



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

February 14, 2016

Avalanche-Sabres Preview

By Jeff Mezydlo

AP

February 14, 2016

Even with Ryan O'Reilly now on their side, the Buffalo Sabres were unable to end their prolonged struggles against the Colorado Avalanche last month.

Getting another crack at his former team, O'Reilly tries to help the Sabres avoid an 11th consecutive defeat to an Avalanche club that can complete a sweep of its three-game trip Sunday.

Deciding it would cost too much to sign O'Reilly to a long-term contract extension after six seasons in Denver, Colorado sent the talented forward to Buffalo in a five-player deal over the summer. The Sabres then signed him to a seven-year, \$52.5 million contract.

In his return to Colorado on Jan. 20, O'Reilly assisted on Evander Kane's second-period power-play goal, but defenseman Francois Beauchemin broke a tie with 31.7 seconds left to give the Avs (29-25-4) a 2-1 victory.

"Once you got on the ice it's just another game," said O'Reilly, who leads Buffalo with 17 goals and 30 assists. "You try to win. It wasn't too weird I guess. It was just different."

O'Reilly should feel even more relaxed this time as the Sabres (22-28-6) try to end an 0-6-4 slide in the series. They've been held to eight goals while losing the last five in regulation.

However, Buffalo could have a little more jump after ending its 0-2-2 slide with Friday's 6-4 home victory over Montreal. Kane and Marcus Foligno each scored twice and O'Reilly had two assists as the Sabres matched their season-high goal total while almost squandering a 4-1 lead.

"We had some moments where we were bending, but we didn't break," defenseman Josh Gorges told the Sabres' official website. "We found a way to get the two points," We'll build and we'll learn from how to play in the third periods with a one-goal lead."

Buffalo has yielded 16 goals in three games and won twice in 11 at home.

That might not bode well against Colorado, which in addition to its series dominance is 11-4-0 on the road since the beginning of December and won five of the last six away from the Pepsi Center.

"We've been playing with confidence on the road," coach Patrick Roy told the Avalanche's official website.

The Avs followed an 0-3-1 post-All-Star break homestand by winning 4-3 at Ottawa on Thursday then 3-2 in a shootout at Detroit one night later. Colorado was outshot 45-21 by the Red Wings, but Semyon Varlamov stopped all but two to improve to 14-3-3 when making 40 or more saves.

"When you see him play like that, it gives you a lot of confidence," said teammate Mikhail Grigorenko, who was also part of the O'Reilly trade.

Varlamov has a 1.84 goals-against average and a .950 save percentage while winning seven of eight on the road. Following his 27-save performance in last month's meeting, the veteran netminder has a 1.65 GAA during a six-game winning streak against the Sabres.

Robin Lehner made 33 saves at Colorado in January, but has yielded nine goals in his last two starts.

O'Reilly's gone 15 games without a goal but has 12 assists during that span. Kane has scored five of his 15 goals in the last seven.

Colorado's Matt Duchene has recorded 17 of his team-leading 25 goals on the road. He has three in three games at Buffalo.

Kane starting to find his comfort zone

By John Vogl
Buffalo News
February 14, 2016

With seven goals in 12 games, Evander Kane feels normal again. It took longer than he thought.

The Sabres' left winger knew the road back from shoulder surgery would be a long one. He felt he was prepared for it. Then three months of the season went by and he wasn't the same point producer he used to be.

"You can think that you know what's going to happen or you can prepare as much as you want, but now going through it and looking back, it was tough in terms of the injury, the surgery," Kane said Saturday in First Niagara Center. "I almost forgot I was a hockey player last season just because I had been off for so long."

He finally found himself in Winnipeg, of all places. The former Jet passed up an empty-net goal to feed Sam Reinhart for a hat trick, ending a drought of six games without a point and starting a 15-game run that features 10 points.

"Maybe nature has a funny way of running its course," said Kane, who will look to continue his production Sunday when the Sabres host Colorado at 12:30 p.m. (MSG, WGR 550 AM).

On a team starving for goals, Kane's spurt of seven in 12 games has been welcomed. His favorite thing to do in hockey is score. He also knows it's expected, which is why there's no extra joy now that pucks are going in. He just feels normal.

"It's nothing that's surprising," he said. "It's nothing that's really new. It's something that needs to continue to happen, needs to enhance as well. I'm looking forward to finishing off these last 20-odd games on a positive note."

By nearly doubling his goal output to 15 during the last 12 games, Kane has put himself on pace for 24 goals. He says he's gotten back into a comfort zone and has figured out how to get into the prime scoring areas.

He's most effective near the net, which he proved again Friday during a 6-4 victory over Montreal. His first of two goals came when he accepted a pass in the right faceoff circle and sped to the top of the crease.

"He gets the puck; it's right in his wheelhouse," coach Dan Bylsma said. "That's where he's at his best scoring goals, coming in there off the right, on his forehand and releasing that shot."

Kane added an empty-net goal, ensuring the Sabres would win in Buffalo for just the second time in 11 home games. He knows that's an unacceptable stat.

"We can't have stretches of 10 games where we only pick up four of a possible 20 points," Kane said. "That can't happen, and that's something we need to learn from and take pride in playing at home. If you can win 70 percent of your home games and be .500 on the road, there's a good chance you're going to be in the playoffs."

"Those are the type of goals we have to look at, and that's what we have to do moving forward."

More was expected of the Sabres this year, but it's turned into another season filled with tough lessons. Kane, acquired last February, watched from the sidelines as last year's team struggled to learn.

"A lot of the guys that I did meet when I did get traded were gone, and it was a whole new team," he said. "We're a team that's learning to win and changing our mentality in terms of being harder to play against. We

have enough skill in here, and I think it's just a matter of being harder to play against, being tougher to play against, especially at home here."

Kane says he likes his new home. He had the major incident of a sexual-assault allegation in late December, but the investigation will likely end without any charges filed, The Buffalo News has learned.

"The city's great," he said. "Everybody's so welcoming. People look after you here, and it's been a real pleasure to live in Buffalo and meet some of the people I have so far."

The team and fans are happy his shots are meeting the net again.

"I'm starting to feel good," Kane said. "If we want to have success as a team, I know I have to be one of the guys to produce consistently every night."

Stamkos would be more than welcome here

By Mike Harrington
Buffalo News
February 14, 2016

Tim Murray needs Steven Stamkos. He thought he needed Mike Babcock too but that ended up with the Detroit coach simply leveraging Buffalo on his way to Toronto. The Babcock affair comes to mind with all the chatter on Canadian sports giant TSN in recent days after the Dion Phaneuf trade opened a lot of cap space for the Leafs.

Suddenly, the thinking is that Stamkos may actually find it more palatable to sign in Buffalo come free agency if he doesn't stay in Tampa Bay, than to head home to Toronto.

Something tells me this is going to end up the same way. If Stamkos doesn't work out an extension with the Lightning, it seems hard to imagine any team trading for him as a rental and then losing him anyway come July 1. If not Tampa, it has to be Toronto.

The Sabres certainly have more to offer Stamkos. They're far closer to winning than the Leafs are and already have core pieces in place. How would Stamkos look alongside Jack Eichel or Sam Reinhart, for instance? You want more money than the \$10.5 million per year that Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews are making? No problem. Terry Pegula can easily come through with \$11-12 million a year, even with the need to pay Rasmus Ristolainen now and Eichel and Reinhart in a couple of years.

Stamkos would be close to home and without the daily media circus sure to envelop him in Toronto. And he would be the kind of addition the Sabres' general manager desperately needs.

Murray has shown he can draft well, although anyone could have taken Reinhart and Eichel. There are some interesting-looking picks from 2014 and the 2015 selections look strong even after Eichel, with what we've already seen from defenseman Brendan Guhle and the American World Junior team berth for St. Cloud State blueliner Will Borgen.

But Murray needs veteran NHL talent now. At the trade deadline and during free agency. There is no excuse for this team to be floundering near the bottom of the NHL again. It's certainly not the fault of Eichel, Reinhart or Ristolainen. Or Evander Kane and Ryan O'Reilly, even though players about to start the largest contract in franchise history really can't go without a goal and play minus-13 hockey for a month, as O'Reilly just did.

This team has failed this year – yes, the standings do matter – because returning players and veterans simply weren't very good.

Tyler Ennis and Zengus Girgensons have battled injuries. So has Zach Bogosian. At 37, captain Brian Gionta's skills are limited. Same for David Legwand at 35. Johan Larsson looks like he's never going to score goals in the NHL and Cody Franson's 5-on-5 play shows why he was a free agent into September.

Then there's Matt Moulson. At 32, the former 30-goal scorer looks finished as an NHL player. No goals since Nov. 1. How is that even possible? Good thing he's Eichel's landlord. The problem is three more years on that five-year, \$25-million contract Murray handed him that is the kind of mistake Murray simply can't make anymore.

People quickly want to say these veterans won't be here "when the team gets good," whenever that happens. Well, who will be? You can't just plug in, say, Justin Bailey and Hudson Fasching. You need NHL veterans to legitimately compete.

Murray just about flushed the farm system to get Kane and O'Reilly and gave away a No. 1 pick for Robin Lehner. He doesn't have a whole lot of capital left to make more trades to help this club. Stamkos, who would be the

biggest-ticket free agent in the salary cap era, would quickly mend that deficiency and bring the Sabres full circle from the day they lost Daniel Briere and Chris Drury.

Almost no one expected the Sabres to be a playoff team this year. Murray said that himself during training camp in the wake of clear fan delusion and some goofy playoff predictions in the Canadian media. But no one expected the Sabres to be on the verge of staging three tankfest games with the Leafs in March either.

If he's still in Tampa by then, you wonder how much Stamkos will be paying attention to those matchups.

Gudas escaped arm of law

Still can't wrap my head about the lack of suspension – or even a hearing – for the scummy, concussive hit Philadelphia defenseman Radko Gudas laid on Sabres newcomer Dan Catenacci Thursday night in Philly. Direct to the head. Isn't that what we're supposed to be taking out of this game?

Of course, this is a league that hired Chris Pronger to work in the Department of Player Safety, which is the antithesis of how the longtime NHL defenseman played during his career. Maybe nothing should be surprising in this area.

What was surprising was the Flyers' reaction. Philly reporters said GM Ron Hextall and coach Dave Hakstol met with Gudas Friday to discuss if his borderline hits are helping or hurting his team. Hakstol went so far as to say there could be changes in the lineup, as in Gudas might sit.

If the team thinks it's a bad hit and acts like it was expecting a suspension, how does the league turn a blind eye?

'Q' fuming over challenges

When he was in Chicago last week announcing the awarding of the 2017 draft to the United Center, Gary Bettman's question-and-answer session included his bizarre comments that the new challenge system was "pretty close" to perfect and was working "extraordinarily well."

That's pretty laughable, and you can add Blackhawks coach Joel Quenneville to the list of conscientious objectors. The Hawks had a Brandon Mashinter goal disallowed in Tuesday's 2-0 loss to the Sharks – their third overturned goal in a month. The play came in the first period and would have opened the scoring but was wiped out on a dubious goaltender interference call.

Quenneville was asked one question about it and bolted from the room clearly to prevent fines after saying, "It's gotten to a different level – I don't know the rules anymore, or something's changed. I played a lot of hockey. I don't know. I think everybody has an interpretation, what's a good goal and what's a bad goal. But I can't believe it."

Quenneville was big on admission-worthy pressers last week.

Thursday's 4-2 loss to Dallas, a game that featured a Patrick Eaves hat trick in the first period, produced this gem from the Hawks coach: "That was a statement loss. It was a terrible, brutal, brutal first period. It was like we had Ringette sticks tonight – no blade on our sticks."

No more chances for Yeo

Time ran out for Minnesota Wild coach Mike Yeo on Saturday night, as he was fired after his team's 4-2 loss to the Bruins. It was Minnesota's eighth loss in a row and 13th in 14 games, a slump rooted in poor offense that KO'd a team coming off a 100-point season.

In his fifth season, Yeo's message clearly grew stale for the Wild. Former Sabres captain Jason Pominville, with just six goals in 55 games, was one of Yeo's big problems and the coach had healthy scratched Thomas Vanek in a game last week as well.

Yeo, remember, is one of Sabres coach Dan Bylsma's close friends in the coaching fraternity. He was Bylsma's top assistant on Pittsburgh's 2009 Stanley Cup champions.

Sabres points

- The Sabres put a lot of effort into getting a new goal song for this season and here's hoping they do likewise next season for whoever mans the public address microphone when regular Jay Moran is unavailable due to his other duties on radio or with Canisius College basketball. On non-Moran nights, names of the opposing team regularly get butchered. And you can give me the people-make-mistakes clause all you want, but there is zero excuse for "ICK-el" to ever come over the air as it did Friday night on an Eichel assist.

That faux pas came from Chris Swenson, the uber-popular Bandits voice for two decades. It just can't happen. This is the NHL, a major pro sports league. It's from a franchise that employed Milt Ellis, the legendary voice of class, at the mic for nearly 30 years. The Sabres have to do better.

- According to the Elias Sports Bureau, Kane and Florida defenseman Alex Petrovic became the first players ejected for fighting each other three times in an NHL game since 2002. They were also the first to do it in a game they scored a goal since Michael Haley of the New York Islanders against Pittsburgh on Feb. 11, 2011.

Petrovic became the first NHL player to produce a "Gordie Howe hat trick" – goal, assist, fight – while earning three fighting majors since Chicago's Al Secord vs. Toronto on Dec. 9, 1984.

- It was flat-out cool for Kane to get tweeted at by Evander Holyfield for his fisticuffs, but certainly not just because he's named after the former boxing great. Kane has a unique appreciation for other athletes outside of hockey, with his affinity for boxing well-known.

And he told this corner in the fall it was a huge thrill to be able to get to see a game in both of baseball's League Championship Series last October. Kane took photos with Blue Jays pitcher Marcus Stroman in the clubhouse after one of the ALCS games against Kansas City in the Rogers Centre.

Around the boards

- All-Star Game MVP John Scott rejoined St. John's of the AHL this weekend after his wild weekend in Nashville and the birth of his twin daughters, giving him four. Scott told ESPN.com he had offers to appear at functions related to the NBA All-Star Weekend in Toronto but turned them down to return to his hockey career.

- Pretty amazing that Toronto doesn't get the All-Star Game, draft or Winter Classic as part of the Leafs' 100th anniversary celebration. But it's also the 50th anniversary for the second six teams added in 1967, with the all-stars heading to Los Angeles and the Classic likely going to Busch Stadium in St. Louis to help mark those celebrations.

Toronto is getting the World Cup of Hockey in September and the NHL was clearly worried about sports fatigue in the market from that tournament, another potential October playoff run by the Blue Jays and the Grey Cup game in November at BMO Field.

- Also from Elias comes this wild nugget on the Canadiens' 5-20-1 stretch: During the glory years of the late 1970s, it twice took the Habs 160 games to lose 20. They were 118-19-23 in one stretch spanning 1975-76 and 1976-77, and 119-18-23 in another spanning 1976-77 and 1977-78.

Sabres notebook: Quick goals by opponents a problem

By John Vogl
Buffalo News
February 14, 2016

Allowing 16 goals in three games, which the Sabres have done, is bad enough. The speed at which opponents are connecting has made things more alarming.

Buffalo has shown a tendency to absorb two punches rather than one during its recent defensive slide. Florida scored twice in spans of 47 seconds and 3:05 during a 7-4 victory. Philadelphia notched two goals in 48 seconds in a 5-1 win. Montreal struck twice in 2:01 during Buffalo's 6-4 victory Friday night.

The Sabres hope to end the trend Sunday when they host Colorado at 12:45 p.m. in First Niagara Center.

"When we start letting in some goals, we've got to take a few breathers," goaltender Robin Lehner said Saturday. "Just chip it in and try to just stay out of our zone for a little bit, go grind it out for a few shifts to calm down. We're trying to find ways."

Lehner, who will get the start against the Avalanche, says blame for the opponents' easy access to the net falls everywhere. Forwards need to cover the slot better. Defensemen can tighten their gaps. The goalies can stop more shots.

"We've got to take care of the puck better in the neutral zone, limit the odd-man rushes a little bit," Lehner said. "Everyone needs to step up a little bit."

"Some good teams are getting to us. On any given night, you start giving away good chances, letting them come in close and giving them time, it's going to be those days when they pick you apart. We've just got to play a little tighter with a little more urgency, play with a little more emotion, a little more aggressive. I think we can get back on track there."

Lehner is eager to get back on track after starting the losses to Florida and Philadelphia. He entered the crease against the Panthers with a .939 save percentage and 2.12 goals-against average. His stats have plummeted to .915 and 2.95 after allowing nine goals on 40 shots and getting yanked 21 minutes into the Florida game.

"It's just been a stretch of some high-quality stuff coming at you," Lehner said. "We've got to step up to make some saves. It's been a tough little stretch."

"The game against Florida, I was there and I was on pretty much every goal. I go through it on video with my goalie coach, and I wouldn't do anything different. It's just good goals going in. There's a lot of stuff in front. I tried to bounce back in Philly, felt good the first period, and the wheels just fell off again. We couldn't really bounce back from it."

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Zemgus Girgensons will be back in the Sabres' lineup after a three-game injury absence. Coach Dan Bylsma would prefer to send Girgensons back to his spot as the left winger for Jack Eichel, but the lingering injury to center Johan Larsson will prevent that.

"With our situation, he'll probably play in the middle," Bylsma said of Girgensons, who practiced fully Saturday.

"I feel ready to go," said Girgensons, who has missed 11 games this season. "It's just been bad breaks. It's been mostly me being a little too reckless. It's just how it goes. I've just got to keep playing the way I've been playing. That stuff happens. You'll have ups and downs with injuries."

To make room for Girgensons, the Sabres sent forward Phil Varone back to Rochester. Bylsma hopes Larsson, who will miss his fourth game, can return to practice Monday. He skated on his own in First Niagara Center. Concussed forward Tyler Ennis stayed off the ice.

"Not a skate day for him," Bylsma said. "He did work out off the ice. He's progressing and doing better but not ready to go to a full-scale workout."

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Ryan O'Reilly hasn't been able to score, but he's certainly helping others do it. O'Reilly, who has no goals in 15 games, has 12 assists during the span. He picked up two assists Friday, giving him seven in the last six games.

"Not scoring a goal is not the biggest issue," Bylsma said. "It's being able to create offense, create those circumstances for yourself and your line.

"He's creating offense, creating in and around the net for him and his linemates. Not going in for him right now with his shot, but he's still creating at the level he was earlier in the year."

O'Reilly leads the Sabres with 17 goals, 30 assists and 47 points in 56 games.

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The Sabres will again scratch two healthy defensemen. Mike Weber and Mark Pysyk sat Friday.

"I didn't like our game in the last two games defensively, and that would be inclusively of a lot of people," Bylsma said. "Just the opportunities and the situations we're giving up in the game, Mark was a part of. We're going to have that accountability in our game, and Mark was the guy that was coming out."

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The Make Lemon Aide Foundation for Cerebral Palsy will be in the arena Sunday to raise funds and increase awareness about the disorder. There will be a lemonade stand in the 100 Level where fans can purchase drinks and enter to win a jersey autographed by Zach Bogosian, who filmed a public-service announcement for the organization. The Sabres will host 16 families affected by cerebral palsy in the arena suites.

Avalanche go for three in a row

By Brian Hunter

NHL.com

February 14, 2016

AVALANCHE (29-25-4) at SABRES (22-28-6)

TV: 12:30 p.m. ET; ALT, BELL TV, MSG-B, NHL.TV

Season series: Colorado Avalanche forward Alex Tanguay scored the tying goal in the third period and set up defenseman Francois Beauchemin for the game-winner with 31.7 seconds remaining in a 2-1 victory against the Buffalo Sabres on Jan. 20 at Pepsi Center. Goalie Semyon Varlamov made 27 saves. Forward Evander Kane scored a power-play goal for the Sabres.

Avalanche team scope: Colorado is looking to sweep its three-game road trip after a 3-2 shootout win Friday against the Detroit Red Wings. The Avalanche had gone 0-3-1 on a preceding homestand. Forward Blake Comeau, who had a goal in regulation and the decisive shootout goal against the Red Wings, has three goals and four assists in his past seven games. Varlamov could be in line for another start after making 43 saves against Detroit in a game he originally wasn't scheduled to start. Coach Patrick Roy changed his mind about using Calvin Pickard in the second half of a back-to-back and was rewarded with a signature Varlamov effort. "I had lots of energy," Varlamov told the Denver Post after the game. "I feel good."

Sabres team scope: Goalie Robin Lehner will get the start Sunday. Lehner has struggled in his past two starts, giving up nine goals on 40 shots and being pulled early in the second period of a Feb. 9 loss to the Florida Panthers, but he was 2-0-1 in his previous three starts, allowing two goals in each and posting a .945 save percentage. Forward Zemgus Girgensons, who sustained an upper-body injury Feb. 6 against the Boston Bruins, practiced Saturday and proclaimed himself ready to go. Girgensons has to be activated off injured reserve. Kane and forward Marcus Foligno each scored twice Friday in a 6-4 win against the Montreal Canadiens. Kane has five goals in his past seven games.

Sabres owner Pegula tries to lift his team and city from doldrums

By Pat Hickey

Montreal Gazette

February 14, 2016

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Let's get one thing straight: The only buffalo in this town are the brightly painted statues on the highways leading into what signs proclaim as an all-American city, a designation it earned in 1996 and 2002.

The city's name traces its origins to French explorers who gazed on what is today Buffalo Creek and said: "Beau fleuve."

Beau hardly describes the state of downtown Buffalo. Once a bustling transportation terminal and manufacturing centre, Main St. between the waterfront and the theatre district is a bleak collection of empty storefronts.

But the city is getting a makeover and it is being spearheaded by Buffalo Sabres owner Terry Pegula and his wife, Kim.

Pegula grew up in western Pennsylvania and lives in Boca Raton, Fla., but it's safe to say he's one of the most popular people in Buffalo because he has saved the city's two major sports franchises, the Sabres and the NFL's Bills.

Pegula is a self-made multibillionaire, using the environmentally questionable practice of hydraulic fracturing to extract oil and natural gas from the Marcellus shale deposit in the eastern U.S. Forbes puts his worth at \$4 billion and he has invested heavily in sports. His attachment to this area stems from his business interests — fracking is illegal in New York State, but he had his corporate headquarters in western New York — and his wife grew up in Fairport, which is midway between Buffalo and Rochester.

He changed the landscape of college hockey when he donated \$102 million to build an arena and jump-start a Division I hockey program at his alma mater, Penn State.

But his largest impact has been on pro sports and downtown development in Buffalo.

In 2010, Tom Golisano put the Sabres up for sale. The Rochester businessman was fed up with high state taxes and cold weather, and moved to Florida with his fiancée, tennis star Monica Seles. He had an offer from former BlackBerry chief Jim Balsillie, who wanted to move the team to Hamilton, but Pegula saved the franchise for Buffalo — paying \$175 million for the team and absorbing another \$14 million in debt.

Four years later, the NFL's Bills went on the market after the death of owner Ralph Wilson. Donald Trump was interested in buying the team and rocker Jon Bon Jovi fronted a bid for a group that wanted to move the team to Toronto. The team was already playing some regular-season games in Toronto and the vibrant market of 4 million seemed more suited for an NFL franchise than Buffalo, which is the 53rd-largest market in the U.S.

Pegula again came to the rescue. He and his wife paid \$1.4 billion and cancelled the deal to play games in Toronto.

The transformation of downtown began with a Marriott Courtyard hotel two blocks north of the arena and Pegula planned to build a parking deck between the hotel and the arena with a sheet of ice to serve as the team's training site. But Kim Pegula, who was born in South Korea and adopted by an American couple, convinced her husband that they could do more with the property.

The result is HarborCenter. In addition to the parking, there is a Marriott hotel, high-end retail shops, a two-story sports bar/restaurant and two rinks. One of them serves as the home for the Sabres' junior team and the Division I program at Canisius College.

The warehouse district adjoining the rink has experienced a spillover effect with bars and restaurants, and Pegula's plans include a new downtown stadium for the Bills, who play in suburban Orchard Park.

The only disappointment to date has been the Sabres' performance on the ice. The team is poised to miss the playoffs for the fourth consecutive season, but there is reason for optimism. General manager Tim Murray has brought a sense of a stability to the franchise and Ryan O'Reilly, Sam Reinhart and Jack Eichel provide coach Dan Bylsma with the foundation for an exciting, young team.

Mother's guidance helped Justin Bailey reach Sabres

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 14, 2016

BUFFALO – On Thursday night, after proudly watching her son, Sabres winger Justin Bailey, make his NHL debut, everything finally hit Karen Buscaglia.

Bailey, 20, had just become the fifth Buffalo-born player to skate for the Sabres, and before Buscaglia went to bed in her Philadelphia hotel room, she looked at her mother.

"I'm like, 'Holy crap, we just saw Justin's first NHL game,'" Buscaglia said Friday prior to seeing Bailey, a Williamsville native, play his first home game, a 6-4 win over the Montreal Canadiens.

Having raised Bailey as a single mother, Buscaglia enjoys a unique relationship – "Playing both the role of my mom and my dad," Bailey called it – with her son.

"He trusts me and he knows I have his back and his best interests at heart," Buscaglia said. "The journey is definitely a father-and-son kind of thing."

That trust has paid off for Bailey, who should play his third NHL game this afternoon when the Sabres host the Colorado Avalanche inside the First Niagara Center.

"As a mother, she knows me probably better than I know myself," Bailey said.

Looking back now, they agree the decisions Buscaglia made and the patience she exhibited boosted Bailey's career. Everybody, she said, wanted to make Bailey a man when he was 10 years old.

"When you have a really gifted athlete as a kid, everybody wants to rush everything," Buscaglia said. "So I think it's the one thing that kind of saved him."

Six years ago, instead of leaving home to play in a junior league in Ontario at the suggestion of former NHL player Tie Domi, Bailey stayed put. Of course, Bailey wanted to go. Four years ago, he briefly left Buffalo and moved in with Sabres legend Pat LaFontaine, who was coaching the Long Island Royals, an under-16 junior team.

That decision, Bailey said, was a lateral move and "kind of frowned upon." Some people were urging him to go bigger and play in the Ontario Hockey League or the United States Hockey League, two higher leagues that held his rights.

"We've put a lot of thought and time into every decision that I've made," Bailey said.

But the season under LaFontaine helped transform the 6-foot-3, 206-pound Bailey, who said he filled out his body, got stronger and found himself as a player.

"I kind of slowed things down, but I think everything we did worked out the way it was supposed to," Buscaglia said.

Eventually, Bailey chose to play for the OHL's Kitchener Rangers, where he morphed into a lethal scorer, instead of Michigan State in 2012.

Bailey, the 52nd overall pick in 2013, has quickly developed into the Sabres' best AHL forward prospect as a rookie in Rochester this season. After compiling four goals and six points in three games, he noticed the Americans' coaches were "all over me for a lot of different things" during Wednesday's practice.

It turned out they were just having some fun.

"They called me over and I couldn't imagine what I did wrong now," Bailey said. "They told me, 'Congrats, you got called up.' It was special."

When Bailey called his mother with the special news, Buscaglia said she screamed out loud and cried in her office.

"It was just a whole bunch of emotion really fast," she said.

Bailey enjoyed one of the best Sabres debuts in recent memory, pumping seven shots on goal in an ugly 5-1 loss to the Flyers, the highest total in a Buffalo debut since Alexander Mogilny in 1989.

Coach Dan Bylsma praised Bailey, calling him the Sabres' best player. Following the game, Bailey shared an emotional moment with his mother and grandmother.

"It's kind of something I've been dreaming of my whole life," Bailey said. "To be able to share it with them (Thursday) night, it was amazing."

With about 100 total supporters watching him Friday, Bylsma bumped up Bailey's minutes and awarded him a plum assignment on the right wing beside slick center Jack Eichel and Jamie McGinn. Bailey wasn't quite as impressive as Thursday, although had some strong moments and nearly scored.

"When you're rating a player's game, you're probably going to look at the first game he played as the top of the line game from him," Bylsma said. "(Friday) you saw some of that ... speed and size and play in the offensive zone and at the net."

When Bailey helped create Josh Gorges' second-period goal, it appeared he might earn his first NHL assist. He said his teammates congratulated him when he got back to bench. But the official scorer ruled the goal was unassisted before awarding Eichel and McGinn assists.

Either way, the play impressed Bylsma.

"It's a play I really liked, just using his size and body down low to win a puck and create room and space," he said.

Buscaglia made it back to Buffalo to watch after a brief scare. When her flight home was canceled, she flew into Syracuse, rented a car and drove home.

"To be a single parent and make all my tournaments, I can't even honestly remember of game of mine she missed growing up," Bailey said.

Or in the NHL.

Sabres' Dan Bylsma not rotating defensemen; Zemgus Girgensons ready

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 14, 2016

BUFFALO – In the last three games, Sabres coach Dan Bylsma has used all eight defensemen on his roster, including Carlo Colaiacovo, who played Friday after sitting 15 straight games and 26 out of 27.

So, is Bylsma finally OK with having two spare defensemen?

"Am I warming to it?" Bylsma asked this afternoon. "No, I'm not warming to it. I don't think I'll ever warm to it."

Why doesn't he like having eight?

"Six is best, and to have eight, it won't be a rotation of three or four five guys with the eight D," Bylsma said. "You don't like a guy to get stale and not play a lot of games, and that tends to happen when you have eight."

Still, Bylsma possesses valuable depth at a critical position, meaning he has the luxury to change his lineup. After two poor losses earlier this week in which the Sabres allowed 12 goals, he scratched Mark Pysyk for Friday's 6-4 win against Montreal.

"I didn't like our last two games defensively, and that would be inclusive of a lot of people," Bylsma said. "I think just the opportunities and situations were giving up in a game, Mark was a part of. We're going to have that accountability in our game, and Mark was the guy that was coming out."

In other news, Zemgus Girgensons, out the last three games (lower body), practiced today inside the First Niagara Center and should return as a center, not a winger, when the Sabres host Colorado on Sunday afternoon. With center Johan Larsson out, Bylsma wants Girgensons in the middle.

Update: The Sabres have returned forward Phil Varone, who had an assist Friday, to the Rochester Americans.

Bylsma said Larsson (lower body) skated on his own today and is "significantly better." He could practice Monday.

Meanwhile, Bylsma said winger Tyler Ennis (likely concussion) is "progressing and doing better" but still isn't ready for a full workout.

Bylsma said goalie Robin Lehner will start against the Avalanche.

Girgensons back at practice, hopes to play Sunday

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

February 14, 2016

Eligible to return to game action from injured reserve on Sunday, Zemgus Girgensons got a practice under his belt with the Buffalo Sabres on Saturday afternoon at First Niagara Center after missing three games with a lower-body injury.

Girgensons sustained his injury late in the game during an overtime loss to Boston on Feb. 6. At the time, Sabres coach Dan Bylsma expressed hope that the injury wouldn't force Girgensons to miss any games but, as the days went on, the need to recall a forward led to his placement on IR.

"It just didn't feel too well the next couple of days," he said. "I kept improving everyday and I feel pretty good now."

While Bylsma said he was still awaiting official word from the team doctor in regards to Girgensons status for Sunday's game against the Colorado Avalanche, he said he expects that Girgensons will be cleared to play. If he is, expect to see him centering a line with Marcus Foligno (coming off a three-point performance on Friday) and Brian Gionta.

Girgensons had been finding success playing to the left of Jack Eichel – the two connected on six goals since Dec. 30 – but the continued absence of Johan Larsson, who's also missed three games with a lower-body injury, has created a hole to fill at the center position.

"I anticipate that the doctor will tell me he's good to go and yes, with Larsson being out – you know I'd like to see Zemgus go back with Jack there on the wing, but with our situation, he'll probably play in the middle tomorrow," Bylsma said.

Larsson sustained his injury during the morning skate prior to Buffalo's game against Florida on Tuesday. He, too, was hopeful to not miss any more than one game, but the nagging injury has delayed that return.

"He skated this morning on his own," Bylsma said. "He's significantly better but not able to join to practice. Hopefully we'll see him continue to get better and look to return to practice on Monday."

For Girgensons, this is the third set of games he's missed due to injury this season. He missed four games in late November and, more recently, missed four more with a lower-body injury from Jan. 16 to Jan. 22.

"It's just been bad breaks," Girgensons said. "It's mostly me being a little bit too reckless so it's just how it goes. I've just got to keep playing the way I've been playing. That stuff happens; you'll have ups and downs and injuries too."

BAILEY'S NEAR-POINT

Playing his first game in his hometown and his second in the NHL, Justin Bailey's teammates congratulated him as he got to the bench after Josh Gorges scored in the second period against Montreal on Friday.

Bailey and his teammates thought that he had just registered his first career point with an assist on Gorges' goal. Bailey dished the puck to Eichel, who subsequently found Gorges in front of the net. The problem, however, was that Gorges scored on a rebound of his initial shot, which bounced off of Jamie McGinn.

The assists were given to McGinn and Eichel, leaving Bailey off the score sheet.

"It definitely would have been nice to get one there," Bailey said, laughing. "I think it will come sooner or later."

While both Bailey and Bylsma recognized that he made some rookie mistakes in his second game, he also once again showed his unique combination of speed and size. On Gorges' goal, Bailey got the play started by battling along the wall and cycling the puck along to Eichel.

"If you look to the goal that Gorges scores, the initial play is a puck along the wall to Justin and he bodies up against the guy, wins the puck, comes up the wall, and makes the scissor cycle to Jack and Jack eventually to Gorges on the far side," Bylsma said. "That's a play I really liked, just using his size and body down low to win a puck and create room and space."

Bailey also, for the second game in a row, had a chance to net his first career goal on a 1-on-1 opportunity with the goaltender thanks to a feed from Eichel in the slot. Bylsma said he would've liked to see Bailey use his shot, but instead the rookie pulled a move and tried to slide the puck in at the post.

"It was real close again," Bailey said. "I'm getting a lot of chances so I've just got to capitalize on the chances I get."

ACCOUNTABILITY ON DEFENSE

After giving up five goals or more in losses to Florida and Philadelphia, Bylsma made the decision to mix up his defensive unit on Saturday by reinserting Carlo Colaiacovo into the lineup after he sat as a healthy scratch for 15 games.

Colaiacovo was a plus-1 in 12:09 of ice time. Mark Pysyk, meanwhile, sat as a healthy scratch along with Mike Weber.

"Well, I didn't like our last two games defensively and that would be inclusive of a lot of people," Bylsma said. "But I think just the opportunities and the situations we were giving up in the games Mark was a part of and we're going to have that accountability in our game."

COLORADO COMING TO TOWN

The last time the Sabres played the Avalanche, it was back on Jan. 20 in Denver and it definitely didn't end the way the Sabres liked. Buffalo held a 1-0 lead into the third period of that game, but Alex Tanguay scored the tying goal with 10:37 remaining and Francois Beauchemin scored the game-winner with just 32 seconds remaining to lift Colorado to a 2-1 victory.

"I think in that game it really wasn't just the third, it was the last 30 minutes of that game that really turned into a half-ice game," Bylsma said. "We played a good portion of that game in our defensive zone and spent a lot of energy defending and you can't do that against this team."

"They come at you with speed and have skill ... That's something we have to do a better job of doing, playing defense offensively by going forward, playing in the offensive zone and not letting their speed and skill come at us."

Coverage on Sunday 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.

VARONE REASSIGNED TO ROCHESTER

The Sabres reassigned forward Phil Varone to the Rochester Americans on Saturday afternoon. Varone was recalled on Friday and earned an assist in the 6-4 win over Montreal.

SATURDAY'S PRACTICE

9 Evander Kane – 90 Ryan O'Reilly – 23 Sam Reinhart

88 Jamie McGinn – 15 Jack Eichel – 56 Justin Bailey

82 Marcus Foligno – 28 Zemgus Girgensons – 12 Brian Gionta

44 Nicolas Deslauriers – 17 David Legwand/ 84 Phil Varone – 26 Matt Moulson

Defensemen: 4 Josh Gorges, 55 Rasmus Ristolainen, 29 Jake McCabe, 47 Zach Bogosian, 25 Carlo Colaiacovo, 46 Cody Franson, 6 Mike Weber, 3 Mark Pysyk

40 Robin Lehner

31 Chad Johnson