



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres outlast Ducks in 10-round shootout, win 2-1

By Dan Greenspan

Associated Press

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ANAHEIM, Calif. (AP) — The Buffalo Sabres shook up their lines in hopes of finally breaking their Southern California malaise. The experiment had to carry over to a shootout, but the Sabres were finally rewarded with a win.

Zemgus Girgensons scored in the 10th round of the shootout to lift the Sabres to a 2-1 victory over the Anaheim Ducks on Friday night.

Ryan O'Reilly and Rasmus Ristolainen also scored in the tiebreaker to help the Sabres end a seven-game skid in Southern California. Buffalo had not won in Anaheim or Los Angeles since a 2-0 win over the Ducks on Feb. 29, 2012.

"I think we kind of stole one," O'Reilly said. "Every team on the West Coast always plays heavy, always plays hard. They don't give you much. It's good to at least get one."

O'Reilly also scored a bizarre goal for his 17th of the season and Anders Nilsson stopped 39 shots.

Ryan Getzlaf and O'Reilly scored in the second round of the tiebreaker, and then Ristolainen and Brandon Montour converted in the ninth round. Nilsson then stopped Nick Ritchie before Girgensons won it.

Ristolainen beat Jonathan Bernier with a shocking maneuver. He got the goalie moving to his left and then reached back around for a one-handed backhand that slid the puck into the open net. It's something Ristolainen has been working on in practice and proved to be crucial as Buffalo won for just the second time in eight shootouts this season.

"I actually knew he was going to do that," Nilsson said. "I wanted to see him out there, and he has done that move on me in practice a couple times and scored, so I had a feeling he was going to do it. I'm happy for him that it paid off."

Buffalo had scored just once in its previous six road games against the Kings and Ducks and were held scoreless five times in that stretch. But everything changed on a fortunate bounce off O'Reilly's skate in the second period.

O'Reilly and Ryan Kesler were grappling to the right of the net when Jake McCabe fired a long shot. Bernier got a glove on the puck but tipped it right to where O'Reilly and Kesler were tangled, sending it into O'Reilly's skate and into the open goal to make it 1-all with 4:25 left.

Jack Eichel picked up his 28th point since the start of February with the secondary assist on O'Reilly's goal.

After a largely invisible outing in a 2-0 loss at the Kings on Thursday, Eichel was much more active against Anaheim. Eichel's skating was on display from the start, creating two scoring chances in the opening 3:15.

O'Reilly only found out that he would be playing on a line with Eichel earlier in the day and enjoyed the opportunity to work with the second-year phenom.

"Getting to play with Eichs is special, his speed, what he can create," O'Reilly said. "For myself, it's, 'Open up the ice and get the puck to him.' You do that, help him get speed, he's going to beat a lot of guys."

Rickard Rakell scored and Bernier made 30 saves for the Ducks, who could not complete their first three-game winning streak since Jan. 10-14.

Rakell pounced on a rebound 8:12 into the first, picking up his 31st goal to put the Ducks ahead 1-0. Rakell has now scored as many goals in 60 games this season as he did in his first 192 games, including the playoffs, for the Ducks, with nine goals over the last 10 games.

"We outshoot them heavily and carry the play for most of the game," Ducks defenseman Kevin Bieksa said. "You don't hold your head too far down for this one. We didn't get the result, but we're happy with the way we played."

NOTES: Sabres RW Kyle Okposo (ribs) missed his eighth straight game. ... Ducks RW Ondrej Kase was a healthy scratch for the second straight game. The rookie has just one goal and one assist in his last 18 appearances. ... The Ducks lost to an opponent who faced the Kings the previous night for just the third time this season. The Ducks had been 7-2-0 against teams playing back-to-back games in Southern California.

UP NEXT

Sabres: Visit the Detroit Red Wings on Monday.

Ducks: Visit the San Jose Sharks on Saturday.

Sabres' Ennis needs to make most of his minutes

By John Vogl
The Buffalo News
March 19, 2017

Tyler Ennis knows what kind of player he can be. He also knows who the Sabres have asked him to be. Usually, that's not the same guy.

Right now, however, everyone sees an identical player. It's up to Ennis to keep it that way.

After long nights on the fourth line, Ennis is back up top for Buffalo. He's scheduled to skate with center Jack Eichel and left wing Ryan O'Reilly on Monday when the Sabres visit Detroit. The trio also played together Friday during a 2-1 shootout victory in Anaheim.

"When you see you're playing with Jack and Ryan, it gives you a little excitement," Ennis said Sunday in HarborCenter. "I've got to make the most of it."

It's an opportunity that hasn't come for Ennis lately. During the 17-game stretch from Feb. 11 in Toronto to Thursday in Los Angeles, the right winger skated just 10:08 per game. That included fourth-line nights of 6:04, 6:19 and 7:35 with linemates such as Derek Grant and Nicolas Deslauriers.

During Ennis' limited minutes, not much happened. He has no points in the last 11 games and no goals in the last 16, leaving him stuck at four goals and five assists in 41 outings.

"It doesn't get any more frustrating than that," said Ennis, whose season was interrupted by sports hernia/groin surgery. "It's been a tough go, but there's a lot worse things in life. You've got to work yourself out of any rut you're in. You've got to work yourself out of any situation you're in."

"I can't complain right now. I'm with Jack and Ryan."

The players are expected to provide offense for a team that has totaled two goals in the last three games. Offense is what Ennis expects out of himself, but it wasn't Job One when he was skating on the fourth line. He hasn't handled those differing mindsets well.

"The toughest thing this year is just finding a common ground between playing how I think I can play, how I should play personally, and how if I'm on the fourth line I should play," Ennis said. "I'm a player that I think brings a lot of creativity, skill, offense. In certain situations like on the fourth line, you have to focus on getting it in and getting it out and simplifying your game. Simplifying has probably been difficult for me."

"When you're not playing as much and things aren't going as well, it can be tough. You want to go out there and do what you know you can do. That's been the toughest part."

Ennis feels better after skating 17:17 against the Ducks, his highest total since he got 17:37 during the season opener.

"It was nice to play a lot of minutes and kind of get in that groove of things again," he said. "You've got to dig yourself out of whatever rut you're in, believe in yourself, know that you're a better player, know that you can contribute a lot, know that you're a really great player. That's the mindset that I have."

Ennis took just one shot Friday, but coach Dan Bylsma saw things he liked.

"I saw some work," Bylsma said. "I saw some compete. I saw some tenacity on the puck. That's what he needs to keep doing here with the time he gets."

Time is a big thing with Ennis. He knows it may be running short.

This is his eighth season in Buffalo, and he has two years left on his contract. He professed his love for the organization and city prior to the trade deadline. He did it again Sunday, but he also admitted to wondering about life elsewhere after those nights nailed to the bench.

"That's the fine line you have between the loyalty you have to a team and a city, and the loyalty that you have to yourself," Ennis said. "I want to do whatever I can to help the team. There's nothing I want more – and there's nothing I've wanted more since the day I put a Sabres jersey on – than to win a Stanley Cup for this city. It's only grown every day since I've been here, getting to know the people, being in the community. I know how desperately this city needs a Cup and how fun it would be to have a celebration in this town."

There won't be a Cup this spring, but Ennis will have a chance to turn around a disappointing season during the last 10 games.

"My plan," Ennis said, "is to get better and dig myself out of it, and enjoy playing with Ryan and Jack."

Sabres Notebook: Ristolainen's shootout skills; Austin could make NHL debut

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

March 18, 2017

Yes, Rasmus Ristolainen called his shot in the shootout. He just didn't remember.

The defenseman scored Buffalo's slickest shootout goal of the season Friday in Anaheim. He deked left, went right and then reached his left arm around goaltender Jonathan Bernier for the goal.

Soon after, a video from Finland surfaced of him saying in August he'd do that move.

"That's like a TV show they did back home, and I actually forgot it," Ristolainen said Sunday. "I saw it yesterday morning, and it's pretty funny."

In addition to trying the move back home, Ristolainen has done it a couple of times in practice this year.

"It worked out as planned. I got a couple a texts after that one," said Ristolainen, who had never before taken part in an NHL shootout. "I've been saving it because I haven't shot yet. That's my move."

Ristolainen was the ninth shooter in the 10-round win by the Sabres. They'll go for their second straight victory Monday night in Detroit.

"We were getting to that point where you knew the D-men were going to start to get involved," defenseman Josh Gorges said after practice in HarborCenter. "You know with his skill level he's got the ability to step in and do something great. To pull a move like that? I didn't see that coming, but I don't think anybody did. I'm sure that's why he was able to put that one home. That was impressive."

There's a chance it won't be Ristolainen's last attempt, though he's unlikely to pass Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart or Ryan O'Reilly in the rotation.

"We've got seven guys that we practice with in shootout team, and he's on there for a reason," coach Dan Bylsma said. "Obviously, he's had success with that move, and today you see him use a different move, a shooting move and score. Maybe he's climbing up the list from seven to six or five."

Once again, the Sabres have a thin blue line. A couple of Rochester players will fix that, which opens the door to an NHL debut.

Buffalo, which practiced with just four defensemen, will call up two blue-liners from the Amerks for Monday's game. A source said Casey Nelson and Brady Austin will get the call, though nothing was official. The Amerks flew home Sunday after two weekend games in Newfoundland.

Austin, selected in the seventh round of the 2012 NHL Draft, has yet to appear in a Sabres uniform. He has spent the past three seasons in Rochester, recording five goals and 30 points in 199 games. The 23-year-old is 6-foot-4 and 234 pounds.

Nelson started the season in Buffalo and has played nine games. He has four goals and 13 points in 45 games with the Amerks.

The Sabres have been crushed by injuries to Dmitry Kulikov (concussion), Cody Franson (undisclosed), Justin Falk (calf) and Taylor Fedun (foot).

"It doesn't look like there's a chance that any of them can play," Bylsma said. "Day-to-day is probably appropriate for all those guys."

The Sabres' injury situation made for some dicey moments in Anaheim. They were down to three defensemen at one point.

"You go from left D to right D to rest, and you came out and went to the left D, then right D and then rest," Bylsma said. "It was a short time, but we had the rotation going there. The fresh guy goes to the farthest point on the ice, and you move toward the bench to get some rest."

The Sabres are making their last visit to Joe Louis Arena. The Red Wings will move into a new building next season.

"It's the rink that I was a fan of growing up," said Bylsma, a Michigan native. "I thought it was the Taj Mahal of all rinks. Now it's not the Taj Mahal anymore, but it is a place where I played and dreamed of playing."

Mike Harrington: If Bylsma goes, Sabres' time for excuses will be over

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 18, 2017

ANAHEIM – With 10 games left in the season, the Buffalo Sabres have to collect 11 points just to match their 81-point total from last season. That's not what you would call progress by any measure and, fair or not, it's got the focus turning harshly on coach Dan Bylsma.

The thought of a coaching change seemed ridiculous even a month ago. Bylsma is two years into a five-year contract where he was given the reins of a burgeoning outfit adding lots of pieces off a 54-point team. He quickly got to 81 points and there's no question everyone both inside and outside the organization expected more this year.

It hasn't happened for a variety of reasons that have been discussed ad nauseum this season. What you couldn't have expected was the way players constantly make veiled comments about just "playing hockey" and "not thinking so much" and "not worrying where I am or where I'm supposed to be."

You've heard it from Jack Eichel and Evander Kane and Sam Reinhart. From Jake McCabe and Ryan O'Reilly. And Tyler Ennis too. No insinuation here that any of the aforementioned are malcontents, nothing close to it.

But their perceptions seem to be taking on more reality as the season winds down. Social media and talk radio, hardly any sort of credible focus groups, are pounding Bylsma regularly. As over the top as they may be, it's hard to argue certain points.

The Sabres' abysmal analytics have them in the land of Colorado and Arizona when it comes to puck possession. They have just 12 road wins in 37 games -- after collecting 19 last season. And they continue to be hovering near a minus-30 goal differential while having one of the league's worst penalty-killing units, a tough nugget to swallow when you consider Buffalo has turned into the NHL's top power play.

If Tim Murray and Terry Pegula want to fire Bylsma on merit, there's a case to be made for that. But they have to tread very lightly.

The Sabres' 3-8-2 record in the last 13 games gives pause to the thought there's some, ahem, tanking going on by some of these players to ensure the coach's departure. No matter the finish, the GM may be inclined to take his huge share of the blame for this lousy defense corps and give Bylsma another shot with a better roster.

The Sabres were badly outplayed through stretches of their three-game California road trip but were in every game through 40 minutes. They were down, 2-1, Tuesday in San Jose only because of the unlucky own-goal Eichel put past Robin Lehner. The game Thursday in Los Angeles was scoreless heading into the third before Buffalo suffered its fourth straight 2-0 loss in Staples Center

Talking to O'Reilly after practice Wednesday in El Segundo, he made it clear he expected progress this year and that this team still has something to play for over the last dozen or so games. The Sabres got nothing out of Thursday's loss in Los Angeles but stayed with Friday's 10-round shootout to squeeze out a win over the Anaheim Ducks.

"You don't just wake up one year and decide you're going to win a Stanley Cup or decide you're going to be a competing team for it," O'Reilly said. "It's tough to jump in the standings. Each year you have to make a push. To us, it's not over yet. We've got a lot to prove that we can play and beat these teams. We have to show we should be better, that we should be in the playoffs and that this should be our run this year. That's something we have to prove constantly."

For those who say the players have quit on Bylsma, my response would be watch the games. The Sabres got better as each game went on during the trip, albeit not a difficult feat when you consider they were outshot badly (20-9 and 15-2) in the first period of the first two games.

You want quit, go watch what's happening to poor Lindy Ruff in Dallas. I was in the stands Sunday in San Jose as the Stars packed it in during a 5-1 loss to the Sharks. It was more of the same two nights later in a 7-1 butt-kicking in Edmonton. Part of the reason the Sabres don't get flogged like that is because Robin Lehner and Anders Nilsson generally don't allow it to happen but it's still a rare night where they're out of a game.

Murray's next move is being watched closely around the league. You fire Bylsma now and you cater to the players' wishes to get a new coach. The next man in will have to be wary of daring to say anything critical about or benching Eichel, who was dubbed "the golden child" by former captain Craig Rivet last week on "The Instigators." Yikes.

There is actually talk from fans, fueled by some of the louder noises around town, that hiring Boston University coach David Quinn would be a good idea to placate Eichel. That's laughable. Murray would no longer need to be employed because Eichel would simply be the GM if his college coach got Bylsma's job.

And how would that play in the rest of the room? Not very well.

One thing that's an issue for the Sabres -- and a good problem to have -- is that Buffalo isn't going to get too many off nights from opponents. The quality of the Sabres' top six, led by Eichel, Kane and O'Reilly, gets every opposing coach's attention and the Sabres need to raise their game accordingly.

"It's a trap game if you don't respect the opposition but we definitely respected their skill," Anaheim defenseman Kevin Bieksa said after Friday's game. "They've got some top-end guys over there and some really good forwards. We played them hard."

Seven of the final 10 games are against teams either in a playoff spot or still legitimately in the hunt. The Sabres are closer to last in the Atlantic Division than they are to the playoffs. If they sink more, the players' thoughts may mean nothing anyway because Murray may simply have to say he hired the wrong coach and move on.

Bylsma may deserve to go. Absolutely. But if it happens, the built-in excuse will be gone. The folks occupying the locker room better keep that in mind.

Inside the Sabres: Vegas will roll the expansion dice on ...

By John Vogl
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Filling out the Sabres' expansion list is harder than you'd think. Not because of the players Buffalo should keep, but because of who they should try to lose.

Contracts, age, production and depth are major considerations when it gets to the final protection choices. Keep Zach Bogosian or Josh Gorges? Let go of Tyler Ennis or Zemgus Girgensons?

It's not as simple as it sounds.

Each NHL team will lose one player in June as the league stocks its newest organization, the Vegas Golden Knights. Vegas will select a minimum of 14 forwards, nine defensemen and three goaltenders. Money matters to the Golden Knights since they must draft players who account for 60 percent to 100 percent of the salary cap.

That could be good for Buffalo, which has a few big contracts that aren't commensurate with production.

First, the rules:

1. Teams have two options regarding players they wish to protect. The first option is seven forwards, three defensemen and one goaltender. The second option is eight skaters regardless of position and one goaltender.

Option Two might be viable for clubs like Chicago. The Blackhawks have to protect defensemen Duncan Keith, Brent Seabrook and Niklas Hjalmarsson because they have no-movement clauses (more on that below). Trevor van Riemsdyk is developing well on the blue line, so maybe they want to protect him, too. The eight-skater option gives them a chance.

For the Sabres, we're going with seven forwards, three defensemen and one goalie.

2. First- and second-year professionals plus unsigned draft choices are exempt from the expansion draft.

This is a nice break for Buffalo, which is loaded with young players. They don't have to expose or protect forwards Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart, Alex Nylander, Justin Bailey, Evan Rodrigues, Hudson Fasching, Nick Baptiste, Eric Cornel, Vaclav Karabacek and Jean Dupuy; defensemen Brendan Guhle, Casey Nelson and Brycen Martin; or goalie Jason Kasdorf.

3. Players with no-movement clauses must be protected.

Kyle Okposo is the only Buffalo player in this category, so he just made the list. The right winger was going to be protected anyway.

The contract Bogosian signed with Winnipeg in 2013 featured a no-move clause from 2015-16 to 2019-20. A source says the Sabres chose not to accept it when they acquired the defenseman, so protection isn't mandatory.

4. Teams must expose at least two forwards and one defenseman who are under contract for 2017-18 and have played in 40 games this season or 70 games during the past two years. In addition, teams must expose one goaltender under contract for 2017-18 or who will be a restricted free agent this summer.

This could affect some teams, but it's not big for the Sabres.

With the rules out of the way, here we go.

Forwards

The seven we'll protect are Okposo, Ryan O'Reilly, Evander Kane, Marcus Foligno, Johan Larsson, Ennis and William Carrier. That leaves Vegas with the opportunity to select Girgensons, Matt Moulson, Nicholas Deslauriers and Justin Kea.

The first five on the protection list were easy. The final two choices were not.

Ennis is a spare part nowadays, and he has two more seasons on his contract with a cap hit of \$4.6 million. That's not a good combination. Still, he's a three-time 20-goal scorer who is only 27. Buffalo should be able to trade him, so just giving him to the Knights is off the table.

Carrier gets the last spot over Girgensons based on potential. He's shown speed and physicality. The 22-year-old definitely needs to increase his production, but the tools seem there.

Girgensons is a former first-round pick who has scored 15 goals, and he's only 23. His numbers have plummeted, however, and he's behind Eichel, O'Reilly and Larsson on the list of centers.

Moulson was a simple choice to expose. Signed when Buffalo needed to reach the salary cap floor, he got a five-year, \$25 million deal. He's under contract for two more seasons, and that \$5 million cap hit will hurt when Eichel, Reinhart and others need new deals in 2018-19.

Defense

The three we'll protect are Rasmus Ristolainen, Jake McCabe and Bogosian. That leaves Vegas with the opportunity to select Gorges, Justin Falk and Brady Austin.

I hear you. Trust me, I hear you.

There are so many reasons to expose Bogosian to the Golden Knights. He's injury prone and unproductive. He has three more seasons on a contract that pays a whopping \$5.14 million a year. He's 41st on the salary chart for NHL blue-liners, and he's 158th in goals, 161st in points and 271st (out of 283) in plus/minus.

There's only one reason to keep him, and it overrides the motivation to expose him: Buffalo has absolutely no defensive depth.

While Bogosian obviously hasn't been what the Sabres expected, he's only 26. He can still carve out a career on the fringes of the top four. Simply put, he's better than what else is out there.

Guhle is the only prospect knocking on the Sabres' door. This summer's crop of free agents is underwhelming, to say the least. It's scheduled to get a little better in July 2018, but any signees won't bust the budget.

Despite evidence to the contrary, the Sabres can't afford to give up Bogosian. (How's that for a bold statement?)

Gorges has one season left on a deal that pays \$3.9 million. He'll be 34 years old entering the 2018-19 season, an unlikely age for an extension. For the long-term plans, Bogosian is a better protection option.

Goaltender

This couldn't get any simpler. The Sabres will protect Robin Lehner and expose Linus Ullmark.

Buffalo is not going to lose Lehner for nothing after giving up a first-round pick to get him. The draft rules for goalies allow teams to expose a restricted free agent provided he has been given a qualifying offer. That's what the Sabres will do with Ullmark, who is finishing his entry-level deal.

Vegas' options

Based on our list, the Golden Knights' pick in the expansion draft can be Girgensons, Moulson, Deslauriers, Kea, Gorges, Falk, Austin or Ullmark.

The best-case scenario for Buffalo is Vegas selects Moulson. There's too much money and term tied up in a 33-year-old who skates less than 12 minutes per game. Vegas General Manager George McPhee has said he plans to build around young players, but maybe he'll need Moulson's \$5 million cap hit to reach the required threshold.

More likely, the Golden Knights will choose between Girgensons and Ullmark. Girgensons can be marketed as a former All-Star, and he has the versatility to play center or wing. He has experience killing penalties.

The available goalie crop will include veteran NHLers Jaroslav Halak, Jimmy Howard, Kari Lehtonen or Antti Niemi, James Reimer and maybe Marc-Andre Fleury. Still, fledgling teams need to start building from the net out. Vegas will need two goalies for its team and two more for a minor-league club.

We'll guess the Golden Knights pluck Ullmark from the Sabres and hope he blooms in the desert.

Ten rounds later, Sabres finally enjoy shootout win

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 18, 2017

ANAHEIM -- The shootout was stretching into extra rounds and extra rounds above that. Deep into the California night and at nearly 1 a.m. back home in Buffalo, there had been 19 shooters and four goals but still no decision. Zemgus Girgensons admitted he had one thought on the Sabres' bench.

"I was just hoping we'd score and get to go home," joked Girgensons.

The long red-eye flight couldn't happen until the Latvian got his first chance of the season by becoming shooter No. 20. In the 10th round. He skated in on Anaheim's Jonathan Bernier and froze the Ducks' goalie with a shot fake. It allowed him to pull the puck to his forehand and slam it past Bernier to give Buffalo a 2-1 win Friday over the Ducks in Honda Center.

The Sabres outscored the Ducks, 3-2, in what was the longest shootout win in their history. They lost an 11-rounder to Colorado in 2010.

The Sabres were pretty deliberate through overtime against the vaunted Anaheim attack, drawing boos from the crowd at a couple points. The Ducks are super talented but were somehow only 2-8 in OT this season. Still, the Sabres seemed content to be patient and then go for quick bursts from Jack Eichel and others.

There were no goals scored and, in case you've been under a rock the last few months, that didn't bode well because the Sabres have been terrible at shootouts with a 1-6 record. The numbers within those seven games are even uglier and the output the Sabres got Friday was in stark contrast to previous forays.

Buffalo shooters entered the game just 3 for 17 but the Sabres went 3 for 10 in this one. The goalies had made just four saves on 16 opponent shots but Anders Nilsson took care of 8 of 10 Anaheim attempts this time.

Nilsson got the Sabres off on the right foot by stopping Jakob Silfverberg's shot in round one and that had to put a charge through the Buffalo bench.

"The feeling of getting a save in a shootout was big," coach Dan Bylsma admitted.

So was the feeling of getting a goal. After Ryan Getzlaf scored in the second round to put the Ducks up, Ryan O'Reilly got the Sabres even with a nifty wrist shot. He had missed his previous two attempts this season.

"I just wanted to come in with speed, make a quick little shoulder fake and get it up," O'Reilly said. "It's about time I scored."

Said Bylsma: "We really needed to see that puck go in the net."

Nilsson stopped the next six shots, giving the Sabres a chance to win each time. But Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart, Evander Kane, Matt Moulson, Brian Gionta and Evan Rodrigues all missed. When Anaheim defenseman Brandon Montour blasted a shot by Nilsson in round nine, the Sabres looked cooked.

Enter Rasmus Ristolainen's first career shootout attempt in round nine. The Buffalo defenseman drew Bernier to the goalie's left, then deftly reached around with his left hand to tuck the puck past the goalie on the backhand as he was skating by the net. Nilsson said he knew Ristolainen might try the move after the big Finn scored on him with it a couple times in practice.

"I definitely knew he could do that," Girgensons said. "Didn't see it coming in the game though. Pretty impressive."

"To get the goalie to move like that and reach around him, I wasn't expecting it but it was an unreal move," O'Reilly said.

After Nick Ritchie shot high in round 10, Girgensons put away his fourth shootout-deciding goal. Girgensons, on a run of 18 scoreless games dating to Jan. 24 in Nashville, said he knew he could get Bernier down and out of the play with his move.

"It took a little patience and I made sure," he said.

The biggest story of the game was 39 saves from Nilsson, in a bounceback effort after being pulled at the end of the first period last Saturday against Columbus with his team in a 3-0 hole.

"He was real strong, real solid and tested with big saves," Bylsma said. "That's where he's been much of the year for us. After the last game he needed to get back to it and it was a big performance."

"I felt good from puck drop, felt good the whole game," Nilsson said. "My job is to stop the puck no matter what else is happening in front of you. I was taking one shooter at a time and I was just happy we got the last goal."

Still, you can't let the giddiness of the shootout overshadow some of the truths about the 1-2 road trip. The Buffalo offense scored just two goals in the three games and O'Reilly's tying goal at 15:35 of the second period Friday was a fluke off his right skate after Bernier let a Jake McCabe shot through his glove.

But Eichel had five shots on goal and easily had his best game on the road trip. Same for Kane, who had four shots on goal and was robbed by Bernier in the slot in the third period. Still, no goals.

Bylsma took a blender to his forward lines, notably putting O'Reilly on the wing with Eichel and Tyler Ennis. He may take a similar look Monday in Detroit.

"I thought we probably still didn't get enough offensive output and chances from our group," Bylsma said. "But Evander was real dangerous. We just slugged one out tonight. It was a hard-fought game."

'07 Cup reunion with Ducks rekindles May's memories

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 18, 2017

ANAHEIM, Calif. – Longtime former Sabres winger Brad May was in his usual spot next to Brian Duff on the team's television broadcast Friday night but it's never just another game for May when he visits Honda Center, home of the Anaheim Ducks.

May was here last weekend as well, missing the Sabres' home-and-home series against Columbus so he could attend ceremonies honoring the 10th anniversary of the Ducks' 2007 Stanley Cup championship team. May was in his 16th year in the NHL and had played more than 800 career games when he was traded from Colorado to Anaheim at the deadline in 2007. That spring, he finally won a Cup.

The players spent the weekend reminiscing about their triumph, which culminated in a five-game pounding of Ottawa in the Stanley Cup final. They did multiple appearances, including a fashion show, and were feted with their trophies during a pregame ceremony prior to the Ducks' win over Washington.

"What was amazing was that I hadn't seen a lot of these guys and time stood still," May said. "You walked in the building and it was like walking in the locker room again even though it was just going inside. All the hugs and how-ya-doings. It was like we had still been together."

May said the players have kept in touch over the years through social media, especially with updates from wives and such. But the weekend crystallized his memory of a team that featured 21-year-olds like Ryan Getzlaf and Corey Perry as well as legends like Teemu Selanne, Scott and Rob Niedermayer, Chris Pronger and workhorse goalie J.S. Giguere. Williamsville native Todd Marchant was also a key contributor and brought the Cup back to the then-Pepsi Center in Amherst that summer.

"Brian Burke traded for me four times and he's my biggest ally in hockey and he built that team," May said. "I can say this with the utmost confidence that we were maybe the toughest team ever built that was good too, if that makes sense.

"We weren't going to be beat up or knocked around but then we had firepower. Young stars who weren't stars yet. Selanne. Andy McDonald was our best forward if you looked at analytics. We had Scott Niedermayer, Chris Pronger, a young Francois Beauchemin who played more minutes than anybody in the playoffs. It was an incredible group."

The Senators, of course, made the final by beating the Sabres in five games in the Eastern Conference final after Buffalo won the Presidents' Trophy during the regular season. May, Buffalo's first-round pick in 1990, said he was openly rooting to play the team he spent the first seven years of his career with, for the right to win the Cup.

"It was absolutely everything I was wishing for," said May, whose 1993 overtime goal against Boston remains one of the most iconic in franchise history. "It was kind of a crazy wish at the time because Buffalo had all the firepower they did at the time. I actually was thinking, 'Oh my God this could happen.' ... But their series was over quickly and that was a shame."

The Ducks, coached by Randy Carlyle, finished with 110 points and won the Pacific Division in 2007. May said the genesis of their playoff run was started in a hotel ballroom the night before the first round started when Carlyle went around the room asked each player to say what they were playing for.

"Randy started it and we went around and it was the coolest thing ever," he said. "Scott Niedermayer said he was playing to get a Cup for his brother. Travis Moen's father had died a couple years earlier and he said he wanted to make him proud because he knew he was watching.

"You were getting goosebumps. I said that I had played 16 years in the NHL and this was my only crack. I got traded here. I was the only one and I don't want to mess it up. My wife and my kids and I moved like five times

and it was all about their sacrifice. You really learned you were not just doing it for you. That exercise was really powerful."

The Ducks went 16-5 in the playoffs, beating Minnesota and Vancouver in five games before dispatching Detroit in six in the Western Conference final. They built a 3-1 lead in the Cup final over Ottawa and Game Five at Honda Center proved to be the clincher they hoped for.

"It was like Christmas morning as a kid but you couldn't get out of your bed until Mom came down. You couldn't go to the tree and shake the presents," May said. "You knew it was there but it was still elusive. It was so nerve-racking but the great thing for us was that it was a 5 p.m. start. It helped not to wait around.

"Dave Farrish, the assistant coach, gave us bracelets with the slogan '1' on them. Didn't matter where you were, the grocery store or wherever. You looked down and saw it. I wore it all day every day. One opportunity, one chance. Anytime you felt yourself being distracted, you would look down at your wrist when you're starting to wander and get back on track. That might sound corny but that bracelet was so important to us."

May was one of several Anaheim forwards to bounce around during the playoffs. During the final, Carlyle entrusted him to play with Selanne and MacDonald. May had one assist in 14 regular season games for the Ducks and one assist in 18 playoff games but was serving as a physical presence and an energy player on a team that had plenty of other offense elsewhere.

"Todd Marchant, Chris Kunitz, Dustin Penner and myself bounced around in tandems," May said. "You'd get spotted in. It was an incredible group to be a part of."

The Ducks' Cup clincher was a 6-2 rout of the Senators that allowed the players to whoop it up on the bench for the final few minutes of Game Five.

"The whole bench was giddy. It was a real celebration," May said. "You were taking it in. I remember standing on the bench going, 'Take it in boys. Take it in.' You knew it was happening. I can feel it again telling the story right now. You could survey everything. I remember during the last couple minutes being able to look around to see my wife smiling, to find my kids."

May, then 35, got the Cup from veteran defenseman Sean O'Donnell and passed it to Giguere. When he got it back for two days in August, he shared it with family and friends, was feted in a parade in Stouffville, Ont., and even flew around with it in a specially designed helicopter with "May Day" emblazoned on the side. He took it to a youth Christian camp and a camp for children battling cancer. A few months later, May even rode on a float with the Cup during the Tournament of Roses parade in Pasadena.

See the Hockey Hall of Fame's recap of May's Cup days [here](#)

The oddest Cup day itinerary: A party with Muskoka neighbor Michael Andlauer, then owner of the AHL's Hamilton Bulldogs and now part owner of the Montreal Canadiens. With May injured and not playing for Colorado and Andlauer's Hamilton team struggling, the pair made a joking bet on a golf course in Naples, Fla., to stage a joint party the following summer with both the Stanley Cup and Calder Cup.

"He goes, 'You're on,' May said. "We shook on the fifth hole right there. It was the most unreasonable bet ever and it happened. There we were on Aug. 16 with so many friends from hockey with both cups."

Quick Hits: Sabres 2, Ducks 1 (SO)

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 18, 2017

ANAHEIM -- Zemgus Girgensons scored the winning goal in the 10th round of a shootout as the Buffalo Sabres pulled out a 2-1 win over the Anaheim Ducks Friday night in Honda Center.

The Sabres won the lengthy shootout, 3-2, with Anders Nilsson making eight saves. Ryan O'Reilly and Rasmus Ristolainen also scored, with Ristolainen's beautiful deke in round nine keeping things alive.

The Sabres improved to 2-6 in shootouts this year and backup goalie Nilsson has won both of them. He beat Pittsburgh Nov. 17 in Buffalo.

Road woes: The Sabres entered the game with six straight losses away from home and an unsightly 11-19-6 road record. That looks even worse when you consider they opened the season 4-1-2 on the road.

Three chances, but how many successes?: Through 40 minutes, every game on the trip was winnable. The Sabres were trailing, 2-1, Tuesday in San Jose en route to a 4-1 loss. They were scoreless Thursday in Los Angeles and fell, 2-0. And the score was even at 1-1 here Friday.

First-period recap: The Sabres went scoreless for the sixth straight period and the Ducks took a 1-0 lead on Richard Rakell's 31st goal of the season at 11:48. It came when Anders Nilsson failed to catch Cam Fowler's shot from the point, with the puck hitting Nilsson in the wrist and dropping just in front of the net. Rakell was able to quickly poke it home in front of Cody Franson.

Pulling even: The Sabres were outshot, 17-7, in the second period but got the only goal on a fluke bounce. O'Reilly was credited with his 17th as Jake McCabe's shot skittered through the glove of Jonathan Bernier and hit O'Reilly in the right skate. Luck o' the Irish or not, the puck bounced into the net behind a startled Bernier for O'Reilly's 17th goal of the season.

Snapping the drought: The O'Reilly goal ended Buffalo's scoreless streak at 154 minutes, 25 seconds. Jack Eichel scored 70 seconds into Tuesday's game and Buffalo had not scored since.

New lines: With just one goal in the first two games of the trip, coach Dan Bylsma tried a major reshuffling of his forward lines. The biggest news was moving O'Reilly out of the middle on to Eichel's wing with Tyler Ennis. The other new lines had Girgensons between Evander Kane and Matt Moulson and Sam Reinhart back at center between Brian Gionta and Justin Bailey. The line of Evan Rodrigues between Marcus Foligno and Hudson Fasching stayed intact from Thursday's game in Los Angeles.

Back-to-backs: The Sabres completed the 15th of their NHL-high 19 sets of games on consecutive games. They are 6-6-3 in the first half and 6-8-1 in the second half.

Sick bay: Defenseman Taylor Fedun, just up Thursday from Rochester, left after one period with a foot injury after being checked into the boards in front of the Buffalo bench by Anaheim's Jared Boll.

In the house: The Ducks announced a crowd of 14,556 in the 17,174-seat arena. The in-house crowd wasn't remotely close to that. It was akin to a gathering in a place like Florida or Carolina. It's the fourth time in the last five home games the Ducks have failed to crack 15,000.

Up Next: The Sabres headed to the airport immediately after the game to take a red-eye home and will be off Saturday. They will practice at home Sunday and then return to the skies to head to Detroit to make their final appearance in Joe Louis Arena Monday night. Then quickly back to Buffalo to host Pittsburgh Tuesday in KeyBank Center.

Sabres beat Ducks in marathon shootout 2-1

WGR 550

March 17, 2017

The Sabres salvaged their three-game California trip on Friday, picking up a 2-1 shootout win over the Ducks. Zemgus Girgensons recorded the winner in Round 10, following goals by Ryan O'Reilly and Rasmus Ristolainen, and Anders Nilsson stopped 8 of 10 skaters. Nilsson turned aside 39 shots in regulation, including 17 in the 2nd period.

Buffalo came one round within tying its franchise record for most rounds in a shootout (11 on 1/9/10 vs. Colorado). The Sabres remain on the road for Monday's matchup at Detroit before returning home to face the Penguins on Tuesday.

Scoring

Rickard Rakell opened the scoring 11:48 into the game, gathering a Brandon Montour rebound in front of Anders Nilsson and putting it home.

Buffalo tied it at 15:35 of the 2nd on Ryan O'Reilly's 17th. Jake McCabe's point shot deflected off O'Reilly's skate and behind Jonathan Bernier, knotting the score 1-1. Jack Eichel picked up a secondary assist, giving him 49 points in 51 games.

1st Period

Goals

11:48 - ANA - Rickard Rakell (31) (Brandon Montour, Cam Fowler)

Penalties

None

2nd Period

Goals

15:35 - BUF - Ryan O'Reilly (17) (Jake McCabe, Jack Eichel)

Penalties

None

3rd Period

Goals

None

Penalties

3:15 - BUF - Zach Bogosian (5 min., fighting)

3:15 - ANA - Nick Ritchie (5 min., fighting)

Overtime

Goals

None

Penalties

None

Shootout

ANA - Jakob Silfverberg - MISS

BUF - Tyler Ennis - MISS

ANA - Ryan Getzlaf - GOAL

BUF - Ryan O'Reilly - GOAL

ANA - Rickard Rickell - MISS

BUF - Jack Eichel - MISS

ANA - Corey Perry - MISS

BUF - Sam Reinhart - MISS

ANA - Patrick Eaves - MISS

BUF - Evander Kane - MISS

ANA - Cam Fowler - MISS

BUF - Matt Moulson - MISS

ANA - Antoine Vermette - MISS

BUF - Brian Gionta - MISS

ANA - Ryan Kesler - MISS

BUF - Evan Rodrigues - MISS

ANA - Brandon Montour - GOAL

BUF - Rasmus Ristolainen - GOAL

ANA - Nick Ritchie - MISS

BUF - Zemgus Girgensons - GOAL

Goaltending

BUF - Anders Nilsson (39 saves, 40 shots)

ANA - Jonathan Bernier (30 saves, 31 shots)

Power Plays

BUF - 0 of 1

ANA - 0 of 0

Sabres' Ennis enjoys his new line

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 19, 2017

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Tyler Ennis had spent the better part of 16 games on the Sabres fourth line. He hasn't scored a goal in 15 games, but in Anaheim, he found himself on a line with Jack Eichel and Ryan O'Reilly. The Sabres winger is happy with this development, "Oh definitely. When you see you're playing with Jack and Ryan, it gives you a little excitement."

"They're easy to play with, fun to play with, so we did a good job."

O'Reilly moved to wing for the Ducks game, but Ennis doesn't see that as a problem, "He's a smart guy in any situation, so now he's on wing and I thought he adapted really well."

Ennis played 17:17 against the Ducks which is the most he's played since game one against Montreal. On the season, he is averaging just over 12 minutes per game which is only better than Matt Moulson. Ennis said he felt more into the game playing more, "That was nice, it was fun. As a player you want to play a lot, so it was nice to play a lot of minutes and get into that groove of things again."

Ennis only has four goals and five assists for nine points in 41 games. That would give him just eight goals over an 82 game schedule and of course, he's frustrated, "It doesn't get any more frustrating than that, it's been a tough go, but there's a lot worse things in life, you've got to work yourself out of any rut you're in, you've got to work yourself out of any situation you're in, so I can't complain right now, I'm with Jack and Ryan and I've got to make the most of it."

It has only been for one game, but in that game against the Ducks, Dan Bylsma saw improvement in Ennis' game, "I saw some work, I saw some compete, I saw some tenacity on the puck and that's what he needs to keep doing here with the time he gets. I saw that in the L.A. game as well in the third period when he got a couple of shifts with Jack."

The Sabres only practiced on Sunday with four defensemen. Dmitry Kulikov is still week-to-week, while Cody Franson, Justin Falk and Taylor Fedun are day-to-day. All four will miss Monday in Detroit which means two defensemen will be called up.

The team practiced for about 45 minutes on Sunday in HarborCenter and then left for Detroit.

Sabres workhorse Rasmus Ristolainen willing to carry load

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 18, 2017

BUFFALO – Back in August, a crew in Rasmus Ristolainen’s native Finland filmed the Sabres defenseman utilizing some slick shootout moves – in the video, he dekes right before deftly backhanding the puck in with just his left hand – during a practice session.

At the end of the clip posted on Youtube.com, Ristolainen says in Finnish he would showcase the same moves if he received an opportunity in an NHL shootout.

This season, the Sabres lost six of their first seven shootouts, scoring just two goals. Still, Ristolainen, who has 43 points, was never used.

But on Friday, down a goal nine rounds into a shootout in Anaheim, Sabres coach Dan Bylsma finally tabbed Ristolainen, 22, for his first chance.

Ristolainen, of course, used the same moves, moving right before one-handing the puck past Ducks goalie Jonathan Bernier.

Zemgus Girgensons scored in the 10th round, clinching the Sabres’ 2-1 win.

The highlight, however, was Ristolainen’s goal, which has been all over the internet for two days.

“I’ve been saving (it) because I haven’t shot yet,” Ristolainen said Sunday inside HarborCenter. “That’s my move.”

What about that video from seven months ago?

“I actually forgot it,” Ristolainen said. “I saw it (Saturday) morning. It was pretty funny.”

Bylsma, who joked he wanted Ristolainen to simply shoot the puck, didn’t expect a wild move.

“We needed a goal,” he said. “It was a big moment. He kind of had his mind made up based on the scouting report that he was going to try that one. (He) made it look good.”

Ristolainen has looked good throughout his fourth NHL campaign, piling up minutes and points while cementing his status as the team’s No. 1 defenseman.

The workhorse has averaged a team-high 27 minutes, one second of ice time a game, the league’s fourth-highest total.

Bylsma has said for months he wants to lighten Ristolainen’s workload, something he repeated Sunday. But injuries and a weak defense corps have tied his hands.

Don’t expect Ristolainen to get any relief soon. Right now, the Sabres have four injured defensemen. They must recall two prior to tonight’s tilt against the Detroit Red Wings, the finale of a four-game road trip and their final visit to historic Joe Louis Arena.

“The workload is fine,” Ristolainen said. “I don’t feel it too much.”

Friday marked the seventh time this season Ristolainen has skated more than 30 minutes. The minutes aren’t exactly light, either. He’s constantly going all-out against the opponent’s top talent.

"The problem with Rasmus playing 30 minutes is he just plays them so hard, so physical," Bylsma said. "He's all in when he plays 30 minutes like that, and that's tough for anybody to do. There are some guys who play that much in their careers and tend to manage it a bit better than Rasmus."

"Rasmus, he's giving you everything he's got. If he's out there two minutes for a shift, he will give you everything he has at the end of that two minutes. That is on an empty tank sometimes."

Ideally, Bylsma said he would like Ristolainen to play about 25 minutes or less.

"But given situations like we've had in the last couple (games) – some injuries and some people going down – he's more than capable of carrying the load," he said.

Ristolainen said: "My trainer back home does a good job, good program. I'm in good shape."

A year ago, Ristolainen starting wearing out down the stretch. This season, he has responded better, although he has still struggled at times. He compiled a career-worst -5 rating March 7.

Handling a heavy workload is more than physical. To Sabres defenseman Josh Gorges, Ristolainen's partner for almost two years, the maturity his friend has developed helps him thrive.

"He's taken on that challenge of being the No. 1 guy on our team and a top player across the league," Gorges said. "He wants that, and I think that's been his biggest thing is his ability to go every night against the best players in all situations, log the minutes he does. It's been impressive."

Ristolainen's point total is impressive. He needs only seven more to become the first Sabres defenseman to hit 50 since Garry Galley had 54 points in 1995-96.

"It means a lot of points," Ristolainen said. "I guess I'm pretty close there. I don't (judge) my game by how many points I get. There's a lot of other things, too."

Sabres must recall defensemen from Amerks

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 18, 2017

BUFFALO – The Sabres, down a whopping four defensemen, plan to recall two from the Rochester Americans for Monday's road tilt in Detroit, coach Dan Bylsma said.

They practiced with only four healthy defenders this morning inside HarborCenter.

Not exactly ideal, huh?

Defenseman Taylor Fedun (foot) and Cody Franson (unspecified) were injured in Friday's 2-1 shootout win in Anaheim. Justin Falk (bruised calf, two games) and Dmitry Kulikov (upper body, seven games) are also hurt.

"It doesn't look like there's a chance any of them can play tomorrow," said Bylsma, whose Sabres close a four-game road trip against the Red Wings.

All four players are day-to-day, Bylsma said.

The Amerks are returning from a two-game road trip to Newfoundland and land in Toronto at 4 pm, Bylsma said.

The most likely recall candidates? Well, rookie Erik Burgdoerfer, who played his first two NHL games earlier this year, hasn't played since March 3. Rookie Casey Nelson will likely be summoned. The other is unclear. The Sabres recently defenseman acquired Mat Bodie from the New York Rangers in the Dan Catenacci trade.

They only have two other defensemen in pro hockey – Brady Austin and former third-round pick Brycen Martin, who's in the ECHL – under NHL contracts.

The Sabres endured a big rash of defense injuries earlier this season and are experiencing a second wave now. At one point Friday, they were down to three defensemen.

"We've had our fair share of them happening," Bylsma said. "I think this is the first time in my playing and coaching career that I've been down to three."

He added: "We got taxed pretty thin in that game. We're stretching it thin."

xxx

Despite an 11-game point drought, Bylsma promoted struggling winger Tyler Ennis to the No. 1 line beside center Jack Eichel and Ryan O'Reilly on Friday. Ennis accumulated his highest ice time since opening night, 17 minutes, 17 seconds.

Why is Ennis, who's enduring a career-worst stretch, playing with the team's best playmakers?

"I saw some work, I saw some compete, I saw some tenacity on the puck – and that's what he needs to keep doing here with the time he gets," Bylsma said.

Ennis has struggled since returning from a groin injury that sidelined him more than two months, scoring only three goals and six points in 29 games.

He practiced on the top line again today.

5 Observations: Sabres top Ducks in SO 2-1

By Matt Bove

WKBW

March 18, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - The west coast has been anything but the best coast for the Buffalo Sabres this week but on Friday they ended their trip to California with a win, knocking off the Anaheim Ducks 2-1 in a ten round shootout.

Julie the Cat vs. Goldberg

On Friday both the Ducks and Sabres were the beneficiaries of excellent goaltending. Sabres netminder Anders Nilsson finished the night with 38 saves, allowing just one goal in the first period to Ducks forward Rickard Rakell. Jonathan Bernier played just as well at the other end of the ice stopping 30 of the 31 shots faced.

The duo was equally as impressive in the shootout, with Nilsson stopping eight of ten shots and Bernier stopping seven of ten shots. Nilsson is now 8-2 in shootouts.

Last week Nilsson was pulled after allowing three goals in the first period against the Columbus Blue Jackets. Friday was a nice bounceback for the Sabres goalie. All week the Sabres have gotten solid performances from the blue paint but failed to capitalize, losing all three games.

A fun shootout !?!?

I've said multiple times that I don't like the shootout -- but Friday's was pretty fun. It would've been even better if more players scored, but Nilsson and Bernier stole the show. That being said, I think the N.H.L needs to get rid of the shootouts and either keep playing three-on-three or end in a tie.

Scoring woes

It's hard to win when you can't score. The Sabres kicked off their west coast road trip off with a goal from Jack Eichel just one minute into their game against the San Jose Sharks on Tuesday. They remained scoreless until four minutes remaining in the second period on a Friday thanks to a fluke goal from Ryan O'Reilly. That's essentially seven straight periods between goals.

Maybe their struggles are a result of a lack of shots or perhaps sloppy zone entries. Whatever the case, the Sabres are starting to look like they did in November when they couldn't buy a goal.

Back to reality

While I don't think they were bad, the Marcus Foligno - Evan Rodrigues - Hudson Fasching line wasn't nearly as effective as they were on Thursday against the Kings. Against the Ducks they generated some chances and made a few nice plays but didn't physically dominate like they did less than 24 hours prior. No need to worry, it's only their second line together as a unit. I'd like to see them stick together for a few more games to see if they can return to Thursday's form.

Luck of the Irish

You knew a guy with the last name O'Reilly was going to find his way onto the score sheet on St. Patrick's Day. As a matter of fact, O'Reilly, Eichel and Tyler Ennis proved to be very effective on Friday, generating the majority of the Sabres shots and scoring chances.

In the first period both O'Reilly and Eichel missed golden opportunities, but eventually found the pot of gold they were looking for at the end of the second period when O'Reilly redirected a puck into the Ducks net with his skate. At the time of the goal Sam Reinhart was on the ice instead of Ennis. Maybe it was an accident, maybe it wasn't, but it was fitting that O'Reilly and Eichel combined for the Sabres first goal.

And now we wait

11 losses in 13 games is unacceptable, especially when less than three weeks ago this team had a very real shot at the playoffs. With every loss things become more uncertain for Sabres head coach Dan Bylsma.

Whether that's fair or not is for you to decide, but the Sabres last ten games are incredibly important. The playoffs are out of reach, but the outcome of the final few weeks could change the course of the Sabres moving forward.

Overshadowed Jack Eichel doing just fine, thank you

By John Matisz

Toronto Sun

March 19, 2017

Patrik Laine is on pace for the most rookie goals in 11 years.

Auston Matthews is chucking gasoline on the Calder Trophy fire with a 32-24-56 stat line while playing hard minutes.

Connor McDavid is, well, Connor McDavid. His patented rocket-boots routine is alive and well, setting the table for a league-leading 80 points through Saturday.

Jack Eichel? Background noise.

Considered the best American prospect since Patrick Kane in the leadup to the 2015 NHL draft, Eichel is traditionally a top-of-mind talent. Right now, though, it feels like he is an afterthought.

His "generational player" peers (McDavid, Matthews and Laine) are all enjoying excellent seasons yet, even lately, as Eichel stockpiles points (at least one in 17 of his last 20 games), he appears to be garnering little fanfare outside of Buffalo.

Let's take a look at potential reasons why and evaluate his season as a whole.

FIRST OF ALL ...

Eichel was inactive for the Buffalo Sabres' first 21 games. The sophomore centre suffered a high ankle sprain on the eve of the regular season and did not return until late November.

Out of sight, out of mind. But since making his debut Eichel has been slyly dominant.

Eichel ranks ninth in league scoring over that span (Nov. 29 through Saturday), his 49 points sandwiched between Erik Karlsson's 48 and Brent Burns' 50.

"His speed, it separates him so easily. His overall game too — great stick, great shot, great hands — and I think it has been showing the past few months. He's a first-class player," said Chicago Blackhawks forward John Hayden, Eichel's teammate on the 2012-13 US National Development Team Program and 2015 world junior championship team.

ABOUT THOSE POINTS

Eichel has clearly made up for lost time but how does his 20-year-old season stack up against other 20-year-old seasons?

In a word, splendidly. The list of recent 20-year-old NHLers more productive than Eichel is short.

Eichel's 0.96 per-game rate (49 points in 51 games) is bested by just six players in the salary cap era — Crosby (1.36), Ovechkin (1.31), McDavid (1.13), Steven Stamkos (1.11), Evgeni Malkin (1.09) and David Pastrnak (0.98).

Eichel, who spent the 2014-15 season at Boston University before turning pro, is showing gains year over year too.

He finished second in rookie scoring last season, picking up 24 goals and 56 points in 81 games. Buffalo has 10 games left this year so, if he sustains or exceeds his current pace, Eichel will likely tie or break his rookie goal total and almost certainly surpass his point total (on pace for 59) despite appearing in 20 fewer games.

What's more, Eichel has proven he can dominate on the power play.

Last year he put up 21 points with the man-advantage. This year, again starting from Nov. 29 and stopping after Saturday's slate of games, he is tied for second in the entire NHL in power-play points with 20, including eight goals.

ABOUT THOSE SHOTS

Sometimes a statistic is so unexpected it deserves to be double-, triple- and quadruple-checked. Exhibit A: Eichel is averaging four shots per game this year.

He is the co-leader in that category — matching Burns, the perennial shot-generating machine and Norris Trophy favourite — and leads the league in shots since making his season debut.

Eichel's 204 shots on goal is 11 more than teammate Evander Kane, the NHL's No. 2 generator. Incredibly, Eichel has recorded a shot in every game this season, hitting the 10-shot mark on two occasions.

If Burns and Ovechkin are the flagbearers for shot quantity, Eichel is making a case to join the club. His four-a-game routine is not Ovechkin-esque but it's close — no other 20-year-old in the cap era has averaged more per game than Eichel and Ovechkin (5.25).

Time on ice and quality of teammates are key factors in the shot conversation.

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma gives Eichel plenty of opportunity (20 minutes a night, including three on the PP) and his most common linemates (Sam Reinhart, Marcus Foligno and Kane) range from OK to above average.

Eichel is billed as a playmaker but the data suggests he has realized sometimes it's better to unleash that trademark shot.

"He's a really good skater. Good hands. Good shot," said Toronto Maple Leafs forward Zach Hyman, who has faced off against Eichel in both college and the NHL. "He's deceptive in the offensive zone.

SOME CONTEXT

Eichel is probably the hardest player to get a handle on, at least statistically, out of the McDavid-Eichel-Matthews-Laine crew.

For one, his work without the puck leaves something to be desired. Secondly, despite throwing everything on net, his puck possession numbers are curiously in the red once again (46.8% in 2015-16; 46.6% this season). To boot, he is awfully unreliable in the faceoff circle (40.6% for his career).

Bylsma told BuffaloHockeyBeat.com recently that he is pleased with Eichel's progress as a pro but stopped short of calling him a complete player.

"He's worked hard on both sides of the puck — playing defence, defensive positioning, being a reliable and steady guy in the defensive zone," Bylsma said in early March. "I think his game has come miles in that regard since last year and even this year.

"The next level for Jack is being a guy who can play on both sides of the puck, (a) 200-foot game, being reliable and strong defensively and also be a guy that lugs the mail and is offensive on the other end of the rink."

Eichel's career, while young and sprinkled with question marks, is mighty interesting.

His ability to create offence should not be overlooked, even in contrast to McDavid, Matthews and Laine.

And, overall, Eichel is certainly not background noise.

ALL JACKED UP

Due to injury, Jack Eichel missed 21 games to start the 2016-17 season. He is a Top 10 scorer since making his debut:

(RANK) PLAYER, TEAM — POINTS + GAMES

(1) Brad Marchand, BOS — 60 points in 49 games

(2) Sidney Crosby, PIT — 57 in 48

(3) Nicklas Backstrom, WSH — 55 in 50

(4) Patrick Kane, CHI — 54 in 48

(5) Evgeni Malkin, PIT — 51 in 40

(6) Mikael Granlund, MIN — 51 in 49

(7) Connor McDavid, EDM — 51 in 48

(8) Brent Burns, SJS — 50 in 48

(9) Jack Eichel, BUF — 49 in 51

(10) Erik Karlsson, OTT — 48 in 48

*Nov. 29, 2016 through March 18, 2017

TWENTY AND ELITE

Jack Eichel is keeping elite company when it comes to the seasons of 20-year-old NHL players. Only six players in the salary cap era best his per-game points rate:

(RANK) PLAYER, TEAM (SEASON) — POINTS PER GAME

(1) Sidney Crosby, PIT (2007-08) — 1.36 points per game

(2) Alex Ovechkin, WSH (05-06) — 1.31

(3) Connor McDavid, EDM (16-17) — 1.13

(4) Steven Stamkos, TBL (10-11) — 1.11

(5) Evgeni Malkin, PIT (06-07) — 1.09

(6) David Pastrnak, BOS (16-17) — 0.98

(7) Jack Eichel, BUF (16-17) — 0.96

(8) Anze Kopitar, LAK (11-12) — 0.94

(9) Marcus Foligno, BUF (11-12) — 0.93

(10) Patrice Bergeron, BOS (05-06) + Tyler Ennis, BUF (09-10) — 0.90

*minimum 40 games

Sabres defeat Ducks in 10-round shootout

By Dan Arritt

NHL.com

March 18, 2017

ANAHEIM -- Zemgus Girgensons scored in the 10th round of the shootout to give the Buffalo Sabres a 2-1 win against the Anaheim Ducks at Honda Center on Friday.

Buffalo goaltender Anders Nilsson made 39 saves and stopped seven of nine in the shootout. Another attempt by the Ducks missed high. Rasmus Ristolainen extended the shootout for the Sabres by scoring in the ninth round, and Ryan O'Reilly scored in the second round.

Buffalo was 1-6 in the shootout this season.

"We've been struggling all season long with shootouts," Nilsson said. "It's nice to get a win tonight. ... It was good for our confidence, even though it's coming late in the season."

Ryan Getzlaf scored in the second round and Brandon Montour in the ninth round for Anaheim (37-23-11), which leads the Calgary Flames by one point for second place in the Pacific Division. Calgary defeated the Dallas Stars 3-1.

"We definitely had our chances," Ducks forward Rickard Rakell said. "It's too bad we didn't get two points, but we need to move forward and focus on the game [at the San Jose Sharks on Saturday]."

Buffalo (29-31-12) ended a six-game road-losing streak and a scoreless streak of 154:25. It lost 2-0 to the Los Angeles Kings on Thursday.

The Sabres tied this game 1-1 with 4:25 left in the second period. A slap shot from Jake McCabe went off the glove of goaltender Jonathan Bernier, hit O'Reilly in the skate as he jostled for position near the right post, and deflected into the net.

"At one point in the second period, we were outchancing them 7-1, and then they get a goal," Carlyle said. "That gave them life, and we had all kinds of opportunities before that. We just didn't finish."

The Ducks led 1-0 after Rakell backhanded a rebound at 11:48 of the first period. He leads Anaheim with 31 goals and has nine in his past 10 games.

The Ducks trail the Sharks by six points for first place in the Pacific Division with 11 games remaining. San Jose has one game in hand.

"We're going into a tough building, but we've played well there before," Carlyle said. "We aren't shaking in our boots, that's for sure."

Goal of the game

Ducks defenseman Cam Fowler got a shot through from the high slot after he received a pass from Montour. The puck hit Nilsson in the chest and popped in the air. When the puck came down outside the crease, Rakell was there to score.

Save of the game

In the opening minute of the third period and tied 1-1, Ducks defenseman Sami Vatanen carried the puck into the Sabres zone and spotted teammate Ryan Kesler driving toward the opposite post. Vatanen put his pass on Kesler's tape, but Nilsson slid over and made the save at 29 seconds.

Highlight of the game

Ristolainen had never scored in an NHL shootout. He skated in on Bernier's right, cut across the middle as he reached the hash marks, forcing Bernier to slide with him. Ristolainen then pushed the puck back to his backhand, reached across the front of Bernier and softly tapped the puck across the goal line.

Unsung performance of the game

With Buffalo defenseman Taylor Fedun out after sustaining a foot injury blocking a shot in the first period, and defenseman Zach Bogosian serving a five-minute fighting penalty early in the third, Ristolainen, McCabe, Cody Franson and Josh Gorges held up for the Sabres during that stretch.

They said it

"I didn't think we were as sharp with the puck. We had 22 shots that were directed toward the net that we missed. We had a 40-shot night. They had a bunch of blocked shots on us. That's an indicator we weren't sharp enough around the puck." -- Ducks coach Randy Carlyle

"We stole one tonight. It wasn't our greatest game, but it started with [Nilsson]. He played phenomenal and gave us a chance. It's been tough. It hasn't been a good trip, but every team on the West Coast always plays heavy and hard. They don't give you much." -- Sabres forward Ryan O'Reilly

Need to know

The shootout was the longest in Sabres history. The Ducks lost a 14-round shootout to the New York Islanders this season (Nov. 22). ... Jack Eichel assisted on O'Reilly's goal and has 28 points (eight goals, 20 assists) in the past 22 games. ... O'Reilly has nine points (four goals, five assists) in the past 10 games. ... The Ducks did not have a power play for the second time this season. The Sabres had one.

What's next

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

Ducks: At the San Jose Sharks on Saturday (10:30 p.m. ET; CSN-CA, PRIME, NHL.TV)

Nilsson, Sabres win 10-round shootout in Anaheim

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

March 18, 2017

ANAHEIM - Dan Bylsma said he had eight names written down on his coach's card in the event of a shootout on Friday. On most nights, eight names would be enough.

Friday was not most nights.

Rasmus Ristolainen scored on the ninth attempt of the shootout to keep the game alive and Zemgus Girgensons netted the winner one shot later to clinch a 2-1 victory for the Buffalo Sabres over the Anaheim Ducks at Honda Center.

Anders Nilsson made eight saves in the shootout, making him the winning netminder now in both of Buffalo's shootout victories this season. The 10 rounds made it the longest shootout victory in franchise history, and a much-needed one for a team that was 1-6 this season in games that made it past overtime.

"As a goalie, I've said it before, you can only control what you can control and my job is to stop the puck no matter what's happening in front of you," Nilsson said. "I was just trying to take it one shooter at a time and yeah, I'm happy we end up with the last goal."

Ryan O'Reilly, who scored Buffalo's only goal in regulation, beat Ducks goalie Jonathan Bernier to knot the shootout at one goal apiece on the Sabres' second attempt. Bylsma called it the most important moment of the shootout.

"Obviously I've struggled in that in the last two years. I've been terrible with the shootouts" O'Reilly said. "I just wanted to come in with speed. Come in with speed, make a quick little shoulder fake and try to get it up. It's about time we score in a shootout. It's been a long time."

After that, both goalies were perfect through the next five rounds until Brandon Montour finally beat Nilsson on the ninth attempt for Anaheim, setting the stage for Ristolainen's first shootout attempt in his NHL career.

What happened next seemed to come as a surprise to everyone on the Buffalo bench. Ristolainen approached with speed until he came in close, luring Bernier out to the right, and then reached out wide with his left hand on the stick to simply slip the puck in behind the Ducks goaltender.

O'Reilly said he was sure Ristolainen was going to shoot. Girgensons said he knew Ristolainen could make that move, but not in a game. Even Bylsma said Ristolainen had surprised everyone.

Everyone, that is, except for Nilsson.

"I actually knew he was going to do that," the Sabres goalie said, laughing. "I wanted to see him out there. He's done that move a couple of times to me in practice and scored so I had a feeling he was going to do it and I'm happy for him that it paid off."

While Nilsson made the next save against Nick Ritchie, Girgensons already knew he'd be coming up next and had decided what he was going to do. He too dragged Bernier to one side of the net, and then lifted the puck in over his pad.

The Sabres had gone winless in two games prior during their California road trip, including a 2-0 loss in Los Angeles on Thursday night. They had been unhappy with their start in that game against the Kings, but Bylsma shuffled the lines and - while the coach said he still would've liked to see more scoring chances for his side - their effort was certainly improved to begin the game.

The most notable line change came at the top, where Ryan O'Reilly was moved to the wing on a line with Jack Eichel and Tyler Ennis. Duties changed with the situations; O'Reilly and Eichel rotated faceoffs depending on the

spot on the ice, and the two were split up late in each period. But aside from some defensive unfamiliarity at wing on O'Reilly's part, the line felt comfortable.

"It was good, getting to play with Eichs is special, his speed, what he creates," O'Reilly said. "For myself, it's open up the ice, get the puck to him. If you do that and help him get speed he's going to beat a lot of guys. I thought we had some good shifts."

"Trying to jump start a line with two of our best players on a line together," Bylsma explained.

For all the scoring chances O'Reilly and Eichel had in the first period, it was a good bounce that led to O'Reilly tying the game at 1-1 with 4:25 remaining in the second. Jake McCabe took a shot from the point and the puck deflected wide off of Bernier's glove, then off of O'Reilly's skate and into the net.

It was a silver lining in a second period that saw the Sabres get outshot 17-7, during which Nilsson kept the team in the game. The goalie was a rock in his first start since being pulled against Columbus last Saturday, ending his night with 39 saves. The lone goal he allowed was to Rickard Rakell in the first period.

"I was just trying to go into this game and be focused and take it puck-by-puck and try to stop every puck that came against me," he said. "I felt good. I felt good from puck drop, since the game started and then I felt good throughout the whole game and I think the guys in front of me battled really hard."

Fedun exits with injury

Taylor Fedun left the game in the first period due to a foot injury and did not return.

Fedun had been recalled on Thursday morning to replace Justin Falk, who is day-to-day with an injury to his calf.

Up next

The Sabres will head home for a practice on Sunday, but then it's right back to the road for a game in Detroit on Monday night. It will be the fourth and final matchup of the season between the two teams, as well as Buffalo's final game at historic Joe Louis Arena.

The game on Monday can be seen on NBCSN, or you can listen live to Dan Dunleavy and Rob Ray on WGR 550. The puck drops at 7:30 p.m.

As more injuries hit, Ristolainen sees more ice time

By Chris Ryndak

Buffalo Sabres

March 19, 2017

The Buffalo Sabres have seen their share of injuries on the blue line this season. They've been in situations where they've needed multiple emergency recalls and it looks like that's the case once again.

Buffalo practiced with four defensemen at HarborCenter on Sunday before flying out to Detroit for a Monday night game against the Red Wings. Cody Franson, Taylor Fedun, Justin Falk and Dmitry Kulikov were all absent from the skate due to injury. While coach Dan Bylsma declared each player "day to day," it's unlikely that any of them will play in Detroit.

So Rasmus Ristolainen, Josh Gorges, Jake McCabe and Zach Bogosian will very well likely be joined by two new faces from Rochester. The Amerks had back-to-back games in St. John's, Newfoundland this weekend.

With both Fedun and Franson sustaining injuries during Friday night's 2-1 shootout win in Anaheim, the Sabres, at some points of the game, were down to three available defensemen.

"We got pretty taxed in that game and now we're stretching it thin. We're going to be calling up some guys to play in Detroit," Bylsma said. "We're in need of some defensemen right now and the Americans are traveling from St. John's today. They'll be landing at 4 o'clock in Toronto this afternoon."

Casey Nelson, Erik Burgdoerfer and Mat Bodie are among the candidates for a recall.

The burden of playing heavy minutes has been placed Ristolainen all season and the team will likely lean on him even more because of the recent crop of injuries.

He's topped the 30-minute plateau twice in the past four games, skating 30:02 on Friday. He's been at or above 30 minutes eight times this season, with his highest total coming on Jan. 20 against Detroit, when he played 35:24.

At 27:01, he's fourth in the NHL in average time on ice per game, behind only Dustin Byfuglien (27:24), Drew Doughty (27:16) and Ryan Suter (27:04).

"The workload is fine, it doesn't feel too much," Ristolainen said. "I didn't like my games in California so I've got to be better and we have another chance tomorrow night."

While Bylsma would ideally like to keep Ristolainen at around the 25-minute mark, circumstances haven't quite allowed for it.

"The problem with Rasmus playing 30 minutes is that he just plays them so hard and so physical. He's all in when he plays 30 minutes like that. That's tough for anybody to do," Bylsma said.

"There are some guys who play that much in their careers and tend to manage it a little bit better than Rasmus. Rasmus is just giving you everything he's got. If he's out there for two minutes for a shift, he will give you everything he has at the end of that two minutes."

Through 72 games, he's already set career highs in assists (38) and points (43) and power-play points (24).

Gorges has frequently been Ristolainen's defensive partner over the past three seasons and has been impressed with the maturation he's seen in Ristolainen as a player.

"From stepping in here two-and-a-half years ago - whatever it's been - you knew his skill level, you knew his ability to play the game. But as a young player, he just needed to develop mentally: How to handle himself, how to be a professional, how to know to be great night in and night out, his consistency," Gorges said.

"I think he's taken on that challenge of being a No. 1 guy on our team and a top player across the league. He wants that and I think that's been his biggest thing - his ability to go every night against the best players in all situations, log the minutes he's done."

And if you somehow missed it, Ristolainen pulled off this dazzling move in the ninth round of the shootout Friday night:

What's been the reaction to it and will it influence Bylsma's shootout strategy moving forward? Brian Duff has more on all that in today's Sabres in :90:

Sunday's lines and pairings

90 Ryan O'Reilly - 15 Jack Eichel - 63 Tyler Ennis
9 Evander Kane - 28 Zemgus Girgensons - 12 Brian Gionta
26 Matt Moulson / 44 Nicolas Deslauriers - 23 Sam Reinhart - 56 Justin Bailey
82 Marcus Foligno - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 52 Hudson Fasching

4 Josh Gorges - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
29 Jake McCabe - 47 Zach Bogosian

40 Robin Lehner
31 Anders Nilsson

Tomorrow night's game can be seen on NBCSN starting at 7:30 p.m. It'll be Buffalo's final game at Joe Louis Arena. Dan Dunleavy and Rob Ray will have the radio call on WGR 550.

We'll have full pre and postgame coverage for you at Sabres.com from Detroit, starting with tomorrow's Morning Skate Report.