



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

March 4, 2017

Lightning, Sabres still in playoff contention

Associated Press

March 4, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. -- The Buffalo Sabres and Tampa Bay Lightning aren't out of playoff contention yet, but time is not on their side.

The Sabres (27-26-11, 65 points) and Lightning (29-26-8, 66 points) meet on Saturday at 7 p.m. with one point separating the two and plenty of ground to make up in order to push for the final wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference. Heading into Saturday night's late games, the New York Islanders held the final wild-card position with 70 points.

Buffalo snapped a four-game losing streak with a dominant 6-3 win over the Arizona Coyotes on Thursday. Buffalo outshot Arizona 41-22 overall but needed to dig deep in the third period to break a 3-3 tie on Evander Kane's goal with 5:36 remaining. Buffalo then added two empty-net goals to seal the victory.

The victory was vital for the Sabres, who had surrendered late leads in recent losses to Arizona and Nashville. The Sabres had appeared to be making a playoff push prior to their bye week in late February, but stumbled following the bye with their extended losing streak.

"If we want to be the team we want to be, I think we've got to learn a little bit better on how to play with the lead and do a little bit of a better job of getting that next goal and stepping on the other team's throat and not letting them get back in the game," Sabres center Jack Eichel said. "I don't know what it is, but we'll take the two points at this point. We just need to keep rattling wins off and see where it takes us."

Both Eichel and Ryan O'Reilly had three points in the win over Arizona.

"It's a better response," O'Reilly said. "I don't think it's going to get any easier. But it is a good win. We've got to use momentum to carry it over."

The Sabres will be without forward Kyle Okposo against Tampa Bay; Okposo left Thursday's game late in the second period after a hard hit to the boards and suffered a rib injury on the play. Okposo leads the team in scoring with 43 points (19 goals, 24 assists) in 63 games.

The Lightning had been on a roll heading into Friday night's game against Pittsburgh, which resulted in a temporary setback. With a record of 7-1-2 in their previous 10 games, the Lightning fell in a 5-2 road defeat to the Penguins.

"This is frustrating," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said. "But we've been on a good run here. We weren't probably going to go 20-0 down the stretch, but it makes (Saturday) pivotal because we have no margin for error."

Adam Erne scored his first career goal for Tampa Bay in the loss to Pittsburgh. Peter Budaj made 30 saves in his Tampa Bay debut after being acquired from Los Angeles via trade on Feb. 26.

Nikita Kucherov leads the Lightning in points with 62 (28 goals, 34 assists).

Sabres' Okposo to miss at least 2 games due to rib injury

Associated Press

March 3, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) -- Buffalo Sabres points leader Kyle Okposo will miss the team's two games this weekend because of an injury to his ribs.

Coach Dan Bylsma did not reveal the nature of the injury and said it was too early to determine how long Okposo might be sidelined. The top-line winger had two assist before being hurt in the second period of a 6-3 win over Arizona on Thursday.

Buffalo hosts Tampa Bay on Saturday night and travels to play Pittsburgh the following day.

Okposo was the team's top free-agent addition last summer and leads Buffalo with 43 points (19 goals, 25 assists) in 63 games.

Foligno's game features physicality but can also bring some goals

By Amy Moritz

The Buffalo News

March 3, 2017

When Marcus Foligno secured an empty-net goal Thursday night, it marked the first time in over a year that he had scored two goals in one game.

In six-years in the National Hockey League, the Buffalo Sabres forward has not been pegged as a goal scorer. His contributions often come in other ways not noted among the stats of the final game summary -- the space he creates for his linemates, the havoc he can cause when parked in front of opposing goalies, the physical play which can wear down opponents over the course of 60 minutes.

Still, the goals are nice. And Foligno can score them. They just seem to come in streaks.

Thursday's two goals, a short-handed finish of a Ryan O'Reilly play and the empty-netter, gave Foligno three goals in his last four games.

His longest goal-scoring streak of the season is three games, from Jan. 5-Jan. 10. That was part of a stretch where Foligno had five points in seven games.

But then came the opposite kind of streak, where he managed just one goal in 20 games.

"Little frustrated," Foligno said about the drought, "but I feel like I was doing the little things right and contributing to help us win. Playing hard, still. Playing physical. I wasn't shying away from things. I was just not getting bounces, not getting opportunities like I had when I was on that streak. Happy to kind of be back on the opposite side of it. Playing with Jack and Sam you've got to get open. You've got to get to the net and then create chances that way."

In Thursday's 6-3 win over the Arizona Coyotes, Foligno played with Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart. He was again on their line Friday as the team practiced in HarborCenter to prepare for back-to-back weekend games, hosting Tampa Bay in KeyBank Center Saturday night, then traveling to Pittsburgh to face the Penguins on Sunday.

While Foligno's value often comes away from the score sheet, he does have a career-high 12 goals this season and part of that comes from playing with offensive talents like Eichel and Reinhart.

"I know that goal scoring isn't my first choice of what my role is out there," Foligno said. "I know it's hard play, physicality, and good defensive play. But there is creativity in my game. It just has to come out in smart ways, let's put it that way. It can't be in tough times on the ice where you've got to get a puck in deep. It's got to be smart, maybe down low and things like that. Trying to be more creative but with Sam and Jack that stuff just comes out of you."

The other part of his game that emerges, the one the Sabres need most from Foligno, are hits. Big hits. And he does that. Foligno had a game-high eight hits in the win over Arizona.

"I don't know where he is in the league at this moment, but he's certainly the leader on our team by a good margin," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "And I think he's a presence out there that other teams notice and are quite leery of."

Bylsma noted that Thursday there "were at least seven times he's standing at the net either occupying space or right in front of the goalie. Whether we shoot it there or got it there or not, he's right in front. ... His eight hits in the game, he was physical, making room for those guys, strong on the puck, going to the net for them. That's what he does for that line. That's what he does when he's playing good."

And when Foligno is playing well, he can be plugged into several spots in the Sabres lineup effectively.

"He's kind of a pivot guy," captain Brian Gionta said of Foligno. "His role is going to change depending upon injury and need but he's a guy when he's using his speed, his body, he's a tough guy to stop. He's a big guy that can make you pay on the forecheck. He can bring pucks to the net. He's been doing that more consistently throughout the year."

Sabres Notebook: No update on Okposo, Lehner excused from practice

By Amy Moritz
The Buffalo News
March 3, 2017

The good news for the Buffalo Sabres: They ended their four-game winless streak and stayed within five points of a playoff spot.

The bad news for the Buffalo Sabres: They lost their leading scorer.

Kyle Okposo was not at practice Friday as the team skated in HarborCenter in preparation for Saturday's meeting with Tampa Bay. Okposo was injured in the second period when he was hit hard into the boards by Arizona Coyotes defenseman Kevin Connauton. Okposo stayed in the game for the rest of the period, but did not return for the third.

"He left the game with a mid-body injury," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said after Thursday's 6-3 win in KeyBank Center. "I know he was getting X-rays and he wasn't coming back to play in the third period. I don't have a final report on it. But it was a shot to the ribs or it was the boards against the rib cage. That is where the injury's at."

On Friday, Bylsma had no further update other than noting Okposo would not play for the Sabres this weekend.

Okposo, who represented the Sabres at the NHL All-Star game, leads the team with 43 points (19 goals, 24 assists) and had two assists in Thursday's win.

"He's our leading scorer and also a big part of our team and how we play, how we want to play and provides big leadership in that aspect and that's something we'll miss when he's not in the lineup," Bylsma said after the team practiced in HarborCenter Friday.

With Okposo out of the lineup, the lines at practiced looked like this:

Evander Kane-Ryan O'Reilly-Brian Gionta
Marcus Foligno-Jack Eichel-Sam Reinhart
Matt Moulson-Evan Rodrigues-Tyler Ennis
Nic Deslauriers-Zemgus Girgensons-Justin Bailey

Kane took Okposo's spot on the first power-play unit while defenseman Jake McCabe took Kane's spot on the second.

Also missing from practice was goaltender Robin Lehner. Lehner took a hard hit from Peter Holland in Thursday's 6-3 win and had issues with a headache and neck injury last week. But Bylsma said his absence had nothing to do with injury.

"Nothing to do with the game. Just not on the ice today," Bylsma said. "Nothing to do with injury or anything that happened the previous week or that hit at all."

Bylsma also noted the absence was excused.

Sabres captain Brian Gionta spent five years with the Montreal Canadiens and was a teammate of P.K. Subban.

So of course Gionta caught a replay of the welcome the Canadiens gave Subban upon his first return to Montreal after being traded to the Nashville Predators. Pictures show tears on the face of an emotional Subban after the tribute played.

"The amount of time he spent there and his connection to Montreal, you knew something like that was going to happen," Gionta said.

The Sabres won't have Okposo this weekend

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 3, 2017

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- The Sabres will play this weekend without leading scorer Kyle Okposo. The winger hurt his ribs midway through Thursday's game against Arizona. He still had time to pick up two assists before leaving.

Okposo has 19 goals and 24 assists for 43 points in 63 games. Next is Ryan O'Reilly who has notched 14 goals and 28 assists for 42 points in 54 games.

The injury puts an awfully big hole in O'Reilly's line. Friday he skated with Evander Kane and Brian Gionta. The other lines were,

Foligno Eichel Reinhart

Moulson Rodrigues Ennis

Deslauriers Girgensons Bailey

Robin Lehner was excused from practice. Dan Bylsma said he is not injured.

Marcus Foligno netted two goals against the Coyotes giving him 12 on the season. That projects out to 15 goals over 82 games which is what I've always said is a reasonable number to expect out of number 82. Foligno said, "I think 15 goals is good, obviously you want as many as you can get, but it's a good number and something that isn't out of sight for me this year."

Foligno is on a streak that's seen three goals in four games. Before that, he had one goal in 20 games. Before that he scored in three straight games and four out of five games. Before that he had one goal in 19 games. The winger knows it can come in streaks, "I wish it was more consistent, but I'll take them as they come. I think my timing could be better because we need goals for this team, so I'm hoping this streak ends in 18 games and then we can pick it up in the playoffs."

I think this has been Foligno's most consistent season as a power forward. It's rare you walk away disappointed in his game. I wondered if he felt his game was still the same when he wasn't scoring, "I was a little frustrated, but I think I was doing the little things right, like playing hard and playing physical."

"Playing with Jack and Sammy I've got to get open, I've got to get to the net and create chances that way."

Foligno's physical play has been spot on all season long. He has also been there to stand up for teammates more too. He said this is his most consistent physical season, "It is, I feel really healthy this year, so I feel strong, I feel good about my game and it's something I've taken pride in this year."

Dan Bylsma doesn't disagree at all with Foligno's assessment, "There's no question, I don't know where his hit totals are in the league (3rd with 222), but I think he's a physical presence out there that other teams are noticing and quite leery of."

Bylsma doesn't only look at goals and assists. The head coach believes there are other things that made Foligno good when he's in a scoring slump, "I think the last time playing with Jack and Sam there was a streak in there where he was not getting on the score sheet, but I thought his play was adding to the line in terms of his physicality, a big body in a straight line to the net and that's what you saw in aces last night. There was seven times he's standing at the net either occupying space or right in front of the goalie."

"He had eight hits last night, he was physical and making room for those guys, throwing them the puck and going to the net."

Sabres' Jack Eichel enjoying career-best stretch

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 3, 2017

BUFFALO – Sabres center Jack Eichel understands his history of scoring and penchant for shooting the puck has helped label him a goal scorer.

After all, the talented American has scored 39 times in his short career. In only 43 games this season, he has pumped a whopping 173 shots on goal, the NHL's highest total since his season debut.

Still, Eichel, 20, said when he gets the puck on his stick, his first instinct is usually to dish it.

"(Some people) kind of chuck me up to be more of a goal scorer, but I'm a pass-first guy," Eichel said Friday inside HarborCenter.

Eichel brings a career-long eight-game point streak – two goals and nine assists – into tonight's tilt against the Tampa Bay Lightning at KeyBank Center.

It's hard to quibble with Eichel's production since he returned from a high left ankle sprain. His 40 points are 13th in the NHL since his Nov. 29 debut. That .93 point per game average is 14th in the league this season overall.

"When I first came back from the injury, I wasn't probably where I wanted to be in terms of play," Eichel said. "I think after a little bit, your ankle starts to feel better, you start to feel like yourself again, you start making plays and you get back to the way that you want to play. It just feels better."

Eichel feels so much better he has morphed into one of the NHL's top players in recent weeks. He and Chicago superstar Patrick Kane are tied for the league lead with 19 points since Feb. 1. Eichel's first in that span with 16 assists.

Points-wise, Eichel's enjoying the most productive run of his 124-game career. Despite missing the first 21 contests, he's tied for third in goals and points on the Sabres, just three points behind Kyle Okposo.

"I'd probably say in the last month it's my best stretch," Eichel said. "I guess the consistency's been there."

That consistency helped the 2015 second overall pick become the 10th player in Sabres history to record 40 or more points in his first two seasons, according to hockey-reference.com.

But Eichel has scored only three of his 15 goals in the last 17 games. He has 66 shots and a paltry 4.5 shooting percentage in that span. His overall shooting percentage is 8.7.

To Sabres coach Dan Bylsma, it's up to Eichel "how many goals he's going to get and how often he uses his shot and how he uses his shot."

"By nature he's a playmaker, likes to have the puck on his stick and make plays," he said.

Bylsma said the Sabres want Eichel, who possesses a lethal shot, to put four on net a game, a number he has right now.

"You've seen some maturation in his game with him shooting the puck," Bylsma said.

Bylsma believes maturation is also evident in Eichel's defensive game. As a rookie last season, Eichel was cognizant he needed to adapt and evolve. He knew he couldn't rely on talent alone.

"He's worked hard on both sides of the puck – playing defense, defensive positioning, being a reliable and steady guy in the defensive zone," Bylsma said. "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."

Sabres captain Brian Gionta has seen Eichel showcased more responsibility this season.

"It's the talent he has, the ability he has to open up games," Gionta said. "It's the ability to open up spots and not take the unnecessary chances. He's starting to really get when that is and it's time to just kind of stay the course and make sure that we're responsible with it."

Sabres' Kyle Okposo out Saturday

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 3, 2017

BUFFALO – Leading Sabres scorer Kyle Okposo will miss Saturday's game against the Tampa Bay Lightning with a rib injury, coach Dan Bylsma said this afternoon.

Bylsma didn't have a full update on Okposo, who left Thursday's 6-3 win against the Arizona Coyotes after Kevin Connauton hit him into the boards.

"He's our leading scorer and absolutely a big part of our team and how we play, how we want to play," Bylsma said following practice inside HarborCenter. "Big leadership in that aspect. That's something we'll miss when he's not in the lineup."

Okposo has 19 goals and 43 points in 63 games. He had two assists before leaving Thursday's contest.

Captain Brian Gionta skated in Okposo's spot today beside center Ryan O'Reilly and Evander Kane.

In other news, Bylsma said goalie Robin Lehner was excused from today's practice. Bylsma said Lehner feels fine.

Sabres' Okposo will not play this weekend

By Matt Bove

WKBW

March 3, 2017

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - The injury bug has reared its ugly head yet again for the Buffalo Sabres.

On Friday the team announced that Kyle Okposo would be out for both the Sabres upcoming games on Saturday [Tampa Bay] and on Sunday [at Pittsburgh]. Okposo's status beyond this weekend has yet to be determined.

The injury happened in the second period of Thursday's game against the Arizona Coyotes when Okposo was hit by Kevin Connauton.

"He's our leading scorer and also a big part of our team and how we play," Sabres head coach Dan Bylsma told reporters on Friday morning. "That's something we'll miss when he's not in the lineup."

Bove's take:

The last thing the Sabres needed was an injury to one of their biggest contributors. At this point in the season, almost every game is a must-win.

The length and severity of the injury are surely the biggest factors, but if Okposo misses an extended amount of time the Sabres could be in trouble. Buffalo will likely recall someone like Nick Baptiste from Rochester to fill the void for the weekend unless they are comfortable with Nicholas Deslauriers.

Eichel among NHL's most productive players as of late

By Jourdon LaBarber

Buffalo Sabres

March 3, 2017

When looking back at Jack Eichel's return from the high-ankle sprain that delayed the beginning of his sophomore season, it's mostly positives that stick out. The Sabres won the first two games Eichel played in, and he scored three goals and an assist in what were arguably two of his most memorable performances yet, given the circumstances.

When Eichel looks back on the time immediately following his injury, however, he says he wasn't quite where he wanted to be. The same couldn't be said right now.

"I think, after a little bit, your ankle starts to feel better, you start feeling better again, you start making plays and you get back to the way you want to play," Eichel said following practice at HarborCenter on Friday. "I just feel better. I feel like I've been doing what I can do."

The numbers don't lie: Eichel has been one of the NHL's most productive players since the beginning of February, if not longer. He's tied with Chicago's Patrick Kane for the most points in the League since Feb. 1 with 19, and he leads all players with 16 assists in that same span of time.

He's also become nearly a point per game player in the process. Eichel's mark of .93 in that category ranks 13th in the NHL, placing in elite company. You could field an All-Star team out of the names behind him: Vladimir Tarasenko, Joe Pavelski, Alexander Ovechkin, Auston Matthews ... the list goes on.

Eichel admitted it's probably the best stretch of hockey he's played since entering the NHL, but he also said he isn't satisfied. When the team loses, you can see the frustration in his face. Even after a win against Arizona on Thursday, Eichel was disappointed that the team has surrendered a late lead.

"I just think there's always that level, and I think that you can never be satisfied," he said. "That's kind of the mindset I try and take and it's been pretty good. Obviously I think that there's been times where I can be a little too hard on myself, but I guess that's the nature of it."

So, what is the next level for Jack Eichel? At the outset of the season, Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said it would be fun to watch and see where Eichel takes his game, whether he leans towards becoming an elite playmaker with the puck - his natural tendency - or toward becoming an elite goal scorer.

Through 43 games, he's done a good deal of both. Eichel has 25 assists compared to 15 goals, and many of his "wow" moments on the ice come when he's distributing the puck. But he also leads the entire NHL with four shots per game. To put that into context, check out this tweet from ESPN's Corey Pronman:

Meanwhile, only seven players who played their age 20 seasons in the last 20 years averaged more points per game than Eichel's .93: Sidney Crosby, Ovechkin, Connor McDavid, Steven Stamkos, Evgeni Malkin, Ilya Kovalchuk and Anze Kopitar.

"We've talked to Jack about averaging four shots a game for the year and using his shot," Bylsma said. "I think by his nature, he's a playmaker, likes to have the puck on his stick and make plays, and really it's kind of up to him how many goals he's going to get and how often he uses his shot and how he uses his shot."

Eichel said he doesn't expect pass-first mentality to change - it's who he's always been - but he does want to continue improving his ability to get into scoring areas without the puck on his stick. Doing so led to him getting a power-play goal on Thursday, thanks to a heads-up pass from Sam Reinhart at the net-front.

"I'm a pass-first guy," Eichel said. "I get pucks in the shooting lane, shooting area a lot of times and I'm looking to make a play. When I get the puck, my first instinct is usually to pass. I've been lucky, a lot of good passes on the power play, a lot of good passes from [Reinhart], just trying to get around the net."

"I think that's something I can do better, still, going forward. You see some of the best goal scorers in the League, they score a lot of goals within 10 feet of the net. Whether it's rebounds or making quick little plays around the net, they score a lot there. I think that's definitely something I need to continue to get better at, getting to the net, making myself available, capitalizing on those second and third opportunities."

While Eichel's offensive prowess has been evident since he scored in his NHL debut last season, Bylsma said the true mark of his improvement from here on out might come on the other end of the ice. It's an area he's improved already, the coach said, but hopes to improve upon further with more experience.

"He's worked hard on both sides of the puck. Playing defense, defensive positioning, being a reliable and steady guy in the defensive zone," Bylsma said. "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, 200-foot game, be reliable and strong defensively and also be a guy who lugs the mail and is offensive on the other end of the rink."

Ask Eichel, and you can bet he'd agree. After all, you can never be satisfied.

Kyle Okposo was absent after leaving the game in the second period on Sunday with an injury to his rib area. Bylsma did not have an update on his status other than to say he would not be playing in Buffalo's game against Tampa Bay on Saturday.

Robin Lehner was also absent from practice, although Bylsma said the absence was excused and not injury related. He'll start one of Buffalo's back-to-back games on Saturday or Sunday and Anders Nilsson will start the other.

Here's how Buffalo's lines stacked up in full on Friday:

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

Defensemen: 29 Jake McCabe, 55 Rasmus Ristolainen, 77 Dmitry Kulikov, 47 Zach Bogosian, 4 Josh Gorges, 6 Cody Franson, 41 Justin Falk

31 Anders Nilsson