



Buffalo Sabres

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Kings-Sabres Preview

By Kevin Chroust

AP

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With Los Angeles being among the best teams in the Western Conference in recent seasons and the Sabres the East's worst, one might have expected the Kings' struggles in Buffalo to have passed by now.

The ups of the Kings and downs of the Sabres are playing out further on current streaks, and they meet Saturday night in Buffalo with Los Angeles after its second seven-game winning streak this season but just its second win there dating to 1993.

The Kings (19-8-1) got out of Pittsburgh with a 3-2 shootout win on Friday after squandering two regulation leads. They've opened a six-game road trip with two wins, and in addition to the winning streak, they're 7-0-1 while allowing 1.63 goals per game since their last regulation loss on Nov. 22.

"I don't know if there's any one thing," goaltender Jonathan Quick said. "It would (be) just keep working, and good teams find ways to win. So we're just trying to be a good team every night. We've got a long way to go. We've got a lot of things to work on and continue to get better at."

The streak has come without a point from Tyler Toffoli, who along with Jeff Carter has a team-high 11 goals. Carter's seven-game point streak came to an end against the Penguins.

Jake Muzzin had a goal and an assist and has two goals and three assists in his last four games, but Los Angeles' eight goals over the last three games have come from eight different players. Quick said contributions from new faces are key on a winning streak like this.

"You can't say they're getting a little more comfortable," Quick said of the team's newcomers. "So we want to see them continue to do that. The older guys that have been around for a little bit continue to push ourselves and push them at the same time and keep working."

Quick hasn't needed much pushing. He made 40 saves against Pittsburgh and has played in each game on Los Angeles' eight-game point streak with a 1.57 goals-against average and .939 save percentage. He's 4-1-0 with a 1.41 GAA and .933 save percentage in six career games against the Sabres.

The teams have split four games over the previous two seasons, but Los Angeles hasn't won in Buffalo since 2003, going 0-5-1 since with eight goals scored and 1-11-1 with a tie since the previous victory there in 1993.

The Sabres (11-15-3) have won their last two home games, but they're returning from a 0-3-0 road trip. It ended with Thursday's 4-3 loss in Calgary despite Rasmus Ristolainen's first career hat trick.

"That's special," Ristolainen, who has seven points in five games, told the team's official website. "That doesn't happen often to me, so I take it, but we really need wins. We've got to find a way and do it together here."

"That wasn't what we wanted. Really bad two periods. They outworked, they outbattled us, and that's not the way we should play, especially the situation - three losses, tough road trip. We've got to pick it up and do it together."

The biggest issue has been containing opponents' scoring with Buffalo allowing 13 goals on the losing streak.

Chad Johnson played in two of the losses, allowing eight goals with a .867 save percentage, but he's 2-0-0 with a 1.48 GAA and .942 save percentage versus Los Angeles.

Sabres' McCormick weighing whether blood is thicker than ice

By John Vogl
Buffalo News
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As Cody McCormick circles the ice with a few Sabres teammates, he wishes the light morning workouts would turn into real NHL games again. Then he meets his wife for a lunch date and helps his three young daughters prepare for Christmas.

"You don't want to put yourself in a position where you might not come home to your family," he said.

The disturbing thought sends the 32-year-old back to his research on blood clots, which have put his career on hold for almost a year and perhaps permanently.

"When I started my career I wasn't really planning on having blood clots to finish it, you know what I mean?" McCormick said. "I thought I would play it out as long as I could until they kicked me off the ice."

McCormick still hopes he'll leave the game on his own terms. He skates with injured teammates in First Niagara Center almost every morning, keeping alive the dream that he'll one day do it at night with fans in the stands.

"I'm just not ready to believe I can't play again," McCormick said. "There's people telling me I shouldn't play, but I just want to make sure I explore everything before I believe that."

McCormick watched with interest this week as Pittsburgh's Pascal Dupuis retired because of blood clots. Dupuis returned after his initial diagnosis, but he said he no longer wanted to frighten his family after several scares took him off the ice.

It was as if Dupuis had ripped the words from McCormick's head.

"When he retired, he said everything I was thinking," McCormick said. "You don't want to have people worrying about you when you're on the ice. There would be risk to playing. It's trying to evaluate how much risk.

"You don't want the family to worry."

McCormick's wife has been his pillar of support as he weighs returning to the ice versus staying with his family, which includes 6-year-old, 2-year-old and 8-month-old daughters. He relishes the unexpected time he gets to spend with them, but he misses the dressing-room camaraderie and on-ice action.

"It's kind of a different lifestyle this season, not traveling, not really around the team like I used to be," he said. "You're not really living the highs and lows with the guys in the room. That's definitely a tough part of it."

McCormick sees all of his teammates in the weight room, but the only ice time he gets is light skates with fellow players on injured reserve. That's only because he asked for permission from General Manager Tim Murray, coach Dan Bylsma and the medical staff.

"I was working out without a real target," McCormick said. "In hockey there's always injuries, so I wanted to contribute a little more. I asked Tim Murray and the medical staff and Dan if it would be all right if I went on the ice with the injured guys just to help out and see if I could contribute a little more than just being around the weight room.

"I think just being able to go on the ice still with these guys in that capacity is beneficial for me."

Because he's on blood thinners, McCormick can't be cleared to play. He may have to take medication forever.

"That's still something I'm trying to find out," he said. "I'm trying to see some more doctors and see what they've had in their experience and what they've found with their research."

He traces the clots to a blocking a shot with his foot Jan. 3. He played three more games and scored a short-handed goal in his finale Jan. 9 in Tampa Bay.

"My last game that I played, I got hit in the chest and I thought I had the wind knocked out of me," McCormick said. "I went to the rink the next day for treatment just to see what the medical staff thought about it, and they wanted to make sure they canceled out all the bad stuff that it could possibly be with chest pain. They sent me in to the hospital, and they found blood clots in my lung that day."

His season ended three months early, and this one never started. He knew when he arrived for his training-camp physical that he'd go back on the injured-reserve list despite having no symptoms.

"I feel as normal as ever," said McCormick, who knows he's at risk for further clots. "Trauma can cause it. Dehydration. Immobility. That's three things that come with playing professional sports."

"The chance of a reoccurrence is something that I'm still trying to explore."

McCormick is in the second season of a three-year, \$4.5 million contract. He's totaled 432 games, 23 goals and 70 points while earning teammates' respect with 59 fights.

Though he may not add to those numbers, he realizes he's a lucky man.

"I'm definitely getting more time with my kids, with my young family," said McCormick, who tucked his daughters into bed while his teammates spent the week in western Canada. "I'm seeing everything that I might have missed before."

Ristolainen makes name for himself with hat trick

By John Vogl
Buffalo News
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Rasmus Ristolainen keeps adding numbers to his impressive stat sheet. By doing so, he's putting his name in distinguished company.

Erik Karlsson. P.K. Subban. Ryan McDonagh. Brian Campbell. Gary Galley. Phil Housley.

Obviously, being part of a list like that means the 21-year-old Ristolainen is blossoming into a star.

The Buffalo defenseman heads into Saturday's home game against Los Angeles fresh off the first hat trick of his career. Thursday's outing in Calgary brought Ristolainen's season totals to seven goals, 14 assists and 21 points, tying him for fifth among NHL defensemen.

Through 29 games, Ristolainen is on pace for 20 goals and 60 points. The last Sabres defenseman to reach 50 points was Galley in 1995-96. Ristolainen would become the youngest Buffalo blue-liner to top 50 since Housley did it as a 20-year-old in 1984-85.

Ristolainen is tied with center Ryan O'Reilly for the team lead in multipoint games (six). Among defensemen, only Dallas' John Klingberg (nine), Ottawa's Karlsson and San Jose's Brent Burns (eight each) have more. Ristolainen, Evander Kane and Sam Reinhart are the lone Buffalo players with multigoal games.

Ristolainen has taken 75 shots, tied with Montreal's Subban for eighth among blue-liners. The Finn has factored in 30.4 percent of Buffalo's 69 goals. He has 16 points in the last 16 games.

Just imagine if the Sabres used Ristolainen as an offensive defenseman.

While Ristolainen is among the Sabres' leaders in power-play time, he and Josh Gorges are used as the team's shutdown defensemen. According to BehindTheNet.ca, Ristolainen starts his five-on-five shifts in the offensive zone just 42 percent of the time, third lowest on the team behind Nicolas Deslauriers (37.2 percent) and David Legwand (41.4 percent).

Ristolainen's percentage is similar to defensemen such as Boston's Zdeno Chara (39.8 percent), Colorado's Erik Johnson (41.9 percent) and the Rangers' McDonagh (40.1 percent). Fellow point leaders such as Karlsson (54.3 percent) and Klingberg (53.6 percent) get the benefit of starting regularly in the offensive zone.

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma also trusts Ristolainen to play against the opponents' best forwards. It's a work in progress. Ristolainen has been on the ice for a team-high 35 goals against. Buffalo has allowed 80 heading into the matchup against the Kings in First Niagara Center.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Ristolainen's defensive play is his ability to avoid penalties. He hasn't taken a trip to the box since last season, when he held the stick of New Jersey's Scott Gomez's with 1:44 left on March 20. Ristolainen is one of only seven players who have appeared in 20 games this season and not taken a penalty. He's the only one skating more than 17:30 per game.

The 39-game run without a penalty is made even more remarkable by Ristolainen's ice time. The defenseman, who skates a team-high 24:13 per game, has been on the ice for 15 hours, 39 minutes, 37 seconds since his last penalty. Streaks like that will put him into the discussion for the Lady Byng Trophy, awarded to the NHL's most gentlemanly player.

Campbell, who won the award in 2012, is the only defenseman to earn the honor since 1954.

Of all Ristolainen's numbers, the one that sticks out most to him is three. Buffalo has lost three straight, including the 4-3 loss to the Flames on Thursday.

"Risto did a great job on all of our goals," O'Reilly said. "He's a big reason why we had a chance there, but we weren't good enough."

The Sabres will need to be much better against the Pacific Division-leading Kings, who had won five straight heading into Friday's game in Pittsburgh to improve to 18-8-1. Buffalo, in a 3-7-3 slump, has fallen to 11-15-3.

"A lot of things aren't going well for us, and we're frustrated," O'Reilly said. "There's moments when you see it, then we do something to deviate from our game plan and our forecheck and what's worked for us. It's frustrating, but it's something we're trying to learn."

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The Sabres' foundation will hold its annual ornament surprise Saturday. Starting at 5 p.m., the players' wives and girlfriends will sell wrapped, light-up Christmas ornaments in the 100 Level pavilion for \$20. Each ornament is autographed by a Sabres player.

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All students from kindergarten to 12th grade who have an A or A-equivalent average on their most recent report card are eligible for a free 300 Level II ticket for a home game next week. The offer, which must be redeemed at the arena box office, is for Tuesday's game against New Jersey and Thursday's meeting with Anaheim. Additional tickets can be purchased for \$25.

Kings visit Sabres seeking seventh straight win

By John Kreiser

NHL.com

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KINGS (19-8-1) at SABRES (11-15-3)

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

Season series: The Los Angeles Kings and Buffalo Sabres split two shutouts last season. Kings goaltender Jonathan Quick allowed one goal in the two games, a 1-0 loss at Buffalo on Dec. 9, 2014, and a 2-0 win at Los Angeles on Oct. 23, 2014.

Kings team scope: Jhonas Enroth, who defeated Quick in Buffalo last December and now serves as his backup, could start against his former team. Quick made 40 saves through overtime and three more in the shootout for a 3-2 victory at the Pittsburgh Penguins on Friday that extended the Kings' winning streak to six games. Marian Gaborik's goal in the fourth round of the shootout was the winner. Coach Darryl Sutter was very pleased with all four of his lines. "I thought we were solid. We needed four lines," he told LA Kings Insider. "You're playing back to back and on a long trip, you need everybody. If somebody doesn't have a good night, then it's not a good thing to shorten your bench."

Sabres team scope: Buffalo had the day off Friday. The Sabres returned home after going 0-3-0 on a Western Canada road trip that ended with a 4-3 loss to the Calgary Flames on Thursday despite a third-period hat trick by 21-year-old defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen. Goaltender Chad Johnson allowed four goals in Calgary, but coach Dan Bylsma didn't blame Johnson for the loss and said the rest of the Sabres have to step up. "I don't think we played with a lot of heart. We didn't play with a lot of passion the first two periods," Bylsma told the Buffalo News. "We need a lot more from a lot of guys in that regard."