



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres Notebook: Reunion in Calgary as Chad Johnson will start for Flames

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

October 17, 2016

CALGARY, Alberta -- The Buffalo Sabres will have a reunion Tuesday night in the Saddledome with one of their secret weapons from last season. Goaltender Chad Johnson, who won 22 games for Buffalo while holding the fort when Robin Lehner was injured, will be the starter against the Sabres for the Calgary Flames.

Johnson made his Calgary debut Saturday in a 2-1 shootout loss at Vancouver, coming within four minutes of a shutout before taking the loss. The Flames had opened the season with Brian Elliott giving up 12 goals in two losses to Edmonton.

"I felt good," Johnson told Calgary reporters after practice here Tuesday morning. "I think I was prepared coming into the year, my focus was where it needed to be. As a group, we got better and played a better game there even though we obviously didn't get what we wanted out of it with an extra point."

Johnson went 22-16-4 in 45 games for the Sabres last season, compiling a 2.36 goals-against average and .920 save percentage. He signed a one-year, \$1.7-million contract July 1 with Calgary, the city he grew up in after being born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

"He was just huge for us. He played extremely well," said Sabres captain Brian Gionta. "I expect it to be a tough night against him. He always seems to have one of those highlight reel saves that ends up on the ESPN Top 10. He always has that."

"He was solid, confident, calm in a comforting influence on the rest of our team," said coach Dan Bylsma. "You felt like when Chad was in the net, we had a chance to win every game that he played. He ends up winning over 20 games and had a great year for us. We don't need to see any of that tomorrow."

Asked by the Calgary media for a scouting report on his old team, Johnson was filled with praise for Bylsma and the Sabres.

"It's a well-coached team. They have good structures, good systems, guys in their group who have been together for a little bit now," Johnson said. "Last year we found our way later on in the season. They're very balanced from top to bottom. They're deep and play hard."

Bylsma said Lehner will make his third straight start in goal Tuesday night but that his plans for Thursday night's game in Vancouver are uncertain. It's possible backup Anders Nilsson, who had a strong preseason, will make his Sabres debut in that game.

The spread-out nature of the Sabres early schedule, which features no back-to-backs until Oct. 29-30, makes it dicey to get Nilsson playing time. After the Vancouver game, the Sabres have four days off before playing Oct. 25 in Philadelphia.

"We definitely want to have Anders play for us in the near future," Bylsma said. "We have some space in the schedule but it's not going to be too much longer before he gets in a game."

Bylsma said he's not averse to changing a winning lineup, given the fact the Sabres have an extra forward on the trip. The coach said winger Nick Baptiste's NHL debut will come "this trip for sure."

Edmonton Oilers coach Todd McLellan canceled his team's CBA-mandated off day Monday after ripping his team following Sunday night's 6-2 loss to the Sabres in Rogers Place. The NHL Players Association is reportedly looking

into the matter as a violation of the contract, as coaches aren't allowed to change the days simply for bad performances.

McLellan told Edmonton reporters Monday he negotiated with the players to switch their off day from Monday to Wednesday and didn't think the situation was that big a deal. The Oilers host Carolina Tuesday night, and will take their day off prior to Thursday's visit by St. Louis.

"Obviously it had to be agreed upon by us and we were all for it," captain Connor McDavid said Monday. "It was a good thing. Everyone feels a lot better leaving the rink today, as opposed to coming in still thinking about that game."

McLellan staged a five-minute virtuoso with reporters late Sunday night, saying his team "looked like the Bad News Bears".

"We learned a lesson that we're not quite ready to take a step," McLellan said. "We can't handle prosperity yet. We just got kicked right between the legs and we deserved it."

McLellan saved his best one-liner for forward Benoit Pouliot, who sat the final 40 minutes against the Sabres after taking two penalties in the first period. Pouliot was penalized three times Friday in Calgary as well.

"We have some foundation or fabric things that we have to continue to fix as an organization. Stupidity is one of them," McLellan said. "So don't play. Watch."

Calgary signed Sanborn native Tom McCollum to a two-year, two-way contract and assigned the 26-year-old goaltender to Stockton of the AHL after he cleared waivers.

McCollum, a 2008 first-round pick of Detroit, has played most of the last seven years with Grand Rapids. He had a training camp tryout with Los Angeles and was released from that contract before signing with Calgary.

McCollum went 15-13-0 with a 2.42 goals-against average and a .923 save percentage in 30 games last year for Grand Rapids. He has played three NHL games in his career and his lone win came against the Sabres on Jan. 18, 2015 in Joe Louis Arena.

Checking line brings offense to Sabres

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

October 17, 2016

CALGARY, Alberta -- The Buffalo Sabres have a checking line that can frustrate opponents. And when the line can score goals of its own, that becomes quite a weapon.

Center Johan Larsson and wingers Brian Gionta and Marcus Foligno did just that Sunday in Edmonton, getting a pair of goals from Gionta while confounding Connor McDavid and Co. in a 6-2 Buffalo victory. They'll get another chance tonight in the Saddledome when the Sabres play a Calgary team led by young guns Johnny Gaudreau and Sean Monahan.

The trio was a consistent unit the second half of last season and was reunited in the third period of Thursday's season opener by coach Dan Bylsma, who had said over the summer he was starting the season with them together but moved away from that during training camp. The way the line played Sunday, it's hard to imagine Bylsma ditching the unit any time soon.

Gionta had his first two goals of the season while Foligno and Larsson both had an assist. The three players were plus-4 in the game and combined with the line centered by Ryan O'Reilly to hold McDavid to one shot on goal in the game.

"There's chemistry there and there's no denying that," Gionta said after practice here Tuesday afternoon. "But what's best about our line is we keep our role in perspective. We know what we're there to do first and foremost. Most of the time, that's be a shutdown line and be a secondary scoring threat at times."

"I like our plays," Foligno said. "We're making them and not panicking. 'Gio' is experienced on the wing. Larsson is a very hard-working centerman and my role is to be tough on the walls. When we're a shutdown line, we take pride in doing that job."

When the line was put back together against Montreal, Bylsma said his new assistant coaches immediately noticed the chemistry it had. The players felt it too.

"We had a good first shift there against Montreal and it's nice to get back together with the guys," Larsson said. "You want to spend as much time as you can in the offensive zone. When you're playing against the best line, you want to make them defend, so the mentality is to be down there but still be responsible defensively."

"It felt normal, felt comfortable again," Foligno said. "We were in the offensive zone and we know how to read off each other. We had really good chemistry."

Both goals scored by Gionta Sunday actually started with the Sabres gaining control after a defensive zone faceoff. It's a great example of putting a scoring line on its heels and making it defend.

"We're there to get it out of our own end first and it ends up in the back of their neck from 'Moose' going hard on the forecheck," Gionta said, referring to the 6-foot-3 Foligno. He's holding the puck down low, being a big body there."

"Me and Lars are tenacious and Foligno is the heavy body on the line. He's being hard on their 'D', heavy on the forecheck, guys looking out for him, stuff like that."

The Larsson line scored its goals against Edmonton's second unit centered by Ryan Nugent-Hopkins. But it had plenty of shifts in the second half of the game against McDavid, who was nearly invisible after collecting six points in Edmonton's first two contests.

"We wanted to make it hard on McDavid, take away his space and speed," said Bylsma. "But we wanted to make them defend. As a checking line, that's something they do extremely well is making the other team defend them."

It will be more of the same Tuesday against Gaudreau, who has just one assist and a minus-4 rating in his first three games. The Flames are 0-2-1 while waiting for their 30-goal man to heat up after he signed a six-year, \$40.5 million contract two days before the season opener.

"You want to play offense and have them be frustrated," Larsson said. "It's tough to play down there, especially for those guys. They want to be offensive guys. If you can put more time down there and make them defend, it will be best for us."

Sabres focusing on themselves ahead of Calgary

By Pat Malacaro

WGR 550

October 17, 2016

Calgary, AB, Canada (WGR 550) -- Heading into the 2016-17 season we have seen the emergence of several young stars in the NHL that can not only score, but also have great speed to add to the game. On Sunday the Buffalo Sabres were able to contain Connor McDavid and the Edmonton Oilers, and on Tuesday the task is to slow down Johnny Gaudreau and the Calgary Flames.

One of the ways the blue and gold held their own was by rolling three equal defense pairings that worked well in two-man units. Dmirty Kulikov was paired with Cody Franson and logged over 19 minutes in his season debut. The defenseman admitted that his timing was not where he wanted it to be at the start, and that he has room to improve as he settles into the lineup, however Sunday was a good first impression.

Kulikov believes, "we have three equal pairings no matter who we play against, what lines or no matter who's going to play with one another. "I think we're all a very capable group, we can shut down the top lines and the minutes are divided by pairs equally and I think it's good in a way that everybody's getting their shifts in and everybody's staying in the game." He was also on the ice for 1:16 of the team's penalty kill in the third period.

Rather than focusing on what the Flames are going to do on Tuesday, Kulikov quickly pointed out that if the Sabres are going to be successful this year they need to worry more about what they need to do well in order to be successful. He thinks the team "just have to play the style that we're going to play throughout the year no matter opponent we're playing. It's hard aggressive hockey and getting on the fore check, breaking out of our zone fast and not allowing them to get in your offensive zone time."

Marcus Foligno echoed that sentiment following practice, adding that "it's about how we're going to execute. It's great to finally worry about our game, worry about what we're going to bring and, you know, we obviously saw it last night where we executed a game plan and it worked out for us." Foligno recorded an assist in the win on Sunday. Linemate Brian Gionta scored two goals, while Johan Larsson picked up an assist as well.

The Flames are a deep young team who did not fail to score in either of the team's losses to Edmonton. However, with a new head coach they may be looking to find a new identity early this season. For Foligno you still have to know where the young stars are at all times, saying that "Gaudreau, [Sean] Monahan that line, those guys those top two players are phenomenal players, so to sit on them, not give them as much time and space and it's again to have another frustrating game for the opposition." Monahan has a goal in three games while Gaudreau is still in search of his first of the year.

Calgary is also a young team that can roll lines much like the Oilers, according to Sabres head coach Dan Bylsma. He believes that "with the skill and the way that they play up front and that's something that we're going to have to be dually aware." Matthew Tkachuk and Sam Bennett are two more young players to watch out for on Tuesday. Tkachuk was selected sixth overall by the Flames from the London Knights of the OHL.

Flames head coach Glen Gulutzan told the media following his team's practice Tuesday that former Sabre Chad Johnson is expected to start against the blue and gold. Johnson was thrust into the starting goalie duties for Buffalo last year after Robin Lehner suffered a high ankle sprain in the season opener against Ottawa. Now Johnson is starting in back-to-back games for Calgary after Brian Elliott started both contests against Edmonton. Johnson was in goal for the Flames' 2-1 shootout loss in Vancouver on Saturday night.

Bylsma said that Lehner would again get the start for the team on Tuesday night. He will be between the pipes for all three games this season, but the head coach said that Anders Nilsson will see playing time soon. The lack of back-to-back games and the time off in between has allowed Lehner to rest in between starts.

Nick Baptiste was the extra forward again at practice on Monday, but Bylsma added that we will see the youngster before the end of the trip. The bench boss said that he is not opposed to switching up the lineup just because of a win. The four forward pairings at practice were:

Kyle Okposo-Ryan O'Reilly-Sam Reinhart
Foligno-Larsson-Gionta
Nic Deslauriers-Zemgus Girgensons-Hudson Fasching
Tyler Ennis-Derek Grant-Matt Moulson

Former Sabres goalie Chad Johnson happy with Flames

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
October 18, 2016

All along, Chad Johnson said, returning to Buffalo was his first choice. The goalie thrived in his only season with the Sabres, becoming the team's backbonewhile playing a career-high 45 games.

But when free agency opened in June, Johnson quickly learned how much his career year had impressed other NHL teams.

Johnson, 30, said he talked to six or seven suitors, including his hometown Calgary Flames.

"You talk to other teams and (learn how) highly different teams feel about you," Johnson told the Times Herald by phone Monday. "It was a tough decision. It came down to the very end."

The likable, soft-spoken Johnson whittled his list down to Buffalo, Calgary and another team. Ultimately, he couldn't pass up the opportunity to go home.

Johnson signed a one-year, \$1.7 million contract with the Flames on July 1.

"It just seemed like the right fit for me opportunity-wise, hockey, life – everything," he said. "It was the best offer."

Johnson's role isn't much different from his other five NHL stops. He's the Flames' new backup, although with Brian Elliott injured, he will likely make his second straight start tonight when the Sabres make their yearly visit to Calgary.

The Flames, who received wretched goaltending last season, have a strong option if they need to rely on Johnson regularly. Elliott, another newcomer, has only been a No. 1 sporadically in his career.

Johnson thrived subbing for the injured Robin Lehner last season, going 22-16-1 with a 2.36 goals-against average and a .920 save percentage. His 44-saves in a 3-0 win over Anaheim on Dec. 17 broke the franchise record for a shutout.

From Nov. 1, Johnson's statistics ranked among the league's elite. In 36 appearances, his .928 save percentage ranked third among regular goalies and his 2.16 goals-against average ranked fifth. He compiled terrific numbers – 6-2-1, 2.21, .925 – after Lehner's high ankle sprain ended his season.

"You felt like when Chad was in the net, we had a chance to win every game that he played," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma told reporters Monday in Calgary.

Clearly, the regular action in 2015-16 – he had never played more than 27 games in an NHL season – helped Johnson seize his opportunity.

"I felt comfortable," Johnson said. "I felt on a roll. The team, we just really worked well together. I think it was a good balance. The guys trusted me, I trusted them. There was cohesiveness as a group."

Leaving that group was difficult for Johnson, who was voted Buffalo's unsung hero by his teammates. Following a strong second half, the Sabres' new direction excited him.

"I think it's such a good group of guys," he said. "I can't say enough about it. You know that (there's) great potential there. It was hard to leave, but I think once I got over that line and the doors open to other teams, you see how wanted you are, I guess, out there in the market and how valuable other teams see you."

The value of every teammate is Johnson's lasting memory of the Sabres. Everyone, he said, had a role and knew "how valuable that they were, regardless if they were Jack Eichel, myself or (Nick) Deslauriers."

"We all had responsibility," Johnson said. "No one was above anybody else. There was no separation with the team, and that, to me, was what was so special about that group last year. Being a part of it, everybody was so close with each other and we needed each other to win games."

The Sabres replaced Johnson with Anders Nilsson. Bylsma said Monday his new backup could play soon. Lehner will make his third straight start tonight.

Johnson got along well with Lehner, who dropped around 40 pounds during the summer.

"I know he lost a lot of weight," Johnson said. "I don't know if I'll be able to recognize him. I'm excited to kind of see how he looks. All the weight loss and everything, I'm happy for him. He's a good goalie. He's a guy that deserves to be playing a lot of games."

"I know he had a tough year last year and opened the door for me. ... He's capable of being the guy there. I know that that's the focus of the organization."

O'Reilly stepping up for Sabres early in season

By Matt Bove

WKBW

October 17, 2016

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - In 2015 Ryan O'Reilly was the Buffalo Sabres best player. Sunday against the Oilers, O'Reilly proved he still is.

The 25-year-old forward recorded the most points of his career (four: two goals and two assists) in a convincing 6-2 win over Edmonton. While the stats are surely impressive, O'Reilly's play away from the puck and ability to create chances is what makes him such a special player.

"We needed a good response from our last game," O'Reilly told reporters after Sunday's win. "I thought we were much more consistent tonight and you know, we just supported each other better and we made plays. That's the hockey we have to establish right away. It's a big road trip and it's nice to start off like that."

O'Reilly got his first point of the night on a secondary assist from Kyle Okposo's first goal as a Sabre. Edmonton turned the puck over in their own end and O'Reilly was able to slide the puck to Sam Reinhart, who made a perfect saucer pass to Kyle Okposo across the net.

While on the score sheet O'Reilly will get the secondary assist – he applied pressure when the Oilers were looking to breakout of their zone, leading to the turnover. The red arrow below shows O'Reilly's entry into the zone. If he doesn't attack the puck, Oscar Klefbom, the Oilers defender, would have been able to clear the zone. Instead, the Sabres got on the board early.

Minutes later, O'Reilly scored his first goal of the season on a tape to tape pass from Kyle Okposo, who was surely returning the favor. O'Reilly's quick release allowed him to capitalize on wide-open net. If O'Reilly would have waited a half second longer, Oiler defenseman Darnell Nurse would have been able to prevent the shot.

All night the Sabres looked crisp when passing the puck. That wasn't the case during their first game against Montreal Thursday night.

"That's what we have to do. We have to be confident in each other and make the right plays at the right time and you know, the puck has to be the fastest moving thing on the ice."

O'Reilly's second goal of the night came off a crazy shot from center ice early in the second period. He joked after the game that he practices that play often – but that he'll take them how he can get them.

If the Sabres are going to be able to overcome long-term injuries with Evander Kane and Jack Eichel players like Ryan O'Reilly are going to need to step things up. If Sunday is any indication of what's to come – than Sabres fans will be thrilled with O'Reilly. Remember, somebody traded this guy.

Johnson ready for old team as Flames host Sabres

Stats LLC

October 17, 2016

CALGARY, Alberta -- All signs point to goalie Chad Johnson getting the start for the Calgary Flames against his old team on Tuesday.

Johnson, who made 22 saves to help the Flames (0-2-1) earn their first point of the season on Saturday in a 2-1 shootout loss to the Canucks in Vancouver, told reporters on Monday that he would be in net against the Buffalo Sabres (1-1-0) at the Scotiabank Saddledome.

"I'll say I'm playing," said Johnson, who signed a one-year, \$1.7 million contract with the Flames as a free agent on July 1.

Fellow netminder Brian Elliott, who the Flames acquired from the St. Louis Blues on July 24, missed Monday's practice in Calgary.

"He had a good maintenance day today and then we'll make that decision tomorrow," Calgary coach Glen Gulutzan said, while noting that it's looking like Johnson will start against Buffalo.

Having played for Buffalo last year, Johnson knows the Sabres well.

"From top to bottom they're good," said Johnson, who compiled a 22-16-1 record last year with the Sabres to go with a 2.36 goals against average and a .920 save percentage. "They're going to be coming in here I'm sure trying to get two points and we're going to come back right at 'em, so it's going to be a good game."

Gulutzan liked what he saw from Johnson in his debut for the Flames against the Canucks.

"I thought he was tremendous in Vancouver," said Gulutzan, while adding that Johnson kept calm under pressure. "That's when you know a goalie's in his element when he looks very calm and the saves look easy and that's what he did."

Although center Jack Eichel (high ankle sprain) and left winger Evander Kane (cracked ribs) are out of Buffalo's lineup for the foreseeable future, the Sabres still skated to a 5-2 road win on Sunday over the Edmonton Oilers, who handed the Flames two losses to start the season.

"Two games into the year, let's not go crazy, but I think we have a really good group and we have some good pieces," said Sabres right winger Kyle Okposo, who had a goal and an assist against the Oilers in his season debut after missing Buffalo's first game with a knee injury. "I think our depth is undervalued, and we have a lot of guys who can play the game, and play it smartly."

"Obviously, Jack being out puts us at a loss because he's such a game breaker. But other guys are going to have to step up and play well, and we have to play better as a team."

After facing the Flames on Tuesday, the Sabres will continue their road swing through western Canada with a game in Vancouver against the Canucks on Thursday.

"It is a tough one," said Sabres center Ryan O'Reilly, who had two goals and two assists against the Oilers. "Last year, when we did this exact same trip, I don't think we got a point out of it. Having it early, getting a win now, we can do some work. It's a good little team kickoff, too. We're with each other every day, eat together all the time. It's a nice way for us to get a little closer as well."

Johnson eager to face his former team

By George Johnson

Calgary Flames

October 17, 2016

CALGARY, AB -- That dictum 'No cheering in the press box'?

A baldfaced lie.

Cranky, crook-backed, curmudgeonly, beady-eyed old scribblers always, but always, rah-rah/siss-boom-ba for the easy, ready-made storyline.

Chad Johnson, bless him, grasps the concept; seems fully invested in playing his part when called upon.

Tuesday night as a for-instance.

"Should be fun," acknowledged the Calgary-reared puck-stopper, a day away from his Saddledome regular-season debut pitting him against his previous employers, the Buffalo Sabres.

"First game, old team.

"Good memories, good experiences there.

"And it sets it up good for you guys to write a story. But me, I prepare the same way.

"My focus is the same.

"I don't change anything. I don't over-analyze anything. I just practice and prepare and battle.

"It's pretty simple.

"It's exciting for you guys, though. You guys are here, like, every day so you need ... something.

"I know how it is. Seriously."

The Calgary Flames go in search of their first win of the new coaching regime Tuesday, and Chad Johnson finally finds himself where he's dreamed about being since ball hockey days back on the cul-de-sac of Deer Ridge Place, SE back in the early-to-mid-90s.

In net wearing the the Flaming C at the Scotiabank Saddledome in a game that matters.

"I'm looking forward to it," he joked. "I have a lot of former teams.

"So I have a lot of practice in this situation and use it as motivation."

Johnson graded out excellent in his first official start wearing the colours on Saturday, stopping 30 shots through regulation and OT in 2-1 SO loss against the Canucks at Rogers Arena.

"I thought he was tremendous in Vancouver," critiqued Flames' coach Glen Gulutzan. "I just told him that. Very calm. In the shootout, he gave us a chance. In overtime, killing the penalty he made a big save off his shoulder with about 50 seconds left.

"And made them look easy.

"That's when you know a goalie is in his element when the goalie is calm and makes the saves look easy."

"I felt good," Johnson said. "But I felt good all pre-season. As I said before, though, sometimes in pre-season you get weird bounces and weird games.

"I think I was prepared coming in for camp, for pre-season. I thought my focus is where it needed to be."

There'll be few surprises Tuesday for Johnson, only a season removed from putting up stellar numbers - a 22-16-4 record, 2.36 GAA and .920 save percentage - in his only season on the eastern shores of Lake Erie, in western New York.

"Johnnie?" says Sabres' No. 1 Robin Lehner, whose early-season ankle injury a year ago opened the door for Johnson to step in and excel. "He's 100 percent going to be a success here. He's an elite goaltender.

"He's been in the shadows a little bit but he's a very technically sound goalie with very good hands and good reactions.

"For me, going through the big injury, he did a good job. He's a very, very good guy, too. Just a nice guy. We talked a lot, exchanged ideas. We worked very well together.

"A good goalie partner to have. Definitely."

A one-year contract, along with the opportunity to return home, brought the 30-year-old Johnson back to where the love of the game was instilled.

It ain't gonna be easy.

Even missing the injured Jack Eichel and Evander Kane, Buffalo sent up a warning flare, dismantling the Oilers 6-2 at Rogers Place on Sunday evening.

"I watched. That's a well-coached team," acknowledges Johnson. "They have good structure, good systems and the guys have been together as a group for a little bit now.

"I know last year they definitely found their way later in the season, we were a really good team with a lot of wins at the end.

"They have a good fourth line with (Nicolas) Deslauriers. They like to get the puck in deep, they're fast and hit bodies. (Ryan) O'Reilly, so skilled. And (Kyle) Okposo's there. The D corps is strong, balanced. (Rasmus) Ritsolainen, I think everybody knows about him from last year, really offensive.

"They're deep and play hard.

"You have everybody talking about where they think teams are going to be. The experts. It's their job to do that - give their opinions.

"(The Sabres) could be right there one of those teams that makes a push. You look at their lineup, there's six good D-men there, four strong lines and lots of skill. When Eichel and Kane get back ...

"And with Lehner in net, they're strong.

"It comes down to learning how to win. Just like our group. It's one thing having the skill and good players. You have to learn how to win."

Among those aiding his development during the year in Buffalo, Johnson singles out Sabres' goaltending coach Andrew Allen, calling him "a big part of my game."

That admiration is reciprocal.

"Chad Johnson," says Allen, as the Sabres trooped off the ice following at 2:30 skate at the 'Dome, "is the same every day he comes to the rink, and that's what makes him a really great pro. Doesn't matter the situation. He comes in, has a great poise to his body language and just does his job.

"What's why we could put him into any situation last year, coming off the bench and in a starter's role after Lehner got hurt. He's just that type of pro.

"To me, his biggest strength is his edge work. His patience on his edges allows him to get into position and not guess.

"He gets there, gets square to pucks and it basically puts him in position to make a save on every shot.

"We obviously wanted him back in Buffalo but this is a great fit for Chad, coming home, family-wise.

"But, definitely, he was a lot of fun for me to work with."

Despite missing the playoffs, Johnson enjoyed himself, too.

"The whole team is close there. Everybody was together. You went out as a group, hung out as a group and there was never that single guy on his own, who didn't fit in.

"You came to the rink everybody talked, everybody joked. It wasn't like one guy was above anybody else."

Tuesday night, though, Johnson hopes to be that one guy above everyone else.

His first home start in the Flaming C silks. His family in the pews. His Buffalo pals in the house.

One of easy, ready-made storylines cranky, crook-backed, curmudgeonly, beady-eyed old scribblers always root for.

"It's a big night for me," admits Johnson, ready to play his part.

"It's a big game for our team.

"I think as a group we played a better game in Vancouver and that helps me out, everybody out, when we play together, as a group.

"We obviously didn't get what we wanted out of it, the extra point there.

"But it's a process, we're only three games in and we want to build off that."

Reunited checking line reclaiming shutdown role

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

October 17, 2016

CALGARY - When Marcus Foligno, Johan Larsson and Brian Gionta took the ice as linemates for the first time this season in the third period against Montreal last Thursday, even Buffalo's new additions to the coaching staff could see that they had a knack for playing with each other. Naturally, Dan Bylsma kept the checking trio together for the team's game in Edmonton on Sunday.

The move paid off.

Foligno, Larsson and Gionta were instrumental in keeping one of the League's hottest players off the score sheet in Connor McDavid, and even kept him without a shot until late in the third period. Meanwhile, the trio was able to produce a couple of goals themselves, both off the stick of Brian Gionta.

"It felt normal, it felt comfortable again," Foligno said of the three reuniting against Montreal. "We just know how to read off each other, and I think you saw that last night too against Edmonton. We had really good chemistry out there, smart breakout plays and yeah, we're just happy to be back on a line again."

What we saw from the line in Edmonton was nothing new. The three became a permanent trio in January of last season, and from that point on they were one of the team's most consistent units. After combining for just 23 points prior to Jan. 8, they combined for 50 from that point on.

The offense they're able to generate typically begins in the defensive zone, where they're often called upon to take draws against opposing top lines. That's what happened on Gionta's first goal Sunday, when Larsson won a faceoff in D-zone. The Sabres were quick to breakout with a bank pass off the wall from Gionta to Larsson, who carried the puck into the offensive zone. He fed it deep to Foligno, who maintained possession as he passed by a defender behind the net and swung the puck to Jake McCabe at the point.

Gionta got the tip on McCabe's shot, but Larsson was battling in front of the net to create traffic and potentially screen the goaltender.

The second goal also began in the defensive zone and displayed the line's strength of supporting one another on the forecheck. Foligno plays the role of first man in and races Adam Larsson to retrieve the puck on the end boards. Darnell Nurse is there to pick up the loose puck and looks to execute a breakout pass, but the Sabres' Larsson rushes in to make an interception. Gionta moves into the slot, and the two connect.

Even having scored two goals, they could have had more. One of their best shifts came late in the first period, just before the Oilers got on the board. The line of Ryan O'Reilly, Sam Reinhart and Kyle Okposo had carried the puck into the zone with 3:54 remaining in the period and, thanks to the forecheck work of Larsson and Foligno behind the net, the puck stayed there until Gionta had a put-back chance 40 seconds later.

For the Sabres, the best defense is a good offense. They're game plan entering the game was to make McDavid and Co. defend, and it worked.

"I think that was one of our key points," Bylsma said. "Yeah, we want to make it hard on McDavid and we want to take away his space and speed, but we want to make them defend and, as a checking line, that's something they do extremely well."

Gionta said after the game that the pressure of playing against top lines also forces he and his linemates to simplify their own game to avoid making costly mistakes as they carry the puck through the neutral zone.

"Definitely," Foligno said. "You're not trying to do too many risky plays and I think that will frustrate them. I think it did last game. We really just kept it simple, we tried to beat them with our strength and speed and we didn't really cough up much. They thrive on turnovers and we really didn't give them anything."

The home team gets last line change in the NHL, so the fact that Bylsma uses the Larsson line to begin road games as he did Sunday is a testament to his faith in their shutdown abilities. The challenge is no different on Tuesday in Calgary. The Flames have a roster full of young gunners, starting at the top with Johnny Gaudreau and Sean Monahan.

"We're really looking at a Calgary team that is a lot like the Edmonton team with the skill and the way they play up front," Bylsma said. "That's something we're going to have to be really aware of."

Here's Johnny

There will be a familiar face starting in goal for the Flames opposite Robin Lehner on Tuesday. Chad Johnson, who won 22 games in 45 appearances for the Sabres when Lehner missed much of the season due to injury, is set to make his second-straight start for his hometown team.

"He was solid, confident, calm and a comforting influence on the rest of our team," Bylsma said of his former goalie. "It felt like when Chad was in the net, we had a chance to win every game that he played and he ends up winning over 20 games and has a great year for us. Don't need to see any of that tomorrow, if we do see him."

Speaking of goalies, Bylsma said that the Sabres' new backup, Anders Nilsson, will make his debut in the "near future."

Kulikov's debut

Dmitry Kulikov was on the ice for both of Edmonton's goals late in the first period on Sunday and admitted it took some time for him to find his footing after missing the end of the preseason due to a lower-body bruise.

At the end of the day, however, he skated 19:11 of ice time, third amongst Sabres defensemen, and was part of a truly balanced defensive effort that kept Edmonton's offensive output to a minimum.

"I would say we have three pairings no matter who we play against, what lines or not matter who's gonna play with one another," Kulikov said. "I think we're all a very capable group. We can shutdown the top lines and the minutes are divided by pairs equally."

For more on the defensive balance the Sabres were able to strike on Sunday, be sure to watch today's Sabres in :90 with Brian Duff below.

Saturday's practice

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