



Buffalo Sabres

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Predators return home with momentum, host Sabres

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On and off the ice, the Nashville Predators got well during their just-completed western road trip.

Not only did Nashville go 4-1-0 to jump over St. Louis for third place in the Central Division, it regained the services of top goal-scorer James Neal and All-Star defenseman P.K. Subban from injuries. The Predators trailed 2-0 in the trip's first and last stops, but rallied to knock off the division's worst team (Colorado) and its best (Minnesota).

Now they look to keep the roll going Tuesday night, when they welcome the Buffalo Sabres to Bridgestone Arena to open a stretch where they play eight of their next 10 games at home.

"We knew how important this road trip was," Nashville captain Mike Fisher said. "It's tested us in a lot of different ways, but we've played real hard and we're coming into our own."

It's reminiscent of two months ago, when the Predators put together an 8-3-1 November and appeared to be ready to resemble the team many thought would be a Stanley Cup contender. Instead, they stumbled through December, failing to find the consistency November brought it.

As it takes the ice against Buffalo (19-18-9), Nashville (23-17-7) is 7-3-1 in January, winning six of its last seven. The formula has evolved from relying on defense and cashing in on counter-attacks to driving play by possessing the puck, but the base for success has been the same: Goal prevention.

In their recent spurt, the Predators have yielded just 12 goals, less than two per game. Whether Pekka Rinne or goalie of the future Juuse Saros is between the pipes, they are getting excellent play, and that's allowed the team to settle into games even when they fall behind early.

Sunday night's 4-2 win over Minnesota was a case in point. Nashville trailed 2-0 early, but Rinne kept it in contention. Then it started overrunning the tired Wild in the last two periods, ripping three goals into the net during the third period.

"We kind of got going and were working hard and we just got back into the game," said Filip Forsberg, who tallied the tying and go-ahead goals. "We played better and better in the game and that's how we want to do it."

Meanwhile, the Sabres arrive in town off one of their best wins of the season, a 3-2 verdict Saturday night in Montreal on Zach Bogosian's first marker of the season 1:48 into overtime.

It was the second goal of the game for a Buffalo defenseman; they had combined for an NHL-low five prior to puck drop in Bell Centre.

"We've started to learn what makes us successful and have actually attacked it in our game plan," said defenseman Cody Franson, a former Predator. "I think we've been competitive in every game for about eight games, win or lose, and when you give yourself honest chances to win, you're going to put some points on the board."

The Sabres are 2-1-0 on a six-game road trip that finishes right after the All-Star break with another trip to Montreal.

Sabres hit the road feeling good after OT wins

By John Vogl
The Buffalo News
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NASHVILLE, Tenn. – Dan Bylsma has shown prophetic tendencies this season. Sometimes it's bad, like when he talked about Philadelphia's power play being due. The Flyers promptly potted three with the man-advantage to beat the Sabres.

Other times, it's been good. The coach has been talking recently about what it will take for Buffalo to get on a roll. Bylsma said a couple of overtime or shootout victories would kick-start things.

Buffalo will carry a two-game winning streak into Tuesday's game in Nashville, and both wins came during overtime. Bylsma hopes it's the push the team needed as it heads into All-Star weekend with games against the Predators and Dallas.

"Over the past month, we've had opportunities to win some big games to catch teams and get back into the mix," Bylsma said Monday. "With these last two wins and the four points in 32 hours, we get within three, four, five points.

"With two more games before the break and the possibility of four more points, it'd be huge for us to go on the road here to Nashville and Dallas and get some points, get some wins and put ourselves even closer to that spot where we want to be."

Because of a wide disparity in games played, the Eastern Conference standings are a jumbled mess. Boston technically entered Monday's schedule holding the third and final playoff spot in the Atlantic Division. But while the Bruins have 52 points in 50 games, the fourth-place Maple Leafs have 51 points in 44 games. If Toronto wins those games in hand, it would vault past Boston.

All the Sabres know is they're at least in the conversation again with 47 points in 46 games.

"We have the opportunity to close out the month and try to get on a roll," left wing Evander Kane said. "At this point we have to if we want to make up big ground."

The overtime victories against Detroit on Friday and Montreal on Saturday helped the Sabres move up. Extra sessions had been killing the Sabres' momentum, but they improved to 5-4-5 in games decided after regulation. The victories will give Buffalo a chance for its first three-game winning streak since Nov. 1.

Getting an early lead on the Predators will help. Nashville is the only NHL team without a regulation loss while scoring first. The Predators are 15-0-4 when making it 1-0.

Of course, scoring first hasn't been a recipe for success for the Sabres. They rank 25th with a 12-5-6 record when getting the first goal. Kane wants that to change.

"We're aggressive for the start, we grab a lead and we'll pull back the reins," Kane said. "I think that's a recipe for disaster. Recently we've been doing a good job of scoring first. That's relative to us having an aggressive mindset. I think that needs to continue throughout the game no matter if we're up by two, three, four, five."

An aggressive mindset from the defense is finally helping the Sabres. The unit has struggled for most of the season, but it earned deserved praise during the weekend.

Rasmus Ristolainen, Justin Falk, Zach Bogosian, Cody Franson and Taylor Fedun made up for the early departure of Jake McCabe on Friday. Against Montreal, Bogosian ended a 29-game scoring drought and Franson stopped a 25-game skid.

The Sabres have just seven goals from the blue-liners this season, but three have come in the last five games.

"It was nice to finally get one to go in," Franson said. "That obviously helps matters a little bit. It was a good job by our whole D corps.

"When you're able to execute your game plan, you're able to generate a little more. I think our game's become a little more solid because of it."

The group, which includes recall Casey Nelson, is expected to get a boost this week. Dmitry Kulikov practiced Monday for the first time in nearly a month. He hasn't played since Dec. 27 because of a back injury that has lingered since the preseason.

The full-contact workout in HarborCenter put him on the cusp of coming back.

"We'll see how he responds from that," Bylsma said, "but it bodes well for seeing him sometime this week."

Sabres Notebook: Parents join trip; Preds rolling

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. – When Tyler Ennis was a kid, youth tournaments were a family affair. While he'd get ready to play, his mom and dad would mingle with the other parents and swap stories.

His mom gets to do it on a grander scale this week.

The Sabres are holding their annual parents and mentors trip for Tuesday's game in Nashville and Thursday's game in Dallas. Players get to bring someone along to see what life is like on the road for the NHL players. Ennis is bringing his mother.

"She's liked the camaraderie of meeting other parents," Ennis said. "My parents were always social. They enjoyed tournaments when I was a kid. Hanging out with parents, they made a lot of friends that we still have today.

"It's also cool for her to see other cities. Nashville and Dallas are two cities where she's never been, so it's nice the Pegulas let us do this kind of thing. She's excited."

Ennis' mom and dad have alternated trips during his career. The parents usually go to lunch or dinner with their kids and sit in on team meetings.

"It's nice," Ennis said. "It's your parents, right? It's comfort. It's nice to maybe get your mind off what you're focused on every day, and that's hockey. Sometimes it's good for your mom to be there to talk about different things. It's the person you can relate most to in the world pretty much. It'll be good company."

While the trip has become a yearly event, it hasn't gotten old. That holds true even for parents who've long lived a hockey lifestyle. Sam Reinhart is bringing his mother, who married an NHL player and has two other sons playing professionally.

"She's looking forward to it, just to be with me," Reinhart said. "It's good for me to spend some time with her. She's familiar with the hockey lifestyle with my two brothers going through it, my dad going through it. She's pretty aware, but for her to experience what a road trip is like for us is new. She enjoyed it last year, so hopefully it's a good trip."

The Predators are home following a successful five-game road trip. They won four times to extend their hot streak to 6-1 in the last seven games.

Coach Peter Laviolette earned the 500th victory of his career Sunday with Nashville's 4-2 win in Minnesota. He became 25th coach to hit the milestone and joined Columbus' John Tortorella as the only Americans on the list.

Laviolette, who is in his third season with Nashville, has an overall record of 500-351-119 with the Predators, Philadelphia Flyers, Carolina Hurricanes and New York Islanders.

"He's been unbelievable," defenseman Matt Irwin told the Predators' website. "He's very structured, very motivational, gets the guys going before the games, and that's just a great accomplishment."

Nashville forward Filip Forsberg has 11 goals in the last 17 games.

Forty of the top youth players in Western New York and Southern Ontario will get to perform for scouts from the NCAA and United States Hockey League. The USHL and the Sabres have teamed up to announce the inaugural USHL Buffalo Showcase on March 23-25 in HarborCenter.

USHL Central Scouting will select the local players born in 2001, 2002 and 2003.

“One of the main pillars of our organization is the growth and development of local youth hockey players,” said Mike Gilbert, the Sabres’ vice president of administration and general manager of HarborCenter. “We take great pride in seeing local athletes advance their careers, and this is a perfect opportunity for us to allow players to showcase their talent to USHL and college teams.”

Sabres' Kulikov is almost ready to play

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 23, 2017

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- With games and mandatory days off, the Sabres haven't had too many team practices lately. With that in mind, Dmitry Kulikov has been practicing hard with rehab and development coach Dennis Miller.

Kulikov almost got a full practice in on Monday until he got hit in the mouth with a stick. Of course he was with the trainers and couldn't speak with us after practice so you won't see any quotes from him. Dan Bylsma offered, "He would've skated with us earlier if we had been home, so he's skated extremely hard for two days and had full contact, so we'll see how he responds from that, but it bodes well for seeing him some time this week." Bylsma said it's even possible he could play Tuesday in Nashville.

Jake McCabe has a shoulder injury and missed most of the Detroit game and the whole Montreal game. In his absence, Cody Franson has been playing his best hockey as a Sabre and the increased minutes has made Zach Bogosian play better just like it did when that happened last year. Bylsma was very proud of the way his D performed against the Canadiens, "I thought a lot of the guys stepped up, I thought it was Franson's best game of the year and I was really surprised to see how all our D executed with the puck and how they joined the play."

"We saw Taylor jumping up into the play, we saw Casey jumping up and supporting the rush, Zach joins the play in the overtime for the goal and I thought it was a really, really strong game from those six guys."

Buffalo only had one left handed shot defenseman dressed for Saturday's game in Justin Falk. Bylsma said that was a first for him, "It was an odd situation, one I've never seen with five righties out there. Talking with the guys about whether they've played the left and are comfortable on the left, not a lot of hands went up, so it's not that usual for righties to play the left side."

"I think Zach really likes playing on the left side and has enjoyed playing on the left side and I think he does a real good job of being an active defenseman."

Bogosian and Taylor Fedun joined Falk as the left defensemen.

I've always felt that when Bogosian plays more minutes, he feels more part of the team and plays much better. Against the Red Wings he played 29:51 and in Montreal it was 25:12. Bylsma said, "When we got down to short numbers on our bench, Zach ended up playing a lot more in the second and third periods against Detroit and you see him joining the play and you see that speed and energy and that was abundant in the Montreal game too."

Franson is a defenseman that has struggled since signing with Buffalo. He's had an opportunity to play a bunch of games with Bogosian and the pair is coming together. Franson agreed that Montreal was his best game, "I felt good, I've felt pretty good for a while now and it was nice to finally get one to go in, but I felt comfortable in the game and it was a good job from all our D."

Monday's pairings:

Falk Ristolainen
Bogosian Franson
Kulikov Fedun
Deslauriers Nelson

Depleted Sabres defense thrives

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 23, 2017

BUFFALO – In 25 years as a professional coach and player, coach Dan Bylsma said he had never seen it before. In Saturday's 3-2 overtime win in Montreal, the Sabres dressed five right-handed defensemen.

"Kind of an odd situation," Bylsma said Monday inside HarborCenter after the Sabres prepared for tonight's road tilt against the Nashville Predators.

Unlike other sports, lefties are more plentiful in hockey. According to the New York Daily News, a whopping 62 percent of skaters last season shot lefty (559).

The Sabres usually balance their pairs with a lefty and righty. But injuries to three lefties – Josh Gorges, Dmitry Kulikov and Jake McCabe – forced them to use the odd defense lineup against the Canadiens.

The only lefty was Justin Falk, the seventh defender on the depth chart.

"It was a really strong game from those six guys back there," Bylsma said.

Naturally, players are most comfortable staying on the side they shoot.

"Talking with the guys about whether they played the left or are comfortable on the left, not a lot of hands went up," Bylsma said.

Still, against the first-place Canadiens, the defense played aggressively, moving up and down the ice and scoring two goals in a game, incredibly, for the first time this season.

"I was really surprised to see, after the first 10 minutes of the game, how our D executed with the puck, how they joined the play," Bylsma said.

Sabres defenseman Cody Franson added: "It's a product of us really buying into what we set out to do. We've tried to keep our game plan simple, make ourselves a little bit more predictable in terms of our forwards knowing what we're going to do with the puck."

Defenseman Zach Bogosian played perhaps his best best game of 2016-17, scoring the overtime winner – his first goal this season – and skating 25 minutes, 12 seconds.

The speedy Massena native showcased his burst, a strong sign he has found a groove. He drew a first-period hooking penalty after pinching in and zooming to the net.

"You saw that the second half of the Detroit game (Friday) as well," Bylsma said. "When we got down to short numbers on our bench, Zach ended up playing a lot more in that second and third period against Detroit. You see that joining of the play, speed and energy he can play the game with."

Perhaps most impressively, Bogosian mostly played on the left side with Franson, who also scored.

"It takes a little while to get used to," Bogosian said. "But it has its pros and cons. Offensive zone, it's pretty fun. But neutral zone, it can be a little tricky. You're trying to find open guys. You're only facing one way. But it's a lot of fun to be able to play the left side and get more minutes."

With all the injuries recently, Bogosian's ice time has shot up. He played a season-high 29 minutes, 51 seconds in Friday's 3-2 overtime win against Detroit.

Clearly, Bogosian, who missed 20 games with a knee injury early this season, has looked more comfortable recently.

"I've been getting more minutes, more opportunities," Bogosian said. "That gets you in the game a little more. I've always tried to use the more minutes to create opportunities and be able to use my speed and that."

Bogosian or another righty might find himself back on his natural side tonight. Kulikov, out the last 12 games with a lower-back bruise, practiced Monday and could return this week, Bylsma said.

"See how he responds to that," Bylsma said. "But it bodes well for him seeing some time this week."

Kulikov, 26, has been dogged by the injury all season after getting knocked into an open bench door Sept. 30, his preseason debut.

The Russian has left the lineup three times. He has one assist in 20 appearances and has missed 26 games.

The Sabres also play Thursday in Dallas, their final game before the NHL All-Star break.

Kulikov skated beside Taylor Fedun on Monday.

Bylsma said Kulikov skated hard on his own over the weekend. Kulikov couldn't talk following practice because an errant stick hit him in the mouth.

If Kulikov returns, rookie Casey Nelson would likely sit out.

Sabres' Kulikov nearing return to injury-plagued blue line

By Matt Bove

WKBW

January 23, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - Injuries have been an obstacle for the Buffalo Sabres all season, but on Monday they finally got some good news. Dmitry Kulikov, who hasn't played in a game since December 27, returned to practice and could find the lineup sometime this week.

Kulikov's effectiveness will be the major question when he finally returns -- in 20 games this season the first year Sabre has only one assist and a -10 plus/minus rating. Kulikov has battled injuries almost all season, so it will be interesting to see how the 26-year-old defenseman performs this time around.

In his absence several Sabres defenders have been called upon -- and on Saturday they played arguably their best game as a unit, combining for two of Buffalo's three goals in a 3-2 overtime win against Montreal.

"It was a good job by our whole d-core," defenseman Cody Franson, one of Buffalo's goal scorers said Monday morning.

"I thought it was Franson's best game of the year with how he did play," head coach Dan Bylsma said. "He was playing the right side with Bogosian but I thought it was Franson's best game."

On Monday Franson and Bogosian practice together yet again. The other pairings during the morning skate were:

Dmitry Kulikov -- Taylor Fedun
Rasmus Ristolainen -- Justin Falk
Nicolas Deslauriers -- Casey Nelson

All the injuries have caused a lot of mixing and matching with the pairings, something Bylsma has never experienced.

"(It's) kind of an odd situation, one I've never seen having five righties out there... I thought a lot of guys stepped up."

Kulikov is a left handed shot, so his return will help balanced the pairings -- but if Zach Bogosian is asked to play on his off-side he'll make it work.

"Offensive zone it's pretty fun but in the neutral zone it can be a little tricky trying to find open guys," Bogosian said. "It's a lot of fun to be able to play the left side and get more minutes and play that way if that's the way it's going to be I'm happy with that."

Like Franson, Bogosian is coming off a very strong performance against Montreal. Bogosian scored his first goal of the season and logged more than 25 minutes of ice-time.

"Everybody I played with, mainly Bogo, but everybody I played with was great in that game," Franson added.

Once Kulikov is ready to go I'd imagine that Casey Nelson is sent back to Rochester. The Sabres are also still waiting on the return of Josh Gorges, who has yet to return to a full practice. Kulikov's status for Tuesday against Nashville is still uncertain, but Dan Bylsma said him making the trip is a positive sign.

Kulikov back at practice, may join lineup this week

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

January 23, 2017

Jake McCabe remained absent from practice at HarborCenter on Monday, but the Buffalo Sabres did get some help on the left side of their defense. Dmitry Kulikov returned as a full participant after missing the last 12 games - and 26 total - with an injury to his lower back.

Bylsma said that Kulikov will travel with the team for their two-game road trip in Nashville and Dallas.

"He would've skated with us earlier if we had been home on the Montreal day (Saturday) or Sunday," Bylsma said. "He skated extremely hard those two days at home and back into practice today, full contact, so we'll see how he responds to that but it bodes well for seeing him sometime this week."

Kulikov skated on a pair with Taylor Fedun, while Nicolas Deslauriers - a former defenseman - participated in line drills on a pair with Casey Nelson. Here's how the full lineup looked on Monday:

63 Tyler Ennis - 90 Ryan O'Reilly - 21 Kyle Okposo
82 Marcus Foligno - 15 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
9 Evander Kane - 28 Zemgus Girgensons - 12 Brian Gionta
48 William Carrier- 19 Cal O'Reilly - 26 Matt Moulson

41 Justin Falk - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
47 Zach Bogosian - 6 Cody Franson
77 Dmitry Kulikov - 38 Taylor Fedun
44 Nicolas Deslauriers - 34 Casey Nelson

40 Robin Lehner
31 Anders Nilsson

With McCabe, Kulikov and Josh Gorges out of the lineup on Saturday, the Sabres played with five right-shot defensemen in their lineup. That meant an increased role for players like Taylor Fedun, whom Brian Duff caught up with in Monday's Sabres in :90.

The Sabres have two games remaining prior to the All-Star break, with the first set for 8 p.m. in Nashville on Tuesday. Coverage begins with the Tops Pregame Show at 7:30 on MSG-B, or you can listen live on WGR 550.

A brief oral history of the Lehner save

You've seen the play. You've watched it once, twice, 10 times since Saturday night; you've seen the traditional angle, then you watched it from behind the net, then you watched it from within the net. But nobody experienced Robin Lehner's overtime save in Montreal quite like Evander Kane and Rasmus Ristolainen, which is reason enough to revisit it one more time.

So, without further ado, here's a mini oral history of the save that made Rick Jeanneret proclaim he'd finally seen everything and the save from Carey Price that preceded it:

After tying the game at 2-2 with less than 10 minutes remaining in the third period, the Sabres found themselves in the offensive zone in the dwindling seconds of regulation. Jack Eichel, falling to the ice near the corner, slapped a one-handed pass to Kyle Okposo, who pushed the puck across to Rasmus Ristolainen.

Ristolainen took his shot alone from the right of the net with 6.6 seconds remaining, but Montreal's Carey Price reached up high with his glove and snagged the shot from point-blank range. Instead of a Sabres victory, the game went to overtime.

Ristolainen: If you ask him, he'd probably say he saw me kind of looking glove side, I kind of gave it [away] and he knew the whole time I was going there. Gotta make a better play there and score.

Bylsma: The great glove save by Price was pretty amazing. I've seen the replay from behind. It looked like he reached up high Risto made a good shot, he makes an awesome glove save. The fans responded like I've never seen, I think, on a save from a goaltender.

Ristolainen was one of three players on the ice to begin overtime, and the Sabres quickly got pinned in their own zone. The Canadiens maintained possession while executing a change, and Alexander Radulov carried the puck into the slot before passing back to Alex Galchenyuk.

Ristolainen: We had a long shift there. They got new guys there and Radulov came with pretty fresh legs, kind of dangled. I went to the other side, tried to follow him. He made a pretty nice pass to the middle.

Lehner: Radulov did it twice to me ... came across to center ice and kept me going with him and passed it back against the grain. He's a very good player. I was just fortunate I got back.

Galchenyuk took his shot, seemingly into an empty net, with 3:31 remaining in the overtime period. Lehner had trailed Radulov a bit, but was able to dive to his left and make the glove save.

Evander Kane, attempting to block Galchenyuk's shot, was directly in front of the Sabre goaltender.

Kane: As you probably saw on my Instagram post my eyes were closed, so I didn't see much. I kind of just saw the puck go back towards the slot there. I saw they had a guy there. I tried to get in the way of it but I didn't feel it hit me, so I was kind of surprised.

When their horn wasn't going off, I was kind of surprised too. I looked back and saw Lenny lying there with his glove stretched above his head. He said, 'I got it.' I think he was a little surprised and so was I.

Bylsma: We had four guys on the bench that were like aghast, clamoring and cheering him on. I saw the same thing from Price's save. Their bench was the same way when he made that save at the end of the game.

Ristolainen: I didn't see it, I was looking at Radulov. I didn't know what happened behind me. I was actually pretty gassed there so I just tried to find my way to the bench.

After the save, the noise in the Montreal crowd didn't dissipate.

Bylsma: I think the fans half-cheered for a goal. It was almost like it was in the back of the net and almost turned into a gasp of "He actually got his glove on it and made the save." I thought the fans actually gave him a little cheer for how awesome the glove save was.

Nineteen seconds after Lehner's save, Zach Bogosian blew a slap shot past Price for the overtime winner.

Lehner: That is a great feeling. I really wanted to have a bounce-back game ... We go into this building and we go into overtime and we win it. That's a great feeling.