atkinson should be available to play after he was cut by the skate of forward Alex Wennberg as players left the bench following a 5-0 win Wednesday against the Toronto Maple Leafs. Atkinson required 10 stitches, according to the Columbus Dispatch. Goalie Sergei Bobrovsky is expected to start against Buffalo. Defenseman Fedor Tyutin (lower body) will be a game-time decision and defenseman Ryan Murray will play, coach Todd Richards told the Columbus Dispatch. Murray played Wednesday; it was his first game since March 18. Center Brandon Dubinsky announced that he will not play for the United States in the World Cup of Hockey and instead will use the summer to rest.

Sabres' Rasmus Ristolainen enjoying career-best stretch

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
April 9, 2015

BUFFALO – It was March 14, and Zach Bogosian's injury had suddenly left the Sabres short-handed. Coach Ted Nolan needed a defenseman to fill the newcomer's big minutes, so he turned to 20-year-old Rasmus Ristolainen, one of his top prospects.

At times, Ristolainen's second NHL season had been a rough ride. He had already been playing 20 minutes many nights. Why add more to the youngster's plate?

Nolan wanted to see how Ristolainen, the No. 8 pick in 2013, would handle additional responsibilities.

"Certain guys grab the reigns when they're given a ride, and some guys choke up a little bit," Nolan said Thursday inside the First Niagara Center. "It all has to do with their personalities. But I think Ristolainen's one of those kids, he seems a little bit more mature than his age. He's really grasped it and he wants to be a real good player."

Ristolainen's enjoying the best run of his 110-game career entering tonight's road finale against the Columbus Blue Jackets.

The Finn had four goals and nine points during one recent nine-game stretch, including a three-assist outing and a goal in three straight contests. After Bogosian went down, Ristolainen skated more than 28 minutes in three consecutive games and never fewer than 24.

"Someone had to step up, so I kind of saw a good chance there," said Ristolainen, who has eight goals and 20 points in 76 games, all team highs for defensemen. "I've got a lot of ice time, so I guess it started from there."

For Nolan, Ristolainen's maturation started almost a year ago, when he arrived at summer development camp looking svelte, having shed about 30 pounds from his 6-foot-4 frame. The Sabres now list him at 219 pounds.

"You could tell his transformation with his body, the amount of work he did in the offseason," Nolan said. "He came here not just with the mission of doing well; he came here with a mission of making this team and stepping right in, and it started right from there."

Still, Ristolainen, as his awful minus-30 rating illustrates, struggled badly for months. His rating ranks 865th in the NHL. Only four players have a worse one.

"He still had his moments," Nolan said. "He's 20 years old. To play the minutes he's played and the situations he's played, he had a great opportunity here, and he took advantage of it. So he's going to get better and better when he's 24, 25, 26, 27. That's when you're really going to see the real one. But watching the process every day is going to be a treat."

Playing big minutes earlier this trying season would've been hard.

"Of course, if I would have played 25 minutes throughout the whole year, there is some tough, tough time, for sure," Ristolainen said. "But for the next years I just (got to) try to keep the level pretty much the same, that's there's no too much up and down."

If the struggles bothered Ristolainen, he never let on.

"He's a pretty quiet person, so I don't think it rattles him very much, and if it does, he doesn't show it," Bogosian said. "He hides it really well."

Bogosian, the No. 3 pick by the Thrashers in 2008, understands Ristolainen's plight well. He also cracked the NHL as an 18-year-old just months after the draft. Playing in Atlanta, a market that received scant attention, helped him.

"I think everyone handles it differently," Bogosian said. "I was fortunate where I wasn't under the microscope every day. But it's something with Rasmus, he's a good young player. He's going to have ups and downs like every other player. Those might be a little more magnified than maybe some of the other guys just because he's so young. I think he's handled it really well."

Sabres' top prospect Reinhart assigned to Rochester

By Matthew Collier

WGR 550

April 9, 2015

Sam Reinhart will end his 2014-15 season as a Rochester American.

According to his WHL team, the Sabres have assigned their top prospect to Rochester after his junior season came to an end earlier this week. Reinhart's Kootenay Ice club was eliminated from the post-season by the Calgary Hitmen in seven games despite the 2013 second overall pick scoring six goals in the series.

After scoring just one point in first nine games in Buffalo, the 19-year-old was assigned back to juniors, where he scored 19 goals and 46 assists in 47 games. Midway through the season, Reinhart led Team Canada to gold in the World Junior Championships.

The Amerks play on the road Thursday against the Lake Erie Monsters, then home on Friday against the Toronto Marlies. If he is in the lineup Thursday, Reinhart could play a total of six games. The Amerks have already been eliminated from the post-season, so his AHL experience will be limited to the half dozen games to end the year.

The final stretch will give the Sabres' organization a chance to gage how far their top prospect has come in his development. He will be eligible to play in Rochester next season as well.

Sabres hold their last practice of the season

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

April 9, 2015

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- For some today is a sad day and for others it's a happy one as the Sabres went through their final practice of this season. Of course they will have one or two morning skates, but they are not really practices.

For Ted Nolan he said, "I look at it like a first practice, I've learned to embrace now and today, you never know what's going to happen tomorrow. We tried to bring our best and enjoy the guys, it's our last trip, but to even watch their passing today I mentioned to one of the coaches that their passing is even getting better, so in one way I'm sad it's over, but in another way you look at it that some guys have really improved."

Matt Ellis is not ready to hang it up and Matt Ellis dearly loves the game of hockey and to play it so you probably know how he feels today, "Those thoughts always cross your mind, you never know when it's going to be your last day, so for me this is a familiar feeling because I seem to go through it every year, but you try to make the most of each day, live in the present and whatever happens, happens." Ellis added, "I took a look around and tried to embrace being here."

With Ellis saying something like that it doesn't sound like he's ready to give it up, "Yes, the passion still burns for the game, physically I feel great, mentally I feel pretty good and there are still things I want to accomplish throughout my career." Ellis will be 34 when camp starts and has played 12 professional seasons."

The Sabres play a red hot Columbus team and most likely a desperate Pittsburgh team. Nolan likes that the competition will be there, "If you look at the last one, we played, Carolina was out, we're out and when you have two out, it's tougher, but when you have one team going in and you know they're going to come at you with their best, you'd better bring your best."

Andre Benoit is not going to be able to play, so Buffalo will call up a defenseman after the Amerks game Thursday night in Cleveland.

Sabres relish spoiler role to close out season

By Zac Hirschbeck

Sabres.com

April 9, 2015

Following a change of pace in the form of a 3-on-3 tournament Wednesday, the Buffalo Sabres returned to the ice on Thursday morning to prepare for their final two regular season games.

Although the players enjoyed the opportunity to let loose and have a little bit of fun with their teammates, they also understood the necessity to refocus and prepare for their upcoming opponents.

"It's been a pretty tough season here at some points, but you have to remember that you love what you do and yesterday was a good way to do that," Patrick Kaleta said. "It was good to bond a little more as a team, but with two games left to go, you have to play your heart out and give everything you got."

The Sabres' penultimate game, which is also their final road game this season, will see the club take on one of the NHL's hottest teams in the Columbus Blue Jackets.

With their 5-0 win over Toronto last night, the Blue Jackets have now gone 11 straight games without a regulation loss (10-0-1), one short of their franchise record.

Although they have long been eliminated from playoff contention, Columbus' strong play hasn't gone unnoticed by Sabres head coach Ted Nolan.

"You know they're going to come at you with their best and you better bring your best," Nolan said. "The one thing with Columbus right now is that they're on a roll, and barring injuries they would probably be in the playoffs right now. They're a very good team. They're well coached, they have some really good young players and it's going to be a good challenge for us."

That challenge is one that the team welcomes. While putting an end to Columbus' win streak is appealing in itself, the Sabres may also have the ability to ruin Pittsburgh's playoff aspirations back at the First Niagara Center on Saturday.

"We want to play spoiler and we want to compete," said Tyler Ennis. "There are guys playing for jobs and everyone wants to get better. That's how you have to look at these last two games."

Thursday's practice also represented the last time the Sabres would convene for a regular season practice.

Although this season has been a difficult one, Nolan managed to find positivity in his club's final skate together.

"To even watch their passing today, I think they're improving and their confidence is getting better too," Nolan said. "In one way it's sad that it's over, but in another way it's fun to look at how some guys really improved."

That improvement has also helped Nolan devote his time entirely upon the present day. While there remains uncertainty as to how the club may be re-shaped during the offseason, Nolan has continued to concentrate on his current responsibilities.

"Over the course of my career I've really learned to embrace now and today," Nolan said. "You never know what's going to happen tomorrow and no one does, but you certainly know what you have control over today."

With Andre Benoit still nursing an upper-body injury, the Sabres are expected to recall a defenseman from Rochester prior to tomorrow night's game. The club has yet to make a decision as to who will take Benoit's place. The Amerks play in Cleveland tonight against the Lake Erie Monsters to start a three-games-in-three-nights weekend.

Matt Hackett also practiced for a second straight day on Thursday. The young goaltender has not seen game action since March 28 in Colorado due to soreness and swelling in his surgically-repaired right knee. While Nolan was encouraged by Hackett's ability to join his teammates on the ice for a second straight day, he's unsure as to whether or not he will start either of the club's final two games.

Chad Johnson continued to work his way back from injury as well. He split time with Hackett during practice, but will not travel with the team to Columbus.

Practice Lineup

26 Matt Moulson – 22 Johan Larsson – 63 Tyler Ennis
82 Marcus Foligno – 25 Mikhail Grigorenko – 12 Brian Gionta
19 Cody Hodgson – 84 Phil Varone – 20 Zac Dalpe
44 Nicolas Deslauriers – 37 Matt Ellis – 36 Patrick Kaleta

24 Tyson Strachan – 47 Zach Bogosian
41 Andrej Meszaros – 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
44 Nicolas Deslauriers – 51 Nikita Zadorov (Deslauriers rotated in with Benoit absent)

35 Anders Lindback
31 Matt Hackett
33 Chad Johnson