



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres, Lightning heading in opposite directions

Associated Press

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TAMPA, Fla. -- The Buffalo Sabres and Tampa Bay Lightning are just one point apart in the NHL standings, out of the playoff picture but headed in different directions as they try to stay in the wild-card hunt in the second half of the season.

The Lightning (19-19-4) have lost four straight and allowed 22 goals in those games -- they allowed six or more goals just once in their first 38 games, but now have done it three times in the last four -- while the Sabres (16-15-9) are 3-0-1 in their last four.

"We want to be a relentless, aggressive, fast, hard team to play against, that keeps coming at you for 60 minutes," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said Wednesday. "That's when we're at our best. We're getting there."

The Lightning are at the other extreme, struggling defensively in front of goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy, who started 10 straight games since Ben Bishop was sidelined. Tampa Bay went 4-1-1 in the first six, but has lost the last four, and Bishop is expected to return either Thursday or Friday against the red-hot Columbus Blue Jackets.

"This is the most difficult stretch we've had since we've been here. It's not a lot of fun," Lightning associate coach Rick Bowness said Wednesday. "There's only one way out of it. You've got to work your way out of it."

The Lightning will try to do that in a difficult stretch -- after Columbus on Friday, they play six straight on the road, including games against three teams atop divisions in the Western Conference in Chicago, San Jose and Anaheim. Having a break over the last three days gave Tampa Bay a rest it has sorely needed.

"I just think that a couple of days off has given the guys some fresh legs," Bowness said. "Tired bodies are a little more rested."

One advantage the Lightning can hope to make the most of is their power play, which is the second-best in the NHL, converting on 23.5 percent of their chances. That will go up against a weak spot for Buffalo, which ranks last in the league in penalty kill, allowing goals on 26 percent of opposing power plays.

The Lightning's struggles on defense may need to be addressed before the trade deadline -- in reaching the Eastern finals last year, they ranked fifth in the NHL with 2.41 goals allowed per game; this year, they've dropped to 25th, allowing 2.98, despite largely the same lineup in goal and on the blue line.

Buffalo is scoring more, with three players tied for the team lead at 27 points in right wing Kyle Okposo (team-best 12 goals), defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen (team-best 24 assists) and 21-year-old center Sam Reinhart, who has nine goals. The Sabres will be without goalie Robin Lehner, who is ill and didn't make the trip, so it's likely Anders Nilsson in net against Tampa Bay.

Sabres goaltenders are taking care of business

By Amy Moritz
The Buffalo News
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Perhaps there is some good news in light of Robin Lehner being the latest member of the Buffalo Sabres sidelined with the flu. After all, it makes Dan Bylsma's job of deciding which goaltender to start a little bit easier.

Backup Anders Nilsson played his best game of the season Tuesday, coming a few minutes short of a shutout in the Sabres 4-1 win over the Philadelphia Flyers in KeyBank Center.

Nilsson has started three of the last four games for the Sabres, picking up two wins. His .930 save percentage ranks fifth in the NHL and goes with a 7-3-4 record.

Lehner picked up the 4-3 win against Winnipeg on Saturday here. He also unleashed his spitfire personality at Dustin Byfuglie and was ready to fight the Jets heavyweight in a scuffle after the final horn sounded.

There's passion. There's stopping pucks. There's a backbone to the Sabres defense, which should feature Nilsson starting in Thursday's game in Florida against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

The Sabres tandem has the sixth-best save percentage in the NHL at .920. To put that in perspective, the last time the Sabres goaltenders finished with a combined save percentage above .920 was the 2009-10 season when Ryan Miller, Patrick Lalime and Jhonas Enroth combined to post a .924 save percentage.

"To have two that are playing well, to have two you can go to on any given night, everyone feels comfortable," defenseman Justin Falk said. "There's no tension or uneasiness on wondering who's going to be back there that night. We can approach everything the same and take care of our business because we know whoever is back in the pipes is taking care of theirs."

While taking care of business in the net means stopping pucks, it also means communicating with your defense. There's a minor style difference between the two in that category.

"I would say Lehner is maybe more vocal out of any goalie I've ever played with," Falk said. "He's very into it."

But both have made it easier for the Sabres defense, directing players so that they can see the puck to stop the puck.

"They're both loud back there," defenseman Cody Franson said. "They try to let you know what they're seeing as best they can. You know when a shot's coming in from the point, we try and focus on boxing out but sometimes you get in a situation where you're going to end up crossing their line of sight to do that. They try to be vocal about just letting them see it so sometimes we'll just wait for a half second to focus on rebounds."

"Both our goalies have been real good in that area which has allowed us to let them see pucks better and let them make the save rather than us trying to go out there and block it."

In Tuesday's win, Nilsson faced 40 shots, faltering just once on a late third-period power play goal. While the majority of the shots he faced were clearly seen from a distance, Nilsson had to make several key saves at key times. He also had good game management, covering pucks and getting whistles to keep trouble from brewing around the Sabres' goal.

"I thought yesterday was a significantly better game," Bylsma said of Nilsson's performance against the Flyers. "He was in control. He was solid. He gobbled up pucks. He was very good on his rebound control. We broke down a few times last game and he had to make a couple saves there in the second period with guys coming down the slot. He made big, solid saves for us and gobbled up the rebound and didn't give up chances. I thought that game, more than any, has been his best at being in control and being a tight goaltender."

Bylsma said that Lehner would not make the road trip, which begins against Tampa Bay Thursday and concludes in Carolina Friday.

That means Linus Ullmark will stay with the Sabres. Named an AHL All-Star with the Rochester Americans, he leads the league in games played with 38.

That volume has been key for his development withing the organization. Ullmark hasn't played this often in his hockey career, in part because of double hip surgery in 2015. But his time in Rochester, sometimes playing three games in three days, has been a calculated part of his maturation process and, frankly, something he's enjoying.

"It's a lot easier to keep a stable performance because you know have to do the same thing over and over again," Ullmark said. "You don't get all those pauses when you have to think about 'OK, how did I do this? Where is my timing?' Those small things, like timing and feeling of the game, gets a lot easier. And well, of course it's a lot more fun to play a lot of games."

Sabres Notebook: An opportunity for precious points

By Amy Moritz
The Buffalo News
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Dan Bylsma doesn't talk much about "four-point games."

"I sometimes struggle with that math," the Sabres head coach said after his team practiced Wednesday in KeyBank Center.

But he knows the opportunity for his team as they travel to Florida to face the Tampa Bay Lightning Thursday night.

The Lightning are one point ahead of the Sabres in the Atlantic Division standings and the Bolts are on a four-game losing streak, giving up 22 goals in that span.

"I think as you try to win hockey games and add points to your column, you're always keeping an eye on the standings, you're always keeping an eye on the teams ahead of you and you're hoping they don't get points when you are getting points," Bylsma said.

"The divisional games are the ones where you have direct control of that. We've got Tampa Bay right in front of us with a couple games at hand," said Bylsma as the Sabres have played two fewer games than the Lightning "and this is an opportunity for us. They call these four-point games. I sometimes struggle with that math but it's two we can get and two we can prevent them from getting and they're critical for us."

The Lightning saw goaltender Ben Bishop as a full participant in practice on Wednesday. Bishop suffered a lower-body injury during a 4-1 win against Detroit on Dec. 20. His return is quicker than anticipated and sorely needed. Without Bishop, Tampa Bay has gone 3-5-1.

The Sabres lost forward Derek Grant after the Nashville Predators claimed him off waivers Wednesday morning.

Placing Grant on waivers was seen as a move to increase depth in the organizational system, but came with the risk of another team picking him up.

"That was part of the plan there," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "Obviously we knew it was a possibility. Hopefully Derek's got an opportunity for Derek going to Nashville. We thought with Cal O'Reilly being a center we could call up as part of the plan as well."

And to clarify, there are no plans to call up Cal O'Reilly.

Grant had no goals and three assists in 35 games while taking just 31 shots. He has never scored in 75 NHL games.

Bylsma also said that Tyler Ennis would not be playing in the Tampa Bay game although the forward seems closer to returning. At Wednesday's optional practice in KeyBank Center, Bylsma put Ennis through some intense skating drills in the neutral zone.

The Sabres announced the return of Report Card Nights for the 7 p.m. games on Friday, Jan. 20 against the Detroit Red Wings and Saturday, Feb. 4 against the Ottawa Senators.

Students from kindergarten through 12th grade who have an A or an A-equivalent on their most recent report card will earn one free 300 Level II ticket to one of the games. Additional tickets can be purchased for \$40. One winner will be chosen at random to win a \$500 contribution to a NY 529 College Savings Program.

The offer can be redeemed at the KeyBank Center box office or online at sabres.com/reportcard. Students must bring their report card to the box office to receive their free ticket.

Kraft Hockeyville USA has opened again this season, allowing communities to share their stories about their local rink, teams, hockey spirit and passion. The winning community hosts an NHL preseason game televised live on NBCSN and \$150,000 in arena upgrades.

The Sabres played a preseason game at last year's winner in Marquette, Michigan. Nominations are open through March 10 at www.KraftHockeyville.com.

Sabres lose Grant. Lehner stays home

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

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Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- With Will Carrier and Justin Bailey the future of the Sabres, Buffalo waived Derek Grant to try to get him to Rochester. Nashville had other ideas and claimed the center off waivers from the Sabres.

Grant was pretty much a penalty killer and faceoff man for Buffalo. In 35 games he had no goals and three assists. He won 52.6 percent of his faceoffs.

Buffalo would like the depth at center, but they do have Cal O'Reilly on the farm. Dan Bylsma said getting him to the Amerks is what they were trying to do, "That was part of the plan there. Obviously we knew it was a possibility. Hopefully Derek's got an opportunity for Derek going to Nashville, but we thought with Cal O'Reilly being a center, we could get through with that part of the plan as well."

Robin Lehner is still sick which means Linus Ullmark is going on the trip to Tampa and Raleigh.

Tyler Ennis was one of 12 players that took part in the optional practice on Wednesday. Bylsma put him through some hard skating drills and he said Ennis needs more time, "He's had four workouts which have been good. He's progressing really well, but I don't think he's quite ready to get into a game just yet, so he won't be in the Tampa Bay game."

Sabres surging halfway through season

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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BUFFALO – Suddenly, the Sabres have some hope. Three wins in four games will create that. So will the type of victories they've earned.

In addition to Saturday afternoon's thrilling come-from-behind win against Winnipeg, a tilt emotional enough it felt like it could change their season, the Sabres have played two of their best games of 2016-17 this month. In beating Philadelphia 4-1 on Tuesday, a game that mirrored their 4-1 road win against the New York Rangers a week earlier, the Sabres compiled complete, start-to-finish efforts against two playoff teams. Given up for dead two weeks ago, the Sabres, 3-0-1 in the last four games, hit the official halfway point tonight in Tampa Bay playing perhaps their best hockey all season.

With a game in hand, the seventh-place club trails Ottawa by five points for the Atlantic Division's final playoff spot.

"We're a team that never gives up," Sabres winger Nick Deslauriers said Wednesday inside KeyBank Center after the Sabres prepared for the Lightning.

For all their struggles this season – and since they've lost 24 times, there have been *a lot* – the Sabres have showcased some resiliency, often roaring back late in games or answering rough stretches with wins. They started their current run after losing six of seven games.

"There's a lot of belief in this room right now," Sabres center Ryan O'Reilly said. "Guys are coming together. You can see we're starting to get bounces."

Slowly, the Sabres have started building an identity.

"We want to be a relentless, aggressive, fast, hard team to play against," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "We want to be a relentless team that keeps coming at you for 60 minutes. That's where I think ... we're at our best."

In the last 15 games or so, Bylsma said, as more injured players have returned, the Sabres have begun to evolve "as how we want to play, how we need to play and how we do play."

Everything starts with the Sabres' tenacity, defenseman Cody Franson said.

"We've proved this year that we can hold our head high (because) we haven't quit," he said. "We're a relentless group. That's a building block. If you don't have that, you don't have much to start on."

Where does that attitude come from?

"It's just the background of everybody," Deslauriers said. "I think we have such a good group here that we all feed off each other. That's why maybe I think lately we have a little bit more success. We have such a tight group. We just work hard for each other."

The Sabres have also started working more responsibly while becoming more opportunistic, Franson said.

"We still haven't generated a ton of offense five-on-five, but I think we're becoming (a) team that teams know they have to play well and are going to have to earn what they get," he said.

Still, the Sabres have scored three or more goals in four straight contests for the first time this season. The offense, the NHL's worst most of the season, is up to 2.3 goals a game, 26th overall.

Three goals a game has become a gold standard in this low-scoring era. If the Sabres can consistently hit that number, they will likely win more games than they lose.

They did a year ago during the second half, when they went 20-14-7. The Sabres will almost certainly need a better mark this season if they want to make the playoffs.

They also need to start winning games in overtime and shootouts. Right now, they're 3-9 in such affairs.

"You look at our overtime losses and shootout losses, for us, we're close," O'Reilly said. "You give us five of those wins or four of those wins, we're even closer to where we want to be.

"I think (as) a team we work hard, but we have to get out of our minds. When we're playing out of our heads and not thinking so much but trusting each other, winning battles, we kind of have that simple kind of mindset where we're enjoying playing hockey. We're a dangerous team."

Predators claim Derek Grant from Sabres

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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BUFFALO – As noon, the end of the 24-hour waiver period, approached, Derek Grant was told to stop practicing with the Sabres and leave the ice.

Why?

The Nashville Predators claimed the center on waivers today, robbing the Sabres of some valuable depth they wanted to send to the AHL Rochester Americans.

"It's a new experience for me," Grant, who was still wearing his Sabres jersey and equipment, told the Times Herald. "Obviously, I'm excited for the opportunity."

Still, Grant, who played 35 games with the Sabres, seemed a bit shocked by the news.

After signing a one-year, two-way contract in July, Grant, 26, enjoyed a huge preseason, scoring three goals and six points in five games.

Grant then settled into a fourth-line role, producing zero goals and three assists. He did, however, win faceoffs and kill penalties.

Incredibly, Grant has never scored a goal in his 75 NHL appearances.

"I proved that I could still play in this league and I should be in this league," Grant said inside KeyBank Center. "So I'm just looking forward to the opportunity. I don't really know where we go from here. It's all new to me. I was just told to get off the ice."

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said "we knew it was a possibility" Grant could get claimed.

"Hopefully, Derek's got an opportunity ... going to Nashville," he said. "We thought with Cal O'Reilly being a center we could call up, that was part of the plan as well."

In other news, goalie Robin Lehner, still sidelined by the flu, won't travel to Tampa Bay for Thursday's game, the start of a two-game road trip. Goalie Linus Ullmark is still with the team.

Meanwhile, winger Tyler Ennis, out since having groin surgery two months ago, practiced again today, his fourth team session. Ennis won't play Thursday, Bylsma said.

"I don't think he's ready to get in a game quite yet," Bylsma said.

Late turnovers, penalties lead to shootout loss

By Jourdon LaBarber

Associated Press

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We'll open this practice report with a trivia question: Which current player on the Buffalo Sabres joined the team after signing a seven-year contract, assumed a leadership position and wore an "A" on their jersey almost immediately and made their first All-Star team during their first season in Buffalo?

If you guessed Ryan O'Reilly, you're correct. If you guessed Kyle Okposo, you're also correct. Such are the parallels between the first seasons of O'Reilly, the Sabres' All-Star last season, and Okposo, who was named an All-Star for the first time on Tuesday.

When O'Reilly joined the Sabres a season ago, he was named an alternate captain out of training camp. By the time he was announced as an All-Star in January, Dan Bylsma referred to him as the team's "heart and soul." He'd already become as well known for his practice habits, which had spread to his teammates, as he was for his in-game abilities.

It's interesting, then, how intrigued O'Reilly has been in getting to watch Okposo work over the past four months.

"It's interesting to see the off-ice habits," O'Reilly said. "You [play against him] and see him last year, seeing how hard he works and the way he can create, the way he can score, you know you see that stuff. But get to know him better and getting to play with him, you see the way he takes care of himself away from the rink. He's always working on his game. He's always in the gym, he's shooting pucks, he's doing stick-handling stuff, he's always working on his game and it's cool to see how guys get the way they are."

O'Reilly's description of Okposo almost exactly matches the description from Matt Moulson, Okposo's teammate for five seasons in New York and a godfather to Okposo's daughter.

"I think he's a guy that comes to the rink every day and works at what he needs to work on, whether its workouts, shooting pucks, doing different things on the ice," Moulson said. "He's a guy that takes his job very seriously and I think you can see that no matter the circumstance, if he's tired or what not, he comes to work every day."

The work off the ice has translated thus far, as Okposo has been every bit the consistent presence on the ice that the Sabres could have hoped for when they signed him this summer. He leads the team outright with 12 goals and is tied with Rasmus Ristolainen and Sam Reinhart for the team lead with 27 points.

In games where either O'Reilly or defenseman Josh Gorges have been absent - of which there have quite a few this season - Okposo has assumed alternate captain duties, a testament to the impression he's already made on his coach.

"He's a true professional," Bylsma said. "You do a little bit of homework on Kyle and you know what kind of player he is but, both on and off the ice, his work ethic and his demeanor, he's been a big leader for our group and our team in that regard."

"It's no surprise to what you see on the ice from him because of how hard he works off the ice."

Now, for the first time in a 10-year career, that hard work has earned him a spot alongside the League's best in Los Angeles later this month.

"It's awesome for him," O'Reilly said. "All year he's been probably our most consistent player. Night in and night out, the way he competes and the way's he been producing, it's nice to see him get that. It's definitely well deserved."

Grant claimed on waivers

Forward Derek Grant was claimed on waivers by the Nashville Predators on Wednesday. He averaged 10:12 of ice time for the Sabres and was a consistent presence on the penalty kill, but he did not score a goal in 35 games.

Grant being claimed does take away a potential goal scorer from Rochester, but Bylsma said the move was made with Cal O'Reilly in mind as a potential fill-in at the center position if the need ever arises. As it stands, the Sabres have O'Reilly, Reinhart, Jack Eichel and Zemgus Girgensons down the middle.

"Obviously we knew there was a possibility [of Grant being claimed]," Bylsma said. "Hopefully it's an opportunity for Derek in Nashville."

Lehner will not travel to Tampa Bay; Ennis is getting closer

Robin Lehner, who missed the game on Tuesday with the flu, was not expected to travel with the Sabres for their upcoming two-game road trip, according to Bylsma. Anders Nilsson and Linus Ullmark will be the two goalies on the trip, which will see the Sabres play back-to-back games in Tampa Bay and Carolina on Thursday and Friday.

Ullmark has not yet played an NHL game this season, but he's played 28 games for Rochester en route to being named an All-Star in the AHL.

Bylsma said that Tyler Ennis, meanwhile, will not play in Tampa Bay but did not rule out a return to the lineup in Carolina on Friday. Ennis has missed 28 games since undergoing groin surgery on Nov. 10