



Buffalo Sabres

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Red Wings-Sabres Preview

AP

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Dylan Larkin and Jack Eichel are among the NHL's top rookies in points and goals, but neither has been able to register any in two head-to-head meetings.

These budding stars meet for the third time Saturday when Larkin and the visiting Red Wings take on Eichel and the Sabres in a matchup of teams on three-game losing streaks.

Larkin tops all rookies with 13 goals and Eichel is tied for second with 11, with Larkin third in the league among first-year players with 25 points and Eichel fourth at 23.

Both have failed to produce a point in two matchups. Detroit (18-13-7) won 5-4 in a shootout on Dec. 1 and Buffalo bounced back with a 2-1 victory 13 days later.

The Sabres (15-19-4) have totaled three goals in their three-game slide while the Red Wings have four in theirs.

Buffalo didn't score in a first period in which it held a 17-5 edge in shots Thursday and went on to lose 2-1 at home to the New York Islanders.

"We're not happy with where we are right now I think as a team," Eichel said. "I think we have a lot more to give."

Eichel assisted on Ryan O'Reilly's power-play goal to give him nine points in his last six games.

He's been moved onto a power-play unit with O'Reilly. Buffalo is 1 for 25 with the man advantage in its last eight games.

"We just feed off each other and move the puck, obviously we would have liked to do better in the first period and that comes with practice," Eichel said. "It's nice to get one and hopefully we'll be able to build off that."

The Red Wings are also scuffling on the power play, going 4 for 27 in their last eight games after finishing 0 for 3 in Thursday's 5-2 home defeat to Pittsburgh. Even more disturbing is a penalty kill that has allowed four goals in seven chances in this losing streak.

"I don't think it should just be talk about the power play," coach Jeff Blashill said. "It's specialty teams. We've given up too many goals when we're on the penalty kill. Our specialty teams combined have to be better."

Henrik Zetterberg, who has a team-high 28 points, has also come up empty against Buffalo this season. He pointed to turnovers as a glaring issue and is hoping for better results in that department as Detroit opens a six-game road stretch.

"The good thing is now we go on the road and maybe it's easier to play a little simpler on the road than at home," Zetterberg said. "We've really got to take care of that."

It's not clear if Detroit will start Petr Mrazek or the struggling Jimmy Howard, who has yielded 13 goals in his last four games. Buffalo will turn to Chad Johnson or Linus Ullmark.

Detroit winger Tomas Jurco played just five shifts in the first period Thursday before leaving with an upper-body injury.

Sabres center Tyler Ennis sat out against New York with an upper-body injury suffered Wednesday on a hit by Washington's Alex Ovechkin.

Sabres search for scoring touch

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

January 2, 2016

Dan Bylsma looks around the Sabres' dressing room and sees guys with a history of scoring. Six players have recorded 20-goal seasons – Ryan O'Reilly, Evander Kane, Matt Moulson, Tyler Ennis, Brian Gionta and David Legwand – and Zemgus Girgensons was on his way to reaching that milestone last year before suffering an injury.

Of those seven guys, only O'Reilly and Kane are on pace to score 20. In fact, they're the only ones on pace to even reach 10.

"I am surprised that we don't have more goals," Bylsma said Friday. "Not by one particular person specifically, but I am surprised. We've created and done things that you need to do to score goals, and we haven't always gotten them throughout the year."

The Sabres, who host Detroit in a 1 p.m. matinee Saturday, have deserved a better fate. According to a much-praised advance stat called PDO, which adds on-ice save percentage to on-ice shooting percentage, the Sabres rank 28th in the NHL at 98.37. The mean is 100, and PDO history shows the Sabres are due to start scoring and head toward the mean.

The question is when.

"We've got to find ways to get those guys hot, get guys scoring up and down the lineup," Gionta said in First Niagara Center. "That's part of the reason why we're not coming out on top of those one-goal games."

Indeed, the Sabres' winning percentage in one-goal games is a paltry .368. The 7-8-4 record ranks 27th in the NHL.

In a league where one goal makes a difference, the Sabres are so far lacking in difference makers. Gionta is on pace for nine goals. Moulson and the injured Ennis are on pace for eight. Girgensons is on pace for just six.

The team shooting percentage of 7.7 percent is identical to last year's 30th-place club.

"I would love to produce more," Gionta said. "I feel the overall game is there. It's just not scoring, not finishing.

"I've had great chances, good looks. I've just got to find ways to get it in."

The Sabres know their power play is the best chance to kick-start the scoring, which is why the team spent nearly all of Friday's practice doing special-teams work. They are 1 for 25 in the last eight games, finally ending their drought with the last power play of Thursday's 2-1 loss to the New York Islanders.

"When we don't score on the power play, that's the small difference," defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen said. "We had a lot of shots and scoring chances, but we only scored one goal. I guess it's going better now. Earlier, we didn't shoot and we passed up a lot of opportunities. That's a big reason why we didn't score."

The Sabres took 15 shots on the power play Thursday. They want to keep the flow, hence Friday's extensive power-play workout.

"We got a lot of momentum off it," Gionta said. "We were moving the puck well. We had a lot of good chances, good looks. Obviously, we scored a goal, but it was more about the chances we got.

"We wanted to continue to stay with that today and make sure that we're sticking with those same principles."

For the first time in a while, people talked about the power play with a smile. They'll smile more if it can help the team end a three-game losing streak that has dropped Buffalo's record to 15-19-4.

"We supported each other," Gionta said. "We made the play that was there. We didn't try to force something that we wanted or thought would be there. We took what they gave us and got pucks to the net."

Added Bylsma: "We had a shooter's mentality. It was evident. We fired. We had pucks going to the net at a high volume, and that's where we've had our success from."

Sabres notebook: Pysyk getting closer to returning

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

January 2, 2016

One week after taking a puck off his foot, Mark Pysyk said he wouldn't be out much longer. That was five weeks ago.

Pysyk finally returned to practice with the Sabres on Friday, and once again the defenseman said he shouldn't be out much longer.

"At the start obviously I told you guys I thought it wouldn't be too long," said Pysyk, who revealed a second set of X-rays showed a broken bone in his foot rather than just a bruise. "Sometimes the first X-ray doesn't show until things sort of clear up.

"I've been on the ice the last three, four days, and it's been good since I've been on the ice, so hopefully it continues to go that way. I don't think there's an exact timeline yet. It's good to be back skating with the team. I think that means I'm a little closer."

Pysyk, who suffered his injury Nov. 17 against Dallas, will miss his 21st game in a row Saturday when the Sabres host Detroit at 1 p.m. in First Niagara Center. Coach Dan Bylsma said Pysyk needs three to five more practices before returning to the lineup.

"He needs to have a few more given the time off," Bylsma said. "He's got to get some conditioning skates in and get some contact situations into his practice before he's available."

Pysyk had one assist in 18 games before going out of the lineup.

"I feel like I haven't seen the guys for a month, so it's good to be back with them and get back in the swing of things," Pysyk said. "It's pretty boring to come in here and watch the guys play for a little bit more than a month. It's frustrating, but there's nothing you can really do. You've got to come back and be in the best shape that I can and hopefully get back in the lineup.

"I had a boot on for a little while. I could ride the bike with one leg and both my arms, so that's not fun. I did some upper-body stuff and cardio the best we could with the bike."

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As his ankle continues to heal, goaltender Robin Lehner has begun looking at Rochester's schedule. He'll make at least one rehab start with the Amerks, and he hopes it's against his former team. The Amerks play the Binghamton Senators next Saturday.

Bylsma said Lehner also will need three to five more practices before the organization determines when the goalie will play in a game.

The coach had no update on forward Tyler Ennis, who will miss his second straight game with an upper-body injury.

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The New York Islanders have placed Johnny Boychuk on injured reserve. The defenseman crashed hard into the boards Thursday when Sabres center Jack Eichel spun away from Boychuk's check.

"It's going to be a little while for him," said Isles coach Jack Capuano, according to Newsday. "Definitely a huge loss for us, but we have to step up and do the job."

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The Sabres are 1-0-1 against the Red Wings, with the third period providing the difference in each game. In the first meeting, Detroit scored a power-play goal with 6:29 left to tie the game before winning, 5-4, in a shootout. In the second game, the Sabres scored twice in the final 4:14 to pick up a 2-1 win.

"We gave up one in the first game and we got one in the second game," Bylsma said. "I'd like it to just be a clean win."

Red Wings, Sabres each looking to end losing streak

By Joe Yerdon

NHL.com

January 2, 2016

RED WINGS (18-13-7) at SABRES (15-19-4)

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

Season series: The Buffalo Sabres and Detroit Red Wings have split two games in Detroit. Sabres forward Evander Kane had two goals, but Red Wings forward Justin Abdelkader scored twice and had an assist and forward Brad Richards scored the only goal in the shootout for a 6-5 win on Dec. 1. Buffalo's Ryan O'Reilly and Johan Larsson scored third-period goals, and Chad Johnson made 32 saves in the Sabres' 2-1 comeback win on Dec. 14.

Red Wings team scope: Goalie Petr Mrazek will make his second consecutive start Saturday. Mrazek gave up four goals on 36 shots by the Pittsburgh Penguins in a 5-2 loss on Thursday. Detroit may be without forward Tomas Jurco, who sustained an upper-body injury against the Penguins. Joakim Andersson would take Jurco's place. The Red Wings have lost three straight games but coach Jeff Blashill told Mlive.com he hasn't decided if he'll change his lines to remedy that. "We're still debating on that internally on which way we're going to go to give our guys the best chance to be successful," Blashill said Friday.

Sabres team scope: Buffalo has lost three straight games and four of its past five games and has scored three goals in the past three games. The Sabres have scored the second-fewest goals in the NHL (87). "I am surprised a little bit given the opportunities that we've had, given the situations our team has been in," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said Friday. "I am surprised that we don't have more goals. Not by one particular person specifically, but I am surprised. We've created and done things you need to do to score goals and we haven't always gotten them throughout the year." The Sabres had no changes in practice Friday and had no update on the status of injured forward Tyler Ennis, who has an upper-body injury. Defenseman Mark Pysyk (lower body) returned to practice but Bylsma said he'll need five or six more practices to get into game shape.

Sabres still struggling to score goals

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 2, 2016

BUFFALO – Just weeks before his 37th birthday, Sabres captain Brian Gionta owns a coveted spot on the right wing beside slick rookie center Jack Eichel.

At an age when most players are either retired or reduced to supporting roles, the Sabres still lean heavily on Gionta in his 15th season, skating him more than 18 minutes a game in every situation.

"I feel the overall game is there," Gionta said Friday inside the First Niagara Center. "It's just (I'm) not scoring, not finishing."

Gionta, who has 266 career goals, has only four in 35 appearances this season entering this afternoon's home tilt against the Detroit Red Wings. The Greece native scored his first goal in nine outings Wednesday in Washington, connecting on Eichel's nifty feed.

That's one of only three goals the Sabres have scored in the last three games.

"I think we'd like to see him score more goals," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said about Gionta. "I think ... I'd put a number of people in that category."

Gionta, as Bylsma noted, is hardly alone with his offensive struggles. The Sabres have scored only 87 goals in 38 games, just 2.29 a contest. The NHL's fourth-lowest total puts them at a 188-goal pace. For some perspective, that would be the third-lowest full-season total in franchise history after an NHL-record low 150-goal 2013-14 season and an anemic 154-goal campaign last year.

As expected, the additions of Eichel, the second overall pick, and No. 1 center Ryan O'Reilly have boosted the offense. O'Reilly has 18 goals and 33 points, both team highs. Eichel has 11 goals and 23 points.

But no one else has scored more than eight goals. Only defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen, who has seven goals and 18 assists, has hit the 20-point mark.

The Sabres have 41 home goals in 21 games and just 15 total in the first period *all season*, both league lows. Their 29 second-period goals rank 27th.

The feeble scoring is killing the Sabres, who have lost 12 one-goal games, including a 2-1 defeat Thursday to the New York Islanders, a contest in which they pumped 43 shots on goal and generated about 20 scoring chances, Bylsma said.

"Given the opportunities we've had, given the situations our team has been in, I am surprised that we don't have more goals, not by one particular person specifically, but I am surprised," Bylsma said. "We've created and done things that you need to do to score goals, and we haven't always gotten them throughout the year."

"Our last game's a great example of that. I feel like you should have some goals from the opportunities and positions our team was in."

Gionta added: "We're in those tight games, and I think that's part of the reason we're not coming out on top of those one-goal games. We got to find ways to get those guys hot, get guys scoring up and down the lineup."

The Sabres have averaged 29.7 shots a game, 15th in the league. Early on, the power play carried the offense. Thanks to a zero of 24 run over eight games the Sabres have dropped from one of the league's top units to 14th. O'Reilly's third-period power play goal Thursday ended the drought.

"I know we've done a lot of good things, not only on the power play in the last game, but other games in general we've done some good things as a group," Sabres defenseman Cody Franson said. "We've had a lot of chances, just haven't been able to get it to go."

Naturally, the Sabres have a slew of forwards struggling offensively.

To wit:

– Winger Matt Moulson, a three-time 30-goal scorer, hasn't scored since Nov. 1, a 25-game stretch. He has four goals and 12 points in 37 games and was a healthy scratch Wednesday.

– Injured winger Tyler Ennis, who led the Sabres in goals the last two seasons, has three goals and 11 points in 23 games this season and hasn't scored since Oct. 30.

– Winger Zemgus Girgensons, who scored 15 goals and 30 points in 61 games last season, has three goals and seven points in 34 games. He scored his first goal in 12 contests Wednesday.

– Center Johan Larsson, who had five goals and 14 points in the final 20 games last season, has one goal and four points in 35 appearances.

– Winger Marcus Foligno has only two goals and 22 shots in 32 games.

How can the Sabres ignite their offense? They believe they simply need to stick with what they've been doing.

"We believe in what we're doing in here, and eventually it's going to turn for us," Franson said.

Eichel added: "I think we're going to wait for that game when we're all going to break through and we're going to get the bounces. We just got to stay consistent in our efforts."

Sabres' Mark Pysyk practices, nearing return

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 2, 2016

BUFFALO – With a “little crack” in his foot, Sabres defenseman Mark Pysyk couldn’t do much off-ice work as he spent the last six weeks recovering.

The boot he had to wear for a bit severely limited him.

“I could ride the bike with one leg and both my arms, so that’s not fun,” Pysyk said today after practicing inside the First Niagara Center.

But Pysyk, out the last 20 games, is finally getting close to returning. While he has no firm timeline, joining his teammates today is a good sign. Pysyk has been skating on his own the last three or four days. Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said Pysyk needs at least a few more practices before he can play.

Initially, it didn’t appear Pysyk, 23, would miss much time with what the Sabres called a “bone bruise.” Eventually, a crack was found. He hasn’t played since Nov. 17.

“At the start we obviously thought it wouldn’t be too long,” Pysyk said. “Sitting up here bored, trying to get back at it, just letting the bone heal, been in the gym quite a bit, just doing what I can when I wasn’t skating.”

In other news, Bylsma said goalie Robin Lehner (high ankle sprain) will need three to five more practices before beginning an AHL rehab stint.

Bylsma has no update on winger Tyler Ennis (upper body).

Pysyk returns to practice as Sabres continue Power-play work

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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Mark Pysyk said that it felt like it had been a month since he'd last seen his teammates. It's been nearly two since he's played alongside them in a game, but he took another step forward when he returned to practice with the Buffalo Sabres on Friday at First Niagara Center.

The defenseman has missed the last 20 games with a lower-body injury.

"I felt good, real good," Pysyk said afterward. "I've been on the ice the last three or four days and it's been good since I've been on the ice. Hopefully it continues to go that way."

Pysyk's last game came against Dallas on Nov. 17. He played 15:49 of ice time in that game and even practiced the following day. On Nov. 19, he left the team's morning skate in St. Louis early and was announced as day-to-day with a bone bruise.

Eventually, however, they learned that the bruise was actually a small break. Day-to-day quickly became week-to-week, with the defenseman working hard to stay occupied in the gym. At one point, he said, he was wearing a boot on his injured foot and riding an exercise bike with the other.

"At the start, [I thought] it wouldn't be too long," Pysyk said. "It was pretty boring, coming in here and watching guys play for a little more than a month. It's frustrating but there's nothing you can really do. You've got to come back and be the best that you can and hopefully get back in the lineup here."

A right-hand shot, Pysyk said he's ready to play on either side upon his return. After playing at the right defensive position to begin the season, he had moved to the offside on a pair with Cody Franson for his final game prior to the injury.

"Mark's a great player, he's a young kid that's very calm out there," Franson said. "He plays the game very patiently, he doesn't panic, he doesn't really get out of position and he's pretty well-rounded. Any time you can get a guy like him back, you're fortunate."

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma also offered an update on the status of injured goaltender Robin Lehner, who practiced again with the team on Friday as he continues to work his way back from a high ankle sprain toward a rehab stint in Rochester. The coach said Lehner and Pysyk are on similar timetables.

"I would anticipate that we would see three to four more or five more practices before we consider a possible return to play [for Lehner]," Bylsma said. "Mark Pysyk is probably on a similar number of days right now."

PROGRESSION ON POWER PLAY

After snapping a seven-game scoreless drought on the power play on Thursday night, the Sabres dedicated almost the entirety of their practice to it on Friday. Buffalo generated 15 shots combined on four power-play opportunities against an Islanders penalty kill that hadn't allowed a goal in 15 games.

"We got a lot of momentum off it yesterday," Sabres captain Brian Gionta said. "We were moving the puck well; we had a lot of good chances and a lot of good looks. Obviously we scored a goal, but it was more about the chances we got so we wanted to continue to stay with that today."

Right off the bat on Thursday, the Sabres' power play looked better than it had in recent games. While they eventually scored on their fourth chance, it was their first attempt – in which they put seven shots on goal – that may have been the one that reignited a unit that ranked second in the League at one point in December.

"I thought we executed well, our entries were quite good and that's probably the meat and potatoes of your power play," Franson said. "When you can enter well you get more zone time and when you can execute, you tend to generate more chances.

When they finally did score, it was the product of a key change that Bylsma had made to the units entering the game. The coach put two of his top scorers in Jack Eichel and Ryan O'Reilly together on the same unit, and Eichel was able to squeeze a pass through net-front traffic to set up O'Reilly for the score.

"I think the tweak in our power-play units helped us achieve [getting back to where they want to be]," Bylsma said. "With Jack flipping, getting on his strong side, it seemed to free up [forward Evander Kane] a little bit to get his shot off as well."

Kane was on a separate unit from Eichel, joined by Gionta, Franson, Matt Moulson and Johan Larsson. Eichel and O'Reilly's unit was rounded out by Jamie McGinn, Sam Reinhart and Rasmus Ristolainen.

AN AFTERNOON WITH THE RED WINGS

The Sabres will ring in the New Year when they host the Detroit Red Wings in a matinee on Saturday at First Niagara Center. The teams have split a pair of games at Joe Louis Arena this season, with Detroit taking the first game 5-4 in a shootout on Dec. 2 and Buffalo claiming a 2-1 win on Dec. 14.

"We play them hard," Gionta said. "There are a few guys up front that can really make you pay with turnovers in the neutral zone. I think we've got to play them the same way we've been playing the last couple games – when we're a better team we're getting pucks in behind their D, were pushing that forecheck and we're getting in-zone time."

Coverage on Saturday begins at 12:30 p.m. with Tops Sabres Gamenight on MSG-B and Bell TV. The game can also be heard live on WGR 550.