



Buffalo Sabres

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As struggling Sabres hit town, Red Wings also need quick answers

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 26, 2016

The Buffalo Sabres aren't the only team coming off the NHL's Christmas break looking for quick answers to their problems. They'll see another one on the other side of the ice Tuesday night in Joe Louis Arena.

The Detroit Red Wings have made the Stanley Cup playoffs for 25 consecutive seasons but they have lots of work to do if they want to extend the longest active streak of any of the four major North American pro sports leagues to 26.

The Red Wings are seventh in the Atlantic Division with 34 points, two points ahead of the last-place Sabres. Both teams are chasing third-place Boston for the final playoff slot. The Bruins have 40 points and have a huge task slated for Tuesday at Columbus, which is on a franchise-record 12-game winning streak.

As per the NHL's collective bargaining agreement, all teams are off Dec. 24-26 from games, practices and travel, so neither skated Monday. NHL rosters have been frozen for the holidays since Dec. 19 and that freeze expires at 11:59 p.m. Monday, so teams will be again free to make moves prior to their next game.

The Sabres, who have slid into the division basement by going 0-2-2 in their last four games, are scheduled to fly to Detroit Tuesday morning and head right to the rink for their 11:30 a.m. morning skate. It will be their second-last game at Joe Louis, which closes after this season. Buffalo plays its final game there on March 20.

The Red Wings have not been giving the NHL's oldest arena a fine sendoff in its 37th and final season. They are just 7-9-3 at home this year, compared to 8-6-1 on the road. Detroit is 15-15-4 overall and coming off Friday's 4-3 shootout win at Florida that got the Wings back to even through 34 games.

"We seem to have a good game and then not be very good," Detroit forward and former Sabres sniper Thomas Vanek said after that victory. "It's good to have a pretty good game, two points, take a few days off mentally and then we've got to put a run together. We all know that."

The Red Wings had an abysmal four-game stretch earlier this month where they went 0-3-1 and scored just three goals. But they hit Christmas winners of two of their last three games, with 11 goals in that stretch. While the Sabres' 1-5 shootout record has been a huge source of consternation, the Wings have stayed afloat in part because of their NHL-best 5-0 record in the skills competition. That includes their 2-1 win over Buffalo Nov. 23 in KeyBank Center.

Vanek, a free-agent signee over the summer, has just five goals but is tied for second on the team with 18 points. He had one of the Wings' two shootout goals Friday. Former Buffalo captain Steve Ott, another summer addition, has two goals and an assist in 30 games for the Wings. He grew up as a Detroit fan living across the border in Windsor, Ont.

The Wings won't be home much in the aftermath of Christmas as Tuesday's game will be the last time they see the Joe until Jan. 14. They start a seven-game road trip Thursday in Ottawa and then head to Toronto for Sunday's Centennial Classic outdoors at BMO Field before the trip moves out west.

Detroit's goaltending situation bears watching. Jimmy Howard has gone down for 4-6 weeks with a sprained knee and that's a huge loss because he had excellent numbers (1.96 goals-against average, .934 save percentage) despite a 5-7-1 record. Coach Jeff Blashill played a hunch at Florida by going with rookie Jared Coreau over struggling Petr Mrazek (9-7-3, but 3.06/.899).

Coreau, just up from Grand Rapids, got his first NHL win while playing in his second NHL game. He blanked the Panthers over the final 34½ minutes of play, counting overtime, and stopped two of three in the shootout. The

Red Wings trailed, 3-1, through two periods and rallied to get a point for the first time this season when down after 40 minutes. They had been 0-10.

The special teams battle in this one should be interesting. The Red Wings are last in the NHL on the power play at 11.9 percent. They have one power-play goal in their last 11 games and are a stunning 0 for 26 in their last six.

The Sabres, meanwhile, continue to struggle on the penalty kill as they are last in the NHL at just 74.3 percent. They are 28th on the road at 72.9 percent.

Sabres prospect Alexander Nylander faces high expectations with Sweden

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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ROCHESTER – A year ago, Buffalo Sabres prospect Alexander Nylander wowed as a 17-year-old at the World Junior Championship, showcasing his dynamic skills while leading Team Sweden with four goals and nine points in seven games.

So naturally, the expectations this year for Nylander, a youngster many believe was the most talented player in the 2016 NHL Draft, are *extremely* high.

Not only is Nylander a year older, the eighth overall pick has spent the first three months this season competing against men in the AHL.

"The expectations on him would be to be one of Sweden's better players," said coach Dan Lambert, whose Rochester Americans loaned the winger to Sweden last week. "I think last year he had a phenomenal tournament. Certainly, we expect him to do the same this season."

Barely 10 minutes into Monday's opener in Montreal, Nylander grabbed a loose puck in the left circle, cut to the slot and scored the tournament's first goal. In the final minute of Sweden's 6-1 demolishing of Denmark, Nylander got knocked down behind the net, quickly got up and redirected a shot in near the crease seconds later.

Nylander's penchant for scoring highlight-reel goals is well-known around Buffalo and Rochester. Shortly after the Sabres drafted him June 24, he wowed a development camp crowd inside HarborCenter with a few nifty shootout scores.

His hands are among the quickest and softest in the world. But slick skill, of course, doesn't always translate into success at the next level.

The AHL's youngest player – Nylander doesn't turn 19 until March 2 – has "been good for us at times," Lambert said. The 6-foot-1, 185-pound Nylander has five goals and 17 points in 29 AHL games. The rookie hasn't gone more than two contests without a point.

"He's been very good for us on the power play," Lambert said inside the Blue Cross War Memorial. "He's a growing man, and it is a process for him as far development. We believe it's going in the right direction."

Nylander's biggest adjustment has been learning how to compete against grown men, Lambert said.

"When you're 18 years old, it's not an easy thing to do," Lambert said. "You're playing against defensemen that are 27, 28. They have man strength and he's not there yet."

In a hallway outside the Rochester dressing room before he left for the world junior championship Dec. 19 – "It's always really an honor to put on that jersey," Nylander said – he reflected on his adjustments to pro hockey.

"You got to be a little bit quicker in your decisions," said Nylander, who spent last season in the junior Ontario Hockey League. "They are smarter players. The guys are a little bit bigger. But other than that, it's similar."

Nylander said his family has helped him acclimate to the AHL. His brother, William, a rookie with the Toronto Maple Leafs, was arguably the league's best player last season, scoring 18 goals and 45 points in 38 games. Their father, Michael, who compiled 679 points in 920 NHL games, briefly played in the AHL in 2010-11, ironically, for Rochester.

"It's crazy," he said of his father playing for the same team only six years earlier.

Their recent experiences have been valuable to Nylander.

"I had a lot of help from my brother and my dad to get going and getting adjusted to this game," he said. "So it's not been too big of a problem."

He added: "It's looking more normal out there."

Red Wings, Sabres try to get something going

The Associated Press

December 26, 2016

The Detroit Red Wings and the Buffalo Sabres are the bottom two teams in the Atlantic Division, and the Red Wings (15-5-4) host the Sabres (12-13-8) Tuesday at 7:30 p.m. at Joe Louis Arena.

Detroit, seventh in the Atlantic Division, has made the playoffs 25 consecutive seasons, but it is seven points and four teams out of the final Atlantic Division playoff spot this season.

At the moment, it appears that both Eastern Conference wild-card teams will come out of the Metropolitan Division.

"I'm hoping going into the Christmas break, it's a time to get flushed, get away from the game a little bit," general manager Ken Holland told mlive.com. "I understand that starting tomorrow ... you don't have 48 games. In the next 20-25 games, we need to play our way back into it because as the year goes along every organization has got to make decisions.

"Obviously, the trade deadline dictates decisions -- buy, sell or stand pat. So, it's not like you can wait until the last 10 or 15 games and all the sudden you're going to put something together. We all understand the next 20-25 games are going to be really critical in determining how this season plays out for us."

Injuries are a major factor for the Red Wings.

Goalie Jimmy Howard is out four to six weeks with a mild MCL sprain suffered last Tuesday in a 4-1 loss at Tampa Bay. This is Howard's second stint on injured reserve. He missed two weeks when he injured his groin Nov. 25 in New Jersey.

The Red Wings may get defenseman Brendan Smith (out since Nov. 26, with a sprained right MCL) back Tuesday but will still be without center Darren Helm (sidelined with a dislocated left shoulder since Nov. 15), left winger Justin Abdelkader (a sprained right MCL suffered Dec. 1) and defenseman Mike Green (an upper-body injury sustained Dec. 17).

Also defenseman Alexey Marchenko (shoulder) and forward Tyler Bertuzzi (high ankle sprain on Nov. 26) remain out.

Meanwhile, the Sabres are last in the Atlantic Division

Buffalo went 0-2-2 in the last four games and scored just one goal in three of them.

"It's really disappointing," captain Brian Gionta told the Buffalo News. "We continue to try to be a different team than we need to be to be successful. We need to be direct. We need to be north with the puck. We need to support it with speed.

"We generate a lot from our forecheck. We generate a lot from working teams down low in the offensive zone. That's how we get a lot of our opportunities. We're not a neutral-zone team that creates chances out there. When we get fancy, we turn pucks over and it's odd-man rushes."

The Sabres are tied for the fewest points in the Eastern Conference with the New York Islanders, a team that beat Buffalo 5-1 on Friday.

According to the stats, there were six giveaways by the Sabres and 17 takeaways by the Islanders.

"I don't know how many odd-man rushes they had," Sabres forward Zemgus Girgensons said. "If we figure out puck management, we'll be better."

In wake of break, Bylsma and Murray have to fix Sabres' mess

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 25, 2016

The best thing that's happened to Dan Bylsma and Tim Murray the last couple weeks is that everybody in these parts has been using up most of their attention on Rex Ryan and Doug Whaley.

That's about to change. Here's to Bylsma and Murray downing their last egg nog and figuring some things out. Fast.

The Sabres are a complete disaster at this point and they can no longer use injuries as an excuse. They hit Christmas last in the Eastern Conference amid growing questions that surround their coach's game management and the moves made to build the team by their general manager.

When they take the ice again for the morning skate Tuesday in Detroit, they should be physically refreshed after being away from the rink since Friday's ugly loss to the New York Islanders in Barclays Center. But will the mindset of the players and their coach be any different?

It better be.

Not counting their one team-credited shootout winner, the Sabres have just 70 goals for the season in 33 games and that's 29th in the NHL. They have given up the first goal in seven straight games. They're 28th in the league in first-period goals, with just 18.

At 12-13-8, the Sabres are bad and they're boring. That's a deadly combination.

Bylsma's plodding system is flat-out unwatchable at times. Players' instincts are stunted in place of where-should-I-be second thoughts. Zemgus Girgensons clearly can't make heads or tails out of it. Tyler Ennis, when he was healthy, had the same problem. Many others seem baffled.

The Sabres need to skate and not think so much on the ice but their coach has to allow them to play that way. You wonder if that's possible.

Bylsma heading down Ryan Road?

Lately, it seems as if Bylsma has lost his mind. It's to the point where it's now an open discussion among Sabres fans if Bylsma, in just the second year of a five-year contract, should be heading down Ryan Road to the unemployment line too if his team continues to implode:

Let's look at some examples:

---Bylsma benched Jack Eichel for the first power play of Thursday's home loss to Carolina and the team's broadcast partners revealed Friday it was for disciplinary reasons. Perhaps not wanting to throw his 20-year-old star under the bus, Bylsma took the bullets for the decision with the media after Thursday's game and made no mention of any discipline issue.

It was a bad miscalculation. By protecting the player, Bylsma made it sound like he actually wanted Matt Moulson on his power play over the kid the Sabres threw an entire season to get. Even though Moulson has seven power-play goals this season, everyone listening thought Bylsma was going goofy.

---The Sabres' best defensive pairing this season has been Jake McCabe, and not the overmatched Josh Gorges, making a fine partner for No. 1 blueliner Rasmus Ristolainen. So what has Bylsma done the last couple games? Paired Ristolainen with trade acquisition Dmitry Kulikov, who has been a complete disaster.

That was going to be the pair on paper over the summer, when Kulikov was acquired from Florida from Mark Pysyk. But Kulikov's preseason back injury set things aside and he looks utterly lost on the ice, with no points and a team-worst rating of minus-10 in 19 games. Ristolainen and McCabe need to be back together.

---Bylsma and Murray made a colossal mistake with their defense in general by not keeping Brendan Guhle in October. Instead, they chose the woefully overmatched Casey Nelson to stay on the roster. Then the injuries piled up and Guhle was summoned from junior on an emergency recall. He was solid in games against Boston, Washington and Edmonton before going back.

Guhle would be no worse than the No. 3 defenseman for the Sabres today. Since his departure, the Buffalo defense corps has not nearly been as good with Josh Gorges, Zach Bogosian (one assist, minus-6 in 13 games) and Kulikov back on the ice. But Guhle is stuck in junior for the season.

---Bylsma needs to completely revamp his philosophy on overtime and have his team go full throttle to score. If they give up the inevitable odd-man rush and a game-winning goal, so be it. At least they will have tried for the win. As it stands now, they have almost no chance in a shootout.

The Sabres are 1-5 in shootouts this year, which makes them 3-12 under Bylsma. That's no small sample size. My worries for the next time Buffalo goes to overtime is that an opponent will try to take the air out of the game and not press, with the idea of getting to the shootout because it's almost a guaranteed win.

None of Bylsma's shooters have any confidence and they all seem stressed by the fact Robin Lehner hasn't made a save yet in six chances and Anders Nilsson is just 4 for 8. Bylsma needs to try different shooters and the coach did say he's willing to consider Ristolainen, among others, in the skills competition. He should do it.

The GM's issues

Murray's hands are all over this mess too. The Kulikov trade looks like a very bad one and Murray's Sammy Watkins moment continues to be giving up a first-round pick for Lehner. The big Swede is proving to be a decent NHL starter but that's about all, not nearly worth giving up that kind of asset.

Murray gave up far too much for Evander Kane and Bogosian, although Kane has been one of the team's most productive forwards of late. And as good as the Ryan O'Reilly trade has looked at times over the last 15 months, shouldn't the owner of the biggest contract in franchise history have more than seven goals and 18 points in 27 games?

With the NHL roster freeze ending at midnight, there's plenty of things Murray should be doing. A trade for another NHL-level defenseman should be at the top of the list. A pox on both Bylsma and Murray to think this defense corps could be part of a 95-point team.

Here's more to-dos:

---William Carrier, with one goal and two points in 23 games, has been given more than ample opportunity to produce and has not been able to. He needs to go back to Rochester and Nick Baptiste, tied for the AHL lead in goals with 14, needs to come back up and get some top-line minutes.

---Derek Grant needs to join Carrier in the AHL as well. He was the Sabres' leading scorer in preseason but doesn't have a goal in 29 games of the regular season -- making him goal-less in all 69 games of his NHL career. It seems inconceivable he can stay, especially since he's not much more than a penalty killer and the team's PK unit has been horrific.

---Justin Bailey has 10 goals for the Amerks and needs to be given a real chance to play in the NHL, something he has not gotten this year. It seems like Murray, and especially Bylsma, have soured on the Williamsville product. But how much worse can he be than Grant, Carrier or Nicolas Deslauriers?

---Let's see if the World Junior Championships can infuse some jump and confidence into No. 1 draft pick Alex Nylander's game. Nylander has only five goals and is minus-11 in 29 games for Rochester. The word is he is not close to NHL-ready right now. If he turns it around at the Juniors, let him ride that momentum right to Buffalo for at least a few games.

No respite for ownership

Terry and Kim Pegula are so over their heads with the Bills' situation that they were probably hoping the Sabres would give them a soft landing come January. No such luck. For people who want to say the Pegulas have only been NFL owners for two years and are learning on the job, what's the excuse with the hockey team? They purchased it in 2011 and it will be six years and counting this spring with no playoff berths.

The Sabres openly tanked for two years and missed the playoffs again last season with 81 points, although it seemed like they were on the right path. Now, they seem like they're going nowhere but traveling on Regrets Boulevard. Connor McDavid, Aaron Ekblad, Leon Draisaitl, Auston Matthews and Patrik Laine all play for somebody else.

Sure feels like Buffalo missed something, doesn't it?

Instead of Ekblad or Draisaitl, the Sabres got Sam Reinhart. Instead of McDavid, they got Eichel.

They didn't get Mike Babcock, they got Bylsma. They didn't get Steven Stamkos, but got Kyle Okposo. They didn't get Jimmy Vesey.

Still, the Sabres had to think they were doing OK in most of the above slots. Except for the all-or-nothing Vesey affair, they got a solid No. 2 choice. It should be worth more than it has been.

It's very interesting to note that the Columbus Blue Jackets, a team built with no "generational talent", entered the break on a 12-game winning streak and atop the NHL's overall standing. The Sabres have won 12 games all season and could essentially be toast in the playoff race by the end of the week.

Losing was supposed to be over. Maybe it's just ingrained so deep in the Sabres' culture right now that it's going to be a lot harder to escape than anyone thought.

Sabres' season is already teetering toward being over

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

December 24, 2016

Sitting in last place on Christmas seems bad enough. By the time New Year's Day rolls around, the Sabres may already be looking to next season.

Happy holidays.

Buffalo just failed its first big test of the year. It wanted to put together a winning streak before the Christmas break. Instead, the Sabres are on an ugly 0-2-2 slide.

But during a compressed 82-game schedule, the next opportunity comes quickly. The Sabres restart the season Tuesday in Detroit, then play back-to-back games against Boston.

It seems too soon in the hockey calendar to use the term "must win." It's not even the halfway point. The games against the Bruins, however, qualify.

The balance of power in the Eastern Conference is tilted heavily toward the Metropolitan Division, which has a realistic shot of claiming five of the eight playoff spots. In order for teams in the Atlantic Division to qualify, they'll likely need to finish in the top three.

That's where the Bruins and Sabres come in. Boston is in third place in the Atlantic with 40 points in 36 games. The Sabres are in eighth with 32 points in 33 games.

If the Sabres lose both games to the Bruins, they'll fall 12 points back. Even with three games in hand, it's a monumental chore to make up that much ground in a league where three-point games are common.

The Sabres already know it's going to take time to inch back into contention. They need to win in Detroit before they can focus on the Bruins.

"We've got to get our first one before we get our second one," defenseman Zach Bogosian said. "We've got to make sure we're trying to get out of this and work toward the better side of things."

The Sabres have a lot of problems, but the biggest seems to be an identity crisis.

The mindset created by coach Dan Bylsma is that Buffalo is a grinding, physical team. The players have accepted that premise, at least outwardly.

"When we turn over pucks and we try to go up and down with these teams that are skilled like Washington, that's not our brand of hockey," defenseman Jake McCabe said after a recent loss to the Capitals. "We grind teams down in the offensive zone. We're not a rush team. We don't go three-on-two and three-on-two, then have them come back four-on-two. That's just not our style of play."

But should it be?

The Sabres have forwards with scoring on their résumé. Three players have topped 30 goals in a season, two others have exceeded 25 and two more have eclipsed 20. That's more than half of their forward lines.

The only players who are on pace to top 20 goals this year are Jack Eichel (25) and Kyle Okposo (23).

The numbers may go up if the coaches loosen the reins. The Sabres have attempted 1,372 shots at even strength, ahead of only Colorado (1,292), Detroit (1,307) and New Jersey (1,336).

It's simply the way Bylsma's system is structured. During his final two seasons with Pittsburgh, the Penguins ranked 22nd in shot attempts. Since he left, they've ranked eighth.

"When you're confronted with a guy in your face, you have to be willing to put the puck by him," Bylsma said.

The happiest the players have appeared was following a run-and-gun, 6-3 victory over Los Angeles. It showed they could skate and find the net.

However, the players have to absorb some blame for the plodding pace. It's hard for a coach to trust them to skate up and down the ice when completing a 10-foot pass is an infuriating chore.

"We know we can make tape-to-tape passes," forward Zemgus Girgensons said. "It's just mentally preparing for that."

Mental preparation has not been Buffalo's strong suit. The Sabres have allowed the opening goal in seven straight games. They've scored just 18 first-period goals, ahead of only the 15 put up by Vancouver and Colorado. The players are often uninterested when the puck drops.

On the flip side, that could be a lack of motivation provided by the coaching staff. Though professionals are expected to be ready no matter what, some need more to get the juices flowing.

As of now, nearly everything about the Sabres is flowing downhill.

Inside the Sabres: Foundation, players bring holiday smiles

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

December 24, 2016

There has been a spirit of giving in Sabreland.

The whole team visited Roswell Park Cancer Institute. Ryan O'Reilly made a private hospital stop. Dozens of volunteers helped feed the homeless in Buffalo. Cody McCormick raised money for impoverished people in Canada. Brian Gionta made sure kids had a seat at a game. Kim Pegula made sure children had a Christmas.

"It's been an active time," said Rich Jureller, president of the Sabres Foundation and the team's director of community relations. "We try and do a lot. The holidays are a special time for everybody."

Whether it's a big event or a personal mission, the Sabres have helped out during the festive season. Jureller and his staff provide support in the background.

While the players are on the road or in the midst of three games in four nights, they need someone to make sure their donated suites are filled and upcoming visits are planned. The community relations personnel take of it.

"It makes it a lot easier when you've got Rich dealing with the logistics," said forward Matt Moulson, who donates to Tickets for Troops and the Wounded Warrior program. "People want to work with different charities or different organizations, but you don't realize the logistics that go into everything. He deals with that and makes sure you keep good relations with the different organizations."

The Sabres' foundation typically donates more than \$500,000 per year, but the time is invaluable. The players hung out with cancer-stricken children as Christmas approached. Dinner conversations came about at Thanksgiving because 2,300 turkeys were delivered to the Buffalo City Mission and Food Bank of Western New York.

More than 100 families had presents to open because of the team's Holiday Angels program. Catholic Charities of Buffalo provided names of those who needed help, and people adopted the families and bought gifts.

"Catholic Charities would email you all the information you need to shop," Jureller said. "We started it last year and I think we had 60 families. We did 113 this year."

"It's good stuff. There's a lot of families in need, so it makes a difference."

Jureller's desire to give back helps the programs thrive. The Western New York native joined the Sabres in August 2005 and has risen to foundation president.

"He's the right person for the job," Sabres defenseman Zach Bogosian said. "He's got a huge heart. He really does care. He cares about us as people, and he cares about the people that we're going to see."

Bogosian and Jureller serve as advisers for the Make Lemon Aide Foundation for CP. It's hard to find a cause that Jureller hasn't helped. His steadiest job is bringing charitable organizations to games. They sit in suites donated by Gionta, O'Reilly and Bogosian.

"We try to split the wealth," Jureller said. "We're getting to the point where we don't want to start asking someone for a second time."

Organizations who would like to team up with the Sabres can contact him at rich.jureller@sabres.com. Conversely, Jureller seeks out charities that are close to the players' hearts. It's why he was auctioning signed jerseys in the lobby of a theatre while McCormick showed a film that benefited the Gord Downie and Chanie Wenjack Fund. It's a charity for First Nations people in rural Canada.

"Anytime a player wants to do something, we'll support it," Jureller said. "It's a responsibility that we have. We ask so much of these guys – Can you do this? Can you go here? Can you help out here? – so when Zach is getting involved with his fundraiser and his foundation, or Ryan wants to go to the hospital, or Cody doing the thing for Gord Downie, it's anything we can do to help.

"We try and use all the resources we have. It's awesome because I love hockey and I love helping people."

Sabres fall back into last with another bad loss

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

December 23, 2016

NEW YORK – The Sabres said it themselves. The stretch right before Christmas could define them.

It sure has. They're a last-place team.

A nice run was supposed to bring Buffalo back toward the playoff pack and send the team into the holiday as an Eastern Conference hopeful. The hope tank is pretty low, as old coach Lindy Ruff used to say.

The Sabres closed the pre-Christmas schedule with another disheartening loss, this time a 5-1 beatdown at the hands of the New York Islanders. The teams are tied for the fewest points in the Eastern Conference, not the spot Buffalo had in mind when it focused on the schedule six games ago.

"We had six games, 12 points before the break here and ended up with six," coach Dan Bylsma said in Barclays Center. "It's .500 hockey, but it feels a lot more disappointing than that."

It sure does. After winning the opening two games of the stretch, Buffalo went 0-2-2 in the last four and scored just one goal in three of them.

"We talked about picking up those points," defenseman Zach Bogosian said. "I thought on the road trip we lost some points. We'd gotten to overtime, but I thought should have won. Our goal was to win those games. We didn't necessarily put ourselves in the greatest position to do that."

There's a clear disconnect inside the Sabres. What's said and what's done are opposite. The organization needs to determine if it's a coaching problem, the wrong players or – worst-case scenario – a combination of both.

"It's really disappointing," captain Brian Gionta said. "We continue to try to be a different team than we need to be to be successful. We need to be direct. We need to be north with the puck. We need to support it with speed."

"We generate a lot from our forecheck. We generate a lot from working teams down low in the offensive zone. That's how we get a lot of our opportunities. We're not a neutral-zone team that creates chances out there. When we get fancy, we turn pucks over and it's odd-man rushes."

The Sabres laid nearly all of the blame for Friday's loss on puck management. Officially, there were six giveaways by the Sabres and 17 takeaways by the Islanders.

"I don't know how many odd-man rushes they had," Sabres forward Zemgus Girgensons said. "If we figure out puck management, we'll be better."

Though the inability to make a pass is a major problem, the Sabres have others. They're a passive team. They usually don't get warmed up until they're in a hole.

The only things they warmed up Friday were the bus and Bylsma's seat.

"Our game is predicated on the puck going north and the puck going in the offensive zone with execution," Bylsma said. "When we're playing good and we're on our game, we manage the puck well, we keep going north, getting to the offensive zone and play there."

"We didn't do that at all and turned the puck over against good players and gave them opportunities."

The Sabres were a step or three behind the Islanders all night.

"It's execution with the puck," Gionta said. "That's why it looks like it's a lack of team speed."

It's not just one night, though. The Sabres have looked terrible too often, with and without their full lineup.

It'll be a Christmas miracle if they return from their three-day break as a reinvented team.

"When it rains, it pours," Bogosian said. "You can hang your head and sulk and be negative all you want, talk and say whatever you want. At the end of the day, I think if we all come back from the break with a fresh attitude and maybe a different outlook on a few things, we'll go from there."

Sabres Notebook: Okposo thanks Isles fans; Nilsson back

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

December 23, 2016

BROOKLYN – Kyle Okposo spent just one year playing in Brooklyn, but he spent nine seasons on Long Island. As he rode the Sabres' bus to the Islanders' arena Friday, he spotted familiar places.

"Both my kids were born here and I grew up here," Okposo said. "I really did."

While he remembered the good times during his first trip back since signing with Buffalo, he also recalled the tough moments.

"Playing in New York, you can face some scrutiny," the left winger said in Barclays Center. "When you have good times, they're definitely going to be behind you. For me, my game was up and down early in my career. I've got to give them a lot of credit. They stuck by me."

"The last few years that I was here, I started to be a lot more consistent and play well. They were really loud and supportive and stuck by us as a group and a team and me personally. I just want to say thanks to the fans for being there for me."

The fans thanked him with a standing ovation during a first-period commercial break as a tribute video played on the scoreboard.

Okposo became one of the Isles' most consistent players the past three seasons, which is why Buffalo pounced on the unrestricted free agent. Much like Okposo's younger days, inconsistencies have arisen for the 28-year-old and his team.

The Sabres entered the game against the Islanders with a 12-12-8 record. Okposo and linemate Jack Eichel were among Buffalo's most prolific point producers. Neither, however, had reached the score sheet in the previous three games, part of a four-game absence for Eichel.

"I don't think it's Jack, honestly," Okposo said. "He took control of the game last game, had seven shots on goal. I've got to be better personally. The last few games for me haven't been very good. I want to get back to being better support for him."

"You're going to have some ups and downs in your career when you're young, but he's a special player. He's going to get through it, and I'm going to help him get through it. We just have to play better as a team, and I think that's going to help everybody out."

Coach Dan Bylsma has seen frustration in both players, with Okposo feeling the weight of being a prized addition.

"Working to come through, but not there," Bylsma said. "He's been pressing a little bit. You can see it and feel it in his game. He's a big part of our team, a big part of our offense, and he has to be a part of the team and not push and press."

"We can't cheat and force it on one end to give up on the other end. Kyle just has to play his game for us to have success."

Regardless of slumps, Okposo has had a positive impact during his first months with Buffalo.

"A big part of Kyle and his addition to our team has been his leadership," Bylsma said. "It's just his presence. He's been a guy who plays the game the right way and demands it of people around him. That's been huge for us."

Former Islanders goaltender Anders Nilsson started against his old team. The Sabres netminder appeared for the second time in Buffalo's last seven games.

Nilsson entered the rink with a 5-3-2 record and .933 save percentage. He was 9-9-2 with a .898 save percentage during parts of two seasons with the Islanders from 2011 to 2014.

"My recollection of Anders is as an Islander and playing against him and seeing him in the net," Bylsma said. "He's ventured down the road a few times since then, but he's kind of come into his own here for us and playing real strong."

The Islanders' transition from Uniondale to Brooklyn continues. New York holds its morning skates less than two miles from Nassau Coliseum, then makes the 30-mile drive to Barclays Center for the game.

"We figured it out halfway through the year last year, the routine that works best," Okposo said. "Definitely a little longer than most teams, but they figured it out. It's just the way it is."

Quick hits: Islanders 5, Sabres 1

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

December 23, 2016

NEW YORK – While the Sabres haven't looked great on the road, they'd been able to gain points in four straight. That streak came to an ugly end Friday.

The New York Islanders rolled to a 5-1 victory over Buffalo, stopping the Sabres' modest 1-0-3 stretch. The Sabres were looking to get points in five straight road games for the first time since March 2012. They didn't come close in Barclays Center.

The offense was inept and goaltender Anders Nilsson had an off night. Buffalo fell to 0-2-2 in its last four overall. The Islanders and Sabres finished the game tied with Detroit for the fewest points in the Eastern Conference.

Unlucky seven: For the seventh straight game, the Sabres fell into a 1-0 hole. New York scored the only goal of the first period with 7:55 left. Anthony Beauvillier reached out for a quality deflection. Nilsson got a piece of the puck with his blocker, but not enough to keep it out of the net.

Doubling the lead: Ryan Strome beat Sam Reinhart to a loose puck in the neutral zone, streaked to the Sabres' end and took a shot at Nilsson. The goalie couldn't handle it, and Strome poked home the rebound with 5:24 left in the second.

Tripling the lead: The Islanders' power play buried the Sabres in their own zone late in the second, and the puck control paid off with 38.2 seconds left. John Tavares cut to the front of the net, and the puck bounced home from a crowded crease.

The Sabres went into the second intermission in a 3-0 hole. New York had a 23-16 shot advantage, including 16-9 during the middle period.

Quadrupling the lead: Andrew Ladd cleanly beat Nilsson to the glove side with 5:35 gone in the third period.

Quintupling the lead: Alan Quine danced around Jake McCabe, slashed the stick of Johan Larsson and fed Calvin de Haan for a tap-in with 7:26 to play. Nilsson smashed his stick after the goal.

Ending the shutout: Zemgus Girgensons scored on a backhand with 1:03 to play.

Fight for a milestone: Playing in his 300th game with the Sabres, left wing Marcus Foligno opened it with a quick trip to the penalty box. It was payback. Foligno fought Isles defenseman Johnny Boychuk, who boarded Jack Eichel in the previous meeting.

Injured forward Tyler Ennis, who has played 375 games with Buffalo, is the only player on the team with more appearances than Foligno.

Warm welcome: During the first commercial break, fans rose for a standing ovation as a tribute video to Kyle Okposo played on the scoreboard. The longtime Islanders forward, playing his first game in Brooklyn as a visitor, responded with heartfelt waves.

Line changes: Just one line – Ryan O'Reilly in the middle of Foligno and Reinhart – remained from Thursday's home loss to Carolina. Evander Kane joined Eichel and Okposo. Larsson centered for Zemgus Girgensons and Brian Gionta. William Carrier rejoined the lineup after being a scratch and played with Derek Grant and Matt Moulson. Players alternated during the third period with Buffalo in its three-goal hole.

Forward Nicolas Deslauriers and defenseman Cody Franson were the Sabres' scratches.

Unique giveaway: The Islanders held Ralph Macchio Bobblehead Night to honor the Long Island native who starred in "The Karate Kid." The likeness had an Islanders uniform and the requisite headband while doing the "crane kick" pose. Macchio's daughter, Julia, sang the national anthem.

"My whole childhood was at Nassau Coliseum," Macchio told the Islanders' website. "Some of my greatest memories of my childhood were in that building and with this team."

Next: The Sabres and the NHL will take a three-day Christmas break, with no activities on or off the ice. Buffalo comes back with three games in five days, and all are against Atlantic Division foes. The Sabres visit Detroit on Tuesday, host Boston on Thursday and travel to face the Bruins for a New Year's Eve matinee.

Versatility could earn Sabres prospect Casey Fitzgerald spot with USA

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
December 24, 2016

BUFFALO – If you ask a hockey prospect who he tries to emulate on the ice, most will name some of the NHL's top talent, perhaps a superstar.

Then there's Casey Fitzgerald, a 5-foot-11, 187-pound defenseman the Sabres drafted in the [third round, 86th overall](#), in June.

Years ago, before Fitzgerald's father, Tom, joined New Jersey's front office as assistant general manger, he told his son to watch [defenseman Andy Greene](#), the Devils' captain.

"So I watched him," the younger Fitzgerald said Monday inside HarborCenter. "I like the way he plays. I think he's just a solid defenseman, undersized, probably 5-10, undrafted guy. ... But now he's captain of the New Jersey Devils.

"He's a guy I look up to and emulate. ... He's solid, kind of a jack-of-all trades."

Fitzgerald, a Boston College sophomore, possesses a similar skill set.

"He's good on the power play," said [Bob Motzko](#), Team USA's coach for the upcoming World Junior Championship. "He's good on the penalty kill. He's just very comfortable in every situation that you could find yourself in."

Fitzgerald, 19, could find himself on the U.S. squad when it begins play Monday against Latvia in Toronto. Right now, he's one of 24 players and eight defensemen left on the roster, which completed a five-day training camp Tuesday in Buffalo.

One more cut must be made after the Americans let forwards Alex DeBrincat and Logan Brown go Thursday.

Update: Fitzgerald has made the team.

After getting bypassed in the NHL Draft as an 18-year-old, Fitzgerald has quickly developed into a strong prospect.

"It doesn't change anything getting drafted a year after," he said. "It's obviously the same feeling. Not getting drafted the first time around was obviously hard for a kid. ... But ... I think it helped in the long run."

On a Boston College team with 13 freshmen, Fitzgerald is relied upon heavily.

"I'm one of the older guys on the back end," he said. "I'm kind of veteran status."

But in Buffalo, he's just a notable prospect. Having spent time here at development camp in July, Fitzgerald, a Boston native, feels comfortable.

"I kind of understand the city and how much hockey a priority is here and they're die hard hockey fans, so it's cool to see that because I'm from Boston and hockey's obviously big there," Fitzgerald said. "Just as big here."

Ex-Isle Okposo welcomed back by Barclays crowd

By Sal Cacciatore

Newsday

December 23, 2016

Before receiving a warm welcome from fans in his return to Barclays Center on Friday night, Kyle Okposo had to make a "strange" walk to the visitor's locker room.

"I didn't know where to go," said Okposo, who signed with the Sabres in the offseason after playing the first nine seasons of his career with the Islanders. "I hadn't been down in the visitor's room before, so that was a little strange, not going to the other side."

Okposo played his first game against the Islanders in Buffalo on Dec. 13, but said he knew "it would be different in this building for sure." He added that the Buffalo game was "odd" but that "sometime in the second period, it started to feel like a hockey game."

Said John Tavares, "After talking to him last week, he said it was one of the weirdest games he's played."

Okposo, who entered the game with nine goals and 13 assists, received a loud ovation after a video tribute during a first-period stoppage.

"They meant a lot," he said. "For me, my game was up and down early in my career, and I have to give them a lot of credit. They stuck by me."

Regarding his former teammates, Okposo said, "I have a lot of buddies over there . . . You're not going to be buddies on the ice, but after the game, you can hug it out and say 'Merry Christmas.' "

Stephen Gionta was called up by the Islanders earlier in the week and called it "a good early Christmas present. It's good to be back around the guys."

Jack Capuano said the 33-year-old center, who was inactive Friday, is "one of those guys that does things the right way. Unfortunately, he got the injury during training camp. He probably could have been in our opening night lineup."

Strome helps Islanders beat Sabres 5-1

By Scott Charles

The Associated Press

December 23, 2016

NEW YORK (AP) — The New York Islanders are hoping their sharp effort against the Buffalo Sabres is a sign of things to come after a so-so start to the season.

Ryan Strome had a goal and an assist, Thomas Greiss made 28 saves and the Islanders beat the Sabres 5-1 on Friday night.

John Tavares had a power-play goal for New York, and Andrew Ladd, Anthony Beauvillier and Calvin de Haan also scored. Defenseman Travis Hamonic had two assists as the Islanders registered four or more goals in consecutive games for the first time this season.

"This was one of the most complete games we've played," Islanders coach Jack Capuano said. "Start to finish, our work ethic was there. Same with our battle level. And our D did a great job."

Greiss was in line for a shutout before Zemgus Girgensons scored with 1:03 left in the third period, and the goaltender improved to 6-2 in his last eight games.

"We looked like a tired team," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "When you are confronted with stiff defense and you are confronted with a guy in your face, you have to be willing to put the puck by him. The Islanders played the way we expected them to play, a tough game, they are a hard-working team. We forced things, and turned the puck over too much."

Anders Nilsson had 27 saves in his 10th start of the season for Buffalo (12-13-8).

"We didn't play at the level we can play," Nilsson said. "We were flat the whole game. We gave up too many odd-man rushes, way too many scoring chances against, and unfortunately I wasn't able to make the saves that the team needed."

The Islanders (13-14-6) honored Kyle Okposo with a video tribute during a stoppage in the opening period. It was Okposo's first game against New York since he left the team for a \$42 million, seven-year deal with Buffalo in the offseason.

Okposo played the first 529 games of his career with the Islanders, collecting 139 goals and 230 assists in nine seasons.

"I didn't know where to go. I hadn't been down to the visitor's room before so that was a little strange not going to the other side but I'm finding my way around quickly," Okposo said about his first appearance in Brooklyn as a member of the visiting team.

"Just driving to the rink today and those emotions start to come back a little bit," Okposo said. "I started to think about the fact that both of my kids were born here and I grew up here."

Beauvillier opened the scoring at 12:05 of the first period with his fourth goal of the season, redirecting a Hamonic shot past Nilsson. Shane Prince also assisted on the play.

Strome made it 2-0 in the second, knocking his own rebound past Nilsson for his fifth of the season.

"I think we are just playing fast, we are getting out of our own zone quick," Strome said. "We are playing a good transition game. I think it's the strength of our team, have to master our trade and keep doing simple things."

Ladd and de Haan added insurance goals in the third. Ladd fired a wrist shot past Nilsson's glove and de Haan buried a pretty feed from Alan Quine.

The slumping Sabres dropped their fourth straight game heading into the NHL's holiday break.

"We have to figure out what kind of team we want to be," Sabres captain Brian Gionta said. "We have to be a simple team, creating offense, passing and executing. We need this time to regroup."

NOTES: Islanders F Casey Cizikas missed his fourth consecutive game with an upper-body injury. ... The Islanders scratched G Jean-Francois Berube and F Stephen Gionta. ... Marcus Foligno became the 75th player to appear in 300 regular-season games for the Sabres. Among current Sabres, only Tyler Ennis (380) has played more. ... Sabres D Cody Franson missed his second straight game with an undisclosed injury.

UP NEXT

Sabres: Visit the Detroit Red Wings on Tuesday.

Islanders: Host the Washington Capitals on Tuesday.

Islanders, Greiss nearly shut out Sabres in win

By Jerry Beach

The Sports Xchange

December 23, 2016

NEW YORK -- The first 10,000 fans entering Barclays Center on Friday night received a giveaway -- a bobblehead doll of Long Island-raised actor Ralph Macchio wearing a New York Islanders jersey and striking his character's wounded one-legged pose at the end of "The Karate Kid" -- that served as an appropriate symbol of the New York Islanders' uphill path in the Eastern Conference playoff race.

But for one night, at least, the Islanders were far more Cobra Kai than hobbled underdog.

Thomas Greiss stopped every shot he faced except the last one and five different players scored a goal apiece as the Islanders routed the Buffalo Sabres, 5-1, in the final game for both teams before the NHL's three-day holiday break.

The win was the second in a row for the Islanders (13-14-6) and ensured they would not enter the holiday break alone in the Eastern Conference basement. Eight players have scored at least one goal in the last two games for New York, which beat the Boston Bruins, 4-2, on Tuesday.

"I think the biggest thing is when we get contributions from different guys, we're successful," said Islanders center Ryan Strome, who scored the first of New York's two second period goals. "We've kind of had a steady flow in our lineups now the last couple games. We're starting to get a little chemistry, so it's nice to get rolling and get a couple guys on the scoreboard, myself included. It feels good."

Anthony Beauvillier opened the scoring in the first for the Islanders, who received a power-play goal from John Tavares in the final minute of the second and insurance scores from Andrew Ladd and Calvin De Haan in the third as New York scored more than three goals for just the eighth time this season.

"One of the more complete games I think we've played," Islanders head coach Jack Capuano said.

The Islanders will need plenty such efforts if they are to find some consistency and contend for their third straight playoff berth. New York is 12 points behind the wild card co-leaders, the Philadelphia Flyers and the Washington Capitals.

"I think day-by-day, (it) might get a little overwhelming looking at the bigger picture," Ladd said. "At this point, it's get ready for practice or get ready for the next game or whatever's in front of you at that time."

The Islanders' current winning streak was preceded by a five-game skid (0-4-1), which in turn came after a six-game stretch in which they went 5-0-1 with wins over a quintet of teams currently in playoff position.

"We strung a good set of wins there," Ladd said. "So we know it's possible in here and we have the right guys to do it. That needs to happen again."

The Islanders' co-tenants in the Eastern cellar over the holiday weekend will be the Sabres (12-13-8), who have scored just six goals in dropping four straight games (0-2-2). The regulation defeat was the second in as many nights for Buffalo, which fell to the Carolina Hurricanes, 3-1, on Thursday.

"We looked like a tired team the last two games," Sabres head coach Dan Bylsma said. "I think the break comes at a good time for us."

The Sabres barely threatened against Greiss, who stopped the first 28 shots he faced before Zemgus Girgensons scored with 1:03 left in the game.

"The 'D' was amazing," said Greiss, who spoke a few feet away from an autographed Macchio bobblehead sitting next to the big-screen TV in the Islanders' locker room "They played a great game in front of me and made my

life easy."

Goalie Anders Nilsson made 27 saves for the Sabres, who are eight points behind the third-place Bruins in the Atlantic Division. Buffalo has missed the playoffs the last five seasons.

"Start to finish tonight, we just couldn't generate anything," Sabres right winger Brian Gionta said. "We've got to do a better job of figuring out what type of team we're going to be and play that way every night."

NOTES: The Islanders scratched C Casey Cizikas (upper body), who missed his fourth straight game, as well as G Jean-Francois Berube and RW Stephen Gionta, the latter of whom was signed to a two-way deal on Wednesday and recalled from Bridgeport of the American Hockey League. ... Islanders G Thomas Greiss was seeking the fifth shutout of his career and his first since Dec. 13, 2015. ... The Sabres scratched D Cody Franson, who missed his second straight game with an undisclosed injury, as well as LW Nicholas Deslauriers. ... Sabres RW Kyle Okposo, who spent his first nine NHL seasons with the Islanders before signing with Buffalo in July, received a warm ovation during a video tribute that aired in the first period

Islanders Rout Sabres 5-1

WGR 550

December 23, 2016

The Sabres' losing skid reached four games following Friday's 5-1 blowout loss at the hands of the Islanders.

Scoring

- The Islanders opened the scoring 12:05 into the game on Anthony Beauvillier's 4th, a tip of Travis Hamonic's shot, for the 1-0 lead.
- New York made it 2-0 in the 2nd period when Ryan Strome scooped up his own rebound and jammed it home.
- Strome also picked up assist on John Tavares' power play goal at 19:21 of the 3rd. Tavares' pass in front of the net deflected off Rasmus Ristolainen's skate and past Anders Nilsson for the 3-0 lead.
- Andrew Ladd made it 4-0 at 5:35 of the final period, going high and short-side over Nilsson for his 5th of the year. Calvin de Haan's 2nd upped the New York to five goals before Zemgus Girgensons got Buffalo on the board at 18:57 of the 3rd. Girgensons flipped a backhand shot by Thomas Greiss with Sam Reinhart parked in front.

1st Period

Goals

12:05 - NYI - Anthony Beauvillier (4) (Travis Hamonic, Shane Prince)

Penalties

2:02 - NYI - Johnny Boychuk (5 min., fighting)

2:02 - BUF - Marcus Foligno (5 min., fighting)

19:24 - NYI - Shane Prince (2 min., hooking)

2nd Period

Goals

14:36 - NYI - Ryan Strome (5) (Dennis Seidenberg, Cal Clutterbuck)

19:21 - NYI - John Tavares (10) (PPG) (Ryan Strome, Josh Bailey)

Penalties

2:31 - NYI - Dennis Seidenberg (2 min., hooking)

7:01 - BUF - Rasmus Ristolainen (2 min., boarding)

17:47 - BUF - Brian Gionta (2 min., holding)

3rd Period

Goals

5:35 - NYI - Andrew Ladd (5) (Travis Hamonic, Jason Chimera)

12:34 - NYI - Calvin de Haan (2) (Alan Quine, Dennis Seidenberg)

18:57 - BUF - Zemgus Girgensons (3) (Sam Reinhart, Zach Bogosian)

Penalties

None

Goaltending

BUF - Anders Nilsson (27 saves, 32 shots)

NYI - Thomas Greiss (28 saves, 29 shots)

Power Plays

BUF - 0 of 2

NYI - 1 of 2

From The Locker Room: Sabres-Islanders

WGR 550

December 23, 2016

Check out what Dan Bylsma, Anders Nilsson and Zemgus Girgensons had to say after the Sabres' fourth straight loss, a 5-1 defeat to the Islanders.

Dan Bylsma

"We looked like a tired team the last two games. The break comes at a good time for us."

"I think that's just a huge indicator for our game is our puck management and our play in the neutral zone with the puck. When we're playing good and we're on our game, we manage the puck well and keep it going north. Tonight we didn't do that at all."

Anders Nilsson

"We definitely didn't play at the level we can play and need to play. We were flat the whole game. We gave up too many on the rushes, way too many scoring chances."

"We need to regroup here for the break and come back after the break and play the way we can and need to."

"We gave up way too many scoring chances, way too many odd-man rushes, too many turnovers. When those happened I wasn't there to make the saves."

Zemgus Girgensons

"Right from the start we tried to mentally prepare ourselves, just our execution wasn't there."

"If you can make tape-to-tape passes more things are going to happen offensively. You're going to break out easier. I know everyone here knows how to pass. We know we can make the tape-to-tape passes. It's just mentally preparing ourselves for that.'

5 Observations: Islanders top Sabres 5-1

By Matt Bove

WKBW

December 23, 2016

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - Before Friday's Buffalo Sabres game defenseman Josh Gorges told reporters "we need to do whatever it takes to get two points." Instead, the Sabres played one of their worst games of the season, falling to the New York Islanders 5-1. Five observations from Friday's loss:

I know how you kids like em, extra sloppy

This was arguably the worst I've seen the Sabres play this season. There really wasn't a whole lot to like. On Thursday against the Carolina Hurricanes the Sabres looked flat. Then things somehow got worse on Friday, and they looked even slower and sloppier. They looked like a team who had played three games in four nights, but that can't be an excuse -- especially against average teams like the New York Islanders, Carolina Hurricanes and Florida Panthers.

Playing from behind

I'm not kidding, I could basically copy and past what I wrote yesterday about the Sabres and their slow starts and use it again. The Sabres have now gone SEVEN games without scoring a first period goal. They've also given up the first goal in each of their last seven games. How are you supposed to turn things around when basically playing from behind every game? The Sabres need to start coming out of the gate faster -- obviously what they're doing isn't working.

Shutting down the Stars

When players like Jack Eichel, Ryan O'Reilly and Kyle Okposo don't score the Sabres are in trouble. Big trouble. Their lack of secondary scoring is very apparent and while their stars have certainly slowed down, the Sabres need some help from their third and fourth line guys. That being said -- Eichel doesn't have a point in five games, O'Reilly has struggled compared to his standards and Okposo, the Sabres second leading scorer, has only one point in his last five games.

Look at the picture

This play drove me crazy. The Sabres were down 1-0 in the second period and Ryan Strome simply out-muscled Zach Bogosian to give the Islanders a 2-0 lead. It looked like Bogosian and Sam Reinhart coasted back, allowing Strome to tap in the rebound on his own shot. Yes, Nilsson needs to do a better job on this shot, but a little help from his teammates wouldn't hurt. It's just like Coach Orion from D3: The Mighty Ducks always said, clean up the garbage and play defense with confidence. Hoorah!

Nilsson struggles

Friday was probably Nilsson's weakest game this season. To his credit, he didn't get a ton of help, but he also let in a few goals you would like to see him stop. Goalies are allowed to have bad games, and usually good teams can bail their goalies out every once in a while, but that didn't happen Friday. Both Nilsson and Lehner have been very good this season -- their four game losing streak should not be put on them.

Happy Holidays to you and yours

Cheers

Islanders defeat Sabres for second straight win

By David Satriano

NHL.com

December 23, 2016

NEW YORK -- Ryan Strome had a goal and an assist and Thomas Greiss made 28 saves to help the New York Islanders to a 5-1 win against the Buffalo Sabres at Barclays Center on Friday.

Anthony Beauvillier, John Tavares, Andrew Ladd and Calvin de Haan also scored for the Islanders (13-14-6), who have won back-to-back games following a five-game losing streak. New York was outscored 15-8 in its previous three home games.

"I don't think it's a secret what we have to do to win," Strome said. "Play fast, use our speed. It's good to get two in a row before the break."

The Islanders took a 1-0 lead at 12:05 of the first period when Beauvillier deflected a point shot by Travis Hamonic that went under Sabres goalie Anders Nilsson's pads.

Strome made it 2-0 at 14:36 after he got the rebound of his own shot and put it past Nilsson. It was his fifth of the season and third in his past five games.

Tavares scored a power-play goal with 39 seconds left in the second period to make it 3-0. It was his first goal in six games.

"I thought it was one of the more complete games we've played," Islanders coach Jack Capuano said. "Our penalty kill was really good and our power-play got us a big goal when we needed it ... the work ethic was there."

Ladd and de Haan scored in the third period for the Islanders, who had been outscored 14-1 after the second period in their previous six games.

"I think we just played with the mindset in the third period that it was a 0-0 game," Strome said. "We came out hard, had a lot of scoring chances and it was nice to kind of keep the pressure on rather than sit back on our toes and our heels."

The Sabres (12-13-8), who got 27 saves from Nilsson, have lost three straight games (0-2-1).

"Start to finish, we couldn't generate anything," Sabres captain Brian Gionta said. "We have to do a better job of figuring out what type of a team we want to be. We're the type of team that has to be direct, using our forecheck."

Greiss lost his shutout when Zemgus Girgensons scored with 1:03 left.

"A lot of their shots were from the outside, there weren't really many rebounds," said Greiss, who made 48 saves in a 4-2 win at the Boston Bruins on Tuesday. "It was a great defensive game for our team today."

Kyle Okposo, who was drafted by the Islanders and spent nine seasons with the organization, played his first game here since signing a seven-year contract with the Sabres on July 1. He had two shots on goal and two blocks in 17:58 of ice time.

Goal of the game

Beauvillier made a nice tip of Hamonic's point shot for his second goal in the past three games.

Save of the game

After a giveaway by Jack Eichel in the offensive zone, Nilsson stopped Tavares on a breakaway with a glove save at 13:13 of the second period.

Unsung performance of the game

The Islanders blocked 22 shots, including four from defenseman Dennis Seidenberg, who had two assists and was a plus-2. It was his first two-point game since he had two assists against the Edmonton Oilers on Nov. 5.

Highlight of the game

Alan Quine took a pass in his own end to start a rush in the third period before losing the puck and regaining control in the Sabres zone. He then sent a beautiful pass in front to de Haan, who scored his second of the season and first since Oct. 23. It was de Haan's first point in 16 games.

They said it

"We know we have to string a lot of wins here together, and hopefully this is the start of us getting on a roll." -- *Islanders forward Andrew Ladd*

"You always want to go into the break on a high note, and it's a good feeling to have a nice break and come refreshed back and play the same way again." -- *Islanders goalie Thomas Greiss*

"We gave up too many odd-man rushes, way too many scoring chances against, and unfortunately I wasn't able to make the saves that the team needed. ... We need to regroup here and come back after the break and play the way we can and need to." - *Sabres goalie Anders Nilsson*

"We looked like a tired team the last two games. I think the break comes at a good time for us." -- *Sabres coach Dan Bylsma*

Need to know

Tavares won 16 of 21 faceoffs. ... Twelve different Islanders scored at least one point. ... The Islanders have killed off all five shorthanded chances in the past two games after allowing eight power-play goals on 15 chances in the five games prior. ... Sabres coach Dan Bylsma remained one win shy of 300 in his NHL career.

What's next

Sabres: At the Detroit Red Wings on Tuesday (7:30 p.m. ET; MSG-B, FS-D, NHL.TV)

Islanders: Host the Washington Capitals on Tuesday (7 p.m. ET; MSG+2, CSN-DC, NHL.TV)

Sabres struggle to execute in loss to Islanders

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

December 23, 2016

BROOKLYN - As he stood at his stall in the visiting dressing room at Barclays Center on Friday night, Brian Gionta admitted it was an opportune time for the Buffalo Sabres to finally have a break. The Sabres had just lost their second game in as many nights, this one by the score of 5-1 to the New York Islanders, in what was their final game before a three-day hiatus for the holidays.

Gionta, the captain of the Sabres, challenged the team to take those three days and decide what type of team they were going to be moving forward.

"We're the type of team that needs to be direct, north, using our forecheck," Gionta said. "You watch the games that we're good at and where we have success, we're a simple team that gets the puck and uses our forecheck and we're a good team creating offense from the offensive zone."

The Sabres struggled to do any of those things right from the opening puck drop on Friday. By the time Anthony Beauvillie scored with a high tip to put the Islanders on the board 7:55 into the period, the Sabres had already been playing the majority of the game in their own zone.

That kind of play eventually caught up to them, and the Islanders scored twice in the second period and twice more on the third. They capitalized on winning races in the neutral zone, forced turnovers to create odd-man rushes and also won the special teams battle by adding a goal on the power play late in the second period.

Buffalo, meanwhile, didn't get on the board until Zemgus Girgensons scored to make it 5-1 with 1:03 remaining in regulation

"A huge indicator of our game is our puck management and our play in the neutral zone with the puck," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "When we're playing good and we're on our game, we manage the puck well, keep it going north, get in the offensive zone and play there. Tonight we didn't do that at all. We turned the puck over against good players and gave them opportunities against us."

"We definitely didn't play at the level we can play and need to play," said goalie Anders Nilsson, who made 27 saves on 32 shots. "We were flat the whole game. I think we gave up too many odd-man rushes, way too many scoring chances against and unfortunately I wasn't able to make the saves that the team needed."

It was only a week ago that the Sabres beat this same Islanders team at home in overtime, which at the time marked their second win in three games. Even when they lost the next two games on the road in shootouts, there was some solace to be found in the fact that they had earned points in eight of 10 games.

With their last two losses to Carolina and New York, however, the Sabres are now winless in four straight. The six-game stretch beginning against Los Angeles on Dec. 13 was one they had honed in on as an opportunity to make up ground in the standings, but it ended with them earning just six points.

Three more games in the Atlantic Division await them on the other side of the break, beginning with a game in Detroit on Tuesday followed by a home-and-home set against Boston. With the Sabres now eight points out of third place in the division, all three of those games become crucial.

"We need to use this time and regroup and like I said, we've got to come back with the mindset that we know what type of team we are when we have success," Gionta said.

"We just have to be willing to play that way every night."

Franson sits again

For the second game in a row, defenseman Cody Franson took warm ups with the team but did not play. Bylsma said that Franson is dealing with a "middle-body" injury, but had not ruled him out when he spoke prior to the game.

William Carrier, who sat as a healthy scratch against Carolina on Thursday, did rejoin the lineup as Nicolas Deslauriers sat out as the 13th forward.

Up next

The Sabres will return to action when they meet the Detroit Red Wings at Joe Louis Arena on Tuesday. Coverage begins at 7 p.m. with the TOPS Pregame Show on MSG-B, or you can listen live on WGR 550.

The puck drops between the Sabres and Red Wings at 7:30 p.m.

Sabres hang a stinker in their stocking

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 22, 2016

In the spirit of the season, it's time to let a literary giant put his best words to the performance the Buffalo Sabres foisted upon their unfortunate fans Thursday night.

Borrowing the memorable creed of The Grinch that stole Christmas: "The three words that best describe you are as follows, and I quote: 'Stink. Stank. Stunk.' "

There's not much more that can be said about the heaping pile of trash formed by the Sabres' 3-1 loss to the Carolina Hurricanes in KeyBank Center, a dreary affair that was one of the team's most coal-worthy performances of the season.

The Sabres fell behind, 2-0, in the first period and never caught up in losing their third straight game. They were outshot, 34-23 -- giving up the first seven shots of the second period and the first eight in the third. The crowd of 18,863 booed en masse after each stanza and during several stages when Buffalo was bottled up in its own end

Buffalo gave up the first goal for the sixth straight game as Jeff Skinner scored for Carolina just 1:44 into the contest, moving into open ice vacated by Dmitry Kulikov. Justin Faulk's goal at 17:51 came on a 3-on-1 break after a turnover by Rasmus Ristolainen and made it 2-0. The Sabres gave up a handful of odd-man rushes in the first period as its defense looked lost at times.

"Today is not acceptable," said goalie Robin Lehner. "You know what, after that first we know we have to do something. I think we all felt pretty embarrassed coming in here."

The biggest subplot to the game, however, was how coach Dan Bylsma kept Jack Eichel off the power play when the Sabres got their first man-advantage on a hooking penalty to Carolina's Noah Hanifin at 2:54 of the first period.

Matt Moulson, whose seven power-play goals entered the night one off the NHL lead, was moved from the second unit on to Eichel's spot at the point of the first. Marcus Foligno went on the second unit. Eichel stayed on the bench for the first opportunity against the NHL's top penalty-killing team.

Eichel takes losing worse than any Sabres player of recent years, along the lines of Ryan Miller and Chris Drury. He was furious in the dressing room after this one, slamming equipment into his duffel bag before a brief meeting with reporters. It's the kind of fire a team needs more of when times are tough.

Eichel has no points and is minus-5 in his last four games. Bylsma admitted to sending both team and star player a message.

"It's not my decision. It's the coach's," Eichel said. "They have a really good PK and we had a lot of good opportunities on the power play. We just need to finish them.

"Obviously, 'Mouls' has had a lot of power-play goals and he's helped our team. Just switching up looks with them the No. 1 PK in the league. Try to keep it a little bit uncertain for them."

Eichel words were politically correct but he was clearly seething. Asked if he was surprised to not be on the ice, the 20-year-old said the time to discuss the topic was over.

"I think I just answered that. I'm not the coach," he said. "Like I said, we had a lot of opportunities on the first power play. ... I was on the second power play. I'm out there working hard. I think that's all I really have to say about that."

Bylsma didn't offer too many specifics on his decision.

"The decision was just something we practiced today and implemented in the game," Bylsma said. "We wanted a certain look, didn't get the result we wanted. He went back on the power play for a different look when we got the second opportunity."

With players across his roster struggling to produce offense and his defensive corps -- notably Dmitry Kulikov -- a trainwreck at times in both the neutral zone and the defensive zone, it seemed odd to send a message with Eichel, the franchise's star player.

What hasn't Bylsma seen from Eichel of late?

"What we need to see is what we saw in the first shift of his game that he had tonight," the coach said. "I thought he had at times tonight for us that speed and electricity with the puck."

Following the morning skate, Bylsma was unusually intense and clearly in gameday mode. The catch-phrase he used several times was about the need for his players to be "emotionally attached." They weren't much of the night. The first period was forgettable and the Hurricanes had the puck for an astonishing 14 minutes, 10 seconds in the second period as the Sabres took four minor penalties but managed to kill them off.

"We handed them opportunities in the game right from the start," Bylsma said.

"We weren't very good in the neutral zone in that first period and that's where they generated all their chances," said defenseman Zach Bogosian. "We have to tighten up in the neutral zone and we'll be all right."

As for any semblance of a playoff race, it's not all right. It's becoming a rumor as far as the Sabres are concerned.

With Toronto's blowout win at Colorado, the Sabres fell back into a tie with Detroit for last place in the Atlantic Division. The Sabres are 10 points out of the last Eastern Conference wild card spot and seven points behind third-place Boston for the final postseason slot in the division.

"It's disappointing for where we're at right now in the season," Bylsma said. "This game should have been a desperation game for us."

The only glimmer of hope the team could hold to was that it was not the final game before the holiday break. The Sabres flew to New York immediately after the game and will meet the New York Islanders Friday night in Brooklyn.

"Another opportunity in less than 24 hours to win two points," Eichel said. "That's what we're focused on."

Sabres Notebook: Stempniak continues to contribute for Carolina

By Amy Moritz

The Buffalo News

December 22, 2016

There are many ways to describe Lee Stempniak's hockey career. Nomadic. Journeyman. Itinerant.

In 12 seasons in the NHL, the forward has played for 10 teams. That's quite a journey. But it's also a point of pride for Stempniak, the West Seneca native who now lines up against his hometown team as a member of the Carolina Hurricanes.

Stempniak recorded his 10th assist, setting up the Hurricane's second goal in a 3-1 win over the Buffalo Sabres in KeyBank Center Thursday night.

It takes work, and cultivating confidence, to stay in the NHL for 12 seasons regardless of how many teams end up on the resume.

Perhaps his biggest challenge came last season, when he was without a team and was invited to the New Jersey Devils training camp. He made the team, was traded to Boston late in season, and finished with 19 goals -- the most he scored since tallying 14 with the Calgary Flames in 2011-12.

"There are people who get a couple chances and sort of wash out of the league where I feel like I've been able to contribute everywhere I've played," Stempniak said. "Last year I went on a tryout to New Jersey and I ended up having one of the best years of my career. That really forced me to take ownership of my confidence. That's something that's never come extremely easy for me. I think having that challenge forced me to be more confident and have a mature approach."

Finding ways to fit in with different teams and new teammates isn't the difficult part of his wandering NHL career which went from St. Louis to Toronto, Phoenix, Calgary, Pittsburgh, New York Rangers, Winnipeg, New Jersey, Boston and now Carolina. The challenging part comes when his family has to move over and over again.

"It's something I take pride in where I can go and play with different people on different types of teams, playing different situations and just be someone who can contribute to wins," Stempniak said. "The off-ice stuff with your family is difficult. I've got three children now. They're young. They're not in quite school yet. My wife has lived all over North America. That's the part that's hard. It's easy when you show up to the rink or the locker room. But when your family is effected, that's a little more difficult."

Stempniak played four years at Dartmouth. He was a fifth-round draft pick of St. Louis in 2003 and started his NHL career with the Blues where he learned from players like Keith Tkachuck, Doug Weight and Paul Kariya. He took those lessons into his role now as an NHL veteran on a young Carolina team.

"Those were guys who really looked out for me and just made sure I was doing things the right way, taught me a lot about the game but were very good people to me off the ice," Stempniak said. "That's the thing I've tried to carry forward. A lot of times coaches do the coaching but it's a tough business. Sometimes guys need a pat on the back or encouragement. I think for the most part we've got a great group. It's very inclusive. There's no cliques. It's very welcoming so a lot of that is just trying to foster that."

Stempniak has been playing with Sebastian Aho and Teuvo Teravainen, and has found chemistry with the pair of young Finnish players, something Hurricanes' coach Bill Peters welcomes.

"He's got really good hockey sense," Peters said of Stempniak. "He's a finisher by trade. The other two look to make plays. Two young guys with an older guy, he can help them on the bench, talk to them and be a mentor in that regard. But he's a real good player. I like him no matter where he plays but now he's found a comfort level with those two guys playing in offensive situations."

There was one positive for the Sabres in the loss on Thursday: the penalty kill.

The Sabres killed off four Carolina power plays in the second period when the Hurricanes poured seven shots on goaltender Robin Lehner. He made 13 saves total saves in the period to keep the Sabres in the game, trailing 2-0.

"You come out flat like that against a skilled team like this, we came out 2-0 could have been little more," said Lehner, who posted a .939 save percentage in the game, topping the .920 mark for the third consecutive game. "Now killing, we have a good penalty kill in the second but they keep coming. They keep getting some chances and we're hanging in there. ... We went out on the penalty kill and did a good job and that's about the only bright spot today."

The penalty kill kept them in the game, but also prevented the Sabres from creating opportunities of their own in the second.

"It took away any chance we had of coming back in the game at that point," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "We had to kill off a succession of penalties there. I thought our penalty killers did a great job and kind of still gave us a chance to be in the game. But it took away from the opportunity. We came on in the third but it's too little too late at that point."

Team USA trimmed its roster to 24 for the upcoming IIHF World Junior Hockey Championship with Buffalo Sabres draft pick Casey Fitzgerald and Youngstown native Joe Cecconi making the cut.

The final roster will be announced by Dec. 24. Team USA needs to make one more cut among the defensemen.

Fitzgerald, a third-round draft pick by the Sabres in June, is a sophomore defenseman at Boston College with five goals and eight assists in 13 games this season.

He was a member of the U.S. National Under-18 Team that won gold at the 2015 Under-18 World Championship. He had four points (one goal, four assists) in seven games.

Cecconi was drafted in the fifth round by Dallas in June. The sophomore defender at Michigan has one assist in 16 games.

Former Buffalo Sabre David Legwand announced his retirement Thursday after 16 NHL seasons.

Legwand played in 1,136 career NHL games including 79 with the Sabres in 2015-16, his final season in the NHL.

Legwand was traded on June 26, 2015 to Buffalo along with Lehner for a first round draft pick. He scored 14 points last season for the Sabres.

Quick Hits: Hurricanes 3, Sabres 1

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 22, 2016

So much for that holiday-time bump in the schedule the Buffalo Sabres were hoping for.

After wins over Ottawa, the New York Rangers, Edmonton and Los Angeles coincided with the return of Jack Eichel, the Sabres were looking for this segment to pile up points against Eastern Conference foes currently not in the playoff pack.

It hasn't worked. Buffalo lost to the Carolina Hurricanes for the second time in six days and dropped its third straight overall with a mostly dreary 3-1 defeat at the hands of the Canes Thursday night before 18,863 in KeyBank Center.

The Sabres were outshot in the game, 34-23, and fell to 6-9-7 this year against Eastern Conference teams. Conversely, Buffalo is 6-3-1 against the West.

Stuck at 299: Sabres coach Dan Bylsma failed in his third straight try at the 300th win of his NHL coaching career.

Waking up: The Sabres gave up the first eight shots on goal in the third period and were being outshot, 27-12, before they finally woke up. Johan Larsson broke the shutout of Carolina's Cam Ward with 14:28, banging home a shot from the edge of the crease after a neat pass from behind the goal from Sam Reinhart.

Scoring First: The Sabres gave up the first goal for the sixth straight game and it took Carolina just 1 minute, 44 seconds to get it, with Jeff Skinner beating Robin Lehner with a hard shot from the faceoff circle. Skinner had plenty of open ice as Dmitry Kulikov inexplicably left his position on the odd-man rush.

Scoring Second: The Canes made it 2-0 at 17:51 of the first as defenseman Justin Faulk tallied his sixth of the season, beating Lehner high to the glove side on the back end of a 3-on-1 after Rasmus Ristolainen lost the puck at the Carolina blue line.

Message sending?: The Sabres had one first-period power play and Jack Eichel wasn't on either unit. Eichel didn't practice on the power play at the morning skate and wasn't on it when the game started either. It was his fourth straight game without a point.

When Justin Faulk went off for hooking with 6:56 left, Eichel was back at his normal spot on the point. he had Buffalo's best chance to score, a one-timer from the left circle that Ward stopped.

The final dagger: Sebastian Aho scored into the empty net for Carolina with 59.7 seconds left.

Surviving short-handed: The Sabres entered the game as the NHL's worst penalty-killing unit but killed off all four minors they took in the second period. The Hurricanes came into the game eighth on the power play -- and third on the road at 24 percent.

Cue "Brass Bonanza": The loss prevented the Sabres for compiling a six-game point streak against the Carolina franchise for the first time since they went 5-0-1 against the then-Hartford Whalers from Oct. 23, 1994 to April 4, 1995 (for the kiddos out there, Bonanza was the Whalers' constantly-played theme song at the Hartford Civic Center).

Back in Business: The Hurricanes had been idle since their 2-1 shootout win over the Sabres Saturday in Raleigh because their game Monday against Detroit in PNC Arena was postponed due to ice system problems.

New scratches: William Carrier was a healthy scratch for the first time this season after getting just one goal and one assist in 21 games. Cody Franson was a surprise scratch on defense after taking the morning skate and warmups in his normal spot alongside Josh Gorges. Justin Falk played in place of Franson, who the Sabres said was injured.

Up Next: The Sabres play their final pre-Christmas game Friday night at 7 against the New York Islanders at Barclays Center in Brooklyn. They play Tuesday in Detroit after the holiday break and the next home game is Thursday against Boston in the opener of a home-and-home series.

Sabres notes: Marcus Foligno showcasing toughness

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
December 23, 2016

BUFFALO – Sabres winger Marcus Foligno has a simple explanation why he fixed his hair at a bizarre time – during a heavyweight scrap against Shawn Thornton, the NHL's dean of fighters – in Tuesday's 4-3 shootout loss to the Florida Panthers.

"Just try to get readjusted and get ready for round two," a smiling Foligno said Thursday prior to the Sabres' 3-1 loss to the Carolina Hurricanes inside KeyBank Center.

The bout was a fight lover's dream, the 6-foot-3, 228-pound Foligno against the 6-foot-2, 218-pound Thornton, who's 39 years old.

After Thornton pried Foligno away from the Florida crease, the two began fighting. Foligno's helmet was eventually knocked off and the two became untangled.

But they weren't done.

As they squared off for round two, Foligno ran his hands through his hair three times to keep it out of his eyes, he said.

It looked more like Foligno was styling it, however.

Within minutes, social media went wild. The Sabres quickly created a GIF, which Foligno's brother, Nick, retweeted.

Foligno said Thornton, the toughest guy he has ever fought, didn't notice the hair-fixing.

"I'm sure he had a laugh after," he said.

The hair overshadowed what Foligno called a "good fight" shortly after the Sabres tied the game at 2.

"He's a tough competitor," Foligno said. "Shawn Thornton, I got a lot of respect for that guy. He's been through a lot of fights in his career. So it was good. The boys were very pumped after."

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said the fight "sparked Marcus' game."

"There's no mistaking what Thornton was doing coming on the ice and coming to the net there and doing what he did," Bylsma said. "He was trying to spark his team with what he was doing. That's a big man and a tough guy to have to deal with, and Marcus I thought did a great job in the fight, stood up for us and his teammates. ...

"That's the way Marcus has got to play. He's got to be a big, strong, physical guy for us. He should be a force to be reckoned with. He proved it not so much with the hair thing, but with the fight."

Foligno usually fixes his hair at a more appropriate time.

"Just when I'm trying to style it in the mirror," he joked.

Bylsma recently promoted Foligno to the left wing beside top center Ryan O'Reilly and Sam Reinhart. Foligno also played on the second power-play unit Thursday.

Sabres winger Evander Kane began Thursday's tilt with six goals and nine points in the last 10 games, including two scores in the last two contests.

What has buoyed the inconsistent veteran?

"In the last two games, he's really been our best forward – speed, physicality, getting in the offensive zone, being hard to play against, being around the cage," Bylsma said.

After breaking four ribs opening night, Kane started slowly, going 11 games with a goal. The injury, Bylsma said, was a factor.

In the last three weeks, however, Kane has "been a force with his speed, a force with his physicality," Bylsma said.

"We need him to be," Bylsma said.

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The Sabres made two lineup changes, scratching winger William Carrier and defenseman Cody Franson.

Winger Nick Deslauriers, a scratch last game, and defenseman Justin Falk, a scratch two straight contests, moved in.

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Former Sabres center David Legwand, who played 79 games last season, has retired, the NHLPA announced Thursday.

Legwand, 36, played 1,136 NHL games, compiling 228 goals and 618 points. The Nashville Predators drafted the American second overall in Buffalo in 1998.

Skinner, Faulk score for Hurricanes in 2-1 win over Sabres

By Jonah Bronstein

The Associated Press

December 22, 2016

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — An extended layoff helped the Carolina Hurricanes start fast and hold on late for their third victory in four games.

Jeff Skinner and Justin Faulk had first period goals in Carolina's 3-1 victory over Buffalo on Thursday night. Cam Ward made 22 saves and Sebastian Aho scored on an empty net in the final minute as the Hurricanes beat the Sabres for the second time in six days.

The Hurricanes had four days off following Saturday's 2-1 shootout win over Buffalo. Monday's scheduled game against Detroit was postponed due to unplayable ice at PNC Arena.

Alternate captain Jordan Staal said the extra rest "probably didn't hurt" the Hurricanes.

"I thought a lot of guys had some good jump tonight," Staal said. "All through the lineup, everyone was skating well and doing good things."

Brian Gionta scored for Buffalo and Robin Lehner made 31 saves. The Sabres have lost three in a row.

"This game should've been a desperation game for us," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "It's disappointing we come out and play that way in the first."

Skinner scored his team-leading 13th goal on a wrist shot from the right circle 1:14 into the game.

Faulk made it 2-0 with 2:09 left in the first period. Lee Stepniak forced a turnover that led to a 3-on-1 rush and Faulk snapped a wrist shot over Lehner's glove for his sixth goal of the season.

"When you get odd-man rushes, they're so few and far between now in the league, you've got to bury some or you're going to be in trouble," said defenseman Ron Hainsey, who led the Hurricanes with 23:56 of ice time.

Carolina's offensive attack was efficient in the first period, scoring on two of its six shots on goal.

"They didn't have many shots in the first, but pretty much every shot was grade-A," Lehner said.

The Hurricanes outshot the Sabres 13-5 in the second period, but could not score on four power plays. Buffalo did not have a shot on goal in the first 9:35.

"I would have liked to have more than two on the board at that stage," Carolina coach Bill Peters said. "I don't like to let teams hang around."

The Hurricanes had lost seven of their last eight road games. They squandered a third period lead in four of those defeats.

Gionta got the Sabres within a goal 5:32 into the third period. Sam Reinhart's pass from behind the net set up Gionta for his sixth of the season.

Buffalo had a chance to tie the game on a late power play but Ward saved the Sabres' only shot on goal.

Bylsma benched star center Jack Eichel on a power play in the first period, but Eichel played on the third period power play. Bylsma said he was trying to send a message to Eichel, who hasn't recorded a point on the power play in his last five games.

NOTES: Buffalo D Cody Franson missed his first game of the season with an undisclosed injury. Franson did skate during warmups. F William Carrier was a healthy scratch after playing the past 21 games. . Hurricanes G Eddie Lack backed up Ward after missing 14 games due to a concussion. ... Carolina snapped a four-game losing streak in Buffalo. The Hurricanes last won here on Jan. 23, 2014. ... Skinner has four goals and two assists in his last five games. ... Bylsma remains stuck on 299 NHL regular season victories.

Up Next

Hurricanes: Host Boston on Friday looking to extend nine-game point streak at home

Sabres: Close out stretch of five games in eight days at Islanders on Friday.

Ward, Hurricanes prevail over Sabres

By Mark Ludwiczak,
The Sports Xchange
December 22, 2016

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- Three players scored and Cam Ward made 22 saves to lead the Carolina Hurricanes to a 3-1 win over the Buffalo Sabres on Thursday night.

Jeff Skinner, Justin Faulk and Sebastian Aho scored for the Hurricanes (14-11-7).

The Hurricanes dominated the Sabres throughout the game, outshooting Buffalo 34-23 overall. It was Carolina's second win over the Sabres in the past week; on Saturday, Carolina picked up a 2-1 shootout victory over Buffalo.

Johan Larsson scored the lone goal for the Sabres (12-12-8). Robin Lehner made 31 saves. The Sabres had a four-game point streak come to an end with the loss.

Skinner opened the scoring just 1:44 into the game following a defensive miscue by the Sabres, who surrendered the first goal for the sixth consecutive game. The Carolina center was left all alone in the right circle, where he faked a one-timer and scored on a wrist shot to the far side. It was Skinner's team-best 13th goal.

Faulk made it 2-0 on a 3-on-1 rush following yet another Sabres miscue with 2:09 left in the first period. Defenseman Jaccob Slavin waited for Faulk to arrive in the left circle, and Faulk buried a wrist shot high to the glove side for his sixth goal of the season.

Carolina's dominance continued in the second period when the Hurricanes outshot the Sabres, 13-5. The highlight of the period came when Sabres defenseman Zach Bogosian fought Hurricanes center Jordan Staal, with Bogosian getting the upper hand.

Larsson got the Sabres on the board 5:32 into the third period. Center Sam Reinhart waited patiently behind the Carolina net before spotting Larsson in front. Larsson's quick one-timer cut Carolina's lead to 2-1.

The Sabres had a prime opportunity to even the score on the power play with 6:56 remaining but came up short. Ward made a big save on Jack Eichel's one-timer with 5:47 remaining.

Aho scored an empty-net goal with 59.7 seconds remaining.

NOTES: D Cody Franson and LW William Carrier were scratched for the Sabres. Franson was a late scratch. ... D Klas Dahlbeck, D Ryan Murphy and C Andrej Nestrasil were scratched for the Hurricanes. ... Hurricanes RW Lee Stempniak was born in West Seneca, New York, a suburb of Buffalo. He played for the Buffalo Lightning of the Ontario Junior Hockey League in 2000-01. ... This was the second of three meetings between the two teams this season, and the only meeting at KeyBank Center this season. The third and final meeting between Buffalo and Carolina takes place at PNC Arena on Jan. 13

Sabres fall flat, Hurricanes win 3-1

By Pat Malacaro

WGR 550

December 22, 2016

First Period

19:09 - Dan Bylsma made a late roster change, adding Justin Falk to the lineup tonight while scratching Cody Franson. Not sure why the change was made, we may find out later.

18:16 - HURRICANES GOAL. This is not the start that Buffalo wanted or needed. **Jeff Skinner** is able to corral a loose puck in the slot and buries his chance past **Robin Lehner**. Neither of the Buffalo defenders did a good job of trying to clear the puck, instead they let the Carolina forward make the play. **1-0 CAR.**

16:43 - This morning Matt Moulson took Jack Eichel's spot on Buffalo's top power play unit. That was not just for show. Moulson is out with the first unit as Noah Hanifin sits for two minutes or less.

5:44 - We went a long time between whistles, and Carolina had the best chance in the last stretch of play. Tuevo Teravainen had a clear scoring chance in front of the net, but did not shoot. Carolina does not even get a shot on goal. You have to, have to, have to, get the shot off. Shots are 6-5 in favor of Buffalo right now.

2:09 - HURRICANES GOAL. The Sabres have the puck from an offensive zone face-off win, but lose it at the point, and Carolina is off to the races. **Lee Stempniak** gets through the neutral zone and finds **Justin Faulk** across the ice. The big defenseman wires a wrister into the top corner of the net, far side, to double the 'Canes lead. **2-0 CAR.**

End of Period

Goal Summary

BUF: none

CAR: 1:44 - Jeff Skinner (13) (Jacob Slavin, Noah Hanifin). 17:51 - Justin Faulk (6) (Lee Stempniak)

Penalty Summary

BUF: none

CAR: 2:54 - Noah Hanifin (2 min., hooking)

Shots on Goal

BUF - 7, CAR - 6

Second Period

19:12 - Not a good start to the middle stanza for the blue and gold as Johan Larsson takes a holding penalty. Now would not be the time to give up a power play goal to the 'Canes.

12:46 - Buffalo does not have shot on goal this frame, while Carolina has five. That is what happens when you take two penalties in the first five minutes of the period. Just a brutal start to this period for the Sabres.

10:07 - Buffalo finally gets its first shot on goal this period, and now they have woken up. Evander Kane is buzzing around the net, trying to use his size and physical play to create chances along with Eichel. I think the message is getting through to the team...the start is simply not good enough.

5:47 - Now Derek Grant is in the box. This really has been a game to forget which is shocking. I would have

thought this team would have come out playing mad and aggressive after how the last game spiraled against Florida.

2:41 - Zach Bogosina tries to fire the team and the crowd up with a fight against Jordan Staal as this period winds down. I will take that trade off right now. We will see if it in fact gives Buffalo a boost or not.

End of Period

Goal Summary

BUF: none

CAR: none

Penalty Summary

BUF: 0:48 - Johan Larsson (2 min., holding). 4:40 - Kyle Okposo (2 min., elbowing). 14:13 - Derek Grant (2 min., hooking). 17:19 - Zach Bogosian (5 min., fighting).

17:19 - Jake McCabe (2 min., slashing)

CAR: 17:19 - Jordan Staal (5 min., fighting)

Shots on Goal

BUF - 5 (12), CAR - 13 (19)

Third Period

15:44 - What is wrong with these Sabres? I don't have any answers, it does not make sense to me. They are being outshot and outchanced this period by Carolina. It is now 8-1 in favor of the 'Canes in shots.

14:28 - SABRES GOAL. Buffalo's first tally of the night is all thanks to **Sam Reinhart**. The forward is able to keep a handle on the puck behind the net and feed a perfect pass to a wide open **Johan Larsson** almost right at the top of **Cam Ward's** crease. How Larsson was able to just glide to the first uncontested is beyond me. A good job of creating the space by the forward. **2-1 CAR.**

8:07 - Ever since Larsson's goal this game has been tilted in Buffalo's favor. Shots are now 12-7 in favor of the visitors, but really 6-4 in favor of Buffalo until right before the score. Eichel has been right in the middle of several of the scoring chances, and so has the second line with Ryan O'Reilly and Reinhart.

6:56 - Buffalo heads to the man advantage for just the second time tonight. Eichel finds his way to the point on the first unit. Looks like it was just a message being sent on the first power play way back in the opening period.

4:31 - The Sabres do not score on the man advantage, but they do get several good scoring chances while a man up, including a one-timer by Eichel close to the net. Ward was up to the task to keep Carolina in front by a goal.

:59.7 - HURRICANES GOAL. **Sebastian Aho** ices this game withn an empty net score. It was a nice rally by Buffalo, but too little, too late. **3-1 CAR.**

End of Regulation

Carolina 3, Buffalo 1

Goal Summary

BUF: 5:32 - Johan Larsson (6) (Sam Reinhart, Marcus Foligno)

CAR: 19:00 - Sebastian Aho (6) ENG (Vikcor Rask, Brett Pesce)

Penalty Summary

BUF: none

CAR: 13:04 - Justin Faulk (2 min., tripping)

Shots on Goal

BUF - 11 (23), CAR - 15 (34)

From The Locker Room: Sabres-Hurricanes

WGR 550

December 22, 2016

The Sabres fell to the Hurricanes on Thursday 3-1 and Jack Eichel was absent from Buffalo's first power play. Read Eichel's comments, as well as quotes from Dan Bylsma.

Dan Bylsma

Q: "Are you trying to send [Eichel] a message, are you sending the team a message? What's the message here?"

A: "Yes on both."

"The decision was just something we practiced in practice today and put in the game. We wanted a certain look and didn't get the result we wanted, but he went back on the power play for a different look when we got the second opportunity."

"What haven't I seen? What we need to see is what we saw in the first shift of his game that he had tonight. I thought he did have at times tonight for us that speed and electricity with the puck."

Jack Eichel

"It's not my decision, it's the coach's. They have a really good PK. We had a lot of opportunities on the power play, just need to finish them."

"It's not my decision, it's the coach's, so obviously Moulson has had a lot of power play goals this year. He's helped our team. Just switching up looks. They're the number one PK in the league. Just trying to keep it a little bit uncertain for them."

"I'm not the coach. Like I said, we had a lot of opportunities on the first power play. Moulson has had a couple of power play goals this year for us. We moved the puck well. Just changing up looks. I'm on the second power play again . . . I'm out there working hard. I think that's all I really have to say about that."

5 Observations: Sabres fall to Hurricanes 3-1

By Matt Bove

WKBW

December 22, 2016

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - Flat -- that's the best way to describe how the Buffalo Sabres looked during the first 40 minutes of Thursday's 3-1 loss to the Carolina Hurricanes. The loss is the Sabres third straight and second to the Hurricanes in less than a week.

Five observations from Thursday's loss:

WHERE IS JACK EICHEL?!?!

Less than three minutes into the game the Sabres found themselves on a power play. Cool, awesome, super — wait.....where's Jack Eichel? Well, he was replaced on the Sabres first unit by Matt Moulson. He wasn't on the second unit either — so what gives?

After the game Sabres head coach Dan Bylsma said he was trying to send a message to both Eichel and the team.

"The decision was something we practiced today," Bylsma told reporters after the game. "He went back in on the second opportunity."

Bylsma said he wants to see more out of Eichel and saw flashes of that in Thursday's game. Personally, I thought Eichel and Evander Kane were two of the Sabres best players against the Hurricanes. Eichel is in a bit of a slump, he hasn't registered a point in four games,

Sabers slow out the gate yet again

The Sabres haven't scored a first period goal in six games. To make matters worse, on Thursday they allowed Carolina to get on the board twice in the first frame. It was one of their sloppiest periods in recent memory, putting them in a hole they wouldn't be able to climb their way out of. If the Sabres are going to start stringing together some wins, they'll need to start scoring earlier games because playing from behind hasn't gone well.

Quite the odd start

Less than two minutes into the game the Sabres had already given up two odd-man rushes. The Hurricanes capitalized on the second attempt thanks to a beautiful Jeff Skinner wrist shot. Rather than tightening up on defense, the Sabres gave up several more odd-man rushes in the period and left goaltender Robin Lehner out to dry.

"The opportunities we gave them is really our puck execution and our puck management on virtually every one of them," Bylsma added.

Shooting themselves in the foot

It seemed like the Sabres played the entire second period short-handed and while it wasn't the entire period, it was a good chunk. During the second stanza the Sabres took four penalties and found themselves a man down for eight minutes. Credit to the Sabres for killing off every penalty they took tonight, but when you play that much of a period short-handed mounting a comeback becomes all the more difficult.

"It's tough when you're killing penalties to generate offense," Sabres defender Zach Bogosian said after the game. He's not kidding — in the second period the Sabres only registered five shots.

Bogosian stands up for Eichel

One of the only bright spots from Thursday was when Zach Bogosian clobbered Jordan Staal seconds after he hit Jack Eichel. I don't think the Staal hit was dirty, but it was nice to see someone step in and defend the teams young star.

"At the end of the day we have to stick up for each other," Bogosian said after the game. Yes, yes you do — and that sand paper has been something the Sabres at times have been missing.

Cam Ward, Hurricanes defeat Sabres

By Joe Yerdon

NHL.com

December 22, 2016

BUFFALO -- Three players scored, and Cam Ward made 22 saves to give the Carolina Hurricanes a 3-1 win against the Buffalo Sabres at KeyBank Center on Thursday.

Jeff Skinner put Carolina ahead 1-0 1:44 into the first period when he faked a slap shot and then beat Robin Lehner to the blocker side for his 13th goal of the season.

Justin Faulk made it 2-0 with 2:09 left in the first when he received a pass from Lee Stempniak and shot over Lehner's glove on a 3-on-1 against Sabres defenseman Jake McCabe for his sixth goal.

"I'm just trying to join the rush and hoping that their [defense] goes back with [Sebastian] Aho there to kind of open up some space," Faulk said. "[Stempniak] made a really good pass over, just kind of shot it and it went in. So we'll take those."

The Hurricanes (14-11-7) have won two straight and three of the past four. They had not played since Saturday after their home game scheduled for Monday against the Detroit Red Wings was postponed due to ice conditions at PNC Arena.

"I think [the time off] hurt a bit," Carolina coach Bill Peters said. "I didn't think we were sharp as we would've been if we kept in the rhythm of playing."

The Sabres (12-12-8) have lost three straight.

Johan Larsson made it 2-1 with his sixth goal of the season 5:32 into the third period.

Aho scored an empty-net goal with 1:00 left.

Goal of the game

Larsson's one-timer in the third period was set up by a pass from Reinhart.

Save of the game

Ward's kick save against Jack Eichel on a Sabres power play with 5:46 left in the third period kept the Hurricanes ahead.

"We need it; the game's on the line, right, it's 2-1 coming down the stretch, you're on the [penalty kill], the building has a little bit of life after they score, they get one there and it's a different situation," Peters said. "So [Ward] was real solid tonight."

Highlight of the game

Faulk's game-winning goal came when he beat Lehner going against the grain.

Unsung performance of the game

Hurricanes defenseman Jaccob Slavin was a dual threat on special teams. Of his 22:13 of ice time, he played 2:30 on the power play and a Carolina-high 2:59 on the penalty kill. He had an assist on Skinner's goal, a shot on goal, hit a post, and blocked three shots.

They said it

"[Ward has] been good, timely as well. When you need a big save, I feel, as of late, the guy's been timely, and like I said, it's always a positive when your goalie's playing really well and [Ward has] been unbelievable for us, and hopefully he continues that." -- *Hurricanes center Jordan Staal*

"We got a couple odd-man rushes early ... when you get odd-man rushes, they're so few and far between now in the League, you've got to bury some or you're going to be in trouble. ... We seemed to get some breaks with the guys in alone on the goalie that you need to finish. Our guys got some up high and hard and we were on our way." -- *Hurricanes defenseman Ron Hainsey*

"It's disappointing for us, and where we're at right now and where we're at in the season, this game should've been a desperation game for us. ... It's disappointing we come out that way and play in the first (period)." -- *Sabres coach Dan Bylsma*

Need to know

Skinner has four goals and two assists in the past five games. ... Eichel hasn't had a point in four straight games. ... The Hurricanes went 2-for-2 on the penalty kill and have killed an NHL-best 91.5 percent. They've allowed three power-play goals on the road in 52 times shorthanded. ... Sabres defenseman Cody Franson was a late scratch and was replaced by Justin Falk. There was no update on Franson following the game.

What's next

Hurricanes: Host the Boston Bruins on Friday (7:30 p.m. ET; FS-CR, NESN, NHL.TV)

Sabres: At the New York Islanders on Friday (7 p.m. ET; MSG+, MSG-B, NHL.TV)

Sabres unable to overcome slow start against Canes

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

December 22, 2016

Starting strong was a point of emphasis for the Buffalo Sabres when they spoke on Thursday morning prior to hosting the Carolina Hurricanes at KeyBank Center. The Sabres were coming off of a 10-game stretch in which they 13 earned points, but too many of those games had required comeback efforts.

In that regard, the Sabres are still searching for answers after a 3-1 home loss to the Carolina Hurricanes on Thursday, a game that saw Jeff Skinner open the scoring a mere 1:44 into the contest and the Hurricanes exit the first period with a 2-0 lead.

Buffalo had a chance to jump Carolina in the standings with a regulation win. Instead, they're three points back and lost ground on Boston, Ottawa and Tampa Bay in the Atlantic Division as well. Robin Lehner, who allowed two goals on 33 shots, said the team felt embarrassed with its effort to begin the game. His coach agreed, given the circumstances.

"I think we all felt it," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "It's disappointing for us in where we're at right now and where we're at in the season. This game should've been a desperation game for us, these two games before the break, and it's disappointing that we come out that way."

Skinner scored his goal after an errant Carolina pass through the neutral zone skipped over Kyle Okposo's stick at the blue line and found him streaking down the right-wing side. He faked a slap shot from the top of the circle and beat Lehner with a wrister for his 13th goal of the season, capitalizing on a play that simply hadn't gone the Sabres' way.

The Hurricanes' second goal, however, was the product of one of the many odd-man rushes the Sabres allowed in the first 20 minutes. On this one in particular, the Sabres had won a faceoff clean in the offensive zone. Lee Stempniak stripped the puck from Rasmus Ristolainen to create a 3-on-1 rush going back the other way and fed defenseman Justin Faulk in the slot. Faulk beat Lehner with a shot to the far-side corner with 2:09 remaining in the period.

"We handed them opportunities in the game right from the start," Bylsma said. "It was an unfortunate break I think on the first goal, we just miss the puck in the neutral zone and give them an opportunity but we gave them three or four other opportunities with our puck execution, our puck management, turning the puck over and that's a huge, huge disappointment for our team."

Buffalo did have another comeback effort in them, but it didn't begin until Johan Larsson put them on the board after 5:32 had elapsed in the third period. That was due in large part to a second period in which the Sabres took four penalties, which prevented them from ever gaining any traction offensively.

"That's taxing on your body," defenseman Zach Bogosian said. "We've got our most skilled guys that probably don't penalty kill, they're sitting on the bench getting cold and the guys that do kill, it's pretty taxing."

The third period started slow too, at least until Sam Reinhart made a perfect pass from behind the net to set up Larsson in the slot. The Sabres found their game a bit from that point on - Jack Eichel took a shot that would've tied the game on the power play if not for a tremendous save by Cam Ward - but, unlike in so many of their other games in the month of December, there was no dramatic finish to regulation.

The game simply ended with Sebastian Aho, the Carolina forward, scoring into an empty net with a minute remaining.

"When we're riding our highs we do pretty well," Bogosian said. "It just seems like the past few games it's been kind of back-and-forth. We're playing well for five or 10 minutes and then the other team will take over for five or 10. We've just got to play a full 60."

Eichel sits for a power play

Although he very nearly tied the game for the Sabres when they had their second power play of the night in the third period, Eichel did not take the ice for the team's first power play of the game in the first period. Bylsma said he was looking for "a different look," but admitted he was also sending a message both to his young forward - scoreless in his last four games - and to the team as a whole.

When asked about the decision, Eichel said that the choice was up to the coach and offered praise toward teammate Matt Moulson, who replaced him on the top unit.

"Mouls has had a couple power-play goals this year for us. We moved the puck well, just changing up looks. I'm on the second power play, I'm out there working hard and I think that's all I really have to say about that," Eichel said.

Franson sits due to injury

Cody Franson participated in warmups with the team and even took the first repetition in line rushes, but did not play due to injury. Justin Falk, a healthy scratch for the last two games, returned to the lineup in Franson's absence.

Nicolas Deslauriers, meanwhile, was back in the lineup after sitting as the healthy scratch for the team's game in Florida on Tuesday. William Carrier sat as the 13th forward after having played in the last 21 games for the Sabres.

Up next

The Sabres will head to Brooklyn and played their final game before the holiday break against the New York Islanders at Barclays Centre on Friday night. It will be the first game back in New York for Kyle Okposo, who spent seven seasons with the Islanders prior to joining the Sabres this past summer.

Coverage on Friday begins at 6:30 p.m. with the TOPS Pregame Show on MSG-B, or you can listen live on WGR 550. The puck drops at 7 p.m.