



Buffalo Sabres

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Blues-Sabres Preview

By John Kosik

AP

November 23, 2015

At this point it wouldn't be surprising if the Buffalo Sabres believed the NHL's scheduling system was playing an elaborate prank on them.

Sitting among the Eastern Conference's cellar dwellers, the Sabres haven't done much through the first four of a five-game stretch against the best in the West.

Buffalo closes the slate Monday night at home with its second meeting in four days against the St. Louis Blues, who have won 17 of 19 in the series dating to 1999.

The Sabres (8-10-2) seemed to have recovered from seven losses - all in regulation - over their first 10 games with a 6-2-0 stretch that featured solid victories over the New York Islanders, Vancouver and Tampa Bay.

And then their schedule became a headache with a game against San Jose preceding two apiece versus Dallas and St. Louis (13-6-2). Those three clubs are a combined 43-18-2 this season and are the West's top three in points earned.

Buffalo managed to pick up a pair of points with an overtime loss to the Sharks and a shootout loss against the Blues, but the NHL-leading Stars outscored the Sabres 6-1 in the two meetings following a 3-0 victory Saturday in Dallas.

Oddly enough, it was the first time this season that struggling Buffalo was shut out. The Sabres came in with the league's fourth-best power play at 22.6 percent, but they went 0 for 3 to fall to 1 of 13 with the man advantage during their four-game skid.

They failed to capitalize on a 5-on-3 that lasted 54 seconds after also coming up empty on a pair of two-man advantages in Thursday's 3-2 loss in St. Louis. Buffalo went 0 for 4 on the power play in that contest.

"Obviously, it's something we need to work on," rookie center Jack Eichel told the club's official website.

"We had two against St. Louis. We could have used that one (Saturday), could have tied the game up. (A 5-on-3 is) a chance we need to capitalize. For us, it's frustrating knowing that we weren't able to get it done, and the 5-on-3 cost us a little bit."

A lack of goals has been the primary issue for the Sabres against the Blues in recent seasons. St. Louis has outscored Buffalo 24-7 while taking seven straight meetings and also owns a 10-1 differential in winning its last three visits to upstate New York.

The Blues, however, have hit a bit of a rut following an 11-3-1 start, losing four times - three in regulation - over their last six games. They've been outscored 21-14 in those contests with starter Jake Allen and backup Brian Elliot each taking two losses.

Allen opened with a 7-3-0 record, 1.53 goals-against average and .950 save percentage, but in his last four starts his GAA is a more modest 2.65. Elliot's downturn has been worse with a 0-2-1 record and 3.60 GAA since winning his first four starts.

Allen, who stopped 32 shots against Buffalo on Thursday and will likely get the nod in this meeting, made 28 saves in a 4-3 overtime loss against Detroit on Saturday.

Kyle Brodziak, Jori Lehtera and Vladimir Tarasenko scored for St. Louis, which had 33 shots on goal after being held below 30 in its previous three games.

"I think we were lucky to get a point. I don't think we played our best as a group as a whole, myself included," said Allen, who made 23 saves in a 1-0 win Feb. 5 at Buffalo in his first career start against the Sabres.

A quarter into season, Sabres still a work in progress

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

November 23, 2015

There is improvement and there is a lot of work ahead.

Pretty easy way to look at the Buffalo Sabres' season as it concludes the first quarter with Monday night's visit by the St. Louis Blues to First Niagara Center.

The Sabres are 8-10-2 through 20 games and have doubled their point total at this stage from last year's 4-15-1 record. They're much better defensively than in the past and have puck possession and faceoff numbers far from the dregs of the league that they've been the last two years.

But their offense continues to struggle. With 42 goals in their 20 games, the Sabres are averaging just 2.1 per contest and that's 27th in the 30-team NHL. It would still only put them on pace for 172 goals – or the third-fewest in franchise history behind the last two years.

The Sabres are currently in an 0-2-2 rut while playing teams exclusively from the Western Conference and have dropped into a tie for last place in the Atlantic Division.

Once 8-8, they failed to climb above .500 for the first time since the opening two games of the 2013 lockout season. For the time being, it's cooled some of the murmurs about playoff contention.

Here's a look at some current topics surrounding the club at the quarter pole:

Eichel's first slump: Jack Eichel is scoreless in his last five games and was particularly frustrated after Saturday's 3-0 loss in Dallas for failing to convert three quality chances, two when he cut around the Dallas defense and got in alone on Stars goalie Antti Niemi.

"I have a long way to go," Eichel said pointedly. "I have not been too happy with a lot of my performances so far this season. We're 20 games into the year. I think I have a lot more to give in all areas. I don't think this is nearly where I should be.

"I can do more. Scoring, faceoffs, power play, penalty kill. Everything."

Eichel has six goals, two off the NHL rookie lead, and leads first-year players with 67 shots on goal. But he is just ninth in points with 10, has only one goal and three points in nine road games and is carrying an ugly minus-6 rating.

Eichel admitted he's still in his infancy of dealing with the NHL's schedule grind. Remember, getting to the 20-game mark in college is usually past the halfway mark of the season. At Boston University last season, in fact, Eichel's Terriers played 41 games – and that was with making it all the way to the championship of the Frozen Four.

"It's long, quite a schedule," Eichel said of the NHL transition. "You're playing a few games a week. You're on the ice every day and it can be tough to manage your body and be up to play every game. But that's part of a being a pro and I'm still adjusting to it. It's something I need to get better at and get more comfortable with."

Eichel isn't alone: Many of the team's experienced forwards are struggling to score, as Ryan O'Reilly has three of Buffalo's four goals over the last four games. Evander Kane, Brian Gionta, Marcus Foligno and the injured Zemgus

Girgensons all have one goal for the season. Tyler Ennis has no goals in nine games, Matt Moulson none in eight. Johan Larsson and David Legwand have yet to score at all.

"We have to capitalize on our chances and that's a big thing," Moulson said. "We're working. Maybe a play here and there by all of us is a difference right now. We can't feel sorry for ourselves. We have to keep working, keep getting better each day. That's what you have to concentrate on, making sure we're improving as a team and individuals."

Ennis, a 20-goal man each of the last two seasons, is stuck at three and has not scored in nine games. He's also having a terrible time with turnovers. Asked after Saturday's loss if he senses that Ennis' game is completely out of sync at this point, coach Dan Bylsma pondered the thought, gave a small smile and then said simply, "I think you just answered the question."

The schedule: Central Division teams entered Sunday 62-34-10 outside the division so it's not in the Sabres' favor to be in the midst of a run against them. The Sabres lost two games to league-leading Dallas last week and suffered a shootout loss Thursday in St. Louis. The Blues are now in town for a rematch and Buffalo also plays Nashville twice this week.

"This is the toughest division in hockey," said O'Reilly, who knows first-hand from his days with Colorado. "Look at the teams and the points they have. There's never an easy game in this division. These teams are big and strong and that makes it a tough swing for us."

Goaltending: In the wake of the Opening Night injury to Robin Lehner, Chad Johnson and rookie Linus Ullmark have held the fort better than anyone could have expected. Johnson's November numbers in the wake of Saturday's loss remain strong: 1-1-1 with a 1.62 goals-against average and a .943 save percentage. Ullmark has put up a .926 save percentage in his eight games.

That panic that seemed to take hold outside the locker room when Lehner went down has proved to be unfounded.

"People can think what they want but for myself there was no panic," Johnson said. "It was an opportunity. Linus has come in and played well. We're just here to do the best that we do and that's stopping the puck and giving the team a chance to win."

Special teams: It was the theme of the road trip as the Sabres went 0 for 3 with a two-man advantage – and didn't get a shot on goal in two of the opportunities. The power play as a whole has been pretty good, ranked eighth in the league at 21.5 percent, but has hurt the club's momentum of late. The penalty kill has been consistently poor, ranked 29th overall and dead last on the road.

Looking ahead: The Sabres went 3-7 in the season's first 10 games and improved to 5-3-2 in the second set. Bylsma was disappointed, however, at not getting Saturday's game.

"At game 20, this would have put us at 6-2-2 in our last 10 and that was something we were fighting for," he said. "We're going to have to continue to fight that way. ... when you play a good Dallas team that's one of the better teams in the league and it's a little bit of a benchmark for you. You're disappointed with that loss."

"The new faces we have are slowly growing together but we're not satisfied at all," O'Reilly said. "We've lost a lot of games by a couple minor details. We know we can be better. We want to win now. We want to get in these playoffs now and make a statement. The opportunity is there."

What to watch Monday night: Bills or Sabres?

By Jay Rey
Buffalo News
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Twice in less than two weeks, Buffalo is faced with that burning question:

Bills or Sabres?

Fans walked the fine line between franchise loyalties Nov. 12, when they flipped back and forth between channels to watch their teams play on the road. Both won – the Sabres defeated the Florida Panthers, and the Bills beat the New York Jets on a Thursday night.

But fans will have an even bigger dilemma Monday night, when the Bills play in Foxborough, Mass., against the New England Patriots, while the Sabres are at home to take on the St. Louis Blues at First Niagara Center.

What's a Buffalo fan to do?

"For me, I'm a Bills fan first and foremost, so it's not much of a debate," said Matt Sabuda, who spearheaded a fan alliance to keep the Bills in Buffalo and now does a weekly Bills analysis on WBFO-FM. "I think in this town, the Bills are king."

"I'll be watching the football game," agreed Del Reid, co-founder of the fan group Bills Mafia. "I love hockey, too, but I'm Bills first."

It's a bit unfair, though, to pit the two Buffalo teams against each other or try to compare the two games, Reid said. The Sabres game is one of 41 at home, he said, while the Bills play 16 games during the regular season.

And while the two franchises may have a history of competing for Western New York's affection, Reid noted how that rivalry has been absent since both teams came under the ownership of Terry and Kim Pegula and their theme "One Buffalo."

In fact, Bills coach Rex Ryan talked about the Sabres last week when told Nov. 12 was the first time in five years the two teams won on the same day.

"They play again the same night you play New England," Ryan was told.

"Oh, do they really?" Ryan said. "All right, let's go. Let's make it two in a row."

Tickets are still available for Monday's Sabres game, said Michael Gilbert, vice president of public and community relations for the Sabres.

"We can't show the Bills game in the building – it's against league rules – but we'll have updates," Gilbert said. "I think nowadays everybody has a smartphone anyway, so they're going to get updates."

The organization realizes attendance could be on the lighter side Monday night, because it's a busy week.

Not only is there a Bills game Monday, but Thursday is Thanksgiving, and there are two other home hockey games: Wednesday against the Nashville Predators and Friday against the Carolina Hurricanes.

Gilbert expects a lot of fans to attend Monday's Sabres game, then head to the local bars and restaurants afterward to catch the rest of the Bills-Patriots game on TV.

"Our game starts an hour and a half earlier," Gilbert said. "Our game should be over by 9:20 p.m., and by then the Bills game will probably be in the second quarter."

Most fans, like Bob Barnashuk, will be tuned in already at home, flipping back and forth between the action.

"It will primarily be around the Bills, but definitely checking in with the Sabres," said Barnashuk, a Hamburg attorney and lifelong Bills and Sabres fan. "I think most Buffalo sports fans in late fall and winter are much more focused on the Bills."

But Barnashuk warned about the mistake he made the last time while watching the Bills game at the home of his sister, Kim, and her husband. Barnashuk commandeered the TV remote, changed the channel and spent too much time watching Sabres highlights during the second intermission.

By the time he switched back to the football game, Barnashuk had missed the fumble recovery and return for a touchdown that put the Bills ahead, 9-3.

He also had his remote privileges revoked.

Sabres notebook: Faceoffs are a big deal to O'Reilly

By Mike Harrington
Buffalo News
November 22, 2015

DALLAS – Win a faceoff, collect the puck. Pretty easy theory to help a team improve, and it's working well for the Buffalo Sabres thanks in large part to Ryan O'Reilly.

The Sabres were last in the NHL in faceoff percentage last year at 44.9 percent – the worst figure in the league since 1998. They were 29th in 2013-14, winning just 46.8 percent.

But O'Reilly has proven to be a dynamo in the circle and the Sabres entered Saturday's game against the Dallas Stars 14th in the league at 50.3 percent. For his part, O'Reilly was tied for fourth among individuals at 58.8 percent.

"It's a possession thing," O'Reilly said prior to the game against the Dallas Stars in American Airlines Center. "Whenever you're doing good on draws, you're giving yourself another extra split second to possess it and make a play in the game. It's huge for the game. It's something I enjoy, a great way to start a shift ... a great way to be engaged coming into the dot right away."

O'Reilly had one of his best nights of the season Thursday in St. Louis, going 16-5 overall – and winning all 10 faceoffs he took in the third period and overtime.

"It can be frustrating when I lose the first couple. It gets in my head a little bit and I have to calm down and get back to things," O'Reilly said. "I take the majority of the draws so I can get in a rhythm. I win a couple, I can get in a roll."

O'Reilly entered Saturday with 266 faceoff wins, second only to Philadelphia's Claude Giroux (285). O'Reilly is at 57 percent on even-strength faceoffs and is 61-24 (.718) on power-play draws. He's also been remarkably consistent at home (59.3 percent) and on the road (58.2 percent)

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma agreed with the notion that faceoffs can be a strong mentality issue.

"You see a person lose confidence in the circle and their physical skill diminishes quickly," Bylsma said. "You see a guy not confident about taking it or getting beat by a certain guy and they shy away. It's a big attribute.

"There's lots of statistics when it's a draw in the offensive zone and numbers go up for people. You wonder why that is. What's the difference between the offensive zone dot and defensive zone dot? There's a huge part of it being mentality."

O'Reilly entered Saturday's game as the Sabres' leading scorer with 16 points and as the NHL's ice time leader among forwards at 21:42 per game. He said he was aware of the Sabres' faceoff troubles when he was traded to the team on draft night and knew he would be a major component to fixing the problem.

"In this league, you see the faceoff plays that teams make and everyone has to be a part of the draw and know what you're doing," he said. "One little lapse and it can be in the back of your net. For us, we try to possess it and win as many draws as we can to help our 'D'."

O'Reilly often works with his teammates on draws. During Saturday's pregame skate, he worked head-to-head with Jack Eichel under the watchful eyes of assistant coach Dave Barr.

"I enjoy helping him out," O'Reilly said. "On draws where it's a key faceoff, you have to get in there and be aggressive. I'm showing him some tools where I position my body that helps me on key draws."

Bylsma is happy to have O'Reilly spreading his knowledge around the team.

"It's a trait to be learned, not something that someone comes in and usually is gifted at," Bylsma said. "You see the evolution of guys who are good in the circle. With Sidney Crosby, where he started at and where he is today are significantly different. It's work in there, knowledge and experience. Ryan has that and hopefully can instill some of that on some of our younger players."

Bylsma said after practice Friday he was concerned that he was burdening O'Reilly with too many defensive zone faceoffs, hurting his leading scorer's offense in the process. O'Reilly shot down that theory.

"To me, it's just as important keeping pucks out as putting them in," he said. "I love those pressure draws. Those ones late in the game are the most fun. It's an exciting part of the game that I enjoy. During the game, I'm not worrying that it's another D-zone draw. I'm thinking, 'We have to get this puck out and go down and score.'"

...

Saturday's game was Dallas' 21st of the season – and already its 14th against the Eastern Conference. The Stars entered the game 10-3 against the East, easily the most wins by a Western club, and a 42-27 edge in goals. Dallas is 5-0 against the Metropolitan Division.

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Sabres defenseman Mark Pysyk missed his second straight game with a lower-body injury that coach Dan Bylsma called a bone bruise. Forward Tim Schaller was a healthy scratch.

The Stars played the game without defenseman Jordie Benn, the brother of captain Jamie Benn. He has been suffering from the flu.

Sabres open three-game homestand against Blues

By Louie Korac

NHL.com

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BLUES (13-6-2) at SABRES (8-10-2)

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

Season series: Left wing Alexander Steen scored the only shootout goal and had two assists in the St. Louis Blues' 3-2 victory against the Buffalo Sabres on Nov. 19. Defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk and wing Vladimir Tarasenko scored power-play goals for St. Louis, which got 32 saves from Jake Allen. Centers Sam Reinhart and Ryan O'Reilly scored for the Sabres, and Linus Ullmark made 27 saves.

Blues team scope: St. Louis is in the middle of playing nine games in 16 days leading into the Thanksgiving break and has opted for rest as opposed to practicing on limited off days. The Blues have lost four of six (2-3-1). "The unfortunate part of what we need to practice would just rip the guts out of the team from a physical standpoint," coach Ken Hitchcock said after the 4-3 overtime loss to the Detroit Red Wings on Saturday. "... We really need to amp up our competitive level at practice and that's probably what we've got to do, but at what risk? ... We need some practices badly, but there's a balance that you have to decide which way you're going to go." Center Paul Stastny, who has missed 16 games with a broken foot, will travel to Buffalo and Pittsburgh. His availability will be determined after the morning skate Monday.

Sabres team scope: Buffalo will know Monday morning the status of Zemgus Girgensons and Mark Pysyk. Girgensons has missed the past three games with an undisclosed injury and Pysyk sat out the past two games with a lower-body injury but is likely to miss more time. The Sabres, who took Sunday off, start a three-game homestand on the heels of a four-game losing streak (0-2-2). Buffalo has scored four goals during the losing skid. "We have opportunities and looks at the net on a couple instances to start the game," coach Dan Bylsma told the Sabres website after a 3-0 loss at the Dallas Stars on Saturday. "We had a couple 2-on-1s that we had people in good spots to score goals and weren't able to convert." Rookie Jack Eichel is among those frustrated offensively. The No. 2 overall pick in the 2015 NHL Draft has gone five games without a goal.

Improved Sabres have long ways to go

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
November 23, 2015

BUFFALO – Realistically, one quarter into the season, seventh in the stacked Atlantic Division is a place many envisioned the Sabres would be at climbing out of their rebuild.

The 8-10-2 Sabres, as their current four-game losing streak (0-2-2) illustrates, are still a raw work in progress. They've already endured a string of ups and downs – a disappointing 2-6 start, a significant 6-2 run to reach .500 and injuries to defenseman Zach Bogosian and winger Evander Kane, to name a few – entering tonight's tilt against the St. Louis Blues inside the First Niagara Center.

What's clear is the Sabres' also-ran days are over under new coach Dan Bylsma. Even in their losses they're usually competitive. Sure, the playoffs probably aren't realistic this season. But they've shown enough progress and possess enough talent to make fans wonder what kind of team they might develop into in the near future.

Here's some of what's transpired so far:

The offense is still terrible

After getting blanked 3-0 Saturday in Dallas, the Sabres have scored only four goals in their last four games and just 42 overall, 2.1 a contest – the NHL's fourth-worst total. That's a 172-goal pace with centers Jack Eichel and Ryan O'Reilly in the lineup. The Sabres scored 153 times last season.

Where would the anemic offense be without O'Reilly, who has a team-high seven goals and 16 points, and Eichel, who has six goals and 10 points?

No one else even has five goals. Captain Brian Gionta, Marcus Foligno and Zemgus Girgensons all have one score each. Foligno only has nine shots in 19 games.

Eichel looks like a teenage rookie at times

The rinks starts to buzz each time Eichel, 19, touches the puck. The second overall pick has been electrifying throughout the season, showcasing his dynamic talents almost nightly. He usually generates two or three prime scoring chances a game on sheer talent.

But Eichel isn't an NHL star yet. He's raw defensively. On the Stars' first goal Saturday, he left a Dallas player open in front. Eichel hasn't scored a goal in five games, a drought that might be the longest he's ever endured. It took him 14 games to record his first assist.

No one seems to be down on Eichel. He's already one of the Sabres' best players. Still, any expectations he would burst into the NHL and instantly become a superstar were wrong.

Tyler Ennis might be enduring the worst stretch of his career

When asked by a reporter Saturday if Ennis, 26, looks "out of sync," Bylsma replied, "I think you just answered your own question." Bylsma said Wednesday Ennis was pressing.

Ennis, the Sabres' best and often lone offensive threat for two seasons, is struggling in Bylsma's system. Clearly, the shifty winger's better when he has more freedom to be creative and showcase his speed. Ennis thrived when former coach Ted Nolan basically gave him free reign.

Perhaps Ennis, who has three goals and 10 points, is experiencing an adjustment period like a lot of his teammates. But Bylsma is clearly growing impatient. After spending all season beside either O'Reilly or Eichel, Bylsma put Ennis with center Johan Larsson last week before demoting him to the fourth line late Saturday. Ennis hasn't scored a goal in nine games.

The goaltending has been strong

The tandem of Chad Johnson and rookie Linus Ullmark quickly alleviated any concerns goaltending would become a problem after starter Robin Lehner suffered a high-ankle sprain opening night.

The duo has alternated starts the last seven games. Ullmark, 22, will likely receive his ninth NHL nod tonight. The Swede's shiny .926 save percentage is tied for ninth in the league.

Johnson, meanwhile, recently went more than four games without allowing an even-strength five-on-five goal.

Overall, the Sabres' team save percentage of .906 ranks 23rd. Still, Johnson and Ullmark have given their teammates a chance to win most nights.

Notes: Bylsma said Saturday that defenseman Mark Pysyk, out the last two games with a bone bruise, is day-to-day. ... The Sabres, who play four times this week, had Sunday off.

At the quarter mark: Grading every Sabre

By Matthew Coller

WGR 550

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Saturday night's game marks an important milestone for the Buffalo Sabres as they will play their 20th game of the season – (approximately) the quarter mark of the season. The Sabres sit at 8-9-2 heading into their matchup with the NHL's best team, the Dallas Stars. Last year they were 5-13-2 after 20 games.

With the focus on progress and winning, it seems like an appropriate time to grade the team. How much better are they than last year? Who has shined? Who has struggled? What do the numbers say?

Coach Dan Bylsma

Quarter Poll Grade: A-

Key stat: 12th in the NHL in Corsi For %

The upgrade at the coaching position has been huge. Bylsma's team has been lauded by players and analysts for its structure and the team's awareness of where teammates will be in every situation. While there have been a lot of lineup changes and shuffles, a look into offensive zone starts and matchups suggests Bylsma is on the mark with assessing players' strengths. The Sabres are out-possessing their opponents on a consistent basis, often pinning opponents down in the offensive zone. Plus, the Sabres' power play ranks fourth in the NHL. Their PK has struggled, as has the team at 3-on-3. That's where the "minus" part comes from. Otherwise, Sabres fans should be pleased with their head coach.

Forwards

Nicholas Deslauriers

Grade: B

Key stat: Five EV points

Tim Murray traded for Deslauriers at the deadline two years ago hoping the big-bodied forward could translate his strong AHL play into a quality NHL depth forward. A recent healthy scratch lowers the grade a bit, but overall the large winger has done his job, adding some physical presence and a few points. He also showed the ability to be a change-of-pace now and then when bumped up off the fourth line.

Jack Eichel

Grade: B+

Key stat: 19:02 average ice time

It is a difficult task for any rookie to make the transition from the NCAA to the NHL in a single leap, much less come into The Show and play nearly 20 minutes per game. Eichel has been one of the Sabres' poorest possession players with a 48.3% Corsi Percentage, but has the second most goals on the team with six and leads the team with shots on goal with 64. He has shown every bit of speed, explosiveness and flash that we expected and seems to have fit in very well with the team and city.

Tyler Ennis

Grade: C-

Key stat: 46.6% Corsi Percentage

The five minute penalty and the Stars' goal by Nichushkin are the recent lowlights, but put those aside and you still won't find much evidence of Ennis making a positive impact this season. He has struggled to fit into Bylsma's system, often trying to make plays by himself by dancing into the offensive zone and losing the puck. The numbers bear out that he has been the team's second worst possession forward and despite oodles of power play and 5v5 time, he only has three goals. We know Ennis can be better, good thing he still has three-fourths of the season left to show it.

Marcus Foligno

Grade: C

Key stat: Nine shots on goal in 18 games

It appears Foligno is finding where he fits as an NHL player after being bounced from coach to coach over his first several years as a pro, but the same shortcomings that existed under Ruff, Rolston and Nolan are still coming up under Bylsma. Foligno has the capability to be an impact player, but has not been as often as his coaches would like. He hasn't used his body as much as he can and he hasn't gotten any pucks to the net. With six points and average possession stats, it's hard to say he's been bad, but there is more there to give.

Brian Gionta

Grade: C

Key stat: 2.8% shooting percentage

The Sabres' captain started off slow after opening the year with an injury and since he's been back there have been very few bounces that have gone his way. Only have one goal is disappointing, but puck luck is at play with just a 2.8% shooting percentage. Considering he's a 10.8% shooter for his career, you have to assume the goals will start coming. With that said, Dan Bylsma has leaned on him a little too heavily with 18:46 average ice time and his Corsi numbers (47.9%) have suffered. Gionta really started humming in the second half of last season, we expect he will get going eventually, though Bylsma should dial it back on his ice time.

Zemgus Girgensons

Grade: B

Key stat: 54.0% Corsi Percentage

His possession numbers reflect he has been dominant. He is the team's No. 1 forward in possession (who has played more than 10 games). When he is on the ice at 5v5, the Sabres are out-shooting opponents 28 to 19. That's 13th best in the NHL with the third best shots against per 60 minutes. But when it comes to luck, to quote blues artist Albert King, "if it wasn't for bad luck, I'd have no luck at all." Girgensons has 32 shots and only one goal, good for a 3.1% shooting percentage and the team is only shooting 2.8% with him on the ice. Those numbers scream that he will get hot and start rolling at some point.

Evander Kane

Grade: Incomplete

Key stat: 33 shots in nine games

A knee injury forced Kane to miss half of the first quarter, but when he was in the lineup, Kane's play was excellent. His 55.6% Corsi Percentage is reflective of terrific forechecking and he has gotten shots on net from all angles. Kane has never been the highest shooting percentage player, but he has also suffered from bad puck luck to only have one goal. They will come. He's fit in with the team nicely, gaining respect from teammates for his all-out effort. If he stays healthy, the midway point grade may very well be an A.

Johan Larsson

Grade: D

Key stat: 49.0% Corsi Percentage

After a very strong finish to 2014-15, Larsson has not gotten off to a very good start under Dan Bylsma, who sung the young Swede's praises during the offseason. His point production wouldn't really be a concern if Larsson was dominating puck possession as he had in the past, but a sub-50% Corsi is a major disappointment, even if he has been asked to be on the ice for more defensive zone faceoffs (45.9% Offensive Zone Start %) than most. Larsson has to find his game soon or the Sabres will be looking for an upgrade.

David Legwand

Grade: C-

Key stat: Zero goals in 16 games

Not that we expected David Legwand to be the 60-point David Legwand of his Nashville Predator days, but he spent several games in the press box and has offered very little outside of "experience" when he is on the ice.

Jamie McGinn

Grade: B-

Key stat: 50.7% Corsi

The Sabres have gotten everything they hoped for with McGinn, who has been reliable whether he is on the fourth line or playing with skill players. He has added a touch of physical play with a few points to boot and has been on the positive side of puck possession.

Matt Moulson**Grade: B****Key stat: 53.3% Corsi on-ice with Ryan O'Reilly**

While Moulson has drawn the ire of some Sabres fans, he hasn't been nearly as bad as some claim. Ryan O'Reilly has been about 3% better in Corsi when playing with Moulson than without him and Zemgus Girgensons' Corsi is also higher when on ice with Moulson. He isn't fast – never was, never will be. But as long as he's not dragging the key possession players down along with adding some points, he's making the team better. He's on pace for 34 points, which would not match up with his contract, but wouldn't be a disaster either.

Ryan O'Reilly**Grade: A+****Key stat: All the stats**

O'Reilly has played like an NHL All-Star so far, leading the team in goals, assists and ice time. In fact, he is the NHL's leader in ice time with 21:42 per game. The Sabres' top center has been dominant on the puck at both ends of the ice, controlling possession and making life difficult on the opposition's best player. He has also put an outstanding 54 shots on goal in 19 games. Nobody has been better on this team.

Sam Reinhart**Grade: B+****Key stat: 61.5% Goals For Percentage**

The Sabres' rookie leads the team in Goals For % and has a 53.5% Corsi Percentage, which suggests his uber-smart play has made a highly positive impact on the club. He hasn't been flashy, but has consistently made the right plays and has added some point production, too. Reinhart started slow, but has proven he shouldn't be taken out of the top six.

Defensemen (at least 50+ minutes)**Carlo Colaiacovo****Grade: B****Key stat: Even plus-minus**

It goes without saying that plus-minus isn't a good stat, but the Sabres' seventh defenseman has done his job by filling in admirably when he's been needed. He's a 50-50 possession player, even plus-minus, even shot on goal differential and has been mostly unnoticed to the eye. That's exactly what a fill-in player is supposed to provide.

Cody Franson**Grade: B-****Key stat: Nine points in 19 games**

When you sign Cody Franson, you know you're getting some really good things and some things that will be frustrating. His power play presence has been outstanding. The former Pred and Leaf has shown top-end ability to pass the puck and distribute on the man-advantage. At even strength, he can exit the zone when he gets the puck, but his slow skating has been an issue, costing the Sabres a few goals. Still the signing looks pretty solid.

Josh Gorges**Grade: B+****Key stat: No. 1 in Quality of Competition**

After a rough 2014-15 that included battling through injury, Gorges has looked much better this season. The key to his grade is how well he has played with Rasmus Ristolainen, who is a budding superstar. The pair has been outshot at even strength, but considering they are facing the likes of Stamkos (4x) and Seguin-Benn etc. on a nightly basis, the pair has done well and Gorges deserves some of the credit.

Jake McCabe**Grade: B****Key stat: Out-shooting opponents 30 to 26 while on-ice**

Many expected Jake McCabe to start the year with the Rochester Americans, but he was having none of that during the prospect camp and training camp. McCabe played his way onto the roster and into a 19-minute per

night role and is now alongside Zach Bogosian. McCabe is a strong skater with an aggressive, hard-working nature. He is still learning the NHL game, so there will be nights where he struggles, but his jump from the beginning of last season to now has been eye-popping.

Mark Pysyk

Grade: A

Key stat: 54.4% Corsi

Pysyk has been brilliant. His highly-intelligent play has been combined with near-flawless passing and skating ability that makes life difficult on opponents. When he has been on the ice, the Sabres have dominated the shot counter, despite Pysyk being thrown from partner to partner. He is often asked to play with someone the team is concerned about because he covers up mistakes. We may see that if he plays the left side with Franson on the right.

Rasmus Ristolainen

Grade: A+

Key stat: 12 points in 19 games (13th in the NHL)

Of all the good signs (coaching, Eichel, Reinhart, O'Reilly etc etc) from the first 20 games, the best may be that Rasmus Ristolainen is turning into a superstar in front of our eyes. He has exploded offensively, becoming one of the elites in the NHL in scoring over the first quarter of the season and has shown that he can continue to grow and grow. Ristolainen's commitment to being a great NHL player has been extremely impressive as he worked hard to get his body in the right shape to handle 20+ minutes and has worked diligently to improve decisions. Stars assistant coach James Patrick told Hockey Hotline on WGR that Ristolainen really frustrated their top line with Tyler Seguin and Jamie Benn – the best line in hockey. Oh and he just turned 21.

Mike Weber

Grade: C

Key stat: 24 shots against per 60 at 5v5

To the eye, Weber has struggled, but statistically he has had decent numbers. However, his numbers are boosted by two really good games alongside Mark Pysyk (73% Corsi in 37 minutes) and the fact that Dan Bylsma had to protect him from facing top lines or tough defensive zone situations. It appears Weber has found his rightful role on the team, which is playing the 6/7 spot.

Goalies

Chad Johnson

Grade: C

Key stat: .900 save percentage

One really bad game against Montreal dragged down Johnson's early numbers, but he has mostly given his chance a team to win while in net. You expect around a .900 save percentage from a backup goalie, maybe a little more.

Linus Ullmark

Grade: A

Key stat: 4-3-1, .926 save percentage

Who knows if Ullmark can keep up this pace, but a .926 save percentage is top notch. Considering he was coming off injury and only played three pro games before his call up, his performance thus far has been outstanding.

Sabres fall to Stars in 1st shutout loss of the season

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

November 23, 2015

DALLAS – Jamie Benn's third-period goal put the Buffalo Sabres in a tough position Saturday, down two against the League's winningest team. The deficit forced them to change their style, pressing to find the back of the net twice in the limited time they had left.

On this night, the risk didn't pay off. Benn scored again less than two minutes later, this time the product of perfect passing in transition, and the Dallas Stars beat the Sabres 3-0 at American Airlines Center.

The game marked Buffalo's first shutout loss of the season.

"Right from the start of the game, they're a team that does open it up, plays a long game," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "As we pressed in the third period when we needed to – after we got down two on their power-play goal – the game opened up a little bit more for them.

"Unfortunately, it gave them and their good players an opportunity to bury the third one."

Tyler Ennis took a holding call 6:21 into the third period with Dallas leading 1-0. On the ensuing Stars power play, Dallas forward Tyler Seguin blocked an attempt by Ryan O'Reilly to clear the puck along the right wing boards and fed a pass across zone to Jason Spezza.

Spezza took a shot from beyond the right faceoff circle and Benn was there to clean up the rebound. Dallas scored again 2:03 later when Patrick Sharp hit Seguin in the slot and Seguin one-timed a pass to Benn, rushing in on the left.

The goals were Benn's 13th and 14th of the season, giving him sole possession of the NHL lead at game's end. Buffalo fell to 8-10-2 after their fourth-straight loss (two in regulation, one in overtime and the other in a shootout).

Chad Johnson stopped 29 shots in net for Buffalo while his Dallas counterpart, Antti Niemi, made 22 saves in the shutout performance.

Dallas scored its first goal of the game 6:22 into the first period when forward Antoine Roussel beat Johnson to his glove side. The goal was Roussel's 38th career marker, setting the record for most scored by a French-born player in NHL history.

"Right now you're dealing with the disappointment of a loss tonight," Bylsma said. "This would've put us at 6-2-2 in our last 10 and that was something we were fighting for. We're going to have to continue to fight that way, I think that's the team we can be and need to be and we're developing into.

"You're playing a good Dallas Stars team that I think is one of the better teams in the League and it's a little bit of a benchmark."

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

Sabres forward Matt Moulson had a chance to break the shutout right off the bat for the Sabres, but just missed on a one-time attempt 17 seconds into the game.

"It kind of bobbed and I didn't put it where I wanted to," Moulson said.

The opportunity was the first of many for the Sabres. Moulson had another chance at a one-timer, this time off of a perfect feed by O'Reilly, but couldn't convert. Jack Eichel nearly scored a few times, including one in the second period when Evander Kane fed him right in front of the net.

Eichel tried to pull the puck back and score over Niemi's left pad but the shot was stuffed. Kane fed him again in third and this time he swept right across the net only to produce another unsuccessful attempt.

"[Kane] makes a good play and I've got to get the puck over the goalie's pad," he said. "I wasn't able to and that's a play where I need to capitalize and build some momentum for our team."

PK PROFICIENCY

Before allowing the power-play goal in the third, Buffalo's penalty kill held strong against a Dallas team whose power play ranked second in the League to begin the night with a 28.3 percent success rate.

The Sabres killed off four penalties in the second, none more prominent than a four-minute high-sticking call against Kane 8:54 into the period. The Stars only generated two shots on goal during those four minutes.

For as good as they performed on the penalty kill, however, the minutes spent shorthanded had an adverse affect on their offensive rhythm.

"You're taxing the guys that are killing, putting a lot of pressure on them and the flipside you've got some guys that are sitting there waiting to go," Sabres captain Brian Gionta said. "A lot of things happen there, you tire out some guys and you flatten out others."

ANOTHER 5-ON-3

The Sabres were unsuccessful on a 5-on-3 power play Saturday for the fourth time in their last four games. After Roussel got caught for interference 18:51 into the first period, Dallas defenseman Jyrki Jokipakka was called for a delay of game with three seconds left on the clock.

The Sabres closed out the period and began the second with the two-man advantage for 51 seconds but were unable to convert. Buffalo had an unsuccessful 5-on-3 against San Jose on Oct. 14 and two more in a loss to St. Louis on Thursday.

"It's tough, a couple of bounces, obviously it's something we need to work on," Eichel said. "We had two against St. Louis, we could have used that one tonight, could have tied the game up ... 5-on-3 is a chance where you need to capitalize and for us it's frustrating knowing we weren't able to get it done."

MAYDAY'S MOMENT OF THE GAME

"Buffalo's best chance to tie this game should have been the 51-second two-man advantage at the start of the second period. Nothing kills a team's momentum more than not scoring in these situations, and Buffalo remains without a 5-on-3 goal this year despite more than 6:00 of advantage time. It hurts especially playing against such a disciplined team where offensive chances are hard to come by." – Brad May, Sabres Studio Analyst.

BACK TO BUFFALO

The Sabres will have the day off on Sunday before returning home to host St. Louis on Monday at First Niagara Center.

Coverage of that game begins at 6:30 p.m. with Tops Sabres Gamenight on MSG-B and Bell TV. The game can also be heard live on WGR 550 with puck drop set for 7 p.m

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