



Buffalo Sabres

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Flames-Sabres Preview

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Hope for the future for the Buffalo Sabres and Calgary Flames revolves around Jack Eichel and Johnny Gaudreau.

These teams have the second-worst records in their respective conferences, and the visiting Flames have lost a season-high six straight as they look to sweep the Sabres on Thursday night.

Buffalo (25-31-8) and Calgary (26-33-4) won't be going to the postseason. That's something the Sabres likely expected after four straight absences resulted in them selecting second in the draft and choosing Eichel. It's more disappointing for the Flames, who ended a five-season playoff drought in 2014-15 and defeated Vancouver in the first round.

In any case, Thursday's matchup will feature two of the NHL's rising young talents in Eichel and Gaudreau. They each won the Hobey Baker Award as the top college player in the country, with Gaudreau claiming that honor in 2014 for Boston College and Eichel the next season for Boston University.

Gaudreau was the star when they first met with the winning goal with 4:50 left in a 4-3 victory Dec. 10, also assisting on Sean Monahan's go-ahead score with 10:35 remaining. Eichel was held without a point.

The Sabres rookie has failed to add to his 41-point total in five straight after Tuesday's 2-1 overtime home loss to Edmonton, in which top overall pick Connor McDavid scored the winner.

"We didn't play well at all," Eichel said. "It started with the way we came out. We just didn't do a lot of good things as a team."

Eichel's five-game point drought has coincided with Ryan O'Reilly going down with a lower-body injury Feb. 19. O'Reilly leads the Sabres with 49 points, and Eichel had five points in a four-game run in the last four games they played together.

Buffalo is enduring a 1-3-1 stretch, but that's better than Calgary's recent play. The Flames are 0-5-1 in their skid after falling 2-1 at Boston on Tuesday.

Gaudreau came up empty as his eight-game streak in which he amassed 12 points ended. Rookie defenseman Jakub Nakladal scored the lone goal.

Nakladal won't be the only young player seeing action down the stretch. Garnet Hathaway has played twice as a rookie while Jyrki Jokipakka made his Flames debut Tuesday after being acquired from Dallas.

"We're going to see a lot about the character on this hockey club," coach Bob Hartley told the team's official website. "We have a lot. Guys like Jokipakka and Hathaway and all those guys, they are coming in and they want to make a name for themselves and we have some players that need to put some money in the bank. There is no reason to quit and obviously we're not going to accept anyone quitting."

Four defeats during the slide have been by one or two goals.

"Nobody likes losing and that's what has been happening here lately," Gaudreau said. "We have to change it. I think four or five games could have been the opposite way around."

The Flames acquired goaltender Niklas Backstrom from Minnesota on Monday, but Jonas Hiller is expected to start.

Ristolainen to suit up for Finland in World Cup

By Jay Skurski

Buffalo News

March 3, 2016

Rasmus Ristolainen knows what it's like to star on the international stage.

The Buffalo Sabres' defenseman scored the game-winning goal for Finland in overtime of the 2014 gold-medal game against Sweden at the World Juniors.

He'll get another chance at heroics with his home county in September, when he suits up in the World Cup. Ristolainen was one of 16 players named to the Finnish club Wednesday, as participating teams made initial roster announcements.

"It's always a pleasure," Ristolainen said of playing for his native land. "It's a huge tournament, all the best players there, so it's going to be exciting."

Ristolainen said he had an inkling he was going to be named to the team, but that didn't make the official announcement any less special.

"It's huge," he said. "It's always nice. A big tournament like this, we have a good team as always. We try to win the tournament every time, that's for sure."

The World Cup will be held in Toronto in September and feature eight teams. The timing of the tournament – before the regular season – is a change from the Olympics, for example, which take place during the year.

"I hope it's good timing," Ristolainen said. "I can't say yet, it's the first time. I haven't done it, so let's see. But I think it's good. Then the camp is after the tournament, so you're already in very good shape, so it's kind of good."

Ristolainen, 21, has blossomed in his second full season with the Sabres, becoming Buffalo's workhorse on the blue line. He's averaging a team-best 25:20 of ice time per game and is third on the team with 35 points.

"It's deserved," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. I'm "real happy for him. He's a young player, but coming into his own this year. He's stepped from being a younger player into a full-time, legitimate NHL player, and I think it shows in his selection."

Ristolainen, however, wasn't exactly ready to throw a party Wednesday. He's been unhappy with his play recently, having failed to score a goal in the last 22 games, dating back to Jan. 12. He's compiled a minus-6 rating in Buffalo's last five games.

"It's not where it should be," he said of the current state of his game. "The start of the year was good. Of course everyone wants to be better and better and play better all the time. That didn't happen. I'm not playing the level right now I want to play. We have 18 games so I want to have a good end to the year."

Ristolainen ruled out fatigue as a reason for his recent struggles.

"It's hard to know exactly the reason," he said. "If I would, I probably would change it already. It's just try to play simple, start simple, and then hopefully get it going again."

Bylsma believes that Ristolainen has tried to do too much over the past dozen or so games.

"We've really pushed Rasmus and his game to get better and to keep getting better," he said. "I think in the last little bit tried to do a little bit too much with his offense, a little bit too much with the puck and run into some problems in his game. ... Maybe less is more from him right now in his game and what he's trying to accomplish."

Ristolainen is a pending restricted free agent, meaning Sabres General Manager Tim Murray has a decision to make. Does he offer a bridge deal, or try and hammer out a long-term extension?

"I haven't talked or thought anything about it," Ristolainen said of his contract status. "I really can't do anything. I just try to play as good as I can, and then let's see what happens."

Ristolainen cracked a slight smile when asked if he was aware of the contract recently signed by Pittsburgh's Olli Maatta, a fellow 21-year-old defenseman named Wednesday to Team Finland.

Maatta received a six-year, \$24.4 million extension with the Penguins last week.

"I didn't really think much," Ristolainen said. "Good for him. Nice contract, obviously."

Jake McCabe avoids serious injury after leaving Tuesday's loss to Edmonton

By Jay Skurski
Buffalo News
March 3, 2016

Jake McCabe looked worse than he felt Wednesday.

The Buffalo Sabres' defenseman sported a shiner on his left eye and cuts both below and above it – the result of a hit that McCabe actually delivered Tuesday night during a 2-1 loss to Edmonton.

McCabe laid out Oilers forward Nail Yakupov in the third period, but took the worst of the collision when Yakupov's helmet came up and hit McCabe in the face.

"He tried to cut to the middle and I hit him and as you can see on my face, his helmet went right in my head and just kind of shocked me a little bit," McCabe said. "But I came back in here and passed all my concussion tests and no symptoms since, so all is well."

With McCabe able to practice Wednesday afternoon, the Sabres had six healthy defensemen on the ice. Cody Franson remains out, as do forwards Ryan O'Reilly and Tyler Ennis.

Since playing a season-low 9:34 against Florida on Feb. 9, McCabe's ice time has shot up. He's skated more than 20 minutes in six of the last 10 games, and has two assists and a plus-3 rating in that time.

Speaking Monday following the NHL trade deadline, Sabres General Manager Tim Murray said McCabe has made "huge strides."

"It's good to hear, but kind of from Day One we've all been saying that's what we want to do is improve each and every day," said McCabe, 22. "Throughout this locker room we've made improvements. We've had stretches of really good play. We just need to start getting over that hump and winning hockey games and learning how to win. I'm young and we've got a lot of young guys in this room and we just got to learn how to win and just continue to grow in that area."

That didn't happen against the Oilers, with McCabe lamenting the number of turnovers committed by the defense.

"It's one of those things where we got away from what we were doing well and we need to get back on track tomorrow night," he said. "We've got to put the onus on us defenseman. We've got to be quarterbacks of the transition game. We want to move the puck quick north and get established in their offensive zone. ... As defensemen, we need to do a better job of getting in their zone and establishing a transition game."

Sabres notebook: Goaltender Lehner confident support from offense will come

By Jay Skurski
Buffalo News
March 3, 2016

Robin Lehner has faced 105 shots in his last three games.

The Buffalo Sabres' goalie has stopped 100 of them – a save percentage of .952.

Despite that astronomical number, Lehner's record in that time is 0-3. The primary reason, of course, is a lack of goal support at the other end. Lehner's teammates have managed to score just one goal in those three games. That came during Tuesday night's 2-1 loss to the Edmonton Oilers at First Niagara Center.

"We're working hard, it's just not going in right now," Lehner said after practice Wednesday. "For me, I just try to take it save by save right now and do my best."

Against Edmonton, Lehner stopped 39 of 41 shots, giving up a pair of goals to rookie superduperstar Connor McDavid. The first of those came just 22 seconds into the game after a Buffalo turnover allowed McDavid to skate in alone. The last ended the game in overtime, on a backhander Lehner probably wishes he had back.

"They came out strong. We ... gave them a little bit too much space," Lehner said. "They had a lot of good chances. They're a fast team. They took advantage of their speed. They really forced us to make a lot of mistakes yesterday. I think they wheeled around our 'D' like five times."

One of those came on McDavid's overtime winner, when he shot down the right wing around defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen for the game-winning goal.

"He has tremendous speed," Lehner said of McDavid. "I think he's going to cut in and go far post, and then he catches me in a transition, which is unfortunate. You give a team 41-plus shots and a lot of chances, you're going to make some mistakes."

The problem right now is Lehner can't afford any of them. The Sabres are stuck in a serious goal-scoring slump, with just 12 in their last seven games.

Lehner said Wednesday he'd be lying if he said that hasn't changed his approach.

"When we're scoring a lot usually you can play a little bit looser as a goalie," he said. "A mistake might not be as costly, but I'm trying to stay calm. It's just been a little tough period offensively for us. We're battling hard, it's just not going in for us right now. That's frustrating."

By now, Sabres fans are well aware that Lehner wears his emotions on his sleeve. But Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said that hasn't been an issue.

"I don't sense any frustration or any thought about the lack of goal support for Robin right now," the coach said. "His mindset, his demeanor, he's been strong and consistent in net."

Lehner has made only 16 starts this season, so Bylsma is still learning about him as a goalie.

"He's the only one I've ever had who has come to the bench and been a cheerleader for the team and a guy who's prodding the guys forward," Bylsma said.

In his 16 games, Lehner has a .933 save percentage and 2.29 goals-against average. That save percentage would lead the league if he had enough games played to qualify.

"He's definitely doing his part, that's for sure," Sabres winger Evander Kane said. "As a team, we need to find ways to get more opportunities – get more Grade-A opportunities, and find ways to just get everybody involved in the offense."

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The Sabres will be represented by at least a pair of players in the upcoming World Cup.

Following defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen's selection to Team Finland earlier Wednesday, rookie center Jack Eichel joined Team North America later in the day.

Eichel is one of 16 players named to the North American squad – a collection of players from both the United States and Canada who are 23 years old and younger. That will make teammates out of players who have grown up competing against each other in international competition.

"It's never warm and fuzzy when it's a U.S.-Canada game," Eichel said during an appearance Wednesday afternoon on NHL Network after being named to the team, before quickly adding, "it's going to be great."

Other notable players named to the North American team include the Oilers' McDavid, Red Wings rookie Dylan Larkin, Avalanche forward Nathan McKinnon and Flames forward Johnny Gaudreau, as well as Panthers defenseman Aaron Ekblad.

Given the North Americans' depth at center, the possibility exists that Eichel could shift to wing. That's something he said he's comfortable with.

"Nowadays most forwards are pretty versatile," Eichel said. "If I have to play wing, I'm more than comfortable doing that."

The Sabres could still have other players named to World Cup rosters. Center Ryan O'Reilly is a candidate for Team Canada, while fellow rookie Sam Reinhart could join Eichel on Team North America for the competition in September.

After Tuesday's much-hyped matchup against McDavid, Eichel had what Bylsma referred to as his "best practice in a while" Wednesday.

"I thought he showed a lot of spunk and a lot of speed in practice today," he said. "I was wondering if it was in response."

Flames aim to end skid against Sabres

By Tim Wharmsby

NHL.com

March 3, 2016

FLAMES (26-33-4) at SABRES (25-31-8)

TV: 7 p.m. ET; MSG-B, SN360, NHL-TV

Season series: The Calgary Flames defeated the Buffalo Sabres 4-3 at Scotiabank Saddledome on Dec. 10. Sean Monahan scored twice and set up Johnny Gaudreau for the game-winning goal with 4:34 remaining. Rasmus Ristolainen scored a hat trick for the Sabres.

Flames team scope: Calgary stayed overnight because of inclement weather after a 2-1 loss to the Boston Bruins on Tuesday. The Flames had a scheduled day off, but did not arrive in Buffalo until 1 p.m. ET. Goalie Joni Ortio has started four of the past five games. The Flames have gone 1-8-1 in their past 10. "Nobody likes losing and that's what has been happening here lately," Gaudreau told the Flames website. "We have to change it. I think four or five games could have been the opposite way around. We are losing by one or two goals by every single game. If we get a couple of bounces here we might get a couple of wins." Gaudreau had an eight-game point streak end Tuesday.

Sabres team scope: Defenseman Jake McCabe will play despite a bruised left eye and facial cuts as the result from a third-period collision with Edmonton Oilers forward Nail Yakupov in a 2-1 overtime loss on Tuesday. McCabe left the game with three minutes remaining and did not return, but he did practice on Wednesday. Forwards Tyler Ennis (upper body), Ryan O'Reilly (lower body) and defenseman Cody Franson (neck) are out. Goalie Robin Lehner has stopped 100 of 105 shots in his past three starts, but the Sabres have scored once in the three losses. "We're in a bit of a funk right now offensively," forward Evander Kane told the Buffalo News. "We need to get over it quickly. Obviously our goaltending, if that continues, we're going to be in good shape if we start putting some goals in the back of the net."

Sabres' anemic offense wasting strong goaltending efforts

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 3, 2016

BUFFALO – In his last three starts, goalie Robin Lehner has been the Sabres' backbone, stopping 100 of the 105 shots opponents have pumped on him, a gaudy .952 save percentage.

For his efforts, thanks to just a single goal of support, Lehner earned zero wins.

"It's frustrating to let those (performances) go to waste," Sabres winger Marcus Foligno said Wednesday.

For the first time since 2010-11, the Sabres could have four players – Jack Eichel, Evander Kane, Ryan O'Reilly and Sam Reinhart – reach the 20-goal mark.

Still, those talented forwards have accounted for 69 of the team's 147 goals – 47 percent – through 64 games entering tonight's home tilt against the Calgary Flames inside the First Niagara Center.

Right now, only a handful of players contribute to the Sabres' 29th-ranked offense (2.3 goals a game). They receive little secondary scoring. Despite adding some frontline talent this season, the offense is still anemic.

After dispersing many of their best players, the Sabres set a full-season NHL record-low by scoring only 150 goals two seasons ago. They upped that to 153 last year. This season, of course, they've improved, albeit it only marginally considering the pathetic teams they fielded for two years.

At their current pace, the Sabres would score just 188 times over 82 games, the third-lowest full-season total in franchise history. They've been shut out or held to one goal in eight of the last 18 games.

Why is the offense, which has 38 power-play goals, so weak? Most notably, several players' production has fallen off a cliff.

Consider:

– Winger Matt Moulson, a three-time 30-goal scorer, has five goals all season and only one goal in 51 games since Nov. 1.

– Fresh off two straight 20-goal seasons, winger Tyler Ennis scored three goals in 23 games before suffering a concussion Dec. 30. He hasn't played since.

– After scoring 15 goals in 61 games last year, winger Zemgus Girgensons has five goals in 53 appearances.

– Center Johan Larsson has three goals and seven points in 57 games. The Swede had three goals and six points in a five-game stretch last March.

– The Sabres have received just 21 goals from their defensemen. Rasmus Ristolainen has scored eight.

Becoming a five-man attack more consistently would greatly help the Sabres.

"That's something ... we need to do a better job of, jumping up in the rush and making sure we're all part of the offense," said Kane, who skates on the Sabres' only true scoring line beside Eichel, the center, and Reinhart.

The Sabres currently don't possess enough healthy talent to score regularly, coach Dan Bylsma said.

Ennis, despite his slump, likely would've started scoring at a better clip given his past exploits. The Sabres have only seven goals in five games since O'Reilly, the team's lone NHL All-Star and top center, hurt his right foot.

"You're taking out guys, who career-wise, have put up 50-point years, 20-goal seasons," Bylsma said. "When you don't have that, now you have to manufacture goals in different ways. I don't think we can expect to get our goals with pretty goals or tic-tac-toe."

"We have to manufacture them with good old-fashioned grit and good-old fashioned pucks and bodies to the net. That is what I expect from the team. We should be able to do that with the group we have."

In Tuesday's 2-1 overtime loss to Edmonton, the Sabres' first game after trading 14-goal winger Jamie McGinn to Anaheim, they dressed four players – forwards Dan Catenacci and Cal O'Reilly and defensemen Carlo Colaiacovo and Mark Pysyk – with zero goals this season.

O'Reilly scored his first NHL goal since Dec. 21, 2011 in the third period, ending the Sabres' 110-minute drought.

"We're in a funk right now scoring goals," Foligno said. "We're really not getting more than one right now, so it's pretty frustrating."

That's partly why Lehner's record is 4-7-3 overall despite having a sparkling 2.29 goals-against average and a .933 save percentage. The Sabres have been shut out or scored one goal nine times in his 16 starts.

"I don't sense any frustration or any thought about the lack of (goal) support for Robin right now," Bylsma said. "In his mindset and his demeanor, he's been strong and consistent in net."

Sabres' Rasmus Ristolainen earns World Cup spot

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 3, 2016

BUFFALO – Forget, for a moment, that Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen has a minus-6 rating in the last five contests and hasn't scored a goal in 22 games.

Ristolainen, 21, has mostly enjoyed a stellar campaign, becoming his team's ace defender while skating more than 25 minutes a game. Finland rewarded Ristolainen's breakout season today, naming him to its initial roster for the 2016 World Cup.

"It's always a pleasure," Ristolainen said. "It's a huge tournament."

Ristolainen, having scored the winner that clinched world junior gold two years ago, is already a hero in his country.

"It's deserved," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "(I'm) real happy for him. He's a young player, but coming into his own this year, he's stepped from being a younger player into a full-time, legitimate NHL player."

Ristolainen has eight goals, 35 points and a minus-18 rating in 64 games this season. He ranks third on the Sabres in scoring.

Still, Ristolainen has clearly slipped recently. He hasn't scored since Jan. 12, a stretch in which he has only seven assists.

"It's not there where it should be," Ristolainen said. "The start of the year was good."

What has happened? Ristolainen said he doesn't feel fatigued.

Bylsma said the coaches have spoken to him about his struggles over the last 10 or 12 games.

"We've really pushed Rasmus and his game to get better and to keep getting better," he said. "I think in the last little bit tried to do a little bit too much with his offense, a little bit too much with the puck and run into some problems with his game."

He added: "Maybe less is more from him right now in his game and what he's trying to accomplish."

General manager Tim Murray said earlier this week the Sabres haven't had any discussions about a new contract with Ristolainen, a restricted free agent following the season.

Pittsburgh defenseman Olli Maatta, who's the same age and a comparable player to Ristolainen, signed a six-year contract worth more than \$24 million last week.

Ristolainen seemed aware of Maatta's new deal, which could set a benchmark.

In other news, defenseman Jake McCabe, who left Tuesday's 2-1 loss to Edmonton after hitting Nail Yakupov late, practiced this afternoon inside the First Niagara Center. McCabe said he passed concussion protocols.

Meanwhile, rookie center Jack Eichel, who almost scored in overtime before Connor McDavid, the phenom picked ahead of him, netted the winner, had "his best practice in a while," Bylsma said.

"I thought he showed a lot of spunk and a lot of speed in practice today," he said. "I was wondering if it was in response."

Eichel is expected to be named to the North America Under-23 team for the World Cup later today.

Update: Eichel has officially been named.

Sabres' Eichel joins Ristolainen at the World Cup of Hockey

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 3, 2016

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- A second Sabre has been named to the World Cup of Hockey. Jack Eichel is on Team North America joining Rasmus Ristolainen who's on Team Finland.

Team North America is made of of players from the United States and Canada under the age of 23.

Eichel of course was the 2nd overall pick in 2015.

Others on the roster for now are:

Connor McDavid Edm. (1st overall 2015)
Aaron Ekblad Flor. (1st overall 2014)
Dylan Larkin Det. (15th overall 2014)
Nathan MacKinnon Col. (1st overall 2013)
Seth Jones Clm. (4th overall 2013)
Sean Monahan Calg. (6th overall 2013)
Ryan Murray Clm. (2nd overall 2012)
Morgan Rielly Tor. (5th overall 2012)
Matt Murray Pitt. (83rd overall 2012)
Connor Hellebuyck Winn. (130th overall 2012)
Sean Couturier Phil. (8th overall 2011)
J.T. Miller N.Y.R. (15th overall 2011)
John Gibson Ana. (39th overall 2011)
Brandon Saad Clm. (43rd overall 2011)
Johnny Gaudreau Calg. (104th overall 2011)

Some former Sabres have made the tournament. Thomas Vanek and Andrej Sekera have made Team Europe. The General Manager of that team is Miroslav Satan.

Goaltender Michal Neuvirth made Team Czech Republic.

Sabres' Ristolainen very happy to be selected for Finland

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 3, 2016

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- At age 21 Rasmus Ristolainen has already established himself as Buffalo's number one defenseman for years to come. Yes, I know he's struggled lately, but this kid averages over 25 minutes per game and will only get better.

Ristolainen has been named to Team Finland for the World Cup of Hockey. He said, "It's always a pleasure, it's a huge tournament and all the best players will be there so it's going to be exciting."

Most players will tell you that there's no better feeling than playing for your country. Ristolainen said, "It's huge, it's always nice and we have a good team as always and we try to win the tournament every time, that's for sure."

Getting back to Ristolainen's game, defensively he's had some tough outings. Last night Ristolainen killed off the full two minute penalty in overtime. Dan Bylsma called a timeout for 30 seconds and put him right back out there. Connor McDavid wasn't going to be on the ice until Bylsma called the timeout so on came McDavid and on came a still tired Ristolainen. McDavid blew around him like he wasn't even there and won the game. Ristolainen does not think he's playing well, "It's not there where it should be. At the start of the year it was good and I am not playing at the level right now that I want to play." The defenseman added, "I have 19 (18) games left, so I want to have a good end for the year."

I wondered if he was getting tired, but he nor his coach think that's the case, "I don't feel anything, when you have days like today you have to have a good recovery, rest well and eat well so then you're ready to go tomorrow."

Ristolainen hasn't scored a goal in 21 games after going on a 20 games hot streak. Dan Bylsma thinks he's pressing towards the offensive side, "We've talked about it at length with Risto over the last 10 to 12 games, I think we've really pushed Rasmus in his game to get better and I think he's in the last little bit tried to do too much with his offense, a little too much with the puck and has run into some problems with his game in that regard and maybe less is more right now from him and his game."

The Sabres got an overtime penalty when Evander Kane wasn't even close to the bench and Zemgus Girgensons went on. I've been very critical of Kane and some others all season with the way they glide to the bench forcing the changing player to wait. The odd time it has led to odd man rushes and even a goal or two. Dan Bylsma said it has been talked about, "We're looking at our shift lengths being under 50 seconds, in the 45 second range for that reason, you can't overextend yourself and stay on the ice and then struggle to get off."

"He's not the only person we've talked about that and doing that, but I don't think last night that was the situation we were in. He probably was on the ice too long, played in the D zone. We changed, I'd say prematurely, but that would probably be too soon. That was about a 100 foot change, Evander was on the goal line when we jumped on the ice, it wasn't even close."

C'mon coach

By Chris Parker

WGR 550

March 3, 2016

We've got an American kid and a Canadian kid. The American kid plays for the American team. The Canadian kid plays for the Canadian team. They were chosen one and two in the most recent NHL Draft. They have been compared and measured against one another for almost two years, if not longer. Your guy even told his new team he felt they actually won the lottery despite settling for picking him second. We know because the team showed us the video. Nothing about Eichel vs. McDavid is "made up".

So, put him on the ice to start the game. I know you probably had meetings about how you wanted to match up with McDavid and that job was going to go to Johan Larsson. Fine, I get it. You're a coach and coaches coach so coach away. Is it too much to ask to at least wait until after the first shift of the first game of their NHL careers against each other?

Dan Bylsma has worked hard in a professional life devoted to hockey and for that he is to be commended. Commitment and sacrifice mark the time in a life like that and I have massive respect for all of it. But how about some respect for the fans and some gratitude for the life pro hockey now provides you?

Somehow, sometimes I'd even say amazingly, people still care a lot about the NHL despite an all too after less than exciting product. Fans pay to come see these games and generate the revenues that provide the salaries to players and coaches alike. I know Bylsma just got here. That said, he should know that there hasn't exactly been much to cheer about the past few years and with his first edition of the Sabres being where they are in the standings fans are actually beginning to debate whether or not losing these games would be better than winning.

Again, I know, ugh.

So do us all a solid next time and have some sense of the moment. Nobody's demanding the Stanley Cup right now or barely even a playoff spot. They wanted to see Eichel start the game against McDavid for symbolism's sake. Because it might have actually been a cool and dare I say fun moment in an arena that last year saw Sabres fans wildly cheering Arizona goals.

For Ristolainen, playing for Finland is always a pleasure

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 3, 2016

Rasmus Ristolainen has already worn the Finnish sweater a number of times, most notably when he scored the winning goal in overtime for his home country in the Gold Medal game at the 2014 IIHF World Junior Championship.

But that didn't make it any less special to find out about his involvement in the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

"It's always a pleasure," Ristolainen said after practice on Wednesday. "It's a huge tournament and all the best players are there so it's going to be exciting."

With roster announcements for the inaugural tournament coming throughout the day, Ristolainen became the first Buffalo Sabre to have earned a spot when Team Finland released its preliminary roster on Wednesday morning.

Ristolainen, 21, has evolved into a top-pair defenseman for the Sabres this season, third on the team with 39 points (8+27) and averaging a team-high 25:20 of ice time per game.

"It's deserved," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "I'm real happy for him. He's a young player coming into his own this year. He's stepped from being a younger player to being a full-time legitimate NHL player and I think it shows in his selection."

For as much as he's improved, however, Ristolainen hasn't been satisfied with his game as of late. He hasn't scored a goal since Jan. 12, and Bylsma suggested that attempting to do too much offensively may have detracted from his defense in recent weeks.

"It's not there where it should be," Ristolainen said. "Start of the year was good, and of course everyone wants to be better and better and go play better all the time, but I am not playing at the level right now I want to play [at]. We have 18 games left so I want to have a good end for the year."

The Sabres have other hopefuls for the tournament. Jack Eichel is a likely candidate to make Team North America – a collection of North American players under age 23 – while Sam Reinhart may also draw consideration, as could Ryan O'Reilly for Team Canada and Zengus Girgensons for Team Europe.

The tournament begins on Sept. 17, and all games will be played at Air Canada Centre in Toronto. Despite the fact that the timing of the tournament will take cause some of his players to miss time in Training Camp, Bylsma spoke in support of the event on Wednesday.

"I think this is probably the best place for it to be, is in September," Bylsma said. "I think probably the best time for the guys to get together and be a part of a national team, a World Cup team and having the best players in the world competing against each other ... I think it's an awesome showcase."

UPDATE (5:15 p.m.) - Eichel has been named to the North American preliminary roster.