



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

March 28, 2017

Blue Jackets pursue Capitals, face Sabres next

Associated Press

March 28, 2017

The playoffs are coming and Columbus' Sergei Bobrovsky is a hot goaltender. That's always a key to Stanley Cup playoff success. And with the first-round matchup the Blue Jackets might get, a hot goaltender will be a must.

The second- and third-place teams in a division face off in the first round. So get ready for the Blue Jackets and the Pittsburgh Penguins -- owners of the second- and third-best records in the league -- to play a high-profile first-round series.

The Washington Capitals are setting the pace in the Eastern Conference and the Metropolitan Division with 106 points. The Blue Jackets and Penguins have 103 each.

With less than two weeks left in the season, it is unlikely either team will finish worse than third. The best both can hope for is to surpass the Capitals and play a wild-card team in the first round.

Columbus continues its pursuit of Washington at home Tuesday night against the Buffalo Sabres, who hope to play the spoiler role for the third straight game.

The Sabres (32-32-12) beat Toronto on Saturday. The Maple Leafs are clinging to a one-point hold on third place in the Atlantic Division over Boston. On Monday, the Sabres all but doused the Florida Panthers' flickering Eastern wild-card hopes with a 4-2 victory.

"I liked the way we played," Sabres forward Marcus Foligno said of the Toronto victory. "We were physical, we didn't have sloppy breakouts the whole time and we were smart in the offensive zone.

"We shot a lot of pucks last game. That's what's got to happen in the next seven games. We have nothing to lose so we've just got to make sure we're playing as a team."

Columbus (48-19-7) has had a season full of positives. Bobrovsky is at the top of that list with seven shutouts, including a 1-0 victory Sunday over Philadelphia to snap a two-game losing streak.

"He's locked in," Blue Jackets coach John Tortorella told The Columbus Dispatch. "There's not a lot extra movement. He just looks confident. To have 100 points and more (in the standings), that's a key position, and he's been consistent with that all year long."

Bobrovsky owns a Vezina Trophy as the league's top goaltender already, but after three seasons of groin injuries his success this season has been more than anyone could have expected. His league bests of 40 victories, 1.99 goals-against average and .934 save percentage could mean a second Vezina Trophy.

Bobrovsky, though, prefers to talk about the final push toward the playoffs and his team's pursuit of the President's Trophy.

"Our most important games are ahead of us, but we still have to compete, still have to work hard," Bobrovsky told The Dispatch. "That's what will get us ready for the playoffs."

To try to take a little pressure off Bobrovsky, the Blue Jackets worked on some different power-play alignments in Monday's practice, according to bluejackets.com. The Jackets have failed to score on their past nine power plays in six games.

Buffalo has been hot on the power play. The Sabres converted twice Saturday and twice again against Florida.

Brian Gionta's power-play goal Monday was his 15th of the season in a milestone game. Gionta played in his 1,000th game for the Sabres. The team captain is the seventh player to do that in a Sabres uniform.

Gionta scores in 1,000th game, Sabres beat Panthers 4-2

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

March 27, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Sabres captain Brian Gionta was presented with a silver-plated stick before the opening faceoff of his 1,000th career game on Monday night.

Afterward, Gionta received a puck to go with it: The game-winner, in fact.

The 15-year NHL veteran celebrated his milestone evening by scoring what stood as the decisive goal in a 4-2 win over the Florida Panthers.

"It was an emotional night, a great thing the organization did and my teammates being a part of it was pretty special," Gionta said. "Seeing my family out there was pretty emotional and I'm just happy to get through it have them share in the moment."

Sabres players wore No. 12 Gionta T-shirts beneath their jerseys and felt it was only fitting their respected leader delivered by upping Buffalo's lead to 3-0 early in the second period.

"Tonight was his night," Marcus Foligno said. "Got a big goal. The boys were pretty pumped about that."

Gionta received a pass to the left of the net, then cut across the crease, drawing goalie James Reimer out of position. After Gionta's first attempt was denied by Reilly Smith, he flipped a bad-angle shot toward the net that deflected in off the hands of defenseman Jason Demers.

"Just a lucky bounce, I guess, on this night," he said.

Foligno, Ryan O'Reilly and Zach Bogosian also scored for the Sabres. Robin Lehner stopped 30 shots, including punching his glove hand out to get a piece of Smith's backhander on a penalty shot 5:23 into the third period.

Buffalo improved to 4-1 in its past five and earned its 76th point to move one back of the 13th-place Panthers in the Eastern Conference standings.

Jonathan Huberdeau had a goal and an assist and Jonathan Marchessault scored his team-leading 29th goal and sixth in three games. The Panthers lost for the first time in three games but dropped to 4-11-1 in their past 16.

Reimer gave up four goals on 22 shots and was pulled after Foligno beat him on the short side with a bad-angle shot from the lower left circle with 4:52 left in the second period. Reto Berra took over and finished with 10 saves.

Florida responded to the goalie change 62 seconds later, when Huberdeau scored from the slot to cut Buffalo's lead to 4-2.

Smith lamented the chance he squandered in being stopped on the penalty shot.

"It was a lot of opportunities out there," Smith said. "It was just tough that not a lot of them went in the back of the net."

The NHL's top-ranked penalty-killing unit shared part of the blame in allowing the Sabres to convert on their first two power-play chances.

"We didn't play the way we're supposed to," general manager and interim coach Tom Rowe said. "We weren't prepared mentally or physically, and that's what happens when you come into a building like this and they're ready and we weren't."

Buffalo does possess the NHL's top power-play unit.

O'Reilly opened the scoring with a power-play goal 3:21 in. Jack Eichel set it up by driving up the right wing and firing a bad-angle shot that caromed off Reimer's pad and into the slot to O'Reilly, who snapped the puck into the top left corner.

Gionta's goal also came with the man advantage. It was the 289th of his career and allowed him to reach the 15-goal mark for the ninth time in 15 seasons and first time in his three years in Buffalo.

NOTES: The Sabers honored Gionta before the game with a video tribute that included footage of him playing as a youngster and recollections and tributes from family, friends and teammates. They included former New Jersey Devils general manager Lou Lamoriello, who selected him in the third round of the 1998 draft. ... Buffalo's Zemgus Girgensons briefly made it 5-2 with a minute left in the second period, but the goal was disallowed following a video review determining the puck was kicked in through Berra's legs. ... Panthers LW Shawn Thornton played his 700th career game, while D Mark Pysyk, acquired by Florida in trade from Buffalo in June, played his 200th.

UP NEXT

Panthers: Continue four-game road trip at Toronto on Tuesday night.

Sabres: At Columbus on Tuesday night.

Quick Hits: Sabres 4, Panthers 2

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 27, 2017

On a night matching the NHL's No. 1 power play against its top-ranked penalty killers, the scorers got the upper hand on the defenders.

The Buffalo Sabres got goals from Ryan O'Reilly and captain Brian Gionta on their first two power plays and held on for a 4-2 victory over the Florida Panthers Monday before 18,564 in KeyBank Center. Buffalo has won two straight games and four of its last five.

The Sabres entered the game atop the league at 24.5 percent while the Panthers were at 86.1 percent on the PK -- and were 36 for their last 40. Buffalo finished 2 for 3.

Striking first: The Sabres went to power play at 1:25 of the first period on Jakub Kindl's tripping penalty and had five shots on goal on the man-advantage. The fifth one came with four seconds left on the penalty as Ryan O'Reilly drove a Jack Eichel rebound to the top corner past Florida goalie James Reimer. It was O'Reilly's 19th goal of the season.

Second of game, second of season: Zach Bogosian made it 2-0 at 14:06 of the first, going hard to the net to get his own rebound. His first shot went off the far goal post but Bogosian got to the puck first and jammed it through James Reimer's leg. It was his second goal of the season; the first was an overtime winner Jan. 21 in Montreal.

The Captain celebrates: Gionta made it 3-0 at 1:25 of the second, banking a puck home off Florida defenseman Jason Demers, who was standing in the crease. The goal came exactly a minute after Jonathan Huberdeau went off for tripping.

Spirit of 1,000 I: Gionta became the 10th player to appear in his 1,000th career game and the first for the Sabres since Mike Grier on Nov. 3, 2010. The others were Dick Duff (1971), Gilbert Perreault (1984), Craig Ramsay (1984), Don Lever (1986), Phil Russell (1986), Dale Hawerchuk (1995), Charlie Huddy (1996) and James Patrick (1999).

Spirit of 1,000 II: Gionta became the third Sabres player to score in his 1,000th game. The others were Perreault vs. Pittsburgh on Jan. 29, 1984 and Russell at Chicago on March 12, 1986. Russell, who played his first seven years for the Blackhawks, played the final 18 games of his 1,016-game career on defense with Buffalo over the '85-86 and '86-87 seasons.

Lots of help: Eichel and Matt Moulson each had two assists in the game. That improved Eichel to a point-a-game player for the season with 55 points in 55 games. He has 32 assists, matching his total over 81 games last year.

Panthers strike: Florida's Jonathan Marchessault scored his 29th of the season on a power play at 10:19 of the second, sweeping home a one-timer off a quick Jonathan Huberdeau pass.

Sabres get a gift: Marcus Foligno put the Sabres up 4-1 at 15:08 of the second with a wrist shot from a bad angle in the left circle. It was his 13th of the season. Panthers goalie James Reimer got yanked after that one in favor of Reto Berra. Reimer gave up four goals on 22 shots.

Panthers strike again: Ageless Jaromir Jagr bothered Evan Rodrigues near the goal line and the Buffalo rookie lost the puck in front of Huberdeau, who pulled it around Lehner with 3:50 left in the second to get the Panthers within 4-2.

No goal I: Zemgus Girgensons scored an apparent goal with 1:00 left in the second to make it 5-2 but it was wiped out on video replay for what was ruled as a kicking motion. Girgensons was getting hauled down by Nick Bjugstad and the puck went in off his foot but the Sabres were furious with the call. The entire bench erupted

when it was announced and alternate captain Josh Gorges accosted referee Brian Pochmarra for several seconds after the horn.

No goal II: The Panthers had a huge chance to get within a goal with 14:37 left but Reilly Smith was stopped on a penalty shot by Robin Lehner. Lehner -- who has not made a save in a shootout situation all season -- snuffed out Smith's deke by deflecting the puck with his left wrist.

Up Next: The Sabres play Tuesday night in Columbus, their third meeting against the Blue Jackets in 19 days. The teams split the first two. They don't play again until they host the New York Islanders here Sunday at 3.

Sabres stay the course to honor their captain

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 27, 2017

Before during and after the game, this was all about the man they call Gio.

As an organization, the Buffalo Sabres honored captain Brian Gionta's 1,000th NHL game with a video tribute and an on-ice presentation featuring his wife, children and parents that drew a standing ovation from the crowd Monday night in KeyBank Center.

Gionta's inspired teammates, who respect their captain like no other player in the dressing room, played inspired hockey for much of their 4-2 win over the Florida Panthers. After they game, they donned white T-shirts with a caricature of Gionta and his captain 'C' on the front and the word "Gio" and No. 12 on the back.

"That was pretty cool," said a beaming Gionta, all 5-foot-7 of him. "They said it was life-like, lifesize on the front."

Gionta has always played bigger than his size and he did again Monday, scoring what proved to be the game-winning goal on a power play 1:25 into the second period. His 15th of the season banked in off Florida defenseman Jason Demers and gave the Sabres a 3-0 lead.

Matt Moulson, who has tapped in a couple goals this season just before the line that could have gone to Gionta, was near the crease again but Gionta kept this goal by firing it to the goalmouth and getting good puck luck.

"I was joking with 'Mouls' that I didn't know if he was going to steal another one of mine," Gionta said. "I didn't know at first whether it went off him first or off the D. Just a lucky bounce I guess on this night."

"That's awesome. Good for him," said goalie Robin Lehner. "It was special night for him and his family and it was cool to be a part of."

Coach Dan Bylsma certainly liked the cool factor too.

"When he scored the goal, I think half our bench jumped up like it was a playoff goal," Bylsma said. "Everyone was pleased to see him get the reward and in a goal scorer's touch around the net."

Defenseman Josh Gorges has spent eight years with Gionta, more than half the captain's career between time with Montreal and Buffalo.

"To be able to be out there with him is a great honor with him but it's a proud moment for me being a teammate, being a friend," said Gorges, who joined Kyle Okposo and Ryan O'Reilly in presenting Gionta a framed painting during the ceremony. "To be able to witness the emotion of his family, it was a great night. Top it off, the guy scores and it ends up being a game-winner."

Lehner made 30 saves -- including a left wrist stop on Reilly Smith's third-period penalty shot that could have pulled the Panthers within a goal. He did it all for Gionta too.

"True professional, true leader," Lehner said. "He always leads by example and it was a big night for him."

The Sabres have won two straight and four of five games to get back to even with 76 points in 76 games (32-32-12). One frustrating sticking point to their season is that they're 19-14-6 against teams currently in the playoffs -- including a stunning 8-0-2 against the trio of Ottawa, the New York Rangers and Edmonton.

But they're just 13-18-6 against non-playoff teams, including a 7-12-6 mark against teams in the East on the outside looking in.

"We get swept by Carolina, we get swept by Boston. You can't do that in a season like this," said winger Marcus Foligno. "Against teams we're playing four or five times, you certainly have to get points from those guys. There's a lot of teams we didn't show up against and it's going to hurt us in the end."

The Sabres are 2-0-1 against Florida and persevered on this night. They had a Zemgus Girgenson goal disallowed on a controversial kicking call with a minute left in the second period and then had to kill off a weak Justin Falk penalty a few seconds later. They survived the penalty shot too. All good signs.

"We showed composure, a huge save by 'Lenny' on the penalty shot there," Gionta said. "It's a pivotal moment in the third period there that can change the momentum."

"We've got to start doing these things night-in and night-out and we wanted to have a good showing for Gio," Gorges said. "This is something we have to continue to learn from. When we do the right things, pay attention to details, success comes."

Sabres Notebook: One thousand games covered a lot of life for the Gionta family

By Amy Moritz

The Buffalo News

March 27, 2017

She remembers Draft Day like it was yesterday. That June day in 1998 in Buffalo at what was then called Marine Midland Arena. Brian Gionta wasn't supposed to make the NHL but there he was, being drafted by the New Jersey Devils.

Harvest was there that day. She's been there every day during her husband's hockey career. Monday night in KeyBank Center it was as much a celebration of 1,000 NHL games for her as it was for the current captain of the Buffalo Sabres.

"We joke around that it feels like yesterday that he was drafted then on the other hand, that part of our life feels forever ago," Harvest Gionta said. "He's been through three teams, he won a Stanley Cup, he's been to the Olympics, he's been captain of the Montreal Canadiens. Most importantly we have three children and then this circles back around and we end up back in Buffalo. So 1,000 games has covered a lot of life but on the other hand I remember him getting drafted like it was yesterday."

There has been a lot of life for Harvest and Brian, both Rochester natives who met while they were in high school at Aquinas. They've been together for 23 years and have three children – Adam (11), Leah (8) and James (4). And all that life hasn't been all unicorns and sunshine. Especially on the family.

"The sacrifice that they make is beyond anything that you could ever imagine," Brian Gionta said Monday morning before the Buffalo Sabres earned a 5-2 win over the Florida Panthers in KeyBank Center. "The long nights, missing holidays. You miss a lot of stuff and to have the support from my wife and the kids, it allows you to come the rink and be ready to play and be fresh and not have that on your mind that you're missing things at home or she's upset with you for traveling for 10 days while three kids are sick at the house. It's those little things. It's huge the support from her.

"It's constant," Gionta said of the support he gets from Harvest. "She had to sacrifice her career. She was a full-time teacher when she decided to move to New Jersey with me. She had to give up a lot and she still gives up a lot. At times it feels selfish, that you're doing it to realize your dream. I'm thankful that we've gotten through."

Harvest doesn't see it as a selfish dream. She sees it as her family's way of life. "We're a team," she said, evident when she slips into saying "we played in New Jersey for eight years." She stops to laugh. "I say 'we' as if I was out there playing."

There's an incredible feeling of gratefulness for Gionta's career path, one that had him with only three teams – New Jersey, Montreal and Buffalo – over those 1,000 games. All of his moves came during free agency and were planned and negotiated. The Giontas did not have to uproot their family's life mid-season, or several times during a season, a reality for many NHL families.

"I don't think it's an accident. I think we've been very stable because of the type of player and person that Brian is," Harvest said.

"Every decision that we make is based on our family. So as hard as it is for him to be away so much, the kids miss him terribly. I miss him terribly. It's the team that we are, the life that we chose. He was lucky enough to play and I chose to support him knowing full well what that would be.

"A career playing is something that so few people get to do. And you only get to do it for a short term. It's not something you can go back to later. You can't go back to this when you're 50 and say, 'Oh I think I want to do this. I missed out.' You don't have that option with this. So you want to take it and ride it as long as it's there because before you know it, it will be gone. I've always supported him, our whole family. We are a unit. Wherever he goes, we go and we make the best of every situation we've had to deal with."

The evening started with an official ceremony from the Buffalo Sabres honoring Gionta and his family on the ice with flowers, a painting and a silver hockey stick.

It continued with the captain scoring what proved to be the game-winning goal in a 4-2 win over the Florida Panthers.

It concluded with his teammates wearing t-shirts in the locker room featuring a cartoon caricature of Gionta with 1,000th NHL games on the front and "Gio" printed on the back.

"It was an emotional night," Gionta said after the game. "It was a great thing the organization did and my teammates being a part of it was pretty special. Seeing my family out there was pretty emotional. I was just happy to get through it and have them share in the moment.

"I was a little jittery those first couple of shifts but settled in a little bit."

The honor was a little uncomfortable for Gionta, who isn't a guy who puts himself out in the spotlight often, or at all if he can help it.

"I'm a guy that likes to stay behind the scenes," Gionta said. "I don't like to be out in front. For tonight, to be the focus early on for the ceremony, I mean I'm just a humble kid from Western New York. I just tried to take it all in."

Gionta has another honor on his resume, being named the Sabres nominee for the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy, as selected by the Buffalo chapter of the Professional Hockey Writers Association.

The award is given each year for perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey. Each chapter makes a nomination and the 30 names are entered into the vote for the honor. The trophy is presented at the NHL Awards ceremony in June in Las Vegas.

Gionta joked Monday morning about the guy in the other dressing room who had played in 1,700 games. "He's laughing at the thousand," Gionta said.

Monday was the 1,704th game in the career of ageless Florida forward Jaromir Jagr, fourth on the all-time list. Jagr was questionable after suffering an upper body injury Saturday but took the morning skate fully and was in the Panther's lineup Monday night in KeyBank Center.

Jagr has 763 goals, 1,146 assists and 1,909 points in a career that dates to 1990. He's second all-time in points (behind only Wayne Gretzky's 2,857), third all-time in goals (behind only Gretzky and Gordie Howe), and fifth in assists.

Thomas Vanek made his second appearance as a visitor in Buffalo this season – with his second team of the year. Vanek was acquired by Florida at the trade deadline from Detroit. Now 33, Vanek has 16 goals and 30 assists this season but just one goal and seven assists in 12 games for the Panthers.

"I was surprised actually how great of a setup it is in Florida to be honest with you," Vanek said Monday morning. "You hear how nice it is to live there away from the rink. But everything at the rink and how the players get treated, it's really been an eye-opener how great it is there."

Vanek will be heading into free agency this summer, and said both Detroit and Florida would be high on his list for a new deal going forward. The Panthers are his fifth team since the Sabres traded him to the Islanders for Matt Moulson in 2013.

Sabres double up Panthers 4-2

By Pat Malacaro

WGR 550

March 27, 2017

Brian Gionta's 15th goal of the season was the game winner, and came in the captain's 1000th NHL game to help the Sabres defeat the Florida Panther 4-2 on Monday night at KeyBank Center.

First Period

18:35 - An early power play could get Buffalo out in front and firing on all cylinders. Jack Eichel draws a power play with his work in the neutral zone, Jakub Kindl will sit for the next two minutes, as the league's best penalty kill goes to work.

16:39 - SABRES GOAL. The Sabres use a very good rebound at the front of the net to capitalize on the power play chance. Jack Eichel simply throws the puck at the net from around the goal line, James Reimer kicks the puck to the slot, and Ryan O'Reilly is able to get just enough on it to put it into the top corner of the net. Buffalo already has five shots on goal in the game. 1-0 BUF.

11:14 - The Panthers have been swarming all over the Buffalo zone, and Jaromir Jagr hits the goal post. Shots are now 8-7 Florida, a 7-2 flip from five minutes ago.

5:54 - SABRES GOAL. Zach Bogosian does not give up on the puck in the offensive zone, and gets rewarded with his second goal of the year. His initial shot from the blue line hit off of the inside of the goal post and did not go in the net, but his second chance when no one bothered playing the puck finds its way across the line. You always follow your shot, because that can happen. 2-0 BUF.

End of Period

Goal Summary

BUF: 3:21 - Ryan O'Reilly (19) PPG (Jack Eichel, Dmitry Kulikov). 14:06 - Zach Bogosian (2) (Zemgus Girgensons, Matt Moulson)

FLA: none

Penalty Summary

BUF: none

FLA: 1:25 - Jakub Kindl (2 min., tripping)

Shots on Goal

BUF - 10, FLA - 11

Second Period

19:35 - Again it is an early power play that gives Buffalo a chance to extend the lead. Kulikov, the former Panther, is tripped up by Jonathan Huberdeau and creates the 5-on-4 chance.

18:35 - SABRES GOAL. Of course the captain gets in on the scoring for the blue and gold. In his 1000th NHL game, Brian Gionta nets his 15th goal of the season. The linesman hands the puck over to the Buffalo bench, and it will be another souvenir for the well-respected captain. 3-0 BUF.

13:07 - Reimer does not look comfortable or confident in goal for the Panthers tonight. He is letting out big rebounds and is flopping all over the crease. The team in general cannot get out of its won way in the defensive zone.

11:23 - The Panthers head to the power play for the first time tonight, as William Carrier sits for tripping.

9:41 - PANTHERS GOAL. Some nice passing in a tight space yields the first goal of the night for the visitors as Joanthan Huberdeau makes a very nice back handed flip pass to Jonathan Marchessault. The forward buries the chance, and the Buffalo lead is cut to two goals. 3-1 BUF.

4:52 - SABRES GOAL. James Reimer again looks bad, allowing a short side goal to Marcus Foligno on a weak shot from the near side face-off dot, and Reto Berra will take over in goal. Sometimes it is just not your night. Jack Eichel will also pick up an asisst on the goal. 4-1 BUF.

3:50 - PANTHERS GOAL. Jaromir Jagr does a good job of fore checking, and it creates the turnover that leads to Florida's second goal of the night. Evan Rodrigues slides the puck right to Jonathan Huberdeau, who has a wide open net to slide the puck into a wide open net. 4-2 BUF.

1:00 - The Sabres thought they had their fifth goal of the night, but video review wiped it off the scoreboard. Zemgus Girgensons kicked the puck into the net as he was falling back. No goal, still 4-2 Sabres.

End of Period

Goal Summary

BUF: 1:25 - Brian Gionta (15) PPG (Matt Moulson). 15:08 - Marcus Foligno (13) (Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart)

FLA: 10:19 - Jonathan Marchessault (29) PPG (Jonathan Huberdeau, Keith Yandle). 16:10 - Jonathan Huberdeau (8) (unassisted)

Penalty Summary

BUF: 8:32 - William Carrier (2 min., tripping). 19:27 - Justin Falk (2 min., tripping)

FLA: 0:25 - Jonathan Huberdeau (2 min., tripping)

Shots on Goal

BUF - 14 (24), FLA - 6 (17)

Third Period

16:32 - Huberdeau takes excpetion to a hit leveled by Josh Gorges on Sasha Barkov, and the two players drop the gloves. Gorges quickly had the upper hand on Huberdeau and the fight ends quickly. Each player gets five for fighting.

14:37 - Lehner comes up big with a save on a penalty shot as Reilly Smith was awarded the chance after being hooked by Kulikov ona breakaway. The Panther still got a shot off before the penalty shot was awarded, but was not stopped twice. That is a big moment in the game for Lehner and the Sabres.

9:01 - Florida is going to go down swinging this period. They have carried the play for the most part, and have come close to getting within a goal of Buffalo once or twice, only to be stopped. If this pace keeps up it could be a sprint to the finish tonight.

5:40 - Time has melted off of the clock this period thanks to the up and down pace being played by each team. Shots this stanza are 9-5 in favor of Florida.

1:24 - Florida will have one last chance to get back in the game. Somehow Matt Moulson is called for interference, the Panthers will head to the power play in eight seconds.

End of Game

Buffalo 4, Florida 2

Goal Summary

BUF: none

FLA: none

Penalty Summary

BUF: 3:28 - Josh Gorges (5 min., fighting). 18:36 - Matt Moulson (2 min., interference)

FLA: 3:28 - Jonathan Huberdeau (5 min., fighting). 16:43 - Jaromir Jagr (2 min., hooking)

Shots on Goal

BUF - 8 (32), FLA - 15 (32)

Brian Gionta's 1,000-game milestone one for the underdog

By Leo Roth

Rochester Democrat & Chronicle

March 27, 2017

BUFFALO – Brian Gionta sat in his office, the spacious dressing room of the Buffalo Sabres, and smiled as I checked off the boxes.

An NCAA championship with Boston College. A Stanley Cup with the New Jersey Devils. Captain of the storied Montreal Canadiens and Sabres, the team he grew up rooting for. Team USA member in the Olympics and World Championships.

That's a storybook right?

"For sure," said Gionta, 38, the Greece native and pride of Aquinas Institute. "When you put it all together like that, 100 percent. I've been fortunate enough to pretty much do everything you can in the game. I'm thankful obviously for the support I've had from my family but also some of the people within the hockey community who believed in me, too. Without having the chance to prove yourself, I wouldn't be where I am."

Where Gionta was Monday night when the Sabres hosted the Florida Panthers at KeyBank Center was the doorstep of the NHL's 1,000 Games Club.

Following an emotional pregame ceremony, Gionta's skates hit the ice for the opening shift and he became the 312th player and just the 43rd American to reach the longevity milestone in the world's best and toughest league. He's just the 10th player to appear in his 1,000th game in a Buffalo uniform including Gil Perreault, the original Sabre.

Hockey has always been a family affair for the Giontas. Celebrating the moment on the ice was Team Gio, his parents Sam and Penny, wife Harvest, and the couple's children Adam, 11, Leah, 8 and James, 4. A touching video with tributes from family, teammates and former coaches began with a clip of Brian in his Rochester Youth Hockey uniform. GM Tim Murray presented him a silver stick.

Then the crowd and players from both teams showered him with applause, including Panthers legend Jaromir Jagr, 45, the Bilbo Baggins of the NHL who appeared in his 1,704th game.

And just to show his appreciation, Gionta scored his 15th goal of the season — the game-winner — early in the second period in the Sabres' 4-2 victory, sending about 50 family and friends stuffed into two luxury suites into a frenzy. He was the game's first star on a Hollywood-scripted night.

Getting one's head around 1,000 games is like getting one's arms around an elephant.

"You know, we never even thought one would be possible let alone 1,000," Sam Gionta said. "It didn't hit us until recently. You don't talk about it really, it creeps up and it's right there. It's just awesome."

Pittsford's Steve Bartlett, Gionta's longtime agent, was also in the building and beaming with pride.

"For anybody to be involved in the game at the professional level is amazing to begin with and then you take the character and quality Brian is as a person and it's a special story," Bartlett said. "When he broke in, there was a real sense that a guy his size couldn't play in the NHL and he's proven them all wrong. It's been a really great ride. He's the epitome of everything good in a professional athlete, from his community to his teammates and to the league as a whole because he's been a great ambassador for the game."

Yes, at 5-foot-7, Brian Gionta wasn't supposed to sip a cup of coffee in the NHL let alone drink from the Holy Grail during a 15-year playing career.

But as Sabres coach Dan Bylsma, who lost the 2003 Stanley Cup final to Gionta's Devils as a member of the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim and who later coached against him while with Pittsburgh, said, "I don't care how tall he is, it's how tall he plays."

Knowing how demanding the game is on the mind and body, playing long enough to be called an "old guy" is one of hockey's biggest accomplishments, Bylsma said.

"You just don't know how it's possible to play that many hockey games," he said.

And in Gionta's case, win over that many hearts and silence that many critics.

A third-round pick in 1998, Gionta beat tall odds just to make New Jersey's roster during an era when most teams wanted big players to compete against the clutch-and-grab tactics of the day. But GM Lou Lamoriello and coach Pat Burns believed anybody who could pile up 232 points in 164 collegiate games and lead his team to a national title — who once totaled 127 points in a 50-game season for the Niagara Scenics junior team — deserved the chance to prove everybody wrong.

And so the underdog did just that, Gionta's tenacity, fearlessness, speed, smarts, strength and scoring touch allowing him to establish himself with 37 goals his first three NHL seasons, before the 2004-05 lockout led to rules changes and some breathing room. He scored 48 goals that next season and he's hit double-digit goals 13 times overall.

"They took away the red line, called every interference you can imagine," said the ever-modest Gionta as if anybody could push a 50-goal year. "But I'm glad I broke in before any of that happened, to kind of prove myself."

Respect is earned and Gionta, a beloved teammate, continues to earn it through his work ethic, consistency and his kindness shown others. He and Harvest, who grew up in Charlotte, are active in both the Buffalo and Rochester communities where they keep homes.

At 22, however, a celebration of his durability and flexibility wasn't on Brian Gionta's mind. Survival was.

"I was never a sure-fire NHLer so it was try and make the league, try and stay in the league," said Gionta, who has 289 goals and 586 total points to go with another 68 points in 112 playoff games. "It's been that way year after year, just trying to make it one more year, one more contract and I've been pretty lucky."

While one could argue it was pretty unlucky to arrive in Buffalo at a time when the Sabres were undergoing a major remodeling project where the place was taken down to the studs, Gionta has relished and excelled in the role of veteran leader.

Nobody outworks him in practice or in the weight room, a key to his fountain of youth.

If he's asked to be a third-line checker or penalty killer, he does so with the enthusiasm of a 12-year-old pee wee. If it's time on the power play, he still flashes his offensive skills — he now has 15 goals and 33 points in 76 games. Gionta has topped 30 points each of his three Sabres' seasons, helping them regain respectability despite the fact they will miss the playoffs for a sixth consecutive year.

And if it's the media that needs a stand-up guy to lend some perspective after a tough loss, he does it with great professionalism and class. Can there be any doubt why Buffalo hockey writers nominated Gionta this year for the Bill Masterton Memorial Trophy given each year to an NHL player exemplifying perseverance, sportsmanship and dedication to hockey?

"He's been such an amazing leader for this team and a true professional," said forward Marcus Foligno, 25. "You look at him and he's still young, in great shape. I hope he goes for a couple hundred more games. The thing with Brian is that he does things the right way and for young guys on this team, he's a true role model."

The role models for Brian and his brothers Joe, an assistant coach at Aquinas, and Stephen, a forward with the New York Islanders with 662 NHL and AHL games to his credit, were their parents who ran a hardware store.

That environment taught the value of hard work. Of never taking a sale — or a hockey shift — for granted.

"It's his drive, his dedication and he's learned over the years how to take care of himself," Penny Gionta said. "And he just loves the game."

As a hockey dad today, Brian understands first-hand the sacrifices his parents made on all those wintry drives to Buffalo, Syracuse and Niagara Falls for youth hockey and junior games. In reflecting on how his dad drove to every one of his Boston College games, he sees the love in every mile.

"It's a big commitment but the joy of watching your kids doing what they love to do, there's nothing better," said Gionta, who has no plans to retire and would like to re-sign with Buffalo. "It's as much about my parents and family and people who have supported me along the way, all sharing this moment."

Yes, hockey has always been a family affair for the Giontas. His 1,000 NHL games are their 1,000 games. Minus the ice packs of course.

Sabres reward captain Brian Gionta with win over Panthers

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 27, 2017

BUFFALO – In the days leading to Brian Gionta’s 1,000th NHL game, the Sabres were a little nervous, even “walking on eggshells,” coach Dan Bylsma said.

No one wanted to talk about their captain’s milestone.

“Didn’t want to jinx it, so to speak,” Bylsma said after Gionta fittingly scored the winning goal in the Monday’s 4-2 win against the Florida Panthers.

But the Sabres loosened up, and following an emotional pregame ceremony honoring Gionta’s achievement, they played a terrific game, winning for the fourth time in five tries.

In a season filled with more losing, Monday was a rare night the Sabres could celebrate.

“It was an emotional night,” Gionta said. “(It was) a great thing the organization did and my teammates being a part of it was pretty special. Seeing my family out there was pretty emotional. I’m just happy to get through it and have them share in the moment.”

Bylsma added: “You saw our guys play with that respect for him.”

The highlight, of course, was Gionta’s power-play goal 1:25 goal into the second period, his 288th in the NHL and 52nd winner.

“Half our benched jumped up like it was a playoff goal,” Bylsma said. “I think everyone was pleased to see him get the reward and in a fitting way.”

Some luck helped Gionta score his 15th goal to the season. The diminutive 38-year-old winger cut across the crease and appeared to wait too long to shoot. But he banked the puck off Panthers defenseman Jason Demers, and it deflected past goalie James Reimer.

Bylsma said it was “kind of a goal scorers goal around the net.”

“I didn’t know at first whether it went off him or the D, just a lucky bounce, I guess, on this night,” Gionta said. “I had a couple shots early and (was) a little jittery those first couple of shifts but settled in a little bit.”

After the game, Sabres defenseman Josh Gorges, Gionta’s close friend and teammate for eight years dating back to their days with the Montreal Canadiens, still seemed emotional.

“To be able to be out there with him, it’s a great honor for him, but it’s a proud moment for me being a teammate, a friend,” Gorges said. “To be able to witness the emotion of his family, it was a great night, and then to top it off, the goal he ends up scoring, it’s the game winner.”

Gorges presented Gionta a painting during the ceremony with teammates Kyle Okposo and Ryan O’Reilly.

“I’m a guy that likes to stay behind the scenes, I don’t like to be out in front of it,” Gionta said. “So for tonight to be the focus early on for the ceremony and whatnot, I’m just a humble kid from Western New York and I just try to take it all in.”

In the happy Buffalo dressing room before the team departed for tonight’s road tilt in Columbus, players were sporting Gionta jersey shirts with a caricature of him.

“That’s pretty cool,” Gionta said. “They said it was kind of a life-size picture of me in the front. (For) the guys to be a part of it and do what they did, it’s just pretty special.”

Gionta's night almost overshadowed the Sabres' second straight victory. The Sabres also soundly defeated Toronto 5-2 on Saturday.

What has been theme of the two games?

"When you want to break it down, guys kept their shifts short, we were able get the intensity, the pace up," Gorges said.

Bylsma added: "We come out with a lot of energy, come out on the forecheck, come out in the offensive zone."

O'Reilly's power-play goal opened the scoring 3:21 into the game. Zach Bogosian followed at 14:06.

Following Gionta's score, Jonathan Marchessault's power-play goal 10:19 into the second period got the Panthers back in it. But Marcus Foligno scored at 15:08, putting Reimer on the bench. Jonathan Huberdeau scored before the period ended.

The Sabres had a fifth goal called back late in the second period. After watching replays, officials ruled Zemgus Girgensons, whose foot hit the puck because Nick Bjugstad hauled him down, kicked the puck in.

Early in the third period, Sabres goalie Robin Lehner stopped Reilly Smith's penalty shot after he zoomed in. Lehner, who has struggled mightily in shootouts this season, played the shooter aggressively.

"I tried to play it a little bit as a breakaway," Lehner said. "He came with a lot of speed, too. It's a little bit easier for me."

Sabres captain Brian Gionta honored for 1,000th game

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 27, 2017

BUFFALO – Sabres winger Tyler Ennis said undersized NHL players – a “brotherhood,” he called them – share “an unspoken bond.”

Small players, of course, have the odds stacked against them. Only they can truly understand what they endured to make the league.

Fifteen or 20 years ago, it was even tougher for them to crack the NHL. That’s why Ennis, who’s listed at 5-foot-9, grew up idolizing diminutive stars, including 5-foot-7 Sabres captain Brian Gionta, who played his 1,000th NHL game Monday, a 4-2 win against the Florida Panthers.

“Brian was definitely an inspiration for me,” Ennis said Monday morning. “You want to talk about (Martin) St. Louis and (Daniel) Briere, but Gio was equally important inspiring me to be an NHL player.”

To Ennis, seeing Gionta thrive in the NHL “proved that you can do it.”

“He’s shorter than I am and he’s played 1,000 games,” Ennis said. “I got to look up at everyone I’m playing against, and Gio’s smaller than I am. He’s got an extremely big heart, he’s got a work ethic and he’s tenacious, and that’s everything you need to be a small guy. On top of that, he’s scored almost 50 goals (in a season).”

As another trying season winds down, the Sabres finally celebrated something special Monday.

The Sabres honored Gionta, who played his first game Dec. 30, 2001 with the New Jersey Devils, in a pregame ceremony.

They played a stirring video tribute before his wife, children and parents joined him on the ice. They also presented him with a painting and a silver stick.

Gionta then started the game beside center Ryan O’Reilly and Kyle Okposo.

Monday was all about Gionta, the 38-year-old Greece native who has enjoyed a long and unlikely career thanks to a mix of talent and tenacity few players possess.

Gionta held court Monday morning, answering questions from a crowd of reporters.

While Gionta started his career in New Jersey – he won the Stanley Cup in 2003 – and later captained the storied Montreal Canadiens, he always wanted to play for what he considers to be his hometown team.

“It’s the team you grew up watching, fell in love with, you dreamed of being in the NHL in,” Gionta said prior to scoring his 289th NHL goal. “For it to have lasted this long, I would have never imagined it. To be able to come here to play was pretty special.”

Gionta became the 10th player to appear in his 1,000th NHL game as a member of the Sabres, joining Dick Duff, Gilbert Perreault, Craig Ramsay, Don Lever, Phil Russell, Dale Hawerchuk, Charlie Huddy, James Patrick and Mike Grier.

Gionta became the 312th NHL player to reach the milestone and the 43rd American. He played 473 games with the Devils and 303 with Montreal. Monday was his 224th appearance with the Sabres.

“That’s a huge, huge honor in this league, a huge milestone and accomplishment,” Sabres winger Marcus Foligno said. “A thousand games in the NHL is rare.”

Gionta might keep going, too. His three-year contract expires following the season. He said Monday he would "assess" his career later on.

"The way he looks, he scores, is in shape as a 38-year-old, I don't think there's any problem him getting to 40 and playing," Foligno said.

Gionta: "I'm still loving what I'm doing. I still love coming to the rink. I still love playing."

The "brotherhood," Ennis said, is proud of Gionta.

"We're all excited for him and happy for him, and it feels like a win for all of us smaller guys to see a guy play 1,000 games," he said.

xxx

Panthers defenseman Mark Pysyk, who spent four seasons with the Sabres, played his 200th NHL game Monday.

What did Pysyk, 24, learn from his two years with Gionta?

"Just how to be a pro," he said. "Just every day he brings it, no matter how he's feeling. You'd never know by the way he's acting on the ice or acting in the room. If he didn't get a good sleep or if he's grumpy, you'd never know. He's always cheerful and he always had a good attitude.

The Sabres traded Pysyk, 24, to the Panthers in the deal that brought defenseman Dmitry Kulikov to Buffalo on June 25.

5 Observtions: Gionta, Sabres beat Panthers 4-2

By Matt Bove

WKBW

March 27, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - "I'm just a humble kid from Western New York. I just tried to take it all in."

That's what Sabres captain Brian Gionta had to say after Monday's 4-2 win over the Florida Panthers. It was a night that Gionta will surely never forget.

On Monday the 38-year-old became just the 312th player in NHL history to play 1,000 games. The Rochester native also becomes only the 43rd American to reach the milestone.

But wait, there's more. In the second period, Gionta scored his 15th goal of the season on the Sabres second power play of the evening. It turned out that the goal was also the game-winner. Doesn't get much more fitting than that.

"It was an emotional night and a great thing the organziation did and my teammates being a part of it was pretty special" Gionta added. "To see my family out there, it was pretty emotional and I'm just happy to of got through it and have them share in the moment."

Life without Rasmus Ristolainen

The Sabres are now 2-0 without Ristolainen this season.

Hack.

Quality goaltending and improved defense have certainly helped, but the biggest difference has been the Sabres offensive production. In their previous five games [before Ristolainen suspension] the Sabres scored six goals in five games [1.25 goals per game]. In their last two games, the Sabres have found the back of the net 9 times [4.5 goals per game].

What has also been surprising was how effective the team has been without Assistolainen. In Buffalo's last two outings they are 4-for-5 with the man advantage. No one is suggesting the Sabres are better without Ristolainen, that would be ludicrous, but it has been nice to see the other guys step up during his absence.

Another Eichel observation

Jack Eichel is now averaging a point per game. In 55 games played since returning from injury Eichel has scored 23 goals and added 32 assists [55 points].

Last year Eichel finished his rookie season with 56 points in 81 games played.

Connor McDavid, Sidney Crosby, Patrick Kane, Brad Marchand, Nicklas Backstrom, Nikita Kucherov, Mark Scheifele and Evgeni Malkin are the only other players to average a point per game [minimum 50 games played].

Lehner looks good yet again

Robin Lehner turned away 30 of Florida's 32 shots including all 15 in the third period. His biggest save of the evening came when he stopped Reilly Smith on a penalty shot in the final period. Smith tried to fool Lehner with a forehand-backhand move, but Lehner turned him away.

Lately, Lehner has been one of the Sabres best players. Night after night he seems locked in and calm between the pipes.

Make or break time

That's how many points the Sabres had last season. They currently have 76 points [in 76 games played]. That leaves the Sabres with six games to get at least six points, which would surpass last year's total. I don't think anyone is content with how this season has gone, but with the injuries the team has suffered a nice little run down the stretch could give fans something to be optimistic about moving forward. If that run doesn't happen at least Sabres fans have Jack Eichel to be excited about.

Gionta set to become only the 43rd American to play 1,000 career games

By Matt Bove

WKBW

March 27, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - Buffalo Sabres captain Brian Gionta is getting ready to join some pretty elite company. On Monday, barring anything unexpected, Gionta will play in his 1,000th career National Hockey League game, making him only the 312th player to accomplish the milestone.

The Rochester native will also become only the 43rd American to lace up the skates 1,000 times in the N.H.L.

"I've been fortunate to have been healthy and have a long career," Gionta told Sabres.com. "I think when I get out there it will be a little different but right now, it hasn't really sunk in."

Career at a glance:

It all started in 1998 when Gionta was drafted by the New Jersey Devils in the third round [82nd pick]. Gionta finished his four-year career at Boston College winning a National Championship as the team's captain.

After college, Gionta played in the American Hockey League for the Albany River Rats but was called up to make his N.H.L. debut halfway through the season for the New Jersey Devils.

"[I'm] Just fortunate that some people believed in me back in the day, the Devils for giving me a chance to break into the league," Gionta added. "I never thought it would last this long, but I'm just happy to be a part of it."

Gionta spent seven seasons with the Devils and won a Stanley Cup in 2003. Statistically, his best season came in 2005-2006 [the year after the lockout] when Gionta scored 48 goals, 41 assists, and 89 points, 29 more than he's had in any other season as a professional.

A few years later Gionta signed with the Montreal Canadiens where he would spend the next five seasons. In his second year with Montreal Gionta became only the second American-born player to captain the Canadiens.

On July 1, 2014, Gionta came home, signing a three-year contract with his hometown team, the Sabres. Before the start of the 2014 season, Gionta was named the team's captain.

"It's the team you grew up watching, " Gionta added. "You dreamed of being in the NHL, and to have lasted this long I would've never imagined and to be able to come here and play was pretty special."

High praise on and off the ice:

"You want to know how to be a professional? You want to know how to work? You want to know how to do it right? Just look at Brian Gionta." Sabres head coach Dan Bylsma told Sabres.com. "That's what I hope our young players look at and learn from and take to their own games."

"He's a good guy. If anything, he treats people with respect," Sabres and Canadiens teammate Josh Gorges added. "I think, in turn, he gains a lot of respect from the people around him. That's something, if you're a young guy, you look at. And respect it's a big word, but it's a big part of his game."

"He's a tremendous leader," Sabres forward Marcus Foligno told reporters. "He's, I think, the definition of a professional. That sums it up. The way he prepares, keeps his body in shape and is great in the community, great as a leader. Everyone in this room looks up to him. Tremendous amount of respect for the guy and it's an honor to be a part of his 1000th game."

The future:

Gionta is under contract with the Sabres for seven more regular season games. The 38-year-old has yet to say whether or not he'll retire, resign with the Sabres or look for opportunities elsewhere.

At the N.H.L trade deadline, Gionta received interest from other teams but asked Sabres General Manager Tim Murray if he could remain in Buffalo. Murray obliged, allowing Gionta to finish the season with the blue and gold.

But what exactly does the future hold?

"I don't know," Gionta said with a smirk on his face. "Like I said before, I am still loving what I am doing, and I still love coming to the rink, still love playing, so, we will just take it a year at a time from here."

The Buffalo Sabres will honor Gionta with a special pregame ceremony before Monday's game against the Florida Panthers. Fans are encouraged to get to the game early.

Gionta scores on milestone night as Sabres top Panthers

By Nick Wojton

The Daily News

March 28, 2017

BUFFALO – Brian Gionta scored what went down as the game-winning goal in his 1,000th career game as the Buffalo Sabres defeated the Florida Panthers 4-2 on Monday at KeyBank Center.

Along with Gionta, Ryan O'Reilly, Zach Bogosian, and Marcus Foligno all scored for Buffalo (32-32-12 overall – 76 points).

Florida (33-31-11 overall – 77 points) had goals from Jonathan Marchessault and Jonathan Huberdeau.

O'Reilly opened the scoring on a rebound off a Jack Eichel shot from the boards 3:21 into the game and then Bogosian doubled Buffalo's lead 14 minutes in as he put in a rebound as well.

Gionta, on another rebound, this time on the power play, gave the Sabres a 3-0 lead one minute into the second period.

Florida then responded on a power play of their own midway through the game as Marchessault's one-timer from the high slot beat Robin Lehner.

Before the end of the second, Foligno responded for Buffalo, giving the Sabres a 4-1 lead. On that goal, Eichel had a second assist in the game, giving him 55 points in 55 games played this season.

Reto Berra (10 saves) replaced James Reimer (18 saves) in the Florida net following the goal.

Huberdeau scored only a minute after Foligno bringing the score to 4-2 but the final period was scoreless thanks to Lehner (30 saves) as the goalie stopped Reilly Smith on a penalty shot.

Buffalo will travel to Columbus tonight to face the Blue Jackets.

Panthers fail to gain ground in playoff race

By Joe Yerdon

NHL.com

March 28, 2017

BUFFALO -- The Florida Panthers missed an opportunity to gain ground in the Stanley Cup Playoff race with a 4-2 loss to the Buffalo Sabres at KeyBank Center on Monday.

Florida (33-31-11) is seven points behind the Boston Bruins for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference with seven games remaining.

"We didn't play the way we're supposed to," Panthers coach Tom Rowe said. "We weren't prepared mentally or physically, and that's what happens when you come into a building like this and they're ready and we weren't. That's what happens."

The Sabres (32-32-12) have won four of their past five games.

Ryan O'Reilly gave the Sabres a 1-0 lead when he put a rebound of Jack Eichel's shot past James Reimer for a power-play goal at 3:21 of the first period.

Zach Bogosian made it 2-0 at 14:06 of the first period when he put a rebound of his own shot that went off the post and past Reimer for his second goal.

Brian Gionta made it 3-0 with a power-play goal at 1:25 of the second period when he shot the puck from the side of the net off Jason Demers and past Reimer.

Gionta played in his 1,000th NHL career game.

"It was a special night for Brian and his family and one he richly deserved, but when he scored the goal, I think half our benched jumped up like it was a playoff goal," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "I think everyone was pleased to see him get the reward and in a fitting way. It was kind of a goal scorer's goal around the net."

Jonathan Marchessault made it 3-1 with a power-play goal at 10:19 of the second period. Marchessault received a pass from Jonathan Huberdeau in the slot and took a shot that beat Robin Lehner for his 29th goal of the season and his sixth in the past three games.

Marcus Foligno made it 4-1 at 15:08 of the second period when he took a shot from near the boards that beat Reimer for his 13th goal.

Reimer was replaced by Reto Berra after Foligno's goal. Reimer allowed four goals on 22 shots; Berra made 10 saves.

"Any time you don't win at this stage of the season it's a tough one to swallow and there's no accepting for that," Panthers defenseman Keith Yandle said.

Huberdeau scored 1:02 later when he faked a shot and slipped the puck past Lehner to make it 4-2.

Lehner made 30 saves.

Goal of the game

Huberdeau pulled back as though he was going to take a snap shot, which was enough to get Lehner out of position for a deke.

Save of the game

Lehner turned aside Reilly Smith's penalty shot at 5:23 of the third period. "I tried to play it a little as a breakaway. He came with a lot of speed too. It's a little bit easier for me. I'm fortunate, I have a hard time handling when it comes low," Lehner said.

Highlight of the game

Gionta's bank shot proved to be the game-winner. "I didn't know at first whether it went off [Matt Moulson] or the [defenseman], just a lucky bounce I guess on this night," Gionta said.

Unsung performance of the game

Sabres defenseman Josh Gorges was plus-2 with four hits and played 3:46 of his 16:34 on the penalty kill.

They said it

"I'm a guy that likes to stay behind the scenes; I don't like to be out in front of it. So for tonight to be the focus early on for the ceremony and whatnot, I'm just a humble kid from Western New York and I just try to take it all in." -- Sabres captain Brian Gionta on his 1,000th NHL game

"I don't think we were as good as we were last game. I think we knew coming into this game, even though we scored seven last game, we knew we had to be just as good defensively. Speaking for myself, I know I wasn't as good as I needed to be and it's ... I'll have to be better tomorrow." -- Panthers defenseman Keith Yandle

Need to know

Marchessault leads the Panthers with 29 goals. ... Eichel had two assists and has 55 points (23 goals, 32 assists) in 55 games. ... The Sabres are 8-1-1 in their past 10 games against Atlantic Division teams, their best stretch against divisional opponents since 2010-2011.

What's next

Panthers: At the Toronto Maple Leafs on Tuesday (7:30 p.m. ET; TSN4, FS-F, NHL.TV)

Sabres: At the Columbus Blue Jackets on Tuesday (7 p.m. ET; FS-O, MSG-B, NHL.TV)

Gionta scores winner for Sabres in 1000th NHL game

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

March 28, 2017

Time seemed to drag on as Brian Gionta dragged across the net in the second period of the Buffalo Sabres' game against the Florida Panthers on Monday night. It was clear that Gionta, in alone, had a chance to score, but the window had begun to close as he drifted through the crease and away from the Florida goal.

We've seen Gionta score in that situation before, and this time he was able to bank the puck into the net off of Florida's Jason Demers. It was the perfect moment to highlight a memorable night for the Sabres captain, one that began with him being honored for his 1,000th NHL game with his family on the ice and ended with the Sabres celebrating a 4-2 victory.

Gionta became the third Sabre to score a goal in his 1,000th NHL game, following in the footsteps of Gilbert Perreault and Phil Russell.

"It was an emotional night," Gionta said. "A great thing the organization did and my teammates being a part of it was pretty special but, seeing my family being out there was pretty emotional and just happy to have go through it and have them share in the moment."

Ryan O'Reilly, Zach Bogosian and Marcus Foligno also scored goals for Buffalo, while Jack Eichel tallied two assists. Robin Lehner made 30 saves.

The game began with a pregame ceremony in which Gionta was greeted by his parents, wife and children and awarded a commemorative painting from teammates O'Reilly, Josh Gorges and Kyle Okposo and a silver stick from Sabres general manager Tim Murray. You can watch the full ceremony below.

If the ceremony was a tribute from the organization as a whole, the players honored their captain with the way they played. Bogosian said there was a buzz in the dressing room already on Monday morning, and the Sabres channeled that energy into a similar performance as the one that led to a 5-2 win over Toronto on Saturday.

"When we got through the last game against Toronto, we recognized that when we play a certain way and we play that way consistently throughout the game, we have success," Gorges said. "We give ourselves a chance.

"We wanted to make sure we followed that up again tonight, one because we've got to start learning how to do these things night in and night out and two obviously we wanted to have a good showing for Gio."

For the second game in a row, it was O'Reilly who opened the scoring. Eichel carried the puck with speed into the offensive zone on the power play and took a bad-angle shot off the pad of Florida goalie James Reimer, creating a rebound for O'Reilly to bury from the slot 3:21 into the contest.

The Sabres added to their lead before the end of the period when Bogosian made a quick pass on the breakout to begin the rush and then ended up getting a shot from the right circle on the other end. The shot beat Reimer between the pads but deflected off the post, and Bogosian raced in to clean up his own rebound.

By the time Gionta scored his goal on a power play 1:25 into the second period, he had already had some chances in front of the net. The possibility of seeing their captain score in his 1,000th game, therefore, was already in the back of their minds when his puck reached the back of the net.

"When he scored the goal, I think half our bench jumped up like it was a playoff goal," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "I think everyone was pleased to see him get the reward and kind of in a fitting way."

"They were all pumped," Gionta said. "Like I said, I've had a lot of great teammates over the years and that's what makes this game special, is being day in and day out in the battle, in the trenches with these guys. The way that they treated me really made it a special night for me."

After the game, players in the dressing room wore special t-shirts brought by O'Reilly that featured a cartoon caricature of Gionta on the front with the nickname "Gio" and the No. 12 on the back, another sign of respect for the captain.

"I think we saw our guys play with that respect for him in the game tonight," Bylsma said.

Florida would go on to score twice in the second period, first on the power play from Jonathan Marchessault and then off the stick of Jonathan Huberdeau, meaning Gionta's goal ended up standing as the game-winner, an appropriate conclusion for a notoriously team-first player.

Of course, with that team-first attitude also comes an unwillingness to be in the spotlight. From that standpoint, for as much as Gionta appreciated the ceremony and the prizes and the t-shirts, it also came with a bit of discomfort.

"It's always hard," he said. "I'm a guy that likes to be behind the scenes, I don't like to be out in front. So tonight, to be the focus early on for the ceremony and what not, it's ..."

Gionta paused.

"I'm just a humble kid from Western New York and I just try to take it all in."

Notes and numbers

With his two-point night, Eichel now has 55 points in 55 games this season. That makes him one of 10 Sabres averaging a point per game or more this season, placing him in some pretty elite company. Tom Martin from WIVB compiled this list:

NHL players currently averaging a point per game:

Crosby
Stamkos*
McDavid
Kucherov
Malkin
Kane
Backstrom
Marchand
Scheifele
Eichel

*in 17gp

Bogosian, meanwhile, now has five career goals against Florida, his most against any opponent.

Up next

The Sabres play again on Tuesday when they visit the Columbus Blue Jackets for the third and final meeting between the two teams this seasons. Each team earned a win when they met on back-to-back nights for a home-and-home series earlier this month.

Coverage on Tuesday begins at 6:30 p.m. with the Tops Pregame Show on MSG-B, or you can listen live on WGR 550. The puck drops between the Sabres and Blue Jackets at 7 p.m.