



Buffalo Sabres

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Ristolainen happy when's he on the ice for Sabres

By Amy Moritz

Buffalo News

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Rasmus Ristolainen would prefer not to get off the ice.

He loves to play defense. Embraces the penalty kill. He loves to fire the puck from the offensive blue line as well. He eats up opportunities on the power play.

So when looking at his average ice time, which clocks in at an average of 24 minutes, 56 seconds a game – which is tied for the ninth highest average in the NHL – he simply shrugs.

"I really like to play a lot," Ristolainen said. "I think my conditioning and that kind of thing feels good and I think I can handle that big ice time. It feels good to play hard.

"Oh yeah. If it's my choice I would like to play 60 minutes but I think that's a little impossible."

Expect more of the same from Ristolainen when the Buffalo Sabres hit the road for the first time this season. The Sabres play at the Florida Panthers Thursday (7:35 p.m., MSG, Radio 550 AM) and stay in the Sunshine State to meet the Tampa Bay Lightning on Saturday.

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said Ristolainen's ice time is by design.

"He's playing in all situations for us," Bylsma said. "He's playing against other teams' best players in defensive situations so it's going to result in being out there in the 20-25 minute range."

"I like that," Ristolainen said of the ice time. "I think I'm a two-way guy. I like to play power play. I like to play penalty kill. I like to play 'D.' I like to play offense. So I think that's my game to be out there most of the time. Just try to get better and play better every night so I earn that kind of ice time."

He's certainly earned his keep on the power play working on a unit with Jack Eichel and Evander Kane. On Monday he gave the Sabres their first lead of the season, scoring a power-play goal with a rocket of a shot from the blue line. He added an assist on the power play, getting 5:31 of ice time over seven power-play opportunities, as Buffalo picked up its first win of the season.

"When I get the puck first I look if there's a lane. I try to get it through," Ristolainen said. "If there's not" a shooting lane "I try to pass to Jack or Kaner. They try to make some plays."

The 20-year-old is in his third professional season and second full season with the Sabres. Last year he averaged 20:36 in ice time, ranking third on the Sabres and clearly establishing himself as a player who can eat up minutes. But as the club struggled at times too did Ristolainen. He finished with 20 points (eight goals, 12 assists) but he also finished a minus-32 as the Sabres defense couldn't keep the puck out of its own zone.

Still the biggest struggle for the defenseman wasn't the numbers but dealing with the losses.

"When you get some years under the belt, some experience, it's good for you," Ristolainen said. "The team and I went through some tough times last year. When you're losing all the time it's tough to handle. When you win you appreciate it more."

The last few summers, Ristolainen has worked with the same trainer, focusing on gaining strength and speed. He feels the workouts have paid off each year in those areas but notes there are still parts of his game he wants to improve upon.

"My defensive zone game. Speed. Physical play. Offense," Ristolainen said. "I try to work everything."

The Sabres continue to work on everything as well with a special emphasis on special teams as they try to gain momentum from their first win.

"Special teams is huge," said captain Brian Gionta, who has practiced with the team but was held out of the first three games with a lower body injury. "We gave up two power play goals," to Columbus "and they got right back in the game. Both ends are huge for special teams. It can win or lose you a game.

"I thought our support was much better. We were moving our feet but we were supporting each other so you're making little passes. Obviously the power play was a big part of that game. It gave us great momentum. From start to finish I thought our effort was much better."

Sabres notebook: Gionta hoping to return to action on Florida trip

By Amy Moritz

Buffalo News

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The lower body injury that has sidelined captain Brian Gionta for the first three games of the season continues to linger, but the forward is hopeful he will return to the Buffalo Sabres lineup during their Florida road trip.

Gionta had his third full practice with the team since the injury. He had hoped to return to game action on Monday when the Sabres picked up their first win of the season, a 4-2 decision over the Columbus Blue Jackets.

But the injury did not respond to two days of hard practice and the Sabres rested Gionta to keep from aggravating the injury.

"It's one of those things where if you're still feeling things you're able to gain three, four more days if you wait until Thursday," Gionta said of the decision to sit out the last game. "You want to make sure it's 100 percent. It felt good again today so we'll see what tomorrow brings. ... You want to push yourself to see where you're at and it just didn't respond the way we wanted to but things are feeling good now."

Also back at practice was Zach Bogosian. The defenseman, who has been out since the first day of training camp with a lower body injury, was wearing a red non-contact jersey.

"I guess you could move that week to week thing to day to day. I'll just take it one day at time," Bogosian said. "That's not saying it will be any quicker than a week. You try to gauge it. You try to be smart about these things. As much as you want to be in the lineup you do realize it's a long season and you don't want something coming up a few games in so just try to be smart about it. You know if I had my own way, I'd be out there opening night but it didn't work that way so just try to be smart about it with the trainers and go from there."

Coach Dan Bylsma said Bogosian will make the trip so he can continue to practice with the team.

"A lot will be how he progresses," Bylsma said about the possibility of seeing Bogosian play on this road trip. "We will see. He's coming on the trip to get team practices in tomorrow and the next day and we'll go from there."

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Jake McCabe has earned his way into the Buffalo Sabres defensive corps. After a brief stint back in Rochester – largely because he could go to the Amerks for a game without having to clear waivers – McCabe was back with the big club, paired with Mark Pysyk in Monday's win over Columbus.

He was again paired with Pysyk in practice on Wednesday and look for the combo during the team's two-game Florida trip.

"He earned the right to be in our lineup with his training camp," Bylsma aid. "He didn't make the first two games but with playing a game in Rochester, being inserted in the lineup was always a real possibility."

McCabe gave himself mixed reviews for his training camp and the second-year pro is looking to prove he belongs in the NHL.

"I was and I wasn't. I think there were some bright spots but there were times I was disappointed in my play. It's just trying to come to work every day and like I said from Day One, just prove that I belong here and try to almost force the coach's hand and I'm still in that process. I'm just happy to be here.

"I thought I moved the puck pretty well. I played physical. I played with confidence here and there and then there were also times where I was gripping the stick too hard and making some turnovers and complicating the issue by trying to make more complicated plays when the simple one is the play to make.

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Defenseman Matt Donovan cleared waivers and was assigned to Rochester on Wednesday. The 25-year old who was a fourth-round draft pick of the New York Islanders in 2008 was signed by the Sabres as a free agent in the summer. He was a healthy scratch in the first three regular season games.

Bylsma has fond memories playing for Bowling Green

By Amy Moritz

Buffalo News

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He starts scrolling through his phone, looking for the email. Dan Bylsma noticed it that morning, but wanted to check the details again.

"I know they won in a shutout," he said, finding the update sent out to alumni of Bowling Green hockey.

Indeed, the Falcons opened the season with a sweep of Ohio State to earn the No. 10 ranking in the country.

They come to Buffalo on Friday to play Canisius College at 7:35 p.m. in HarborCenter. Bylsma won't be there, but he'll be among those checking his email for the result.

College hockey passions run deep and former college hockey players hold tight to their alma maters.

Bylsma, in his first year as head coach of the Buffalo Sabres and seventh overall in the National Hockey League, played at Bowling Green from 1988-92 – the same years Canisius coach Dave Smith played at rival Ohio State.

They remember each other, but nothing specific stands out in their memories about their on-ice clashes. For Bylsma, his college years are about his memories of playing for the students and of course his now eternal dislike for Bowling Green's rivals.

"I could think about some of the competition – Michigan State and Michigan and Ohio State," Bylsma said. "Some of the rivalry teams that we had that I still hold in my heart. I don't like Michigan State. I never can. My brother, my sister went to school there but I don't like green and white."

His fondest memories of being a Falcon are about walking to the rink on game days and playing in a classic college hockey atmosphere.

"Back then we had 3,500 or 3,600 people who could fit in the arena. Students occupied about two-thirds of that and they had to line up and wait to get in the door," Bylsma said. "They would start lining up at 4:30 or 5 so when you walked to the rink there were sometimes 300, 400, 500, 600 kids waiting in line to get in the arena so they could get a seat. They'd be cheering when you walked over to the arena.

"And you'd come out for warmups, and the stands were now full of those people, so warmups was like an event. When the other team scored on their own goalie in warmups, they cheered every time. So how many pucks go in the net in warmups? Like 50 or 60? And every time our student section would cheer. Goalies and teams hated playing at Bowling Green because of warmups. They dreaded warmups because every time the puck would go in, they'd cheer on them."

Smith doesn't recall dreading warmups at Bowling Green, but he does remember being given the cold shoulder by the student section.

"I don't remember the warmups but when they announced your names, they all had newspapers and they just held them up in front of their face and nobody cared," said Smith, who also served as an assistant coach at Bowling Green from 2000-02. "They turned their back. It was dead silent. And their team they went crazy for. The student section was incredible. The support was incredible."

But college hockey isn't just about memories.

It's become a legitimate path to a professional hockey career. Last season, 30 percent (296) of NHL players were former college hockey players. One-third of NHL general managers played college hockey and Bylsma is one of nine NHL head coaches who played in the NCAA.

Bylsma credits rule changes implemented in the NHL after the 2004-05 lockout which tweaked the pro game and created more opportunities for former college players. Officiating points of emphasis reduced interference and the clutch-and-grab style of game which opened up play along with the elimination of the illegal two-line pass.

"There's less clutching and grabbing and there are now, I think, more opportunity for smaller players and skill players and late developers," Bylsma said. "That's really kinda what college hockey offers you as a developing hockey player. Instead of being 18 when you're drafted and trying to fend for yourself, you're 21-22 and turning pro at that point in time.

"I think there's more opportunity because of changes in the game for college hockey players and I think as a result you're seeing more skill players come out of college hockey and play in the National Hockey League. You think you're going to get people out of college hockey into the NHL where maybe 20 years ago they were not thinking that as much."

Sabres, coming off first win, visit Panthers

By Brian Hunter

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Season series: The Florida Panthers went 4-0-1 against the Buffalo Sabres last season, led by forward Nick Bjugstad's three goals. Goalie Roberto Luongo won all four of his starts with a 1.25 goals-against average and .949 save percentage. Sabres defenseman Nikita Zadorov scored 29 seconds into overtime on Dec. 13 at First Niagara Center in Buffalo's lone win.

Sabres team scope: Captain Brian Gionta (lower body) said after practice Wednesday he's feeling good and hopes to make his season debut on this brief Florida road trip, which concludes Saturday against the Tampa Bay Lightning. Defenseman Zach Bogosian (lower body), injured during the preseason, practiced in a red no-contact jersey. He termed himself day-to-day as opposed to the initial week-to-week prognosis. The Sabres look to build off their first win of the season, 4-2 against the Columbus Blue Jackets on Monday. "Florida plays a really tough game. They play hard. They're not easy," forward Tyler Ennis told the Sabres website. "Going down to Florida's a tough trip. We're going to have to do what we did against Columbus: play a full 60 minutes." Defenseman Matt Donovan cleared waivers and was assigned to Rochester of the American Hockey League.

Panthers team scope: Luongo and backup goalie Al Montoya have combined to make 92 saves on 95 shots over the first three games, a .968 save percentage. Luongo is expected to be back in net after Montoya made 22 saves Tuesday in a 4-1 win against the Carolina Hurricanes. Fifteen of the 19 Panthers skaters to have dressed for a game have at least one point. All 19 have at least one shot on goal. "That's how you have a successful team, when everybody's chipping in, your first line to your fourth line, your defense," coach Gerard Gallant told the Panthers website.

The Sun Is Rising in Buffalo

By Katie Baker

Grantland

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Jack Eichel is a teenager, and he will remain so for another year and two weeks. His hair is so tightly coiled, his cheeks so easily crimson, that you wonder exactly what sort of industrial operation churns away inside his head. He was taken second overall by the Buffalo Sabres in this summer's NHL draft, though everyone seemed to agree that in any year without Connor McDavid on the board, Eichel would have been the first pick.

Eichel spent last season attending Boston University, having grown up in Massachusetts, and even when he suits up as the Green Bay Packers in a game of *Madden*, he monkeys with the settings so that they run the New England Patriots' plays. "You gotta use Belichick's playbook," he says, with a deadpan assurance that would no doubt be appreciated by the impassive coaching legend himself. Eichel is at his stall in the Sabres locker room on the morning of a preseason game day in late September, and that is good news for everyone: It means he's in the lineup tonight.

A week earlier, as the Sabres got set for their first home game of the preseason, Eichel wasn't on the roster. Sabres fans understand that not every player appears in every game during the early stages of training camp, but that didn't make them any less bummed.

"Why isn't Eichel playing?" kids asked their parents outside the arena. "Ugh, no Eichel tonight," dudes remarked to dudes inside the expansive (716) Food and Sport. A Sabres beat writer regarded me with mock pity: "Aw, you're missing Eichel." The reporter had just returned from Minnesota, a trip he wouldn't normally make during training camp, but it had been worth it. The game wasn't televised, so he was lucky to have been there in person to see Eichel's debut: one goal, one assist.

The way everyone talked about the kid made him sound less like an athlete and more like a hot new restaurant or a limited-time-only museum show. You almost wanted to call him *the* Eichel, as if you were referring to *the* Marina Abramovic at the MoMA or something. Either way, the name of the exhibit could definitely be the same: "The Artist Is Present."



With all of this attention on the team's youngest member, it's easy to forget that he's far from the only notable new face on Buffalo's revamped roster. Following two straight seasons of finishing DFL in the NHL, of approaching losing as a legitimate tactical goal rather than an outcome to avoid at all costs, the Sabres are now attempting to make a power turn and start transitioning back up the ice.

General manager Tim Murray — a quirky former scout described by the *Buffalo News* as the "bespectacled brewmaster of this Sabres' rebuild" — has attempted to make good on an April 2014 promise that the evolution of the franchise would not rely on some goalpost-pushing five-year (or more!) plan. Jaded Buffalo fans, who love hockey so deeply that they can consistently be counted upon to generate top-five TV ratings regardless of whether their team wins (or is even out on the ice), might roll their eyes at this; the Sabres have missed the playoffs in six of the last eight seasons and haven't advanced past the first round since 2007. But there's reason to believe that the Sabres finally have a little skip in their skates.

Last winter, Buffalo acquired 24-year-old hotshot Evander Kane, who also once made an NHL roster at age 18, and a few years later had racked up a 57-point season. And thanks to some urging by Tyler Ennis, Murray made a draft-day trade in June that yielded Ryan O'Reilly, the sort of faceoff-taking, tough-minutes-swallowing player who gets roundly praised as underrated so often that the label starts to seem impossible by definition.

The Sabres also hired head coach Dan Bylsma, formerly of the Pittsburgh Penguins and the U.S. national team. They bought low on defenseman Cody Franson. They traded for Ottawa goalie Robin Lehner. And they made it known that, while they were clearly targeting established NHL talent, they'd also be giving a shot to some of the upsidy youngsters they had accumulated with their recent lottery picks, like 20-year-old defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen and 19-year-old forward Sam Reinhart.

This turnover all happened one year after Matt Moulson, who was traded from the Sabres to the Minnesota Wild in March 2014, came *back* to Buffalo — of his own volition! — when he became a free agent that summer. Choosing to return to such a floundering franchise may have seemed like an oddball career choice, but Moulson liked what he saw: some method to the madness, a general manager unafraid to strike, a promising roster mix of youth and experience, and generous, passionate ownership.

"I believed that when I signed back here that they can win a Stanley Cup," Moulson said. "And they've done the right things to go in that direction. We have a lot of work to do, but it's the right start."

It hasn't just been the hockey operations side of the business that has signaled a bold willingness to deal. The mentality originates all the way at the top — in this case, with multibillionaire owners Terry and Kim Pegula, who made their vast fortune in natural gas and have been spending it for years now on sports franchises, hockey rinks, urban development projects, and the intersection of all three.

"When we came up here five years ago and Terry told me he wanted to buy the Buffalo Sabres, the truth of it is I tried to talk him out of it," admitted Cliff Benson, the team's chief development officer. He was standing in front of a crowd of mostly developers, politicians, and hospitality professionals gathered for a ribbon-cutting ceremony in honor of the three-week-old Marriott behind him. Through a big picture window about six floors up, people on exercise bikes and ellipticals gazed determinedly across cloudy skies, highway overpasses, and the Buffalo River canal.

"Number one, I said, why don't we go to Florida? It's a little bit warmer. And secondly, I said, if you're going to own a sports team, you're getting into a whole different business. Everyone's going to shoot at you every day. And he said to me, 'We're going to Buffalo. We're going to change that city, and that's *why* we're getting into the sports business: so we have a platform to change the city.'"

The Pegulas spent \$189 million in February 2011 to purchase the Sabres (as well as the National Lacrosse League's Buffalo Bandits).¹ It wouldn't be their last purchase of a sports franchise. Last October, one of the Pegula daughters, Jessie, a professional tennis player, finished a workout and tweeted a screenshot of her phone. It showed the weather in Boca Raton, Florida, a vet appointment reminder, and a brief text from Dad: "We own Bills," it said. The Pegulas had beaten out Donald Trump and a consortium fronted by Jon Bon Jovi with an all-cash, \$1.4 billion offer to buy the NFL team from late owner Ralph Wilson's estate.²



In the beginning, the Pegulas' willingness to spend money got the Sabres into some trouble. The six-year, \$27 million contract the team gave Ville Leino in the summer of 2011 would go down as one of the more egregious displays of wallet-emptying optimism in recent NHL history. (Last summer, the team bought out Leino's contract, and he currently plays professional hockey in Latvia.) The Sabres failed to reach the playoffs that year and haven't since, a trend that — depending on whom you ask — reached either its zenith or its logical cold-blooded conclusion last season as Buffalo nakedly maneuvered into last place in the standings. Jack Eichel was part of the reason why.

For several years, hockey insiders had been eyeing the trajectories of two young players the way meteorologists project the development and location of faraway tropical storms. In 2012, when he was 15, a good Ontario boy named Connor McDavid signed an endorsement contract with Reebok and was granted exceptional player status to allow him to play major junior hockey despite his young age.³ That same year, Eichel made a verbal commitment to one day suit up for Boston University. With both players eventually eligible for the 2015 NHL draft, their particular class became one of the most anticipated hockey cohorts in some time.

The consensus among scouts and other observers was that McDavid would almost certainly be selected first overall but that Eichel was such a lovely consolation prize that it was pretty hard to go wrong either way. The two-headed beast that came to be known as “McEichel,” combined with NHL lottery rules that guaranteed the league’s last-place team would, at worst, pick second in the draft,⁴ created a set of circumstances that led to one of the more blatant races to the bottom.

Some of the moves the Sabres made to best position the team for certain disgrace were remarkably savvy. In February, the Winnipeg Jets decided they’d had enough with Kane, who traveled with the former Atlanta Thrashers up to the team’s new home in Manitoba and in doing so went, not always fairly, from a young hockey sensation to a frequent subject of sensationalist headlines. (One of his more notorious crimes: posing for tacky photos in Vegas.) When the news came out that the frustrated Kane would be getting season-ending shoulder surgery, Murray, the GM, saw a great opportunity: Here was a chance to acquire a truly skilled young player at a reasonable cost, without having to actually play him and risk winning *just yet*. A Dallas Stars blog summed up the transaction as “the Mona Lisa of tank related masterpieces.”

But there were other springtime happenings that were far more awkward. When the basement-dwelling Arizona Coyotes beat the Sabres in overtime in late March, the Buffalo home crowd loudly rejoiced. Eichel started getting text messages from buddies about the phenomenon. “It’s kind of a bizarre thing to think about — that fans are cheering against their team, hoping they lose,” he told the *Toronto Star*. “But I guess, really, they’re just excited about the future.”



In the interim between buying the Sabres and securing the Bills, the Pegulas kept themselves busy with a development project on land adjacent to First Niagara Center, the Sabres’ arena. For years, the building had sat next to an uninspiring hodgepodge of parking lots and waterfront land — “this was a tragedy when we got here,” is how Benson put it; “we had ship parts and dirt” — and when the city sought proposals for how to make use of the area, Pegula put his hat into the ring.

Benson warned Pegula that developing a couple of hockey rinks and two levels of parking, their initial idea, would cause him to lose about \$30 million out of pocket. Several years later, the project had ballooned into a couple of hockey rinks, five levels of parking, an athlete training center, several retail spaces and some restaurants, and a 200-room Marriott.⁵ The eventual price tag for what came to be Harborcenter topped \$200 million of the Pegulas’ money. Millions of dollars worth of tax abatements, to be repaid from eventual proceeds generated by the new buildings, bolstered the development.

Now, with the finished project rising behind them, the town’s movers and shakers preened. Benson quoted the Book of Jeremiah: “If the city prospers, you too will prosper.” Mayor Byron Brown said that images of Buffalo as a place where nothing ever gets done were now fading away. Lance Shaner, an old buddy of the Pegulas who now owns the hotel group that operates the new Marriott, called Terry and Kim “dream-makers.”

Pegula himself got up and spoke for a few minutes. He earned serious laughs from the friendly crowd when he referred to his old-timey flip phone as “my handy-dandy here” and reminisced about how far he and Shaner had come. He could remember back when they were two unknowns playing racquetball in Olean, New York, he said, and now Shaner “has got a couple of jets down in State College.” (Somehow, he made this line sound almost folksy.)

He compared Buffalo’s potential to Pittsburgh, which went “from a dingy, smelly steel town into what is a pretty impressive city” thanks to the efforts of “a bunch of businesspeople and government getting together.” He said that while a lot of people see him as a Republican, he prefers to consider himself an American. “We could be feeling a little bit better today,” he admitted, referring to the Bills’ loss a day earlier to the New England Patriots. “But on the other side of town it’s still early,” he concluded, “and it’s early here, too.”

Staffers hurriedly unpacked sets of giant ceremonial scissors from bespoke giant ceremonial scissor cases and unspooled large swaths of ceremonial red ribbon from bespoke ceremonial red ribbon spools. Smiling for the

cameras, the Pegulas and their collaborators stood at the Marriott parking valet station, counted to three, and made declarative snips. They repeated this in various permutations of people, pausing to sub in fresh lengths of ribbon for a good 10 to 15 minutes.



Evander Kane was at a waterfront restaurant in Malibu with a hockey buddy and both of their girlfriends this April when the NHL draft lottery rolled around. They asked a bartender to switch on the telecast, left the ladies at the table, and then watched as the Sabres didn't win.

With the league's worst record, the Sabres had a 20 percent chance of drawing the top pick; the Coyotes were second at 13.5 percent, and the Edmonton Oilers — who in 2010, 2011, and 2012 occupied the no. 1 spot — had an 11.5 percent shot at getting first dibs once again. Thanks in part to geography, Sabres fans had grown particularly enamored of McDavid over the years, many of them making the less than two-hour drive down the shore of Lake Erie to Pennsylvania to see him play for the OHL's Erie Otters. (Murray was among them: "I watch him too much and I think too much about him," he admitted to the *New York Times* in late March. "I wish I could help myself.")

"Yeah, *that* was surprising," recalled Kane of watching Edmonton's name being called, a small smirk playing across his face.

Murray hadn't been smiling, nor did he mince words when speaking to reporters. "I feel for the fans," he said. "I mean, we went through a tough year, and I think that they were extremely excited about Connor."

Eichel handled the awkward situation gracefully, pointing out that "I have a lot to offer" and asking "Who doesn't want to be first?" A few months later, when he was brought in to meet with the Sabres at the NHL combine in Buffalo, he told Pegula that his parents had been happy when Buffalo lost the lottery.

"Maybe we *won* the lottery," one Sabres employee replied.

"I think you did," Eichel said.

On the day of the draft, Edmonton selected McDavid with their no. 1 pick. As the Sabres contingent made its way to the podium, Murray caught Eichel's eye in the crowd and stared him down. Most general managers give a little song and dance before they make their pick, thank the host city, congratulate the Cup winners — Murray did none of that. He had scarcely even gotten to the mic before he leaned in and said just four words: "Buffalo selects Jack Eichel."

Besides drafting Eichel, trading for O'Reilly, hiring Bylsma, getting Lehner, and acquiring Kane (and defenseman Zach Bogosian, his Winnipeg teammate), a Pegula-owned team made another hefty — well, once-hefty — offseason move earlier this year: It got Rex Ryan.

The self-described "biggest bandwagon" fan in hockey, Ryan has seemingly never turned down a chance to turn up in a jersey. The first-year Bills coach donned Rangers blue, Devils red, Flyers orange; he's dropped the puck at an Islanders game in a Billy Smith sweater. He's changed colors midgame. And yet he actually does have something of a hockey background, having spent much of his youth in the greater Toronto area, where he played street hockey⁶ and cheered for the Maple Leafs.

Ever the showman, Ryan recorded a video welcoming Bylsma to town when the Sabres hired the former Penguins coach, making sure to tie in the "One Buffalo" sports branding that the Pegulas have instituted across their various team holdings. He pointed out Bylsma's offensive background and said it would mesh well with Ryan's defensive focus. Bylsma returned the favor after one practice, saying he wanted to talk about a Bills win over Miami, and that he wished he could run hockey preseason like NFL training camp.

Several weeks ago, when Ryan walked out for his routine Wednesday press conference, he had hockey on the mind.

"So let's start with the Sabres," he said. "That Eichel — he's an impressive kid."

The night before, Eichel — *the* Eichel — had been on full display. In a preseason game against the Toronto Maple Leafs, Eichel snagged the puck and opened scoring with a shorthanded breakaway goal in which he somehow managed to get exponentially faster with each stride while still barely looking as though he were skating at all. He was still wearing no. 41, not wanting to change into his desired no. 15 because, as he humbly pointed out, he still hadn't technically made the team.

After the game, which Buffalo won 4-0, Eichel was practically giddy, his mouth yapping and his face flushed. "Only questions about Evander Kane!" he shouted as Kane, wrapped in a towel, tried to slide by his stall undetected to hit the showers. (A night earlier, the two had checked out a WWE event at First Niagara Center; Eichel has hit up a Bills game and a Shania Twain concert in the last few weeks as well.) He chatted about his rising comfort level with teammates and about scoring in front of the home crowd.

It was easy to see what Moulson, who with his wife and two children is hosting Eichel in his home this season,⁷ meant when he described his houseguest as "the type of person who likes to always be doing something — he'll get up out of the blue and start playing with the kids."

When a small media scrum developed around young prospect Evan Rodrigues, Eichel's former BU teammate who had scored twice that night, Eichel sneaked over and hovered shirtless over the back of the group, blue eyes boring into Rodrigues's soul as the poor guy tried his best not to laugh.



Buffalo fans are grimly conditioned to always prepare for the worst; they've lived through Scott Norwood's "Wide Right" and Brett Hull's "Skate in the Crease" and have, perhaps most valiantly, weathered endless yuks about their weather. They've watched one of their most beloved hockey locals, Patrick Kane, go through a terribly ugly and twisted summer, and seen one of their most exciting hockey newcomers, Ryan O'Reilly, sign with the Sabres and almost immediately get arrested back home for, according to police, drunk-driving an antique pickup truck into a Tim Hortons.

And so, when the season began with the team's already questionable defensive corps banged up even further, and when Robin Lehner played poorly in goal and then promptly injured his ankle so badly that he won't be playing at all for quite some time, and when the Sabres opened up their season — Ryan's enthusiasm aside — with a pair of losses, it all felt bleakly familiar. Here we go again, and this time we can't even tank.

But that first loss, to the Ottawa Senators, had silver linings: Eichel scored his first NHL goal, a top-shelf snipe that was as lethal as it was preternaturally poised, and the fans got to hear the hilarious new goal song they'd voted in: DJ Kool's "Let Me Clear My Throat." It sounded ridiculous; it felt perfect. Shortly after Eichel opened the scoring, Kane tied the game, but the goal was called back based on a belated video review of an offside skate. Rasmus Ristolainen, the 20-year-old Finnish defenseman whom the Sabres took eighth overall in the 2013 draft and whom Bylsma compares to Ekblad and Olli Maatta, almost added a goal, but it bounced off the post. All of these things were, at the very least, promising.

A 4-1 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning could be more easily written off: They *were* the reigning Eastern Conference champs, after all.

On Monday, in a Columbus Day matinee against the Blue Jackets, it all started coming together. Ristolainen finally netted that goal. O'Reilly also scored, assisted by Moulson and offseason pickup Jamie McGinn. The Blue Jackets narrowed the score to 2-1, and two minutes later Jack Eichel did a Jack Eichel thing. "Eichel steals puck

and picks the top corner" is how the NHL chose to title its goal video, but a YouTube account called All Things Buffalo Sabres described it much more succinctly, and much better: "Jack Eichel Sick Goal."

With the puck in Columbus's zone, Eichel first tried setting up an assist. The puck ricocheted out to the blue line, and he won the race to it, narrowly and calmly keeping it in. He circled back around toward the far side of the faceoff circle, as if this were some casual warm-up drill, and skated wide. He saw Columbus goalie Sergei Bobrovsky go down, so he shot the puck up. Play-by-play guy Rick Jeanneret's voice wavered and cracked. The fans were beside themselves. "dirty," tweeted Jessie Pegula. "I watched this at least 15 times in a row #unreal," added Kelly Pegula, her sister.

It was a Broadway performance, it was event viewing, it was a showstopper, it was an exhibit — Eichel's "latest piece of artwork." Yeah, yeah, it was the team's third game, fine. But Sabres fans had gotten their chance to see *the* Eichel at the First Niagara Center. The artist was finally present. And it was worth every dollar of the hard-earned price of admission.

Rasmus Ristolainen developing into Sabres' top defenseman

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
October 15, 2015

BUFFALO – Just a week ago, it appeared the Sabres would be forced to utilize a blue line by committee early on. Without a proven No. 1 defenseman to gobble up minutes, coach Dan Bylsma had to spread the ice time out evenly, right?

Well, just three games into the season, Rasmus Ristolainen, 20, has quickly emerged as the club's ace defenseman.

“(He’s) playing in all situations for us, playing against other teams’ best players in defensive situations, so it’s going to result in being out there for the 20-, 25-minute range probably,” Bylsma said Wednesday following practice inside HarborCenter.

The Finn ranks 10th in the NHL in ice time entering tonight’s road tilt against the Florida Panthers, averaging 24 minutes, 56 seconds a game.

“If it’s my choice, I would like to play 60 minutes,” Ristolainen joked. “I think it’s impossible.”

So far, Ristolainen’s three totals – 23:10, 26:41 and 24:58 – have topped the Sabres each game. Only one other defenseman, Josh Gorges, his current partner, is averaging more than 20 minutes a contest.

Ristolainen enjoyed a strong outing Monday afternoon, scoring a power-play goal and adding an assist in the Sabres’ 4-2 win against Columbus, his third effort of two or more points in his last 10 appearances dating back to last season.

“Being able to do what he can at his age is exceptional,” Gorges said. “His ability to continue to grow, to be what he can be in the future is a whole other thing. The future is bright for him.”

Ristolainen has been pegged for stardom since the Sabres selected him eighth overall in 2013, and he occasionally provided glimpses during his first two seasons, using his 6-foot-3, 207-pound frame and smooth skating to be an aggressive presence.

“I think he’s an exceptional talent,” Gorges said. “It’s hard to find guys that are big and strong and can play a physical game when you need to, but can skate, move pucks and be an offensive player. Whether it’s just moving pucks out of his zone or joining the attack and being an offensive threat, it makes him a dangerous hockey player.”

Still, Ristolainen regularly experienced growing pains as a neophyte on two historically bad Sabres teams. The Sabres won only 29 of his first 112 NHL appearances.

Not surprisingly, he accumulated some terrible statistics. With the emergence of advanced stats, plus-minus has taken a backseat to some other numbers. Nonetheless, the wretched minus-32 Ristolainen registered last season illustrates how much he struggled. Only one NHL player, Edmonton’s Nail Yakupov, had a lower rating.

“Always when you get some years under the belt, some experience, it’s good for you,” said Ristolainen, who missed the first part of training camp with an upper-body injury. “You kind of know what to (expect). I think we and I went through some tough times last year. When you are losing all the time it’s tough, so I think every time when you win you appreciate it more.”

Ristolainen kept playing through those tough times, skating more than 20 minutes in his final 20 appearances in 2014-15. Those minutes, no doubt, are helping him now.

Gorges traces Ristolainen’s strong start to maturity.

“It’s early in the year ... but details, little details in his game that he’s going to continue to get better, and when he starts to get all those little things down, he’s got it all,” he said.

xxx

Sabres captain Brian Gionta, out the first three games with a lower-body injury, practiced beside center Jack Eichel and Evander Kane on Wednesday. The winger is questionable for tonight.

Gionta also practiced Sunday.

“It’s one of those things, if you’re still feeling things, you’re able to gain three or four more days by waiting until Thursday,” Gionta said. “I want to make sure it’s 100 percent. It felt good. We’ll see what tomorrow brings.”

Meanwhile, defenseman Zach Bogosian, out with a lower-body injury since the beginning of training camp, practiced for the first time Wednesday in a non-contact role. Bogosian is progressing and accompanied the team for its two-game Florida trip, Bylsma said.

In other news, defenseman Matt Donovan cleared waivers Wednesday and was assigned to the Rochester Americans.

Sabres captain Brian Gionta questionable for Thursday; Zach Bogosian practices

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
October 15, 2015

BUFFALO – Some quick updates from HarborCenter, where the Sabres practiced about an hour before catching a flight for their two-game Florida road trip:

– Captain Brian Gionta, out the first three games with a lower-body injury, skated this morning beside center Jack Eichel and Evander Kane. He's questionable for Thursday's tilt against the Florida Panthers.

Gionta practiced Sunday but sat out the Sabres' 4-2 win Monday afternoon.

"It's one of those things, if you're still feeling things, you're able to gain three or four more days by waiting until Thursday," Gionta said. "I want to make sure it's 100 percent. It felt good. We'll see what tomorrow brings."

– Defenseman Zach Bogosian, out with a lower-body injury since the beginning of training camp, practiced for the first time today in a non-contact role. Bogosian is progressing and will make the trip, coach Dan Bylsma said.

– Defenseman Matt Donovan cleared waivers today, meaning he can report to the Rochester Americans.

Update: Donovan has been sent to the Amerks.

Through three games, Bylsma showing coaching savvy

By Matthew Coller

WGR 550

October 15, 2015

One of the fundamental questions in hockey is: How do I know if my team's coach is good?

We know that wins and losses don't always tell the story. Talent is the No. 1 difference maker in who wins. There's also luck and the fickle nature of goalies. But the growth in statistics has given us more information to judge coaches with that goes beyond, "he doesn't yell at his players on the bench!"

When analyzing statistics, sample size is always a huge deal. A goalie can have a .930 save percentage in 40 games and still turn out to be bad (Hi, Cristobal Huet!) just like a forward can average a point-per-game for a few weeks but may not be able to keep it up for 82 games.

In the case of Dan Bylsma, however, it has only taken three games to be able to see some of his smarts behind the bench being revealed in the numbers.

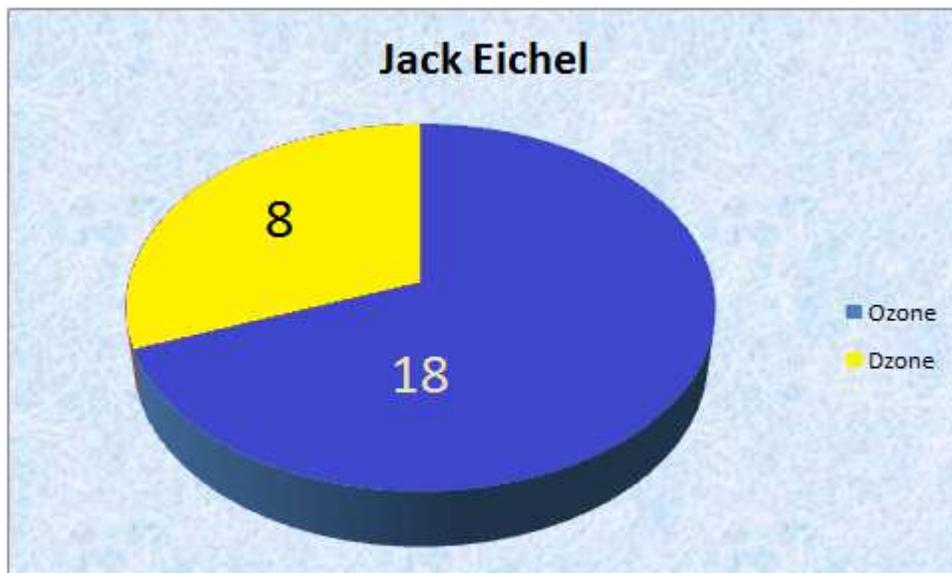
Player usage

A key coaching duty is to put players in positions to succeed by playing to their strengths. One of the major criticisms of Lindy Ruff was that he wanted every player to handle offensive and defensive faceoffs, which often put players like Cody Hodgson, a one-dimensional center, in situations where he was over his head.

Looking at the splits between offensive and defensive zone faceoffs also gives us a window into how a coach views a player. Is he scouting his own crew properly? Does he correctly identify which are one-dimensional offensive players, which are two-way and which would be better as purely defensive?

So far Bylsma is hitting the ball out of the park. And since all three games have been at home, we know he has gotten the last change and the assignments he wants.

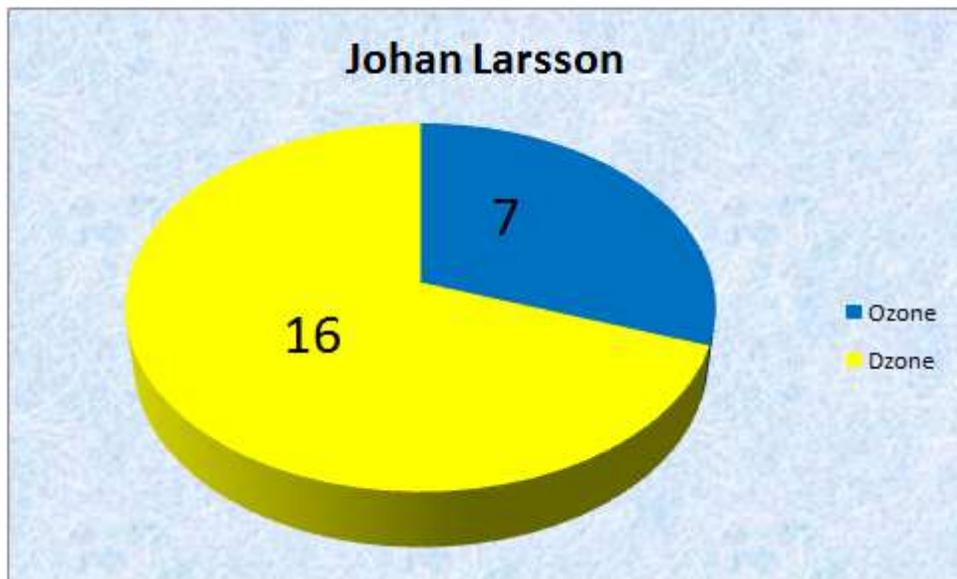
Here are some examples:



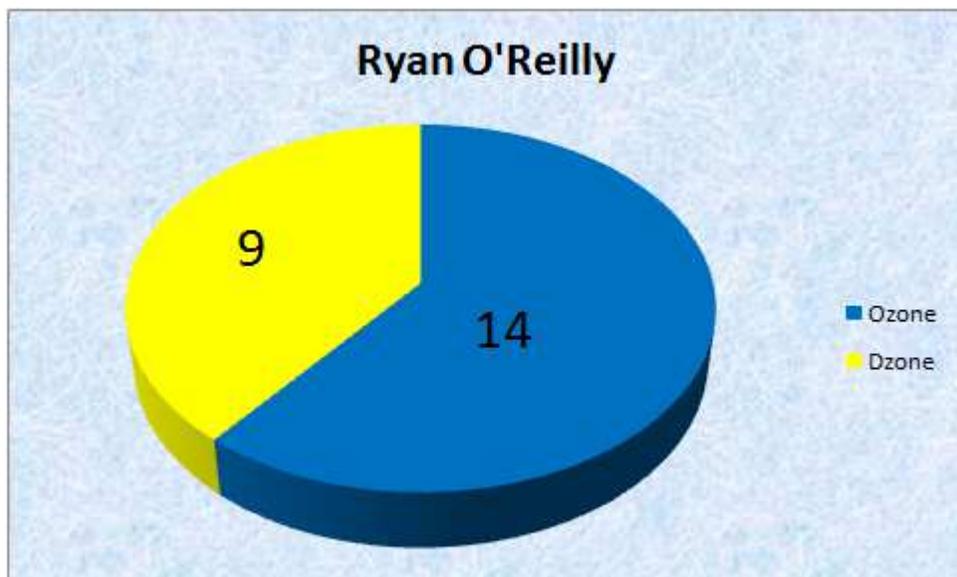
The Sabres' coach has done exactly what he said he would: Protect Eichel from tough situations. He wants his offensively-gifted young player to focus on putting pucks in the net and acclimating to the NHL, rather than having to attempt to lock down the opponent in the defensive zone. Bylsma also does not want to give up a goal

because of an inexperienced play, so he has selected Dzone faceoffs carefully for Eichel. We can expect this to change as we go along, but it is very common. Of course, in nine games last year, Ted Nolan started Sam Reinhart in the offensive zone only 36.7% of the time – but to quote Frozen, the past is in the past.

There's no need to post Evander Kane's chart because it's nearly identical to Eichel's since he's been alongside the rookie for the first three games. Having another big, fast, tough, skilled player on a line with Eichel just makes all sorts of sense.

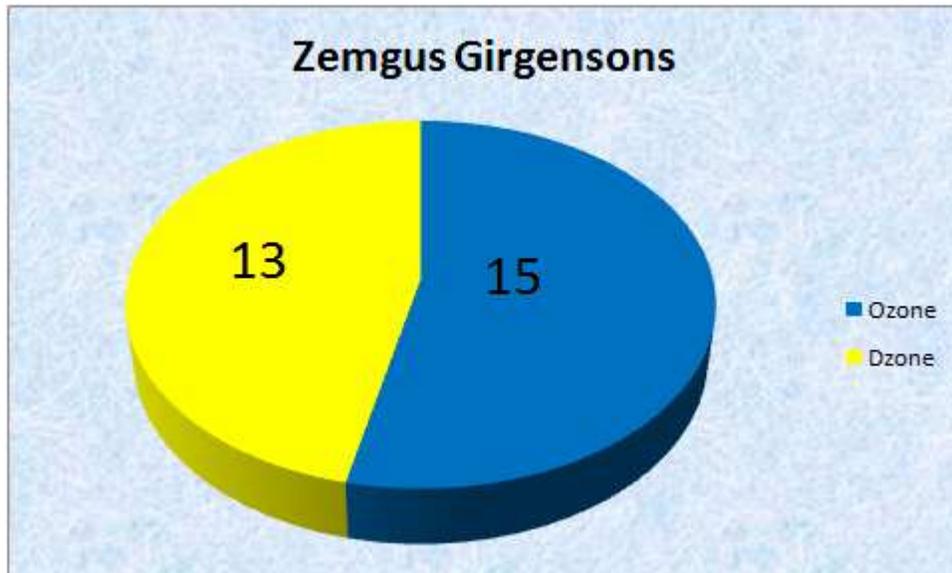


The scouting report on Larsson when the Sabres acquired him in a deal that sent Jason Pominville to Minnesota was that he was gifted defensively. During his time in Rochester and Buffalo, he has proven that report true by demonstrating his high IQ, stick skills and the ability to win battles in the corners and behind the net. Bylsma has clearly taken notice as he has used Larsson as a "shutdown" forward of sorts.



So far, we've had an offensive-minded center in Eichel who needs some easing into defensive minutes receiving a high percentage of Ozone starts and a gifted defensive forward in Larsson getting heavy Dzone starts. How about our two-way guys?

O'Reilly has been on the ice for more offensive than defensive zone starts, but it's closer to 50-50 than the others. These numbers could be tweaked a bit by the fact that O'Reilly has done very well in terms of possession so far, meaning he might stay out on the ice for another offensive faceoff if there is a shot early in his shift.



Girgensons leads the team with a 60.6% Corsi Percentage (shot attempt differential).

The only quibbles you might have with Bylsma's usage so far is that Mike Weber and Cody Franson have both had more defensive zone starts than offensive. David Legwand has zero offensive zone faceoffs and 12 defensive. His veteran status may be being weighed a little too heavily there. But overall, strong results.

Possession

The Sabres played two playoff teams and a Columbus club that has high expectations and Buffalo came out with a 53.7% Corsi Percentage. They took 21 more shot attempts than their opponents. Last year they were out-shot attempted by 2,183 for the season or 26.6 per game.

Talent is the No. 1 reason the Sabres have turned their possession numbers around, but they also look capable of a breakout this year.

During Bylsma's tenure in Pittsburgh, his system was not considered one of the strongest possession wise and the Penguins still had a 51.4% Corsi Percentage. Of course, there was plenty of talent there.

Power play

The Sabres have had 12 man-advantage opportunities thus far and have scored on four of them. One of them was 100% Jack Eichel, so we won't give the coach credit for that one (although he has been pushing Eichel to provide back pressure).

This goal is a little different. The Sabres get set up in Bylsma's 1-3-1 set and it works just like it was drawn up. A pass from the Ennis on the wing down to Jamie McGinn, who centers it to Matt Moulson, who spins and directs the puck to Ryan O'Reilly, who is all alone with the goalie.

Sure, it has only been three games and the Sabres have lost two of them, but we can already see improvements in coaching. We will see how Bylsma's player usage changes as the season goes along.

Sabres' welcome Bogosian back to practice

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

October 15, 2015

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- Zach Bogosian practiced with his teammates for the first time since getting injured in training camp. He had the red non-contact jersey on and Dan Bylsma said he'd like to get him full go in practice on the trip, "Zach had a red jersey on today. He's going on the trip with us and he'll practice the next two days and hopefully we'll get him out of that red jersey in a couple of days."

Bogosian didn't want to get too excited, but of course he was happy to be back, "It's nice, but it was only one practice. It's been quite a while, so it's nice to get back into the swing of things and just take it a day at a time."

Bogosian didn't want to go into too much detail, but said, "It was a practice thing, sometimes those things happen during camp. It was unfortunate the way it happened, but it's in my past."

Bogosian didn't want to put a timetable on his return, but did say, "I think you can move that week to week thing to day to day. That's not saying I won't be out any quicker than a week, but you try to gage it, you try to be smart about it."

"As much as you want to be in the lineup, you have to realize it's a long season and you don't want something coming back a few games in."

The captain had hoped to play on Monday, but woke up sore after a hard practice on Sunday. Bylsma said, "Brian's still day to day and we'll see how he is tomorrow. He's been in a progression and reacted well to each stage and hopefully we'll see him on the road trip."

Gionta of course wanted to play, but said, "Yes, It's one of those things if you're still feeling things, you're able to gain three or four more days by waiting until Thursday, so we wanted to make sure it was 100 percent. It felt good again today, so we'll see what tomorrow brings."

Gionta knew after working very hard on Sunday that he might wake up sore. He said, "That's what you want to do, you want to push yourself to see where you're at and it just didn't respond the way we wanted it to."

Gionta was back on right wing with Jack Eichel and Evander Kane. Johan Larsson centered Matt Moulson and Jamie McGinn while Nic Deslauriers, David Legwand, Marcus Foligno and Sam Reinhart alternated in together.

The team left for Fort Lauderdale after practice at HarborCenter.

Bogosian returns to practice as team readies for 1st road trip

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

October 15, 2015

It was hard to miss Zach Bogosian on the ice at HARBORCENTER on Wednesday morning. The defenseman wore a red non-contact jersey, making him stand out in his first practice with the team since sustaining a lower-body injury early in Training Camp.

Regardless of the color he wore, Bogosian was glad to finally be back with his teammates.

"It's nice," he said. "It's just one practice but it's been quite a while. It feels nice to kind of get back into the swing of things and just kind of take it a day at a time."

Bogosian will travel with the team to Florida for a four-day road trip where he will continue to participate in team practices, according to Sabres coach Dan Bylsma. Bylsma said that the team hopes to have him out of the red sweater in the next few days.

On their road trip, the Sabres have games in Florida on Thursday night and in Tampa Bay on Saturday. Bylsma said that whether or not Bogosian will be ready for either of those games is dependent on how he responds to practices.

"A lot of it would be how he progresses," Bylsma said. "He was up a level today and he has to react to that so we will see. He's coming on the trip to get team practices in tomorrow and the next day and we'll go from there."

Having to sit out for all of the preseason and for Buffalo's first three games of the regular season had been a challenge for the veteran defenseman.

"You try to gauge it; you try to be smart about these things. As much as you want to be in the lineup you do realize it's a long season," he said. "If I had it my way I'd be out there opening night but it didn't work out that way so you've got to be smart about it with the trainers and go from there."

A BIRTHDAY SURPRISE

After being reassigned to Rochester and playing there on Saturday night, defenseman Jake McCabe was recalled and inserted into the Sabres lineup against Columbus on Monday, which also happened to be his 22nd birthday.

While Bylsma said that the move to send McCabe down to the American Hockey League for one game prior to bringing him back was a part of the plan all along, it was news to the young defenseman when he got the call back to Buffalo.

"I went down there and played my game and had no expectation whether I was going to be up here or down there," he said. "Kind of like this whole camp and taking into the season, [I'm] taking it day-by-day and that's all I can do."

McCabe said in the preseason that he had been disappointed with aspects of his camp, but his performance was strong enough to earn him at least one game at the NHL level. More might be on the way; at Wednesday's practice, he remained on a defensive pair with Mark Pysyk.

The defenseman was pleased with the game he and Pysyk put together in the victory over Columbus.

"I think we were very steady," he said. "I thought we spent not a whole lot of time in the D-zone so that's always a good sign as a defenseman, if you can play in the offensive zone more than the D-zone you're doing something right."

Buffalo currently has seven defenseman on the roster. Matt Donovan cleared waivers at noon and he has been assigned to Rochester.

GIONTA CONTINUES TO RECOVER

After practicing with the team on Sunday, Sabres captain Brian Gionta said that he was cautiously optimistic about playing on Monday afternoon against the Blue Jackets. But when he woke up that morning, the team decided it was best to hold him out of the game and allow for a few extra days of rest.

Following Wednesday's practice, Gionta said that he was beginning to feel better.

"It's one of those things where if you're still feeling things, you're able to gain three, four more days by waiting until Thursday so you want to make sure it's 100 percent," Gionta said. "It felt good again today so we'll see what tomorrow brings."

Bylsma said that Gionta is still day-to-day and that he too is hopeful that the forward will return to the lineup at some point on their Florida road trip.

WEDNESDAY'S PRACTICE

90 Ryan O'Reilly – 28 Zemgus Girgensons – 63 Tyler Ennis
9 Evander Kane – 15 Jack Eichel – 12 Brian Gionta
26 Matt Moulson – 22 Johan Larsson – 88 Jamie McGinn
44 Nicolas Deslauriers – 17 David Legwand – 82 Marcus Foligno – 23 Sam Reinhart

4 Josh Gorges – 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
6 Mike Weber – 46 Cody Franson
29 Jake McCabe – 3 Mark Pysyk
25 Carlo Colaiacovo
47 Zach Bogosian (Non-Contact)

31 Chad Johnson
50 Nathan Lieuwen