



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres-Capitals Preview

By Kevin Massoth

AP

December 30, 2015

Braden Holtby doesn't need much help these days, but the scheduling gods have lined the Washington Capitals' goaltender up with consecutive games against one of the NHL's worst offenses.

Two days after shutting out the Buffalo Sabres, Holtby will try to help the Capitals to their ninth straight win Wednesday night in the conclusion of a home-and-home set at Verizon Center.

Washington (27-6-2) is off to the best start in franchise history and padded its huge lead ahead of both New York teams in the Metropolitan Division with Monday's 2-0 win at Buffalo. The Capitals have a chance to take the season series on Wednesday while winning nine games in a row for the first time since Feb. 26-March 15, 2011.

The Capitals have also won eight games in a row at home and are 14-3-1 at Verizon Center.

Holtby has six wins during Washington's streak, upping his league-leading total to 23. His last regulation loss came on Nov. 10, and he is 15-0-1 since. Holtby holds a 1.68 goals-against average in his last 20 starts and has pushed aside 60 of 61 shots in his last two.

Captain Alex Ovechkin scored his team-leading 18th goal in Monday's win for a team that ranks second in the NHL with 3.09 goals per game. Still, he pointed to the man in net as the difference as Holtby posted the 22nd shutout of his career and second this season.

"We knew he's good," Ovechkin said. "He's our best player and probably the best goalie in the league right now."

Backed by an average of 3.80 goals in the last five games, Holtby will face a team that ranks toward the bottom of the NHL with an average of 2.33. He holds a 1.48 GAA and .944 save percentage in his last four starts against Buffalo, winning the last three.

Buffalo (15-17-4) exploded offensively in Saturday's 6-3 win at Boston, but Holtby handed the Sabres their second shutout in five games and third this season.

The Sabres went 0 for 3 on the power play, extending their scoreless streak on the man advantage to 0 for 17 through six games, while the Capitals have killed off all eight penalties in their last three wins.

"We didn't execute in certain areas (Saturday) night," right wing Brian Gionta said. "We played hard, we limited their chances, but the goals they got came off of mistakes by us."

Chad Johnson figures to get the start in net for Buffalo after Linus Ullmark suffered Monday's loss. Johnson has won three of his last four starts with a 1.47 GAA and .957 save percentage, but he has a 2.61 GAA in three career starts against Washington.

Evander Kane played in his first game on Monday since The Buffalo News reported that Buffalo police were investigating a sex crime allegation against him. Kane, who finished with four shots, said after Monday's morning skate that he's innocent and looks forward to clearing his name.

Washington has won the last three games in this series and has picked up points in nine of the last 10.

Deslauriers is ready for rematch against Capitals

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

December 30, 2015

Nicolas Deslauriers didn't make many friends on the Washington Capitals.

"No, not at all," the Sabres forward said Tuesday.

First, Deslauriers put on crushing hit on Justin Williams and inadvertently bloodied the veteran during Monday's meeting. Then the winger accepted a fight with Michael Latta and won convincingly, with Latta getting hurt during the bout. Finally, Deslauriers really irritated Washington's players by celebrating the technical knockout on his way to the penalty box, exhorting the ecstatic Buffalo crowd to get even louder.

The Capitals warned Deslauriers to keep his head up from that moment on. He'll be on the lookout Wednesday when the teams meet again in the nation's capital.

"For sure, there could be some things going on out there – and it could be really quiet," Deslauriers said after practice in First Niagara Center. "We'll just see. I'm here to play hockey. I'm not here to fight every single game. We'll try to get a win down there."

While Deslauriers made a statement with his physicality, the Capitals talked louder by winning, 2-0. They scored their second goal with Deslauriers still serving the fighting major, and Washington tough guy Tom Wilson taunted the boxed-in forward.

"A little karma when he wants to play it up a little bit like that," added Washington coach Barry Trotz. "It actually helped us out on the bench. We scored right away. I thought it was just karma."

Karma or not, Deslauriers' enthusiasm has put spice into a game that has slowly rid itself of fisticuffs and pugilistic showmanship.

"I enjoyed it," Sabres defenseman Mike Weber said. "That's a part of the game that's gone away. It's an emotional game out there. Especially a guy like D'lo, he plays with his heart on his sleeve and gives you whatever he's got with whatever he gets a night.

"It's still hockey. It's still a tough game. It's very emotional. It was nice to see some emotion."

Deslauriers is undoubtedly the Sabres' physical spark plug. Though he skates just 9:39 per game, second lowest on the team to David Legwand's 9:27, Deslauriers leads Buffalo with 98 hits. The total ranks 21st in the NHL. He has three of the Sabres' seven fights.

"With the minutes that I play, I have to bring everything every single shift," Deslauriers said. "We just try to turn the game around. It didn't go the way I thought it was going to go after that fight, but things happen."

Deslauriers caught Washington's eye when he threw the puck-carrying Williams into the boards with a hard left hand. As both players fell to the ice, Deslauriers' stick caught Williams in the face.

"I looked at it and it was just unlucky," Deslauriers said. "My stick just snapped him. I don't wish anybody to get stitches like that on their face, but I think it's just an unlucky bounce."

On Deslauriers' next shift, Latta challenged him during the faceoff.

"I had to answer the bell there," Deslauriers said. "A couple guys wanted to do it. Give credit to him. He had to step up. I hope everybody appreciated it."

The Sabres did. The fans did. The Caps didn't, especially when Latta headed to the trainer's room with an arm injury. Defenseman Karl Alzner had words with Deslauriers when the forward skated from the box to the bench.

"They tried to send a message," Alzner said. "We tried to send a message. I guess we'll see whose sunk in and who's raring to go more next game."

Washington, which improved to 27-6-2, will look for its eighth straight victory. The Sabres will try to win for the fifth time in eight games.

"They're up among the top of the league there with Dallas, and we want to knock them off," Weber said. "You need to play hard against those guys. You need to get those guys off their game and thinking about something else other than putting the puck in the back of the net."

Sabres notebook: Lehner works hard in return to full practice

By John Vogl
Buffalo News
December 30, 2015

Dan Bylsma didn't care if Robin Lehner stopped one puck or 100 Tuesday. That wasn't the point. What mattered was the Sabres' No. 1 goaltender was back on the ice with his teammates.

His face red and sweat pouring, it was clear Lehner had a tough workout. For the first time since suffering a high-ankle sprain in Buffalo's season opener, Lehner participated fully in practice. He faced plenty of shots and even took part in the session-ending shootout, showing he's close to putting the injury behind him.

"I can pretty much do whatever, but I still have a little issue around my right post," Lehner said in First Niagara Center. "I'm pretty much 100 percent to practice. Game-wise, I've been out, I don't even know, around three months. It's going to take a few days to get back in the swing of things and get back in the tempo and get back reading the pucks."

Bylsma said the Sabres will gauge Lehner's progress in practice over the next five to seven days before determining when to put him in a game. The goaltender will get at least one rehab start in Rochester before rejoining the Sabres, who play Wednesday in Washington.

"I've been working almost 10 times a week with the gym guys, so it's going to be a lot easier coming back with what's been going on here," Lehner said.

"They gave me kind of six to 10 weeks right when it happened, more to the 10-week part because I'm a goalie and we need our feet and we need to bend them pretty well.

"I had a little setback around the eighth week. I felt like I was pretty much 100 percent, and I had a little setback. It's been a mental part to this, too, but we stuck through it. All the medical staff has been really good and pushed me through it. It's nice to be back."

Lehner clearly needs to get back up to speed before heading into an NHL net. Shot after shot sailed by him early in practice, which was expected after nearly 12 weeks off.

"I purposely didn't watch if he stopped the puck or didn't stop the puck," Bylsma said.

The time alone was rough for Lehner. Last season ended early because of a concussion, and his Sabres career was short-circuited after just 30 minutes.

"My concussion with Ottawa was my first injury, and it was pretty unlucky to get this one right away coming into this season," the 24-year-old said. "I'm not used to being away from the guys, and that's the hard part. You miss being around."

Chad Johnson and Linus Ullmark will continue to share the Sabres' net until Lehner is ready. Johnson is 10-9-2 with a .918 save percentage, while Ullmark is 5-7-2 with a .911 in his first 14 games in North America.

“He’s come in and embraced it, and he’s shown what he’s capable of,” Lehner said of Ullmark. “Both him and Johnny have been very good, and I’ve been very happy for them.”

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The Sabres practiced in front of advertisements for Rochester-area restaurants, attorneys and medical facilities. It’s because the Amerks are taking over the arena Wednesday.

Rochester will face the St. John’s IceCaps, the farm team for the Montreal Canadiens, at 7 p.m. in First Niagara Center. Tickets range from \$10 to \$20. It is a home game on the Amerks’ schedule.

The Amerks’ roster includes first-year pros Justin Bailey, Nick Baptiste, Evan Rodrigues and Jean Dupuy, and veterans Patrick Kaleta and Matt Ellis.

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Bylsma altered his lines late in Monday’s 2-0 loss to Washington, and he hinted they would remain in place for the rematch. The lines had Ryan O’Reilly centering for left wing Jamie McGinn and right wing Sam Reinhart, Jack Eichel in the middle of Zemgus Girgensons and Brian Gionta, Johan Larsson flanked by Evander Kane and Tyler Ennis, and David Legwand in the middle of Matt Moulson and Nicolas Deslauriers.

Bylsma said he will not change the personnel on his struggling power-play unit, which is in an 0-for-17 slump.

“Our breakout and our entry was more about execution than personnel,” the coach said.

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The Sabres held their monthly “mustache boy” shootout contest at the end of practice. The last player to score has to grow a mustache for a month or shave one already in place. Facial-haired defenseman Zach Bogosian lost and angrily chucked his stick into the empty stands.

Said Bylsma: “No one’s happy when they get mustache boy.”

Evander Kane investigation could take weeks, police say

By Gene Warner, Lou Michel
Buffalo News
December 30, 2015

Buffalo police expect that their probe into a weekend incident involving Buffalo Sabres forward Evander Kane could take weeks to conclude, as they await the results of toxicology tests.

“Don’t expect anything soon,” one law enforcement source told The Buffalo News on Tuesday.

Police officials have cited no specific allegations against Kane in the case, as the 20-year-old woman who had been with him early Sunday morning has told police that she didn’t recall exactly what happened.

Kane has denied any wrongdoing in the case, telling reporters Monday morning that he looked forward to having his name cleared. Sources have said that Kane claimed his encounter with the woman was consensual.

A local hospital called 911 at about 7:40 a.m. Sunday morning, after the woman went there seeking treatment for an injury.

Signs of trauma were found on her body, authorities have said.

Sex Offense Squad detectives responded to the hospital to collect and preserve any physical evidence in the case, as they would in any such case.

It’s not clear how extensively they interviewed the woman then.

Earlier Sunday, the woman left a message with an acquaintance at a downtown bar that she wasn’t heading home, as she was seen leaving the establishment with Kane, one source said.

Other sources have said he took her to his room in the Buffalo Marriott HarborCenter early that morning.

Pegulas may be in over their heads

By Bucky Gleason
Buffalo News
December 30, 2015

Kim and Terry Pegula find themselves in quite a pickle, wouldn't you say? The owners of Buffalo's two major professional sports franchises had euphoric fans fawning over them after they purchased the Bills and hired a big-name head coach. A year later, your worst fears have come true.

The Pegulas now own two franchises going nowhere rather than just one. The Bills missed the playoffs for a 16th consecutive season with no end in sight. The Sabres entered Tuesday's games in 26th place in the NHL. They were two points ahead of Anaheim, which had two games in hand and was one stop from the bottom.

OK, so the Sabres are in better shape now than they were two years ago. The same could be said about the Bills' quarterback situation. But it doesn't take a genius to figure out that neither could get much worse. Temporary improvement speaks to low standards more than it points to overall progress.

The cold truth: As it stands now, the Pegulas are in over their heads.

It sounds harsh, but my intention isn't to tear down ownership while ignoring the Pegulas' greater body of work. They single-handedly changed the landscape downtown. They pumped millions of dollars into our region, which boosted confidence among other investors and led them to do the same.

They spared Buffalo major headaches and eternal heartache. The Sabres weren't going anywhere, but the Bills leaving town was a real possibility before they came to the rescue. As one of my former bosses often said, Buffalo without the Bills and Sabres might as well be Utica. Buffalo is thriving because the Pegulas believed and helped others believe.

Praise them for their commitment to a region otherwise dismissed. Thank them for their generosity and vision. Hold them up as civic heroes who deserve a section of the city named after them. They're responsible for Pegulaville. They restored faith in Buffalo in more ways than anyone would have imagined.

It's all true but so is this: When it comes to owning professional sports franchises, they don't know what they're doing. It's not their fault. Can you imagine a banker or lawyer – or sports columnist – trying to run a natural gas and oil company? The Pegulas had good intentions for both teams, but pro sports were foreign territory.

And now they need help.

In recent weeks, there has been talk about them hiring a football consultant, a czar, who would provide a thorough examination of the Bills and offer advice. It makes sense but only if the Pegulas hired the right person, fully trusted his ability and accepted his decisions no matter how uncomfortable.

The true value of a consultant isn't measured by his findings. It's determined by the action taken by ownership based on his recommendations. The Bills could hire a football czar, but he's worthless unless

they follow his guidance. Before they make such a move, they need to embrace him without preconceived conditions.

Otherwise, what's the sense in hiring him?

If that means Rex Ryan and Doug Whaley should stay, fine, so long as ownership accepts the possibility the czar decides one or both should be fired. If you're going to replace Whaley but keep Ryan, the consultant better have a replacement GM who would be satisfied with the current coach.

Sure, it equates to giving full, unprecedented power to someone from outside the organization. It may be terrifying, but it's not like the people who have been in charge provided the answers. It creates a tricky situation for any owner, trickier yet for new owners who lack inexperience in identifying the right football people.

Maintaining status quo is an alternative, but the Pegulas made that mistake after purchasing the Sabres. It was obvious before they arrived that major changes were in order. Rather than clean house, they were smitten by Darcy Regier and Lindy Ruff and ended up spending more money for a lousy product.

If you remember, Terry Pegula talked about winning a Stanley Cup within three years after buying the franchise. It's laughable now, but at the time the Sabres really weren't that far away from competing for a title. He had the right idea path before handing Regier an open checkbook and effectively sending his team to the ashes.

People forget the Sabres hired a hockey czar in Pat LaFontaine, who hired Tim Murray as part of a three-pronged management team. It never fully took shape before LaFontaine was swept out the door. Ownership shipped out Sabres President Ted Black, a Pegula crony and LaFontaine adversary, the next year.

Fans wanted to believe the Pegulas learned from their errors with the Sabres, which cost them money and credibility. I'm still not convinced. There's still a sense they believe money solves most problems. It doesn't work that way in pro sports. Often, money creates other problems and compromises common sense.

Ownership made a mistake when giving LeSean McCoy a five-year contract worth \$40 million to soothe him after he was traded to Buffalo. McCoy is a terrific back, but his new deal put unnecessary pressure on the salary cap. They should have stood firm, knowing good backs were available if he didn't want to play in Buffalo.

It's one example for why they're in a tough spot.

The Bills need to make a decision on Mario Williams, who appears all but gone. They must decide whether Tyrod Taylor is a franchise quarterback before paying him like one. The sooner they sign him, the less it will cost them. If they wait to give him an extension, they're essentially betting against their own quarterback.

Free agents Cordy Glenn, Richie Incognito and Nigel Bradham present similar dilemmas. Stephon Gilmore is among others who have a year left on their deals before they become free agents. All need to be addressed one way or another. The Bills aren't expected to have cap space to aggressively shop the open market.

What to do?

I would be in over my head, too, which would lead me to hire Bill Polian or somebody else as a consultant. The Bills need someone who doesn't need the money and, therefore, has no financial stake in the organization. It means trusting him to take a cold, unsentimental and holistic look moving forward with the idea he can prevent the organization from taking a step back.

From the outside, it appeared people entrenched with the Bills and Sabres too often were more concerned with preserving their jobs than working toward the greater good. So far, in case you didn't notice, the greater good hasn't been nearly good enough for either team.

Sad but true, for the Bills, it could get worse before it get better.

Capitals host Sabres looking for ninth straight win

By Michael LoRe

NHL.com

December 30, 2015

SABRES (15-17-4) at CAPITALS (27-6-2)

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

Season series: The Washington Capitals defeated the Buffalo Sabres 2-0 at First Niagara Center on Monday. Left wing Alex Ovechkin and right wing Jay Beagle scored in the second period for the Capitals, who won their eighth straight and 15 of their past 17. Goalie Braden Holtby made 31 saves for his second shutout of the season and 22nd of his NHL career. Goalie Linus Ullmark had 24 saves for Buffalo.

Sabres team scope: Goaltender Robin Lehner practiced Tuesday as he continued his road to recovery following a high-ankle sprain sustained in the season opener on Oct. 8 against the Ottawa Senators. "It was a little fast out there, first practice with the guys for a while," Lehner told the Sabres website. "A lot of good things and I hope with time it's going to get better and better. It feels pretty good. ... It's going to take a few days to get back in the swing of things. I'll take it day by day." Coach Dan Bylsma said the Sabres will gauge Lehner over the next 5-7 days in the hopes of getting him some games with Rochester of the American Hockey League. "He's going to have to make some tweaks while dealing with the ankle and he has to work through that," Bylsma said. "He has to get some good practices in."

Capitals team scope: Holtby has dominated much of the talk surrounding the Capitals' eight-game winning streak. He is 15-0-1 in his past 17 games with a 1.74 goals-against average and .943 save percentage following the win Monday against Buffalo. "He's definitely the main reason why I think we're sitting at the top right now," defenseman Karl Alzner told The Washington Post. Holtby leads the NHL in wins (23) and GAA (1.86), and his .935 save percentage is third in the League. "The goaltending is 75 percent of the team, or 80 percent," Ovechkin said. "We knew he's good. He's our best player and probably the best goalie in the League right now." Washington didn't practice Tuesday. Center Michael Latta's status is unclear after sustaining an arm injury Monday. Forward Zach Sill was recalled from Hershey of the AHL.

Sabres veteran Mike Weber playing regularly, wants to stay

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
December 30, 2015

BUFFALO – When you sweat and bleed for an emblem for so long, Sabres defenseman Mike Weber said, it becomes a part of you.

Weber, 28, is the Sabres' longest-tenured player by two full years. Having debuted Oct. 26, 2007, he has experienced all the highs and lows of the team's recent tumultuous history.

The Pittsburgh native will proudly tell you he has grown up in the organization and how much he loves Buffalo.

"I don't know how else to say this," Weber said Tuesday inside the First Niagara Center. "This is home to me."

In the early days, Weber was considered a terrific prospect. In recent seasons, fans have relentlessly chastised him over his awful plus-minus rating and some strong comments he made after the home crowd rooted against the Sabres late last season.

The Sabres' rapid decline into a laughingstock for two seasons hurt the prideful Weber badly, and he often spoke passionately about developing a standard for success amid all the chaos.

"You want nothing more than to help this organization succeed and be a part of a success," Weber said after the Sabres prepared for tonight's road tilt against the Washington Capitals.

That's why the Sabres' resurgence this season has meant so much to him. On the first day of training camp in September, with so many new faces around him and one structured practice from coach Dan Bylsma under his belt, Weber couldn't stop smiling.

"I've ... seen a lot of good players in and out and seen some great players come in here," Weber said. "It's just exciting for this city and the guys in the locker room to get back to where we should be. Last time we were in the playoffs was (2011). That's way too long. It's time. This city deserves it. ..."

"It's really exciting for this team to be going in the right direction and how good our team has really jelled. It truly is a family atmosphere in here. We've stuck together. I know it's only been three months, but we've really stuck together as a family here."

But how much longer will Weber be in that family? He's in the final season of a three-year, \$5 million contract. With his deal ending, Sabres general manager Tim Murray might want to trade him before the deadline. Veteran depth defensemen are always in demand as the season goes on.

Weber could have some value. After sitting out 11 games earlier this season as a healthy scratch, he has been playing perhaps his best hockey in years on the third pair beside Cody Franson. Weber, a minus-51 the last two seasons, has played nine straight contests and is a plus-1 overall.

His reputation for gritty play could also make him an attractive option for a contender.

"He's a hard guy to play against," Bylsma said. "Other players in the league know it. My experience is that he's hard to play against and is hard to play against good skill players. I know it's probably one of his proudest things is that he has that reputation, that he is that type of player. That's something I didn't get being here. I think I kind of knew that about Mike from previous years."

Naturally, Weber's future has been on his mind.

"You think about the stuff away from the arena with your wife and your kids and what might happen," he said. "But at the end of the day, I can only do what I do, and that's show up with a good attitude, work hard and play hard in the minutes I get in the games and hopefully someone's watching and you hope that you stay here. Obviously, this is home to me."

Undergoing knee surgery in November helped Weber get going. Bylsma said Weber probably played through the injury for too long and it hampered his skating and his ability to defend.

"I think even his puck play has been better," Bylsma said. "His ability to skate, get to pucks has allowed him to make better plays with the puck, even on the penalty kill, penalty kill clears and that type of situation, and I think he's played real solid in the last seven, eight games coming back from that break."

Sabres goalie Robin Lehner practices, could play soon

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
December 30, 2015

BUFFALO – Robin Lehner still has no firm timeline for his return to NHL game action. Right now, the Sabres goalie just plans to keep practicing, something he did with his teammates Tuesday for the first time since suffering a high right ankle sprain Oct. 8.

Still, Lehner knows he should be back soon, and that's a good feeling for the Swede, who has played only 32 minutes since Feb. 16, when he suffered a season-ending concussion with Ottawa.

Just being on the ice with his teammates inside the First Niagara Center as they prepared for tonight's road game against the Washington Capitals was special.

"It's really fun," Lehner said. "When you get injured, I felt it last year for the first time with Ottawa. It was my first injury in my career. It just sucks being away from the guys. I was pretty unlucky to get it again right afterwards, especially I'm not used to being away from the guys. That's the hard part. You miss being around."

Lehner, 24, said he's 100 percent and "can pretty much do whatever," although he still has "a little issue around my right post" that is improving. High ankle sprains are widely considered the worst injury a goalie can suffer.

"It's going to take a few days to get back in the swing of things," Lehner said.

At some point soon, Lehner will begin a rehabilitation stint in the AHL.

After Lehner was injured opening night in his debut as the new starter, the Sabres said he would miss six to 10 weeks. Lehner said Tuesday he knew then it would probably be closer to 10.

He said he felt like 100 percent around the eighth week but suffered a "little setback." Thursday will mark 12 weeks since he was injured.

Lehner has been skating on his own and doing off-ice workouts 10 times a week, he said. He even cut off his hair that extended past his shoulders so those workouts would be easier.

"There's been a mental part to this, too," Lehner said. "I stuck to it. All the medical staff is really good and pushed me through it."

With Lehner sidelined, rookie Linus Ullmark, a fellow Swede, has emerged as the Sabres' potential goalie of the future.

"I've been impressed," Lehner said. "He's a true professional and a great guy."

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In the Sabres' 2-0 home loss Monday, the Capitals were clearly irritated by winger Nick Deslauriers, whose second-period hit on Justin Williams left the winger bloodied when his own stick hit him in the face as he fell down.

Michael Latta fought Deslauriers, and the Sabres' best scrapper threw his arms in the air and yelled after he soundly defeated Latta, who was injured.

The Capitals scored shortly after the fight, a goal coach Barry Trotz called "karma" for Deslauriers' actions.

Scrum materialized throughout the rest of the chippy game.

There could be more fireworks tonight. The Capitals recalled tough guy Zach Sill on Tuesday.

"I think the reason why they weren't happy with him is a good thing for Deslauriers," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "He played a hard game. He played hard on their good players."

Sabres' Lehner returns to practice

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

December 30, 2015

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- Robin Lehner saw his first full practice with the team since injuring his ankle in game one.

Lehner shared the net with the other two goalies and looked pretty good. He said, "It was a little fast out there, first practice with the guys in a while. There were a lot of good things. I hope with time it's just going to get better and better."

Lehner started before practice and Dan Bylsma said he didn't pay much attention, "I purposely didn't watch to see if he stopped the puck or didn't stop the puck, but it's good to see him on the ice."

With severe ankle sprains goalies sometimes have some pain with different movements. Lehner said he did have one problem, "I can pretty much do whatever, but I still have a little issue around my right post. It's getting better every day, but it feels pretty good."

A few weeks ago it was reported that Lehner had a setback, but Dan Bylsma said he wouldn't call it that. Lehner confirmed that he indeed had a setback, "They gave me kind of six to 10 weeks right when it happened, more to the 10-week part because I'm a goalie and we need our feet and we need to bend them pretty well. I had a little setback around the eighth week. I felt like I was pretty much 100 percent, and I had a little setback. It's been a mental part to this, too, but we stuck through it. All the medical staff has been really good and pushed me through it. It's nice to be back."

The netminder confirmed that once he's ready to play in games he probably will go to Rochester. "It's not my decision at this point. We'll take it day-to-day here. I'm probably going to do down and play a few games with Roch first." Dan Bylsma said they'll monitor the goaltender for 7-to-10 days and then he'll likely get at least one game with the Amerks. "That is the plan, so we'll gauge on practice for the next seven to 10 days and want to get in some good practice time. He's going to have tweaks dealing with the ankle in the next handful of practices and he's got to work through that and then we'll go from there getting back to a game possibly in Rochester."

It can get lonely when you're hurt for long periods of time. I remember Zach Bogosian talking about not being around the guys. Lehner said, "When you get injured, I felt it last year for the first time with Ottawa. It was my first injury in my career, and it just sucks being away from the guys. I was pretty unlucky again to get it right afterward. I'm not used to being away from the guys, and that's the hard part. You miss being around."

Mark Pysyk is going through drills on his own with Dennis Miller and Bylsma said this morning on WGR Sports Radio 550 that he hopes to have the defenseman back in practice after the New Year's Eve game.

The team left after practice for Washington.

Lehner returns to practice with rehab games on the horizon

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

December 30, 2015

Robin Lehner's return from a concussion lasted all of 27:30 in the Buffalo Sabres' season opener on Oct. 8. Playing against the Ottawa Senators, his former team, the goaltender dropped into the butterfly after playing the puck behind the net. When he tried to get back up, he was visibly struggling to put pressure on his right leg.

Lehner had sustained a high ankle sprain, an injury that's bad for most players and worse for goaltenders. After months of rehab from the concussion he had sustained while playing for Ottawa in February, his first game back hadn't even lasted two full periods. He'd need 6-10 weeks to recover, Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said at the time.

Now, nearly 12 weeks removed from the injury, the goaltender finally returned to a full practice with his teammates on Tuesday at First Niagara Center.

"It's really fun," Lehner said after the skate. "I mean I felt it last year – the first time with Ottawa – it was my first injury in my career and it just sucks being away from the guys. It's pretty unlucky to get it again right afterwards; I'm not used to being away from the guys and that's the hard part."

Being away from his teammates wasn't the only obstacle Lehner faced during his rehab, which the goaltender said was as tough mentally as it was physically. He said he had a setback about eight weeks into his recovery, just when he felt he was approaching 100 percent.

Lehner believes he's at 100 percent now, but only for practice. The speed of the game was a bit quick for him on Tuesday, which could be expected. Bylsma even said that he purposefully avoided watching to see whether or not his goalie was stopping pucks on his first day back.

He'll continue to develop his timing in practices, which will eventually lead to playing rehab games in Rochester. In the meantime, there will be more tweaks to his ankle.

"No question," Bylsma said. "You're dealing with a confidence issue and even a knowledge that if you tweak it, it's not the end of the world. It's going to happen; it's the nature of the injury."

"How he's going to be going down repeatedly, it's going to happen and to have it happen and respond and get confidence in being on his feet and doing it over and over again is part of the process for him."

Buffalo's goaltending has been sound in Lehner's absence. Chad Johnson, a backup for his career entering this season, seized his opportunity and has gone 7-3-2 with a .932 save percentage and a 1.81 goals-against average since the beginning of November.

Linus Ullmark, a rookie who had never even played a game in North America and wasn't projected to return from hip surgery until November, has gone 5-8-2 with a .912 save percentage and a 2.60 GAA.

"I've been impressed," Lehner said of Ullmark. "He's been a true professional; he's a really good guy. He's come in and embraced it and he's showed what he's capable of."

THE RIGHT AREAS

Bylsma was asked after practice how he felt the team had progressed in regard to pouncing on loose pucks. He

gave an insightful answer, which he began by posing a hypothetical question: Who's the best net-front player of the last 20 years?

"We'd probably get to Tomas Holmström pretty quick," Bylsma said. "Pretty much everyone you talk to would get to that answer too. There's a reason why. You know every coach says, 'Go to the net,' every coach says 'Go to the dirty areas,' but why is he the best at it, clearly? I've tried to learn from what he did and how he did it."

What he's learned, he said, is that simply "getting to the net" isn't always the answer.

"How you go there and where you go is maybe more important than just going there," Bylsma said. "There's rebound areas, the puck goes to certain areas, and if we all go to the one area we're not necessarily going to get the opportunity to be in that area to score goals."

"Drilling those habits in and getting those details in is more important than just the notion that we've got to get to the net more."

He used Jamie McGinn's game-winning goal in Boston on Saturday to illustrate his point. On that play, Ryan O'Reilly skated behind the goal line and tossed the puck to the front of the net. McGinn was waiting in the perfect location to capitalize.

"You see him go the area, the puck comes in off the goalie and he's in the right spot to cash in on that opportunity," Bylsma said. "That's something I think we've got to keep getting better at and have been better at."

Buffalo will look to improve starting Wednesday night when they face the Washington Capitals at Verizon Center to complete a home-and-home series. Pregame coverage on MSG-B and Bell TV begins at 6:30 p.m. with puck drop set for 7 p.m.