



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

January 18, 2018

Sabres find motivation after the bye week

Buffalo News

Amy Moritz

January 17, 2018

Mathematically, the possibility still exists for the Buffalo Sabres to make the playoffs.

But 20 points out of the wild-card spot with the fewest points in the Eastern Conference have the Sabres all but assured of sitting out the postseason for the seventh straight season.

So after five days off from the National Hockey League with the Rangers up Thursday night in New York, the Sabres got back to work physically rested and mentally refreshed, but with what to play for exactly?

"I don't think you ever lose your motivation," Sabres defenseman Marco Scandella said. "I do what I love. I can't speak for everyone in this room, but I definitely know that for myself it's always exciting to play hockey. I'm always motivated. I think what getting a break does for you just gives you time to heal. You get to get away from it for a bit so when you come back you're just that much more hungry and excited about it."

The popular assumption is that once out of the playoffs, there's not much to play for outside of pride and individual future contracts.

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Scandella, in his eighth NHL season and first with the Sabres, doesn't see it that way at all.

Instead, this is can be a crucial time for the Sabres to establish their identity, to ferment their culture, and set the foundation for the future.

"It's the absolute best thing ever to play in this league so you can't take it for granted," Scandella said. "You just remind yourself every day that we're out of the playoffs but we're still building here, we're building for next year and we have to find a way to turn things around. We can't just say, oh this year's lost and let's just show up for training camp and it's all going to come together for us. I think it's up to us in this group, in this room, to figure things out, to make it happen this year so when we come in next year, we have confidence that we've done it before and have the group that knows how to do it."

Coach Phil Housley echoes those sentiments. The Sabres have to learn how to win and throwing away these last 38 games would be a profound waste of time.

Asked if it's a challenge to motivate players in this situation, Housley said, "No, I don't think so."

"The challenge for us is that we're playing a lot of teams down the stretch here that are in the playoffs or in playoff contention. That's our challenge – see how we measure up day in, day out against really, really good teams. Columbus was a good example. We've got New York who is first in the wild-card spot. They're looking to move up and Dallas is right in the hunt so that's the challenge for us. You see where teams are and watch them and realize it's tough to win."

The Sabres went into their five-day break after a well-played 3-1 win over the Columbus Blue Jackets. They return to action at 7:30 p.m. Thursday playing the Rangers in Madison Square Garden, where New York holds a 16-8-3 record this season. The Sabres come back to Buffalo to host Dallas at 1 p.m. Saturday in KeyBank Center with the Stars holding the top spot in the Western Conference wild-card race.

Buffalo is in no race, other than the race to avoid last place overall in the NHL. The Sabres' 31 points (11-24-9) have them ahead of the Arizona Coyotes of the Western Conference, who have just 28 points (10-28-8).

But there is no heroic run to 30th place in the NHL, so players have to be intrinsically motivated. For veterans like Kyle Okposo, that motivation is not terribly difficult to find.

"You've always got to find motivation somewhere," Okposo said. "I don't think it's that hard. You come to work and you want to be at your best and prove to yourself and prove to everybody that you still have it, that you're a good player. I think we all should take that into consideration."

"You find motivation in team success, personal success. You find it anywhere," Okposo said. "Anytime you come to work and you come to play, you want to be at your best. I really want to get back to the level that I know I'm capable of and being an elite player. I feel like it's been a trying year for me mentally but there's some things I've really liked about my game in the last 20 and I'm really looking forward to keep getting better. I want to get to the place where every night I'm helping my team out."

Sabres Notebook: Big doings over break for Girgensons, Housley

Buffalo News

Amy Moritz

January 17, 2018

The bye week in the National Hockey League gives players and coaches five days away from hockey. Both usually get away, some to tropical locales and some just back home with family.

But for two members of the Buffalo Sabres, big things happened during the five-day break.

Coach Phil Housley returned to Minnesota and was part of the official campaign launch for his wife, Karin, who is running for the U.S. Senate.

Forward Zemgus Girgensons, meanwhile, went to California and proposed to his girlfriend.

"We went to Santa Barbara," Girgensons said. "I had that planned. I popped the question there. Everything went smooth."

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Teammates offered congratulations by pushing him into the center of the team circle on the ice to lead pre- and post-practice stretching in KeyBank Center as the Sabres got back to work Wednesday.

Meanwhile, Housley was in Stillwater, Minn., where his wife, Karin, officially launched her campaign for the United States Senate.

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Karin Housley



@KarinHousley

I have never been silent about things that matter, which is why I am running for the U.S. Senate. GREAT CAMPAIGN KICK OFF today! Thank you to the hundreds that came out to support & join in the fun! Freedom matters. ☺

3:52 PM - Jan 15, 2018

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Karin Housley, a Republican, is currently a state senator in Minnesota representing the Stillwater and Forest Lake areas. She is running for the U.S. Senate seat that was vacated by the resignation of Sen. Al Franken. A special election will be held in November 2018.

"It was great," Phil said of joining Karin for the campaign rally. "It's a great opportunity for her to jump into the U.S. Senate race. A good time and now with Tim Pawlenty backing out, she's pretty much in the pole position, so it's an exciting time."

Pawlenty, a former Republican governor of Minnesota, announced Tuesday he will not run in the special election.

Karin Housley



@KarinHousley

Couldn't make it to the Housley for U.S. Senate kickoff? That's okay! Check out our video from the event.

I cannot wait to spend the next 10 months traveling across this wonderful state and meeting Minnesotans from all walks of life!! #ANewVoice #HousleyforSenate

9:42 AM - Jan 17, 2018

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Defenseman Casey Nelson was recalled from the Rochester Americans and practiced with the Sabres on Wednesday. He was in for Nathan Beaulieu who is sick and listed as "day-to-day." Beaulieu missed five games in December with an illness.

Nelson is on his second recall this season, but did not play in his earlier callup. Through 37 games in his second AHL season, Nelson has 11 points (two goals, nine assists) and leads the Rochester Americans with a plus-11 rating.

"Hopefully I can capitalize on this opportunity," Nelson said adding that his season in Rochester as been "pretty good."

"I've been focusing on my defense first. That's where I feel my game has taken a step this year and just playing responsible."

Victor Antipin is working his way back into the lineup. The defenseman has not played since Dec. 19. He was a healthy scratch for two games before coming down with the flu after Christmas, causing him to miss six games, including the Winter Classic. He returned to practiced and was a healthy scratch for the last two games (Winnipeg and Columbus) for a grand total of 10 straight games out of the lineup.

"I'm feeling better," Antipin said after practice on Wednesday. "It was really bad. I lost 10 pounds. I had to eat, eat, eat to get it back. I have a good appetite now."

Antipin said he has regained the weight and is ready to play. The message from the coaching to him as been that they "they want more skating from me, be more aggressive," Antipin said.

In 24 games, Antipin has four assists with a minus-3 rating.

In Amerks news, Brendan Guhle landed on the injury update, listed as day-to-day.

"Too bad that he suffered a lower body injury his last game but you know he's doing a great job down there," Housley said. "We want him back healthy. If he does come up we don't want to put any pressure on him and put him in a position not to succeed.

"I really liked what he brought the last games he played with us. Especially in the Columbus game. A lot of times it was him and Jake (McCabe) up on the rush. I'm all for that kind of hockey especially attacking the game the way he did."

The Amerks begin a season-long five-game road trip Wednesday against the Utica Comets.

Story topics: Brendan Guhle/ phil housley/ Zengus Girgensons

Housley hoping to avoid a slow start off the bye week

WGR

Howard & Jeremy

January 17, 2018

Heading into the NHL's league-mandated bye week, the Buffalo Sabres came off of a big 3-1 win over the Columbus Blue Jackets at KeyBank Center last Thursday night. After the five days off to rest and relax for a bit, the team is back in Buffalo and gearing up for a matchup with the New York Rangers this Thursday at Madison Square Garden.

Through the first 44 games of the season, the Sabres have been one of the worst teams in the NHL with an 11-24-9 record, and sit dead last in the Eastern Conference standings. Buffalo also comes out of the bye as the lowest scoring team in the league, averaging just 2.25 goals per-game and 99 goals total.

Since the start of the league-mandated bye weeks last season, teams around the NHL have tended to get off to slow starts, which has impacted their spot in the standings heading into the final stretch of the season. Even though the Sabres are 20 points out of a playoff spot and likely to miss out on the postseason, head coach Phil Housley is hoping to get his team into the right mindset out of the bye week.

"If you look at a lot of the teams that come out of that bye week, they're not doing very well," Housley said with Howard Simon and Jeremy White, Wednesday morning. "We've got to send that message that this team is ready to go, and we have to be ready to play because they have a lot to play for. We're going to have to be ready, so we've got to get our minds geared up, set in the right way and hopefully get off to a good start."

The Sabres have struggled since the start of the 2018 calendar year with losses in their first five games. However, they snapped that streak with their win over the Blue Jackets last Thursday to grab their first win since December 29th against the New Jersey Devils. Housley was pleased with his team's effort before taking their five days off.

"I thought we responded in the right way," Housley said. "I thought our attention to detail and our play away from the puck was very good. We did limit them in the chance department, they're a very good team. They're third in the Metropolitan Division, which is a very tough division right now at this point of the season. It was a good response."

Part of the reason for the win last Thursday was the play of Linus Ullmark in net and Brendan Guhle on the blue line. Ullmark made 44 saves on 45 shots faced in his first game of the season in Buffalo, and Guhle registered his first career point while playing a very solid game in both ends of the rink. The two of them were re-assigned to the Rochester Americans the day after the win to continue playing while the Sabres were on break.

Even though both Guhle and Ullmark were stellar in Thursday's win over Columbus, Housley wants both young players to remain in the American Hockey League and continue their winning ways in Rochester.

"They're going to stay in Rochester for now," Housley said. "They have a game tonight against Utica [Comets] in Utica, and we're going to continue to let them develop. It will be a topic of discussion moving forward here."

"I don't want to take anything away from Rochester and what they've accomplished up to this point of the season," Housley said. "They've had a terrific season as they get ready to go into the playoffs. There are certainly players that maybe we feel that are going to be a big part of our team in the future, and if they do get an opportunity and play well, I'd really like to keep them up here. Especially because of our schedule coming up here, we've got a lot of home games and we have to start winning more games at home and provide a winning culture in Buffalo as we build throughout the rest of this season."

The Sabres come back to practice refreshed

WGR

Paul Hamilton

January 17, 2018

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - After five days off the players seemed refreshed at Wednesday's practice. Many players like Evander Kane like having the five day break, but Jack Eichel said he likes playing hockey more than resting, "Yes, but I think it doesn't really take a whole lot to get mentally refreshed.

"I try to get excited to play hockey every day and for the most part, I do. I could've taken just a day or two, but it's always nice to get a couple of extra ones."

As the Sabres get into the second half of the season, they'll be working on improving the power play. Getting one extra goal in a game could help this team win a lot more Eichel said it was starting to get better before the break, "In the last few games, we had been doing a lot of good things. Even in games where we didn't score, we had some good looks and I think it was going in the right direction, so it should be something that we use as a weapon and not something that gives the other team momentum."

Phil Housley was home in Minnesota by his wife's side as she formally announced her run for the U.S. Senate. I know players try to refresh their minds from hockey, but Housley said it's different for coaches, "Well you're always thinking hockey and I think for us, after winning that game, you want to continue on, but it was great that we won that game before the break because you could see the energy in our practice, we had really good life out there. I think guys were feeling good about themselves."

Last season the Sabres were awful coming out of the bye week losing to the two worst teams in the league at the time, Colorado and Arizona. Phil Housley wasn't here, but he is concerned, "When you get into these bye weeks, the records coming off it aren't very good. If you look at the teams, there's not a very high success rate, so we know we've got our hands full tomorrow."

Nate Beaulieu missed practice due to illness and is day-to-day. Brendan Guhle had no chance to be called up thanks to a lower-body injury suffered late in Monday's game in Rochester. He is also day-to-day. Housley said he feels bad for Guhle, "It's too bad that he suffered a lower body injury last game, but he's doing a great job down there and we want him back healthy if he does come up. We don't want to put any pressure on him and put him in a position not to succeed.

"I really liked what he brought to the last two games, especially in the Columbus game. A lot of times it was him and Jake up on the rush and hey, I'm all for that kind of hockey, especially attacking the game the way he did."

Victor Antipin is back to full strength after missing close to two weeks due to illness. The Russian defenseman said, "I'm feeling better, I'm good. I was feeling really bad, I lost 10 pounds, but now I have a good appetite."

Antipin said he wasn't able to eat for two days, but he's been able to eat normally again and has gotten the 10 pounds back.

Antipin was a healthy scratch for a few games before he got sick. He said he's ready to play now and told me what the coaches want him to do better, "They want more skating with puck and be more aggressive."

Wednesday's Lines:

Pouliot Eichel Okposo

Kane O'Reilly Pominville

Girgensons Rodrigues Reinhart

Wilson Larsson Nolan

Scandella Ristolainen

Gorges Nelson

McCabe Antipin(Falk)

The Sabres left for New York after practice and will play the Rangers in Madison Square Garden on Thursday.

Kane is being realistic about if he'll remain a Sabre

WGR

Paul Hamilton

January 17, 2018

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Evander Kane took five days off from hockey and he comes back knowing that he probably won't be a Sabre when the season ends.

Kane is an unrestricted free agent and he's realistic about his future, "It's happened before and obviously I'm aware of my situation and things are probably going to happen with the position we're in as a team, so I'm just taking it one day at a time and one game at a time.

Kane isn't the type of person that sits awake worrying about being traded. He said, "I'm not holding my breath, that's for sure, but I'm aware of the position I'm in with my contract and it's part of the business and it's not something I worry about or concern myself too much with."

Kane knows there are scouts out there and he knows what they're looking at, "I think every time you play a game, no matter what your situation, you're always playing in front of the league, It's your career, so for me, it doesn't really change my mindset."

Nelson called up from Rochester

WGR

Brayton Wilson

January 17, 2018

The Buffalo Sabres were back on the ice Wednesday following their league-mandated bye week.

Before practice, the Sabres announced that defenseman Nathan Beaulieu has an illness and will be out on a day-to-day basis.

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@SabresPR

Sabres/Amerks injury report for Wednesday, January 17.

10:02 AM - Jan 17, 2018

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With Beaulieu out an uncertain amount of time, Buffalo has called up defenseman Casey Nelson from the Rochester Americans. It is the second time this season that Nelson has been called up to the big club, but he did not play the last time he was in Buffalo.

Nelson, 25, has been primarily playing as a top-pairing defenseman with the Amerks in the American Hockey League with Brendan Guhle. In 37 games played this season, Nelson has two goals and eleven points, and leads the Amerks with a plus-11 rating.

He was skating on a pairing with Josh Gorges at Sabres practice Wednesday morning.

Some thought that Guhle was going to get called up once the bye week had ended after a successful two games in Buffalo last week. However, Guhle left practice on Tuesday with some lower-body soreness and is considered day-to-day. Rochester is in Utica on Wednesday to face the Comets in the second game of a home-and-home series.

The Sabres will head out to New York City to face the Rangers at Madison Square Garden on Thursday night. Faceoff is set for 7:30 p.m.

Comeback from concussion tougher than Sabres' Kyle Okposo expected

Olean Times Herald

Bill Hoppe

January 17, 2018

BUFFALO – Kyle Okposo said he figured everything would be normal again. When the season started, the Sabres winger felt healthy. Five months had passed since a harrowing concussion hospitalized him.

Okposo thought he could immediately showcase the talents that made him an NHL All-Star last season, his first with the Sabres.

But Okposo, 29, struggled early, looking nothing like his old self.

The veteran mustered two assists in his first 10 games. He scored his first goal in his 11th outing and had only three goals in his first 26 appearances.

“It was tougher than I thought, just to get back in the swing of things, just to get back playing again and kind of (have) a routine again,” Okposo said Wednesday after the Sabres prepared for tonight’s road tilt against the New York Rangers.

These days, Okposo talks about his struggles like they’re over. With five points in the last two games, he’s one of the Sabres’ hottest scorers coming out of their bye week.

“I really like the place I’m at now,” said Okposo, who recorded goal and two points in last Thursday’s 3-1 win against the Columbus Blue Jackets at KeyBank Center.

Okposo has looked much more comfortable in the last month, creating offense by aggressively pursuing and carrying the puck.

“It’s definitely been better, (I) just have better jump and more consistency to my game,” Okposo said. “It was a tough start, a really tough start mentally for me and physically just coming back from last year. So I’m still building. I want to continue to improve, I want to continue to get better. I still think I’ve got more to give.”

Okposo has compiled seven goals, 24 points and a minus-16 rating in 42 games. His recent production – four goals and 13 points in the last 16 contests, a 21-goal, 67-point pace over a full season – is in line with his normal stat line.

The American compiled 19 goals and 45 points in 65 games last season. In the last five non-lockout campaigns, he has averaged 22 goals and 55 points.

“I really want to get back at a level that I know I’m capable of, being an elite player,” said Okposo, who’s in the second season of a seven-year, \$42 million contract. “I feel like it’s been a trying year for me mentally, but there’s some things I really liked about my game in the last 20, I’m really looking forward to just keep getting better. I want to get back to a place where every night I’m helping my team.”

Okposo believes his skating – “When I’m moving my feet and hunting guys down,” he said – illustrates how well he’s playing.

“That’s probably the biggest thing for me,” he said. “Sometimes where I’m not as into the game I get a little bit less assertive and just kind of hope the puck’s going to come to me instead of going after it, hunting it down.”

Sabres coach Phil Housley said Okposo’s “work and compete, especially away from the puck,” has helped buoy him.

“Kyle was doing a great job of that just disrupting the play,” Housley said.

Naturally, Okposo’s long slump took its toll on him. But in the last two months, he said he’s starting to feel more like himself away from the rink.

A self-described “hockey junkie,” Okposo said he likes to watch a lot of games.

“It’s tough to watch games when you’re not playing very well and you’re not feeling like yourself,” he said. “I think over the break I had a game on all the time, just really watching it, watching what’s happening around the league.”

Sabres emerge from break feeling good; Casey Nelson recalled

Olean Times Herald

Bill Hoppe

January 17, 2018

BUFFALO – Six days ago, the Sabres began their bye week on a rare high note, earning only their 11th win in 44 tries by beating the Columbus Blue Jackets 3-1.

The Sabres, of course, fell out of the playoff race a long time ago. Still, the confidence the rare victory generated carried through the break.

When the Sabres convened for practice this morning, coach Phil Housley noticed his team's jump.

"It was great that we won that game before the break because you could see the energy in our practice, really good life out there," Housley said inside KeyBank Center. "I think guys are feeling good about themselves."

The Sabres have one two-game winning streak this season. That's not a typo. They won consecutive games on Oct. 21 and 24. That's it.

They have another chance in Thursday's road tilt against the New York Rangers.

Finding motivation when you're buried in last place can be difficult. But for Housley, a rookie coach, the Sabres' schedule presents an opportunity.

"We're playing a lot of teams down the stretch that are in the playoffs or in playoff contention," Housley said. "That's our challenge, see how we measure day in and day out against really good teams. Columbus was a good example."

Sabres winger Kyle Okposo said finding motivation is easy.

"You come to work and you want to be at your best, you want to prove to yourself and prove to everybody that you still have it, you're a good player," he said. "I think that we all should take that into consideration."

The Sabres made one roster move today, recalling defenseman Casey Nelson from the Rochester Americans. Defenseman Nathan Beaulieu is ill and day-to-day, Housley said.

The flu sidelined Beaulieu five games last month. The Sabres summoned Nelson once earlier this season but didn't dress him.

Why didn't the Sabres recall top defense prospect Brendan Guhle? The slick youngster, who looked impressive in two outings before the break, suffered a lower-body injury in Tuesday's practice and is day-to-day, Housley said.

"We want him back healthy if he does come up," Housley said. "We don't want to put any pressure on him and put him in a position not to succeed. I really liked what he brought the last two games for us, especially the Columbus game. A lot of times it was him and Jake (McCabe) up in the rush, and I'm all for that kind of hockey."

The Sabres also have defenseman Victor Antipin, who missed 10 games battling the flu, available. The Russian said he lost 10 pounds but has put the weight back on.

Evander Kane: "things are probably going to happen"

WKBW

Matt Bove

January 17, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - After years of speculation and rumors, Evander Kane realizes that his time with the Buffalo Sabres may be coming to an end.

"Obviously I'm aware of my situation and things are probably going to happen with the position we're in as a team," Kane told reporters on Wednesday. "It's something that I'm aware of but I'm taking it one day at a time and one game at a time."

Kane, 26, is in the final year of his contract and is putting up arguably his best numbers as a Sabre. In 44 games this season, Kane has 16 goals and 20 assists [36 points], just seven points shy of his total from last season [43 points, 70 games].

Chris Nichols

@NicholsOnHockey

McKenzie: "Evander Kane is one of the players that Jim Rutherford has been talking to Jason Botterill, his former employee, about." Scoring winger might be luxury #Pens can't afford though. #Sabres

6:15 PM - Jan 16, 2018

2 2 Replies 38 38 Retweets 69 69 likes

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In recent weeks, the what has seemed like non-stop speculation surrounding Kane's future has ramped up. According to Darren Dreger of TSN, Sabres GM Jason Botterill is seeking a first-round pick, an NHL player, a prospect and a conditional draft pick if Kane is resigned by the team he's traded to.

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While Kane is trying to avoid the noise and speculation surrounding his name, he is also aware that the future remains uncertain.

"I'm not holding my breath, that's for sure," Kane added. "I'm aware of the situation that our team is in and the position that I'm in with my contract. You know, it's part of the business and it's not something that I worry about or concern myself too much with. I'm just focused on each and every game and with the break, you're able to get that focus a little bit tighter, so it's good."

There is still no timetable on when a deal might happen but with the NHL Trade Deadline [Feb. 26] looming, you can bet that speculation surrounding Kane won't end anytime soon.

Matthew Bové

✓

@Matt_Bove

Evander Kane on continuous trade speculation:

"Obviously I'm aware of my situation and things are probably going to happen with the position were in as a team,"

@WKBW

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Sabres return from bye week with Kane trade rumors swirling

WIVB

Shannon Shepard

January 17, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – While the results in games after the NHL bye week have been iffy, players in the Sabres dressing room agree this break came at a good time. Not only were they able to rest their legs, but also refresh their mindset as they head into the later half of the season.

“Body gets pretty beat up during the year and if you get four straight days off the ice your body is going to heal,” said winger Kyle Okposo. “You heal some of those nicks and aches and pains and so everybody gets a chance to refresh and heal a little bit and I am a big fan.”

“It doesn’t take a whole lot to get mentally refreshed,” Jack Eichel said after Wednesday’s practice. “I try to get excited to play hockey everyday and I usually do. So, I could have taken a day or two but it is nice to get a couple extra ones, and now we just have to attack the last part of the season.”

“Obviously when you get into these bye weeks the records coming off of it are not very good,” remarked Sabres head coach Phil Housley. “You look at the teams and there is not a very high success rate. We got our hands full tomorrow and I thought our guys really prepared today and we have to have a good start against that team.

While the focus does shift to Thursday’s game, it is the trade deadline of February 26th that many have circled on the calendar. Top trade bait Evander Kane is aware his phone could ring at any moment.

“It has happened before and it is something that I am aware of and I am taking it one day at a time and one game at a time,” Kane said.

Injury update and moves from Wednesday — Nathan Beaulieu did not practice with the team due to an illness and Casey Nelson was called up from Rochester.

Sabres return from bye with something to prove

Sabres.com

Jourdon LaBarber

January 17, 2018

With their bye week behind them and a trip to New York on the docket, the Buffalo Sabres returned to practice at KeyBank Center with renewed energy and focus on Wednesday morning. Not only did the team have five days off to rest and recover, they went into that break with a win over Columbus last Thursday.

Given the way they played in that victory, Phil Housley admitted his preference would have been to keep playing. The effect it had seemed to be positive nonetheless.

"It was great that we won that game before the break because you could see the energy in our practice," Housley said. "[The team had] really good life out there. I think the guys are feeling good about themselves. I think the coaches are feeling good about themselves."

In that win over Columbus, the Sabres managed to tighten up the defensive inconsistencies that had plagued them in four consecutive regulation losses. When possession changed in the offensive zone, Housley felt his team got back with urgency and eliminated time and space for the Blue Jackets.

It resulted in the Sabres being able to protect a 1-0 lead for two periods before going on to win 3-1 in the third.

"We used those examples today in our meeting, what it takes to win in this league," Housley said. "The guys, I thought, really came back hard."

Buffalo currently sits in last place in the Eastern Conference with 38 games remaining. In spite of their place in the standings, Housley said their goal from here on out is to prove their ability to win games against playoff-caliber teams.

The Sabres' next two opponents, the New York Rangers and the Dallas Stars, currently hold the top wild card spots in their respective conferences.

"We're playing a lot of teams down the stretch that are in the playoffs or in playoff contention, and that's our challenge," Housley said. "See how we measure day in and day out against really good teams. Columbus was a good example.

"... You see where those teams are and you watch them and realize that it's tough to win. That's our challenge moving forward."

Individuals, too, feel they have something to prove. Kyle Okposo admittedly struggled at times to begin this season, but scored nine points (4+5) in eight games entering the bye and was and was one of the team's defensive standouts against Columbus.

"I really want to get back at a level that I know I'm capable of, being an elite player," he said. "I feel like it's been a trying year for me mentally, but there's some things I really liked about my game in the last 20, I'm really looking forward to just keep getting better.

"... You come to work and you want to be at your best, you want to prove to yourself and prove to everybody that you still have it, you're a good player. I think that we all should take that into consideration."

Changes on the back end

Nathan Beaulieu, who missed five games with the flu back in December, is day-to-day with an illness and did not practice on Wednesday. The loss coincides with the continued recovery for Victor Antipin, who has practiced but not yet played since experiencing his own bout with the flu.

Antipin said Wednesday he was unable to eat for two days while ill, which ultimately caused him to lose 10 pounds. He's been building his strength since, but Housley said he's not yet sure whether or not Antipin will be ready to return in New York on Thursday.

"We'll see," the coach said. "That's an evaluation that's ongoing day-to-day because of just where he was and then you get a five-day break. We'll evaluate that tomorrow."

The other possibility is that Casey Nelson makes his season debut after being recalled on Wednesday morning. Nelson, 25, has played 18 games for Buffalo during the past two seasons but said his experience with a winning team in Rochester this season has made him a changed player.

"My game has totally changed on the back end," he said. "I just feel more comfortable and responsible than I was even at the beginning of the year. I think it helps the forwards as well and just spreads throughout the locker room and hopefully I can bring that here."

Nelson's recall also came in the wake of a lower-body injury to Brendan Guhle, who is day-to-day. Guhle impressed in two games for the Sabres going into the bye week, averaging 16:58 and scoring his first career point with an assist against Columbus.

"We want him back healthy if he does come up, we don't want to put any pressure on him and put him in a position not to succeed," Housley said. "I really liked what he brought the last two games for us, especially the Columbus game. A lot of times it was him and Jake up in the rush, and I'm all for that kind of hockey."

Lines at practice

67 Benoit Pouliot - 15 Jack Eichel - 21 Kyle Okposo
9 Evander Kane - 90 Ryan O'Reilly - 29 Jason Pominville
28 Zemgus Girgensons - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 23 Sam Reinhart
20 Scott Wilson - 22 Johan Larsson - 17 Jordan Nolan

Defense: 4 Josh Gorges, 6 Marco Scandella, 19 Jake McCabe, 34 Casey Nelson, 41 Justin Falk, 55 Rasmus Ristolainen, 93 Victor Antipin

40 Robin Lehner
31 Chad Johnson

Sharpen Up: January 17, 2018

Sabres.com

Chris Ryndak

January 17, 2018

We're back. The Sabres return from their bye week today and will practice today at HarborCenter.

Here's what you need to know.

The Sabres will fly out to New York after practice as they prepare for their game tomorrow night against the Rangers. That game can be seen at 7:30 p.m. on NBCSN. Dan and Rayzor have the radio call on WGR 550.

Casey Nelson has been recalled from the Amerks.

Through 37 games in his second AHL season, Nelson (6'1", 185 lbs., 7/18/1992) has recorded 11 points (2+9) and leads the Amerks with a plus-11 rating. The Wisconsin Rapids, Wisconsin native has appeared in 18 games with the Sabres during the last two seasons, totaling four assists and 12 penalty minutes.

A look at last game

Ullmark's stellar 44-save effort

01:54 • January 11th, 2018

The Sabres will look to build off their 3-1 win on Thursday against Columbus.

From the Lexus Postgame Report

Coming off of four straight losses and with one game to go before their bye week, Phil Housley decided that the Buffalo Sabres were in need of a spark for their contest against the Columbus Blue Jackets on Thursday. It came in the form of a goalie wearing a "Minions" mask.

HOUSLEY: Postgame

03:56 • January 11th, 2018

Linus Ullmark made a career-high 44 saves in his season debut and the Sabres solidified their effort defensively in a 3-1 win over the Blue Jackets. The victory was Ullmark's first in the NHL since April 9, 2016, and Buffalo's first since Dec. 29.

So, Linus, how did it feel?

Ullmark with Dan (1/11/18)

02:46 • January 11th, 2018

"Very emotional," Ullmark said. "I try to keep it inside, naturally. It's been my dream ever since last summer to get it all together and come up and play ... I'm very humbled and happy about the win tonight."

If Ullmark was trying to hide his emotions during the game, he did an excellent job. The goaltender was calm and collected in his first NHL start since last season's finale, a 4-2 loss in Tampa. As teammate Kyle Okposo said afterward, he made difficult saves look easy with his poise and positioning.

OKPOSO: Postgame

02:44 • January 11th, 2018

"He looked really calm back there," Okposo said. "That was the first game that I've seen him play live in the regular season so I thought he did a really good job. Obviously we don't want to be giving up 45 shots too many nights, but he'll take that win."

Friday morning, the Sabres sent Ullmark and Brendan Guhle back to Rochester.

The Amerks have had three games since then and play again tonight in Utica. They're two points back of Toronto for first place in the North Division.

For more on the Amerks, check out this week's update.