



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

March 26, 2016

Jets-Sabres Preview

By Kevin Massoth

AP

March 26, 2016

The Buffalo Sabres and Winnipeg Jets have little but pride to play for these days, but both clubs are finding some success as the season nears its conclusion.

With playoff eliminations imminent over the next few days, the Sabres seek their fourth win in six games on Saturday as the visiting Jets try for their first three-game winning streak of the season.

Signs pointed to Buffalo (30-34-10) suffering its second straight loss on Tuesday, when it trailed 2-1 at Carolina with less than four minutes left. Instead, the Sabres scored twice in a minute to rally for a 3-2 win, their third in five games.

Evander Kane, who will play his former team for the second time since an ugly breakup in February 2015, scored his first goal in seven games with 3:49 remaining and Johan Larsson added his first in six contests exactly one minute later to complete the rally.

Buffalo is riding a 3-1-1 stretch, and half its wins have come from a 15-12-6 stretch since Jan. 10.

"We want to take pride in these next eight games that we have here and kind of have a good feeling going into next year and finish off the season strong," Kane said. "(Tuesday night) was a good comeback win for us and it's something we're going to have to be able to do in the future."

The Sabres will take a look in that direction with the NHL debuts of defenseman Casey Nelson and forward Hudson Fasching. They were signed to entry-level contracts this week after finishing up their junior seasons at Minnesota State and Minnesota, respectively.

Carlo Colaiacovo, who scored his first goal on Tuesday, and Cal O'Reilly will sit to make room for the rookies.

Chad Johnson will start after making 25 saves against the Hurricanes. He has won six of his last seven starts and has a .927 save percentage over his last six.

Johnson has faced the Jets franchise twice in his career, holding them to two goals on 69 shots while suffering a pair of shutout losses.

Buffalo won the first meeting 4-2 on Jan. 10 behind Sam Reinhart's hat trick. Kane tallied an assist in his first visit with the franchise he called home for the first six seasons of his career. The Jets traded him after several reports of disagreements with teammates and offseason trade requests.

Winnipeg (31-37-6) had won the three previous games in this series and nine of 11. The Jets have taken four of the last five games in Buffalo.

Winnipeg already has its longest point streak of the season at three games and seeks its first winning streak of the same length since last April.

Ondrej Pavelec made 33 saves in Thursday's 4-1 win over Los Angeles, while Adam Lowry, Dustin Byfuglien, Paul Postma and Drew Stafford scored to help the Jets close a homestand 2-1-1.

"It's all about building for next year at this point for us," Stafford said. "It's habits."

Pavelec has allowed just one goal while making 61 saves his last two starts. He holds a .951 save percentage while winning eight of his last nine against the Sabres.

While Winnipeg is riding a 2-5-1 slump away from home, Buffalo is on a 5-2-3 stretch at First Niagara Center.

Sabres' rookies hope to impress in Blue and Gold debuts

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

March 26, 2016

Hudson Fasching and Casey Nelson were in college a week ago. They will make their NHL debuts Saturday. Jake McCabe understands the exhilarating mix of joy, fear and nervousness coursing through their bodies.

It wasn't long ago that he was in the same situation.

The Sabres signed McCabe at the conclusion of his junior year at Wisconsin and brought him to Buffalo immediately. He played in the final seven games of the 2013-14 season and remembers the experience well.

"I was scared," the defenseman said Friday. "My first encounter with the team was on the plane. I flew here, had physicals in the morning and then we flew to St. Louis. I stepped on the plane knowing maybe a couple guys. You're nervous.

"You're walking into an NHL team, and you've got guys who are looking at you. They're obviously not thrilled with where they're at in the standings, and here comes a college kid that has no experience and is thrown into the fire."

As terrifying as it sounds, McCabe wouldn't have traded it for anything.

"It was a good experience, and I think it'll be good for these guys," said McCabe, who will join the newcomers in hosting Winnipeg at 1 p.m. in First Niagara Center. "You just get to see all the high-caliber players in this league and how fast the game is and just what the game is all about up here. You get a little taste of it before summertime, and it just gives you that extra motivation when you go back and train. You go that extra mile to get that extra work in just to get to this level."

The work has paid off for McCabe, who has come a long way in two years. Just 22 years old, he has grown into a top-four defenseman whose skating and smarts have him on the ice at key parts of the game.

"I love playing with him," said defense partner Zach Bogosian. "He's a good skater, plays the game the right way. He's always eager to get better and learn. It's fun playing with him."

As Bogosian said the word "fun," his face exploded into a smile.

"As a defenseman, you're pretty much with the guy all the time," Bogosian said. "I play five-on-five with him and kill penalties with him. We have fun with it. There's a time and place to be serious, but there's also a time and place to have fun. We do a good job of balancing out both.

"If something funny happens out there, we get a good chuckle out of it. If we're winning and I give him a bad pass, he'll say something to me and I'll say something back to him. It's just that bond that you can jab back and forth with each other. It makes it fun to be out there with him."

Success adds to the fun. The duo has been just as important to the Sabres as the top pair of Rasmus Ristolainen and Josh Gorges. McCabe has topped 20 minutes of ice time in the last 11 games, bringing his average to 18:56. He has three goals and 12 points in 69 games while being one of only two players with a positive plus/minus ratio. He's at plus-1, and Marcus Foligno is at plus-4.

"What I've been trying to do all year is take feedback from coaches and veteran guys and just try to improve every day," said McCabe, who feels consistency is the best trait any player can learn. "Whether you have it or you don't, you've still got to bring it every night. It's a long season, but at the same time there's no excuses.

"You have a role and there's things that are expected of you. You have to produce. That's the whole trust thing. You've got to trust your teammates to do the same thing. You have to fulfill your role."

The lesson about consistency is pounded home every time McCabe looks at the standings. He knows that being better in just one game per month would have put Buffalo in the mix for a playoff spot.

"Every team can beat any other team on any given night," McCabe said. "Each team has high-caliber players and world-class players. You need to be ready to go every single night. You can't take nights off because teams will make you pay."

He hopes Fasching and Nelson will see that.

"It's not easy, and they'll realize that as these next couple weeks go by," McCabe said. "It's a weird thing, but they'll be better because of it."

Sabres notebook: Fasching, Nelson will be in lineup

By John Vogl
Buffalo News
March 26, 2016

Odds are good Hudson Fasching will have rediscovered his vocabulary by the time he pulls on his Sabres jersey Saturday. Then again, maybe not.

A whirlwind week that will end with a spot in Buffalo's lineup left Fasching speechless Friday. The 20-year-old, signed to a three-year contract Monday, will make his NHL debut when the Winnipeg Jets visit First Niagara Center. Coach Dan Bylsma floored the rookie with the news after practice, and Fasching still couldn't believe it minutes later.

"I'm so excited," he said anxiously while trying to catch the emotions running through him. "I'm almost speechless. It's a dream come true for me."

Bylsma started the life-changing conversation by asking Fasching if the team needed to get his parents to Buffalo. After Fasching said yes, Bylsma said that was good because the right winger was playing.

"I just zoned out," Fasching said. "It was cool. I'm excited. I didn't know what to say."

The Minnesota native hoped his mother, father and girlfriend would make the journey. They'll see him play alongside center David Legwand and left wing Matt Moulson.

"There's a possibility he'll get some shifts in other spots," Bylsma said. "I think the big thing to see will be an adjustment to the pace and the speed. He's a good skater, but I think the pace is going to be an adjustment for him."

Fasching will become the fourth player to wear No. 52 for the Sabres, joining Alexander Sulzer, Craig Rivet and Dave Andreychuk.

"I'm not trying to overthink it too much is my strategy going into it," Fasching said. "It's something that I've dreamed of since I was a little kid, just to play in the NHL. I put a lot of hard work in. My family and I have sacrificed a lot to get here, so it means the world to me."

Casey Nelson, another player signed out of college this week, will also make his debut. He'll skate in a defense pairing with Mark Pysyk.

"Against some long odds, against some difficult situations he has carved out his game, has carved out his ability," Bylsma said. "He's gone from being a walk-on to a huge part of a team to one of the most sought-after free agents. He's done that through hard work. He's done that through development of his game.

"He's really kind of defying the odds right now in terms of making the NHL, and I think he's going to find a way to carve out a career for himself."

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The Sabres will once again close their home schedule with "Fan Appreciation Night." Buffalo's final game in First Niagara Center will be April 8 against the Columbus Blue Jackets.

The first 5,000 fans to enter the 19,070-seat arena will receive a free Sabres mini-stick. Select season-ticket holders will receive the jerseys off the players' back following the game. There will be various food giveaways during the game along with a 30 percent discount at the Sabres Store and discounted concession prices, including popcorn, pretzels, hot dogs and sodas for \$2 each.

Tops Markets, which sponsors the alumni plaza, will have food-sampling kiosks set up outside the arena from 5-7 p.m.

The Sabres' foundation 50/50 raffle will have a guaranteed jackpot of at least \$70,000. After the first period, one fan will get a chance to win two round-trip tickets on Delta Airlines to anywhere in the continental United States.

In a pregame ceremony, the Sabres will present their annual awards for Most Valuable Player, Unsung Hero and Rookie of the Year, as voted by the players. Roswell Park Cancer Institute will present the Sabres Foundation Man of the Year Award, and one fan will be given the 7th Man Award.

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The Sabres have signed playmaking center Eric Cornel, a second-round pick in the 2014 NHL Draft, to a three-year, entry-level contract.

Cornel, who began the Ontario Hockey League playoffs with Peterborough on Friday night, finished the regular season with 27 goals, 56 assists and 83 points in 68 games. His assist total ranked eighth in the OHL, while his point total was 13th overall.

The 6-foot-2, 191-pounder has 70 goals and 213 points in 265 games with Peterborough, plus four goals and eight points in 16 playoff games. He won't join the Sabres' organization until the Petes' season ends.

Cornel, drafted 44th overall, signed an amateur tryout contract with Rochester at the end of last season. He recorded one assist in six games with the Amerks.

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Sabres goaltender Chad Johnson will start in net for the fourth straight game. He is 6-1 in his last seven decisions.

"He's earned that success with his play in net," Bylsma said. "We're really seeing him be comfortable with the opportunity to take the net and run with the net."

Collegiate additions bolster Sabres down stretch

By Joe Yerdon

NHL.com

March 26, 2016

BUFFALO -- The Buffalo Sabres have a new look to their roster late in the season with the additions of forward Hudson Fasching and defenseman Casey Nelson, who will make their NHL debuts Saturday against the Winnipeg Jets (1 p.m. ET; TSN3, BELL TV, MSG-B, NHL.TV).

Fasching recently completed his junior season at the University of Minnesota, and Nelson finished his junior season at Minnesota State University, but their roads to the Sabres were distinctly different.

Fasching, who set career highs in goals (20), assists (18) and points (38) in 37 games this season for the Gophers, signed an entry-level contract with Buffalo on Monday and practiced with the Sabres for the first time Thursday.

"It was exciting, really exciting," Fasching said. "A little bit of nerves out there, but you know, all in all it was a fun day and it was good to be on the ice with all the guys."

Fasching (6-foot-2, 216 pounds) was a fourth-round pick (No. 118) in the 2013 NHL Draft by the Los Angeles Kings, but was traded to the Sabres on March 5, 2014, in a package with forward Nicolas Deslauriers for defenseman Brayden McNabb.

"I think it's a little bit missing in the game today; you don't see that big power forward in the game as much as you would before," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "The toughness element aside, you're looking at a guy like Rick Tocchet; you're looking at a power forward-type of guy. You're looking at a Keith Tkachuk who's a power forward; a presence at the net. We don't have a lot of that in the game today. [Fasching] is stepping out of college and still in the development portion of his game and where he's going to fit in, but that's something you look to possibly see in a guy that size who can skate that well and possibly be a force at the net."

Fasching, 20, will graduate from Minnesota this summer.

Nelson is three years older than Fasching but is going through the same process after the collegiate free agent signed an entry-level contract Tuesday.

"[I was a] late bloomer, very late bloomer," Nelson said. "I kind of had to fight my way through each step here and I'm excited for this one."

Nelson was named Western College Hockey Association Defensive Player of the Year this season after he had six goals and 16 assists in 40 games with the Mavericks. His plus-15 rating was a team high.

"My freshman year I was kind of thrown in pretty early, couldn't handle it," Nelson said. "I was out of the lineup for a while there my freshman year, but my sophomore and junior years, those were my first plus plus-minus years of my career."

Nelson is 6-2, 182 pounds, which doesn't make him a physically imposing defenseman, but Bylsma said Nelson's skating was the best part of his game and that's something that should help him adjust to the speed of the NHL.

"I really like the way he skated, liked the way he moved and with confidence," Bylsma said. "His hockey card reads 6-1 or 6-2 and I don't know how much they say he weighs, I think he's 180, but yesterday and today on the ice [he] looks a lot bigger than that and it's really because of the way he skates and how well he skates, and that's something that's a big attribute to his game."

Fasching cycled with Cal O'Reilly on the fourth line alongside David Legwand and Matt Moulson at practice Thursday and again Friday. Nelson was most often paired with Carlo Colaiacovo and got some reps on the penalty kill.

"I was just really excited to be [in Buffalo] and be a part of this program, so I think that's one of the major pulls," Fasching said. "I think from the standpoint of just my game, I just felt that I think I was ready. I got a lot out of college hockey and I think that from a development perspective, making the jump [to the NHL] was kind of the best option for me to develop my game and continue to get better and to grow."

Rookies Fasching, Nelson to make NHL debut for Sabres

By Patrick Williams

NHL.com

March 26, 2016

JETS (31-37-6) at SABRES (30-34-10)

TV: 1 p.m. ET; TSN3, MSG-B, BELL TV, NHL.TV

Season series: Sam Reinhart's first NHL hat trick helped the Buffalo Sabres defeat the Winnipeg Jets 4-2 at MTS Centre on Jan. 10. Sabres goaltender Linus Ullmark made 42 saves.

Jets team scope: Defenseman Jacob Trouba will be a game-time decision, coach Paul Maurice told the Jets website. Trouba was hit by a shot in a 4-1 win against the Los Angeles Kings on Thursday. "He felt a little better [Friday] than [Thursday]," Maurice said. Defenseman Brenden Kichton was recalled from Manitoba of the American Hockey League on an emergency basis in case Trouba is not able to play. If Kichton does play, it would be his NHL debut; he has nine goals and 25 assists with Manitoba. Maurice has not confirmed a starting goaltender. Defenseman Julian Melchiori and forward Nic Petan also remain on recall. It's the first game in Buffalo for forwards Drew Stafford and Joel Armia since they were traded to the Jets by the Sabres on Feb. 12, 2015. Defenseman Tyler Myers, who was also part of the package the Jets received from Buffalo, had knee surgery Thursday and is out for the season.

Sabres team scope: Right wing Hudson Fasching and defenseman Casey Nelson each will make his NHL debut, according to the Sabres website. Fasching, 20, had 20 goals in 37 games at the University of Minnesota. He will play on a line with left wing Matt Moulson and center David Legwand, but "it's possible that he will get some shifts in other spots," coach Dan Bylsma said. Nelson, 23, signed as a free agent from Minnesota State, where he played three seasons. He will skate with Mark Pysyk. "I think he's comfortable there, capable there," Bylsma said of Pysyk, a right-handed shot, playing on the left side. Goaltender Chad Johnson will start. Defenseman Carlo Colaiacovo and center Cal O'Reilly will be healthy scratches.

Casey Nelson defied odds to reach Sabres

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 26, 2016

BUFFALO – Barely two years ago, Casey Nelson wasn't ready for NCAA hockey. After some notable gaffes early in his freshman season, the newest Sabres defenseman got yanked from the lineup.

"His first couple games in college hockey were tough," said Mike Hastings, who coached Nelson three seasons at Minnesota State University.

Nelson, 23, sat out a chunk of his first season before finally earning regular duty late in the year.

"I kind of got thrown in pretty early with a lot of stuff on my plate, couldn't handle it, took some time off," said Nelson, who will make his NHL debut with winger Hudson Fasching this afternoon against the Winnipeg Jets inside the First Niagara Center.

In three seasons, Nelson morphed from an overwhelmed freshman into a top prospect and the best defenseman available in college free agency.

"Once he got back into the lineup, he never came out again," Hastings said.

Nelson became a smooth-skating, two-way defender, compiling 13 goals and 55 points and a gaudy plus-33 rating in 80 games over his final two seasons. He was named to the All-WCHA First Team this season and earned Defensive Player of the Year honors.

The undrafted Nelson, who calls himself a "late bloomer," officially picked the Sabres over several teams on Tuesday, signing a one-year, entry-level contract.

"He's really kind of defying the odds right now in terms of making the NHL," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said Friday. "I think he's going to find a way to carve out a career for himself."

So how has Nelson reached the NHL? Why did he develop so rapidly after starting college so slowly?

The 6-foot-2, 182-pound Nelson is used to dealing with adversity. He said he's "kind of been behind" and had to "prove himself" at every level.

"I'm close to 6-2," Nelson said. "I graduated high school at about 5-9, 5-10. So that's how it was. I was always playing catchup."

When Nelson joined the Mavericks after three seasons in the junior North American Hockey League, Hastings said he was "raw."

"He skated well, but I think in his words, really not mine, (he's) the prototypical late bloomer," Hastings said. "He just needed some strength and needed a little bit of time to put some substantial muscle on his frame."

Nelson's penchant for "controlling everything he could control" helped buoy his development, Hastings said. That meant asking his coaches to break down film with him, rigorously following a plan in the weight room and eating properly.

Nelson enjoyed a huge sophomore season, compiling seven goals, 33 points and a plus-19 in 40 contests. He was also named the team's most improved player and earned conference second team honors.

The stellar 2014-15 campaign offered the Wisconsin native the opportunity to turn pro last year.

"I think that would've been kind of far-fetched, because I know I wasn't ready," Nelson said. "I had to have another big summer last summer just to get to the point where I am right now. It was kind of a stepping stone for my sophomore year, a good decision to go back, that's for sure."

Around Christmastime, in the midst of a strong junior season, Nelson decided he wanted to stay another year and finish his sports management degree. But he changed his mind about a month ago.

While school is important to Nelson, he said he knows he can get his degree in the future. He's still taking four classes online while he spends the final two weeks with the Sabres.

So what might Nelson, a right-handed shot, showcase this afternoon beside Mark Pysyk, another righty? An anxiety-free game.

"There's really not any (anxiety)," Hastings said about Nelson's style. "He kind of takes what the game gives him, which I think is a real gift. He doesn't force things, whether that's offensively, defensively. I think he sees the game very well and just reacts to it."

Nelson's reaction to some long odds is "a big attribute," Bylsma said.

"Against some difficult situations, he has carved out his game, has carved out his ability ... and he's done that through developing his game," he said.

Sabres rookies Hudson Fasching, Casey Nelson set to debut

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 26, 2016

BUFFALO – Somewhere in Minnesota earlier today, the Fasching family was probably anxiously waiting for Sabres rookie Hudson Fasching to phone home with some special news.

"I think they're kind of ready if they get the call," Fasching said this afternoon inside the First Niagara Center.

Minutes after Fasching spoke, following a chat with Sabres coach Dan Bylsma, he likely called his parents to tell them he would be making his NHL debut Saturday afternoon when the Sabres host the Winnipeg Jets.

"I asked Hudson if we needed to get his parents here for tomorrow," Bylsma said. "He's like, 'Yeah, we do.'"

Fasching, 20, won't be alone playing his first NHL game. Bylsma also said defenseman Casey Nelson, 23, will debut against the Jets. Both youngsters signed their entry-level contracts earlier this week.

"Two practices with the team, hopefully they've gotten their feet wet a little bit, gotten the chance to practice with their teammates, practice with the team," Bylsma said. "Hopefully, (it's) as comfortable as you can feel in your first NHL games."

Fasching's debut has been highly anticipated in these parts for a long time. He just finished a stellar career at the University of Minnesota, scoring 20 goals in his junior season.

The 6-foot-2, 216-pound power forward will start Saturday on the right wing beside center David Legwand and Matt Moulson. Fasching could also move around, Bylsma said.

"I think the big thing to see will be adjustment to the pace and the speed," Bylsma said. "He's a good skater, but I think the pace is going to be an adjustment for him. I think at his best he's going to see a big-bodied guy, a physical guy, a power forward type of guy around the net."

Nelson, a free agent from Minnesota State University, will skate on the right side beside Mark Pysyk, Bylsma said.

To make room for the rookies, forward Cal O'Reilly and defenseman Carlo Colaiacovo will be scratched, Bylsma said. Chad Johnson will start in goal.

In other news, rookie goalie Jason Kasdorf (groin) had his first on-ice session today with goalie coach Andrew Allen before his teammates practiced.

Update: The Sabres have signed forward Eric Cornell, the 44th overall pick in 2014, to an entry-level contract, the team announced this afternoon.

Cornell, 19, compiled 27 goals, 56 assists, 83 points and a plus-19 rating in 68 games with the Ontario Hockey League's Peterborough Petes this season, all career highs.

The 6-foot-2, 191-pound Cornell, the Petes' captain, had 70 goals and 213 points in 265 career OHL games.

Former Sabre's spirits high as Jets shuffle off to Buffalo

By Paul Friesen
Winnipeg Sun
March 26, 2016

The atmosphere in the Winnipeg Jets dressing room late Thursday night told you all you needed to know about these "meaningless" late-season games.

The steps were light, the smiles were abundant and the jokes were flying as players savoured their unlikely win over the Los Angeles Kings.

There may not be a Stanley Cup Playoff berth on the line -- and it could be argued losing games right now would be better for the organization, long-term -- but for a professional hockey player the taste of victory is, and always will be, as refreshing as a glass of cold beer on a hot summer day.

"What do you think?" forward Drew Stafford said. "You can answer that one. Yes. Winning cures a lot of things."

Which brings us, and Stafford specifically, to Buffalo.

Saturday marks the 30-year-old's first game back in his old stomping grounds since the blockbuster trade that brought him and Tyler Myers to the Jets and sent Evander Kane to the Sabres just over a year ago.

The shock of the move, even though he knows now it was good for everybody, remains fresh for the man who over the course of nearly a decade knew only of playing for the Sabres.

"I spent nine years there," Stafford said. "Nine years of my life. My son was born there. This profession is so routine-based. You have your same schedule every single day, you go to the same places, see the same people, you're in that bubble together. And then just like that -- it's over.

"Going to a different country -- I had to get passports for my wife. My four-week-old son had to get a passport. Little things like that."

There was a saving grace, though.

Two of them, actually.

A mid-western American who'd gone to high school at Shattuck-St. Mary's in Minnesota, Stafford knew a handful of players on his new team.

And after being on a last-place team for two years, and out of the playoffs for four, Stafford found himself smack-dab in the middle of a playoff race with the Jets.

He and Myers jumped right in, helping the NHL's newest team scratch and claw for its first playoff spot, as its fevered fan base went ballistic.

They weren't in Buffalo anymore.

"I've got nothing but respect for that organization, and I'm very appreciative for the opportunities I got there," Stafford said. "It was time for both parties to move on. It was a healthy thing. I don't have any ill will, or 'I'll show you' attitude, at all."

Neither does Myers, although the big defenceman did reveal Saturday's game would be extra-sweet to win.

That was before he underwent knee surgery this week, ending his season and keeping him from making the trip.

Myers was probably a little less shocked at the trade, but he's no less at home in his new digs.

"We went through so many changes in the last two years I was there. I wasn't too surprised when it happened," Myers said. "It's hard to believe it's been over a year since I played there. It was a good fit coming to Winnipeg. I've really enjoyed my time here. It feels like home being back in Canada, especially. I didn't realize how much I'd like that.

"That's not to say I didn't have a lot of good times in Buffalo, too. Buffalo's a great hockey city."

For Stafford, going back as a Jet will be weird.

He's spoken to me before about how miserable things became there. And some of those feelings might resurface.

"Just losing," he said. "Losing's not fun for anybody. I was on three playoff teams there, so I have some great memories. There's also the bad ones. And the last few years... there's a lot of negativity, a lot of frustration – it's no fun being part of that."

The thing is, he's back to losing again this season.

It doesn't feel the same for him, though.

Disappointed about the year? For sure.

Feeling hopeless? Not a chance.

"If we repeat the same thing for the next three years," Stafford said. "Then we'll see."

Fasching and Nelson to make NHL debuts on Saturday

WGR 550

March 26, 2016

Dan Bylsma announcing after practice Friday that recent NCAA signees Hudson Fasching and Casey Nelson will play Saturday afternoon against the Winnipeg Jets. Carlo Colaiacovo and Cal O'Reilly will be the healthy scratches for the game.

Fasching and Nelson each were signed to contracts earlier this week by the Sabres. They had their first practice with the team Thursday. Fasching has been working in with the 4th line of David Legwand, and Matt Moulson, splitting time with Cal O'Reilly.

Nelson has been rotating in with the defensive pairings. Each saw time on the penalty kill units yesterday.

We will have complete coverage of Fasching's and Nelson's NHL debut on WGR.

Where does Larsson fit in with the Sabres long term?

By Matthew Coller

WGR 550

March 26, 2016

A few days after the Buffalo Sabres traded Jason Pominville to the Minnesota Wild for a first-round pick, goalie Matt Hackett and forward Johan Larsson, Sabres owner Terry Pegula showed up in Rochester to see one of the newly-acquired assets.

Late in the game, Larsson got a pass in front of the net and did not miss. He scored the game-winning goal on a top-shelf wrist shot. After the game, Pegula made his way to the locker room to congratulate Larsson and welcome him to the organization.

Since getting off on the right foot, there have been all sorts of ups and downs for the Swedish center. He was criticized by Ted Nolan last season after showing frustration at his role during limited NHL time. But he kept putting up points in Rochester – 40 in 44 games – then proved to Nolan that he had a point when he finished the season on a hot streak while playing in between Matt Moulson and Tyler Ennis.

While some in the Sabres' front office questioned whether the 23-year-old was big or fast enough to play a defensive-style role, the tape and the numbers showed him making life difficult on opposing centers. In a meeting with WGR staff, Tim Murray said he had "every kind of emotion" regarding Larsson.

In the offseason, new head coach Dan Bylsma noted in several different interviews that he had heard good things from opposing coaches about Larsson. It appeared the young forward would be a big part of the future, adding depth to a much-improved lineup that now included Evander Kane, Ryan O'Reilly, Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart – none of which had been there in 2014-15.

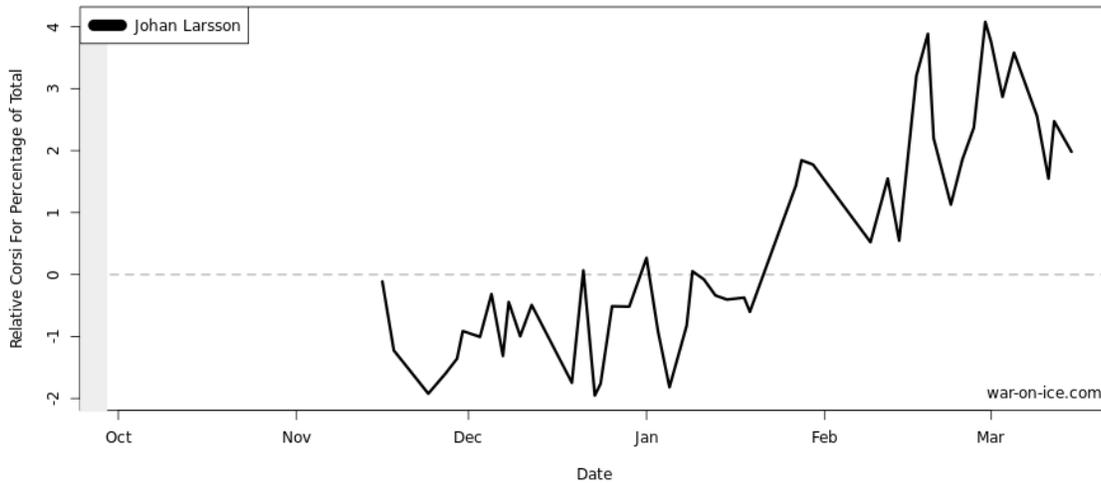
But Larsson struggled at the beginning of the season. Playing on the wing, he was rarely engaged in the game and had trouble retrieving pucks on the forecheck. Even when he did win battles, scoring chances were few and far between. Larsson had just five points in the first 40 games.

Then on Jan. 15, in a game in Boston against the Bruins, Bylsma put the former Wild prospect in between Marcus Foligno and Brian Gionta. While Jack Eichel stole the show in his hometown, Larsson had five shots on goal and the Sabres out-shot attempted the Bruins 18-11 with Larsson on the ice.

"I've felt like we've played good over the last month," Larsson said Friday. "We find each other. We have kind of the same style. We kind of have our role. We just have to keep working until the last game."

Since that game, his puck possession numbers have been growing steadily

Johan Larsson over time

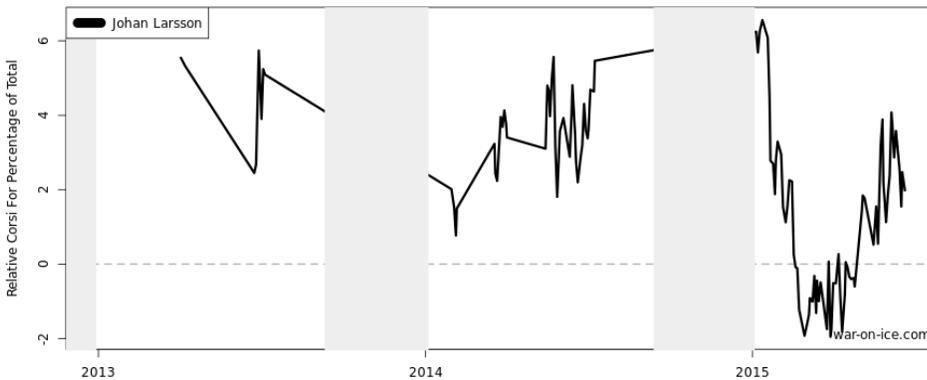


Bylsma hasn't broken up the line since and Larsson's play has taken off. Or maybe his play has just returned to the level where it was last season and where we should expect it to be in the future.

His three-year statistics make Larsson's recent play look much more of the norm than the outlier.

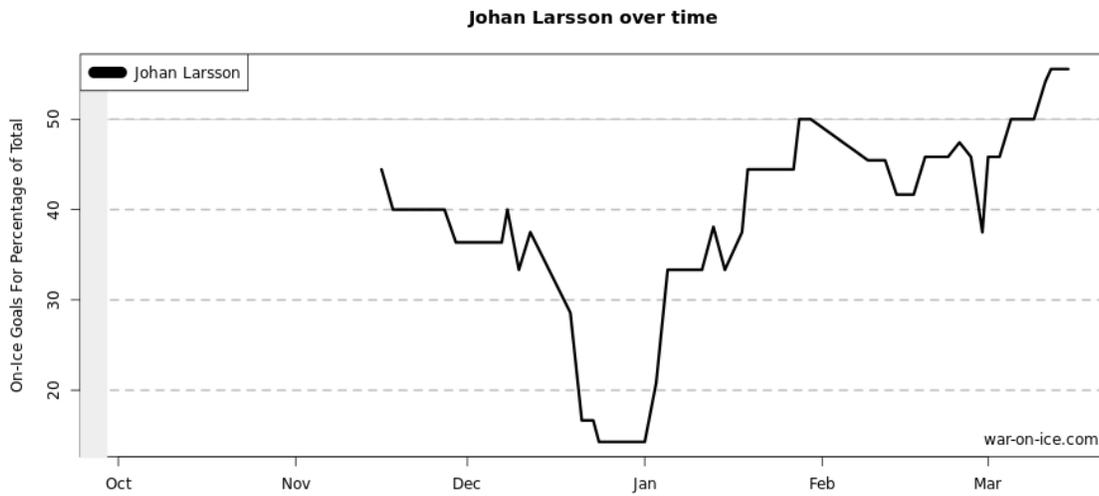
Larsson's Relative Corsi Percentage (On-ice Corsi vs. Off-ice) was exceptional during his time with Nolan, then dipped and has now returned.

Johan Larsson over time

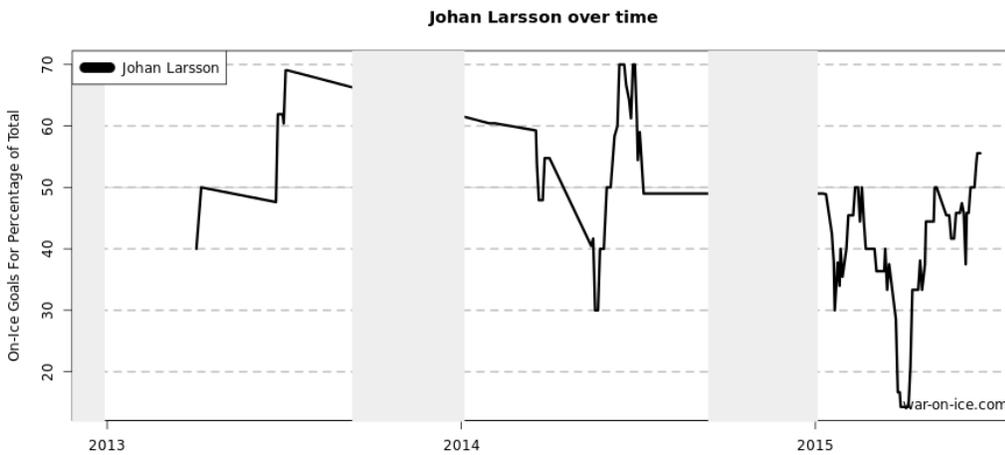


His Goals For Percentage follows a similar pattern.

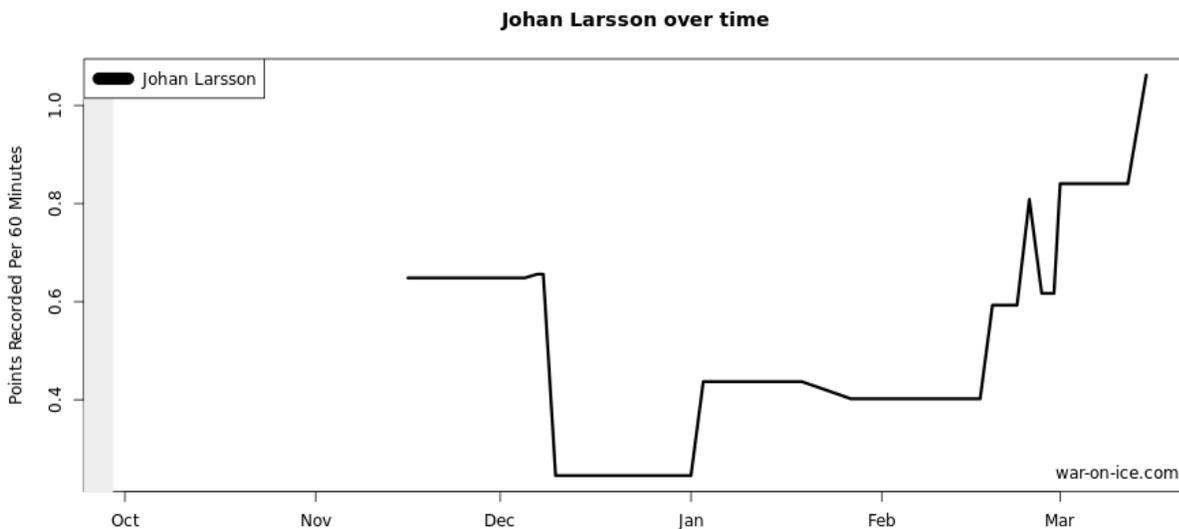
Here is this season



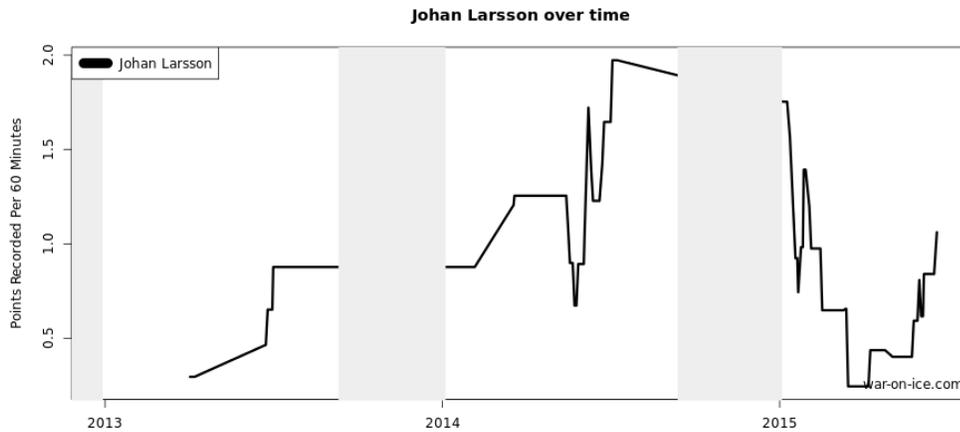
Here is the past three seasons



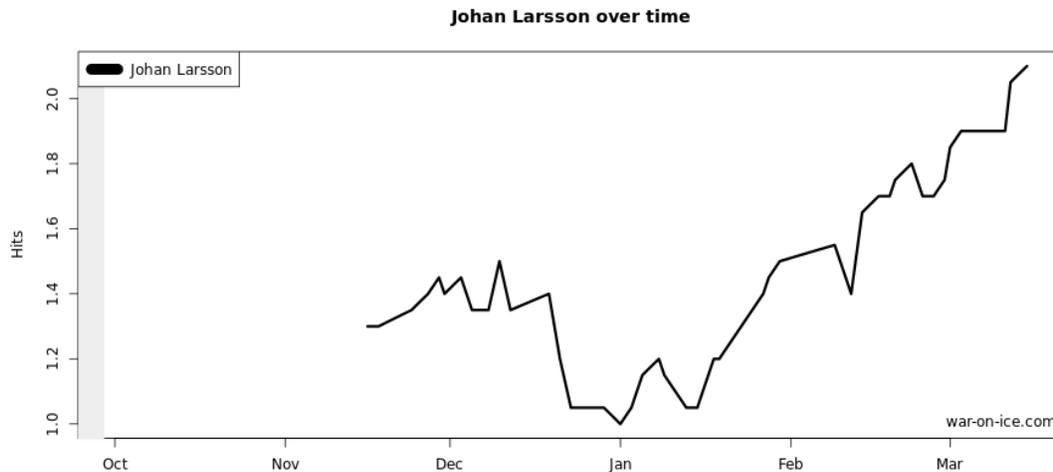
Larsson's individual points per 60 minutes has been rising. Here's this season:



However, the three-year look suggests there is still room to get back to last year's rate.

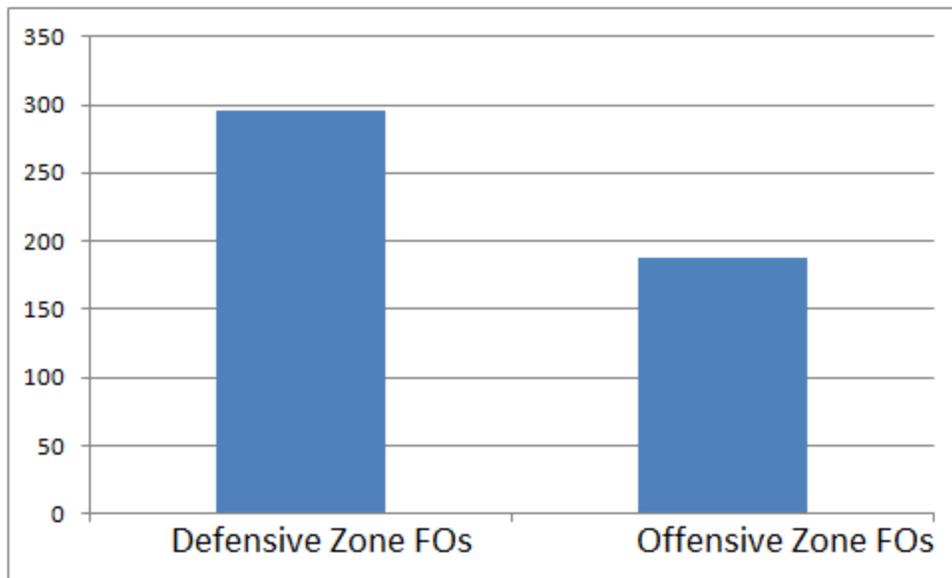


Part of Larsson's rise - as WGR's Paul Hamilton has noted - is an improvement in physical play. When Relative Corsi and hits both go up, you can probably determine the player's physical play has improved.



Bylsma's deployment of Larsson tells the story of how he sees the 23-year-old: As a defensive-minded center. He has often been matched up at home with some of the NHL's best players, including spending 17 minutes on the ice against Sidney Crosby and managing a 53% Corsi. Larsson has also spent 16 minutes against Patrick Kane, 16 against Zach Parise, 20 against Alex Galchenyuk and 17 against Pavel Datsyuk.

Often times, those matchups have come off defensive zone faceoffs.



Of all his faceoffs (Ozone, Dzone, Nzone), only 24.1% have come in the offensive zone, the lowest number of any Sabres player this year.

So what does this say about where he fits in in the future?

Larsson has proven that he is a much better center than winger, which makes things difficult on a team that is stacked with centers. If the Sabres see Zemgus Girgensons as a top six winger as opposed to third line center, that could mean Larsson's spot on the third line as a shutdown center is solidified, but if the Sabres make a "hockey trade" in the offseason for more scoring in the top six, they will have to decide whether they want Girgensons or Larsson at the 3LC position.

Can he score enough to be effective in a third line role? If Larsson can produce at the 1.5 points per 60 minutes at 5v5 rate that he did last season, he would be a solid top-nine forward, comparable to Mikael Backlund of Calgary or Andrew Shaw of the Blackhawks. However, Larsson's three-year P/60 rate is only 0.85, which puts him in the range of fourth liners like Steve Ott and Paul Gaustad.

If he ultimately turns out to be a fourth-line center, that may be just fine. The NHL has changed from the days of fourth-liners being either borderline AHLers or tough guys. Most of the league's top contenders have fourth-line centers who can be used as defensive players and also produce. His raw total of goals and assists may depend on which role he lands on. If he is a third-liner, 25-30 points per season may be a reasonable expectation, while on the fourth line 20 would be the max.

Whether he is on the third or fourth line in the future, his extended stretch of strong play indicates he should be part of the immediate future.

Newest Sabre needed the dictionary fast

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 26, 2016

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- Thursday we heard from Hudson Fasching about becoming a Sabre so today let's find out about free agent signee Casey Nelson.

Nelson had been here before, but he had to consult Webster or Google to find out how to spell a key thing, "Since I was little I haven't really had much of a favorite team and I didn't even know how to spell Sabres right away so I had to look it up."

Nelson was never drafted so he was a sought after free agent defenseman that wound up getting just a one year deal because of his age. He will become a restricted free agent July 1.

Buffalo has very little defensive depth on the pro level as they go eight deep with Chad Ruhwedel. Nelson chose Buffalo because he saw opportunity, "I love the city, been here once before, I think it was a good fit for me, I love the coaches and staff and they've got great management, so I think it was just a great fit for me." Nelson added, "There were quite a few teams, but we narrowed it down pretty quick."

When Minnesota State got eliminated, Nelson's agent had to work fast. He said it was a tense process, "It was nerve wracking, that's for sure. I didn't have much time to do it, it was kind of a quick turnaround after we lost on Saturday, but it's an exciting time and I'm just here to learn and soak things in."

Unless you're a big college hockey fan, you probably have never seen the Wisconsin native play. He said there's one thing he does the best, "Probably my skating, I think I get up and down the ice pretty well. Other than that probably hockey sense, so yah, that's what I've been told."

Dan Bylsma saw them before they hit the ice today. He said, "I got to see them yesterday, I went on the ice with Hudson and Casey. My first impressions were yesterday they had some nerves."

His coach also noticed Nelson's skating right away, "I really liked the way he skated, I really liked way he moved and with confidence."

"His hockey card says he's 6'2 and weighs around 180, but yesterday and today on the ice he looks a lot bigger than that and it's really because of the way he skates."

Nelson wasn't drafted and he said there was a big reason why, "I was a very late bloomer, my freshman year I was kind of thrown in pretty early, couldn't handle it, was out of the lineup for a while. I've had to fight my through each step here."

Bylsma said there's an eye to get him in a game, but wouldn't commit to Saturday.

Former Sabre Tyler Myers won't make his return to Buffalo on Saturday. Winnipeg announced Myers is out four to five months with knee and hip surgeries.

In 73 games this season Myers scored nine goals and 18 assists for 27 points.

Drew Stafford will be making his return to Buffalo. In 69 games he has 19 goals and 15 assists for 34 points.

Fasching, Nelson to make NHL debuts on Saturday

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 26, 2016

One week removed from playing in college and with just two team practices under their belts, Hudson Fasching and Casey Nelson will both make their NHL debuts for the Buffalo Sabres at home Saturday afternoon against the Winnipeg Jets.

Fasching and Nelson signed their entry-level deals with Buffalo on Monday and Wednesday, respectively. Both completed their junior seasons in the NCAA on Saturday – Fasching with the University of Minnesota and Nelson with Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Fasching, 20, hadn't yet found out whether he would when he spoke after practice on Friday, but he had no trouble summoning the words as to what it might mean if he did.

"It's something that I've dreamed about since I was a little kid," he said. "I've put in a lot of hard work, my family and I have sacrificed a lot to get here. It means the world to me."

While Sabres coach Dan Bylsma left open the possibility for him to move throughout the lineup as the game progresses, Fasching will start the game on the right wing alongside Matt Moulson and center David Legwand. Fasching spent time in the past as a linemate of Jack Eichel's with the U.S. National Development Team.

Nelson, meanwhile, will play on the right side of a defensive pair with Mark Pysyk. Cal O'Reilly and Carlo Colaiacovo will be healthy scratches to make room in the lineup.

"We don't have a lot of practices going forward," Bylsma said. "We're playing the back-to-back games on the road in Detroit and Pittsburgh [next week] so part of that played into the equation for the opportunity, when they got it and when they were going to get it."

"Two practices with the team, hopefully they've gotten their feet wet a little bit, gotten a chance to practice with their teammates, practice with the team and hopefully [they'll be] as comfortable as you can feel in your first NHL game."

One player who knows how they'll be feeling is defenseman Jake McCabe, who played seven games at the end of the 2013-14 season after completing his third year at the University of Wisconsin. McCabe joined the team on a flight to St. Louis, scared of the situation and not really knowing his teammates.

"You're nervous," he said. "You're walking on an NHL team and guys are looking at you, they're obviously not thrilled with where they're at in the standings and then here comes a college kid with no experience and thrown into the fire kind of thing. But it was a good experience and I think it'll be good for those guys too."

With that in mind, McCabe and the other Sabres have made it a point to help the newcomers feel welcome over the past few days.

"I know exactly where they're coming from," he said. "It's uncomfortable, but we have a great group of guys here in the room ... It's a weird thing, but I think that they'll be better from it and I think our veterans guys – and us young guys even – will welcome them with open arms."

Fasching and Nelson at least have some familiarity on their side, though in different ways. Fasching was acquired in a trade with the Los Angeles Kings in March 2014 and had the opportunity to spend time in Buffalo at Development Camps this past summer along with the likes of Eichel, McCabe and Sam Reinhart.

Nelson's familiarity, meanwhile, stems more from experience. The 23-year-old defenseman has had to prove himself at every level to this point, from earning a walk-on role at Minnesota State after three years in the North American Hockey League to becoming a premier undrafted free agent after struggling in his freshman year.

"I think it's a big attribute for Casey that he has been able to – against some long odds, against some difficult situations – he has carved out his game, he's carved out his ability," Bylsma said. "He's gone from being a walk-on to a huge part of a team in three years and one of the most sought after college free agent now.

"He's done that through hard work, he's done that through development of his game and he's got an older age to him I guess than a young kid but he's really defying the odds right now in terms of making the NHL and I think he's going to find a way to carve out a career for himself."

Chad Johnson will be the starter in net for Buffalo on Saturday. Coverage 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.

KASDORF HITS THE ICE

Goalie Jason Kasdorf skated on Friday for the first time since signing his entry-level deal on March 14, a delay caused by a groin injury he sustained at the end of his season with Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

Kasdorf spent time working with goalies coach Andrew Allen and then took shots along with fellow goaltenders Johnson and Nathan Lieuwen at the beginning of practice.

"It was really good," Kasdorf said. "We just wanted to test it out, see how I felt and it obviously felt a lot better so it was really nice just to see a couple pucks and be skating again after two weeks."

The weeks since he signed have been bittersweet for Kasdorf. On one hand there's the excitement of being with an NHL organization; on the other there's the frustration of not being able to practice due to injury.

In the meantime, he's been watching the Sabres' goalies closely every day at practice and creating a relationship with them off the ice. He said he's already learned from watching Johnson's collected, limited-movement style.

"I've gotten to know them quite well," he said. "I really like them and they've been really nice to me with kind of helping me out with whatever I need. Obviously Chad being a college guy as well, he's had lots of good stuff for me."

FRIDAY'S LINES

9 Evander Kane – 90 Ryan O'Reilly – 44 Nicolas Deslauriers
28 Zemgus Girgensons – 15 Jack Eichel – 23 Sam Reinhart
82 Marcus Foligno – 22 Johan Larsson – 12 Brian Gionta
26 Matt Moulson – 17 David Legwand – 52 Hudson Fasching/19 Cal O'Reilly

4 Josh Gorges – 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
29 Jake McCabe – 47 Zach Bogosian
3 Mark Pysyk – 34 Casey Nelson/25 Carlo Colaiacovo

31 Chad Johnson
50 Nathan Lieuwen