



# **Buffalo Sabres**

**Daily Press Clips**

*December 13, 2016*

## **Playoff race slipping away as Sabres' East foes stay hot**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 12, 2016

As playoff droughts in these parts go, the folks down at One Bills Drive hardly have a monopoly on things.

Terry Pegula's first purchase when he swept into town in 2011 has come up awfully dry on postseason trips as well and is quickly heading down the path to its sixth straight quiet spring on the ice.

During an idle weekend, the Buffalo Sabres slipped into last place in the NHL's Eastern Conference. They are in danger of falling out of touch with the playoff race entirely before their season even hits the halfway mark.

Even though the Sabres have just 26 points, they have hardly been terrible of late. They enter Tuesday night's game against the Los Angeles Kings in KeyBank Center with a 5-3-2 record in their last 10 games, but their main problem is that teams in the East are dominating the West and playing at an astounding pace overall.

The top five teams in the Metropolitan Division -- New York, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Columbus and Washington -- combined to go 17-1 last week and are 29-7-3 since Dec. 3. After losing to Boston on Monday, Atlantic Division-leading Montreal is first overall with 42 points and holds a league-leading 14-1-2 home record. Washington holds the final wild-card slot and is already 11 points ahead of the Sabres.

Buffalo is eight points behind Boston for third in the Atlantic and the Sabres will have three games in hand over the Bruins when play starts Tuesday. Wild-cards look unreachable, so a top-3 finish in their division already looks like the Sabres' only hope at their first playoff trip since 2011.

"It's frustrating. That's where we want to be," Sabres center Ryan O'Reilly admitted after practice downtown Monday. "We want to stay close to these teams. You see the success they're having and the ways they're finding to win games. We have to go inside ourselves and see what we can do to get back in it."

Captain Brian Gionta admitted he checks the standings daily, partly to catch up on the previous night's scores but also to see where his team fits in the picture.

"It's still about winning your games, getting as many points as you can," Gionta said. "It's still early in some ways but we know there's a lot of people between us and the playoff spots and we need to start making up some ground."

Coach Dan Bylsma said he's a daily standings watcher as well and that they're posted in the team's dressing room complex so players and coaches can see the task at hand.

"We have a good understanding where we're at in the standings right now," Bylsma said. "I don't over-obsess about it but I want it to be something that's prominent for our players and to have a good idea where we're at and where we need to go."

According to Sportsclubstats.com, the Sabres entered Monday with just a 10.5 percent chance of making the playoffs. Their chances don't even hit 50 percent unless they win at least 30 of the remaining 55 games.

Bylsma said one thing he noticed through the first quarter of the season was how well Eastern teams were doing against the West. One result is that six of the top seven teams overall are from the East.

After Pittsburgh's win over Arizona on Monday, the East is 92-54-19 against the West, while the West was just 73-74-18 against the East. The Metropolitan's top five are 42-13-6.

The current winning streaks in the league right now are also eye-opening. Entering Tuesday, there are four NHL teams who have won at least six straight (Philadelphia-9, Columbus-6, Calgary-6 and Pittsburgh-6) while Washington and Minnesota have both won four in a row. The Sabres' top run this year is three wins in a row and they haven't hit five straight since March, 2012. That's the kind of streak they're going to need now.

This might be as good a time as any for the Sabres to get hot. After meeting Los Angeles, the Sabres' final five games before Christmas are all against Eastern teams currently on the outside of the playoff pack. There are two games apiece against Carolina and the New York Islanders and a game at Florida.

The Sabres obviously need to get more scoring throughout the lineup and especially at crunch time. They are just 2-6 in overtime/shootouts while Philadelphia, by contrast, is tied for the NHL lead with seven wins past 60 minutes.

"You look at teams that are on a roll and you win, say, three games overtime or shootout, you're still on a roll," said Bylsma. "You come out on the wrong side of those, you end up with two in a row or three in a row and don't extend the streak. That's something we're going to have to do and are looking to do in these six games before the break."

"You have to stay in the process," O'Reilly said. "It's one period at a time, one game at a time. It's winning battles, competing more than the other team and that gives you a better chance. It's one win at a time to get back into this. Of course, we want to have a five-game winning streak or more than that. You want to get on a roll but it starts with Tuesday."

## **Sabres Notebook: Kings open brutal road trip**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 12, 2016

As road trips go, there's not many that will be more arduous than what the Los Angeles Kings will open Tuesday night in KeyBank Center.

The Kings' game against the Buffalo Sabres will be the first of nine straight away from Staples Center. They'll start it with seven games over 12 days, break for Christmas and then play two more away from home. The trip is the result of a packed schedule at Staples, a four-day run of Disney on Ice plus seven NBA games in a 10-day stretch for the Los Angeles Lakers and Los Angeles Clippers.

The Kings are just 4-7-1 on the road this year, compared to 10-4-1 at home. Their trip continues Thursday in Detroit, Friday in Pittsburgh, Sunday in Boston, Dec. 20 in Columbus, Dec. 22 in Nashville and Dec. 23 in Dallas before the Kings get their Christmas break. They head back out on the road for games Dec. 28 in Vancouver and Dec. 29 in Edmonton before hosting San Jose on New Year's Eve in what will be their first home game in 21 days.

Sabres captain Brian Gionta recalled a nine-game road trip when he was part of the New Jersey Devils at the start of the 2007-08 season, prior to the Devils' inaugural game in Prudential Center.

"It was a grind but it was important to go out and stay focused," Gionta recalled of the trip, which saw the Devils go 3-5-1 but stay entirely in the Eastern time zone. "It's not like what these guys have. Ours was broken up a bit. We came back home and practiced some, had games at the Rangers and Islanders, but it was still 10 days at the start."

The longest road trip in Kings history is a 10-gamer in 2010-11 but their longest uninterrupted roadie resulted in a 1-7-1 record in 1969-70.

"I can relate to it as a player. I never have as a coach," said Sabres coach Dan Bylsma, whose career included a stint with the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim. "When you play out in the West that far away, you get the 10 and 11-dayers once or twice a year and it's a whole different ball of wax managing your schedule, managing the road trip. It's a different mentality and outlook from a coaching staff perspective too. I have experienced them as a player where you pack for 12 days, say your goodbyes and you're out East for a long time."

The Kings are 7-2-1 in their last 10 games but are on a brutal run of games in Buffalo. The Sabres are 13-1-1 here against Los Angeles since the 1992-93 season and have won seven straight since a 4-1 Kings win on Feb. 21, 2003.

The Kings did not practice Monday, flying to Buffalo to prepare for the start of the trip. Former Sabres defenseman Brayden McNabb has been sidelined by a broken collarbone that required surgery since the Kings' loss Oct. 29 to the St. Louis Blues

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Sabres winger Kyle Okposo sat out practice Monday with the flu, but coach Dan Bylsma said it was likely that Okposo would be fine for Tuesday's game. That did, however, cost Okposo a second practice with new linemates Jack Eichel and Evander Kane, a switch Bylsma first unveiled at practice Sunday in HarborCenter.

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Former Sabres captain Daniel Briere and current Buffalo assistant coach Terry Murray were named as honorary captains for the AHL All-Star Classic Jan. 29-30 in Allentown, Pa., AHL president David Andrews announced Monday.

Briere and Murray will join the teams in the locker room and on the benches of the event, which will be played in a 3-on-3 format. They will also be recognized for their careers at the annual AHL Hall of Fame Induction and Awards Ceremony.

Murray, in his second system on Dan Bylsma's staff, was a two-time winner of the Eddie Shore Award as the AHL's outstanding defenseman in 1978 and 1979 with the back-to-back Calder Cup champion Maine Mariners in the Philadelphia organization. He played 363 regular-season games in the AHL and won 150 games as an AHL head coach with the Baltimore Skipjacks (1988-90) and the Adirondack/Lehigh Valley Phantoms (2012-15).

Briere spent the majority of his first four professional seasons in the AHL, playing 169 games for the Springfield Falcons in the Phoenix organization. He won the Dudley "Red" Garrett Memorial Award as the AHL's outstanding rookie in 1998 after scoring 36 goals and collecting 92 points.

## **Sabres' Cody Franson enjoying heavier workload**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
December 12, 2016

BUFFALO – Playing limited minutes would be easier for Sabres defenseman Cody Franson if he enjoyed the comfort of some contract security.

But the affable veteran, whose ice time has recently increased because of injuries, will be a free agent following the season.

Every minute, an opportunity to showcase his talents, is precious.

"I got to be able to show people I'm very capable of playing this role for a full season," Franson said Monday inside KeyBank Center. "I did it in Toronto for four years."

Franson, 29, has skated 17 or more minutes in 18 consecutive games entering tonight's home tilt against the Los Angeles Kings. Eleven times in that stretch he has surpassed the 20-minute mark.

In his first nine appearances this season, Franson only hit the 16-minute mark once. Twice he barely skated 11 minutes.

A run of defense injuries, most notably Zach Bogosian's knee problem, has forced Sabres coach Dan Bylsma to rely heavily on Franson, who has produced 29 or more points four times in the last six seasons.

Naturally, playing 20 or more minutes a night has helped Franson find a groove.

"I'm most comfortable up and around there," he said. "If you can get 18 or more minutes, it's easier to stay in the game and get in the flow of the game, not have those pockets where you're sitting there for long periods of time and getting cold and losing the rhythm of the game."

"I think it's gone well for myself in that time span and I've felt quite good about my play."

Franson has scored one goal – the entire defense corps, incredibly, has combined for two *all season* – and seven points in 27 games. His plus-1 rating is the highest among Sabres who have appeared in at least 20 games.

"Playing the bigger minutes you get a little bit longer leash, you don't have to try to be as perfect," Franson said. "I think that's a big part of me playing well, I don't have to try to make every little play, have a mistake-free game. You can kind of just go out there and ... know that if you do have one of those hiccups, you're going to go back out."

"Playing that small-minute role, that could cost you the rest of the game. That long leash allows you to play confidently."

The last five weeks have been perhaps the most notable stretch of Franson's 86-game stint here. After signing a two-year, \$6.65 million contract days before training camp started last season, Franson started strongly, then tapered off as his minutes declined.

His season ended when Columbus' Scott Hartnell boarded him Feb. 19, creating a vision problem – his left eye was moving about 20 percent slower than his right – he spent all summer correcting.

"It's been real frustrating," Franson said of his time with the Sabres. "I had the injury at the end of the year, but playing the small-minute role the whole season, really, mentally, it was a long year."

Franson finished with a career-low four goals and 17 points in 59 games.

With Dmitry Kulikov back for Friday's 4-1 loss to Washington, Franson's ice time dipped to 17 minutes, 35 seconds, his second-lowest total since Nov. 3.

Of course, Franson knows his minutes could keep decreasing as the blue line returns to full strength.

"The strength of our defense when everyone's healthy is going to be six good guys back there sharing the minutes, not having four guys at 23-plus minutes and two guys at the 10-minute range," Bylsma said. "Is there an adjustment going to the 15-, 16-(minute) range? I think a little bit.

"But I don't think ... the role for Cody won't change, and I think that's the important part."

But will Franson's team change? With an expiring contract, he could be dealt prior to the trade deadline. That happened two years ago, when the Maple Leafs dished him back to the Nashville Predators, his first team.

Franson struggled skating fewer minutes with the Predators, which possibly cost him millions of dollars in free agency.

"They put me in a small-minute role there," he said. "(It's) a little unfortunate the way it all worked out."

## **Sabres' standing still weak**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
December 12, 2016

BUFFALO – Somewhere in KeyBank Center, Dan Bylsma has the NHL standings posted prominently – “On purpose,” the coach noted – so the Sabres can look at them.

“We have a good understanding and a good idea of where we’re at in the standings right now,” Bylsma said this afternoon inside KeyBank Center. “So don’t over obsess about it, but I want it to be something that’s prominent for our players (to) have a good idea of where we’re at and where we need to go.”

Right now, the Sabres are in an ugly spot.

At 10-11-6, the 16th-place Sabres are the Eastern Conference’s only team under .500. They’re six points behind Boston for the Atlantic Division’s last playoff spot and 11 points out of the final wild card spot.

The Sabres have just a 10.5 percent chance of making the playoffs, according to sportsclubstats.com.

The Sabres must go on a run to make up ground. Good teams rattle off five or six wins in a row and charge up the standings. The Sabres haven’t won more than three consecutive contests this season.

“We’ve had a few games, win two in a row and get to an overtime or a shootout and that streak ends,” Bylsma said. “That’s really been one that’s kept us from putting four in a row or five in a row together.

“You look at teams that are on a roll, you win three of those games in overtime or shootout, you’re still on the roll. You come out on the wrong side of those extra time in the shootout, you end up with two in a row or three in row and don’t extend the streak.

The Sabres have six overtime or shootout losses this year, one of which ended a two-game winning streak.

In other news, winger Kyle Okposo, the Sabres’ leading scorer, missed today’s practice with the flu. Bylsma didn’t seem concerned Okposo would miss Tuesday’s home game against Los Angeles.

## **Kings open nine-game road swing in Buffalo**

The Associated Press

December 12, 2016

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- The Los Angeles Kings have survived the first third of the season without starting goaltender Jonathan Quick. They'll be pushed to the limit, however, as they embark on a nine-game road trip that begins in Buffalo on Tuesday night.

"It's fun. It's a little different," said center Tyler Toffoli, according to the Los Angeles Times. "We've been at home for so long, so going on the road is going to feel weird at first but we've got to start off the trip right, with a win at Buffalo, and just keep going from there."

The road trip will indeed be quite the test for Los Angeles (14-11-2). It includes two back-to-back scenarios before wrapping up in Edmonton just before the start of the new year on Dec. 29.

The Kings played eight of their past 10 games at home, posting a 6-2-1 record. They'll hope to fare better than they did in their most recent long road trip; Los Angeles went 1-3-1 in a five-game road trek in mid-November.

"I know it might not be mathematically the midseason break, but it feels like that, especially for the players," defenseman Matt Greene said, according to the L.A. Times. "Once you hit Christmas the pedal goes down until the All-Star break and it goes down a little bit more after that, so you've got to eat up these points and get into the holiday break."

Center Jeff Carter leads the Kings in points with 22 (12 goals, 10 assists). Peter Budaj has performed admirably in place of the injured Quick, who has been out of action since the very first game of the season. Budaj has a record of 13-7-2, along with 2.18 goals against average and .910 save percentage.

Los Angeles is coming off a 4-1 win over the Ottawa Senators on Saturday.

The Sabres (10-11-6) are hoping to have the services of forward Kyle Okposo against the Kings. Okposo missed Monday's practice due to an illness.

"When I was hurt I got to watch him a lot and learned a lot about how he plays," center Jack Eichel said of Okposo, according to the team's website. "I think he's probably one of the most underrated players in our league, just how good he is with the puck, without the puck, in all areas of the game. He's strong on it, he's very skilled, and he can make passes."

"He was not feeling well last night and just had to stay at home," Sabres head coach Dan Bylsma said, per the team's website. "We hope he recovers and does well and can play."

If Okposo does play, he's expected to be on a line alongside Eichel and Evander Kane. He switched places with Sam Reinhart in the lineup at Sunday's practice.

Buffalo is coming off a disappointing 4-1 home loss to Washington on Friday. The Sabres are 1-2-1 in their last four games.

## **Eichel, Kane hopeful for new dynamic alongside Okposo**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

December 12, 2016

There was one notable absence when the Buffalo Sabres took the ice for practice at KeyBank Center on Monday morning, although if all goes well the absence will be short-lived. Kyle Okposo felt under the weather and missed practice but the team is hopeful that he'll be ready when they play host to the Los Angeles Kings on Tuesday night.

"He was not feeling well last night and just had to stay at home today," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "We hope he recovers and does well and can play tomorrow."

If Okposo does play on Tuesday, expect to see him in a new role playing on the right wing with Evander Kane and Jack Eichel. That was the case at practice on Sunday, when he and Sam Reinhart swapped lines with Reinhart moving alongside William Carrier and Ryan O'Reilly.

While Reinhart has plenty of experience playing with O'Reilly from last season, the combination of Okposo and Eichel is relatively new. They've played on the same power-play unit since Eichel returned from injury on Nov. 29, but have not yet been linemates. Still, Eichel watched Okposo for 21 games while he nursed his high-ankle sprain and that alone was enough to learn about his new teammate's skill set.

"Obviously when I was hurt I got to watch him a lot and learned a lot about how he plays," Eichel said. "I think he's probably one of the most underrated players in our league, just how good he is with the puck, without the puck, in all areas of the game. He's strong on it, he's very skilled, and he can make passes."

There's little question that, to this point, the Sabres have gotten what they paid for when they signed Okposo to a seven-year deal on the first day of free agency in July. Okposo leads the Sabres with nine goals and 18 points through 26 games.

Kane talked about playing basketball with Okposo recently and said one of the things he's learned about his new teammate is how much of a "well-rounded" athlete Okposo is. It makes sense; much like a basketball player uses his body to box out for rebounds, Okposo uses his body to maintain possession while engaging with defenders along the boards and low in the offensive zone.

"You know what, he was one of the better players obviously on the Islanders and I've played against him for a lot of years," Kane said. "Really he's kind of the same players he's always been. He has great puck skills, he works hard, he's strong on the puck and he's got a great shot obviously and likes to use it."

In the dressing room, meanwhile, Okposo is already a respected leader on a young team. When O'Reilly and fellow alternate captain Josh Gorges have missed games this season, it's been Okposo who's filled in and worn an "A."

"He's a leader," Eichel said. "He's played a lot of hockey in the league and he's been a part of a lot of different teams so he brings good experience as a veteran. He's somebody who someone like myself, who's still young, can learn a lot from."

### **Kulikov being eased back into the lineup**

Dmitry Kulikov skated 18:23 in his return to the lineup from a lower-back injury in Friday, but Bylsma said it will take some time before the defenseman resumes his complete role with the Sabres. You can hear more from Bylsma and hear from Kulikov himself on his return below in Monday's Sabres in :90.

### **An eye on the standings**

While he wouldn't go so far as to say his team was "obsessed" with watching the standings in the Eastern Conference, Bylsma admitted on Monday that it's something the Sabres pay close attention to throughout the season. The Sabres are six points out of third place in the Atlantic Division with two games in hand.

"They're up in our room in a prominent place on purpose so that we do look at them," Bylsma said. "We have a good understanding and a good idea of where we're at in the standings right now. I don't know if we're obsessed about it, but I want it to be something that's prominent for our players."

In what's shaping up to be a good season for the East, the Sabres are currently the only team below .500 in the entire conference (the West, on the other hand, has five sub-.500 teams). They can pull above .500 with a win over Los Angeles on Tuesday, but it will take a winning streak to really make a dent in the standings.

Bylsma pointed to the Sabres' six remaining games before their holiday break, five of which are against Eastern Conference opponents, as an opportunity to make that dent. After the break, they play Detroit on the road prior to a home-and-home set with Boston, which currently holds the third spot in the Atlantic Division.

"It's something we're going to have to do and looking to do," Bylsma said. "We have six games before the break and a good opportunity for us to really focus in on these six games starting with L.A. tomorrow."

### **Lines at practice**

48 William Carrier - 90 Ryan O'Reilly - 23 Sam Reinhart  
9 Evander Kane - 15 Jack Eichel - 26 Matt Moulson  
82 Marcus Foligno - 22 Johan Larsson - 12 Brian Gionta  
44 Nicolas Deslauriers - 27 Derek Grant - 28 Zemgus Girgensons

29 Jake McCabe - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen  
77 Dmitry Kulikov - 6 Cody Franson  
4 Josh Gorges - 41 Justin Falk

40 Robin Lehner  
31 Anders Nilsson

## **Standings tell ugly tale for Sabres**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 12, 2016

The Sabres take the ice Tuesday against the Los Angeles Kings in KeyBank Center, starting their final six pre-Christmas games with the sobering reality that they're in last place in the Eastern Conference.

The recent dominance of the top five teams in the Metropolitan Division -- who went 17-1 last week and are 28-7-3 since Dec. 3 -- has essentially rendered Buffalo's wild-card chances moot, as the Sabres are already 11 points behind Washington for the final slot.

The Sabres are, however, only six points behind Boston for third in the Atlantic Division heading into the Bruins' game Monday in Montreal and Buffalo will have three games in hand after that contest is played. Sneaking into a top-3 slot in their division appears to be the Sabres' only chance.

"You have to stay in the process. It's one period at a time, one game at a time," said center Ryan O'Reilly. "It's winning battles, competing more than the other team and that gives you a better chance. It's one win at a time to get back into this. Of course, we want to have a five-game winning streak or more than that. You want to get on a roll but it starts with tomorrow."

Going against the Kings is good idea based on the history books but recent history shows LA is 7-2-1 in its last 10 games. Still, the Sabres are 13-1-1 in Buffalo against Los Angeles since the 1992-93 season and have won seven straight since a 4-1 Kings win here on Feb. 21, 2003.

The Sabres have not won as many as five games in a row since March, 2012. There are currently four NHL teams on such a run (Philadelphia-9, Columbus-6, Calgary-6 and Pittsburgh-5). In addition, Washington and Minnesota have both won four straight.

"You look at teams that are on a roll and you win, say, three games overtime or shootout, you're still on a roll," said coach Dan Bylsma. "You come out on the wrong side of those, you end up with two in a row or three in a row and don't extend the streak. That's something we're going to have to do and are looking to do in these six games before the break."

Winger Kyle Okposo sat out practice Monday with the flu, but Bylsma said it was likely that Okposo would be fine for Tuesday's game. That did, however, cost Okposo a second practice with new linemates Jack Eichel and Evander Kane, a switch Bylsma first unveiled Sunday in HarborCenter.

## **Desperate for scoring, Sabres expected to load up a line with Eichel, Kane and Okposo**

By Cam Tucker

NBC Sports

December 12, 2016

The Buffalo Sabres could have a different look to their forward lines against the L.A. Kings on Tuesday.

Provided he's feeling better and able to play, Kyle Okposo is expected to be put on the right side of a line with Evander Kane and 2015 second-overall pick Jack Eichel, per reports on Monday.

The Sabres are currently last in the entire league with 2.04 goals-for per game, so perhaps this move could help spark the offense. They could certainly use a boost from a trio of players with plenty of talent.

"Obviously when I was hurt I got to watch him a lot and learned a lot about how he plays," said Eichel, per NHL.com. "I think he's probably one of the most underrated players in our league, just how good he is with the puck, without the puck, in all areas of the game. He's strong on it, he's very skilled, and he can make passes."

The Sabres landed Okposo as a free agent in the summer, spending quite a bit of money on the former New York Islanders forward.

So far, he has provided the Sabres with offense, leading the team with nine goals and 18 points. Buffalo also needs Kane to get going. He has struggled with injury and discipline this season, with only seven points in 16 games. Meanwhile, Eichel has played in only six games, re-joining the lineup at the end of November because of an ankle injury.

The Sabres currently sit last in the East, and 11 points out of the final Wild Card spot.