



Buffalo Sabres

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Capitals looking for consistency in Buffalo

Associated Press

December 8, 2016

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- The Washington Capitals will look for their third win over Buffalo in two weeks when they take on the Sabres on Friday night.

The Capitals have suffered from inconsistent play in recent games, even in victories. After surrendering a 3-0 lead on Wednesday against the Boston Bruins, Washington survived with a 4-3 overtime victory. The players still held a players-only meeting after the game.

"We had a little talk in here and there's some things we've got to clean up," said forward T.J. Oshie, who returned against Boston after missing seven games with a shoulder injury. "I think it's more of mentality than it is any systems or anything like that. Once we get a step up on somebody, we've got to get that mentality that we're going to finish them off."

The Capitals haven't had many problems against the Sabres in recent weeks, however. Washington picked up a 3-1 win over Buffalo on Nov. 25 and a 3-2 overtime over Buffalo on Dec. 5. In their most recent game, the Capitals came back from a late 3-2 deficit before winning in overtime. Marcus Johansson had both the game-tying goal and the game-winner in the victory.

Nicklas Backstrom had the game-winner in overtime against Boston on Tuesday. Backstrom leads the team with 22 points (eight goals, 14 assists) in 25 games. Captain Alex Ovechkin isn't far behind with 19 points (12 goals, seven assists) in 25 games.

Goaltending has been a major strength for the Capitals this season. Starter Braden Holtby has a .923 save percentage and a 2.18 goals-against average, and backup Philipp Grubauer has a .936 save percentage and a 1.80 goals against average. Each has a win over Buffalo this season.

The Sabres are hoping to be much healthier along the blue line opening the season plagued by injuries. Buffalo has been without three key defensemen for a significant period of time -- Dmitry Kulikov (lower back), Josh Gorges (foot) and Zach Bogosian(knee sprain) -- and both Kulikov and Gorges have a chance of returning against the Capitals.

"I feel like I could (play)," Gorges said, according to the team's website. "I guess we'll reevaluate things today and tomorrow morning, talk to doctors and the medical staff and get a better idea of whether that's possible or not."

The Sabres sent defenseman Erik Burgdoerfer back to the AHL's Rochester Americans on Thursday with their blue line getting healthier. It's expected that youngster Brendan Guhle will return to his junior team after being promoted on an emergency basis.

Guhle, 19, has impressed in his limited time with the big club.

"I don't know what I totally expected given the circumstances, given who he was playing against," Sabres head coach Bylsma said, according to the team's website. "You kind of look to see how anyone's going to do against (Alex) Ovechkin, against (Connor) McDavid's speed, and he did a pretty good job of it, a pretty remarkable job for a young kid to step in."

The Sabres are coming off a 4-3 overtime win over the Edmonton Oilers on Tuesday. Defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen had the game-winner on his first goal of the year.

Sabres' Kane is scoring, but 'rotten' penalties have to go

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

December 8, 2016

Evander Kane has become a regular on the stat sheet. He has three goals in the last three games. He also has three penalties.

"The goals are good. The penalties are bad," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma deadpanned Thursday.

Despite the chuckle, Bylsma knows Kane's infractions are a serious matter heading into Friday's visit by Washington:

The left winger took a hooking penalty during the third period of Monday's game in Washington. The Capitals tied the game five seconds later.

Kane took a cross-checking penalty during the third period of Tuesday's game against Edmonton. The Oilers took the lead during the power play.

"The type of penalties are more the discussion point than the penalties," Bylsma said in KeyBank Center.

"Evander is an aggressive guy, a physical guy, and we want him to be and need him to be. If he's taking penalties being aggressive and being physical, then that's one we'll kill.

"The penalties away from the puck, the cross-checking last game, those are not good situations to put yourself in, put your team in. That's really been a big part of us giving other teams opportunities in the last few games, the Edmonton game in particular.

"Evander's penalty was a rotten penalty to take at that point in time of the game for us."

Unlike the 3-2 overtime loss to the Caps, Kane made amends against the Oilers. He scored his second goal of the night with 29 seconds left, tying the game and enabling Buffalo to earn a 4-3 overtime win.

"Refs make calls throughout the course of the game," Kane said. "Whether you feel they're right or they're wrong or it's they've been letting it go all game, you've got to find a way to respond."

The penalties have taken away from an offensive surge by Kane. He has three goals and five points in five games after a start to forget. He entered the hot streak with no goals and two assists in his opening 10 games.

He's not the only offensive talent in Friday's matchup who has been taking too many trips to the box. Capitals coach Barry Trotz had a talk with Alex Ovechkin earlier this week after the sniper took five minors in three games.

"If it's going on again, then there's not going to be a lot of power play and playing time," Trotz told Washington reporters. "If my message is not getting through, then the only thing I have is really ice time."

Ovechkin is on a one-game streak of avoiding the box, steering clear of the referees during Wednesday's 4-3 overtime win against Boston.

"Obviously, I have to be on the ice and not in the penalty box," Ovechkin said in Washington. "It's a good thing we talk. It's my mistakes, and I just have to handle it and don't take those penalties."

The Sabres need to avoid infractions because the penalty-kill unit has been their Achilles' heel. They rank second-last in the NHL at 75.6 percent. Buffalo has given up a power-play goal in eight of the past 11 games while going just 17 for 29 (58.6 percent).

Washington's power play has scored in each of the teams' two meetings. Both came during third periods. The Caps' top unit features Ovechkin, Nicklas Backstrom, Justin Williams, Marcus Johansson and John Carlson.

"They've got an elite group of guys out there, and they move the puck well," Sabres center Derek Grant said. "If Ovechkin gets the puck, he's going to be shooting. We're trying to keep it out of his hands, but last game we still gave him too many good looks from the top.

"They've got four other guys on that unit that are pretty skilled, too. If you take one guy away too much, it gives those other guys more opportunity and more time. We've got to figure out a way to limit those guys' time and space, and at the same time making sure we're not giving him that opportunity to take that shot that he likes."

Sabres Notebook: Kulikov, Gorges may return; Deslauriers practices

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

December 8, 2016

The Sabres' defensive shuffle will continue Friday. For once, it's because players are coming back.

Dmitry Kulikov is expected to play against Washington after missing 13 games with a back injury. There's a chance he'll be joined by Josh Gorges, who also practiced fully in KeyBank Center despite having a nondisplaced fracture in his foot.

"I'm at the point where it's feeling good and I can play now," Kulikov said Thursday. "It's been a long time. I've had a couple practices with the team, been skating on my own for more than a week now, and I feel ready. I feel healthy."

Gorges' appearance was a surprise. He has missed three games and was slated to be out longer, but he says putting the foot in a skate feels the same as putting it in a walking boot. The issue now is pain tolerance.

"I feel like I could" play Friday, Gorges said. "You could get hit in the same spot again and potentially make it worse, but I could get hit on my other foot – which is completely fine – and have a chance of breaking that one, too.

"Maybe it's a little more heightened chance of reoccurrence or something happening, and that's something I have to talk to the doctors and medical staff about, weigh out the risk-versus-reward factor."

With at least one of the players coming back, the Sabres have returned defenseman Erik Burgdoerfer to Rochester. The 27-year-old played the first two games of his NHL career, recording two shots and a minus-1 rating while averaging 11:10 of ice time.

If Gorges and Kulikov both come back, it would mean the end of Brendan Guhle's time in Buffalo. The 19-year-old is on an emergency recall from juniors.

"He could not be an emergency recall with healthy players," coach Dan Bylsma said.

Guhle has looked good during his first three NHL games, firing four shots with a plus-1 rating while skating 16:21 per game.

"A pretty remarkable job for a young kid to step in," Bylsma said. "Defending-wise, skating-wise, he's looked cool and calm on the ice with the puck. I thought he's done a real good job stepping in those games he's played."

Nicolas Deslauriers was as rambunctious as ever, throwing checks at Sabres teammates Evander Kane, Cody Franson and Guhle. The left winger needed to see what his body could handle during his first practice since suffering a knee injury Oct. 29.

"It was a good test to get involved a little bit more with the guys," said Deslauriers, who has missed 19 games. "I felt back to normal."

Coaches usually want to see more than one practice before reinserting an injured player, but Deslauriers says he's good to return.

"Now it's more on Dan's decision and how he feels about it," Deslauriers said. "I feel ready. I feel back in shape."

During the past two games on the top defense pairing, Jake McCabe has averaged 26:19 of ice time while taking six shots and recording an assist. He's likely earned another game as Rasmus Ristolainen's partner.

"He's playing his best hockey for us right now," Bylsma said. "In terms of defending, I think they've been a good pair together against the other teams' tough guys and top guys.

"He's a guy who is coming in to be a leader on our team, and that's how he's playing on the ice."

Washington defenseman Matt Niskanen didn't make the trip because of an upper-body injury and will miss his first game since April 13, 2014. He has nine assists in 25 games.

The Capitals have recalled Aaron Ness from Hershey of the American Hockey League. The 26-year-old defenseman has three goals and nine points in 17 games with the Bears.

Three Sabres return to practice on Thursday

By Brayton Wilson

WGR 550

December 8, 2016

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- The Buffalo Sabres were looking surprisingly healthy at Thursday morning's practice at the KeyBank Center.

Three players that haven't been out of the lineup due to injury all practiced with the team on Thursday. Defenseman Dmitry Kulikov skated with his teammates once again, while forward Nicolas Deslauriers and defenseman Josh Gorges also joined to party.

Kulikov has been out of action since November 9 with a mid-body injury that has lingered since the preseason. Kulikov returned to practice with the Sabres on December 4, and a return to the lineup seems imminent.

Head coach Dan Bylsma said Kulikov could play on Friday night against the Washington Capitals, and Kulikov feels good enough to return to the lineup. Kulikov has been held pointless in 12 games played this season with six shots on goal and a minus-4 rating.

Deslauriers has not seen game action since October 29 against the Florida Panthers when he suffered a knee injury. Thursday was his first time back on the ice with his teammates since his injury. Deslauriers has no points in just seven games played with six shots on goal and a minus-3 rating.

Gorges was the surprising return to practice on Thursday. He left last Thursday's game against the New York Rangers after he blocked a shot with his foot. Gorges was diagnosed with a displaced fracture in his foot and his prognosis was a week-to-week timeframe.

However, Gorges returned to practice and he says he feels like he could be ready to go for Friday. Gorges has one assist in 23 games played this season.

Bylsma said after practice that both Deslauriers and Gorges could have the chance to play on Friday.

If the Sabres will get Kulikov and Gorges back in the lineup, it would likely mean the end of Brendan Guhle's emergency recall with the Sabres. Guhle will need to return to the Prince George Cougars in the Western Hockey League if both defensemen can play. Guhle has played in the last three games with four shots on goal and a plus-1 rating.

The Sabres will return to the ice for Friday's morning skate before facing the Capitals in the evening. Faceoff from the KeyBank Center on Friday is scheduled for 7 p.m. with pre-game coverage on WGR beginning at 6 p.m. with Mike Schopp and the Bulldog.

Versatile Jake McCabe Sabres' 'Swiss Army Knife

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 9, 2016

BUFFALO – Sabres defenseman Jake McCabe, like most hockey players, has a pretty straightforward nickname he was given years ago, "Caber."

But these days, McCabe, 23, is a top-pair defender, skating in every situation for a team whose blue line has been ravaged by injuries in recent weeks.

So the Wisconsin native's versatility has earned him another moniker.

"We joked around, called him 'The Swiss Army Knife,'" center Ryan O'Reilly said Thursday after the Sabres prepared for tonight's tilt against the Washington Capitals at KeyBank Center. "He does everything well. He's tough to play against. He's good offensively. He's good defensively."

McCabe has quietly morphed into the Sabres' unsung hero in the last month, averaging 23 minutes, 47 seconds of ice time in the last 14 games.

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma recently promoted McCabe to the No. 1 pair beside Rasmus Ristolainen, a spot Josh Gorges had occupied for more than a year.

"I expect a lot of myself," McCabe said. "I know how I can play and the way I can play. I started to bring it a little bit more in the last four or five games."

It's not crazy to think McCabe and Ristolainen, 22, could be the team's top tandem for years to come.

McCabe played a career-high 28 minutes, 52 seconds in Monday's 3-2 overtime loss in Washington, a game he spent defending superstar Alex Ovechkin.

A night later, with his minutes scaled back a bit, McCabe faced Edmonton Oilers phenom Connor McDavid throughout the Sabres' 4-3 overtime win.

"Whenever I see 97 (McDavid) or 8 (Ovechkin) hop over the boards ... I know I'm going out there, too," McCabe said. "It's one of those things where ... I'm going out there, I'm going to shut them down and hopefully provide some offense."

He added: "With the injuries that we've had ... I need to be relied upon and maybe take a little bigger role and just play with that little swagger, take pride in shutting down a team's top line, just going out there with an attitude like I belong to be out there."

To Bylsma, McCabe is "playing his best hockey for us right now."

"They've been a good pair against the other team's tough guys and top guys," he said. "I think that's a little bit of growth and maturity for Jake."

McCabe has grown rapidly in the last 14 months. He enjoyed a stellar training camp in 2015, forcing the Sabres to keep him.

A year ago at this time, McCabe said, the Sabres finally told him to find a place to live because he wouldn't be returning to the AHL, where he spent the majority of 2014-15, his first full pro season.

McCabe began this campaign with some new comfort and more confidence.

"It's stability and know that I belong here and know that I can be a top-four defenseman in the NHL and with this team," McCabe said.

Early last season, McCabe said, he was worried about making the Sabres and pressing.

"This year, I know the player I am and know the way I can play, just the comfort level with the coaching staff and the players and my role with the team, I think I can be a leader – and we have a lot of good leaders in this room – just by the way I play," he said.

Right away this season, Bylsma noticed a change in McCabe.

"I've seen a big difference in his game – on the ice, in practice, just his mindset," he said. "He's a guy who's coming into being a leader on our team, and that's how he's playing on the ice."

That's why McCabe was upset following Tuesday's win. Sure, the Sabres roared back late. But they also blew a commanding 2-0 lead, chasing the Oilers for the final 30 minutes of regulation.

"He's a guy who's taken a lot of responsibility for that and taking it on his shoulders, and that's something that's coming in his game, developing in his game and we need more of in his game," Bylsma said.

Sabres' Josh Gorges close to returning from foot fracture

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
December 8, 2016

BUFFALO – When practice started this morning, Sabres defenseman Josh Gorges, who was supposed to be sidelined weeks with a non-displaced fracture in his left foot, was skating with his teammates. Incredibly, Gorges, who has missed three games, could play Friday against Washington.

"Testing it out, seeing how it feels," Gorges said inside KeyBank Center. "When it's in your boot, it's not much different than being in your skate. The boot will act to hold everything together."

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said Gorges has been examined by the doctor and skated without pain Wednesday.

Meanwhile, defenseman Dmitry Kulikov could return Friday from a back bruise that has shelved him 13 games. "It's just a process of going through the rehab," Kulikov said. "You can't force it. You can't speed it up. It takes as long as it takes. I think I'm at the point where it's feeling good and I can play now."

When the Sabres have more healthy defensemen, rookie Brendan Guhle, 19, will have to be returned to his junior team.

"He's on emergency recall," Bylsma said. "You cannot be an emergency recall with healthy players."

Under difficult circumstances, Guhle has turned heads in his first three NHL games, looking comfortable and skating aggressively.

"It's been pretty good," Bylsma said of Guhle's play. "I don't know what I totally expected given the circumstances, given who he was playing against. You kind of look to see how anyone's going to do against (Alex) Ovechkin or against (Connor) McDavid's speed. He did a good job of it, a pretty remarkable job for a kid to step in.

"Defending-wise, skating-wise, he's looked cool and calm with the puck. I thought he's done a real job stepping in."

In other injury news, winger Nick Deslauriers, out the last 19 games with a knee injury, practiced today and could also return Friday.

Update: The Sabres have sent defenseman Erik Burgdoerfer, who played his first two NHL games this week, back to the Rochester Americans.

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It's a disturbing trend. In each of the last two games, ill-timed, third-period penalties from Sabres winger Evander Kane have led to key goals from the opposition.

In Monday's 3-2 overtime loss in Washington, Kane's hooking call led to Marcus Johansson's tying goal. In Tuesday's 4-3 overtime win against Edmonton, his cross-checking call led to Leon Draisaitl's go-ahead goal. Kane made amends later, however, scoring the tying goal, his second of the night, with 29 seconds left.

"The goals are good, the penalties are bad," Bylsma said. "The type of penalties more the discussion point than the penalties. Evander is an aggressive guy, a physical guy, and we want him to be and need him to be. And if he's taking a penalty being aggressive, being physical, that's one we'll kill. Penalties away from the puck, the cross-checking, those are not good situations to put yourself in, put your team in.

"It's been a big part of us giving teams opportunities in the last few games, the Edmonton game in particular. Evander's penalty was a rotten penalty to take at the point in time in the game for us."

Sabres slowly, but surely, getting healthy

By Matt Bove

WKBW

December 8, 2016

BUFFALO, N.Y., (WKBW) - Injuries on the blue line have been the norm for the Buffalo Sabres this season -- but they may finally be starting to get healthy.

On Thursday, the team announced that Erik Burgdoerfer, who was recalled earlier in the week, has been sent back to the American Hockey League (Rochester).

In his two games with the Sabres, Burgdoerfer finished with about 11 minutes of ice-time in each game, registering no points, and a minus-one rating.

So why did the team send him back? The roster move is a good indicator that one of the Sabres injured defensemen, if not two of them, should be back in the lineup Friday night against the Washington Capitals.

Earlier in the week Sabres head coach Dan Bylsma said that Josh Gorges would miss "weeks" with a foot injury after blocking a shot -- but he may be back sooner than originally thought.

"I feel like I could (play Friday)" Gorges told reporters after practice. "I guess we'll reevaluate things today and tomorrow morning, talk to doctors and the medical staff and get a better idea of whether that's possible or not."

But Gorges isn't the only defender on the verge of a possible comeback. On Thursday, Bylsma hinted that Dmitry Kulikov could also return to the lineup as soon as Friday.

Kulikov, who the Sabres acquired in the offseason from the Florida Panthers, has only played in 12 games this season, and has yet to register a point.

If both Kulikov and Gorges return to the lineup, the Sabres will likely reassign Brendan Guhle back to his junior team -- his call-up was on an emergency basis and returning two defensemen would lift the Sabres out of the 'emergency'.

Bove's take:

I've REALLY liked Guhle in his first three games -- but the return of Gorges and Kulikov could prove to be a huge boost for the organization.

Before the season started Kulikov was penciled in by many, including myself, as a top four defenseman. Lingering injuries have kept the newcomer out of the lineup for more than half of the Sabres' early games -- but when he has played, Kulikov has been pretty solid.

It's hard to evaluate his game with such a small sample size, but Kulikov was brought in to be a big, physical, consistent defenseman, who can take on a 'big' workload.

The possible addition of Kulikov back into the lineup not only adds depth, but it takes some pressure off guys like Rasmus Ristolainen and Jake McCabe, who have been asked to handle the majority of the workload; both had nearly 30 minutes of ice time in Buffalo's 4-3 win over the Edmonton Oilers on Tuesday.

As for Gorges, he's been criticized a lot early in the season, but like Ristolainen and McCabe he's been asked to do a whole lot. Personally, I think Gorges can really thrive as a third-pair d-man who can play both 5-on-5 and the penalty kill. The veteran defender does occasionally make mistakes, and doesn't bring a whole lot offensively to the table -- but he does add grit and great shot-blocking to the lineup.

No, I don't think he should be a top-pair guy or matched with Ristolainen, but I absolutely think he should be on this team.

Now here's a question to those who have criticized Gorges (yes, it has been warranted, at times):
Who is the better option?

Don't count Guhle, his circumstances is a unique one and the Sabres won't want to burn a year of his contract -- he'll be a big piece moving forward.

Taylor Fedun?

While some of you may think Fedun is a better option, he will remain in the lineup for the foreseeable future because of Zach Bogosian's injury -- but who else is there?

Josh Gorges is a better option than Justin Falk and Erik Burgdoerfer, at least in my opinion.

Regardless, the Sabres are FINALLY getting healthy, and are still just a few games out of a playoff spot with more than two-thirds of the season left to play.

Evander Kane Finds Scoring Touch

By Kyle Silagyi

The Hockey Writers

December 8, 2016

"It must be a joke around the league: You score two goals against the Buffalo Sabres and you're going to win the hockey game," said a disgruntled Evander Kane in late November.

He was right.

At the time, the team was averaging just 1.82 goals per game, worst in the league by far. Kane made these comments in an attempt to address the problem that was Buffalo's offensive production and to energize the uninspired Sabres' forwards, but up until recently, Kane was part of that problem.

The 25-year-old cracked three ribs after crashing into the boards during the team's season opener, an injury that kept him out until mid-November. Kane struggled upon his return, recording just two points in his first 10 games of the 2016-17 campaign. The Vancouver native's lack of production sparked trade rumors, leading many Buffalo fans to believe that the Sabres' brass was ready to move on from the player they gave up so much for in February of 2015.

However, the former Winnipeg Jets forward has been able to turn it on as of late. In his last five games, the fourth overall pick in the 2009 NHL Entry Draft has five points (3 goals, 2 assists), scoring two goals in the team's crazy come-from-behind victory against the Edmonton Oilers on Dec. 6.

Kane has more than tripled his season point total in the past five games alone, and is currently on pace for roughly 38 points this season. While fans were certainly expecting more out of the former 30-goal scorer, the former Atlanta Thrashers winger could easily eclipse 38 points, especially if he continues playing the way he has been for the past number of games.

While Kane's improved production could just be attributed to him playing up to his full potential, there are certainly a number of different aspects that have helped the winger find his stride.

Related: [Sabres Season Far from Over](#)

[Jack is Back](#)

Most players in the National Hockey League would improve if they played on a line with 20-year-old Jack Eichel, and Evander Kane is no different.

Since the former second overall pick returned from an ankle sprain in late November, he has played on a line between Kane and 21-year-old Sam Reinhart, something that has been of great benefit to both wingers. Eichel's return has allowed Kane to break out, as the former Memorial Cup winner has recorded at least one point in all but one of the games Eichel has played since his return.

Eichel's return has helped Kane not only offensively, but defensively, as well. Before Eichel's return, the former Vancouver Giants prospect had a minus-6 rating, often being out on the ice when Buffalo allowed a goal. Since the former Hobey Baker Award winner's return, Kane has not finished a game with a minus rating, and is actually a plus-2 throughout the past five games. Though Kane still sits at a minus-4 rating on the year, his recent production suggests that he will not have a negative plus/minus rating for much longer.

Throughout the past five games, the Kane-Eichel-Reinhart line has been great for Buffalo. The grouping has scored four goals for the team, with the two players that didn't bury the puck in the net often picking up assists on the goals.

Kane described Eichel as a "pretty dynamic player" as the former Boston University Terrier's return drew closer, and Eichel has been just that for Kane's game. Eichel's return has almost single-handedly improved Kane's production, something that Buffalo fans have been yearning for all season.

Something to Prove

If a Sabres fan has to describe Kane's run with the team in one word, that word may be "underwhelming."

When the team acquired Kane from the Jets in exchange for promising defenseman Tyler Myers, consistent winger Drew Stafford, talented prospects Joel Armia and Brendan Lemieux, and a 2015 first round draft pick, fans expected to receive a powerful winger with offensive upside. They expected a difference maker. Instead, they've received a player who has become just another Buffalo forward not playing up to his full potential.

In his debut season with the team, Kane recorded 35 points, finishing fifth on the team in scoring. Kane's lack of any significant production combined with a controversial off-season left many fans calling for his exit. This resulted in trade rumors involving the winger and some fans believing that Kane would be left unprotected in next summer's expansion draft, essentially shipping him off to the Vegas Golden Knights for nothing in return.

Related: [Recap: Sabres Late Comeback Stuns Oilers](#)

The former WHL all-star's early season struggle did nothing but place more doubts in the minds of the Buffalo faithful, and many had already given up on the young forward. Fortunately, it appears as though Kane has realized he has something to prove, and has been proving himself as a top six forward over the past number of games.

Kane wants to be a consistent producer for the Buffalo Sabres, and has been able to establish himself as just that over the past five games.

"I'm very, very, very happy with where I'm at here in Buffalo," Kane said in late November. "And maybe I couldn't have said that in the past in my career."

Both Sabres' management and Buffalo fans expect Kane to be one of the best players on the ice night in and night out, and recently, Kane has been just that. Hopefully, as the season progresses, Kane will continue put points on the board and help the Sabres win games, something fans of the Sabres were promised when he arrived in the Queen City.

Gorges, Deslauriers return to practice

By Jourdon LaBarber

Associated Press

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Given the fact that Dmitry Kulikov already practiced with the team earlier in the week and had been described as day-to-day with his lower-back injury, it was of little surprise to see him back on the ice with the Buffalo Sabres at their practice on Thursday morning.

The same definitely couldn't be said of Josh Gorges.

Just four days after it was announced Gorges would likely miss weeks due to a non-displaced fracture in his foot, the defenseman was a full participant in practice with the Sabres on Thursday. Forward Nicolas Deslauriers also practiced for the first time since sustaining a knee injury that has forced him to miss 19 games since Oct. 30.

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said that Kulikov and Gorges are both possibilities to rejoin the lineup when the team hosts Washington at KeyBank Center on Friday night. He said that Deslauriers is "close" to being game-ready, but added that he had not yet seen a post-practice report.

Gorges expressed optimism when asked about playing on Friday.

"I feel like I could," he said. "I guess we'll reevaluate things today and tomorrow morning, talk to doctors and the medical staff and get a better idea of whether that's possible or not."

Gorges sustained his injury while blocking on a shot against Boston on Saturday. Despite the "weeks" timeframe, Bylsma said the fact that the fracture was non-displaced meant his return to skating would depend primarily on pain tolerance. For a player with a reputation for blocking shots by any means necessary, perhaps it's not a surprise that pain tolerance isn't as much of an issue as expected.

"When I gave you the prognosis, I said it was a pain tolerance thing," Bylsma said. "He's revisited the doctor postgame, [after] the Edmonton game [on Tuesday], and they're happy with where he's at and now it's just a pain tolerance thing for him. He skated yesterday and skated without pain and that led to practice today ... We'll see what that means for tomorrow, but it's a possibility."

Deslauriers said he's skated nine times over the past 10 days and was also optimistic about his readiness for Friday.

"It's Dan's decision," he said. "Whatever happens tomorrow, I'll be ready. And if not, next game's probably going to be a better option."

In the event that Kulikov and Gorges both return, it would likely spell an end to Brendan Guhle's tenure with the team this season. Guhle was recalled from his junior team in Prince George on an emergency basis and thus would have to return once the emergency situation is relieved, which in this case is the absence of two left-shot defensemen.

Guhle, 19, has impressed with his skating ability and poise on the back end in his three NHL games. He's averaged 16:21 of ice time in games against Boston, Washington and Edmonton while going head to head with some of the most talented players in the League in Alexander Ovechkin and Connor McDavid.

"I don't know what I totally expected given the circumstances, given who he was playing against," Bylsma said. "You kind of look to see how anyone's going to do against Ovechkin, against McDavid's speed, and he did a pretty good job of it, a pretty remarkable job for a young kid to step in. Defending-wise, skating-wise, he's looked cool and calm on the ice with the puck and I thought he's done a real good job stepping in."

Coverage of the game between the Sabres and Capitals on Friday begins with the TOPS Pregame Show at 6:30 p.m. on MSG-B.

Gionta offering consistent offense

Brian Gionta's goal against Edmonton on Tuesday was his sixth in 26 games this season, meaning he's already halfway to his 79-game total from last season. In fact, as injuries have hampered the Sabres forward group in the early going this season, Gionta has been one of the team's most consistent contributors.

According to puckalytics.com, Gionta leads the team in goals per 60 (1.07) and assists per 60 (0.89). The former number ranks 39th in the NHL.

"It's about helping the team," Gionta said. "It's about doing something that helps the team win. Sometimes it's a goal, sometimes it's about shutting down [other team's] top lines. That's how I measure how the season is going."

That willingness to help the team in any way possible is evident in the fact that the majority of his shifts begin outside the offensive zone. In fact, 45.87 percent of the faceoffs that have been taken when Gionta is on the ice during 5-on-5 situations have come in the defensive zone, a number that ranks ninth in the League.

That tendency to start in the defensive zone signals a change in Gionta's role from years past. His 17.66 offensive-zone faceoff percentage this season is a career low, and he was often over 30 percent in that category with New Jersey and in his first few years with Montreal. Even last season, when he joined Marcus Foligno and Johan Larsson to form the Sabres' checking line, he was still taking 25.46 percent of his faceoffs in the offensive zone.

What hasn't changed is his team-first approach, which is why he's been able to adapt to find success in his new role. In spite of the matchups against opposing team's top players and the defensive-zone starts, he's currently on pace to score 18 goals over the course 82 games. At age 38, that would be his highest mark since 2013-14.

"The biggest thing with him is he hasn't changed," said Gorges, who has been Gionta's teammate since the 2009-10 season when they played for Montreal. "He's always been - and I think that's why he's always had success - is he's a true professional. He does what he needs to do to be successful, he does what he needs to do for the team to be successful. He's a guy that, and I've said this before, young guys should look at and watch and know, this is how you have success for a long time in the NHL."

Burgdoerfer reassigned to Rochester

The Sabres announced that the team has reassigned defenseman Erik Burgdoerfer to Rochester on Thursday afternoon. Burgdoerfer averaged 11:10 of ice time in two games filling in for Taylor Fedun on the back end.