



Buffalo Sabres

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Toews scores 2 in rallying Blackhawks to 4-3 win over Sabres

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

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BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Jonathan Toews is making erasing late-game Chicago Blackhawks' deficits a regular habit.

The Blackhawks captain scored goals 47 seconds apart — including the winner with 56 seconds left — to spark a 4-3 win over the last-place Buffalo Sabres on Friday night. Toews' latest clutch performance came five days after he capped a two-goal, third-period comeback by scoring with 31 seconds left in a 4-3 win over Winnipeg, his hometown.

"He's had a big, big week," coach Joel Quenneville said. "He's a special player, and the bigger the stage, the bigger the response."

With the Blackhawks in jeopardy of squandering a 2-1 lead to the NHL's worst team and a chance to inch closer to Central Division-leading Nashville, Toews came up big by scoring his 27th and 28th goals of the season.

He tied the game with 1:43 left with a gritty effort in front. After Buffalo goalie Anders Lindback stopped Duncan Keith's blast from the blue line, the rebound trickled in front, where Toews shoveled it in under the goalie's glove hand while he was falling forward.

That got a large crowd of Blackhawks' fans in Buffalo on their feet.

They cheered even louder when Toews scored again to cap a two-on-one break. Brandon Saad drove into the Sabres' zone and cut into the middle before dropping a no-look pass to Toews, who snapped a shot just inside the right post.

"Obviously, we're not too happy with the way we let up control of the game halfway through," Toews said. "Maybe we got a little bit too comfortable."

Chicago was playing on consecutive nights after a playoff-berth-clinching 3-1 home win over Vancouver.

The Blackhawks (48-24-6) have now won four straight and vaulted a point ahead of second-place St. Louis and a point behind Nashville entering the final week of the season.

Keith and Patrick Sharp also scored for Chicago, which set a franchise record for road wins by improving its record to 24-14-1.

Marcus Foligno scored twice and Johan Larsson also scored for Buffalo.

"A bounce here and there," Foligno said. "It ends up a two-on-one and Jonathan Toews going down one on one with the goalie. He's going to put it in 10 times out of 10."

And it wasn't lost on Foligno how many cheers went up when Chicago pulled ahead.

"When I scored, I didn't hear too much," he said, "But it is what it is right now. We know our fans are awesome. And obviously, there were a lot of Chicago fans probably because of No. 88 over there on that side."

Foligno was referring to Blackhawks forward Patrick Kane, who is from Buffalo. Kane is sidelined with a broken clavicle, but made the trip to his hometown and watched from the press box.

There are also numerous Sabres fans who have spent much of the season openly rooting for Buffalo to finish last. That would secure a guaranteed shot at selecting one of two highly touted draft prospects: Erie Otters center Connor McDavid or Boston University center Jack Eichel.

With the loss, the Sabres (23-47-8) remained in 30th, two points behind Arizona.

The Sabres stunned the Blackhawks by scoring three straight.

The run was capped with 7:18 left when captain Brian Gionta fed Foligno cutting across the middle. Blackhawks defenseman Brent Seabrook knocked the puck loose, and nearly tapped it into his own net, before goalie Scott Darling kicked out his right skate. The rebound came right back to Foligno, who swept it in.

The Sabres were in a position to win their fourth game of the season when trailing after two periods, and second in a row. Buffalo rallied from a 3-1 deficit for a 4-3 win over Toronto on Wednesday.

The Blackhawks, however, found their legs and improved to 25-0 when leading after two periods this season.

"I don't think we expected to score two that quickly," Toews said. "I think at that point, any team would've been thinking about going to overtime. Glad to have salvaged a point for a so-so effort in the third."

NOTES: The Sabres were minus LW Matt Moulson (illness) and D Mike Weber (undisclosed soreness). F Tim Schaller was recalled from AHL Rochester. ... During a pregame ceremony during which four mothers of soldiers killed in action were being introduced, someone in the crowd yelled: "Let's go 'Hawks!'"... Buffalo extended its streak of scoring three or more goals to six straight — matching the team's longest stretch since Jan. 14-25, 2014.

Sabres-Islanders preview

By Jeff Bartl
Associated Press
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With the playoffs approaching, it may seem troubling that the New York Islanders recently struggled through a gauntlet featuring mostly postseason contenders.

The Buffalo Sabres do not fall into that category.

New York continues its quest for home-ice advantage in the first round of the playoffs when it hosts the NHL-worst Sabres on Saturday night.

The Islanders (45-27-6) went just 1-6-1 from March 10-28, with each loss coming against a club fighting for playoff position while the lone victory was over the eliminated New Jersey Devils.

They bounced back to beat Detroit 5-4 on Sunday before running into suddenly surging Columbus on Thursday. The Blue Jackets, who have been ousted from contention, tied a franchise record with an eighth straight win by beating the Islanders 4-3 in a shootout.

New York led 3-1 on Ryan Strome's goal 55 seconds into the third period.

"It's frustrating," coach Jack Capuano said. "We had our chances, we just couldn't bury it. You can't fault the guys for their effort, but we just have to find a way to get the job done."

The Islanders are tied with Washington for second in the Metropolitan Division, one point ahead of Pittsburgh, which has a game in hand on both. The slump has caused New York to fall in the division after it held a one-point edge on the Rangers for first March 11.

"This is the time of year you really want to focus on regrouping quickly because this happens in the playoffs," Capuano said. "You have to be ready to go the next game."

The only potential postseason excitement for Buffalo would be securing the No. 1 overall pick in the draft. The Sabres (22-48-8) have the fewest points in the NHL, and have scored the fewest goals while giving up the second-most.

They've played well lately, though, beating Arizona and Toronto before blowing a one-goal lead in the final two minutes of a 4-3 loss to Chicago on Friday.

Marcus Foligno scored his second goal with 7:18 left in the third to give the Sabres the lead after the Blackhawks jumped ahead 2-0 in the first. Anders Lindback then allowed two goals to Jonathan Toews 47 seconds apart, the last coming with 56 seconds remaining.

Buffalo has tried to remain focused despite fans appearing to turn against the club, often celebrating opposing goals in hopes the Sabres have a better shot at the No. 1 pick.

"When I scored, I didn't hear too much," Foligno said. "But it is what it is right now. We know our fans are awesome. And obviously, there were a lot of Chicago fans."

Matt Hackett could get the nod in net to finish the back-to-back set. Hackett is 0-4-1 with a 4.32 goals-against average in four starts and one relief appearance this season, most recently replacing Lindback and allowing three goals on 10 shots in a 5-3 loss to Colorado last Saturday.

Jaroslav Halak could get the start for the Islanders. He's won four straight outings against the Sabres while posting a 1.25 GAA, but faced just 10 shots in a 3-2 win Feb. 8.

Tyler Ennis scored the lone goal in the shootout as Buffalo overcame two goals from John Tavares in a 4-3 victory in the first meeting Dec. 27.

Halak, Islanders shut out Sabres 3-0

By Denis Gorman

Associated Press

April 4, 2015

UNIONDALE, N.Y. (AP) — Once again, Jaroslav Halak has played a major role with the New York Islanders closing in on a playoff spot.

"(Halak) made a few big saves," Islanders coach Jack Capuano said after the Islanders' starting goaltender made 21 saves for his sixth shutout of the season to lead New York to a 3-0 win over the Buffalo Sabres on Saturday night.

Halak improved to 37-16-3 this season, and has the franchise's single-season win record.

He was aided by goals from Kyle Okposo, Brock Nelson and Nikolay Kulemin. Kulemin's goal, his 14th of the season, came in his 500th game.

Okposo opened the scoring at 6:37 of the first with a power-play goal from the left circle. New York's right wing gathered John Tavares' diagonal, cross-ice pass, then waited a moment before sending a shot past Sabres goaltender Andrey Makarov.

In his first NHL start, Makarov stopped 33 of 36 shots for Buffalo. The Sabres have lost three of five, and have been shut out 12 times this season.

"I thought he played very well for his first game. He can be very proud of his first experience. He acted like a very mature young man," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said of his goaltender.

Buffalo fell to 22-49-8 and has three games remaining this season.

"I was very proud of the way we played. We battled well," Nolan said. "You can't ask for more. They're giving (everything they have)."

Entering Saturday, Buffalo's 52 points were the fewest in the league, followed by the Arizona Coyotes' 54.

Both the Coyotes and Sabres could finish the season with the league's two worst records. The team that has the league's worst record can select no lower than second in June's draft.

The upcoming draft possesses what are widely considered to be generational talents in the Ontario Hockey League's Erie Otters center Connor McDavid and Boston University freshman center Jack Eichel. McDavid had 120 points in 47 games, while Eichel had 67 in 38.

The Sabres had a power play after a four-minute double minor assessed to New York defenseman Brian Strait for high-sticking Buffalo left winger Nicholas Deslauriers late in the second period.

However, the Sabres only generated three shots on the power play that spanned the end of the second period and start of the third.

"It was big," said Okposo of killing Buffalo's four-minute power play. "Our penalty kill has been hot over the past month."

Nelson made it 2-0 when he scored his 20th of the season 9:32 into the third. An unassisted goal, the play began when Zach Bogosian's diagonal, cross-ice clearing pass ricocheted off a stick in the slot and Nelson retrieved the turnover just inside the blue line before sending an unassisted goal from the left faceoff circle.

"It happened pretty quick," Bogosian said. "Off the stick and right to the guy."

Kulemin ended the scoring with a tip of Travis Hamonic's drive with 6:47 left.

Despite moving to 46-27-6 this season, New York did not clinch a playoff berth.

Still, New York is in good position to qualify for the playoffs as it only needs two points in its final three games to get in.

"If you would have told us that at this point with 98 points, we'd still be battling, it's very surprising," Capuano said. "It's amazing the races that are going on in the East and West. You can't control that. You can control what you can control and that's all we are focused on right now."

NOTES: As part of season-long ceremonies honoring the franchise's history on Long Island, the Islanders honored their Decades team prior to the game. Ed Westfall, Garry Howatt, Bobby Nystrom, Butch Goring, Ken Morrow, Pierre Turgeon, Steve Webb, Shawn Bates and Eric Cairns were those selected to represent the Islanders teams of the 1970s, 80s, 90s and 2000s. ... Sabres left wing Matt Moulson, defenseman Mike Weber and goaltender Chad Johnson did not make the trip to Long Island due to illness. ... Islanders center Mikhail Grabovski missed his 19th straight game. ... Buffalo scratched goaltender Matt Hackett and right wing Jerry D'Amigo. ... New York scratched right wings Colin McDonald and Michael Grabner, center Tyler Kennedy, and defensemen Calvin de Haan and Matt Donovan.

Hurricanes-Sabres preview

Associated Press

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Not too long ago, Buffalo Sabres fans were criticized for rooting against their own team.

Any spectators in attendance Monday night at the First Niagara Center who want Buffalo to finish with the league's worst record have the finish line in sight.

The Sabres will guarantee themselves a 30th-place overall finish with a regulation loss to the Carolina Hurricanes in a matchup of last-place teams.

When Buffalo (22-49-8) hosted Arizona on March 26, Sam Gagner scored a goal in overtime for the visitors was cheered by many Sabres fans. That prompted an angry response by many players, with defenseman Mike Weber calling the situation "extremely frustrating."

Finishing with the worst record means the Sabres can select no lower than second in June's draft. That's important since Connor McDavid and Jack Eichel are the consensus top picks and seen by many as potential franchise cornerstones.

The Sabres have a league-low 52 points and the Coyotes - the only team that can finish below them - have 56. A regulation loss Monday for Buffalo means that it could still finish with 56, but would have fewer regulation victories than Arizona.

Players and coaches for the Atlantic Division's worst team recognize that they are in an odd situation. Buffalo is enduring a 2-6-1 slide after Saturday's 3-0 loss at the New York Islanders.

"In order to get where we want to get to, and that's the Stanley Cup playoffs and the Stanley Cup finals and the Stanley Cup, you go through a learning curve," coach Ted Nolan said. "It's not going to happen overnight."

Carolina (29-38-11) is at the bottom of the Metropolitan and taking a similar approach as it will miss the playoffs for a sixth straight season. The Hurricanes have the league's fifth-worst record, so their chances of getting McDavid or Eichel are diminished.

"We have to get better, we have to get deeper, we have to find a way to score more," coach Bill Peters said.

Buffalo averages a league-low 1.86 goals and Carolina is fourth-worst at 2.24. The Hurricanes, however, are in the top half of the league with an average of 30.5 shots on goal while the Sabres are last at 24.1.

Carolina starts a three-game trip after Saturday's 3-2 shootout victory over Philadelphia. The Hurricanes have been outscored 14-3 in a three-game road slide.

"I thought for the most part this season we've been pretty good here in our building and obviously we need to keep improving," said star center Eric Staal, who has team highs of 22 goals and 51 points. "Now it's the steps on the road that we need to get better at."

Staal has eight points in his last seven games.

Carolina is on a 6-1-1 run in this series with a victory and shootout loss this season.

The Hurricanes' Nathan Gerbe, sixth on the team with 26 points, is still searching for his first point as a visitor in Buffalo. This marks the third game back for the winger, who played for the Sabres from 2008-13.

Sabres get tazed by Toews

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

April 3, 2015

It was chaos when Jonathan Toews stole a victory from the Sabres on Friday night. Buffalo fans dreaming of last place stood for hugs, high-fives and fist pumps. The Sabres backers who want victories ran to the exits quickly, angrily as cheers echoed through First Niagara Center.

Emotions poured out during an unreal finish in a season that defies reality.

The biggest fear for fans who want the Sabres to finish 30th is unexpected points. It's one thing for Buffalo to beat Arizona or Toronto – opponents with a similar lowly standing – but the Sabres should have no business taking anything from an elite club like Chicago. The Connor McDavid and Jack Eichel fans just want a big "L" in the loss column.

Yet the Sabres' push for 29th place was in overdrive Friday. After looking like they didn't even belong in the same league as Chicago at the start, they rallied to take a 3-2 lead with 7:18 to go. Draft fans all across Sabreland were making their foreheads red by slapping their noggins and rubbing them in disbelief.

Then Toews showed why he's one of hockey's greatest winners. The Chicago captain scored two goals in a span of 47 seconds, tying the game with 1:43 left and giving his team a 4-3 victory with 55.2 seconds to go.

"An elite player came in and just stole two points from us," Sabres forward Marcus Foligno said.

Those two points are vital to the standings as the Sabres stayed two behind the 29th-place Coyotes. Arizona played a late game in San Jose, leaving the bottom clubs with four games left apiece.

The Sabres boarded their charter following the game and will visit the New York Islanders on Saturday night. Arizona will host the Sharks on Saturday in a rematch.

"It would have been harder if it was really important for us," Foligno said. "Obviously, every game you've got to play like it's your last, but that one stings for sure."

While the game may not have been really important to Foligno, those in the crowd were gasping for air during the final minutes. It looked like the Sabres – who entered the week 2-34-2 when trailing after 40 minutes – were going to win their second straight in that situation.

Johan Larsson's power-play goal with 5:29 gone in the third made it 2-2, an unimaginable score for anyone who saw the Blackhawks dominate the opening nine minutes of the game while taking a 2-0 lead.

Buffalo took a 3-2 lead with 7:18 left, lifting some Sabres fans out of their seats while making others slump in theirs. While playing four-on-four, Foligno bulled his way to the net to get to a rebound. He reached around goaltender Scott Darling with the puck, sending it home and celebrating along the boards.

Foligno, who also scored the Sabres' first goal, hadn't found the net during the previous 23 games.

"You think, 'Shut it down,'" Foligno said, hoping the Sabres could keep the Blackhawks quiet.

It wasn't silent in the building. There were legions of Chicago fans in the crowd of 19,070, with more Blackhawks jerseys Friday than Toronto sweaters on Wednesday. It's not clear who started the chant, but a loud, "Let's go, Blackhawks," rippled through downtown.

"They had the fan support for sure," Sabres captain Brian Gionta said.

Toews tied the game by winning a faceoff in the Buffalo zone and beating Larsson to a carom in front.

"He's won almost every championship there is to win and going against a guy who's played 30-40 games in the National Hockey League," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "That's why those guys are big players."

After Rasmus Ristolainen (who had three assists during a stellar night) failed to get the puck out of the Buffalo zone, Chicago started toward Sabres goalie Anders Lindback on a two-on-one. Brandon Saad dropped a pass to Toews, and he put a laser into the top corner to give Chicago its fourth straight win.

"It's tough to swallow," Gionta said. "You're talking a minute and a half or so."

It was a span of time that fans in the building won't soon forget.

"Battling back against one of the better teams in the league after being down, 2-0, to take a 3-2 lead was very good," Nolan said. "If you look back to when we first played in the beginning of the year, I think they just walked over us" during a 6-2 win. "It was a big improvement from that game to this game.

"You give a team like that chances, they're going to make you pay."

Trottier prepares for trip back to where he started

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

April 3, 2015

For one night at least, this space is a No Tank Zone. It's time to pay tribute to the last of a bygone era of hockey. To the days when NHL teams played in barns. Come next year, they'll all be gone and they are missed.

The Sabres make their last appearance in Nassau Coliseum tonight when they play the New York Islanders. And while Ted Nolan coached there for a couple of years and Matt Moulson played there for five, this game is all about assistant coach Bryan Trottier.

He was the Calder Trophy winner for the Islanders in 1975-76, the team and building's fourth season. He's a Hall of Famer who played 1,123 games for the Islanders, the most in franchise history. He's their leader in assists (853) and points (1,353), and scored 500 goals for them, second to Mike Bossy's 573.

Talking to Trottier Friday afternoon, the emotions just flew out of him. Imagine what it will be like for him tonight.

"I'm sure there's going to be some strangeness to it," Trottier said. "It's never fun going into the building as the enemy. I have such a great memory there. It's going back kind of to my first home. When there's no more games being played there, it will be sad but at least they're not torching it, tearing it down, thank goodness."

Trottier grew up in the place. He was a 19-year-old rookie in 1975. By 1980, he was a Stanley Cup champion – the first of four straight Cups. That's a feat no one has matched since. The first one was a storybook finish he'll never forget. Game Six of the 1980 Cup final against Philadelphia. A Saturday afternoon in May. An overtime goal by Bob Nystrom that turned a once-woebegone expansion team into a champion for the first time and sent Long Island into a tizzy.

The Rangers, remember, were still stuck in nothing-since-1940 mode. The kids on the Island had passed them by.

"It was a constant roar that came down on the ice," said Trottier, now a 58-year-old grandfather who was smiling as he thrust his arms over his head and did a fake scream to demonstrate. "I can remember looking up in the audience and out of this group of crazy, fanatical, wonderful fans, I picked this elderly lady out and it was kind of eyeball to eyeball for that split second with her going, 'I loooooove you, Bryan!'"

"I can remember not only reading her lips but even hearing her say it. Her voice. That din. She was like 20 rows up. That's how magnified everything gets. Your senses make you want to absorb everything. Your vision and your hearing. It's one of my favorite memories. I can still see her face, can still hear her voice."

This is a building full of mystique. The Coliseum is a tiny place. The seats are right by the ice. The portable rows on the lower levels bounce and shake and have gaps in spots. But the upper reaches seem like they're only at about the level of the suites in a cavernous place like First Niagara Center.

"There was a tremendous amount of noise that little building can generate that just funnels down to the ice and it's deafening," Trottier said.

The Nystrom goal, a backhand deflection off a John Tonelli pass, remains one of the most dramatic video clips in the post-expansion era of the NHL.

"You're in the moment so much and you're absorbing as fast as you can and as much as you can," Trottier said. "The fans were streaming over the glass and people were trying to stop them. After a while you just said,

'whatever.' People were falling and slipping, couldn't get their footing and they got frustrated and started funneling off the ice.

"We were loving it that there was this inclusion with no exclusion. They were such a big part of it. I wish every player can experience that. It's such a vivid memory and such an everlasting memory."

The Islanders are moving next year to Barclays Center in Brooklyn while the folks in Nassau County work on some sort of renovation to make the arena a trade show and concert hall. Owner Charles Wang could never get politicians to agree on an arena expansion plan and got tired of waiting.

"It's sad but on the other side of it there's this freshness that will happen on the other side of the road," Trottier said. "All of us hope that history moves with them like what happened here at the old Aud."

Trottier won seven Stanley Cups in his career with four coming on Long Island, two more in Pittsburgh and one as an assistant coach in Colorado. So you'd think enduring a season like this one with the Sabres would be impossible to deal with. Far from it. He's reveled in the teaching role, the work with Nolan.

"We knew what we were getting into here. We knew there might not be an overabundance of victories," he said. "But we knew there was going to be an opportunity here to really bring something positive and really watch the positives evolve. I'll look back and reflect and I've started my 'Santa Claus' list of all the good things, and my short list over here of other things that we knew we would be getting into anyway."

To their credit, the Sabres haven't quit. Much to the chagrin of a large segment of their fan base. They'll be overmatched again tonight as Trottier gets one final look at his old home.

"I only wish the franchise great success. I only wish the fans great success," Trottier said of the Islanders. "Except tomorrow night. Every time I go in there, I've been like, 'Jeez, I wish I didn't have to play these guys. I still feel like part of me wants to be them.'"

"But you've got to turn on your professional face and go in there and say, 'Hey guys, I'm just coming in with the professional side. It's nothing personal, nothing to do with the history we share. It's where I am now. Don't hate me for this. I'll never hate you guys.'"

Blackhawks glad to make playoffs again

By Amy Moritz

Buffalo News

April 3, 2015

For the seventh straight season, the Chicago Blackhawks have secured a playoff spot.

That's not a statistic the organization takes for granted.

Not when wins are difficult to come by, even against the last place team in the National Hockey League.

A hot start and a hot finish helped the Blackhawks to their fourth straight win, a 4-3 final over the Buffalo Sabres in First Niagara Center Friday night.

The rest of the game was rather forgettable for Chicago.

"You gear up for the big ones, and I think maybe today we got a little too comfortable having that lead," said captain Jonathan Toews, who scored twice in a 47-second span in the final two minutes of regulation.

"If it was a closer game early on and midway through the second, that intensity wouldn't have dropped off the way it did, but I think we maybe just got a little bit too comfortable being up early thinking those chances were going to keep coming. Credit to them. They fought hard."

The Blackhawks were all over the Sabres in the opening minutes, jumping out to a 2-0 lead just 8:36 into the game. But Chicago got lulled into complacency, and the Sabres have given notice they're going down swinging.

With less than eight minutes left in the game, the Sabres had taken a 3-2 lead.

"We're not too happy with the way we kinda let up control of the game halfway through and late in the game they took over and created more chances," Toews said.

"It was a good start for us, we just didn't have the effort we needed all the way through. I think we still did some good things through the 60 minutes so nice for us to get a few bounces at the end."

"We had a great start to the game and a great finish and in between they had the majority of the game," Chicago coach Joel Quenneville said.

"They really came at us in the second period and hanging on in the lead in the third and now we're playing from behind. It was one of those games where both teams had good stretches."

The Blackhawks secured their playoff spot Thursday night but are in a battle for playoff positioning, particularly with Central Division rival St. Louis. The teams meet Sunday and again on April 9.

"I think this year is probably the one year where 16 teams all believe they have as good a chance as anybody of winning the Cup," Quenneville said.

"Whether you're staring on the road or at home the advantages you could argue are probably very small or minimal. But that's what it is. It's 82 games and getting in the playoffs is an accomplishment this year.

"The rewards are you've got a great opportunity and a chance to win, but in our division and the parity throughout the league it has never been tighter than it is right now."

...

While this summer's NHL draft class is most compelling for its potential offense, the most intriguing position on the Sabres roster is goaltending.

By not playing Friday night, Matt Hackett guaranteed he would not hit the minimum threshold to remain a restricted free agent.

That means the 25-year-old goaltender will be an unrestricted free agent this summer. While his transition from restricted to unrestricted free agent won't impact his salary – he's unlikely to get a raise from his \$750,750 contract – he can search for a fit with any organization as a Group 6 free agent.

Hackett has tried to work his way back from reconstructive knee surgery after he tore multiple ligaments in a game for the Sabres last April. He is 0-4-1 in five games for the Sabres and after each start has struggled to get back on the ice with swelling and pain in his knee.

Part of the problem for Hackett is the schedule with few opportunities for practice.

"It's tough," coach Ted Nolan said after Friday's pregame skate in First Niagara Center. "Our practice schedule isn't really good right now to even get in practices before the game. That could be an issue. We'll deal with it. Maybe he feels good tonight and practices tomorrow."

Nolan said there's a possibility that Andrey Makarov could start Saturday against the New York Islanders as the Sabres play back-to-back for the 18th time this year. Makarov was recalled from the Rochester Americans for the second time this season on March 30 but has yet to play for the Sabres.

Chad Johnson, who was acquired in a trade with the New York Islanders on March 2, has yet to play for the Sabres after suffering an injury last month.

That leaves Lindback as the goalie of choice by necessity most nights. In the 13 games he has played for the Sabres since the team acquired him from the Dallas Stars on Feb. 11, he has a .920 save percentage and a 2.77 goals-against average. He has stopped at least 30 shots in eight of his 12 starts.

Sabres give way to Islanders

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

April 4, 2015

UNIONDALE – It was another one of those games where, on paper, the Buffalo Sabres didn't figure to stick around long. Then they took the ice and kept the playoff-bound New York Islanders plenty nervous.

With goaltender Andrey Makarov looking strong in his first NHL game, the Islanders didn't get any real breathing room until the final 11 minutes of their 3-0 win over Buffalo in Nassau Coliseum on Saturday night.

The Sabres' final visit to the NHL's oldest rink crossed another game off the schedule and put them another notch closer to locking up a top-two pick in the NHL draft.

The Arizona Coyotes moved four points ahead of Buffalo with a 5-3 win late Saturday night over San Jose. Arizona and Buffalo both have three games left and the Sabres would clinch 30th with a regulation loss in their next game, Monday against Carolina in First Niagara Center.

Makarov made 33 saves but was outdueled by Jaroslav Halak, who made 21 stops for his sixth shutout of the season. A buzzing crowd of 16,170 saw the Islanders move to the brink of clinching just their second playoff berth in the last eight years. It could have been wrapped up Saturday with a regulation loss by Ottawa, but the Senators beat Washington in overtime, 4-3.

Kyle Okposo scored a power-play goal in the first period, with Brock Nelson and Nikolai Kulemin adding insurance in the third and that was that. Buffalo fell to 3-11-3 in its last 17 games.

Makarov's start was announced prior to the game by coach Ted Nolan, who also revealed that forward Matt Moulson would miss his second straight game with the flu. Moulson played here for five seasons and thus missed out on his chance for one last game on his old home rink.

More ominous was Nolan's pronouncement that defenseman Mike Weber (lower body) would sit out for the second straight night – and could miss all three of this week's games that close the season.

Makarov, a 21-year-old Russian, was signed by the Sabres as an undrafted free agent in September 2012, and made his pro debut last season by splitting time between Rochester and Fort Wayne of the East Coast Hockey League. With the Amerks, he's posted a 15-17-3 record with a 2.98 goals-against average and .902 save percentage.

With Matt Hackett still battling knee trouble and the Sabres in the midst of three games in four nights, this was the right time to play someone other than Anders Lindback in goal.

"To be honest, I didn't feel nervous," Makarov said. "I tried to play a simple game and I was more nervous on the first shot and I stopped it. My confidence got up, and I felt good the whole game. I've been waiting for this opportunity for a pretty long time. I finally got one and I took a chance to play my best game I could."

Makarov made 29 saves the last time the Sabres saw him, during a shootout loss in Toronto during the preseason. Nolan said prior to the game his curiosity was definitely piqued to see how his progress during the year translated to the NHL.

As it turned out, Makarov was stellar. He looked strong in his crease, often attacked shooters out of it and was confident with his glove.

"He wasn't afraid. He looked like a very confident young man," Nolan said. "Sometimes you get those first games in and you're kind of jittery and nervous and young, but he acted like a very mature guy here tonight. He went in and did a job very well."

The Islanders had the game's first six shots, with only a sparkling glove save by Makarov on Nikolai Kulemin keeping the game scoreless.

They broke through on Okposo's goal at 6:37, which came 39 seconds after Matt Ellis went to the penalty box for hooking. Okposo's slap shot hit Brian Gionta and pinballed by Makarov. That was the only goal until Nelson leaked a quick snap shot through Makarov's pads at 9:32 of the third.

Zach Bogosian was in complete control of that play in the left corner but his cross-ice pass to Tyson Strachan boinked directly off an errant stick on the ice. It went right to Nelson in the slot and he beat Makarov, who had to quickly move to stop a shot he never figured was coming.

"It's just a tough bounce and that's all you can really say about it," Bogosian said. "Those things happen sometimes. I was trying to throw it over to Tyson and just unfortunate luck there. Kind of perfectly off the stick right to their guy. Not much you can do there."

Kulemin tipped home a Travis Hamonic shot with 6:47 left for the Islanders' final goal. The Sabres were 0 for 4 on the power play in the game, failing to score on a four-minute high-sticking penalty on Brian Strait in the second period.

Sabres notebook: McDavid at heart remains a Leafs fan

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

April 4, 2015

UNIONDALE – Connor McDavid is a kid from suburban Toronto who lives with a billet family in Erie, Pa., that's full of Sabres fans. It would make sense the presumed No. 1 choice in the June draft is a little conflicted with the April 18 NHL Draft Lottery less than two weeks away.

McDavid was in front of the television Wednesday night in Erie, Pa., watching the Sabres' 4-3 win over the Leafs in First Niagara Center, knowing full well he could be drafted by one of those teams come June based on the results of the lottery.

"I love the Sabres too, but I'm just a Leafs fan because that's the way I grew up," McDavid told the Toronto Sun in Saturday's editions. "I grew up a Leafs fan, and I'd like to see them do well."

McDavid, remember, bought a ticket with some friends and walked into First Niagara Center for the Sabres' regular-season finale last April against the New York Islanders. And he was the talk of the town during an August promotional press conference and the October regular-season game his Erie Otters played in the building against the Niagara Ice Dogs.

In a January interview with Sportsnet, McDavid said he wasn't that interested in playing for teams tanking to improve their draft position, but he softened that stance in the Sun interview when the subject was broached.

McDavid stayed politically correct about the topic, especially in the wake of the Leafs' epic second-half collapse dropping them to the fourth-best odds in the lottery.

"It's all in good fun," he said. "The Leafs fans are some of the most passionate fans in the world. They're obviously not enjoying the experience of all the losing. But if there is some benefit to the losing, they are going to get a very, very good player and whether that's whoever, it doesn't matter. The draft is so deep this year. So I'm sure Leaf fans are going to be pretty excited."

McDavid's team won its first-round OHL playoff series over Sarnia in five games, wrapping it up with Friday's 7-0 victory. McDavid and potential No. 3 pick Dylan Strome each had a goal and two assists. Sabres property Nick Baptiste, a third-round pick in 2013, had two goals.

Erie's second-round series won't start until Thursday at the earliest.

...

The New York Islanders honored players from each of their decades prior to Saturday's 3-0 win over the Sabres, the second-last regular season game they will play in Nassau Coliseum. One of the players on hand was Pierre Turgeon, the No. 1 overall selection of the Sabres in 1987.

The Sabres haven't had the top pick since. What does Turgeon think about how tough things would be for McDavid?

"At least he speaks English. I wasn't able to say 'Hi, how are you doing?'" Turgeon, now 45, said with a laugh. "That's how bad I was when I got drafted. I was so nervous, I missed half of this stuff."

"What you control, you control. He has to focus on finishing the season strong for him. It's a big step from junior to the NHL. He's a great player, and I've seen him a couple times, but he has to take it a step of the time and go from there. He has to focus on the end of his season first."

The jump to the NHL was big enough for Turgeon, even though he had 69 goals and 158 points in the 1986-87 season with Granby of the Quebec League. The language barrier made things even tougher.

"It was an adjustment in practice just hearing coaches talk," Turgeon said. "You go behind the line, hopefully when it's your turn you don't mess it up. I had no choice to learn English living with a family in Buffalo."

Turgeon had goal totals of 14, 34, 40 and 32 for the Sabres before going to Long Island as part of the Pat LaFontaine trade with the Sabres in 1991. Turgeon paid particular tribute to former GM Bill Torrey and former coach Al Arbour.

The Islanders haven't won a playoff series since 1993, when they upset Washington and two-time defending champion Pittsburgh before losing to Montreal in the Eastern Conference final. They are moving next year to the Barclays Center in Brooklyn.

"It's sad. There's a lot of history and memories here," said Turgeon, who now lives in Denver. "We had many guys involved here. Coming in with Mr. Torrey and Al Arbour it was easy to come in and get involved and be a part of it. It was a process that took a couple years for us to jell as a group and we have great memories of them."

...

Sabres coach Ted Nolan said his favorite memory from his two seasons coaching came on Nov. 3, 2007, when he got the legendary Arbour to join him on the bench for the then 75-year-old coach's 1,500th career game.

"A legend like Al Arbour and to actually stand behind the bench with him in such a significant game, it's like standing next to Vince Lombardi," Nolan said.

Sabres assistant coach Bryan Trottier, the Hall of Famer who is the Isles' all-time leader in games played and points, was wistful when talking this week about Arbour, who is now 82 and battling dementia at a retirement facility in Sarasota, Fla.

"It's really neat how time makes the good the biggest part of your memory. And some of the ugly disappears," Trottier said. "There's moments I'm sure that Al and I probably would say, 'Oh, I wish that had never happened.' It happens, but it never becomes the biggest part of your memory."

"When somebody brings up Al Arbour, I smile from ear to ear because he's so much a part of every good thing that's happened with me from the time I stepped into the NHL until I wasn't with the Islanders anymore."

History show good starts mean postseason

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

April 4, 2015

As the NHL reaches its final week, teams still having playoff dreams will finally hear the words "officially eliminated." For most of them, that was true Jan. 1.

It takes extraordinary runs for teams to overcome a slow start. In the case of Ottawa, even the Hamburglar might not let them cut the mustard.

Going back through the last five full seasons, at least 75 percent of the playoff teams had been decided by New Year's Day. Fourteen of the 16 teams remain unchanged in 2009 and 2010, 13 of 16 stayed locked in during 2012, and 12 of 16 held their positions in 2011 and 2014.

With three-point games in vogue – there were 289 games decided past regulation entering the weekend after 307 last season – teams find it nearly impossible to make up ground. Here are some of the organizations that accomplished a comeback and the records they needed:

2014: Minnesota (27-12-3), Columbus (26-13-3) and the New York Rangers (25-12-4).

2011: Buffalo (28-11-6).

2010: Ottawa (24-12-5).

2009: St. Louis (27-11-7).

The Wild will do it again this year, entering the weekend with a 27-12-3 record in 2015. Boston (21-10-9) or Andrew Hammond-led Ottawa (24-12-5) will take advantage of Toronto's free fall.

Colorado is one of the teams feeling the regret of a slow start. The Avalanche entered the season hoping to build off last year's stellar coming-out party. They finished second in the Western Conference and third overall in the NHL at 52-22-8.

On New Year's Day, they were 12th in the West at 14-15-8. Despite a 21-13-4 run through a win over Buffalo last weekend, they remained 12th in the West.

"It's been a great learning process for our team," Avs coach Patrick Roy said before facing the Sabres. "Obviously, we're not where we want to be at this time. At the same time I think this group learned a lot, and that's going to help us."

With the core of the team – Semyon Varlamov (26 years old), Ryan O'Reilly and Matt Duchene (24), Tyson Barrie (23), Gabriel Landeskog (22) and Nathan MacKinnon (19) – still very young, it's a good time to get a lesson.

"One of the best things we learned this season is how important a start is," Duchene said. "Last year, we had such a good one (24-11-4) and we could pretty much go .500 the rest of the way and make the playoffs."

"This year was the complete opposite. We had such a tough first month – I don't think we were over .500 until the middle of December or after Christmas – you put yourself behind the eight-ball like that, this league is too good."

The run after Jan. 1 showed the Avs once again how good they can be.

"I think that's the hardest part," said Duchene, who noted how different the atmosphere has been with nothing to look forward to after this week. "Last year at this time, you walk in the room and just the energy is so high from knowing you're going to play for the Stanley Cup. It's tough.

"No matter what happens at the end of the season, I know we've taken strides to move closer to a Stanley Cup. Obviously, we're going to take so many lessons we learned this year into next season. I know guys are going to be so hungry in the summer because we just know how big that start is."

Hart of the matter

Determining a Cup favorite will be just as hard as deciding which player should win the Hart Trophy.

Entering the weekend, 12 teams had a chance to top the 100-point mark. Anaheim, the Rangers, Nashville, Tampa Bay, Montreal, St. Louis and Chicago had already done it, with Washington, the Islanders, Pittsburgh, Minnesota and Vancouver on the verge.

Each team can find legitimate reasons why it should be the top contender. The vote here is the Rangers given their experience in reaching the finals last year, goal differential (NHL-best plus-53) and an ability to win at home (23-10-5) or on the road (26-11-2). Tampa Bay struggles away from home, Anaheim gives up too many goals and the Central Division teams (Nashville, St. Louis and Chicago) will spend too much time pounding on each other during the opening two rounds.

As for the Hart Trophy, the Canadiens' Carey Price, Washington's Alex Ovechkin and Minnesota's Devan Dubnyk are the established front-runners.

Ovechkin is clearly the top skater, eclipsing the 50-goal mark while shedding his reputation as a selfish player. New coach Barry Trotz brought in his typical defensive mindset (Washington will finish in the top 10 in fewest goals allowed), and Ovechkin fit right in while still excelling in the offensive zone.

The wording for the Hart, however, is the "player judged to be the most valuable to his team." That leaves Price and Dubnyk as the top choices. The Canadiens entered the weekend fourth overall in points but tied for just 22nd in goals. If Price isn't good, they don't win.

My vote still has to go to Dubnyk. When the Wild acquired him in January, they were 18-19-5 and in 12th place in the West. He shut out the Sabres after flying overnight to join his new team, giving the Wild the immediate jolt of confidence it needed. He went to the crease every game thereafter while putting up a .938 save percentage and 1.74 goals-against average.

That's a guy who is most valuable to his team.

On the fly

- The Sabres' players deserve respect for the way they handled the tanking hoopla all season. The talk about losing started on the opening day of training camp, and it never boiled over until after the Arizona game. The Coyotes couldn't even handle five days of it without whining about the questions or walking away from interviews.
- The Flames' Kris Russell set the NHL single-season record for most blocked shots Thursday when he passed Anton Volchenkov (273). Russell is 5-foot-10, 173 pounds. "Hockey needs to invent a medical device that can measure character," coach Bob Hartley told the Calgary Herald. "He's a small body but a big-time player."
- Detroit's Drew Miller, the brother of Ryan, will never forget taking a skate to the face. The scars of 60 stitches near his right eye will remind him after the blade of Ottawa's Mark Stone got him. Miller played in the next game. "I got really lucky," he told Detroit media, "and I'm very thankful nothing happened to my actual eyeball."

NHL's race for bottom could end Monday night; loss by Sabres clinches last place

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

April 5, 2015

This is the night it can mercifully be over. All of it.

The Tank talk. The fan-on-fan and media-on-media barking. The social media sniping. The late nights at the television or computer screens watching horrific performances from the Arizona Coyotes and Edmonton Oilers.

Same for the crowds at First Niagara Center openly chanting and cheering for the visiting team, leaving the Buffalo Sabres sullenly shaking their heads in the dressing room about a phenomenon almost never seen in professional sports.

The masses will almost certainly be partaking in that distasteful practice for the fourth straight home game when the Carolina Hurricanes take the ice against the Sabres here Monday. But at this point, 79 games into a lost season, it's hard to argue.

With one more regulation loss, the Sabres will clinch 30th place in the NHL's overall standing for the second straight year. While that should in no way be considered a proud accomplishment, it looks like this six-month death march is going to reach its goal of producing a new star in Buffalo sports.

The face of NHL hockey in the city will change forever when the Sabres suffer their 50th regulation loss of the season, be it against the Canes or in the Friday-Saturday wrapup back-to-back against Columbus and Pittsburgh. Or if the equally putrid Coyotes win one of their last three games.

That's because cementing last place will complete the organizational mandate of ensuring that either Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel will become Sabres property June 26 at the NHL Draft in Sunrise, Fla.

And it will also mean a relaxing week heading into the April 18 draft lottery. There would be no fretting about the chance to slip to the No. 3 pick and miss out on one of the two generational talents preparing to graduate to the NHL.

With one more loss, lottery week becomes bliss with two simple scenarios:

1. McDavid, the Erie Otters star who led Team Canada to the gold medal in the World Junior Championships, would become a Sabre if Buffalo's league-best 20 percent odds in the lottery came through to win the top selection.
2. Eichel, the Boston University freshman who has taken the NCAA by storm and will lead his team into the Frozen Four on Thursday night in Boston, would ostensibly be the choice of the Sabres with the No. 2 pick if any team other than Buffalo wins the lottery to grab No. 1.

McDavid's and Eichel's seasons are continuing as the spectre of the end of the NHL's regular season and the draft lottery looms. McDavid's Erie Otters open their second-round Ontario Hockey League playoff series later this week, while Eichel and Boston University play North Dakota on Thursday in Boston's TD Garden.

McDavid revealed over the weekend that he watched the Sabres' win over the Toronto Maple Leafs here on Wednesday on television during an off night in Erie. In Sunday's Toronto Star, Eichel said he had an FNC informant during Friday's Sabres loss to the Chicago Blackhawks, who got two goals from Jonathan Toews in the last two minutes to steal a 4-3 win.

"I have a friend that was at the game and I got a text message saying the Buffalo fans were cheering when they lost," Eichel said. "It's kind of a bizarre thing to think about — that fans are cheering against their team, hoping that they lose. But I guess, really, they're just excited about the future."

Sabres fans have been cheering hard for their team to lose of late, but the Sabres made things interesting with wins over Arizona and Toronto. Buffalo was close to making it three straight for the first time since December until the collapse against Chicago pretty much ended the run.

By Saturday night the Sabres were in survival mode for much of their game against the New York Islanders in Nassau Coliseum and suffered a 3-0 defeat. A couple hours after the final horn, the Coyotes posted a 5-3 win over San Jose to push the margin over Buffalo to four points.

Until Saturday's blanking, the Sabres had scored three or more goals for six straight games - something they had not done since the 2011-12 season. But the shutout on Long Island was their 13th of the season, extending their own franchise record.

The final week of the season is likely going to be the end of Ted Nolan's tenure as Buffalo coach. It's pretty much a foregone conclusion the Sabres will be looking elsewhere for a new coach this spring, giving General Manager Tim Murray his first chance to hire his own man since he took over 15 months ago.

Nolan confirmed prior to Saturday's game there's been "no talk whatsoever" about his status.

"I'm not concerned," Nolan said. "The only thing I'm concerned with is doing the best job I can on a daily basis. Everything else will fall where it may fall."

Nolan said he has not heard from Murray, nor has he made any inquiries with the GM about his status.

"I signed a three-year deal last year," he said. "So we'll see what happens."

Nolan is happy with the Sabres' progress of late, especially since the trade deadline.

The offense has been strong, the power play is clicking at a 25 percent rate over the last 11 games and the penalty kill was 14 of 15 until giving up a power-play goal Saturday to New York's Kyle Okposo.

"I want to see the same thing we've been preaching all year," Nolan said. "In order to get where you want to get to - and that's the Stanley Cup playoffs and the Stanley Cup final and the Stanley Cup - you have to go through a learning curve. It's not going to happen overnight. ... The compete level is something you can't ask for more. They're giving everything they have to give and we ask. As a coaching staff, we're very proud of that."

Toews scores twice late, Blackhawks edge Sabres

By Joe Yerdon

NHL.com

April 3, 2015

BUFFALO -- Jonathan Toews again came through when the Chicago Blackhawks needed him most.

The Chicago captain scored twice in the final 1:43 to lead the Blackhawks to a 4-3 win against the Buffalo Sabres at First Niagara Center on Friday.

The Sabres had scored three unanswered goals to take a 3-2 lead with 7:18 remaining.

Toews' two goals came 47 seconds apart. With Blackhawks goalie Scott Darling pulled for the extra attacker, Toews put a rebound of Duncan Keith's point shot past Sabres goalie Anders Lindback with 1:43 left to tie the game 3-3.

"One play where we got it back to the point, and it landed on our stick and ended up in the back of the net," Toews said. "Big goal for us to tie it. I don't think we expected to score two that quickly. I think at that point any team would've been thinking about going to overtime. Glad to have salvaged a point for a so-so effort in the third."

Toews scored the game-winning goal with 56 seconds left. After receiving a drop pass from Brandon Saad, his wrist shot went over Lindback's glove hand for his 28th goal, which leads the Blackhawks.

"It was a nice play, a nice drop pass by [Saad] and a great shot by [Toews]," Keith said. "I think everybody in this room has that hunger to come out and try and be a difference. Obviously, [Toews] leads the way, and Toews and [Patrick] Kane lead the way in that regard. ... We got a couple bounces and a couple nice goals for a pretty good player."

Toews scored the game-winner with 31 seconds left in a 4-3 road victory against the Winnipeg Jets on Sunday.

"He's had a big, big week," Blackhawks coach Joel Quenneville said. "He scored some big goals this week, started in his hometown (Winnipeg) and ended up here tonight with two big ones. So yeah, a special player, and the bigger the stage, the bigger the response is, so he's one of those guys that he's driven in a different manner than a lot of players. Big-time week for him this week."

The Blackhawks (48-24-6) have won four straight games and are one point behind the Nashville Predators and St. Louis Blues for first place in the Central Division. Chicago is 25-0-0 when leading after two periods.

"I think this year's probably the one year where 16 teams all believe they have as good a chance as anybody at winning the Cup," Quenneville said of the Stanley Cup Playoffs. "Whether you're starting on the road or at home, the advantages you could probably argue are very small or minimal, but that's what it is."

"But it's 82 games to get into the playoffs, a big accomplishment this year. The rewards are you have a great opportunity and a chance to win, but our division, the parity throughout the League has never been tighter or more competitive than it is right now."

The Sabres (22-48-8) lost for the first time in three games.

"They've got Toews out there. He's won almost every championship that there is to win," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "Going against a guy (Johan Larsson) who's played 30, 40 games in the National Hockey League with a big draw, he wins it, he battles his way, he beats him to the net, he scores a big goal. That's why those guys are big players."

Marcus Foligno scored two goals to lead the Buffalo rally from an early 2-0 deficit. On his second goal of the night, eighth of the season, Foligno poked a loose puck past Darling after it was deflected by Blackhawks defenseman Brent Seabrook to give Buffalo a 3-2 lead at 12:42 of the third period.

"I think it's just confidence, everybody just being relaxed, knowing we got nothing to lose so you can make plays," Foligno said. "When there's guys making a high-risk play that are getting rewarded for it, you've got to do it."

Foligno scored to make it 2-1 with 6:50 left in the second period when he picked up a rebound of defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen's shot from the point and put a backhand shot past Darling.

"As much as you're disappointed with the loss, a big bright spot for us was the way Marcus Foligno played," Nolan said. "I thought he was really, really good. The way he battled, especially that first goal, he really battled through, and he was certainly a bright light for that entire game."

Larsson tied the game on the power play when he tipped in Ristolainen's shot from the blue line for his fifth goal.

"We played well for 58 minutes against one of the best teams in the League," Sabres forward Tyler Ennis said. "They showed what they can do when their back is against the wall."

Keith gave the Blackhawks a 1-0 lead with his 10th goal. His slap shot from the blue line got through traffic and beat Lindback 2:16 into the first period.

"Right off the bat, getting the puck on net, made some nice plays off the point as well and defended quick in the puck areas," Quenneville said of Keith. "He's one of those players that brings another dimension to our team, be it off the rush or in zone offensively, and defends very well, so it's a nice component to our team game."

Patrick Sharp made it 2-0 with his 15th goal. He received a pass from David Rundblad and entered the Sabres zone, where he took a wrist shot that glanced off Lindback into the net 8:36 into the first period.

"I thought we gave them a little bit too much respect in that first period," Sabres captain Brian Gionta said. "We sat back, were kind of scared to join the game."

Darling made 35 saves, and Lindback 32.

Halak, Islanders shut out Sabres, inch toward playoffs

By David Satriano

NHL.com

April 4, 2015

UNIONDALE, N.Y. -- Jaroslav Halak and the New York Islanders did their part trying to wrap up a berth in the Stanley Cup Playoffs, defeating the Buffalo Sabres 3-0 at Nassau Coliseum on Saturday.

But the Washington Capitals were defeated by the Ottawa Senators 4-3 in overtime, which means the Islanders will have to wait at least one more day before seeing an "X" next to their name in the standings.

"It's amazing the races that are going on in the East and West," Islanders coach Jack Capuano said. "You can't control that. You can control what you can control and that's all we are focused on right now."

New York (46-27-6) moved into second place in the Metropolitan Division, one point ahead of Washington. The Pittsburgh Penguins were defeated by the Columbus Blue Jackets, 5-3; two points behind the Capitals, the Penguins hold the first wild card into the playoffs from the Eastern Conference.

Halak made 21 saves for his 37th win and sixth shutout of the season. He is 7-2-2 with two shutouts against the Sabres in his career.

"If you would have told us that at this point with 98 points, we'd still be battling [for a playoff spot], it's very surprising," Capuano said.

The Islanders don't play until Tuesday against the Philadelphia Flyers but can clinch Sunday if the Senators, who visit the Toronto Maple Leafs, lose in regulation. New York also controls its destiny; if the Islanders win their remaining three games, they will have home-ice advantage in the Eastern Conference First Round.

"It would be nice to get home-ice advantage and let our fans have more opportunity to watch us here," defenseman Travis Harmonic said.

Kyle Okposo, Brock Nelson and Nikolay Kulemin scored for the Islanders.

Okposo scored a power-play goal at 6:37 of the first period.

New York defenseman Brian Strait took a double-minor for high-sticking at 16:33. Halak made two saves during the power play, including stopping a Zach Bogosian slap shot from the left circle with 1:39 left.

"I think guys did a good job killing the penalty," Halak said. "Everyone was competing, blocking shots, being in the right spots. Obviously it was a big kill for us at the end of the second."

New York has allowed one power-play goal on 34 chances in its past 15 games.

Nelson scored at 9:32 of the third period to give the Islanders. Bogosian tried to clear the puck and it ricocheted off a stick that was on the ice and went to Nelson near the left circle, where he sent a wrist shot past Sabres goalie Andrey Makarov for his 20th goal.

"Just unfortunate," Bogosian said. "Off the stick and right to the guy. It happened pretty quick."

Kulemin, playing his 500th NHL game, scored his 14th goal off a rebound of a Harmonic shot from the right side at 13:13 of the third period.

Buffalo (22-49-8) lost to the Chicago Blackhawks 4-3 on Friday.

"No matter where they are in the standings ... they compete hard," Islanders captain John Tavares said. "We knew this was a game we wanted to have."

Makarov made 33 saves in his NHL debut.

"I thought he played very well for his first game," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "He can be very proud of his first experience."

Hurricanes open three-game road trip at Sabres

By Evan Sporer

NHL.com

April 5, 2015

HURRICANES (29-38-11) AT SABRES (22-49-8)

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

Season series: The Buffalo Sabres and Carolina Hurricanes have split the season series. Buffalo won 4-3 in a shootout on Oct. 14, and the Hurricanes won 5-2 on Jan. 8. Goalie Cam Ward started each game for Carolina. Defenseman Justin Faulk had two assists in the Hurricanes' victory.

Hurricanes team scope: Carolina did not practice Sunday following a 3-2 shootout win against the Philadelphia Flyers on Saturday. The Hurricanes will play the first of a three-game road trip before returning to PNC Arena for their regular-season finale April 11 against the Detroit Red Wings. Carolina is 18-15-7 on home ice and 11-23-4 on the road. "For the most part this season, we've been pretty good here in our building," said captain Eric Staal, who had an assist in the win Saturday, according to the Hurricanes' website. "We need to keep improving, and now it's the steps on the road that we need to get better at."

Sabres team scope: If Buffalo loses in regulation, it will clinch last place in the NHL standings. The Sabres lost to the New York Islanders on Saturday 3-0 in goalie Andrey Markov's NHL debut. It was the 13th time this season the Sabres were shut out, a League-high. Buffalo was without forward Matt Moulson (illness), and defenseman Mike Weber (lower body). Coach Ted Nolan said Weber's injury could be season-ending and that he was unsure if Moulson will be available against Carolina, according to the Sabres website. When Islanders forward Kyle Okposo scored a power-play goal Saturday, it was the first power-play goal Buffalo had allowed in four games, after going 10-for-10 on their prior kills. The Sabres won't play again until Friday when they travel to Nationwide Arena to play the Columbus Blue Jackets, and then finish the season the next day at home against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

'Distracting,' 'immature,' 'selfish,' 'cocky,' 'jerk'

Evander Kane has been called a lot of things. But that's not the whole story. What you don't know about the centrepiece of the biggest trade of the NHL season just may change your mind about him.

By Kristina Rutherford

Sportsnet

April 5, 2015

Evander Kane faces the Las Vegas city skyline. It looks like early morning. He's parallel to the floor, elbows bent, in a push-up position. He's shirtless, but his muscular back is obscured by seven stacks of American bills that are piled on top of him. Some stacks are bigger than others. Most are held together by elastic bands.

The photo that captures this moment appears on Kane's Instagram account on Dec. 1. The accompanying caption he chooses is simple: "#pushups."

The next day, Kane is all smiles, addressing a cluster of reporters in the Winnipeg Jets dressing room. They're asking "Why?" in every way they can think of. It's an old picture, Kane says. He was just having fun, he says. He didn't hurt anybody, he says.

This is Evander Kane. He's flashy. He loves to get a reaction. And he has a way of making headlines like no other player in the NHL. Consider his final days in Winnipeg: Kane was made a healthy scratch after reportedly wearing a track suit to the rink on a game day. A teammate allegedly threw his clothes in the shower, and later likened him to a child in need of discipline. Kane was traded days later. And though season-ending surgery means he won't make his debut for the Buffalo Sabres until October, Kane remains in the spotlight, the centrepiece of the biggest blockbuster in recent history. In the early days of his four- to six-month rehab, he's more controversial than ever. But the questions remain: How much of a problem is Evander Kane? Who exactly are the cellar-dwelling Sabres getting? His misdeeds have been well-publicized. But sit down and talk to Kane, and a different picture emerges. You might even like the guy.

Kane started early, at age three or four. Most of the time, his dad, Perry, woke Evander up for practice, but sometimes it was the other way around. Father and son were regulars at 8 Rinks in Burnaby, B.C., where the 6:15 a.m. stick-and-puck sessions were drop-in and desolate. In other words, perfect. The Kanes often had the ice to themselves, or shared it with a couple of others. Perry set up cones and yelled. He never used a whistle.

Perry played Jr. A in Nova Scotia, and he wanted his eldest child to learn to stop both ways, skate backwards and have a decent shot before he started organized hockey. "He didn't want me to be one of those kids who couldn't stand up and couldn't skate and couldn't move," Kane says. The practices were tough, but Kane understood even then that he had to put in the work. "You might not believe it, but I knew then I was gonna be an NHL player."

Perry was adamant that they should wait until Evander turned 10 before signing him up for organized hockey, but Evander's mom, Sheri, secretly signed him up when he was eight. They were strict, the Kane parents. Evander and his younger sisters, Brea and Kyla, who are two and four years younger than him, respectively, had to get A's and B's in school. Kane made the honour roll every term but says his sisters, who excelled academically, "made me feel like I was getting F's."

Sheri and Perry poured everything they had into their children—hockey at the North Shore Winter Club for him, competitive dance for the girls. Kane says the family didn't have any savings. The five of them rented the upstairs of a two-bedroom house in southeast Vancouver, and Kane shared a room with his sisters. Brea and Kyla shared a bed, and Kane had his own on the other side of the room, with a couple of his hockey sweaters pinned to the wall above it. They painted his side blue and the girls' side pale lavender. "We had some separation, which was nice," Kane says. "At least, as much as we could." Sure, they'd have their arguments, and he says he spent less time in there as he got older. "But it was awesome," Kane says. "You always have somebody to talk to, and you're always playing with somebody."

They had a TV in there, too, and a PlayStation. "I think it made us a tight family," Kane says. "It's funny. I look back on it now, and everybody's like, 'Aaah, you didn't have your own room when you were a kid?' But it was fun to share a room with my sisters. I really enjoyed growing up." He pauses. "I almost wish I could go back. Wish I could be a kid again."

This is not the Evander Kane refrain we're used to. That he's named after Evander Holyfield is well-known. That he comes from an athletic family is too: Sheri played pro volleyball, and after Perry's junior-hockey days, he was an amateur boxer. Kane's upbringing isn't something he's talked about much, though. He says he's been asked vague questions, and he gives equally vague answers. "It's not something you just say," Kane explains. "The thing is, it's not like I was a rich kid who grew up in the Hamptons, and Mommy and Daddy gave me a trust fund or something like that. I've worked hard. And I've been fortunate to have the family that I have."

The Kanes bought their first home the summer Evander turned 19, a couple of months after the Atlanta Thrashers' fourth-overall pick in 2009—the NHL's highest-drafted black player ever—put up 14 goals and 12 assists in 66 games, 12th among rookies. Until then, Kane considered the rental his home. In his eyes, he shared a room with his sisters until his second year in the NHL. His rookie contract, three years at nearly \$1 million per, must have paid the bill for the family's Vancouver home, but Kane won't say so. When asked, he says, "We bought a new house."

Hockey's most famous money flaunter won't come out and say he paid for his parents' house. "It's not something I feel I need to talk about," he says.

This from the guy who did push-ups with stacks of cash on his back and felt he needed to Instagram it.

Front and centre A six-foot-two power forward, Kane has been lauded for his ability to force the issue in the goalmouth. He's also been criticized for his propensity to stay in the news after the final horn.

Kane settled into a chair at ice level at the MTS Centre, wearing shorts, runners and a long-sleeved Winnipeg Jets hoodie. It was late December, a little more than a month before he became a Sabre, and it was immediately clear why Jets centre Mark Scheifele calls his former winger "a specimen"—when Kane is immobile, he looks like a sculpture. Kane's closest friend in hockey, Jets winger Chris Thorburn, says the first thing he noticed about him when they met five years ago was this: "He looked like he'd been working out his whole life."

Kane is easy to talk to and well-spoken. He's open about how much he enjoys the "adult playground" that is Las Vegas and the fact that he gets a manicure and pedicure on a weekly basis (his cuticles are immaculate). And he smiles even when he doesn't like your question, a skill he developed, he says, after being asked hundreds of times whether he was happy playing in Winnipeg, questions that persisted even after he signed a six-year, \$31.5-million contract with the Jets in 2012. "I've learned to enjoy the process," Kane says, grinning.

This season was far from enjoyable for No. 9, however. Kane was injured in the opener and again in December, and upon returning, he played hurt until he announced in February he'd undergo season-ending shoulder surgery, days before he was dealt. The six-foot-two, 195-lb. power forward scored 30 goals at age 20 in this league and has been vocal about the fact that he expects to score 50, but he's put up just 29 in the past two seasons combined. That he has yet to suit up for a playoff game in the NHL—let alone get close to a Stanley Cup—reads nothing like his early career. Kane had the storybook on-ice experience for a junior hockey player: He won the Quebec peewee tournament, the Memorial Cup and world junior gold. The trifecta. And not only did Kane win the Memorial Cup, but he did it at home—at age 15.

The Vancouver Giants' then-coach Don Hay describes Kane as "not very thick" in those days. Still, he decided Kane was more valuable in the lineup than an older player, and dressed him for five playoff games during that 2007 championship run. Brent Regner was a 17-year-old defenceman on that Giants team, and he doesn't remember young Kane being any more nervous than he was. "Good players have that certain swagger," says Regner, who now plays for the American Hockey League's Chicago Wolves. "He was pretty confident, even at 15."

Kane may have been a support player on the Memorial Cup-winning team, but in 2007–08, he had 41 points and was runner-up for Western Hockey League rookie of the year. A year later, Kane was a late addition to Canada's 2009 world junior roster after initially getting cut. He started that tournament as the 12th forward and was challenging for a spot on the second line by the final. "That's the belief in himself that he has," Hay says. He calls Kane "stubborn" and "a challenge," but adds that those qualities are part of what make him a great player. In Kane's final Canadian Hockey League season, he was a WHL West first-team all-star and finished fourth in league scoring with 48 goals and 96 points in 61 games.

Regner takes pains to be diplomatic, but he will say that Kane's "swagger" rubbed a few Giants the wrong way. "Maybe he took it a little bit too far sometimes," Regner says. "But he was such an integral part of our team, so you wanted him to be pretty confident, right?"

Though Kane's attitude might have bothered some, nobody questioned his desire. Hay is a fan of Kane because he tells his guys that if they want to win, the best players on the team also have to be the hardest-working. Kane was a great example. Regner says Kane practised like a grinder, not a skill player. Nobody disputed his commitment or work ethic then. But that changed shortly after the Thrashers relocated to Winnipeg.

In late December, when a Jets beat reporter learned Sportsnet magazine was in town to do a profile on Kane, he wondered aloud about the angle. He answered his own question: "Problem child?"

Kane has been called a lot of things. Cocky. Selfish. A jerk. In hockey circles, "distraction" is the popular term. But that's not how teammates characterize him. In December, Scheifele was delivering straight-faced hockey talk until the "#pushups" photo came up. "He got a little ribbing for it," Scheifele said, grinning. Thorburn brought up the time Kane "carved" the acronym for "Young Money Cash Money Billionaires," into his hair. (Thorburn thought it said "YMCA" at first.) And the guys in the room had recently given Kane a new nickname: "Cocktails," the origins of which Kane called a "long, long story." Thorburn got into it: "We'll say, 'Let's go for drinks or for a beer,' and he'll always use the term 'cocktails.' 'Let's go out for a cocktail.' And it's just like"—Thorburn paused to laugh—"you only hear that in movies, you know? He's trying to be fancy and play along with his persona. We shut that down pretty quickly."

It all seemed like playful mocking. And it continued even after he was gone. In February, while Kane was calling his situation with the Jets "unique" and welcoming a "fresh start" in Buffalo, his former team was making light of the track suit incident. When coach Paul Maurice showed up to a scrum without a suit jacket on, he told reporters that despite his dress code violation, "My clothes aren't wet." Of course, only the guys in that room know the inner workings of Kane's relationship with his teammates and how it may have changed after the shower episode and the healthy scratch. Zach Bogosian, dealt with Kane to Buffalo, refers to it as "the incident," and that's about all he'll say. This is as far as Kane goes with the details: "Was I wearing a track suit?" he said at his first press conference as a Sabre. "No." Then he laughed.

Fair or not, fans associate that wet track suit and those stacks of money with Kane. But if you talk to friends and teammates, at least half the picture's not accurate. In December, Thorburn laughed when asked whether the money pictures posted to Instagram are a good representation of who Evander Kane is. "No, that's not who Kane is," he said. "He's a very caring guy, a good friend to have. But he does wear his flashy suits, his sunglasses, his headphones. He puts on a show."

Thorburn wasn't surprised that Kane didn't own up to buying his parents a house. "Deep down, he's modest. It's just weird, because he comes off so flamboyant on social media."

Bogosian has been Kane's teammate the past six seasons; they've grown up in this league together. "He's a very emotional, very charismatic kind of guy, so that naturally brings more attention to a player," the defenceman says. "Whether it was brought on by him or other people, I think his personality was really blown up—which isn't always a bad thing—but I think a lot of people have a misunderstanding of what kind of person he is."

If you ask Kane, here's who the Buffalo Sabres are getting: He describes himself as "generous," "loyal" and "kind-hearted." He knows the average fan wouldn't attach those adjectives to his name. And he knows he's had a hand

in this, beyond what he calls the “loud” pictures he’s posted. He says several things about him have been “made up,” but he’s never been quick to correct anyone or point out what those things are. “Too many to even pick one out,” he says. Kane will arrange his own interviews via text message (he’ll even write “lol” and use exclamation marks), but he’s hesitant to connect a reporter with his family to offer a better picture of where he came from. It could be he’s afraid of what his family might say, or what they might be asked. It could be part of that loyalty he talks about. Kane still spends his summers skating with his dad, who turned those morning practices into a business and now runs individual training sessions. Kane bought him a whistle two years ago. Perry still doesn’t use it.

This off-season, back in Vancouver, Perry will run Kane through drills and on-ice workouts—though Kane says those practices are “a lot more give-and-take” today—as he rehabs from surgery and prepares for his debut in a Sabres sweater. After that, there is much to be seen: Whether Kane will be the centrepiece of an exciting rebuild in Buffalo; whether he’ll stay healthy; whether he’ll achieve that 50-goal season he says is in his future; whether his track suits will stay out of the shower. A lot of eyes will be on this new-look Sabres team, and on Kane, though No. 9 has never been one to avoid the spotlight. “That’s what sports is,” he says. “It’s an entertainment business.”

Former Blade Makarov pleased with NHL debut

By Daniel Nugent-Bowman

The StarPhoenix

April 5, 2015

Andrey Makarov has manned the crease in some big games.

He stopped 57 shots in the 2012 world junior championship final, his first of two appearances — and two medals — for Russia at the tournament.

He was in net for the Saskatoon Blades during the 2013 Memorial Cup.

None of those experience quite compare with what happened on Saturday night.

“When you play your first NHL game, it’s the most exciting,” Makarov said.

Makarov made 33 saves in his NHL debut as his Buffalo Sabres fell 3-0 to the New York Islanders.

However, it wasn’t a night he’ll soon forget.

“I waited to have that experience a long time ago. I tried to play my best game,” said the 21-year-old, who followed winger Michael Ferland (Calgary) as the second Blade from the Memorial Cup team to appear in an NHL game.

“I wasn’t really nervous. It was my first game and it was against a good team. They have good players. That’s all I focused about — be square to the puck, be in the right spots at the right time.”

Makarov was busy in the Buffalo net.

A Kyle Okposo wrist shot from the slot beat him on a first-period power play.

He was the victim of some bad luck on the second goal. A pass attempt from Sabres defenceman Zach Bogosian ricocheted off a discarded stick and right to Islanders’ Brock Nelson.

A late slapper by Travis Hamonic got past him in the third.

But Makarov made his share of tough saves.

He stopped Josh Bailey twice in close and flashed his glove to thwart Ryan Strome.

His biggest stop came on Isles captain John Tavares. Makarov closed his five hole just in time to prevent a breakaway goal.

“He’s one of the best players in the league,” Makarov said. “I tried to figure out what he was going to do. A couple times I see his highlights from the shootout. He always dangles goalies so easy.

“I tried to be patient as much as I can. I didn’t trust any of his moves and he decided to shoot.”

Makarov was signed by the Sabres in September 2012 as an undrafted free agent before his 19-year-old season with the Blades.

The Kazan, Russia product established Blades records for shutouts in a season (seven) and career shutouts (nine) during the 2012-13 campaign, his second with the club.

The previous marks were both held by the Washington Capitals' Braden Holtby.

Makarov spent most of last season with the Fort Wayne Comets of the ECHL.

He's posted a 15-17-3 record with a 2.98 goals-against average and a .902 save percentage with the AHL's Rochester Americans this season.

Makarov was recalled by the Sabres on March 6, but was only with the big club for a day. He was summoned again last Monday.

Makarov was pleased to appear in his first NHL game. But he's not satisfied.

He didn't keep any mementos from the occasion.

"To be honest, I think I should keep the puck when I get my first W," he said. "Keep short memory. I played good game, but I can do better the next time."

The last-place Sabres have three games left on their schedule. They host Carolina on Monday.

Makarov said he hasn't been told if he'll see the net again this season.

Blackhawks' late rally stuns Sabres

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
April 3, 2015

BUFFALO – In 47 seconds late Friday, the mood inside the First Niagara Center changed dramatically. The Sabres fans worrying their team would pull its most unlikely upset this trying season felt relieved as mighty Chicago Blackhawks quickly roared back.

When Chicago star Jonathan Toews tied it with 1:43 left, the building, which was filled with red Blackhawks jerseys, erupted.

Some hometown fans who had remained quiet as the Sabres erased an early 2-0 deficit and grabbed a 3-2 lead late joined in the cheering. Some even high-fived one another.

When Toews struck again with 56 seconds left, securing the Blackhawks' crazy 4-3 win, the capacity crowd of 19,070 erupted again.

"When I scored, I didn't hear too much," said Sabres winger Marcus Foligno, who scored twice, his first goals in 24 games. "It is what it is right now. We know our fans are awesome."

Some of those fans cheered for the 29th-place Arizona Coyotes last week. They want the Sabres to be guaranteed the first or second pick.

By losing in regulation, the Sabres couldn't earn a point for their effort, meaning they're stuck in 30th place, two points behind the Coyotes, who played late Friday. Four games are left this season. Finishing last means the Sabres can draft either Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel.

The late rally ruined what could've been the Sabres' most satisfying win this season.

"I just looked at the way we competed, the way we worked," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "I couldn't be more proud of our bunch of guys."

Sabres winger Tyler Ennis added: "We played well for 58 minutes against one of the best teams in the league. They showed what they can do when their back is against the wall."

The Sabres looked cooked early, falling behind 2-0 by the 8:36 mark.

"We need everybody to play on this team," Nolan said. "Certain guys just weren't sharp in that first period. They take advantage."

Duncan Keith opened the scoring 2:16 into the game. Patrick Sharp followed, undressing Andre Benoit with a nifty move.

Then the Sabres got back into it.

"When we first played them in the beginning of the year, (a 6-2 loss), I think they just walked over us like we weren't even there," Nolan said. "It was a big improvement."

Foligno's first goal since Feb. 8 made it 2-1 13:10 into the second period.

"Really relieved," Foligno said about scoring. "Obviously, I had a lot of chances previous games."

Johan Larsson's power-play tip, his fourth goal and 11th point in the last 12 games, tied it 5:29 into the third period.

Foligno put the Sabres up 3-2 12:42 into the third period, zooming to the net and gloving a pass before beating Blackhawks goalie Scott Darling.

"As much as you're disappointed with the loss, a big bright spot for us, the way Marcus Foligno played," Nolan said. "I thought he was really, really good the way he battled."

Then Toews, who scored the winner with 31 seconds left Sunday in Winnipeg, his hometown, went to work.

"Good teams find a way to win, even on bad nights," Foligno said.

After beating Anders Lindback in close, Toews whistled a shot by the Sabres goalie from the right circle.

"He's going to put it in nine times out of 10," Foligno said.

Toews said the Blackhawks didn't expect to score two goals so quickly.

"I think at that point any team would've been thinking about going to overtime," he said. "Glad to have salvaged a point for a so-so effort in the third."

The Sabres, who play tonight in New York against the Islanders, have plenty of positives to build on. The offense has at least three goals in six straight games. They outshot an opponent for the fourth straight contest, pumping 38 pucks on Darling. The Sabres have 143 shots in the last four games.

"I think it's just confidence, everybody just being relaxed, knowing we got nothing to lose so you can make plays," Foligno said about the offense. "When ... guys are making a high-risk play that are getting rewarded for it, you got to do it."

The Blackhawks played without superstar Patrick Kane, who's recovering from a collarbone injury.

Sabres assistant coach Bryan Trottier has special memories of Nassau Coliseum

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 3, 2015

BUFFALO – New York Islanders legend Bryan Trottier remembers the noise. The roar inside Nassau Coliseum would become deafening, funneling down from the stands to the ice.

"To the point where you're reading lips," Trottier, a Sabres assistant coach, said Friday. "Until you actually experience it, it's just fantastic."

The Isles are moving to bigger and better digs 24 miles away next season, the shiny Barclays Center in Brooklyn. Trottier, a Hall of Famer who won four straight Stanley Cups with the Isles from 1980-83, will make his final visit to the antiquated building in Uniondale tonight with the Sabres.

"I'm sure there's going to be some strangeness to it," Trottier said prior to the Sabres' 4-3 loss to the Chicago Blackhawks inside the First Niagara Center. "It's never fun going into the building as an enemy, so to speak. For me, it's going back kind of to my first home. When there's no more games being played there, it will be sad. But at least they're not like torching it, tearing it down."

The NHL's oldest building possesses some unique charm. The 58-year-old Trottier sounded nostalgic Friday recalling some of his favorite Coliseum memories from the Isles' dynasty.

One special moment came on May 24, 1980, in the aftermath of Bob Nystrom's overtime Cup-winning goal against Philadelphia.

"We won the Cup, it's just (a) constant roar that's coming down on the ice," Trottier said.

Trottier looked out into the crowd – a "group of crazy, fanatical, wonderful fans," he said – and picked an elderly lady out. The two eyeballed each other for a split-second.

He heard the woman say, "I love you, Bryan."

"I can remember not only reading her lips, but hearing her say it, her voice, out of that din, and she was like 20 rows up," he said. "That's how magnified everything gets, your senses, because you want to absorb everything."

Trottier can still see her face and hear her voice.

As the players celebrated, fans climbed over the glass onto the ice.

"There was this inclusion with no exclusion," Trottier said. "They were such a big part of that."

He wishes every player could experience that moment.

"It's such a vivid memory," he said. "But it's also such an everlasting memory."

Still, as much as Trottier loves the Coliseum, he understands it's time for the Isles to leave Long Island. He hopes the history will move with the team.

"As much as a big part of me would like to continue forever, you understand it needs some freshness, it needs some newness, it needs an upgrade," Trottier said. "If they can't do it there, what's the alternative? I only wish the franchise great success, I only wish the fans great success, except (tonight)."

"Every time I go in, I'm like, 'Geez, I wish I didn't have to play these guys.'"

The Isles honored Trottier earlier this season, a night he said was "very beautiful."

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For Trottier, this season has been a special experience.

Trottier knew what he was signing up for when Sabres coach Ted Nolan asked him to return to coaching after more than 11 years away.

"We knew that it was not going to be an overabundance of victories," Trottier said. "We knew that there was going to be an opportunity here to really bring something positive and really watch the positives."

Being engaged with the players and coaches has been "wonderful," Trottier said.

"There's been so many good things that have happened that ... through the team and through the groups and through the individuals, to me, just supersede all the challenges or struggles or whatever you want to call it," he said. "We knew what we were getting into here."

When Trottier reflects on the season, the good things will outweigh the bad.

"I've already started my Santa Claus list," he said. "All the good things."

xxx

Winger Matt Moulson woke up Friday morning feeling ill, so the Sabres recalled Tim Schaller from Rochester. Schaller had to get to Buffalo from Iowa, where the Americans played Friday.

The Sabres also scratched defenseman Mike Weber (soreness). Tyson Strachan moved in.

With Moulson out, captain Brian Gionta moved to the left wing beside center Johan Larsson and Tyler Ennis.

In other news, goalie Matt Hackett (soreness) was scratched for the third straight game. Hackett, who had major knee surgery less than a year ago, hasn't been able to practice.

"It's tough," Nolan said about Hackett. "Our practice schedule's not very good right now."

Nolan said backup goalie Andrey Makarov could make his NHL debut tonight.

End in sight for Sabres after long season

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
April 5, 2015

BUFFALO – Finally – or perhaps a more appropriate word would be “mercifully” – the end of the Sabres’ long, trying season is in sight.

Three games are left. A regulation loss tonight at home to the Carolina Hurricanes or later this week will cement 30th place, ending probably the oddest campaign in the franchise’s 45-year history.

Hours after the Sabres’ 3-0 loss to the New York Islanders on Saturday, the 29th-place Arizona Coyotes beat the San Jose Sharks 5-3, moving them four points up.

Finishing last will guarantee the Sabres the first or second pick in June, either Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel.

The Sabres could go 2-0-1 and still catch the Coyotes, who own the regulation-overtime wins tiebreaker, if they lose out.

That’s *very* unlikely, however. The Sabres play their final road game Friday against the Columbus Blue Jackets (they’ve won nine straight) before hosting the season finale Saturday against the Pittsburgh Penguins, a team suddenly fighting for a playoff spot.

What could happen tonight? Will some Sabres fans inside the First Niagara Center cheer against their team *again*? They did March 26 when Arizona won 4-3 in overtime and again Friday when the Chicago Blackhawks stunned the Sabres with two goals in 47 seconds, winning 4-3.

No one, of course, expected the Sabres to win much this season. They’re a team built to lose. Still, these could be the final days of coach Ted Nolan’s second run with the Sabres.

Yes, general manager Tim Murray awarded Nolan a three-year extension at the end of last season. But Nolan isn’t truly Murray’s guy. Pat LaFontaine brought Nolan, Buffalo’s coach from 1995-97, back in November 2013, the first act of his four-month run as president of hockey operations.

When LaFontaine resigned March 1, 2014, Nolan lost his top supporter. Murray, at some point, will want to hire his own man.

Nolan said he’s had “no talk whatsoever” with Murray about his future.

“I’m not concerned with that,” he told reporters Saturday in Uniondale. “The only thing I’m concerned with is doing the best job I can on a daily basis. Everything else will fall where it may fall.”

Has Nolan asked Murray?

“No,” he said. “I signed a three-year deal last year. We’ll see what happens.”

xxx

On Saturday, Andrey Makarov became the eighth goalie to start a game for the Sabres since Nolan took over. The 21-year-old looked sharp in his NHL debut, making 33 saves, including 13 in the first period.

Makarov, an undrafted free agent, spent most of last season in the ECHL before joining Rochester. The Russian recently assumed the No. 1 job in with the Americans.

"Steady improvement," Nolan said about Makarov's development. "When he started getting a lot of games, he started playing a lot better. As a No. 1, a steady increase of playing time, his angling got better, his positioning got better. That's what the American Hockey League's all about, as far as development of the young guys."

Makarov had a shutout in his last AHL start March 28. The Sabres recalled him late last season and briefly earlier this year, although he only dressed as a backup.

Meanwhile, Sabres goalie Matt Hackett is still feeling sore and sitting out. Hackett, who tore up his knee April 12, has played five games this season. The 25-year-old must play eight times (30 minutes counts as an appearance), or he will become an unrestricted free agent.

xxx

Two of the Sabres' top young contributors – center Johan Larsson and defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen – learned some valuable lessons late Friday.

Larsson lost a draw to Jonathan Toews before the Chicago captain broke away from him in front and scored. Ristolainen couldn't chip the puck out of his own zone seconds prior to Toews' winning goal.

"Some games, that old cliché, you learn a lot by losing," Nolan said. "I think (Friday) was a pivotal game for a couple of guys, in particular, Larsson. A big faceoff at the end, how Toews kind of beat him to the front of the net and got better positioning on him. That's the difference right there. That's why you win a couple of Stanley Cups, in position like that. That's why you're one of the elite athletes."

xxx

Nolan said Saturday defenseman Mike Weber (soreness) could be finished for the season.

Toews, Blackhawks rally to shock Sabres 4-3

By Dan Cave

WGR 550

April 3, 2015

Jonathan Toews scored the tying and game-winning goals in the final 1:43 of regulation, sending the Blackhawks to a stunning 4-3 win over the Sabres. Marcus Foligno scored twice for Buffalo and Rasmus Ristolainen racked up three assists.

Duncan Keith put the Blackhawks up just 2:16 into the game with his 10th goal of the season. Keith wound up and fired a laser past Lindback's glove for the early Chicago lead. Six and a half minutes later, Patrick Sharp made it 2-0, stepping into a shot that dribbled past Lindback and over the goalline.

The Sabres cut the lead in half at 13:10 of the second period on Foligno's seventh. The Buffalo forward was left alone in front of the crease and jammed a Ristolainen rebound under Darling's pads. Johan Larsson's power play goal tied it in the third, deflecting a Ristolainen point shot by Scott Darling.

Buffalo went ahead at 12:42 of the final period thanks to Foligno's second of the evening. Foligno beat Brent Seabrook, who struggled on Friday, to the puck to put the Sabres ahead.

Toews, however, took over in the final minutes. The Chicago forward scored his first right off a faceoff, slamming a Duncan Keith rebound under Lindback, tying it 3-3. Less than a minute later, Toews struck again, cutting into the slot with Brandon Saad and wristing his 28th into the top corner for the 4-3 lead.

Buffalo racked up 38 shots in the loss, the team's fifth straight game recording 30 or more shots on net. With the win, Chicago stays undefeated when carrying a lead into the third period, now 25-0-0.

The Sabres return to action on Saturday, visiting the New York Islanders at 7 p.m. Hear the call on WGR 550 and the Buffalo Sabres Radio Network.

1st Period

Goals

2:16 - CHI - Duncan Keith (10) (Brandon Saad, Andrew Shaw)

8:36 - CHI - Patrick Sharp (15) (David Rundblad, Brad Richards)

Penalties

13:26 - CHI - Marcus Kruger (2 min., tripping)

19:59 - BUF - Johan Larsson (2 min., boarding)

2nd Period

Goals

13:10 - BUF - Marcus Foligno (7) (Rasmus Ristolainen)

Penalties

6:51 - BUF - Delay of game - puck over glass (2 min., served by Nicolas Deslauriers)

12:16 - BUF - Tyson Strachan (5 min., fighting)

12:16 - CHI - Andrew Desjardins (5 min., fighting)

14:13 - CHI - Andrew Shaw (2 min., tripping)

17:30 - BUF - Nikita Zadorov (2 min., slashing)

3rd Period

Goals

5:29 - BUF - Johan Larsson (5) (PPG) (Rasmus Ristolainen, Tyler Ennis)

12:42 - BUF - Marcus Foligno (8) (Brian Gionta, Rasmus Ristolainen)

18:17 - CHI - Jonathan Toews (27) (Duncan Keith)

19:04 - CHI - Jonathan Toews (28) (Brandon Saad, Marian Hossa)

Penalties

4:21 - CHI - Kimmo Timonen (2 min., tripping)

11:14 - BUF - Zach Bogosian (2 min., cross checking)

11:14 - CHI - Kris Versteeg (2 min., slashing)

Goaltending

CHI - Scott Darling (35 saves, 38 shots)

BUF - Anders Lindback (32 saves, 36 shots)

Power Plays

CHI - 0 of 3

BUF - 1 of 3

Three Stars

1.) CHI - Jonathan Toews (2 G, 0 A)

2.) BUF - Marcus Foligno (2 G, 0 A)

3.) BUF - Rasmus Ristolainen (0 G, 3 A)

Hamilton: The Hawks showed early what the Sabres want to be

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

April 3, 2015

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- The shots in the first period were 12-11, but for the first 10 minutes the Blackhawks just toyed with the Sabres. Chicago passed and skated and Buffalo seemed helpless to do anything about it.

At the 2:16 mark, Zac Dalpe got right in front of Anders Lindback and Duncan Keith took advantage of the screen ripping a bomb to the far corner. The Hawks hardly ever left the Buffalo zone, but the one time they did, Patrick Sharp came down the right side and undressed Andre Benoit to walk down the slot. Sharp fired it between Lindback's pads and it squirted over the line for the 2-0 lead.

In between the goals captain Jonathan Toews just plain and simply took the puck from Tyson Strachan and went in front only to be stopped by Lindback. Kimmo Timonen was next on the wraparound followed by Brent Seabrook sneaking in from the right point and shooting wide from point blank range.

Buffalo finally showed some life when both Pat Kaleta and Zach Bogosian tattooed Andrew Shaw in the same shift. Scott Darling got into the game getting a pad on Nikita Zadorov's shot and Mikhail Grigorenko's rebound.

Marcus Kruger took a penalty and Buffalo got five shots on Darling during the two minutes. Darling stopped Grigorenko twice from the right circle. The Russian got credit for one shot, but he clearly had three.

Darling ended up with 11 saves after 20 minutes after while Lindback had 10. In the first period, Dalpe played 1:39 and was -2. Cody Hodgson played 1:55 and was also -2.

The Sabres really picked up their play in the second period and it looked like Chicago got disinterested.

Chicago started with a power play and Lindback stopped Kris Versteeg and a wide open Brandon Saad in the slot. After his problems in the first period, Hodgson made a great deke on Seabrook to walk in on Darling only to be stopped. Grigorenko went behind the net and showed great work to take the puck and then find a wide open Nic Deslauriers in front who was again robbed by Darling.

Some big hits also got Buffalo going, including Strachan's huge check on Kruger sending him to the dressing room. Andrew Desjardins took exception and fought Strachan, leading to five minute majors for each.

Buffalo finally got on the board in the second period when Grigorenko won the draw back to Ristolainen. Darling stopped his shot but left a nice rebound. Marcus Foligno outfought Seabrook and put home his first goal in 24 games. Darling had to make 15 saves in the second period while Lindback stopped 12 pucks.

Johan Larsson had a great chance to tie it early in the third, but as he cut in on Darling, Timonen wisely tripped him up for a penalty. Timonen's trip was the right move, but Buffalo tied the game on the power play. Ristolainen's shot from the point was right on the ice where Larsson could tip it by Darling to tie it at two.

It took about nine minutes for Chicago to get a decent chance in the third as Antoine Vermette cut in and was stopped twice point blank.

Foligno gave Buffalo its first lead of the game when he outworked Seabrook again. The Chicago defenseman allowed Foligno to get the original shot and just stood there as he banged home the rebound. Ristolainen got another assist giving him three on the game.

"I thought our line was having some success down low and causing turnovers all night," said Foligno. "You just gotta outmuscle and pay the price to get there, and we did it... fortunate enough tonight to get two."

With less than two minutes to play, Toews took over. The Blackhawks captain netted two goals in the span of

just 47 seconds to put Chicago ahead 4-3. The tying goal came with 1:43 remaining in regulation and Toews provided the winner less than a minute later, burying a wrist shot in the top corner of the Buffalo net.

"[Toews] has won almost every championship there is," said Ted Nolan. "Going against a guy who has played 30, 40 games in the National Hockey League, big draw, he wins it and he battles his way, beats him to the net and scores a big goal. That's why those guys are big players."

"Good teams find a way to win, even on bad nights," said Foligno. "That team over there, they've got so many weapons. Every night, they have a chance. If they're down by two, there's always a chance for that team. You can never take it easy on some shifts. Unfortunately, we did and it cost us."

"I just looked at the way we competed and we worked," Nolan said. "Couldn't be more proud of a bunch of guys."

Halak, Isles blank Sabres 3-0

By Dan Cave

WGR 550

April 4, 2015

Jaroslav Halak stopped all 21 shots he faced, leading the Islanders to a 3-0 shutout win over the Sabres on Saturday. Andrey Makarov, making his first NHL start, turned aside 33 shots in the loss.

Kyle Okposo's power play goal gave the Isles the early 1-0 lead. Okposo's shot deflected off Brian Gionta and into the Buffalo net for the 1-0 lead. Makarov kept it that way heading into the third. The Sabres netminder played well in his first action as a starter, even as New York continued to pepper him with shots, coming up with several big stops and 20 saves through the first two periods.

Makarov finally let in his second goal nearly halfway through the final period. Brock Nelson gained possession in front after Zach Bogosian's pass bounced off a stick laying on the ice. Nelson's wristshot sailed through Makarov's five-hole and into the Buffalo net, making it 2-0. Nikolay Kulemin added insurance less than four minutes later, deflecting Travis Hamonic's shot by Makarov for the three-goal lead.

With three games remaining in the regular season, the Sabres return home on Monday to face the Carolina Hurricanes at 7 p.m. Hear the call on WGR 550 and the Buffalo Sabres Radio Network.

1st Period

Goals

6:37 - NYI - Kyle Okposo (17) (PPG) (John Tavares, Frans Nielsen)

Penalties

5:58 - BUF - Matt Ellis (2 min., hooking)

2nd Period

Goals

None

Penalties

11:33 - NYI - Cal Clutterbuck (2 min., hooking)

16:33 - NYI - Brian Strait (4 min. double minor, high sticking)

3rd Period

Goals

9:32 - NYI - Brock Nelson (20) (Unassisted)

13:13 - NYI - Nikolay Kulemin (14) (Travis Hamonic, Lubomir Visnovsky)

Penalties

4:07 - BUF - Tyson Strachan (2 min., tripping)

10:26 - NYI - Frans Nielsen (2 min., interference)

18:34 - NYI - Eric Boulton (10 min. misconduct)

18:34 - NYI - Eric Boulton (2 min., unsportsmanlike conduct)

18:34 - BUF - Patrick Kaleta (2 min., unsportsmanlike conduct)

Goaltending

BUF - Andrey Makarov (33 saves, 36 shots)

NYI - Jaroslav Halak (21 saves, 21 shots)

Power Plays

BUF - 0 of 4

NYI - 1 of 2

Three Stars

- 1.) NYI - Jaroslav Halak (21 saves)
- 2.) NYI - Kyle Okposo (1 G, 0 A)
- 3.) NYI - Brock Nelson (1 G, 0 A)

Hamilton: Sabres' Makarov gets his first NHL start

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

April 4, 2015

Uniondale, LI (WGR 550) -- Andrey Makarov was called up at the end of last season when the Sabres ran into goaltending injuries, but never played.

Injuries to Matt Hackett and Chad Johnson have brought the young Russian back, and this time he made his first NHL start on Saturday. The 21-year-old has 47 AHL games under his belt going 22-20-3. This season his goals against average is 2.98 with a .902 save percentage.

The first thing that struck me about Makarov is that he's very quick. He's active in his crease and can get across in no time. That may have been part of the reason why the Islanders let the Sabres off the hook. New York dominated the first half of the period and were passing like they were in an All-Star game. The Islanders passed up many good opportunities trying to get better ones that weren't there.

He got into the game right away stopping a long shot from the left point by Nick Leddy.

The next save a few seconds later was robbery when Makarov was on top of his crease and made a huge glove save on Nikolay Kulemin. He had other good saves on Matt Martin in the slot and a Kulemin tip from the point.

The goal that beat him came on the power play. Kyle Okposo's shot hit Brian Gionta and went in.

As the period was winding down, Makarov wasn't nearly as busy. He did make a real nice save on Josh Bailey off a 3-on-2. Makarov made 12 saves in the first.

In the second the Sabres lost track of Ryan Strome coming down the middle. Makarov stayed with him and flashed the glove again.

About three and a half minutes into the second Makarov made a routine save on Bailey, but for some reason he thought it got through as he quickly looked behind him. Bailey then got behind Andrej Meszaros and was right in Makarov's lap, but he made two saves.

Bailey stole a puck from Rasmus Ristolainen and had an open shot through the left circle. He dropped the rebound, but got back on it.

Makarov seems to be pretty good at handling the puck. He went behind the net, made a nice back pass and Buffalo got out of the zone. The rookie was very solid through 40 minutes, making 20 saves.

The Islanders came out very fast in the third period. He almost got knocked over by a huge shot from Lubomir Visnovsky and then Travis Harmonic shot another rocket that hit the post.

Just 4:07 into the period the shots were 5-0 Islanders. About eight minutes into the third John Tavares got his best chance when he was allowed to come out from behind the net. Markarov wasn't fazed and gave him nothing.

We got to see that Makarov likes to gamble. He came flying towards to blue and just barely beat Brock Nelson to a loose puck.

Just seconds later, Zach Bogosian made an innocent pass that hit a stick laying on the ice and went right to Nelson. He took a few steps and beat Makarov through the pads for his 20th.

"That's just a tough bounce," said Bogosian. "That's all you can really say about it. Those things happen sometimes. Trying to throw it over to Tyson [Strachan], just unfortunate luck there. It went off the stick right to

their guy. Not much you can do there. It's just tough luck."

Not too much after that Makarov had another tip in front, this time Kulemin tipped in a Harmonic shot and it was 3-0. Makarov finished with 33 saves and turned in a solid performance in his first-ever NHL start, earning positive reviews from Ted Nolan.

"I thought he played very well for his first game, especially against a team like this," Nolan said. "To play that game, that strong...it was 1-0 late in the third period. You have to be very proud of his performance."

"I thought he made some really nice saves," Bogosian added. "It's never easy. The Islanders are a good team, they're fast, they throw a lot of pucks on net. I thought he played really well for us."

Are you kidding me? What a weekend in the race for 30th

By Howard Simon

WGR 550

April 6, 2015

Wow!!! What an incredible weekend.

On Friday night, the Buffalo Sabres are less than two minutes away from catching Arizona and moving into a tie for 29th place. Then Jonathan Toews steps out of the phone booth in the Superman outfit and saves the day for the "McEichel" crowd.

A little over 24 hours later, the Coyotes hang on for their first regulation victory in two months and now it seems like it would take the hockey equivalent of the "Music City Miracle" for the Sabres to blow this.

Now if any fan base should be nervous, it would be fans of the Sabres and Bills, the Kings of Heartbreak, but I have a good feeling about this. With three games left for the Sabres and Coyotes, all it takes is Buffalo losing two points or Arizona gaining two points and the race for 30th is over. Then we can all get back to our normal, root for the Sabres to win lives.

The Sabres can wrap up 30th and a guaranteed top two pick in this year's draft as early as Monday night, with a regulation loss at home to the Carolina Hurricanes.

If that doesn't happen then we go back to scoreboard watching as Arizona plays at Calgary on Tuesday and Vancouver on Thursday.

If 30th still isn't settled after that, the Sabres play at red hot Columbus on Friday and then both teams close out the season on Saturday. Buffalo hosts Pittsburgh while Arizona is home for Anaheim. If 30th place comes down to that last night, I'm going to have to double my meds.

Maybe the hockey gods are actually going to come through for us folks! Think about what just happened over the weekend starting with the game against the Blackhawks.

Chicago gets out to a 2-0 first period lead and perhaps you're thinking you won't have to sweat this one out. But the Sabres fight back and grab the lead in the third period and as the clock ticks down under two minutes, we're about to take "freaking out" to a whole new level. Then Toews carves out a place for himself in the Sabres history books with a tying goal at 18:17 and the game winning goal at 19:04. Arizona would lose at San Jose later that night but major bullet dodged right there.

I actually didn't see the Sabres game. I recorded it on my DVR. My wife and I went out for the night with another couple and I promised her I would stay off twitter. There were TV's in the bar area of the restaurant we went to but I never even checked to see if the game was on. However, the couple we went out with are Sabres season ticket holders so while I went twitter-free, my friend Brian was not subject to the same rules. He was giving me updates. 2-0 Buffalo in the first and I did an internal cheer(a really loud one).

After dinner, we decided to go for dessert so I turned on WGR but kept it very low. I tuned in just in time to hear the Sabres score their first goal and promptly turned the game off. A wonderful dessert completed, we were driving our friends home when Brian told me it was now 2-2 in the third.

When I got home, I decided not to turn the game on. I didn't want to run the risk of ruining my Friday night and end up going to bed angry. Since I recorded the game, I'd just watch the end on Saturday morning.

When I woke up, I couldn't take it so I flipped on Sportscenter to see the score in the crawl. First I saw the Hawks had won(YES!). Then I made sure it was in regulation so there was no loser point gained(YES!!). Then they had the note about Toews' late game heroics to which I exclaimed "Holy Toledo" only I didn't use Toledo. I then went to the DVR to watch the last few minutes. Unbelievable. But the best part was going back into my

twitter feed to read reactions which went from outrage and anger to wild celebration and incredible relief in the span of a few minutes.

The hockey gods are smiling on us, part two. On Saturday night, the New York Islanders are clinging to a 1-0 lead in the third period when a Zach Bogosian pass to Tyler Strachan in the Sabres end of the ice, hits off a stick lying on the ice and goes right to Brock Nelson. He beats a surprised Andrei Makarov and the Isles go on to the 3-0 victory.

Now it was time for Arizona to help out. The Coyotes did their best to stay just two points ahead of the Sabres and keep your blood pressure at a higher than normal rate. On two occasions, the Coyotes took a two goal lead over San Jose but there was barely time for Sabres fans to celebrate. After going up 3-1, Arizona gave up a goal on the first shift after the face-off. When Arizona took a 4-2 led they were called for a penalty on the next shift and the Sharks pulled within one again, on a power play goal.

Arizona had two power plays inside the final 10 minutes of the third period but couldn't score. Then the Coyotes were called for delay of game with 2:49 left. I did the hand over my eyes move at that point as I could barely watch what I thought would be a certain Coyotes collapse but lo and behold they killed off the penalty and clinched the game with an empty net goal.

Whew! Four points up with three games to go. The garage door is opening...just need to pull in without hitting anything.

Young Sabres capitalizing on opportunities

By Jonah Javad

WGRZ

April 3, 2015

BUFFALO, NY- Do not be fooled by their record or place in the standings, the Buffalo Sabres are out to prove everyone wrong.

The Sabres, young and old, have no plans to pack it in and call it a day until the final whistle blows on April 11.

The media, the critics and the Buffalo fans who cheer against them have become the fuel to their fire. Every time a Sabres fan cheers on the other team, the players grit their teeth and play harder - and better.

All season long, Buffalo has been putrid offensively - averaging fewer than two goals per game. Somehow (*see: proving everyone wrong*), the Sabres have figured it out - scoring at least three goals in each of their last five games.

Veteran forward Brian Gionta and defenseman Andrej Meszaros have four goals apiece over that stretch, while second-year defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen has three.

Forwards Tyler Ennis and Matt Moulson have also played well, as have the younger crop of players, especially Ristolainen.

Since Buffalo is (and has been for quite some time) eliminated from playoff contention, the remaining games provide an opportunity for the younger players to get more experience. Many of them have responded included Ristolainen, Zemgus Girgensons (when healthy) and Nikita Zadorov (when he's in the coaches' good graces).

With nearly a week to play in the regular season, many of the Sabres are auditioning for next year. Understandably, those guys do not care about tanking for a guaranteed top two pick.

None of the Sabres want to purposely lose. It's not in their DNA.

And, they certainly do not want to purposely lose if there's no guarantee they'll be here to see the rebuild come to fruition.

Toews' late goals lift Blackhawks over Sabres

By Mark Ludwiczak

The Sports Xchange

April 3, 2015

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- Jonathan Toews came through yet again in the clutch for the Chicago Blackhawks.

The Chicago captain, known for his ability to produce when it matters most, scored twice in the final 1:43 to lead the Blackhawks to a thrilling 4-3 win over the Buffalo Sabres on Friday night.

Toews' two goals came 47 seconds apart in a frenetic finish.

"He's had a big, big week. ... A special player, and the bigger the stage the bigger the response is," Chicago coach Joel Quenneville said. "He's one of those guys that he's driven in a different manner than a lot of players. Big-time week for him."

The goals came five days after Toews scored the game-winner with 31 seconds remaining against the Winnipeg Jets in his hometown.

The tying goal came on a rebound opportunity in front of the Buffalo net. After defenseman Duncan Keith's long shot from the point was stopped, Toews pounced on the rebound and poked it into the net.

The game-winner was even more impressive. After a turnover by Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen at the blue line, Blackhawks left winger Brandon Sodd found Toews with a drop pass and the captain lifted a quick wrist shot into the top corner of the net with 56 seconds remaining.

"Big goal for us to tie it," Toews said. "I don't think we expected to score two that quickly. I think at that point any team would've been thinking about going to overtime. Glad to have salvaged a point for a so-so effort in the third."

Keith and left winger Patrick Sharp also scored for the Blackhawks (48-24-6), who are one point behind the Nashville Predators at the top of the Central Division. Each team has four games remaining. Goalie Scott Darling made 35 saves for Chicago.

Right winger Marcus Foligno scored two goals and left winger Johan Larsson scored for the Sabres (22-48-8), who once again received a mixed reaction from the hometown crowd. With many Sabres fans hoping for the top pick in the draft -- and either prospect Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel -- each of Chicago's two late goals received raucous ovations from a mixed crowd that did feature a large contingent of Blackhawks fans.

Goalie Anders Lindback made 32 saves for Buffalo.

"When we first played them in the beginning of the year, I think they just walked over us like we weren't even there," Sabres coach Ted Nolan said. "It was a big improvement."

"They got Toews out there. He's won almost every championship that there is to win ... That's why those guys are big players."

Chicago's skill and speed were on display from the very start, but the Sabres clawed their way back as the game went on.

Keith opened the scoring 2:16 into the first period on a hard slap shot from behind the left circle. It was his 10th goal of the season.

Sharp made it 2-0 six minutes later following some terrific skating in the Sabres end. The Blackhawks winger cut inside and took advantage of some open space before beating Lindback with a hard wrist shot.

The Sabres were much improved in the second period and eventually evened the score.

Foligno got the Sabres on the board with 6:50 remaining in the second following some nice work in front of the Blackhawks net. After a save by Darling, Foligno controlled the puck with his left skate before putting a backhand chance in.

Larsson made it 2-2 with a power-play goal 4:29 into the third period. Following a blast from Ristolainen, Larsson tipped the shot from close range for his fifth goal of the year.

Foligno made it 3-2 on an outstanding individual effort with 7:18 remaining. His initial shot attempt was deflected by Blackhawks defenseman Brent Seabrook and stopped by Darling's right pad. Foligno then quickly followed up on the rebound and scored on the forehand.

After winning four in a row, the Blackhawks are hoping to take their momentum into a pair of key games against the rival St. Louis Blues. With playoff positioning and a potential division title on the line, the teams square off on Sunday and Thursday.

"Huge games for us," Quenneville said. "They're four-point games with so little time to make up ground so we'll see how it sorts out."

NOTES: LW Daniel Carcillo, D Michal Rozsival, RW Kyle Baun, C Joakim Nordstrom and D Michael Paliotta were scratched for the Blackhawks. ... D Mike Weber, LW Matt Moulson, RW Jerry D'Amigo, G Matt Hackett and G Chad Johnson were scratched for the Sabres. ... Before the game, the Sabres recalled F Tim Schaller from the AHL's Rochester Americans. It was Schaller's sixth recall of the season. With Rochester this season, Schaller is second on the team in points with 41 (15 goals, 26 assists) in 59 games. ... This was the second and final meeting between the Sabres and Blackhawks this season. Chicago beat Buffalo 6-2 on Oct. 11.

Moulson, Weber questionable against Blackhawks

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

April 3, 2015

UPDATE (2:45 p.m.): The Buffalo Sabres today announced the team has recalled forward Tim Schaller from the Rochester Americans of the American Hockey League (AHL).

PREGAME VIDEO

Ted Nolan

Zach Bogosian

Patrick Kaleta

Brian Gionta

The Chicago Blackhawks clinched a berth in the Stanley Cup Playoffs with a win over Vancouver on Thursday, but the Buffalo Sabres still expect the 100-point club to come into Friday night's game at First Niagara Center looking to gain some more ground in the standings.

The Sabres will enter the game with back-to-back wins, most recently coming back from a two-goal deficit against the Toronto Maple Leafs on Wednesday.

"It's been a fun game to play. I think the way we've won, just the fashion that we've won has been the most exciting and fun part about all of it," defenseman Zach Bogosian said.

"We've just got to keep our effort up. A team like Chicago, they have a lot of skilled players. We just have to make sure we outwork them and be physical on them and make it hard for them to make those plays because if you give them time and space, they're going to make those plays. But it'll be a fun game."

The Tops Game Night pregame show begins at 6:30 p.m. on MSG-B and Bell with puck drop scheduled for 7 p.m. The game can also be heard live on WGR 550.

Defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen will return to the lineup after missing one game due to what Sabres coach Ted Nolan called an illness.

However, left wing Matt Moulson and defenseman Mike Weber may not play. Neither partook in the team's morning skate.

Moulson woke up feeling ill Friday morning while Weber has been feeling sore the past few days. Sabres coach Ted Nolan said they're both questionable for the game against the Blackhawks.

With Schaller's recall, it's more likely that the team may be without Moulson.

No matter which players are in the lineup, Nolan expects his club to give 100 percent.

"You have to step it up. Obviously anybody in this League you don't step up to, you're going to get beat," he said. "I don't care what position you are in and particularly when you play top seeds like L.A. and Chicago and Anaheim, those type of teams, the Bruins. They're all good teams in this League and you have to step up."

Anders Lindback will start in net for Buffalo, marking his fourth-straight start. In the 12 games since he was acquired by the Sabres from Dallas on Feb. 11, he's recorded a .923 save percentage and a 2.65 goals-against average, stopping at least 30 shots in seven of his past 11 starts.

FINALLY, GOALS

Buffalo's offense has been clicking lately. They've scored at least three goals in each of the past five games, including two without leading scorer Tyler Ennis. On the season, Buffalo has only averaged 1.9 goals per game.

Nolan said that the success has come in part because there is no longer the uncertainty of the trade deadline no longer looms. Players, especially younger ones looking to make an impact in the NHL, have been able to feel comfortable and grow into their expanded roles.

"It's kind of a settled-in group. Some of the kids are really learning fast," Nolan said. "[Captain Brian] Gionta's one of the best leaders in this game so they're learning what it takes to be a pro. They're learning how to be more consistent.

"[Johan] Larsson, from the first time he got called up to this time, he's much, much improved. [Mikhail] Grigorenko, the last couple games, has been gotten better, Ristolainen, all those [young players]. They're learning on a fast track and they're getting better."

The Sabres power play has also had some success in recent games and has had to deal with some missing pieces along the way. With Moulson not at the morning skate, Philip Varone took a spot on the first unit, which features four forwards (Gionta, Larsson and Ennis on the point) and Bogosian on the other point.

"It feels good to get out there. As a defenseman, you like to pound pucks and shoot a lot. The power play gives you that opportunity," Bogosian said. "Having Tyler back there on the point's pretty fun. He can dish the puck pretty well so it's pretty impressive watching him move the puck up the ice, especially on the breakouts."

Ristolainen practiced on the second unit Monday, manning one point, while Andrej Meszaros set up at the other. Grigorenko, Cody Hodgson and Marcus Foligno were once again the forwards there.

INJURY UPDATE

The status of goaltender Matt Hackett remains a question mark. He did not partake in the morning skate and Nolan hinted that Andrey Makarov could start in net on Saturday against the Islanders. Nolan also said it's possible that Hackett could feel good enough to practice on Long Island.

Hackett is dealing with some soreness and swelling in his knee that was surgically repaired a year ago. He last played on March 28, allowing three goals on 10 shots in two periods of relief.

PROJECTED LINEUP

12 Brian Gionta – 22 Johan Larsson – 63 Tyler Ennis
44 Nicolas Deslauriers – 25 Mikhail Grigorenko – 82 Marcus Foligno
20 Zac Dalpe – 84 Philip Varone – 36 Patrick Kaleta
37 Matt Ellis – 59 Tim Schaller – 19 Cody Hodgson

24 Tyson Strachan – 47 Zach Bogosian
41 Andrej Meszaros – 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
61 Andre Benoit – 51 Nikita Zadorov

35 Anders Lindback
1 Andrey Makarov

Toews is Jonny on the spot in Chicago victory

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

April 3, 2015

A pair of late goals stifled a would-be comeback for the Sabres in a 4-3 loss to Chicago on Friday at First Niagara Center. Buffalo led 3-2 with less than two minutes to play in the contest, but Blackhawks captain Jonathan Toews scored twice in a one-minute span to shock the Sabres and earn the victory for Chicago.

Marcus Foligno bookended the Sabres' scoring with a pair of goals and Johan Larsson also scored for Buffalo in the loss. In net, Anders Lindback allowed four goals on 36 shots for the Sabres. In addition to Toews, Duncan Keith and Patrick Sharp each scored for Chicago.

Chicago's comeback began when the Blackhawks pulled their goaltender for an extra attacker in the game's final minutes. Toews beat Larsson in an ensuing faceoff, feeding Keith for a shot and then scoring on a rebound. Then, 47 seconds later, Toews ended up on the receiving end of a 2-on-1 opportunity to net the deciding goal.

"It's a bounce here and there, obviously," Foligno said of the late goals afterward. "They score on a six-on-five, and then a misplay by two guys and it ends up 2-on-1 and Jonathan Toews is going down one-on-one with the goalie. He's going to put it in nine times out of 10."

At the outset, it looked as if the Sabres were in for a long night against one of the league's top teams. Keith opened the scoring for Chicago less than three minutes into the game, and Sharp deked around Andre Benoit and fired a shot past Lindback to double the Blackhawks' lead a few minutes later. At that point, the shot tally was 9-3 in favor of Chicago.

But for the third straight game, Buffalo fought back. The Sabres outshot Chicago 8-3 for the remainder of the first period and again 16-12 in the second. For their part, the Blackhawks failed to capitalize on a few good scoring opportunities – none more glaring than a missed one-timer by Vermette in the dwindling seconds of the first period.

The Sabres finally broke through on Foligno's goal in the second period, a backhander on a rebound in front of the net. It was the first time the Sabres were able to breach Chicago's rookie goaltender, Scott Darling, who had allowed just one goal in his last three appearances coming into the contest. The goal set the tone for Buffalo's comeback. Larsson scored on a tip-in to tie the game early in the third and, with momentum in Buffalo's favor, Foligno scored the go-ahead goal on his own rebound with less than eight minutes to play.

After the game, Sabres head coach Ted Nolan lauded Foligno's efforts in the comeback attempt.

"As much as you're disappointed with the loss, a big bright spot for us was the way Marcus Foligno played," Nolan said. "I thought he was really, really good. The way he battled, especially on that first goal, he really battled through and he was certainly a bright light for that entire game."

RASMUS ON A ROLL

Rasmus Ristolainen continued one of the best offensive stretches of his young career with his two assists in the loss. The second-year defenseman has now registered a point in four straight games, the longest streak of his career and second longest by a Sabre this season. He'll have a chance to match Chris Stewart's season-high streak of five games with a point on Saturday against the Islanders.

"Rasmus has been playing unbelievable offense the past month," Foligno said. "I think that he's improved dramatically and it's been great to see a young guy like that lead on the back end and improve. He's been getting shots through, I think he's been working on it. Just his composure too with the puck, he's been rushing in a lot, head up, and finding guys too so it's been great to see a guy like that play well."

It was Ristolainen who made both of the Sabres' first two goals possible on Friday. When Foligno scored to put the Sabres on the board in the second period, it was on a rebound off of a Ristolainen slap shot. Larsson's goal in the third also stemmed from a slap shot by the young defenseman, this time on a tip in front of the net.

Ristolainen had scored in three consecutive contests prior to missing the Sabres' last game against Toronto due to sickness, including a two-point performance in a loss to Colorado on March 28. He now has 19 points on the season, including seven in the last four games.

RISK AND REWARD

Friday's loss marked the sixth straight game that the Sabres have scored at least three goals, their longest such streak of the season. After the game, Foligno attributed the team's offensive success to their willingness to take more chances.

"I think it's confidence. But I think it's just being relaxed and knowing you have nothing to lose so you can make plays," he said. "Those guys that are making the high risk plays that are getting rewarded for it, you've got to do it."

Makarov makes 1st start in loss to Islanders

By Chris Ryndak

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UNIONDALE, NEW YORK – In the penultimate game at Nassau Coliseum, Andrey Makarov made his first career start in net for the Buffalo Sabres, stopping 33 of 36 shots.

The New York Islanders took home a 3-0 victory as Makarov finally got a taste of what it's like to play in an NHL regular-season game.

The Islanders took the lead on the power play 6:37 into the contest on a slap shot by Kyle Okposo that deflected in off Sabres captain Brian Gionta. Buffalo hung in the game until New York scored twice in the third on goals from Brock Nelson and Nikolay Kulemin.

The Sabres signed Makarov as an undrafted free agent in 2012. With the Amerks this season, the 21-year-old Russian netminder has played in 37 games, recording a 15-17-3 record with a .902 save percentage and 2.98 goals-against average.

After joining the Amerks in March 2014, he helped the team close out its regular season by posting a 7-3-0 record, while registering a .927 save percentage and a 2.20 goals-against average.

In the 2014 Calder Cup Playoffs, Makarov went 2-3-0 in five games played and recorded a .907 save percentage and 3.01 goals-against average.

He served as the backup for three games last season and played one preseason game for Buffalo this year, making 27 saves in a shootout loss in Toronto.

He's up with the Sabres because of injuries to Chad Johnson and Matt Hackett.

Makarov had served as a backup in four games this season including Friday night's 4-3 loss at home to Chicago. Anders Lindback played that game, making 32 saves. Saturday marked the first time Marakov had seen action in a regular-season NHL game.

All of those experiences helped him look pretty composed in his first NHL action.

"To be honest, I didn't even get nervous," Makarov said after the game. "I went into the game, simple as every one. I was more nervous waiting for that shot on net. I had to stop it."

That first shot came just 48 seconds into the game when Ryan Strome put a wrister on net from 30 feet out.

"I thought he made some really nice saves. It's never easy," defenseman Zach Bogosian said. "The Islanders are good team, they're fast. They throw a lot of pucks on net and I thought he played really well for us. He has a bright future ahead of him. Obviously you'd like to get a win in your first NHL start but I thought he showed tonight that he can battle and he made some big saves."

Sabres coach Ted Nolan liked how Makarov settled in to put together a solid effort in net.

"He looked like a very confident young man," Nolan said. "Sometimes when you get those first games in, you're kind of jittery and nervous and young, but he acted like a very mature guy here tonight. He went in and did his job very well."

SPECIAL TEAMS PROVE TO BE DECISIVE

Okposo's tally was the first power-play goal the Sabres had allowed in four games. The penalty kill units had gone 10-for-10 over that stretch.

Buffalo had a chance to tie the game near the end of the second period, with a four-minute power play after Brian Strait caught Nicolas Deslauriers with a high stick. The Sabres sustained pressure in the Islanders zone, but were unable to convert.

"You have to give the Islanders credit," Nolan said. "They got in a lot of good shot-block lanes. We couldn't get the puck through. We were moving the puck well."

ONE LAST TRIP

Sabres assistant coach Bryan Trottier spent 15 seasons with the Islanders, winning four Stanley Cups from 1980-83. He's the franchise's all-time leader in points (1,353), assists (853), games played (1,123) and plus/minus (plus-470). He's second in Islanders history with 500 goals.

Sabres TV's Brian Duff talked with him Saturday morning about his last trip to the Coliseum.

The Islanders will move to Brooklyn next year after calling Long Island home for the past 43 years.

TWO BIG CONTRIBUTORS OUT

Neither Matt Moulson (illness) nor Mike Weber (lower-body injury) made the trip to Long Island. Nolan said prior to the game that Weber's injury could be season ending. It's unclear if Moulson will be available on Monday when the Sabres host the Carolina Hurricanes.

The Tops Game Night pregame show will begin at 6:30 p.m. on MSG-B and Bell with puck drop set for 7 p.m. The game can also be heard live on WGR 550.