



Buffalo Sabres

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Bruins-Sabres Preview

By Jeff Mezydlo

AP

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The Boston Bruins' inability to hold a lead heading into the third period of the past two games has prolonged their recent struggles. That current rough stretch included a defeat to the Buffalo Sabres in the same fashion.

As the Bruins try to avoid concluding their five-game trip with a season-high fourth straight defeat Friday night, they'll look to extend the Sabres' lengthiest home slide of 2015-16.

Two nights after taking a 1-0 lead into the third period of a 2-1 loss to the New York Rangers, Boston (21-16-5) failed to hold a 2-1 advantage after two in Wednesday's 3-2 defeat at Philadelphia. The Bruins outshot the Flyers 32-21, including 12-7 in the final period.

"Right now, it's a frustrating time for our team," said coach Claude Julien, whose club has lost three in a row four times this season. "Missed opportunities at one end and mistakes at the other, so we've got to turn the tide."

Mired in a 2-7-1 stretch, Boston has scored 23 non-shootout goals in the last 11 contests. Since opening this trip with a 4-1 victory at New Jersey last Friday, the Bruins have totaled four goals while dropping three straight one-goal decisions.

"(We) just have to stay even-keeled and stick with it," goaltender Tuukka Rask, who has a 3.01 goals-against average while going 0-4-1 in 2016, told the Bruins' official website.

The Bruins led 2-1 after two periods and David Krejci increased the lead with the first goal of the third against Buffalo (17-22-4) at home Dec. 26 before the visitors broke out to win 6-3. Rookie Jack Eichel and Ryan O'Reilly each had two goals with an assist in the final 20 minutes to help the Sabres beat Boston in consecutive games for the first time since February 2012.

Buffalo earned one point in last season's two meetings with Boston at the First Niagara Center, where it's totaled seven goals during an 0-4-1 stretch and yielded nine in the last two contests.

The Sabres, however, return home winners of two straight after suffering six consecutive regulation defeats. Buffalo was outscored 31-15 in the first period prior to claiming a 5-1 advantage in back-to-back wins at Winnipeg and Minnesota.

All the Sabres' offense came in the first 20 minutes of Tuesday's 3-2 win over the Wild.

"We've probably played our best in the first period and not got the goals, not got the scoring chances to go in," coach Dan Bylsma said. "In the last two games, it's been the opposite. We've played well in the first, but we've gotten the goals to go in, we've gotten the pucks to get by the goalie."

Rookie Linus Ullmark stopped 70 of 74 shots in the last two games, but he was demoted to AHL Rochester on Thursday to make room for Robin Lehner. Buffalo's starting goaltender has been out since spraining his right ankle midway through a 3-1 season-opening loss to Ottawa on Oct. 8.

Lehner went 1-2 and allowed 10 goals in three games of rehab work with Rochester.

Eichel, the Massachusetts native who starred one season at Boston University, recorded one point on Buffalo's three-game trip but has four goals and five assists in the last 11 at home.

Patrice Bergeron, Boston's leading scorer, has one point in four games but two goals and four assists in his last nine against Buffalo.

Sabres recall goalie Lehner after 3-game conditioning stint

By John Wawrow

AP

January 15, 2016

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — A late-night drive through a lake-effect snowstorm was a small sacrifice for goalie Robin Lehner in his bid to reclaim the Buffalo Sabres starting job.

"A little tired right now," Lehner said following practice Thursday. "Some nerves. But excitement is the best word I can think of."

Lehner was back on the ice in Buffalo some 12 hours after stopping 35 shots in AHL Rochester's 4-0 loss at Albany. The game capped a three-game minor-league conditioning assignment for the goalie, who had been sidelined since spraining his right ankle in the Sabres 3-1 season-opening loss to Ottawa on Oct. 8.

Lehner went 1-2 and allowed 10 goals.

Without saying when, coach Dan Bylsma said there's a good chance Lehner will play this weekend. Buffalo plays consecutive home games against Boston on Friday and Washington on Saturday.

"I feel like I'm ready. Is it going to be perfect? I don't know," Lehner said, noting that he's still experiencing soreness. "But I'm going to do my best."

The injury was a setback for Lehner, who was looking forward to a fresh start after the Sabres gave up a first-round draft pick to acquire him in a trade with Ottawa in June.

What made it worse is the injury occurred after Lehner missed the final two months of last season because of a concussion. Lehner then became expendable in Ottawa after minor-league call-up Andrew Hammond took over the starting job and helped the Senators reach the playoffs.

It has been nearly a calendar year since Lehner played a complete game — a 25-save performance in Ottawa's 7-2 win over Edmonton on Feb. 14.

"It was a little crushing in the beginning of this year, But I went through it," Lehner said. "I'm not supposed to sit at home and come in and work out. That's not what I'm made for. I like to play hockey. It's nice to be able to do that again."

Though somewhat disappointed in his numbers in Rochester, Lehner said he used the playing time as a chance to refine his game.

"I just wanted to get back to being a goalie here, see pucks, start working on some details, make some mistakes so I can correct those mistakes," he said. "I feel like I made strides in a very short period of time."

Lehner will get the benefit of having additional time to recover. The Sabres (17-22-4) have seven more games before getting eight days off between games over the NHL All-Star break.

Minus Lehner, Buffalo went with a two-goalie rotation of backup Chad Johnson and rookie Linus Ullmark, who was demoted to Rochester on Thursday.

Johnson has a 10-12-2 record, while Ullmark went 7-10-2, including wins in his final two games.

The 24-year-old Lehner has a 30-36-13 career record and 2.88 goals-against average since being selected by the Senators in the second round of 2009 draft.

Lehner back to resume quest to be top goalie

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

January 15, 2016

Robin Lehner wasn't merely the Sabres' injured goaltender for the past three months. He was also a regular observer.

"The team's played a lot of good games," Lehner said Thursday. "I've followed this team closely this year, and I'm very excited. It's a totally opposite team. There's been a lot of games where it looks like we're right there, but it just slips away."

It's now his job to make sure the games no longer slip away.

Lehner, who hasn't played since suffering a high-ankle sprain during Buffalo's season opener, will return to the crease Friday against Boston or Saturday against Washington. The 24-year-old is eager to essentially start his Sabres career.

"I'm just excited to play again," Lehner said in First Niagara Center, site of the next two games. "My family is excited for me to play. I'm not supposed to just sit at home and come in and work out. That's not what I'm paid for. I like to play hockey, so it's nice to be able to do that again."

"I'm ready. Is it going to be perfect? I don't know, but I'm going to do my best. I'm going to compete, and I feel like I'm getting better every day."

Lehner returned to Buffalo early Thursday morning after eight days with Rochester. He started three games for the Amerks, going 1-2 with a .888 save percentage and 3.36 goals-against average. He stopped 35 shots during a 4-0 loss in Albany on Wednesday night, then took a late-night ride back home.

He's not as scared of the subpar numbers as others might be.

"I'm a competitive guy," Lehner said. "I want to win, but obviously I also went down with the mindset I wanted to get back, you know? I just wanted to get back to being a goalie, see the pucks, work on some details, make some mistakes so I can correct the mistakes."

"Obviously, we lost, 4-0, the last game, but I felt good. I had a few unfortunate bounces, but I felt good. I felt in position. I felt like things were going in the right direction."

How much Lehner plays will depend on his health and success. He felt soreness during his recent games, but it affected him less and less with each start.

"We have a plan right now in place for the next five days, and then we'll see how we go from there," said coach Dan Bylsma, who also has Chad Johnson to use after sending rookie Linus Ullmark to Rochester. "This is not going to be a situation where Robin plays the next 39 in a row. Chad's going to get the net as well, and I think it's important for us to have that to turn to with Chad."

It won't be a shock if signs of inactivity are evident with Lehner. His next start will be only his second in the NHL in 11 months. He suffered a season-ending concussion with Ottawa on Feb. 16, 2015, then lasted only 27:30 against the Senators on Oct. 8.

"It's been very difficult," Lehner said. "I don't think many guys have gone through what I went through last year. I went down with a concussion, and Andrew Hammond comes in and plays out of this world. You lose your job. That's how it works. I've got a new chance here, and I get injured again."

"It was crushing in the beginning this year, but I went through it, worked hard to come back."

Eventually, the Sabres want a healthy Lehner to become the unquestioned No. 1 netminder. It's why they acquired him from Ottawa during the offseason.

"If you don't prove yourself, you don't play here," Lehner said. "It's on a daily basis for everyone in this locker room and everyone in this whole league."

Johnson is aware his role will change, but he says his mindset will remain the same. He's appeared in 26 games, going 10-12-2 with a .916 save percentage and 2.46 GAA.

"It doesn't really change what I'm doing," Johnson said. "It's just prepare every day and practice. When I have the opportunity to play, play hard and try to get the win."

"Robin coming back will probably get in a bunch of games here. I'm obviously going to be here to push him and try to help this team keep winning games."

Ullmark, meanwhile, will continue his rapid development in Rochester. The rookie has outperformed expectations during his first year in North America, going 7-10-2 with a .915 save percentage and 2.58 GAA. Ullmark backstopped the Sabres to victories in their previous two games, stopping 70 of 74 shots.

"He's a good guy and a good goalie," Johnson said. "It's just the situation, right? Everyone's done that. Robin and me, same thing. You come up and play well and it doesn't matter. There's always guys that are above you. It's part of the game."

"It was fun having him here, and I'm sure he'll go down there and do well."

Sabres notebook: Players know more home focus needed

By John Vogl
Buffalo News
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Dan Bylsma's message to the Sabres is simple. He wants them to play the same regardless of the venue, the opponent, the referee or the weather.

"We've done that maybe better on the road than we have at home," the coach conceded Thursday in First Niagara Center. "We want to make this a tough place for visitors to come into, and that's something I don't think we've done."

Indeed, Buffalo has rolled out the welcome mat for visitors. The Sabres' home record of 8-13-2 ranks 28th in the NHL. They have back-to-back chances to improve their standing. They host Boston on Friday and Washington on Saturday.

"We've got to find a way," captain Brian Gionta said. "I'm not sure exactly what it is or what's causing it. It's been different things at different points of the year with our home games, whether it's a bad start or a bad second period. It's a matter of bearing down."

The Sabres are 0-4-1 in their last five home games. They've allowed the opening goal in eight of the last nine. Overall, they've been outscored, 60-46, in the arena.

They hope this time they can maintain the good vibes created on the road. Buffalo has won two straight, beating Winnipeg and Minnesota. It scored the opening goal in both games, improving to 11-6 when scoring first.

"We talked about good starts, so obviously we got good starts with the first goal," center Johan Larsson said. "We've got to make sure we play the same style, simplify it a little more at home. Maybe we try too much of the fancy stuff. It's just get to the net, and that's how we scored on the goals on the road. We'll try to carry that into home ice here."

It won't be easy to turn things around. Boston is sixth in the NHL with a road record of 12-5-3. The Capitals rank first at 16-4-2.

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Sabres forward Tyler Ennis will miss his seventh straight game with an upper-body injury.

"Tyler Ennis is still week-to-week," Bylsma said.

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Former Sabres center Cody Hodgson is off to the minors. Nashville, which waived Hodgson on Wednesday, assigned him to Milwaukee on Thursday after no one claimed him. Hodgson had three goals and five assists in 39 games.

"We signed him to enhance our offense, and it didn't happen," Predators General Manager David Poile told the Tennessean. "You look for other areas that maybe a player can help you - checking or penalty killing or some other area. Really, I think we were pretty honest with Cody and told him that he had to produce offensively, and he hasn't. This is the move."

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The Sabres are looking for three straight wins against the Bruins for the first time since winning four in a row in 2010-11. ... Buffalo defenseman Cody Franson has a five-game point streak against Boston, recording seven assists. ... The Sabres and Bruins have gone to a shootout 12 times, tying Buffalo's highest total against any team (Ottawa and New Jersey). Each team has won six times.

Bruins' Pastrnak could miss game against Sabres

By Michael LoRe

NHL.com

January 15, 2016

BRUINS (21-16-5) at SABRES (17-22-4)

TV: MSG-B, BELL TV, NESN

Season series: Rookie Jack Eichel had two goals and two assists for an NHL career-high four points to help the Buffalo Sabres to a 6-3 comeback victory against the Boston Bruins at TD Garden on Dec. 26. Ryan O'Reilly scored two goals and Jamie McGinn had a goal for the Sabres in the third period to erase a 3-1 deficit. Patrice Bergeron, Matt Beleskey and David Krejci scored for Boston.

Bruins team scope: Right wing David Pastrnak remains day-to-day with an upper-body injury that kept him out of a 3-2 loss against the Philadelphia Flyers on Wednesday. The Flyers scored two goals 1:22 apart in the third period. Boston is 1-2-1 on a five-game road trip. "Right now, it's a frustrating time for our team," Bruins coach Claude Julien said after the game. "Missed opportunities at one end and mistakes at the other, so we've got to turn the tide." Boston is 2-7-1 in its past 10 games and hoping to pick up two points. "I don't think that with this group we're going to allow ourselves to look back on past games and think that we're not as good as we are," left wing Brad Marchand told the Boston Globe. "We know that we have a good team in here and we could have won pretty much any of the games that we lost. You want to continue to improve on each game and take the positives with what you can and learn from it and be better."

Sabres team scope: Goalies Chad Johnson and Robin Lehner likely will split back-to-back games Friday and Saturday (against the Washington Capitals). Lehner, who hasn't played in the NHL since sustaining an ankle injury in Buffalo's season opener on Oct. 8, was recalled from his conditioning assignment with Rochester of the American Hockey League on Thursday. "There's a good chance we'll see [Lehner] this weekend," coach Dan Bylsma told the Sabres website. "... Chad's had a lot of the net for the first 43 games, and you look at his November chunk, which he was excellent in. He's played some excellent hockey for us, and this is not going to be a situation where Robin's going to play the next 39 in a row. Chad's going to get the net as well, and I think it's important for us to have that." Lehner was 1-2-0 with a 3.36 goals-against average and .888 save percentage in three AHL starts. Center Tyler Ennis (upper body) remains week-to-week, Bylsma said. Goalie Linus Ullmark was reassigned to Rochester.

McCabe learning what it takes to be full-time NHL player

By Mike Klees

Eau Claire Leader Telegram

January 15, 2016

ST. PAUL — For the past two years, Eau Claire native Jake McCabe has been checking off a list of firsts as he climbs up the ladder of the Buffalo Sabres organization.

His NHL debut (April 3, 2014 in St. Louis). His first career point (an assist against the Islanders on April 13, 2014). His first career goal (Oct. 15, 2015 against the Panthers). His first regular season game at Xcel Energy Center, just 90 miles west of his hometown (Tuesday).

But those accomplishments are in the past for the 22-year-old defenseman. The goals next up on the list are a bit more of the big-picture variety — continuing his education on what it takes to be a full-time NHL player and helping build the young Sabres into a playoff team and, eventually, a Stanley Cup contender.

"It's a long season," McCabe said Tuesday of his growth through the first half of his first full NHL season. "It was a big adjustment last year, but this year I think I'm used to it. You got to take care of your body. You just got to stick with it, and your confidence has got to stay even-keeled."

McCabe has been up with the big-league club for all but two games this season after spending almost all of last season with the AHL's Rochester Americans. He has three goals and five assists on the season and helped the Sabres to a 3-2 win over the Minnesota Wild on Tuesday with some solid play in the defensive zone. McCabe, who finished with a game-high five hits, especially stood out in the second and third periods as the Wild stepped up their offensive pressure trying to rally from a 3-0 first-period deficit.

"Jake's really, through 42 games, he's really kind of exceeded expectations and really been a big part of our team defense," said coach Dan Bylsma, who is in his first season behind the Sabres bench.

"I think he's done a remarkable job bringing that speed, ability to defend, with his skating. He's been a physical presence for us. Some of our bigger defensive plays, physical plays, have been from Jake and his ability to skate and defend."

McCabe has been pairing with Zach Bogosian. The 25-year-old is in his eighth NHL season and came over from the Winnipeg Jets midway through last season as part of the Evander Kane trade.

"I think (McCabe has) really made some good strides," Bogosian said. "He's a good skater, he's a strong guy, he plays physical and I think both of us together have gotten more and more comfortable playing with each other and it's been a good match."

The win over the Wild was the second straight for the Sabres after dropping six in a row. They are last in the Atlantic Division and are tied with Edmonton for the second-fewest points in the NHL, ahead of only Columbus.

But with No. 2 overall draft pick Jack Eichel and a ton of other young talent, including McCabe, the Sabres could be a contender in the not-so-distant future.

"I think there's been some definite improvement," McCabe said. "It's been an up-and-down season for us, we're kind of streaky, but we've had a good little road series, winning two of out three. That's kind of what we're making here in the last half of the season, just trying to win two out of three games and put ourselves in a spot to try to make the playoffs."

Sabres goalie Robin Lehner ready to play

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 15, 2016

BUFFALO – During some tough days over the last three months, as Robin Lehner recovered and rehabbed from the injury he suffered opening night, the goalie leaned on his family and friends for support.

Lehner just endured an arduous 11 months, suffering a season-ending concussion last year with Ottawa and a high right ankle sprain Oct. 8, only 28 minutes into his debut as the Sabres' new starter.

The Swede had never experienced a major injury before.

"It's been hard, you know?" Lehner said Thursday after the Sabres recalled him from his three-game AHL conditioning assignment with the Rochester Americans. "It's hard mentally. This is your job. This is what you do. (It's important to have) the support around you and people being positive and (helping) you through this.

"It's pretty depressing just sitting out watching, coming in with pretty much no purpose every day. It's been good to have friends and family around."

Lehner's grateful to finally have a purpose again. He will likely play his second game for the Sabres this weekend at home, either tonight against the Boston Bruins at the First Niagara Center or Saturday versus the Washington Capitals.

"I think excitement is the best word right now," Lehner said.

To make room for Lehner, the Sabres sent rookie goalie Linus Ullmark, who won the last two games, back to the Amerks. More on Ullmark later.

So how much will Lehner play? Sabres coach Dan Bylsma has a plan he wouldn't share. For now, he simply wants to see how Lehner, who was acquired from the Senators for a first-round pick June 26, responds to some NHL action.

Lehner, 24, hasn't played a full NHL regular-season game since Feb. 14, 2015. He suffered his concussion two days later.

"This is not going to be a situation where Robin plays the next 39 in a row," Bylsma said.

The Sabres still have backup Chad Johnson, who subbed admirably for Lehner. In 16 games since the beginning of November, Johnson is 7-6-2 with a 2.10 goals-against average and a .932 save percentage.

Lehner, of course, will likely need some time to acclimate. He looked shaky early in the preseason before some superb work.

"I feel like I'm ready," he said. "Is it going to be perfect? I don't know. But I'm going to do my best."

Lehner went 1-2 with a 3.36 goals-against average and a .888 save percentage with the Amerks. He made 35 saves Wednesday in Rochester's 4-0 loss in Albany.

"It's been a little up and down with the foot," Lehner said. "It's still sore. It's probably going to be sore for a little bit. I felt as the games went on it affected my games less and less."

Lehner said he wanted to "make some mistakes" so he "can correct those mistakes."

These early days could be like another camp for Lehner.

"In a lot of ways it still is," Bylsma said. "He spent a lot of time off his feet for the past 10 weeks. Yes, he's had practice time. Yes, he's had seven good practices with the team and in Rochester ... but he essentially hasn't played a game in a year's time. ... It's been an awful long time."

Lehner played 25 times last season. Andrew Hammond, his replacement, performed so well – he went 20-1-2 in his first 23 NHL games — the Senators deemed Lehner expendable.

"Andrew Hammond came in and played out of this world," Lehner said. "You lost your job, that's how it works. Got a new chance here and get injured again."

"Those are the first two injuries and they come back-to-back. It was a little bit crushing in the beginning this year."

He added: "I'm not supposed to sit at home and come in and work out. That's not what I get paid for. I like to play hockey."

Meanwhile, sending Ullmark, 22, to Rochester was the easiest choice given he didn't need to clear waivers. Still, the decision was difficult, Bylsma said.

"It's the right thing to do this time," he said.

Ullmark stopped 70 total shots in the last two games, including 42 in Sunday's 4-2 win in Winnipeg. The Swede went 7-10-2 with a 2.58 goals-against average and a .915 save percentage in 19 games during his first NHL stint.

"I think it's pretty promising he's shown what kind of goaltender he can be and making the big saves and being a big-time goaltender for the Sabres in the future," Bylsma said.

Ullmark told reporters in Rochester he knew he would likely get sent down.

"It feels better to get sent down with two wins than getting sent down losing eight straight games," he said. "I'm coming down with good confidence in my game."

Peters: Grading the Sabres at the midway point

By Andrew Peters

WGR 550

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We're at the midpoint of the Sabres' season. There are a lot of mixed emotions that the rebuild isn't happening as quickly as people would have expected/accepted.

My question is - what did you expect?

Athletes are groomed and forced to try and always keep a positive attitude, stay confident, don't let people see they're struggling or frustrated and most of all believe you can and will always win. Not always the case, but many seem to have the answers. Yet many still overlook the fact that this team finished dead last the past two seasons. Despite all the areas of improvement, the questions are still asked: "What's going on with Sabres this season? I thought they were supposed to better."

At that moment, I'm thinking: Buddy, are you watching this team or the NHL standings? If you're watching this team you know they have made major improvements in talent and work ethic alone. With that being said, I am giving you my grades by overall team positions.

In principle, I don't believe grading individual players on a last place team is fair to anyone, even if you are going to the All-Star game or making millions and underachieving. You win as a team and lose as a team. My grades are not based on statistics, analytics, draft position or expectations from fans, media (myself included) or experts within the game. My grades are circumstantial. What I mean by that is: The player's situation, the role he has been asked to play, the line mates he has been playing with and each player's own individual purpose for being here.

Goaltending

Grade: A

I'm starting with goaltending because you couldn't ask for much more from these guys. Chad Johnson and Linus Ullmark have given this team a chance to win most nights. Johnson is doing an excellent job proving he can be a valuable backup in the League and I'm going to give him a long shot to be a number one somewhere, because I never say never. And hey, No. 2s are proving more valuable now than they ever have.

But that does not excuse some of the early goals and late goals that both have allowed. If this team were a Stanley Cup contender and they were performing this way, their grade would be a D-

As for Ullmark, he had double hip surgery in May. When Lehner returns I look forward to seeing Linus in a starting goaltender's schedule in the AHL. It's the easiest choice for GM Tim Murray to make. Ullmark doesn't have to pass through waivers.

We need these guys to make that big save late, or show the team can have confidence in you that night by not giving up an early goal. Both scenarios are desperate needs of improvement but, I give these two guys a A. This was supposed to be Lehner's net. This opened the door for both of these guys. Neither one really been given a bulk of games to comfortable and establish their groove.

Defense

Grade: B

Rasmus Ristolainen is a huge part of this massive improvement. Each year, from the day he was drafted, he has made himself such a valuable part of this team's future. When he and Nikita Zadorov came in together, I was a huge Zadorov fan. His personality, confidence, ability, SIZE. I was like, "oh my god"!!! You could see the natural ability in Risto and his size, but when he came back the next season from training camp and showed how

committed he was to making this team as a regular, he separated himself from the rest. forget his points, he's just a remarkable hockey player. Think about how big he is how hard he plays. He has four penalty minutes.

I think the rest of the D have fared well. Mike Weber is playing a much better brand of hockey. The last couple of years haven't been fair to Mike. I'm happy to see him playing on a more competitive team. It suits his style. Analytics back that up by the way. Every team needs this type of defenseman. Does everything he's asked and more. Plays hurt, he's one of the last of true gritty lumberjack style. Love it! He has way more skill and ability than people think. he just knows how to keep it simple.

Zach Bogosian was a great pick up in my eyes last year. Even more than Evander Kane. I've been a Bogo fan since I was a player. When he first came into the league and did what only a half dozen guys per year had the courage to do.. drop the Mitts with Donald Brasher. In his first game, too! But Zach isn't off to the start that he wants, I'm sure. He came in like gangbusters at the end of last season. Then, he starts the year off on the IR. He needs to stay healthy. I want Dan Bylsma to see his offensive capabilities. Try him on the power play if it struggles.

Pysyk has been hurt, so it's not fair to comment. I Think he's improving nicely and will hopefully soak up all he can while being out with an injury. I watched him play in Rochester on Sunday. Looked like the injury had healed.

Carlo Colaiacovo wasn't brought in to be a top 4 or even a top 5. People always complain when these types of players are on the ice and don't produce big points. They are over criticized when they make a mistake because its easy. Carlo has never had a string of games to put together to go out and get comfortable. All he has to do is keep a strong attitude, continue to work hard and play hard when he gets the chance. He can be a good role model for the younger players.

Jake McCabe had the most to prove and the most at stake coming into training camp. He's on a two-way contract with no waivers to save him. He came into the season, was sent to Rochester for a day and recalled. The injury to Mark Pysyk didn't hurt either. Sometimes making it to the NHL is all timing. Right now Jake is making the most of his time. He was a healthy scratch in Edmonton and since then has been a regular in the lineup. His competitive nature alone is enough to keep him here, plus he has the talent, smarts, skating ability and enough nastiness when need be. Can be a solid open ice hitter and has looked good jumping down the boards in the offensive zone. Great open ice hit on Patrick Kane in Chicago Friday night. I can still remember the hit he laid in Boston on my former teammate Dan Paille. Those hits will force player to keep their heads up when Jakes on the ice.

Cody Franson. Pretty much a advertised. Love when the big man uses that huge frame to steamroll guys. Heavy shot. He'll tell you he's not the fastest guy. Primarily a bottom pair defenseman you can use on the power play. The game is faster today than yesterday.. he needs to continue working at that part of his game to keep up.

Notable in Rochester: Matt Donovan.

Forwards

Grade: D

Collectively the forwards haven't been good. They haven't been able to finish, to many turn overs by key players, but the effort has not once been an issue. So far to me the Forwards have earned a D grade. You point the finger in a lot places, but not capitalizing on prime chances has cost this team most nights. They are making life harder on the defense and goalies all over the ice.

As I mentioned, this isn't about where the Sabres stand in the league, but how much they've improved in one year. I'd say the core of the forwards on this team are Eichel, O'Reilly, Reinhart, Kane, hopefully McGinn and possibly Ennis and Girgensons. I say possibly because I could see teams looking at these guys for return value if Murray were to make a deal to add different pieces to is growing core. McGinn as well, but Sabres would have a chance at reacquiring McGinn on July 1.

Kane didn't score in his first 9 games. He has 8 goals in 22 other games. Missed some games due to injury. He brings electricity every game in some capacity, using straight-ahead speed and willingness to hit. His set up pass to Reinhart for his Hat Trick was very cool to see.

The rest of the group is kind of spread all over the map and Bylsma's attempts with constant line juggling may or may not help some of the player's causes, but it's only been a huge opportunity (theres that word again) for most of these guys to show what they can offer.. both young and old.

Johan Larsson has been the biggest disappointment so far. He wants so badly to prove he's a top six forward. It appears he will not accept a lesser role. There's nothing wrong with being a bottom six forward, kid. Could be Tomas Holmstrom, will most likely end up wearing a gold helmet on a Svedish Eliet Series Team as the leading scorer. Nice guy, great skill, his expectations are too high.

Matt Moulson isn't the Matt Moulson he once was. It's not just about speed because he was never the swiftest of players. This is hugely related to confidence. I also don't think it has helped that this team has been in cruise control for two seasons. It's hard to snap out of that. Still, this team needs Moulson to start scoring like he is capable of. John Tavares made a player out of him in Long Island and I have no doubt that some of the talent on this team can snap him out of this. Not scoring is one thing. there other areas of the game he contribute and hasnt. He needs to get in gear or the GM is going to have a tough decision to make at seasons end if he cant convince a team to take Matt in a trade.

Marcus Foligno still needs to find that consistency in his power game. It is hard to do because he also wants to continue to prove he can make plays and score at the same time. It's a struggle for a lot of big players that are required to provide physical presence. He just needs to find the right balance. Nice goal in Winnipeg.

Nicholas Deslauriers has been more noticeable to this team when out of the lineup. When he's not playing, this team is missing a big piece of its fire. He's energy and when put in the position he can finish. However, just like Foligno, he can't forget what his sole purpose is on this team. Its not to score or even fight, but everything in between. His recent absence lately has exposed a lot players desire to be physical. He allows every play a little tougher.

Brian Gionta is the epitome of leadership on all levels. He just plays the game right way. He wasn't brought here to be the 48 goal man he used to be. He works his butt off and can still skate with the young pups. He competes at such a level everyday that it can only prove invaluable to these younger players. He'll stand in front the net and take a beating, and fly fearlessly into the corners for the puck. His professionalism everyday is world class. The guy is still producing points too. Plus, If he shaved his goat, he'd look a lot like Benny boy from the bachelor.

Dave Legwand wasn't brought here to help this team win hockey games this year, but like Gionta he brings something to the table that only a guy with a 1000+ games can. Experience. He was a former #2 overall pick in '98. Ring a bell? How can we get 1000 games out of Eichel and Reinhart? Hopefully Legwand can help with that in some areas. The one thing I will say about Legwand though, is that he has accepted his role on this team gracefully, showing younger players how to be good team players and accepting a role. Yes, I know how much \$ he's making, and maybe he was a throw in to take some salary off the Ottawa Senators' hands, but he's still trying to leave a mark on this squad of young players.I think he's doing just that. I've liked his game a lot. Works hard, does all the little things right.

Sam Reinhart has just flat-out impressed everyone. This kid is tough as nails. Not "snails" Rocky. Nails. He's like a fine watch.. "Takes a lickin' and keeps on Tickin". But seriously,I honestly didn't see this young man excelling like this. His hat trick isn't even part of the reason why I think we are all so impressed with him. I believe putting him at wing has not only made Sam better, but he's been huge for Ryan O. He wants to learn and he's allowed ROR to teach him. He's only going to get better.

McGinn. "Just a throw in"- Everybody. I'm fearful he could be gone at deadline to a team that needs a solid depth forward you can move up and down your line up and play in all situations. Has scored some huge goals and to me, has been the most pleasant surprise on the this hockey team. He can be a key piece to this team.

Ryan O'Reilly. All-Star. And it all starts with his work ethic. Talk about complete package. This guy has everything you want in a hockey player and more. His commitment to his performance is incredible. He could be a strong candidate for the Mark Messier award in the future. He'll be 25 next month and this is already his seventh season in the NHL. See kids, Forecheck, Backcheck, Paycheck.

The Latvian Locomotive hasn't generated as much steam offensively this year compared to last year. Girgensons' first goal was an OT winner this season in Philadelphia, eight games into the season. He's had two since and 5 in games last season. However, he still plays a major role on this team and is still relied on heavily for his two-way style and hard nosed tenacity. Bylsma has been able to move him around to try and get some of his energy flowing on different lines. He's up for a contract this year. He's proven he can score but also proven he can valuable as a #3 center.

Tyler Ennis hasn't been nearly as impressive this season compared to the last few. Granted he's been hurt most of this season. There is no doubt about Tyler's ability. He is one the craftiness players in this league but needs to trust his line mates more in the sense that when he gives the puck up, he will get it back. Trying to do too much with the puck can be a players worst enemy especially when you have this guys tools and a ton of pressure to perform. Tyler just needs to go out and play hockey. Dump pucks and use his speed to go get, make quicker plays down low. That one extra toe drag or spin can be the difference between a puck on net, or a rush going the other way. Love this guy, but you wonder sometimes if he might benefit from a change of scenery. Like Drew Stafford has.

Last but certainly not least... Jack Eichel. He literally can do it all. Speed is ridiculous, his offensive awareness is off the charts. He's so fast and strong that when you watch him back check he muscles players off the puck. He's only scratching the surface of what he can be in this league. Having all the others players around him has made this easier and less pressure packed. There is another all star on the team already and it's not Jack. How great is that? He's been playing center all season and has no doubt held his own. He cooled off a little before Christmas but came back on fire. He's going to go through growth spurts in the league. I wouldn't mind seeing him moved on the wing with Zemgus in the middle. I think the wing on O'Reilly's line has made Reinharts transition that much easier. Noteworthy prospect: Justin Bailey RW

Coaching

Grade: C

Dan Bylsma didnt walk into the same team here as he did in Pittsburgh in 2008-2009. Not even close. But he might have walked in here while this team was in the 05-06 or 06-07 Penguins season when Crosby and Malkin hit the scene together. Ther rebuilding years. Marc-Andre Fleury too. With Reinhart and then Eichel, now O'Reilly and Kane he has to be happy with the small dynamic forward core that is in place.

My only criticism would be all the line juggling that still occurs. Bylsma doesnt have a lineup that is obvious with where you put players and who you play with them with does make a difference. With some guys excelling and certain guys not, its made it extremely difficult for the coach to find the right continuity amongst his lines. I think we all assumed that Moulson's success with John Tavares was going to be obvious the minute Eichel arrived at his house ready to move in. It has been anything but that. in fact, the exact opposite. Bylsma has made a line out of McGinn, O'Reilly and Reinhart. He's still trying to find the right line mates to play regularly with Jack. Im not sure that player is even in the system yet. Could be Matthew Tkachuk, a player Tim Murray trades for down the road and who knows... The lottery could fall in Buffalo's favor and land Auston Matthews the young phenom playing for Marc Crawford in Switzerland.

Either way, time is on Bylsma's side to find Jack-a-mate. So i wouldnt expect the line juggling to stop anytime soon.

The team just looks so much better. Yes, it's a combination of things. better players make it easier that's for sure, but it's a new team. He's been able to coach this team to some come backs this season. They've been in games against the former champs and shcked a solid Los Angeles Kings team in OT.

The product is just better overall and should make for some raised eyebrows if you're watching close enough. So for now we should all just sit back, enjoy watching a way better brand of hockey and continue to watch this team grow together. Not sure they have a shot at the playoffs but last year's Ottawa Senators made a believer that anything can happen if you have enough time and play well enough. Just don't root for this team to lose. even though there is a generational player in the draft in June.

Lehner recalled, expected to play this weekend

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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A long night of travel found Robin Lehner sitting tired at his stall in the Buffalo Sabres' dressing room after practice on Thursday morning. In the last 24 hours, he'd played a full game in Albany, took a three-hour bus ride down Interstate 90 to Rochester and then arrived, finally, back in Buffalo.

That trip, the goaltender hopes, is his last on what's been an exceptionally long road to recovery. Now 11 months removed from his last full game in the NHL, he feels the time is right for him to get back into the net for the Sabres.

"I'm ready. I feel like I'm ready," he said without hesitation. "Is it going to be perfect? I don't know. But I'm going to do my best and I'm going to compete and I feel like I'm getting better every day right now."

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma confirmed that, whether it's against the Boston Bruins on Friday night or the Washington Capitals on Saturday, it is likely we'll see Lehner start at least once over the weekend. It will mark his first League action since Buffalo's season opener on Oct. 8, when he went down with a high ankle sprain.

To recap: Lehner was traded to the Sabres from the Ottawa Senators along with David Legwand on June 26 in exchange for the No. 21 overall pick in the 2015 NHL Draft. At that time, he hadn't played a game since sustaining a concussion on Feb. 16. Andrew Hammond replaced him in that game and went on to win 20 of 23 contests for the remainder of the season.

Lehner's Sabres debut was supposed to mark the end of his rehabilitation. But 27:30 into that game, against the team that traded him, the goalie hurt his ankle while dropping into the butterfly. Not even halfway through his first game, he was already back on the injured list.

"It's been very difficult," Lehner admitted. "I don't think many guys have gone through what I went through last year. I went down with a concussion and Andrew Hammond comes in and plays out of this world. You lose your job, that's how it works and I get a new chance here and get injured again."

"A little soul-crushing at the beginning this year but I worked through it and I worked hard to come back. I've been working hard to try and help the team."

That work took him most recently through a three-game conditioning stint with the Rochester Americans, which concluded with a 35-save effort against Albany on Wednesday. He went 1-2-0 with a .888 save percentage and a 3.36 goals-against average.

The Amerks lost that game 4-0, but Lehner said he was comfortable with his individual performance. He's grown more accustomed to playing with a sore ankle and said his positioning had gotten better. When the time does come for him to get in net for the Sabres, he said, the rehab stint will bode well for his confidence.

"I'm a competitive guy, I want to win," he said. "Obviously I also went down with the mindset that I wanted to get back. I just wanted to get back. Being a goalie, you see the pucks, start working on details [and] make some mistakes so I can correct those mistakes."

Linus Ullmark was reassigned to Rochester in a move that corresponded with Lehner's recall. Tossed into a significant role with the team despite having never played a game in North America, he went 7-10-2 with a .915 save percentage and a 2.58 goals-against average in 19 games.

Naturally, Ullmark got better as his experience mounted. He allowed two goals or less in six of his last seven starts and was the winning goaltender in Buffalo's last two contests. The decision to send him down, Bylsma said, was a difficult one.

"Yes, it was," the coach said. "He's gotten in the net and shown he can be a big-time goalie and make big saves for us at the NHL level in his 20 games that he got with us. I think it's pretty promising, what he's shown, with what type of goaltender he can be in making the big saves and being a big-time goaltender with the Sabres in the future."

Chad Johnson, meanwhile, has done just as much to fill the void left by Lehner during the first half of the season, going 10-12-2 with a .916 save percentage and a 2.46 goals-against average. His role remains of equal importance in light of Lehner's return, Bylsma said.

"Chad's had a lot of the net for the first 43 games and you look at his November chunk (.954 save percentage in seven games) which he was excellent in," Bylsma said. "He's played some excellent hockey for us and this is not going to be a situation where Robin's going to play the next 39 in a row. Chad's going to get the net as well and I think it's important for us to have that."

Forget 39 games; Lehner's looking forward to playing just one. For as tired as he may have been as he sat at his tall on Thursday morning, he summoned a more appropriate word to describe the feeling of being back in Buffalo: excitement.

"I'm just excited to play again," he said. "My family is excited for me to play again. I'm not supposed to just sit there at home and come in to work out, you know, that's not what I'm made for. I like to play hockey so it's nice to be able to do that again."

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