



Buffalo Sabres

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The linemates keep changing, but Evander Kane keeps scoring

By Amy Moritz

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Looking at the Buffalo Sabres line chart over the last four games has prompted a version of the game "Where's Waldo?" In this version it's "Where's Evander?"

Evander Kane has played everywhere from a scoring line to a checking line. He's started a game on the first line with Jack Eichel and Kyle Okposo and finished a game on the fourth line with Zemgus Girgensons and Nic Deslauriers.

Who knows where he will show up Thursday when the Sabres host the Carolina Hurricanes in KeyBank Center. But regardless of who he's teamed up with, Kane will be looking to keep his point streak alive.

While his spot in the lineup has been in a state of flux, his play has been consistent. Kane is on a four-game point streak, including scoring dramatic game-tying goals in Carolina and Florida.

"I thought his last two games, the Carolina game and the Florida game, were very good," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said about Kane on Wednesday afternoon as the Sabres had team meetings in KeyBank Center. "Skating. Physical. Really had a lot of jump, leading the way with our speed game. He came up with big goals in both those games."

The lineup shakeup started Dec. 13 against the L.A. Kings. Kane started the game with Eichel and Okposo, scoring a goal with assists from them, but later found himself on the fourth line with Girgensons and Deslauriers.

He played on the fourth line for much of the next game against the New York Islanders, setting up a power play goal for Matt Moulson. Kane started the game in Carolina with Girgensons and Deslauriers before finishing it with Johann Larsson and Brian Gionta. That trio stayed together for Tuesday's game against the Florida Panthers.

"Evander's never really cared who he played with," Bylsma said. "He just wants to play and I think really moving him next to Larsson in the Carolina game with Gionta, he added a lot to that line. Besides being an effective line I think Evander's done a great job of checking on that line as well. He's played against good players, he was last night again and doing an excellent job with that line and his speed but checking as well."

There is something about consistency of linemates that creates chemistry and a comfort zone. But that's beyond a player's control and while the shifting line combinations can be challenging, for Kane it's all about the mindset.

"I've played with, well now pretty much everybody on the team," Kane said. "Obviously it's nice when you can play with a couple of guys consistently. It helps. It's not as challenging. But I'm just going to come with the mindset that it doesn't really matter who I'm playing with or where I'm playing. I've just got to go out and try to bring as much as I can on the ice. At the end of the days it's the coach's decision."

Perhaps the coach's decision has lit a bit of fire for Kane, who now has five goals in his last six games including scoring in the last two. Against Carolina, Kane scored the game-tying goal with 2:37 left in the third period as the Sabres lost in a shootout. On Tuesday against Florida, Kane again scored the game-tying goal as the Sabres erased a 2-0 deficit in the second period only to lose in a shootout.

His start to the season was slowed by an injury during the season opener, when he suffered cracked ribs after sliding hard into the end boards. He returned on Nov. 9 but it took him 11 games to get his first goal of the season.

Now, he feels as if he's warmed up.

"I mean I've played 20 games now. Probably the first eight of them, it takes a while to get back in the rhythm," Kane said. "I was coming off a pretty serious injury and I've just started to find my rhythm and feel better about my game. For me I think it's just about being consistent. I'm a guy that wants to make a difference and wants the puck on his stick and wants to be the guy. We have a few guys like that on the team. That's part of my job and for me, I just hope to be put in a position where I can have the opportunity to do that."

Sabres notebook: Hurricanes come to Buffalo after strange week in Carolina

By Amy Moritz

The Buffalo News

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The last time the Carolina Hurricanes played, they were hosting the Buffalo Sabres in Raleigh's PNC Arena on Saturday.

The Hurricanes were supposed to host the Detroit Red Wings on Monday. Only the ice started melting.

Poor ice conditions caused the game between the 'Canes and Red Wings to be postponed with a make-up date yet to be announced.

The News & Observer reported that Hurricanes president Don Waddell said a broken seal on a compressor that operates the main ice chiller resulted in freon "shooting out" from the system. The loss of freon caused the temperature of the ice at PNC Arena to rise, making the ice unplayable.

Carolina coach Bill Peters said the ice was fine during the team's pre-game skate at 10:30 that morning. Crews worked to try and fix the problem, but it could not repair it before 9:30 p.m., the NHL cutoff time for starting the game since Detroit was scheduled to play the following night in Tampa Bay.

"It was pretty strange," Hurricanes forward and West Seneca native Lee Stempniak told reporters after the team practice on Wednesday. "We didn't find out until about 10 minutes before going on the ice for warm-ups so everyone was sort of through their off-ice warm-up and starting to get dressed and we heard there was an issue and to just play it by ear. By that point got you undressed, tried to stay warm a little bit and after about half an hour it got hard to do that so you just sat around and waited. We knew it was probably going to be around nine o'clock when we knew if we were going to be playing so some of us tried to warm up as if it was going to start then and then it was cancelled. We had the day off," Tuesday "so it's been a pretty weird couple of days."

When last the Hurricanes played, they beat the Sabres, 2-1, in a shootout. Carolina had taken a 1-0 lead in the first period before a late goal from Evander Kane tied the game, sending it to overtime. Cam Ward recorded 23 saves over 65 minutes then stopped Sam Reinhart and Jack Eichel in the shootout while Stempniak and Sebastian Aho beat Sabres backup Anders Nilsson for the win.

The matchup has early implications in the standings. In the Eastern Conference wild card standings on Wednesday morning, the Hurricanes had 33 points, one ahead of the Sabres who are tied with Detroit at 32 points. The top two teams in the conference wild card standings are Philadelphia (42 points) and Washington (41 points).

The Sabres may find more possibilities on the road to the playoffs in the division as they trail Boston by just five points for the final spot in the Atlantic Division.

The Sabres are 5-2-3 in their last 10 games and have points in their last four games (2-0-2). They've shown resiliency, but still those first periods are troubling. In those last four games, the Sabres have left each first period trailing, 1-0, while being outshot by a combined 52-29.

"We've got to find a way to get ourselves into the game quicker," Sabres captain Brian Gionta said. "Whether it's establishing our game, getting into it somehow. I don't think we're waiting around but we're just kind of content. It's not that we're playing bad, but we're just not playing assertive enough. We need to be more desperate earlier on and have that mentality from the get-go and not get behind and then make our push later on."

Rasmus Ristolainen is not a person to shy away from ice time. If he could play, he probably would. Not that there's much more time for him to be on the ice. He ranks fifth among NHL defensemen in average time on ice with 26:41. In Tuesday's game in Florida he played 28:57.

"I think it was five games ago he was out there for a long shift and an icing and we may have called a time out and he said 'I'm fine,'" Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "He's a guy who'll take as much as you give him. The overtimes, he seems like he can keep going and going and going. Nothing can stop him. He gets a 30-second breather and he's back out there again. He ends up with 28 minutes and again we can have this conversation probably over and over again about the number of minutes that you want him to play, but he handled 28 minutes just fine," Tuesday "night."

Torrid stretch puts Sabres' Rasmus Ristolainen in elite company

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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BUFFALO – The significance of defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen's recent exploits shouldn't be overshadowed by the Sabres' disappointing season.

In the near future, if Ristolainen becomes an NHL All-Star or garners serious Norris Trophy consideration, remember the torrid run he is enjoying entering tonight's tilt against the Carolina Hurricanes at KeyBank Center.

Ristolainen has three goals, two overtime winners and 14 points while averaging a whopping 27 minutes, 41 seconds of ice time over the last 10 games.

The stretch, one of the best by a Sabres defenseman in recent memory, has vaulted Ristolainen, 22, into the elite company.

"He's starting to slide into that," Sabres center Ryan O'Reilly said Wednesday.

Consider: Ristolainen is tied for third among NHL defensemen with 23 points and 20 assists. The Finn's average ice time of 26 minutes, 41 seconds ranks fifth among all skaters.

"He's playing with a ton of confidence with the puck and a ton of confidence moving the puck," said Sabres coach Dan Bylsma, who noted that confidence has grown from the beginning of the season.

Right now, Ristolainen leads the Sabres in assists and points. Winger Kyle Okposo, whose 13 assists rank second, is one point behind. A defenseman has never led the Sabres in scoring, although Hall of Famer Phil Housley finished second three times in his eight-year Buffalo career.

After scoring a goal and two points in Tuesday's 4-3 shootout loss in Florida, Ristolainen is on a 61-point pace. The Sabres haven't had a 60-point defenseman since Housley scored 81 in 1989-90, a franchise record for the blue line.

A defenseman hasn't hit the 50-point mark since Garry Galley had 54 in 1995-96.

Ristolainen, who usually says little about himself, hasn't set any goals for a point total.

"I just want to make it to the playoffs," he said.

The Sabres rely on Ristolainen for a *huge* portion of their offense. He has assisted on 31.3 percent of the goals he hasn't scored this season, a number that trails only Edmonton's Connor McDavid (33.3) and Ottawa's Erik Karlsson (32.9).

Like those superstars, the 6-foot-3, 201-pound Ristolainen has produced offense playing difficult minutes against the opposition's top talent every game.

"You look at what he does on the ice and the players he plays against and to still be able to produce at the rate he does, it's impressive for a young defenseman," Sabres winger Evander Kane said. "I see nothing but good things in his future."

O'Reilly said: "You look at everything he does out there – offensively, defensively, tough to play against. You get his best game every time he's on the ice. He's just a complete player."

Ristolainen was on similar pace last season – he had seven goals and 24 points on this date a year ago – before tailing off during the winter and finishing with nine goals and 41 points.

Why could Ristolainen showcase more consistency this season? His body is better conditioned to handle the rigors of playing mega-minutes every night.

“The big difference from last year, I think he’s gotten even stronger,” Kane said.

Ristolainen added: “I try to work my (butt) off every summer and get stronger, faster.”

Bylsma said Ristolainen is “a tireless worker off the ice.”

“He’s a workout machine in the summertime and even during the season and builds that base for him to be able to be a strong, heavy player,” Bylsma said.

Incredibly, thanks to five overtime games, Ristolainen has played 28 or more minutes in five of the last eight contests.

“He’s a guy who he’ll take as much as you can give him,” Bylsma said. “The overtimes, it seems like he can keep going and going and going. Nothing stops him. He gets a 30-second breather, he’s back out there again. He ends up with 28 minutes (Tuesday).”

Ristolainen said: “I can play more than 30 (minutes).”

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The Sabres keep falling behind early and roaring back. Tuesday against the Panthers, they trailed 2-0 before racing back to take a 3-2 lead.

“You felt it coming from our team,” Bylsma said. “The guys were jumping over the boards, wagging the tails and kind of had a belief we were going to win that game.”

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The 12th-place Sabres (32 points) trail Carolina by one point in the Eastern Conference standings.

Kane heating up offensively after slow start

By Jourdon LaBarber

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Buffalo Sabres

You could almost carve an entire lineup out of the list of linemates that Evander Kane has played with over the past 10 games. Sam Reinhart and Kyle Okposo both played on the wing opposite him when he had Jack Eichel as his center, before he switched to a line with Zemgus Girgensons and Nicolas Deslauriers. Most recently, since the third period against Carolina on Saturday, he's skated with Johan Larsson and Brian Gionta.

For as inconsistent as Kane's linemates have been, all it's meant lately is that he's had more faces to celebrate with. Kane has scored nine points, including six goals, in his last 10 games, including game-tying goals in both of the Sabres' shootout losses during their recent road trip to Carolina and Florida.

His current hot streak comes on the heels of a 12-game goalless drought to begin his season. Nearly a month separated games No. 1 and 2 in that stretch thanks to the cracked ribs that he sustained when he crashed into the boards on opening night. Kane was eager to return as early as possible from that injury, but he admitted Wednesday that getting back to his normal self was an adjustment.

"I've played 20 games now," Kane said. "It takes a while to get back into the game. I was coming off of a pretty serious injury and I'm just kind of starting to find my rhythm and feel better about my game."

"For me I think it's just about being consistent. I'm a guy that wants to make a difference and wants to have the puck on his stick and wants to be the guy, and we have a few guys like that on the team. That's part of my job and for me I just hope to be put in a position where I can have the opportunity to do that."

He was "the guy" in Carolina when coach Dan Bylsma moved him to a line with Larsson and Gionta with the Sabres trailing 1-0 in the third period. Bylsma said he thought Kane's first shift with his new line energized the team for the remainder of that period, and it paid off when Kane tipped in a shot by Rasmus Ristolainen to tie the game with 2:37 remaining in regulation.

Kane played with Larsson and Gionta again in Florida on Tuesday, and this time he tied the game at 2-2 after Gionta collected a rebound on Cody Franson's shot from the point and fed Kane with a pass through the crease.

"I think moving him next to Larsson in the Carolina game with Gionta has added a lot to that line," Bylsma said. "I think Evander's done a great job of checking on that line as well. He's playing against the other teams' good players, he was last night again, and doing an excellent job with that line in the speed but checking part of the game as well."

Kane's goals helped the Sabres earn two points during their two-game road trip, giving them 15 points in their last 10 games. They had to come back to earn points in a handful of those games, be it in the third period at home against New York, or the second period against Los Angeles, or in those last two games against Carolina and Florida. In the process, Bylsma said he's seen his team develop a greater sense of confidence when they find themselves trailing.

"I think we have started to develop that with our team," he said. "Unfortunately we've had to do it from behind, but we have and we've fought back. The Florida game last night, they score the power-play goal to make it 2-0 nothing and roughly from the 10-minute mark on or probably the eight-minute mark, we took over that game and I think we had a good feeling we were going to come back."

"Especially when we get the power-play goal from Sam, you felt it coming from our team. The guys were jumping over the boards, wagging their tails and kind of had the belief we were going to win that game."

The Sabres now trail the Bruins by five points in the Atlantic Division with three games in hand, a fact not lost on the players.

"If we win those games, we're in the playoffs," Kane said. "We see that, we're aware of that. We've been picking up points pretty consistently these last 10 or so games and we know before the Christmas break we have to make a push. These next two games coming up are games we need to win and that are going to put ourselves in a really good position to have a good second half.

"I think we're a pretty confident team right now. I think that can still grow. We're starting to find our swagger a bit as a team but I still think we can improve on that."

The Sabres will play two more games before taking that three-day break for the holiday, at home against Carolina on Thursday and in Brooklyn against the Islanders on Friday. On the other side of the break, a road game in Detroit and a home-and-home set with Boston to close out 2016 await.

There's no time for Kane, or any of the other Sabres, to slow down now. If they make the most out of those games, the Sabres could very well be looking down from third place, not up at it.

Hurricanes travel to Buffalo for back half of unexpected home-and-home

The Associated Press

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BUFFALO, N.Y. -- Thursday night's game between Carolina and Buffalo will serve as the second half of an unexpected home-and-home series for the Hurricanes, but not for the Sabres.

The two teams squared off on Saturday in Carolina, with the Hurricanes picking up a 2-1 shootout victory. Both teams were scheduled for games to open the week, but Carolina's Monday game against the Detroit Red Wings was postponed due to an ice problem at PNC Arena.

"We apologize to our fans who made the trip to PNC Arena tonight hoping to see the Hurricanes extend their nine-game home point streak," said Hurricanes president Don Waddell in a statement. "A mechanical problem arose early this evening with the cooling system that keeps the ice solidified."

With that ice mishap behind them, the Hurricanes (13-11-7) will look for a similar performance to Saturday's shootout victory. Joakim Nordstrom scored in regulation, and Lee Stempniak and Sebastian Aho scored in the shootout. Cam Ward made 23 saves and stopped both shots in the shootout for Carolina.

Carolina led the game 1-0 until Buffalo's Evander Kane evened the score with 2:37 left in regulation.

With that victory, the Hurricanes improved to 8-0-1 in their last nine home games.

"It was a tight game throughout the whole match," center Jordan Staal said, according to the team's website. "Shootouts have been a sore spot for us. (Ward) did a great job and a couple big goals from two skilled guys got us over the top."

"It's good to get the win in the shootout," said Stempniak, per the team's website. "Those points make a difference at the end of the year."

The Sabres (12-11-8), meanwhile, cannot find a way to win in the shootout. On Tuesday, the Sabres picked up a point for the fourth straight game but fell in their fifth shootout of the season. Buffalo is 1-5 in shootouts this year, and starting goaltender Robin Lehner is 0-3 in shootouts and has yet to stop an attempt in six tries this season.

"Keep trying and keep working at 'em," Sabres head coach Dan Bylsma said, according to the team's website. "We keep practicing them a different way, focus a different way, mindset a different way and it's what we've got to keep doing."

"I need to keep working on them," Lehner said. "The first one there, it caught me a little off-guard. And (Aleksander) Barkov's a good shooter. What can I say?"

One bright spot for Buffalo has been the play of young defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen, who has taken another step forward as the team's best blue-liner. Ristolainen had a goal and an assist against the Hurricanes and has 15 points in his last 13 games. Last Friday, Ristolainen picked up his second career overtime goal, becoming only the fourth Sabres defenseman in franchise history to score multiple overtime goals in his career.

Ristolainen leads all Buffalo skaters with 23 points (three goals, 20 assists) in 31 games.