



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Sabres aim to continue push vs. Blues

Associated Press

February 17, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- With their offense clicking, the Buffalo Sabres have a daunting task this weekend as they look to continue their late-season playoff push.

The Sabres have back-to-back home games with a matinee against the St. Louis Blues (1 p.m., Saturday) before a Sunday evening matchup against the Chicago Blackhawks.

Before Buffalo can get to the Blackhawks -- who are on a five-game winning streak -- they have to deal with the Blues, who are on a six-game winning streak of their own.

St. Louis (31-22-5) has turned it around since Mike Yeo took over as head coach on Feb. 1, going 7-1 since Yeo's arrival. The Blues went on the road and won every game in a five-game road trip before a 4-3 win over Vancouver on Thursday at home.

St. Louis' recent surge has the Blues sitting comfortable in third place in the Central Division, five points ahead of Nashville.

"I think that the mentality that we've had day in and day out -- we come to the rink, we try to get better," Yeo said. "Whatever the result was the day before, if we win, we lose, we want to come back the next day and we want to start preparing. We want to start getting ready for the next one and when you do that, more often than not you're ready to go.

"The biggest part of that challenge is that we don't start feeling too good about ourselves, about what we've done, and that we recognize all the little things -- whether it's the blocked shots, the sacrifice and the commitment to the game that we're playing. That's why we're having success."

Vladimir Tarasenko leads the Blues in points with 55 (27 goals, 28 assists) and is tied for 10th in the league in scoring. Kevin Shattenkirk is second on the team with 42 points (11 goals, 31 assists). Goaltending has been an issue for the Blues throughout this season, with Jake Allen (.903 save percentage) and Carter Hutton (.907 save percentage) taking turns between the pipes.

The Sabres (25-23-10) are riding a two-game win streak for the first time this month following a 3-2 win over Ottawa on Tuesday and a 2-0 win over the Colorado Avalanche on Thursday. Evander Kane has five goals in his last five games and scored a pivotal goal with 4:14 remaining to keep the Sabres on top of the Avalanche.

The Sabres, three points out of the final wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference, have played two more games than the final team, Toronto.

"We need to go back-to-back-to-back-to-back-to-back-to-back," Kane said of the Sabres' current playoff chances. "That's where we're at right now in terms of this point in the season. You've got two tough teams coming to our building to cap it off before the break and we have to have both of those games."

Robin Lehner has been tremendous in net for Sabres in recent games. Lehner has a save percentage of .926 and a goals-against average of 2.49 on the season.

Sabres' Rodrigues performing well on center stage

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

February 17, 2017

Rochester Americans coach Dan Lambert did not find many centers when he looked at his roster at the start of training camp.

That has worked out very well for Evan Rodrigues.

The former winger has found a home in the middle. With Buffalo also thin at center, Rodrigues will play his fifth straight NHL game Saturday when St. Louis visits KeyBank Center.

"It's been a nice thing to see Evan being able to step in there and do good things," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said Friday. "I don't want to say I'm surprised, but great intelligence, some good hockey smarts and sense on both sides of the puck, in particular defensively."

Rodrigues has embraced the role formerly held by injured Johan Larsson. Skating between captain Brian Gionta and left wing Marcus Foligno, the 23-year-old has put up two assists, six shots and an even rating.

"I feel like I'm playing well," Rodrigues said in HarborCenter. "I'm having some fun, and I'm just enjoying the moment."

The moment came because of the position switch. Rodrigues entered the year bunched up with fellow wingers Justin Bailey, Nick Baptiste, William Carrier, Hudson Fasching, Cole Schneider and Alex Nylander. His competition for NHL playing time in the middle is Cal O'Reilly, Jean Dupuy and Dan Catenacci.

O'Reilly failed to produce during his last recall, so the Sabres tapped Rodrigues when Zemgus Girgensons went down. That early season conversation with Lambert was a good one.

"He said that he wanted to try me at center and thinks I have the ability," Rodrigues said. "The first 10 games or so I played center every game, then from there on out I've been going back and forth a little bit. Having that versatility has helped me out."

On a team that regularly gets outshot by large margins, Rodrigues has found success keeping the puck out his zone. He had a team-best Corsi of 68.18 percent Thursday during a 2-0 win over Colorado, with Buffalo attempting 15 shots while Rodrigues was on the ice and giving up only seven.

He was at 64.71 percent Sunday against Vancouver and 36.36 percent last Saturday against Toronto, which sounds bad but was actually seventh on the team. He struggled Tuesday against Ottawa at 21.74 percent.

"The intelligence that Evan has been able to bring to the line has made it a good solid defensive line with Marcus and with Brian," Bylsma said. "One of the keys to us playing well defensively is not spending time in the defensive zone and being able to break the puck out, support the puck out of the zone. Evan has done that tremendously well."

The rookie credits his wingers, who have been linemates for the better part of two seasons.

"It makes me feel a little bit more comfortable and confident," Rodrigues said. "Those two play really well down low, and they both know where each other's going to be for the most part. I try to give them some space and try to find open areas so they can find me when they get a chance. I think we've been playing pretty well."

"We're not trying to be too fancy. We're hitting the blue line, getting pucks in when we don't have anything. When we have a chance to make a play, I think we're making it. We're getting a lot of pucks to the net and we're getting some chances."

As expected for a first-year center, Rodrigues has room to grow on faceoffs. He's won just 36.8 percent, so he spent time working with team-leader Ryan O'Reilly on Friday.

"Obviously, he's really good at them, so taking draws with him is going to help me out a ton," Rodrigues said. "I'm just trying to take any little tips that the guys can give me and just continue to improve."

Rodrigues, who has appeared in eight NHL games over two seasons, skated a career-high 15:47 last game because fourth-line center Derek Grant left with a shoulder injury. Grant will miss this weekend's home games against the Blues and Chicago Blackhawks, so Nicolas Deslauriers will return to center.

Bylsma plans to give more ice time to O'Reilly, Jack Eichel and Rodrigues. The rookie has been earning the minutes.

Said Bylsma: "We've seen flashes of good offensive play from him with keeping in mind the good play on the other side of the puck."

Sabres Notebook: Streaks collide; Lehner hot; injuries

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

February 17, 2017

The Sabres are nearing the end of a ridiculous run of games. They certainly can't exhale yet.

Buffalo will close a stretch of 11 games in 18 days with back-to-back home games. St. Louis will visit KeyBank Center at 1 p.m. Saturday, while the Chicago Blackhawks come to town at 6 p.m. Sunday.

They're a combined 11-0 in the past 11 games.

The Sabres, meanwhile, have won two straight and three of four. They've inched within three points of a wild-card spot.

A pair of losses would mean more than a slip down the standings. Buffalo begins its bye week Monday, then plays three games leading into the March 1 trade deadline. General Manager Tim Murray can make deals during the bye.

"The next two games are going to dictate a lot where we're going to go the next 25, so it's a big couple games," right wing Kyle Okposo said Friday.

The Sabres have yet to string together a long winning streak this season. They know time is running out.

"For a long period of time we've been on a bit of a roller coaster with one up and one down, the highs of winning and the lows of tough losses," coach Dan Bylsma said in HarborCenter. "Now we're looking at a stretch of winning three of our last four and putting back-to-back wins together. It's critical and important games for us as we go into the break."

It wouldn't be a shock to see Robin Lehner start both games this weekend. The goaltender has skated to the Buffalo crease five straight times. He's started nine of 10 and 11 of the last 13.

He's also done well. Since Jan. 21, Lehner is 6-4-1 with a .937 save percentage and two shutouts.

While Anders Nilsson may get the call against the Blues or Blackhawks, Bylsma could rely on Lehner with the knowledge that five days of rest awaits.

"We've had a chance to kind of give Robin the net a little bit more in the last two weeks," Bylsma said. "He's handled it really well. He's gotten better and better really over the last few games. He's been in control, controlled more rebounds and been in control in those tight-in situations.

"We're going to keep riding that guy going forward. Every one of these games is a huge game for us. We're going to see Robin in there quite a bit."

Since delivering a harsh assessment of the Sabres following Sunday's loss to Vancouver, Lehner is 2-0 with a .969 save percentage and 1.00 goals-against average.

"He's played well since he came out and said that, and it's definitely good to see," Okposo said.

When Cody Franson blocked a shot off his foot Feb. 9, he figured he was done for at least a month. The Sabres defenseman is back in just more than a week. Franson practiced fully Friday and is ready to return after missing four games.

"Initially, it sounded like it was going to be four to six weeks, then after the CT scan they thought they could probably shave it down to two or three," Franson said. "We made it almost seven days. I feel good and ready to go."

"They said it was a weight-bearing area, but as soon as I could handle the pain I could play. We started putting a program together for it, and fortunately my foot responded well."

Left wing Evander Kane (illness) and defenseman Dmitry Kulikov (maintenance) didn't practice but are expected to play. Center Zemgus Girgensons (full body), left wing William Carrier (knee) and center Derek Grant (shoulder) are out.

Grant, hurt during Thursday's 2-0 win over Colorado, received a position evaluation.

"He's unlikely at this point in time for the weekend but is feeling a lot better from where he was," Bylsma said. "Zemgus has skated the last couple days but not able to return to contact. That will probably last through the break. Hopefully, after the break we should be able to see him."

Sabres' Moulson looking for more ice-time

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 17, 2017

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- Despite scoring 12 goals in 58 games, it has not been an easy season for Matt Moulson. The winger is on a pace for 17 goals, but nine of his 12 goals this season have come on the power play.

Buffalo has the number one power play in the NHL, but it's close to the bottom of the league in 5-on-5 goals. Moulson started the season in the top six forwards, but for the past few months, he's played mostly on the 4th line averaging just 11:37 per game.

Moulson spent the summer getting himself in great shape and of course, he's disappointed he doesn't play more, "It's tough, you want to be out there contributing, so we have to mentally be ready to go at any point."

Inside a game Moulson might play with seven or eight of the 11 forwards. He said at times he can roll with it, "It depends, we have a lot of good players on this team so it's easy to play with the guys out there, but when you get out there, there are different situations and it's easier to play with different guys, so just mentally I have to be ready to go whenever it's my turn to go."

"I still know I can be successful in this league so I keep working at it, it's not something you just do over the summer, its consistent day in and day out of working and trying to get better each day on the ice and off the ice."

One thing I've noticed this season is Moulson is always staying late after practice working on his game with Ryan O'Reilly. Some of the younger players have abandoned the O'Reilly practice, but Moulson keeps working at his game.

I have seen an attitude change from the players the past two games. After both wins, each player on the postgame show has said it means nothing unless they win the next game and the one after that. Moulson said they sat down as a team and did some soul searching, "I think earlier on, even maybe a month ago we were maybe getting too high after a win or too low after a loss rather than just taking it game by game."

"A win really doesn't mean anything unless you win the next one or win the next one after that, so we know we have to put together a string of wins to get to that playoff mark and I think that's where we're at right now saying, 'OK, it's great we won, but we're moving on to the next one!'"

Buffalo has won two in a row and four out of six games. In 2017 they're 12-8-2 which is a point percentage of .591. A 94 point pace is a point percentage of .573.

The Sabres enter Friday three points behind Toronto for the East's final Wild Card position. They're four in back of Boston for third place in the Atlantic Division, but don't forget, the bye week starts on Monday and Buffalo will not play for five days while other teams are picking up points.

At 58 games, the Sabres have played the most games in the Eastern Conference along with the Bruins, Canadiens and Flyers.

Cody Franson said he's way ahead of schedule with his ankle injury and has been cleared to play. Dan Bylsma said, "He's had three good days of practice, so we should see him on the weekend."

Missing from the short practice at HarborCenter on Friday were Derek Grant, Evander Kane, Will Carrier, Zemgus Girgensons and Dmitry Kulikov. Bylsma said Kane had low energy from being sick, but is ok.

As far as Grant goes, Bylsma said the news is good, "Grant had a shoulder evaluation which was a good one. He still has some strength issues there and is unlikely for the weekend."

Kulikov got a maintenance day to rest and Girgensons has skated the past few days, but is not able to return to contact which will last through the break.

Bylsma said Carrier skated Friday morning, but is still dealing with the bone bruise.

St. Louis is in Saturday for a 1:05 faceoff. Join Pat Malacaro for the pregame starting at noon when he'll be joined by Dan Bylsma, Matt Moulson and Cody Franson.

Dreger: Kane's return value might be as good as it gets

By Brayton Wilson

WGR 550

February 17, 2017

With the NHL Trade Deadline rapidly approaching, the rumors and speculations surrounding teams looking to sell off assets will continue to sky-rocket.

The Buffalo Sabres currently sit just three points out of a playoff spot with games on Saturday and Sunday before taking their scheduled five-day bye week. With 24 games left to play, it is unclear whether or not general manager Tim Murray will want to buy or sell before the March 1 deadline at 3 p.m.

One player who could be traded by the deadline is Sabres forward Evander Kane. In 46 games this season, Kane has scored a team-high 19 goals and has registered 29 points since suffering four cracked ribs in the season opener on October 13. Kane is currently in the fifth year of a six-year deal that will pay him an average annual salary of \$5.25 million.

The rumors have been swirling around Kane all season long, and it is expected to continue up until the deadline has passed. TSN's Darren Dreger knows a number of teams who are looking to make an upgrade at forward, especially for a playoff run this season.

"There are a number of teams who absolutely are looking for an upgrade up front and somebody they can inject into their top-six," Dreger said with Andrew Peters and Martin Biron on The Instigators on Friday. "There are lots of teams most definitely looking for a top-six player. Evander Kane, when healthy and motivated which he appears to be on both fronts, he can be an impact guy."

Since being acquired from the Winnipeg Jets over two years ago, Kane has scored 38 goals in 110 games but has dealt with injuries that has caused him to miss 58 games with the Sabres.

Kane has also dealt with some off ice issues with law enforcement, which has seen him under investigation twice by Buffalo police. Kane was charged with harassment and criminal trespass after an incident this past June, but his case will be dismissed as long as he stays out of trouble with the law.

While Kane has remained healthy and in goodwill with law enforcement, his play on the ice has arguably been at its best since his arrival in Buffalo. With his elevated play, the price tag on Kane could continue to rise if Murray is fielding trade offers. On the flip side, if Kane continues to excel at the pace he is at, it may make it more enticing for Murray to keep Kane in house.

"From Murray's perspective in Buffalo, you have to wonder if he's not a little bit worried," Dreger said. "If he can look into the crystal ball and see that for the next couple of seasons Evander Kane was going to remain healthy and remain as dominate of a player as he can be, why would you consider trading him? You don't know that. So what you have to do then is balance what the return might be based on how the way he is playing right now. A return might be as great as it's ever going to be. So do you maximize the asset via trade now, or do you hope that he continues to play as well as he's playing for the length of his term in Buffalo?"

Earlier in the season, it had been reported that the Sabres and Vancouver Canucks had trade discussions surrounding Kane. While no structured deals were ever reported, the asking price for Kane was speculated to be very high.

"When those rumors first started circulating, I checked with both general managers and both acknowledged that it was nothing more than tire kicking," Dreger said. "I don't even know that they got down to the point of swapping names... It happened earlier in the season, so you would assume that Murray was big-game hunting. I don't even want to speculate some of the names that might have been included coming out of Vancouver. They were probably players that Jim Benning wouldn't consider trading."

Sabres goalie Robin Lehner thriving with heavy workload

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 17, 2017

BUFFALO – Fresh off a shutout victory, Sabres goalie Robin Lehner will start again this afternoon, his sixth straight nod and 10th in the last 11 games, the NHL's heaviest workload of late.

At his current pace, Lehner would play 56 times this season. Today's tilt against the scorching St. Louis Blues at KeyBank Center will be his 41st game this season, breaking a professional high he set five years ago in the AHL.

"We're going to keep riding that guy as we go forward," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said Friday inside HarborCenter. "Every one of these games is a huge game for us. We're going to see Robin in there quite a bit."

A Sabres goalie hasn't hit the 50-game mark since Ryan Miller played 61 times in 2011-12.

"I can play a lot," Lehner said. "I think my style allows it."

The frequency of Lehner's action has helped the Swede, 25, find a groove and enjoy a rhythm he has only occasionally felt in the NHL.

"The more you play, the more into it you get," Lehner said. "You see the puck better. You take a lot of thought out of the game. When you don't play regularly, you might overthink things and hesitate a little bit. When you play a lot, you kind of just get into a flow and keep doing the things you're doing."

Quietly, Lehner, who was often outplayed by backup Anders Nilsson earlier this season, has transformed into one of the NHL's best netminders in recent weeks.

His .926 save percentage ranked sixth entering Friday's games. Since Jan. 24, Lehner has started 11 of the Sabres' 13 games. His numbers over that span – 6-4-1 with a 2.35 goals-against average and a .937 save percentage – are some of the league's best.

Lehner also has the most saves – a whopping 388 – in that stretch. The next-closest goalie, Arizona's Mike Smith, has 323. No one else has more than 287.

"It's what you want to do," Lehner said. "I want to be a starter and I want to be a part of carrying this team. Just going night after night, you kind of forget the last one and just go on to the new one. I feel like I've been playing good, playing pretty solid all year."

Given Lehner's recent run, don't be surprised if he starts again Sunday at home against Chicago, the Sabres' final contest before their bye week. Lehner has started two back-to-back sets in the last month.

"We've had a chance to kind of give Robin the net here the last two weeks," Bylsma said. "We had a back-to-back in there, he's handled it really, really well. I think he's gotten better and better really over the last few games ... been in control."

Lehner has performed splendidly in the last two games, stopping 62 of 64 shots. After making 39 saves in Tuesday's 3-2 win in Ottawa, he stopped 23 shots in Thursday's 2-0 win against Colorado, his second shutout in seven outings.

Remember, after Lehner passionately called out his teammates following Sunday's 4-2 loss to Vancouver, he threw himself into the mix, saying he, like everyone else, had to be better.

"He's an emotional guy," Sabres winger Kyle Okposo said. "He's played extremely well for us this year. We talked in the locker room. He talked among us as players. He's played well ... since he came out and said that."

Of course, Lehner played well last year, his first with the Sabres. But a high ankle sprain he suffered opening night cost him three months and eventually forced him to undergo season-ending surgery.

He spent the summer training in Buffalo and shed about 40 pounds. That work – Lehner couldn't really exercise the previous offseason as he recovered from a concussion – is paying off now, he said.

"It was more just a thing for the team to see I am committed," Lehner said. "You know what? I have a special style as a goaltender. I'm very energy efficient on the ice. I said it before and I'll say it again, my weight, my physique – whatever – I can play with both, because the biggest part of my game is my brain.

"It's reading plays, being in position and using my reflexes. I don't move that much on the ice. I have strong legs ... to move across. I'm competitive. I know I can play at this level."

Sabres' Cody Franson ready to play; Derek Grant out

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 17, 2017

BUFFALO – Some quick updates from HarborCenter, where the Sabres practiced briefly today following Thursday's 2-0 win over Colorado:

– Defenseman Cody Franson, out the last four games with a bruised left foot, pronounced himself ready to play after practicing again today, his third straight day on the ice.

"It was supposed to be a two- to three-week thing, and I think we made it almost seven days," Franson said. "I feel good and ready to go."

The Sabres host St. Louis on Saturday afternoon and Chicago on Sunday.

"We should see him on the weekend," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said.

– Center Derek Grant, who injured his shoulder late in the first period Thursday, "had a decent amount of good news from his evaluation today," Bylsma said.

Still, Grant has some weakness and is likely out this weekend, Bylsma said.

Instead of recalling a center, the Sabres will likely use winger Nick Deslauriers as their fourth-line pivot, something they tried earlier this month.

– Bylsma said winger Evander Kane and defenseman Dmitry Kulikov had maintenance days today.

– Injured forwards William Carrier (bone bruise) and Zemgus Girgensons (middle body) skated on their own today. Neither has been cleared for contact.

– Goalie Robin Lehner said he will start Saturday, his sixth straight nod.

Sabres look to avoid emotional attachment to wins and losses

By Tom Martin

WIVB

February 17, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – The Sabres practiced at HarborCenter on Friday afternoon, following a win over the Colorado Avalanche that came on Thursday night. After a rough week of winning and losing games last week, the Sabres won two in-a-row this week and have an opportunity to win two more this weekend when they welcome the St. Louis Blues and Chicago Blackhawks. It goes without saying but getting off the emotional roller coaster is very important for the blue and gold moving forward.

“Our focus is one game at a time here four times in a row for the last four,” head coach Dan Bylsma said. “It is a big win for us to put two together but at the same time we need to have an even keel about us going into playing St. Louis.”

“It is a long season and there are going to be some ups and downs and you have to try and keep your emotions in check,” winger Kyle Okposo said. “You can’t get too high when you win a couple games and when you lose you can’t get too low you have to try and maintain and bring your best every night. But, at the same times we have to realize the opportunity we have in front of us and do our best.”

“With a loss we get real low and with a high we get real high,” defenseman Cody Franson added. “I think if you watch the good teams they are able to manage those things and make it a small wave issue. It was more of a roller coaster for us, the high peaks and low valleys. That is not what we are focusing on right now, we are focusing on the game in front of us.”

Evander Kane did not practice with the team on Friday — he is battling an illness and was given a day of rest. Cody Franson, who has missed time with a foot injury, has been medically cleared and said he will be ready to play this weekend.

Sabres Host Blues, Blackhawks This Weekend

WGRZ

February 17, 2017

BUFFALO, NY- Its a huge weekend for the Sabres as they play host to the St. Louis Blues and Chicago Blackhawks this weekend.

The Sabres are tied with Florida with 60 points, that's 3 points behind Toronto as the Maple Leafs currently hold down the final wild card playoff spot.

Sabres All Star forward Kyle Okposo knows his team has to find the consistency they've been searching for all season. "I think it's something we have to learn how to do over time. It's a long season.... There's going to be some ups and downs... and you have to keep your emotions in check. If you win a couple of games you can't get too high... If you lose a couple of games you can't get too low. You have to try to maintain be at your best every night. "

St. Louis has been hot since firing head coach Ken Hitchcock and replacing him with Mike Yeo. The Blues are on a 6 game winning streak and are 7-1-0 with Yeo behind the bench. Face off Saturday afternoon is scheduled for 1-pm.

Sunday evening the Chicago Blackhawks and South Buffalo's Patrick Kane make their annual appearance at the KeyBank Center. The Blackhawks return from their bye week with a home game Saturday night against Edmonton then travel to Buffalo for Sunday's game which is scheduled to face off at 6-p.

Preview: Blues at Sabres

By Joe Yerdon

NHL.com

February 17, 2017

BLUES (31-22-5) at SABRES (25-23-10)

1 p.m. ET; MSG-B, FS-MW, NHL.TV

Blues team scope

The St. Louis Blues will have center Kyle Brodziak back in their lineup when they look to win their seventh straight game. Brodziak was expected to miss five weeks with a right-foot injury he sustained Jan. 24 against the Pittsburgh Penguins, but he was activated off injured reserve Friday and will play. "It's obviously been frustrating being out and not being able to contribute," Brodziak told the Blues website Friday. "But [rehabbing] the injury went well and I just had to take some time to let the bone heal. It feels good now." To make room for Brodziak, the Blues sent forward Wade Megan to Chicago of the American Hockey League. Center Paul Stastny (lower body) traveled to Buffalo, but his status won't be known until Saturday morning. He's missed three games. Goaltender Jake Allen is likely to start. He made 18 saves in a 4-3 win against the Vancouver Canucks on Thursday and is 4-0-0 with six goals-against and one shutout in his past four starts. The Blues are 7-1-0 since coach Mike Yeo took over for Ken Hitchcock, who was fired Feb. 1.

Sabres team scope

The Buffalo Sabres will look to win a third straight game for the first time since they did it Jan. 20-24. Before they defeated the Colorado Avalanche 2-0 on Thursday for their second straight win, the Sabres alternated wins and losses for eight consecutive games. "For a long period of time we've been on a roller coaster of being one up and one down and the highs of winning and the lows of tough losses," coach Dan Bylsma said. "Our approach here is one game at a time here four times in a row here in the last four (before a five-day break starting Monday). It's a big win for us to put two in a row together, but at the same time we need to have an even keel about us going in and playing St. Louis." Defenseman Cody Franson, who sustained a foot injury blocking a shot on Feb. 9 against the Anaheim Ducks, practiced Friday and said he was cleared by doctors and could be available to play Saturday. "Initially [the doctors] thought it was going to be 4-6 [weeks] and then after the CT [scan] they thought they could probably shave it down to two or three," Franson said. "They said it was in a weight-bearing area, but as soon as I could handle the pain I could play." Bylsma did not specify whether Robin Lehner or Anders Nilsson would be the starting goaltender. Lehner is coming off a 23-save shutout against the Avalanche and has started the past five games and nine of the past 10.

Blues projected lineup

Alexander Steen -- Jori Lehtera -- Vladimir Tarasenko

Jaden Schwartz -- Patrik Berglund -- David Perron

Kenny Agostino -- Ivan Barbashev -- Magnus Paajarvi

Scottie Upshall -- Kyle Brodziak -- Ryan Reaves

Jay Bouwmeester -- Alex Pietrangelo

Carl Gunnarsson -- Kevin Shattenkirk

Joel Edmundson -- Colton Parayko

Jake Allen

Carter Hutton

Scratched: Robert Bortuzzo, Nail Yakupov, Dmitrij Jaskin

Injured: Paul Stastny (lower body), Robby Fabbri (knee)

Sabres projected lineup

Justin Bailey -- Ryan O'Reilly -- Kyle Okposo

Evander Kane -- Jack Eichel -- Sam Reinhart

Marcus Foligno -- Evan Rodrigues -- Brian Gionta

Matt Moulson -- Nicolas Deslauriers -- Tyler Ennis

Jake McCabe -- Rasmus Ristolainen

Dmitry Kulikov -- Zach Bogosian

Josh Gorges -- Cody Franson

Anders Nilsson

Robin Lehner

Scratched: Taylor Fedun, Justin Falk

Injured: Derek Grant (shoulder), Zemgus Girgensons (mid-body), William Carrier (knee), Johan Larsson (wrist)

Status report

Kane and Kulikov did not practice Friday. Kane got the day off to rest after he returned Thursday after missing the game Tuesday against the Ottawa Senators with an illness. It was a maintenance day for Kulikov.

Who's hot

Berglund has five goals in the past five games. ... Kane has 12 points (seven goals, five assists) in his past 12 games. ... Eichel has one goal and nine assists in the past eight games.

Blues-Sabres preview

By Tom Timmermann
St. Louis Post-Dispatch
February 17, 2017

BLUES AT SABRES

When • Noon Saturday

Where • KeyBank Center, Buffalo, N.Y.

TV, radio • Fox Sports Midwest, KMOX (1120 AM)

Blues • The Blues beat the Sabres 4-1 at Scottrade Center on Nov. 15, breaking open a 1-1 game with goals early in the third period by Jaden Schwartz and Kyle Brodziak. ... The Blues have killed 21 consecutive power plays. ... The Blues are 7-0-1 with Magnus Paajarvi in the lineup this season. ... Mike Yeo's 7-1 record is the best eight-game mark for a coach in franchise history. ... The Blues haven't lost in Buffalo since the 2008-09 season.

Sabres • Buffalo has won two in a row and this is the start of back-to-back games against the Blues and Blackhawks, which could mean the Blues see former teammate Anders Nilsson in goal. The Sabres are in sixth place in the Atlantic Division with 60 points but are four points out of a wild-card spot in the tightly packed East. ... The Sabres have the league's best power play at 23.3 percent, and it's 26.1 percent at home. Their penalty-killing, though, is 29th at 74.3 percent. ... Kyle Okposo leads the team in scoring with 38 points (18 goals, 20 assists).

Injuries • Blues — C Paul Stastny (lower body), doubtful; F Robby Fabbri (knee), out. Sabres — F Derek Grant (shoulder), F Zemgus Girgensons (middle body) and F Johan Larsson (wrist), out; D Cody Franson (foot) and F William Carrier (knee), day-to-day.

Rodrigues excelling at center between Foligno, Gionta

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

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Evan Rodrigues said at the outset of training camp that he truly believed he could play in Buffalo. An entire season spent in Rochester as a first-year pro in 2015-16, followed by two NHL games in which he scored a goal and an assist to end last season, had proven that to him.

Now, in the midst of his third recall of his second season, Rodrigues might just be proving it to others, too.

The undrafted forward out of Boston University has played in four games since being recalled from Rochester on Feb. 11, culminating in a career high 15:47 of ice time in Buffalo's 2-0 win over Colorado on Thursday. He has two assists in that stretch.

What's more is that Rodrigues has been playing center after spending his college career and his rookie season on the wing. With depth at the position lacking in Rochester, coach Dan Lambert saw the ability to play the position in Rodrigues and put him there to begin the season.

It turned out that Lambert had some foresight. Four months later, Rodrigues is playing center at a high level on a line with Marcus Foligno and Brian Gionta.

"I don't want to say I'm surprised, but great intelligence, some good hockey smarts and sense on both sides of the puck, in particular defensively," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said when asked what he's seen from Rodrigues during this stretch. "Positionally, when he gets the puck coming out of D-zone and puck retrievals, he's made real intelligent and smart plays."

Bylsma joked that he wanted to put Rodrigues in a No. 22 sweater when he first placed him on the line with Foligno and Gionta, alluding to the very successful trio that those wingers had formed with center Johan Larsson during the second half of last season and the first two months of this one. The line was broken up when Larsson went down with a dislocated elbow and wrist at the end of December.

What made that line effective was its simplicity. The trio would matchup with opponent's top lines and beat them simply by possessing the puck in the offensive zone, beginning often with a chip over the blue line followed by battles along the boards and down low, with each forward constantly supporting one another.

With Rodrigues now in the middle, he's trying to bring that same element. He said Foligno and Gionta's comfort with one another helps with his confidence on the ice; he simply tries to make the smart play and find open space for them to get him the puck.

"I think that's what's helping us out a ton," Rodrigues said. "We're not trying to be too fancy. We're hitting the blue line, chipping pucks in if we don't have anything and if we have a chance to make a play I think we're making it. We're getting a lot of pucks to the net and we're getting some chances."

Rodrigues has contributed his fair share on the forecheck as well. His line was responsible for some of Buffalo's best shifts on Thursday, including one in the first period that saw Rodrigues twice bounce off defenders while maintaining puck control during a long offensive-zone stay in which he nearly set up Gionta for a goal at the net front and twice got the puck out high to create shots attempts for his defensemen.

"Guys seem to go and try to hit him and he kind of bounces off and keeps going," Foligno said. "As a centerman, he tries to keep his momentum going up ice and he's been playing great for us."

Ask Bylsma about Rodrigues, and he quickly points to his play in the defensive zone. At the center position, Rodrigues is responsible for playing down low and executing clean breakouts, something he did well on Thursday even when under pressure. He's also done well to support his wingers in advancing the puck up through the neutral zone,

Meanwhile, he's been working hard to improve on his faceoffs, working with well-established guys like Ryan O'Reilly and Derek Grant after recent practices. Bylsma used him in the faceoff circle in all situations on Thursday, and the team had him at 50 percent on the night.

"I think the intelligence that Evan has been able to bring to the line has made it a good, solid, defensive line with Marcus and with Brian there on the right side," Bylsma said. "One of the keys to us playing well defensively is not spending a lot of time in the defensive zone and being able to break the puck out and support the puck out of the zone and Evan's done that tremendously well."

"You can see it last year at camp and what not, that he had potential," Gionta added. "But he seems to have really taken off and feels comfortable out there with himself and knows that he belongs."

How long Rodrigues sticks with Foligno and Gionta remains to be seen. Zemgus Girgensons is expected to return from injury at some point after Buffalo's bye week, and he too has done well in the role of checking centerman.

For the time being, Rodrigues is happy to continue to prove himself.

"I feel like I'm playing well," he said. "I'm having some fun and just enjoying the moment."

Friday's practice

Grant did not practice after leaving the game on Thursday with a shoulder injury in the first period, but Bylsma said that evaluations on him have been positive. Still, the coach said not to expect to see Grant in the lineup in either of Buffalo's games this weekend.

Evander Kane and Dmitry Kulikov were both also absent from practice. Kane is still recovering from an illness despite playing on Thursday, while Kulikov sat out for a maintenance day. Both should be ready to play against St. Louis on Saturday afternoon.

In Kulikov's absence, Cody Franson stepped in and skated on a pair with Josh Gorges. It was Franson's second time skating with the team and third time skating overall since sustaining a foot injury that has cost him the last four games. He said afterward that he feels ready to return to the lineup on Saturday.

"I'll have a meeting with him after practice here and we'll see how that goes," Bylsma said. "He's obviously had three good days of practice and that's a good thing. We should see him on the weekend here."

Girgensons (middle body) skated on his own again on Friday, but still has not been cleared for contact. William Carrier (knee) also skated prior to practice.

Here's how the full lineup looked at practice:

56 Justin Bailey - 90 Ryan O'Reilly - 21 Kyle Okposo

26 Matt Moulson (filling in for Kane) - 15 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart

82 Marcus Foligno - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 12 Brian Gionta

26 Matt Moulson - 44 Nicolas Deslauriers - 63 Tyler Ennis

29 Jake McCabe - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen

4 Josh Gorges - 6 Cody Franson

41 Justin Falk - 47 Zach Bogosian

38 Taylor Fedun

40 Robin Lehner

31 Anders Nilsson