



Buffalo Sabres

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Blackhawks-Sabres preview

By Jack Cassidy
Associated Press
April 2, 2015

Having clinched a seventh consecutive playoff berth their last time out, the Chicago Blackhawks can now set their sights on the Central Division crown.

They can move within one point of that top spot with a win Friday night against the Buffalo Sabres, whose tanking effort has seemingly been set aside following consecutive victories.

Chicago (47-24-6) faced a third straight loss Sunday to drop out of the Central's top three and into a wild-card slot, but mounted a third-period comeback to edge Winnipeg 4-3 in what coach Joel Quenneville called "probably the No. 1" game of the season.

Since that victory, the Blackhawks have enjoyed dominant wins over both Los Angeles and Vancouver to reach 100 points for the fifth time since 2008-09, and after clinching a postseason berth Thursday, they currently sit just three points back of first-place Nashville with one game in hand.

"The last three games, I definitely like the trend," Quenneville said. "We had a stretch there where we were very ordinary. ... We got more speed to our game, we got more balance to our lines, we have more urgency to our game.

"We should be happy now with clinching the playoff spot, but we still got some work to do."

Jonathan Toews has sparked Chicago's run with three goals in his last four games. He scored the go-ahead tally in Thursday's 3-1 victory over the Canucks for his 64th point of the season, tying Patrick Kane for the team lead.

Goaltending has also been a bright point for Chicago. Corey Crawford stopped 35 of 36 shots against Vancouver, and backup Scott Darling held the Kings to one goal on 32 shots.

"I think we're more focused on playing good hockey, playing the right way," Crawford said. "I think if you do that, the wins will come, the points will come. I think we did that tonight."

Darling, who has a 0.37 goals-against average in three appearances this month, figures to get the start Friday. He'll likely be opposed by Buffalo's Anders Lindback, who is in the midst of his first winning streak this season.

Lindback and the Sabres (22-47-8) have won two straight, beating fellow bottom-feeders Arizona and Toronto. The Sabres' 4-3 win over the Maple Leafs on Wednesday upped their scoring average to 3.4 over their last five contests, a significant improvement from their league-worst 1.76 mark through the first 72 games.

That improvement, however, may not be welcome. The Sabres, whose home fans cheered Arizona's overtime win over Buffalo on March 26, currently own the NHL's worst record, but trail the Coyotes by only two points.

Should the Sabres clinch the lowest point total, they would have a league-best 20 percent chance at winning the NHL Draft Lottery, and at worst would end up with the second selection.

Still, that goal is not one that coach Ted Nolan will allow his team to focus on.

"It's about the integrity of the game," Nolan told the Sabres' official website. "You're not going to tell professional athletes not to work and not to compete. This group here, they're giving us what they have to give for the last little while here."

A 6-2 victory over the Sabres on Oct. 11 was the Blackhawks' sixth straight in the series since a 2-1 loss on Dec. 11, 2009.

Sabres' Dalpe doing all he can to land a spot

By Amy Moritz

Buffalo News

April 2, 2015

Zac Dalpe will be looking for a job.

It's the nature of the hockey business after the unrestricted free agent signed a one-year deal with the Buffalo Sabres over the summer. Win or lose, the 25-year-old would be looking to secure a spot with an organization for the 2015-16 season.

He gave himself a boost on Wednesday night, scoring a goal for the Sabres in their 4-3 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs. The showcase opportunity continues for the next five games, starting Friday night when the Sabres host the Chicago Blackhawks.

Around the Sabres dressing room there is plenty of discussion about pride and the integrity of the game. Collectively, the group is committed to playing for each other. Individually, many are hoping to make favorable impressions.

Dalpe was a second-round draft pick of Carolina in 2008. He played two seasons at Ohio State before turning pro and spent three seasons in the Hurricanes' organization, mostly with its American Hockey League affiliate.

He played in 55 games with the Vancouver Canucks last season, notching four goals and three assists, and signed with the Sabres as an unrestricted free agent in July.

Dalpe spent the majority of the season back in the AHL with the Rochester Americans. On his second recall to the Sabres, he is starting to find his stride.

"I've played quite a bit of games now where hopefully someone notices that I can skate and shoot the puck," Dalpe said. "It's taken me awhile to kind of work my way into the NHL speed, but I think I caught it at the right time. Hopefully someone will notice, whether it's Buffalo or whoever. I don't look at the future that way. I just kind of play every game. I know it's a cliché, but I play every game and bring my best and work hard and somebody at the end of the day will like it.

"Every game you try to kind of highlight what you're good at and assess yourself. ... With me I have to skate and shoot in order to feel good. I try to do that all the time."

Dalpe's game against Toronto left a favorable impression on Sabres coach Ted Nolan, and not just for scoring his first goal in 16 games with the team this season.

"The one thing he can do is skate and last night was arguably the best game he's played for us, not because he scored the goal but he had a number of chances," Nolan said. "He got the puck out. He was first on the forecheck. He was good on the backcheck. I thought it was good to see."

Opportunity has been the buzzword for the Sabres roster, which features a number of players who spent the majority of the season with Rochester. Some have excelled with the chance. Others are riding their own personal roller coaster.

Nolan singled out Johann Larsson and Phil Varone as two players who have helped their cause with their recent play.

Larsson was rather unimpressive during previous call-ups to Buffalo. His first 20 games with the Sabres this year produced just three points and an average of 9:47 on the ice. During 13 games in March, Larsson had three goals, nine points and averaged 19:19.

"Larsson comes to mind right off the bat," Nolan said. "His first time up, he played OK. I tell everybody OK is not good enough. He's played a lot better. He's moving his feet. He's making some plays. He's being aggressive. He's really taken advantage of it. Phil Varone, I thought early on he did the same thing then he tapered off. The way he played last night was another indication how he's trying to take advantage of it also. Those two off the top of my head are the best so far taking advantage of it."

As players with something to prove find their comfort zone, their production naturally increases. The Sabres have scored three or more goals for five straight games for the first time in 14 months. Their last stretch of this much offensive production came from Jan. 14-25, 2014. And where once the team looked like it would finish with historic lows in goals, which it set last year with 150, the Sabres have 144 goals with five games left.

A two-game winning streak. Bunches of goals. More confidence.

But for guys like Dalpe, the approach stays the same.

"Yeah, it's a boost, but if you look at our schedule coming up we have five games in the next eight days," Dalpe said. "You can ride the wave a little bit and stay high, but you also gotta kind of come back down. ... You can't dwell on the win too much."

"It's a short-term memory game as far as hockey goes, regardless of where you are in the playoff race or in the standings. That's how I approach it."

Sabres notebook: Kaleta gets an 'A' for inspiration

By Amy Moritz

Buffalo News

April 2, 2015

Patrick Kaleta failed to find the right words. Honored and humbled and proud were the best he could offer, but even those didn't accurately convey all he was feeling.

On Wednesday, before the Buffalo Sabres played the Toronto Maple Leafs, defenseman Mike Weber made a presentation to Kaleta with the help of coach Ted Nolan.

It was a jersey with an embroidered "A," making the Western New York native an alternate captain for his hometown team.

"We were in a meeting and Teddy called down Webs and he gave Webs a jersey and he threw it up to me and it had an 'A' on it and Webs said it was mine the rest of the way," Kaleta said Thursday after the team had an optional practice at First Niagara Center. "I was very, very proud and humbled by the 'A,' and it means the world to me.

"I was at a loss for words. I don't really know how to describe it. You dream your whole life to play for the Buffalo Sabres. Now that you're playing for them, getting an 'A' is like another dream come true that you work your whole life toward. I'm just honored and just try to do my best to represent the team and the city of Buffalo the best I can. It's an unreal experience for me."

Kaleta did not skate on Thursday, instead doing his off-ice therapy as he continues to work his way back from a knee injury.

Kaleta has suffered through a number of injuries, including essentially breaking his face when blocking a shot in an exhibition game this season. He battled back to the Sabres after an AHL demotion last year. Through it all, he never lost belief in himself or his place in the organization.

And through it all he gained the respect of his teammates.

"It was kind of inspiring when a fellow teammate has that much respect for another one and doing a gesture like that in front of his teammates," Nolan said. "You look at these guys and think they're big, burly individuals all the time, but they do have some emotion and you see some tears coming out of Patty's eyes. He said good thing the room was dark or you would have seen them more. It was very emotional. It was a great gesture."

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It took him 34 games with the Sabres this year to register a point. Matt Ellis picked up two in Wednesday's win over Toronto – a goal and an assist.

And as good as it felt to score, it was even better Thursday morning when his children woke up.

"My sons are big hockey fans," Ellis said. "The first thing they do every morning is get online and check all the scores from the night before, before I'm even out of bed, so it was a good feeling this morning to have the boys excited for me after dad scored one last night.

"At this stage of the game you just plow ahead. You always know your stat line. There's no better reminder of it than my 8-year-old son who understands the game now. You try to go about your business every day. Play the game the right way. Be resilient. Follow the process. There's no secret to scoring. You gotta get pucks to the net

and bodies. Try to bring it day in, day out. You hope for a night like last night, for an opportunity and to break that goose egg."

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The Chicago Blackhawks arrive in Buffalo without Patrick Kane in the lineup, but the Buffalo native is inching closer to a return.

Kane was back practicing with the Blackhawks on Wednesday as he continues his rehabilitation from a broken left collarbone. The initial timetable for his return from the injury he suffered Feb. 24 was 12 weeks. Kane is five weeks into the recovery process.

"My mobility's fine," Kane said to Chicago media Wednesday. "The biggest thing right now would probably be putting some impact on it and actually taking a hit or a one-timer, something like that."

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Chad Johnson faced some shots at an optional Sabres practice Thursday morning. The goaltender was set to make his Sabres' debut against Ottawa March 6 but suffered a lower body injury in the morning skate.

Johnson seemed eager to get back to work on Thursday, but Nolan was preaching caution.

"He mentioned that to us the other day," Nolan said. "We kind of slushed it off as wishful thinking. He's out taking some shots today. Sometimes people recover quicker. It looks like he's on track. I just think it's words right now until we talk to the medical team and see where he's at."

Nolan left the door open for Matt Hackett to return in net. The goaltender, still recovering from reconstructive knee surgery, has been dealing with postgame swelling.

"We're going to give him some extra time to rest without going on the ice and see how he recovers so he could be ready next game. Who knows," Nolan said.

Nolan said it was unlikely Zemgus Girgensons would return this season. The forward has been on injured reserve since Feb. 25, missing the last 16 games after taking a slap shot to his ankle.

Blackhawks visit Sabres, aim for fourth straight win

By Brian Hedger

NHL.com

April 2, 2015

BLACKHAWKS (47-24-6) at SABRES (22-47-8)

TV: CSN-CH, MSG-B, BELL TV

Season series: Andrew Shaw was one of six Chicago Blackhawks to score a goal in a 6-2 win against the Buffalo Sabres at United Center on Oct. 11. Brandon Saad had three assists.

Blackhawks team scope: Chicago clinched a berth in the Stanley Cup Playoffs for the seventh straight season with its 3-1 home win against the Vancouver Canucks on Thursday. The Blackhawks trail the St. Louis Blues by one point for second place in the Central Division and are three behind the Nashville Predators for the top spot. Chicago and St. Louis each has played one fewer game than Nashville. "It's a lot about confidence," center Marcus Kruger said of the Blackhawks' three-game winning streak. "We got confidence winning a tough game and scoring with 30 seconds left (at the Winnipeg Jets on Mar. 29). I thought we played a pretty good game there and to get that win was maybe a little boost for us."

Sabres team scope: Buffalo has won two games in a row but is still last in the NHL standings, a position that would give it the best chance of winning the lottery for the top pick in the 2015 NHL Draft. The Sabres enter Friday two points behind the Arizona Coyotes, who are 29th in the League. "Whether we're in the basement, it's about the integrity of the game," coach Ted Nolan told the Buffalo News. "It feels good when you see a group like this work and get rewarded for a win." Forward Matt Moulson has two goals and three assists in the past five games, and defenseman Andrej Meszaros has four goals and an assist in the past three.

Bailey chose Maple Leafs over Sabres

By Mike Zeisberger

Toronto Sun

April 2, 2015

BUFFALO — Playing in just his second NHL game, young Casey Bailey has already added fuel to the fire that is the Sabres-Maple Leafs rivalry.

After all, how do you say no to Buffalo moneybags owner Terry Pegula?

Keep in mind that when Bailey played at Penn State, the team's home rink was called the Pegula Ice Arena, part of the \$102-million US donation Terry and his wife, Kim, made for the facility and the school's hockey program.

As a result, when Bailey became a free agent and opted to sign with the Leafs over Pegula's Sabres recently, well, there were more than a few eyebrows raised around the hockey world.

With just one pro contest under his belt, there was Bailey on Wednesday night, playing on a line with Zach Sill and Richard Panik, facing Pegula's Sabres at the First Niagara Center.

The young forward played just eight shifts in the Leafs 4-3 loss, but Leafs management hopes he'll become a key cog in the team's rebuild, much to Pegula's chagrin, we imagine.

"It's a learning experience for me," Bailey said after the game. "It's a step by step process."

For his part, Bailey said he hopes Pegula "understands" the decision he made, one that came after Leafs president Brendan Shanahan persuaded him that Toronto was the ideal fit.

"He made me feel very comfortable," Bailey said of Shanahan. "He has a lot of passion, a lot of heart. His (sales pitch) just made sense."

And with that, Bailey gave the nod to the Leafs, a decision that came despite the efforts of Sabres GM Tim Murray to woo him here to the Queen City,

According to Bailey, joining the Leafs was not an indictment of Murray's sales pitch; instead it was an endorsement of the one forwarded by Shanahan.

"There is opportunity here," said the 6-foot-3 forward, who led Penn State in scoring with 40 points.

Of note: The Sabres were not open to having Bailey join the parent club right away. Had he jumped right into the Buffalo lineup it would have eclipsed a year from his entry level contract, which the Sabres didn't want to do.

The Leafs did. And now, instead of being a member of Team Pegula, he's become a foe.

MacKinnon: Fans will not forgive nor forget if Sabres lose No. 1 pick

By John MacKinnon

Edmonton Journal

April 2, 2015

EDMONTON - It has been noted before that this NHL business of rewarding abject failure with the hope of future success in the form of top draft picks for last-place teams can put the short-term objectives of a team's coach and players in bizarre conflict with management.

Players and coaches do their best to win; they rarely, if ever, have any incentive not to. They are judged, after all, on current performance. They are proud professionals.

Management, their eyes squarely on those top draft picks, can up their chances of obtaining the No. 1 pick by off-loading talent so their current team, despite its best efforts, sinks to the bottom of the NHL standings.

This season, more than in recent memory, the conflict has entangled fans, particularly those of the Buffalo Sabres.

That conflict was starkly demonstrated this week by an email sent from one Sabres season-ticket holder to John Vogl, the Sabres' beat reporter for The Buffalo News.

As follows: "For two years we were polite, did not boo, etc., because we realized we could get some great talent in the draft to move forward ..."

"Now (Sabres head coach Ted) Nolan and these players are acting like they are in the Stanley Cup Finals (one down six more wins to go — REALLY?)."

"They are kicking the fans in the groin. If they blow this opportunity for (Erie Otters star centre Connor) McDavid or (Boston University star centre Jack) Eichel, the fans will not forget and will not forgive."

So the Sabres are "kicking the fans in the groin" ... by doing their jobs, by trying their best to win games, to entertain the paying customers?

One can only imagine that particular fan's displeasure over the Sabres' 4-3 victory over the Toronto Maple Leafs on Wednesday night.

Good grief. Thus does a major professional sports league stumble into the twilight zone. And the fault lies with the lottery system, which is obviously inadequate as a disincentive to be lousy.

The NHL believes that a phased-in tweaking of the draft lottery, implemented in 1995 owing to some loose talk of tanking by one of the then-owners of the Ottawa Senators, is sufficient to safeguard the integrity of the game.

The weighted odds allotted to the bottom-feeders are meant to be a disincentive for teams thinking of sewerage a season or two or three. Evidence suggests otherwise.

The Oilers, after all, picked first overall three straight years, 2010-2012, selecting Taylor Hall, Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Nail Yakupov

The best outcome to discourage teams from even being perceived as performing a regular-season cannonball this June would be for one of the outlier non-playoff teams to select first overall.

At the moment, Buffalo (20 per cent); Arizona (13.5), Edmonton (11.5) and Toronto (9.5) are at the head of the lottery pack. The sliding probability scale includes the 14 non-playoff teams and ranges from 20 per cent to one per cent.

It would serve the bottom-feeders right if the one percenter (currently the Los Angeles Kings), the 14th-worst team in the NHL, wound up with the gifted McDavid.

In a deep draft such as this one, the Sabres, Oilers, Coyotes and the rest all will come away with a good player. But things have gone sideways when fans are openly rooting for losses so their team can grab the phenom.

Hockey world 'Short Shifts': Could Buffalo Sabres entice Mike Babcock to coach them if they land Connor McDavid in NHL Draft?

By Jim Matheson
Edmonton Journal
April 2, 2015

EDMONTON — The one team we're forgetting to mention in the possible Mike Babcock free-agent sweepstakes is Buffalo.

Terry Pegula, who owns both the National Hockey League's Sabres and the National Football League's Bills, has bundles of money and likes to make a splash.

He could sell Babcock on coaching Connor McDavid, who is being billed as the next Sidney Crosby — that's if Buffalo scores McDavid in June's entry draft.

We know one thing: Sabres general manager Tim Murray will move heaven and earth to get McDavid if his team doesn't win the draft lottery and falls to No. 2 behind, say, the Arizona Coyotes.

That includes trading their top pick from last year, centre Sam Reinhart.

I can't imagine he'd also move his best young defenceman, Rasmus Ristolainen, who is supposed to be taking Tyler Myers' place on Buffalo's blue-line, but they have two additional first-round picks acquired in trades last year.

If Arizona had the first pick and flipped it, they'd have Jack Eichel and Reinhart in the middle, a pretty nice daily double.

"I'd do that in a heartbeat," said one NHL amateur scout. "Reinhart could be a No. 2 centre running their power play."

Brian Gionta captaining Sabres through rough season

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
April 2, 2015

BUFFALO – Sabres captain Brian Gionta has finally started scoring again. With two more assists Wednesday, the winger has four goals and 11 points in the last nine contests, his hottest stretch in more than a year.

Gionta, after months of offensive struggles, looks like the slick veteran who has averaged 26 goals in his full NHL seasons. The production has helped buoy the Sabres' late-season goal surge and a two-game winning streak entering tonight's tilt against the Chicago Blackhawks inside the First Niagara Center.

But these days, Gionta's offense is a bonus. The Sabres signed the respected 36-year-old, a 2003 Stanley Cup winner, to help shepherd the young team through an uncertain rebuilding process.

"His leadership alone has helped us get to where we are with the steps we're making with the younger guys," Sabres winger Patrick Kaleta said Thursday. "Numbers are numbers. I don't believe it shows if you're a good hockey player or not. It's the way you approach the game, the way you play the game, and Brian does everything the right way."

Through all the losing, through all the uncertainty this season, the Sabres have mostly stayed in a good place. Players are upbeat and still appear to enjoy coming to the rink every day.

"I try to stay as positive as I can," Gionta said. "You come in and you do the same thing day in and day out and hopefully it rubs off on other people."

Teammates see Gionta's professionalism and try to follow in his footsteps, Sabres center Matt Ellis said.

"I think there's always just that trust factor from the guys in the locker room to know that Gio's going to be leading the charge, day in and day out, the way he prepares, the way he takes care of himself, the way he approaches the game," Ellis said.

The Sabres' awful record hasn't changed Gionta's approach, which is "the integrity of the game," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said.

"Whether you're a team going in the playoffs or going for the Stanley Cup, which he was a part of, his approach hasn't changed," Nolan said. "I think that's how you have longevity in this game, that's how you win championships, with people like that. Brian's a shining example to our young guys what it takes."

"He's been in the game 14 years, never been late for a meeting, never been late for a practice. There's a couple young kids here that have been late a couple times, only been in the league six months. So it's a real good teaching agenda."

Players gravitated to Gionta, Montreal's captain for four seasons, immediately. Nolan awarded him the prestigious 'C' before the season opener.

"It was an easy room to come into," Gionta said. "They're very accepting, and guys were great with the transition with the new guys that came in, myself included."

The Sabres felt Gionta's absence after he suffered an upper-body injury Dec. 21, losing 12 out of 13 games without him. Nolan noticed players felt more comfortable when he returned to practice weeks later, comparing his presence to that of a parent.

"He's got that great balance between the openness and the accountability factor," Ellis said. "Guys can come in with anything. He can settle the room down or he can take control of a room. It's that comfort level. It starts to rub off on guys."

"I think that's a sign of a great leader, he's able to do what's needed, whether it's a pat on the back or hold someone accountable, Gio goes about it the right way. There's some guys that have different leadership styles, and the way Gio does it, he does it the right way."

Ellis and Kaleta have played a combined 694 NHL games in the last nine seasons. They understand the game well. But both veterans try to pick up whatever they can from Gionta.

"It's been a learning experience and a real pleasure to watch a guy like Gio and what he does on a day-to-day basis," Ellis said. "It never hurts also that he's a winner, and guys know that he's a champion."

Kaleta added: "If I can be a sponge and learn one thing from Brian, I'm going to be a better person, better hockey player."

Sabres' Patrick Kaleta honored to wear letter: 'I was at a loss for words'

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 2, 2015

BUFFALO – It was Wednesday morning, and before the Sabres hit the ice, Ted Nolan had some business to take care of in a team meeting. The coach handed Mike Weber a jersey, which the defenseman then tossed to winger Patrick Kaleta.

The jersey was Kaleta's No. 36 with an 'A' stitched on it, meaning Weber wanted the heart-and-soul player to take over his alternate captaincy.

Emotion overwhelmed Kaleta. The 28-year-old Angola native had tears in his eyes. Teammates hugged him and shook his hand.

"I was at a loss for words," a proud Kaleta said Thursday inside the First Niagara Center. "I don't really know how to describe it. You dream your whole life to play for the Buffalo Sabres. Now that you're playing for them, getting an 'A' is like another dream come true that you work your life toward.

"I'm just honored and try to do my best to represent the team and city of Buffalo as best I can. It's an unreal experience for me."

Kaleta, a free agent after the season, will wear the 'A' for what could be the final five games of his Sabres career. He sported it for the first time Wednesday. Weber had been wearing it for injured defenseman Josh Gorges. Kaleta, who plans to have one of the jerseys framed, last wore a letter in junior.

"Being able to wear it in my hometown and for this team, the blue and gold, it's hard to explain," Kaleta said. "It really means the world to me."

Nolan believes Weber giving his letter to Kaleta shows how much the Sabres care for each other.

"When a fellow teammate has that much respect for another one and doing a gesture like that in front of your teammates, sometimes you look at these guys and you think they're big, burly, tough individuals all the time," Nolan said. "They do have some emotion. You do see some tears coming out of Patty's eyes. He said, 'Lucky thing the room was dark, or you would've seen it more.' It was very emotional. It was a great gesture."

Nolan added: "That's one thing we try to instill, a group that cares for one other, because a group that cares for one another usually plays well together going forward. To see that, it was great to see."

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Nolan said defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen (sick) will return tonight against the Chicago Blackhawks after missing Wednesday's 4-3 win against Toronto. Ristolainen skated in the Sabres' optional practice Thursday.

Meanwhile, Nolan said goalie Matt Hackett, who didn't dress the last two games due to soreness, is resting and could be available Friday.

Goalie Chad Johnson, out since hurting his ankle March 6, hopes he can return late next week before the season ends. Nolan seems less optimistic than Johnson the newcomer can play.

Johnson, Ristolainen take part in practice on Thursday

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

April 2, 2015

Country music pumped out of the sound system as a handful of players took the ice Thursday morning for an optional skate following the Buffalo Sabres' 4-3 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs on Wednesday.

Defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen, who missed the game because of the flu, skated, as did goaltender Chad Johnson, who has been out since March 6 with an ankle injury.

Sabres coach Ted Nolan said that Ristolainen should be available to play Friday night against the Chicago Blackhawks. He was less optimistic about Johnson being able to return to the lineup before the season ends on April 11. But Johnson hopes to be ready to go by that weekend.

Johnson took some shots during practice and worked on some in-game scenarios like moving from post to post. Most importantly perhaps, he continues to get more comfortable putting pressure on that right leg as he manages the different pain thresholds.

"It's definitely a tough situation. If you have two games, I don't know what it really will do, but just personally, it'll be nice to get in and sort of get acquainted with everything and get my feet wet in the organization here," he said. "It's just exciting just to know I might be able to get in a couple games. But again, I don't want to get my hopes up too much because if it's not right then I'm not going to push it."

Johnson was injured on the last shot he faced during the morning skate in Ottawa before his first scheduled start. He's under contract for next season, but hopes he can still make a difference this year.

Buffalo acquired him along with a third-round pick from the New York Islanders for goaltender Michal Neuvirth on March 2.

"My whole perspective was to come in and be a positive influence for the team and try to help them win hockey games," Johnson said. "That was for this year and that was for next year too. It would only be two games possibly or a game, but it's still good to get in and let people see that I can contribute to the team here and make them better.

"If it happens, it happens. If not then I'll definitely look forward to it next year."

As for the country music? Johnson thinks Cody McCormick, who skated with the team without any pads on as he recovers from blood clots, may have had something to do with it.

"I heard some Carrie Underwood some hopefully the guys and everybody kept their minds in the right places," he said. "It was definitely an interesting playlist today."

Goaltender Matt Hackett did not skate as he continues to heal from a knee injury sustained last April. Nolan said they'll manage his practice time and that he could possibly be ready to go against Chicago.

Kaleta 'proud and humbled' to serve as alternate captain

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

April 2, 2015

Playing for the team you cheered on as a kid is one great accomplishment, but Patrick Kaleta learned Wednesday that serving as an alternate captain for that team can mean something much more.

Kaleta served as an alternate captain for the first time in his career Wednesday night in Buffalo's 4-3 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs. It was an experience he had trouble putting into words.

When Sabres coach Ted Nolan and defenseman Mike Weber presented him with a jersey with the alternate captain's "A" on the front during a team meeting Wednesday morning, the Angola, N.Y. native admitted that he got pretty emotional.

Weber had been serving as an alternate captain with Josh Gorges out for the season with a lower-body injury, but Weber decided to pass the honor onto his long-time teammate.

"Webs said it was mine the rest of the way," Kaleta said. "I'm just very proud and humbled by the 'A' and it means the world to me."

He sustained a knee injury last November while with the Rochester Americans of the American Hockey League that he's still in the process of rehabbing. In February, he had bone chips removed from it and he feels like his game has improved drastically since having that surgery.

He's played four games since then. Against Toronto, he registered four hits in 8:16, including 2:38 on the penalty kill.

"Last night was probably the best I've felt the whole season," he said. "You still have to manage it and be smart with it. That's why I have therapy days like today and just being smart with your body, knowing your body and preparing yourself for the games to go out and do what I need to do."

Nolan has always been a big proponent of team building and he thinks Weber's gesture was a great sign of the team coming together, especially in a difficult season when positive results have been tough to come by.

"That's one thing we try to instill – a group that cares for one another because a group that cares for one another usually plays well together moving forward," Nolan said. "It was great to see. When you see one guy who really cares about another guy who is actually from this city, it was great to see."

Kaleta has dealt with a slew of injuries in his career including, but not limited to the knee injury, a broken hand and broken bones in his face from a high slap shot. And through all that adversity, he's found his way back to playing a regular shift in the NHL.

"I try to lead by example and even for something like my injuries, seeing how hard I had to work to get back and the perseverance of being sent down and trying to work my way back to playing in the NHL hopefully can inspire and help out the younger guys," he said.

"I truly believe that it has. One of the best things about playing hockey and being on this team is having the respect of your teammates. I'd do anything for any of those guys and I think that's one of the most important things in hockey – being able to have that bond with your teammates."