



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

March 19, 2018

Baptiste lifts Sabres to 5-3 win over Blackhawks

AP

Mark Ludwiczak

March 18, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — For the first time in nearly a decade, the Buffalo Sabres had the bounces to go their way against the Chicago Blackhawks.

Nicholas Baptiste scored two goals in the third period to lead the Sabres to a 5-3 win over the Blackhawks on Saturday. It was Buffalo's first win over the Blackhawks since December 2009, snapping a 12-game losing streak against Chicago.

The game featured deflections and redirections for both teams, with three of Buffalo's five goals a result of fortuitous bounces.

"Definitely some lucky bounces, that's for sure," said Sabres center Ryan O'Reilly, who had a goal and an assist. "A little luck of the Irish tonight."

Benoit Pouliot and Sam Reinhart also scored for the Sabres — who wore green St. Patrick's Day jerseys during warmups — and Chad Johnson made 34 saves.

Baptiste was an unlikely star, picking up the sixth and seventh goals of his career.

The 22-year-old tied the game at 3-3 early in the third on a long shot through traffic. With 1:56 remaining, he picked up the game-winner on a deflection. Following a faceoff win in the Chicago end, Marco Scandella's shot from the point was deflected by Baptiste in the slot to put the Sabres on top for good.

"That's been the focus of our team for the last little while — getting shots to the net and getting bodies to the net and scoring some ugly ones and we got a couple tonight," Baptiste said. "That's what it takes to score goals in this league and to win in this league."

The Sabres got a significant lift from the returning Jack Eichel, who was back in the lineup after missing 15 games because of an ankle injury. Eichel had one assist and five shots in 18:14.

"It's so nice to have him back," O'Reilly said. "The little things he does when he gets the puck, you feel like the whole building is like, 'OK, what's he going to do?' The other team has to be so sharp when he's out there and it makes us a more dangerous team."

Eichel briefly tweaked his ankle early in the third period, but said he was fine after the game.

Jonathan Toews, Jordan Oesterle and Tomas Jurco scored for the Blackhawks, and Jean-Francois Berube made 27 saves.

"A couple tips and just didn't get the job done," Blackhawks winger Patrick Kane said. "It's been a common theme here for a while. A lot of the games, it even seems we're scoring the first goal and we can't come up with anything. It's kind of been that way all year."

Pouliot opened the scoring with 1:50 remaining in the first period. After Rasmus Ristolainen's pass was deflected into the crease, Pouliot had an easy tap-in for his 13th goal of the season.

Oesterle evened the score 8:15 into the second following a pretty passing sequence in the Sabres zone. After Toews led Patrick Kane with a drop pass, Kane swung to his right before firing a pass to a wide-open Oesterle in front of the Buffalo net. Oesterle had an easy finish for his fifth goal of the season.

O'Reilly made it 2-1 on the power play with 8:53 left in the second, poking in a rebound that fell behind Berube after Eichel's shot hit the goalie's shoulder and went high into the air.

Chicago evened the score again with 5:45 left in the second when a rebound from Toews' shot hit Ristolainen and went into the net. Jurco was given credit for the goal.

Toews made it 3-2 on a terrific one-man effort 20 seconds into the third period. After his initial shot on a 2-on-1 was stopped, the Blackhawks captain sped to the crease and stole the rebound off Johnson's stick. The puck flipped into the air, and Toews batted it in for his 20th goal of the season.

Reinhart added an empty-net goal with 38.4 seconds left.

NOTES: Buffalo native Emily Pfalzer was honored in a ceremonial opening faceoff before the game. Pfalzer was a member of the United States women's hockey team at the 2018 Olympics, winning the gold medal in a shootout victory against Canada. Pfalzer was also captain of the Buffalo Beauts in the National Women's Hockey League in 2015-16 and 2016-17. ... Sabres center Zemgus Girgensons was injured midway through the first period and did not return. ... Sabres starting goalie Robin Lehner was a healthy scratch.

UP NEXT

Blackhawks: Home against St. Louis on Sunday.

Sabres: Host the Nashville Predators on Monday.

Casey Mittelstadt's freshman year is over. Is Buffalo next?

The Buffalo News

John Vogl

March 18, 2018

The Casey Mittelstadt watch is about to intensify.

The NCAA announced its Frozen Four bracket Sunday and, as expected, Mittelstadt's Minnesota Golden Gophers failed to make the field. His freshman season is over, which could prompt the Buffalo Sabres to sign their top prospect.

Buffalo has 11 games remaining, starting with Monday's visit by the Nashville Predators, giving Mittelstadt time to begin the standard three-year, entry-level contract. The first season would burn off with one game played because of clause in the collective bargaining agreement related to Mittelstadt's birthday being in November.

Buffalo has interest in bringing last year's No. 8 overall draft pick into the organization. The only question is whether Mittelstadt is ready to leave college behind.

Two top prospects bolted for the NHL after their freshman years last season. Clayton Keller left Boston University to play three games for the Arizona Coyotes. Tyson Jost departed North Dakota and skated in six games for the Colorado Avalanche.

ADVERTISEMENT

Sabres fans have been clamoring for the 19-year-old Mittelstadt since watching him excel during the World Juniors in Buffalo this winter. Mittelstadt was the tournament MVP after recording four goals and 11 points in seven games for the United States.

Mittelstadt finished second for Minnesota with 30 points in 34 games. He scored 11 times and added 19 assists while earning a spot on the Big Ten All-Freshman team. The center tied for the Minnesota lead with four power-play goals and was tied for second with 95 shots.

The Gophers could be facing tumultuous times after enduring a disappointing season. The perennial power went 19-17-2, including 10-12-2 in the conference. Don Lucia has coached the Gophers since 1999, but failing to make the Frozen Four field is unacceptable in Minnesota.

Any potential changes could impact Mittelstadt's decision. It's a decision that will generate a lot of interest in Buffalo.

Story topics: Casey Mittelstadt

Sabres' Okposo set to return; Bailey 'sent down' to Amerks

The Buffalo News

John Vogl

March 18, 2018

Kyle Okposo is ready to play. He's eager to make an impact.

The formerly concussed right winger is expected to return to the lineup Monday when Buffalo hosts Nashville. Okposo has missed three games since colliding with Ottawa's Bobby Ryan on March 8.

"All signs look like a go," Sabres coach Phil Housley said Sunday.

Okposo wants to use the final three weeks of the season to re-establish himself as a premier forward. He is having one of the worst statistical years of his career with 11 goals, 38 points and a minus-29 rating in 65 games.

"You have to prove yourself every night in this league," Okposo said in KeyBank Center. "Obviously, we're not going to make the playoffs and you can say, 'Oh, these guys have nothing to play for,' but every night you get to play in the National Hockey League is special. You can't take that for granted because it goes by pretty quick."

ADVERTISEMENT

While Okposo has eclipsed last season's assist total of 26, he is on pace for his worst goal output since scoring four times in 48 games during the lockout-shortened 2012-13 season.

"I've got a personal number I'd like to hit with my own goals, assists and points and shots," the 29-year-old said. "It's been a real struggle personally for me this year, I think a down year for me. I'm just trying to work as hard as I can and make a positive impact on this group and just try and lead by example with my work ethic and preparation.

"I'm just going to try and get back to where I want to be."

Okposo had 22 goals and 64 points in 79 games with the New York Islanders two seasons ago, prompting Buffalo to sign him to a seven-year, \$42 million deal.

"I think it's just trying to fit into the team concept, get his legs underneath him, getting little bumps in there to see where he is at that point," Housley said. "If he is to play tomorrow, just his overall 200-foot game.

"He's a power forward. Use that down low in the offensive zone, get your body over and hang onto it, get to the net, add to our power play like he has in the past. I think just defensively just getting his reads, just his awareness back in our zone."

Okposo practiced on a line with center Evan Rodrigues and left wing Seth Griffith, but Justin Bailey could replace Griffith against the Predators. The Sabres assigned Bailey to Rochester on Sunday so he could serve his one-game American Hockey League suspension, but his equipment was still in his Buffalo locker.

"He might be coming back," Housley said.

Forward Zemgus Girgensons skipped practice after leaving Saturday's win over Chicago with a first-period injury.

"Zemgus is day to day," Housley said, "so we'll see where he is each and every day as we move forward."

Story topics: Kyle Okposo

Sabres' young trio takes big step against Blackhawks

The Buffalo News

John Vogl

March 18, 2018

Whenever Nick Baptiste, Justin Bailey and Evan Rodrigues would crowd around the TV in Rochester and watch NHL games, this was the kind of day they envisioned. They'd be on the ice together for the Buffalo Sabres, joining forces to take it to an established team like the Chicago Blackhawks.

And they took it to them Saturday. Put together as linemates during the third period, the three young players sped past the Blackhawks, making plays, creating scoring chances and – more importantly – finishing those chances. Baptiste tied the game early in the third and scored the winner with 1:56 to play, lifting Buffalo to a 5-3 victory.

"We were flying," Baptiste said in a jubilant KeyBank Center dressing room. "We were really going in that third period. It's exciting. We're all three guys that are trying to really establish ourselves in the NHL. We're going 110 percent at all times.

"It's a tough league to play in, but when me and Justin, especially, are moving our feet like we did, we're hard to defend against. When you have us moving our feet like that and Evan making plays the way he does, it's hard to stop.

"I was just happy to get out there with those guys and have an impact on the game."

ADVERTISEMENT

The joy was evident in Baptiste's words and goal celebrations. He lived it up, and he deserved the party. He scored his first game-winning goal and had his first two-goal game. The Ottawa native also did it in front of his mother and brother, who saw him score in person for the first time.

"I was jacked up," Baptiste said. "It's been a good weekend for me, and I just want to keep it rolling."

The Sabres want the three players to keep rolling. Actually, they need them to keep rolling. The third-year pros have long been regarded as key components of future success, but the road hasn't always been smooth.

They rolled over it with ease Saturday.

"There's a lot of opportunity," Bailey said. "That's been communicated to us before the game. We are wanted to give the team a spark, and I think that's just what we tried to do.

"We're really good friends. We've worked hard together down in the minors. We got the opportunity to play together, and it was a huge goal by Nick. I think our line as a whole, we were hemming the Hawks in, giving our team energy through the third period."

The bond the trio has built through the years was evident in its drive on the ice. Once they united, each player seemed to push the other.

"We got a little excited when coach put us out there together," Rodrigues said. "It's a business, and we've all been wanting to make it. When you have been playing together for three years and you know all of us are up here, it's exciting.

"When we got a chance to play together, I think we all had a little extra giddy-up in our step, and I think we showed that."

Justin Bailey got the Blackhawks' attention Saturday. (James P. McCoy/Buffalo News)

The 24-year-old Rodrigues is well on his way to proving he's an NHL regular. He has six goals and 18 points in 37 games this season, showing speed and playmaking skills.

Bailey and Baptiste are still finding their footing. Baptiste's goals were just the third and fourth in 22 games this year. Bailey has three goals in 10 outings, but he's bounced back and forth between Rochester and Buffalo.

"Everyone wants to score goals," the 22-year-old Baptiste said, "but my focus is helping this team win whether that's blocking shots or chipping pucks in and get on the forecheck or scoring two goals. I'm just trying to do whatever it takes to help this team win.

"I'm focused on us getting wins and getting this team back to where it should be."

In order for the Sabres to become a playoff contender, they need their young players to mature and develop. Baptiste, Bailey and Rodrigues took an impressive step against the Blackhawks.

"They really provided the spark," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "That's what we were looking for, especially from our young players."

Story topics: Evan Rodrigues/ Justin Bailey/ Nick Baptiste

Sabres Notebook: Pfalzer shows off gold; Eichel plays through pain

The Buffalo News

John Vogl

March 17, 2018

For probably the 1,000th time since Emily Pfalzer won Olympic gold last month, someone asked her to show off the medal. She was then asked if she ever tires of hearing that.

"No, not at all," she said with a smile Saturday. "It's fun to share."

Pfalzer and the U.S. women's hockey team have certainly done their part to share the Olympic experience. They've been on television with Ellen DeGeneres and Jimmy Fallon, been feted at NHL games, traveled to the nation's capital and even watched Serena and Venus Williams play tennis.

On Saturday, Pfalzer started her homecoming.

The Getzville native dropped the ceremonial faceoff for the Buffalo Sabres and Chicago Blackhawks in KeyBank Center. She repeated the feat for the Buffalo Beauts before their Saturday evening playoff game in HarborCenter. She'll be in Sunday's St. Patrick's Day parade with Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown.

"I'm so happy to come home," said Pfalzer, who flew in from Florida on Friday night. "It's been insane. We came from South Korea to L.A., then we went back to Tampa, where we've been training all year, and then we went to Washington D.C. and then New York and spent some time there.

"Everything's been so incredible."

The U.S. women are riding the momentum from a scintillating shootout victory over Canada in the Olympic gold-medal game in South Korea. They're relishing the honors they deserve.

"We just worked so hard to win the gold medal, and I'm just kind of taking it all in right now," the 24-year-old said.

Pfalzer isn't sure how long she'll spend in Buffalo, but she plans to make a few more appearances with the medal. One of the stops will be Nichols School, which she graduated from in 2011.

"Nichols has been amazing to me," she said. "I was so fortunate to have gone there academically and athletically. I love Nichols, and they've supported me all along the way."

She wants to give back by inspiring girls across the country to lace up the skates and strive to give their best.

"I hope it inspires young girls to play the sport we love and to continue playing and to dream big," Pfalzer said. "Just don't let anyone tell you you can't do anything and keep working hard and make sure you have fun."

Pfalzer had fun with the faceoff, dropping the puck for the Sabres' Jack Eichel and the Blackhawks' Patrick Kane – fellow USA Hockey representatives. Pfalzer's older brother, Matt, played youth hockey with Kane in Buffalo. Emily Pfaizer, a 5-foot-2, 125-pound defenseman, has modeled parts of her game after the 5-11, 177-pound Kane.

"I love watching him," she said. "He's a smaller player, so am I, so he was always someone I looked up to on the ice."

After helping the United States win gold, Pfalzer is the one who's being looked up to across the country.

"That was amazing watching that game," Kane said. "It was fun seeing a name that you know, seeing her in the shootout. She's a great skater. I played with her brother growing up, so I can remember her around the rinks always wanting to talk to the guys. We knew she was really big into hockey, so it's not surprising to see she ended up where she did.

"It's always fun to see someone representing Buffalo and Western New York like that. Her family and everyone in Buffalo should be very proud of her."

Eichel knew he'd be in pain at some point. It didn't matter. He wanted to play.

He played pretty well.

In the Sabres' lineup for the first time since Feb. 10, Eichel recorded an assist, had five shots on 11 attempts and drew a penalty that led to the winning goal in Buffalo's 5-3 victory.

"I felt good," said Eichel, who missed 15 games with a high-ankle sprain. "It's not easy to take that much time off, come back and feel like yourself. I thought before I got hurt I was playing some of my best hockey, and obviously you miss five weeks, you come back and you're not as sharp as you want to be, your game's not where you want it to be exactly.

"But you can't be too picky. Obviously, a little bit of rust out there and a couple things I want to clean up, but overall it was just a lot of fun to get out there and play again. That was the biggest thing. I just really enjoy it. I enjoy playing the game, no matter what time of the year it is, who we're playing, where we're playing. It's just a lot of fun to be out on the ice with these guys."

Eichel skated 18:14, two minutes below his average of 20:02, but he felt the grind at one point. During the third period, he tweaked the ankle and was clearly in pain on the bench. He didn't miss a shift.

"You can tweak it here and there and it stings for a minute, but it comes back around," Eichel said. "Last year dealing with the injury and what goes with it, you know you're going to tweak it. It's not an if thing, it's a when thing.

"You just want to get it to the point where you're not thinking about it on the ice. I thought maybe in the first period I was a little hesitant. It's my first game in five weeks, but I thought as the game went on I started to feel more comfortable, started to kind of forget about it and just play."

Injuries continue to travel through the Sabres' dressing room. Forward Zemgus Girgensons left Saturday's game during the first period with an undisclosed injury. Coach Phil Housley had no update.

Defenseman Casey Nelson has a nagging lower-body injury and missed his first game since being called up from Rochester on Jan. 18. Nelson has two goals and seven points in 26 games while skating 18:18 per night. Housley expects Nelson to return Monday when the Sabres host the Nashville Predators.

The long season for center Jacob Josefson continues with another lower-body injury. He's week-to-week with only three weeks remaining in the season. Ankle injuries have limited Josefson to just 39 of the Sabres' 71 games. He has two goals and two assists.

Buffalo wore green St. Patrick's Day jerseys for warmups. The sweaters are up for auction at Sabres.com/auction and will benefit the team's foundation. The auction will run until 9 p.m. next Sunday.

Story topics: Emily Pfalzer/ Jack Eichel/ Zemgus Girgensons

The Wraparound: Sabres 5, Blackhawks 3

The Buffalo News

John Vogl

March 17, 2018

What do Patrick Lalime and Chad Johnson have in common?

They're the only two Buffalo Sabres goalies to beat Chicago in the past nine years.

The Sabres ended a 12-game winless streak against the Blackhawks on Saturday, snapping a tie with 1:56 to play and finding an empty net for a 5-3 victory. Buffalo was 0-9-3 in the last 12 meetings with Chicago, including 0-4-1 at home.

The Sabres' last victory over Chicago was Dec. 11, 2009. Thomas Vanek and Clarke MacArthur scored, while Lalime made 39 saves in a 2-1 victory. Since then, the Blackhawks have won three Stanley Cups.

Johnson made 34 saves as Chicago outshot Buffalo, 37-32.

ADVERTISEMENT

Jack's back: Jack Eichel's absence from a high-ankle sprain came to an end at 15 games. The Buffalo center played for the first time since suffering the injury Feb. 10. The Sabres went 6-7-2 without their franchise player.

Eichel drew a hooking penalty with 3:57 to play, accepting a pass in the slot and driving the net to force Brent Seabrook to reach out with his stick. Just as the power play ended, Nick Baptiste tipped home a Marco Scandella shot to make it 4-3.

The end: Sam Reinhart scored into an empty net with 38.4 seconds left, earning a huge roar from the St. Patrick's Day crowd.

Short day: Sabres left wing Zemgus Girgensons departed with an injury midway through the first period and did not return. He was slow to get up along the boards with 8:41 remaining the first and headed to the trainers' room.

On the board: The Sabres entered the game with a 17-7-8 record when scoring first, and Benoit Pouliot gave them a chance to better that mark. After the Sabres won a faceoff in the Blackhawks' zone, Sam Reinhart sent a cross-ice pass to pinching Rasmus Ristolainen. The defenseman tried to set up Pouliot in front.

Chicago defenseman Jordan Oesterle and goaltender J-F Berube got a piece of the pass, but it still bounced to Pouliot for his 13th goal of the season with 1:50 left in the opening period.

No doubt: A four-on-four situation with Chicago's Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane on the ice? As expected, the visitors scored. Toews stickhandled and left the puck for Kane, who drew all of the Sabres' attention. No one picked up Oesterle driving to the net, and he tapped home Kane's pass with 8:15 gone in the second.

Back in front: Eichel also returned to the score sheet, helping give Buffalo a 2-1 lead. The center took a quick shot from the top of the left circle during a power play, and the puck glanced off Reinhart and over Berube. Ryan O'Reilly skated into the crease to push the puck over the line, recording his 20th goal of the season with 8:53 left in the second.

Bad bounce: Sabres goaltender Chad Johnson kicked away a rebound of Tomas Jurco's blast, and it struck the leg of Ristolainen in the slot. The puck bounced into his own net, allowing Chicago to pull back into a tie with 5:45 to go in the second.

Chicago outshot the Sabres, 16-6, during the second period.

Quick start: Toews needed just 20 seconds of the third period to put Chicago in front. Johnson stopped Toews' shot, but the captain beat the goalie to the rebound, chipped the puck into the air and batted it home.

Toews has nine goals in 16 career games against Buffalo.

Quick answer: The Sabres' Nick Baptiste made it 3-3 less than two minutes later. He reached out to tip Nathan Beaulieu's pass/shot from the left boards, then celebrated his third goal in 22 games this season.

Goalie rotation: With three netminders on the roster, the Sabres will rotate the starter and backup. Linus Ullmark filled the reserve role Saturday while Robin Lehner was scratched.

Injury update: Defenseman Casey Nelson sat out with a lower-body injury that's categorized as day-to-day. Justin Falk took his spot after being scratched in four of the previous five games.

Center Jacob Josefson missed the game with a lower-body injury that's listed as week-to-week.

In memoriam: The Sabres honor a U.S. veteran every game through the "Tickets for Troops" program. Saturday's honoree, former Army Sgt. Norbert Sliwinski, died last month. The fans gave a standing ovation to the teary-eyed family of the World War II veteran, who was part of the Normandy invasion.

Next: The Sabres will play the fourth game of their six-game homestand Monday when coach Phil Housley's old team, the Nashville Predators, come to Buffalo.

Photo Gallery: Sabres 5, Blackhawks 3

Inside the Sabres: Assistant GM Steve Greeley is on the rise, sees Buffalo doing the same

The Buffalo News

John Vogl

March 17, 2018

Steve Greeley would get up with the sun, head to the golf course and hope for the chance. The teenage caddie was a hockey fanatic, the kind who poured over the Boston Globe's NHL stats page every Sunday, and Bruins executive Mike O'Connell golfed at Greeley's club. The kid loved to carry O'Connell's bag.

"I used to bribe my brothers or other kids to let me take Mike's bag so that I could spend time around a general manager and kind of network and get to know him," Greeley said. "If one of my brothers got it, I'd be like, 'I'll give you 10 bucks to let me take him.'"

It was money well spent. Not long after a four-year playing career at Boston University, Greeley tired of the finance world. He wanted to work in hockey.

"As I was sitting in a desk in banking, I sent letters out to a bunch of the general managers," Greeley said. "Mike O'Connell had recently been fired by the Bruins and went to Los Angeles. Three months after I sent Mike O'Connell a letter, he invited me over to his house for a cup of coffee.

"Honestly, 24 hours later I was on an airplane to Los Angeles interviewing with Dean Lombardi."

ADVERTISEMENT

The Kings' new GM liked what he saw, hiring Greeley as an amateur scout in 2006. It started a journey that's led Greeley to Buffalo as one of the Sabres' assistant general managers. He and Randy Sexton form a front-office triumvirate with GM Jason Botterill.

Other teams have taken note of Greeley's ride. Carolina recently interviewed the 37-year-old for its open GM job, a sign he's a rising young hockey mind.

"It's flattering," said Greeley, who saw the interview as a sign the Sabres are doing things right. "Obviously, our record is not great, but I think we're doing things the right way. I think Jason's got good people working for him. The Pegulas have brought nice people in.

"It was flattering, and it's nice to have your name out there. It kind of acknowledges that we are going to be going in the right direction."

It's clear Greeley sees good things ahead for Buffalo. He oversees the pro scouting staff and player development department. He knows who's in the system.

"I've spent a lot of time in Europe this year," Greeley said by phone from his home base in Boston. "I've spent a lot of time at the University of Minnesota and St. Cloud State. I do know we have some players coming."

He quickly pointed to Minnesota freshman phenom Casey Mittelstadt, Swedish Hockey League scoring leader Victor Olofsson, U.S. Olympian Will Borgen, Swedish center Rasmus Asplund and Ontario Hockey League forward Cliff Pu.

"You come here and see Jack Eichel and Mittelstadt and a high first-round pick this year, we know we have high-end talent," Greeley said. "Certainly, we plan on adding to that this summer, so that's exciting. We are going to have a young core of very good players, and to me that's a good thing."

Steve Greeley has faith in the Sabres' future. (Getty Images)

It's easy for beleaguered Sabres fans to be skeptical or beaten down when it comes to prospect talk. But Greeley sounded sincerely optimistic, enthused about the future rather than mired in the present. The front office has had to deal with this pain for only eight months, so the three GMs are still running on faith and adrenaline.

Greeley has seen a team rise from the ground. When he arrived in L.A. with Lombardi and O'Connell in 2006, the Kings had missed the playoffs for three straight seasons. They won the Stanley Cup in 2012 and advanced to the Western Conference finals the next season.

"I was able to join that group in the beginning stages, which I think has been extremely helpful in my career, seeing how they did it," Greeley said.

In 2013, after seven years as an amateur and pro scout for the Kings, Greeley made a career change. He joined his alma mater, becoming associate head coach at Boston University.

"When you're the associate head coach of a college team, your primary responsibility is building the team and recruiting players, identifying talent and convincing kids to show up on campus rather than go to the Ontario League or play in Europe or whatever it might be," Greeley said. "I looked at it as an amazing opportunity to see another side of the game."

Once again, his team rose from the ashes. The Terriers were just 10-21-4 during his first season. Eichel arrived on campus the following year, and BU went 28-8-5 and advanced to the NCAA title game.

But it was more than wins and losses for Greeley.

"When you're watching college hockey, you are watching like 14- and 15- and 16-year-old kids," he said. "You're able to create a book on players that is pretty significant. There's kids that committed to Boston University that still aren't on campus that I recruited, and I've been gone for three years. That's just how it works, so it gives you an appreciation of what's out there and what's coming."

In 2015, it was the New York Rangers who took note of Greeley. They hired him as the assistant director of player personnel, a job he held for two years before Botterill called last spring.

Though Greeley and Botterill had chatted and shared stories in rinks, it would be a stretch to call them friends at the time. They had a lot in common, though. Both played four years of college hockey and quickly rose through NHL front offices.

"I kind of bounced around from team to team in a good way," Greeley said. "Rather than kind of being in the same position for 20 years, I had learned different sides of the business, and he had done a little of that. I think there was no fear in bringing in a young guy."

"Obviously, Randy Sexton's experience speaks for itself, so it was a pretty good combination."

Sexton, who was GM of the Ottawa Senators and Florida Panthers, and Greeley joined the Sabres on the same day in June. Botterill named Sexton as general manager of Rochester and tasked him with running the amateur scouting department, complementing Greeley's work on the pro side.

"In Buffalo, we do really work together," Greeley said. "We kind of have our hands in everything, but Jason has certainly defined our roles, which brings clarity and a lot of structure. I do a lot of working with the pro staff, our player development staff, NCAA and European free agents. Randy obviously has Rochester and really works a lot with our amateur side."

"You can kind of see how it gets in both sides. As the GM of Rochester, you're obviously involved with the pro staff, too, and that's how we incorporate all three of us. We might have clearly defined roles, but we're all helping each other."

In addition to his experience in scouting and development, Greeley is an easygoing talker. Owner Terry Pegula wanted to improve communication in the organization, and Greeley is teeing off on the challenge.

"He was a great coach for me when I was at BU," Sabres center Evan Rodrigues said. "He's a very down-to-earth guy, and someone who's really personable and easy to talk to. Whenever I was in a lull or anything at BU, he would always be a guy that I could just walk into his office and talk to him about anything from hockey to off ice. He's just a great guy."

Inside the NHL: KeyBank takeover by Leafs fans a low moment in Sabres' lost season

The Buffalo News

Mike Harrington

March 17, 2018

The place to take the scene all in Thursday night was the highest point of KeyBank Center. This corner is a big fan of the view from the press box, from where it's very easy to watch plays develop on the ice and equally cool to scan the stands. What we saw during this game was stunning.

I've been going to Sabres-Leafs games since the 1970s in the Aud and there is no question in my mind there has never been a Buffalo crowd as dominated by Toronto followers as the one we saw here Thursday night. You had to scan with binoculars to find someone in an odd Sabres jersey here and there because they were swallowed up by a sea of Leafs blue and white.

The number of Leafs sweaters in the stands was astounding. The Sabres were booed when they took the ice. So was the announcement of their starters. The noise after Toronto goals was clearly louder than when Buffalo scored. The "Go Leafs Go" chants are generally booed and then drowned out by a response of "Let's Go Buffalo". There weren't enough people in Blue and Gold to offer one on Thursday.

Say this for the Sabres: They didn't have to get worried about getting booed off the ice with all the cheers that went up after the first two periods for the Leafs. When Toronto's 5-2 win ended, there were jokes in the press box wondering if the Leafs were going to go to center ice to salute their fans because there were so many of them in the building.

Now, the explanations for all this are pretty easy to understand. The standings are the standings, with the Leafs headed to the playoffs and the Sabres three weeks from the golf course in a season that's been toast since Thanksgiving. Many Toronto fans who routinely come to Buffalo simply can't get into the Air Canada Centre, where the prices are outrageous and the crowd is much more of the wine-and-cheese variety. No doubt some Buffalo fans stayed home to watch basketball, with St. Bonaventure and UB both playing NCAA games later in the evening.

ADVERTISEMENT

Obviously, many season ticket-holders cashed out for a night looking for Canadian fans to give them something back for their money after months of the Sabres doing nothing for them. It's all understandable. There's no aspersions to be cast upon Buffalo fans for that decision.

But it clearly shows how far the Sabres have fallen, especially in their No. 1 rivalry, and how much work they have to do to become relevant again. Even to their own fans.

"It was a good atmosphere anyway," Sabres coach Phil Housley said sheepishly when asked about the crowd. "We've got a lot of work to do and we understand that. We have a lot to prove. Not only the players, the coaches. We're all in it together and we're going to try to earn their trust back."

That's going to be a long and arduous process for a franchise with no playoff series wins since 2007 and no berths at all since 2011. As the losing seasons pile up, the scene off the ice in this game rates as one of the lowest moments in franchise history. What's worse than your fans turning on you and showering you with boos? When they don't even care enough to show up and the other team's fans take over your building.

Housley and his players insist they have a lot to play for the rest of the way and young players like Brendan Guhle and Linus Ullmark certainly do with an eye on next season. Longtime prospects like Nick Baptiste and Justin Bailey might in their final push to show they can be NHL players. Jack Eichel wants to get back on the ice and get to a point a game for the year. Other veterans might be playing out the end of their NHL careers.

How many fans will be in the building is anyone's guess. Still, Housley has addressed motivation with his team and insists he doesn't expect it to be hard to keep his players interested in the rest of the season.

"We not only owe it to ourselves to keep pushing forward to get better as a group," he said. "But we owe it to our fans."

The real question: How many of them will be left when next season starts?

Eichel will research his injury

Fans who were apoplectic that the Sabres were rushing Eichel back into games have to be appeased by the deliberate pace the team is using for the star's return. And they also had to like Eichel's reference Friday to GM Jason Botterill being involved in the decision making.

For his part, Eichel said he'll do some soul-searching over the summer about the back-to-back high ankle sprains he's endured the the last two seasons. He said he spent a lot of time last summer doing exercises to strengthen his ankles and will have to go back to the drawing board on that area again.

"You look into everything," Eichel said. "Your skates, edges, whatever you're doing. I'll do a lot of digging this summer on how to help myself. I think most things are preventable. In that situation, it's unfortunate that it happened like that. A bit of a freak accident, kind of a freak fall. I'm lucky it wasn't a lot worse and something else."

Kane goes fourth in San Jose

Evander Kane poured in four goals for the Sharks late Friday night in a 7-4 win over Calgary and got his name off the top of a dubious list: Most two-goal games in a career without a hat trick.

Kane led active NHL players with 27 two-goal performances before finally getting his first three-goal game by the end of the second period. He notched No. 4 just 62 seconds into the third period and only a big save by Calgary goalie Mike Smith prevented Kane from becoming the first NHLer since 2011 with five goals in a game.

"Most two-goal games (without a hat trick), I've been reminded of that for awhile," said Kane, who posed for photos in the dressing room with four pucks along with teammates Brent Burns and Joe Pavelski. "It was great to be able to get the third, and especially in a real important game."

Kane has 10 points in eight games for the Sharks, including five goals. The Sabres can only hope he keeps piling up the points and continues to pique the interest level in San Jose to get paid this summer. Remember: A re-sign with the Sharks turns the trade into what Buffalo wants with a first-round pick in 2019 then coming the Sabres' way.

[View image on Twitter](#)

[View image on Twitter](#)

Evander Kane



@evanderkane_9

Took me 9 years in the @NHL but was worth the wait. Happy I was able to get my first 🏒 trick with this group of guys!
@SanJoseSharks Huge win!

12:27 AM - Mar 17, 2018

13.4K

1,980 people are talking about this

[Twitter Ads info and privacy](#)

San Jose Sharks



@SanJoseSharks

It's not official until you break down your four-goal game with @sharkvoice and @BretHedican!

12:21 AM - Mar 17, 2018

155

29 people are talking about this

[Twitter Ads info and privacy](#)

GMs have lots to talk about

NHL general managers start their annual spring meetings Monday in Boca Raton, Fla., and it will be interesting to see what changes, if any, they make to goaltender interference rules. There's continued chatter the GMs will push for decisions to be made at the situation room in Toronto rather than on the ice as a way to enforce consistency from game to game.

You wonder if the GMs may set the groundwork at this gathering for discussion at the draft about offside rules (the skate on the ice is a bone of contention) and playoff formats. You wonder if the divisional format will get increased opposition this year if 100-point teams get eliminated again in the first round, and there's likely to be some talk about increasing the number of teams to make the postseason.

Commissioner Gary Bettman seems to have no appetite to going past 16 teams in the postseason but the NHL is likely only 2-3 years away from adding Seattle to become a 32-team league. Only half that group would make the postseason, the same number as in 1979 when the league had just 21 teams. It's to the point where it's getting too hard to make the playoffs at all, as Sabres fans can attest.

Happy 100th to Punch

There was a certain symmetry to Thursday's meeting between the Sabres and Leafs because it was the 100th birthday of Punch Imlach, the legendary coach and GM of the Leafs who was the original coach of the Sabres and the GM who built Buffalo's 1975 Stanley Cup finalists.

Imlach died in 1987 at age 69 after the last of a series of heart attacks that marred the final 15 years of his life. He stepped away from coaching for good in 1972 after the first cardiac issue, turning the reins over to Joe Crozier and watching Crozier lead the '72-73 Sabres to the playoffs for the first time in franchise history.

Around the boards

*The Professional Hockey Writers Association announced Friday that it will become fully transparent on members' votes for various postseason awards, effective with this year's balloting. By a vote of 174-40, the PHWA will now release all ballots cast for the Hart, Norris, Calder, Lady Byng and Selke Trophies. The PHWA does not vote for the Vezina (selected by general managers) or the Jack Adams Award (NHL Broadcasters' Association).

The voting will be released on the organization's Website after the awards are handed out in June. A similar process is done in baseball, where ballots for the MVP, Cy Young, Manager of the Year and Rookie of the Year awards are released in November when the awards are announced.

*Everyone knows Swedish defenseman Rasmus Dahlin is the consensus No. 1 pick in the June draft. The early-line favorite for No. 1 pick in 2019 is center Jack Hughes of Orlando, Fla., and he's making history with the U.S. National Development Team. Hughes had a five-point game last week in the USHL, and his season point total of 87 has broken the under-17 record of 83 set by Phil Kessel and Clayton Keller.

*Leafs coach Mike Babcock, on the lack of NHL time that's been available to star goaltending prospect Garret Sparks: "In the end your job as a prospect is to keep pushing the people who make the decisions. You do good things, eventually you'll play in the NHL ... The great thing about the AHL is that you're trying out for 31 teams every night. To think anyone is not watching you, you're sadly mistaken. There's no vacuum, you're playing in front of everyone."

*Coyotes coach Rick Tocchet gave it up to his 93-year-old mother, Norma, upon returning to the team Thursday following her death: "I never deserved a penalty. I never had a bad game. It was always the coach's fault. I could do no wrong. In her eyes, I was like Gretzky and Lemieux put together."

Story topics: Buffalo Sabres/ Evander Kane/ Jack Eichel/ Jason Botterill/ Mike Babcock/ Punch Imlach/ Rick Tocchet/ San Jose Sharks/ Toronto Maple Leafs

Sabres score late, defeat Chicago 5-3

WGR550

Pat Malacaro

March 17, 2018

Nick Baptiste scored twice in the third period, once to tie the game in addition to the game-winning goal, in the Buffalo Sabres' 5-3 win over the Chicago Blackhawks on Saturday afternoon at KeyBank Center.

Here's how the game unfolded:

First Period:

19:02 - Jack Eichel is on the ice for his first shift back from injury. He is on a line with Jason Pominville and Zemgus Girgensons.

14:21 - Much better start today for the blue and gold than two nights ago when Toronto dominated. The Blackhawks have been able to get players into good scoring positions, but the chances are one and done opportunities, not sustained rushes. It is Buffalo that seems to be dictating the pace for the most part, and have six shots on goal already.

10:10 - Chicago has found their legs, and are now starting to assert themselves. Chad Johnson had to make one or two very good saves to keep it scoreless. Shots are now 7-7 for the two teams.

8:05 - Brendan Guhle is called for the game's first penalty, a slashing minor. We'll see if his teammates are able to kill it off and keep this game without a score.

4:15 - Chicago's power play lacked any real fire power. Buffalo did a very nice job of clogging up the shooting lanes and keeping the east to west passes that can disrupt the defense. Still scoreless late in the opening period.

1:50 - SABRES GOAL. Benoit Pouliot was at the right place at the right time and was able to slam home the puck on a rebound chance into a wide open net. It was the culmination of a good couple of shifts for Buffalo 1-0 BUF.

End of Period

Goal Summary:

BUF: 18:10 - Benoit Pouliot (13) (Rasmus Ristolainen, Sam Reinhart)

CHI: NONE

Penalty Summary:

BUF: 11:55 - Brendan Guhle (2 min., slashing)

CHI: NONE

Shots on Goal:

BUF - 12, CHI - 12

Second Period:

15:29 - This period has been all Chicago, even since the puck drop. They nearly scored right at the start of the frame, and have continued to make life miserable for Johnson in the Buffalo crease. The netminder has been up to the task so far on all 20 Blackhawk shots on goal, but I get the feeling that it will not be the case all game long.

12:35 - INJURY UPDATE:

Sabres PR



@SabresPR

Injury update: Sabres forward Zemgus Girgensons will not return to today's game.

2:11 PM - Mar 17, 2018

8

See Sabres PR's other Tweets

Twitter Ads info and privacy

11:45 - BLACKHAWKS GOAL. With both sides skating 4-on-4 due to penalties, Patrick Kane was able to draw all of the attention of the blue and gold and put the puck right on the stick of Jordan Oesterle. The defenseman has no trouble slamming the shot home into a somewhat open goal to tie the score. 1-1 tie.

8:53 - SABRES GOAL. Ryan O'Reilly crashed to the front of the net, and a loose puck that popped up into the air was knocked home by the forward. Chicago has been the far better team this period, but is back down by a goal. 2-1 BUF.

5:45 - BLACKHAWKS GOAL. A very good bounce off of Rasmus Ristolainen goes right into the Buffalo goal. A bad break for the blue and gold has re-tied the game. Shots on goal are 13-4, that is the thing that happens when it is a one-sided period. 2-2 tie.

End of Period

Goal Summary:

BUF: 11:07 - Ryan O'Reilly (20) PPG (Sam Reinhart, Jack Eichel)

CHI: 8:15 - Jordan Oesterle (5) (Patrick Kane, Jonathan Toews). 14:15 - Tomas Jurco (4) (unassisted)

Penalty Summary:

BUF: 6:35 - Rasmus Ristolainen (2 min., interference)

CHI: 7:00 - Vinnie Hinostroza (2 min., tripping). 9:46 - Tomas Jurco (2 min., slashing)

Shots on Goal:

BUF - 6 (18), CHI - 16 (28)

Third Period:

19:40 - BLACKHAWKS GOAL. The two players that have dominated the series for the past decade, Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews, combine for a goal just seconds into the final stanza. Kane hits Toews with a pass through the neutral zone, and after the shot cannot be handled, the Chicago captain bats the puck out of the air and into the goal. 3-2 CHI.

17:43 - SABRES GOAL. The lead is short lived for the visitors after a shot from the point finds its way through traffic and into the net. Justin Bailey did enough at the top of the crease of J-F Berube. Nick Baptiste tipped home the Nathan Beaulieu shot that tied the game for a third time today. 3-3 tie.

13:57 - Duncan Keith's tripping penalty has given Buffalo a window here to re-take the lead for a third time today. Can the blue and gold get it done?

5:03 - This has been a very quick period of game action. I am not sure that there has been a whistle since the Keith penalty.

3:57 - Brent Seabrook is called for a hooking penalty. This is another golden opportunity for Buffalo to score the game-winning goal.

1:56 - SABRES GOAL. I am not sure if it will officially be credited as a power play goal, but Nick Baptiste's beautiful tip of a Marco Scandella shot from the point has given Buffalo a one-goal lead late in this game. Great goal. 4-3 BUF.

:38.4 - SABRES GOAL. Sam Reinhart puts the icing on the cake with an empty-net goal. 5-3 BUF.

End of Game

Buffalo 5, Chicago 3

Goal Summary:

BUF: 2:17 - Nick Baptiste (3) (Nate Beaulieu, Victor Antipin). 18:04 - Nick Baptiste (4) (Marco Scandella, Johan Larsson).

19:21 - Sam Reinhart (19) ENG (Ryan O'Reilly)

CHI: 0:20 - Jonathan Towes (20) (Brandon Saad, Patrick Kane)

Penalty Summary:

BUF: NONE

CHI: 5:50 - Duncan Keith (2 min., tripping). 16:03 - Brent Seabrook (2 min., hooking)

Shots on Goal:

BUF - 14 (32), CHI - 9 (37)

Goalies:

BUF: Chad Johnson - 34 saves

CHI: Jean-Francois Berube - 27 saves

Power Plays:

BUF: 1 for 4 (25%)

CHI: 0 for 2 (0%)

Three Stars:

Nick Baptiste - BUF

Ryan O'Reilly - BUF

Sam Reinhart - BUF

What's Next:

The Sabres have three more home games before heading out on the road next week. First up for the blue and gold is a date with the Nashville Predators at 7 p.m. on Monday night. You can hear all of the action on the flagship home of the Sabres Radio Network - WGR Sports Radio 550, starting with the pre-game show. Mike Schopp and the Bulldog begin our coverage from (716) Food and Sport at 6 p.m.

Sabres' Eichel made his return from an ankle injury

WGR550

Paul Hamilton

March 17, 2018

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Jack Eichel missed 15 games with a high-ankle sprain, but he returned to action on Saturday. Eichel had been practicing since Tuesday and had been working the ankle very hard. He said he decided after Friday's practice that he was ready for game action.

He replaced Jacob Josefson, who is now out week-to-week with a lower-body injury.

This season, Eichel is averaging 0.96 points per-game which ranks him 31st in the NHL. Nate MacKinnon of Colorado leads the league with 1.36 points per-game.

It was a pretty quiet return off the bat for Eichel. He appeared to be skating well, but really didn't get loose for much in his 5:46 of playing time. He admitted in the postgame show that things were slow for him to start.

With an injury to Zemgus Girgensons, Eichel did take a shift on the wing with Ryan O'Reilly.

Eichel looked much more comfortable in the second period when skating in the offensive zone. With Girgensons out, Benoit Pouliot went to the left wing on Eichel's line.

The Sabres had an early 4-on-4 and Eichel did a lap in the offensive zone before breaking free for a good shot.

Late in the period, he cut to the middle of the ice and found Jason Pominville close in, but Pominville tapped the puck wide.

Eichel was in his usual spot on the power play, which is the half-wall. He took a heavy shot that hit J-F Berube in the shoulder and popped up. Ryan O'Reilly worked hard to dig it loose and tapped in his 20th.

Defensively, Eichel struggled. He was on the ice for both of Chicago's second period goals and had a very careless giveaway leading to the second goal. Eichel was on the offensive left wing wall and blindly tried to pass it back to Marco Scandella. Alex DeBrincat was in the way and started the rush the other way which led to a goal.

After 40 minutes, Eichel played 12:09 with an assist and two shots. He was minus two and was 4-of-8 on faceoffs.

On a third period power play, Eichel tried a one-timer on the power play and tweaked the ankle to cause pain. He limped back to the bench and was in a lot of discomfort, but shook it off and didn't miss a shift. Eichel said the same thing happened when he came back last year and it's not will he tweak it, it's when.

With about four minutes left, Eichel showed some great speed coming down the slot and just missed giving the Sabres a 4-3 lead. He did force Brent Seabrook into a hooking penalty.

Eichel seemed to move well throughout, but the rust showed a few times when he tried to force plays that just weren't there. He said that it wasn't his best and there were plays that he'd want back, but he felt it was an overall good game for him coming back from a long layoff.

Eichel finished with 18:14 of playing time with one assist. He was on for two of the three Blackhawks goals, but offensively he had five shots on goal and 11 shot attempts.

From the Locker Room: Sabres-Blackhawks

WGR550

March 17, 2018

On the back of two goals from Nick Baptiste, the Buffalo Sabres defeated the Chicago Blackhawks for the first time since December of 2009. The 5-3 blue and gold triumph broke a twelve-game head-to-head losing streak against the Hawks (0-9-3).

As previously mentioned, it was Baptiste doubling up on Saturday afternoon with a multi-goal effort. This also marked the first time in Baptiste's young career that the forward tallied a multi-goal game. Benoit Pouliot, Ryan O'Reilly and Sam Reinhart also found twine for Buffalo in the triumph.

Go inside the locker room to hear from Jack Eichel, Nick Baptiste, Ryan O'Reilly and Phil Housley following the win.

Jack Eichel:

On the effort: "Love the outcome. Big win. First time beating the Blackhawks [since 2009]. Huge home win, fun to be a part of. I thought we played well. They're a good team on the rush, and Johnson was really good in net for us."

Decision to play: "I decided yesterday after practice. I felt good. It's not an easy injury to come back from, but I felt this would be the next step for me in recovery. It was about five weeks since my injury, I'm not as sharp as I'd like to be at this point, but overall it was just a lot of fun to get out there again and play. It's a lot of fun to be out on the ice again with these guys."

AUDIO: <http://www.wgr550.com/media/audio-channel/3-17-jack-eichel-post-game>

Nick Baptiste:

Dirty goals: "It's been a focus of our team for a while; get pucks to the net and score some ugly ones. I was fortunate enough to finish a couple tries."

Youthful, hungry line play: "I felt like we were flying out there [with Evan Rodrigues and Justin Bailey]. It's exciting. We're three guys who are trying to establish ourselves in the NHL. I was happy to get out there with those guys and make an impact on the game and the outcome."

AUDIO: <http://www.wgr550.com/media/audio-channel/3-17-nick-baptiste-post-game>

Ryan O'Reilly:

Chicago's early goal in the third period: "It's a tough one. We wanted to establish our game in the third, but we gave up a goal. It's a bad bounce, but we've got to get better in that area."

Bench mentality after losing the lead: "No one panicked. Right after we got off the ice, everyone said we're going to get that one back. That was the mentality all afternoon. Energy was phenomenal tonight."

Jack Back: "It's great to have him back; all the little things that he can do. You feel like the whole building is sitting there saying, 'what is he going to do next'."

AUDIO: <http://www.wgr550.com/media/audio-channel/3-17-ryan-oreilly-post-game>

Phil Housley:

Better response: "Really liked the way we responded after that. Any time you give up an early goal in a tied situation [Toews' third period goal], it puts you in answer mode. I really like the way we took charge and grabbed control of the game the rest of the way."

Thoughts on Eichel's return: "I think it was a great game for him. After being out that long and having a tough assignment against their second line, he did well. He had a shot mentality, I think he had 11 shot attempts. Also, he really hunkered down in our defensive zone after that tweak of his ankle. Overall, I liked the way he looked after five weeks off."

AUDIO: <http://www.wgr550.com/media/audio-channel/3-17-phil-housley-post-game>

Experience with Predators special for Sabres coach Phil Housley

Olean Times Herald

Bill Hoppe

March 19, 2018

BUFFALO – By about 2013, Phil Housley knew it was time to take a crack at the NHL.

When Housley retired from his 21-year career as a defenseman in 2003, he went home to Minnesota and enjoyed life as a husband and father while coaching the boy's team at Stillwater High School.

After so many years moving around North America, Housley, who now coaches the Sabres, wanted to settle down and watch his children grow up and be a part of the community.

Then five years ago, Housley's successful foray into international hockey as a head coach, a gold medal at the World Junior Championship, earned him some notice. So did the bronze medal he won as an assistant months later at the World Championship.

"I thought it was a good place in my life and my family's life to get to the NHL," Housley said Sunday. "I was going to put my resume out there, but having that success with the World Junior team and the national team, there were some offers on the table. I was very fortunate to be able to jump from high school to the NHL."

An offer to be an assistant materialized from the Nashville Predators, tonight's opponent at KeyBank Center.

The Predators' ownership and base of talent impressed Housley. He also knew their general manager, David Poile, from USA Hockey.

"The future looked really bright for them, just with the young players and their development and the defensive corps, a lot of young guys on that team," Housley said. "It was a good mix and it was a great opportunity for me. (I) had some really good, fun years there."

Over four seasons, first under coach Barry Trotz and then Peter Laviolette, Housley developed into one of the NHL's top assistants, earning praise for his work with Nashville's defense, perhaps the league's best group.

By last year, as the Predators roared to the Stanley Cup final, Housley became the league's hottest assistant. The Sabres hired one of their all-time great players as head coach in June.

Of course, facing the Predators for the first time will be special. When Housley spotted some familiar faces following Sunday's practice, he shared some hugs and laughs.

"There's going to be a lot of emotions, mixed emotions," Housley said. "I'm just glad the game's here to start out, and it's been so far into the season it's going to be a little bit easier being in your own rink."

"I spent a lot of time in that organization, they gave me a start in the NHL. We sort of grew together, the players and myself as a coach."

The Predators look like they're better than last season. They've already earned an NHL-high 104 points. Having won three straight games and 13 of the last 14, they're the league's hottest team.

The Sabres, meanwhile, rank 30th in the 31-team league with only 58 points. They've been a colossal disappointment during Housley's first season.

While the Predators are gearing up for a Cup run, the Sabres are trying to stave off the embarrassment of finishing dead last.

Throughout the Sabres' struggles, Housley has remained resolute, preaching the message every day.

"I try to sell something as a coach, I try to get their minds focused in the right area, and that's a daily thing," he said.

"Whether that's a good message or a negative message, you're trying to get better and motivate them to be the best players they can be."

Housley often does that emotionally. His bench demeanor is quiet. He hasn't lost his cool during a game yet. But he's different during practices and behind closed doors.

On the ice, he often barks out orders. Instead of a whistle, he simply uses his mouth. Before the Sabres waived him, former winger Matt Moulson said Housley "gives it to you honest, whether you want to hear it or not."

"He's pretty fiery, he's a competitor," Sabres winger Kyle Okposo said of Housley. "This season's obviously not what he envisioned and he really wants to try to get better every day. I know that's a cliché, but he thinks you got to come to work and you got to prepare and got to get better every single day. I think we could definitely use that message."

Okposo has noticed his coach's detail this season.

"His passion for the game is very noticeable," he said. "He really gets fired up if things aren't going the way he wants them to. You can tell he's one of the best defensemen of all time, just in the way he's so fiery. ..."

"When he played, he just wanted to be the best. You can definitely see that in his coaching style."

Sabres' Kyle Okposo ready to return from concussion

Olean Times Herald

Bill Hoppe

March 18, 2018

BUFFALO – All signs point to Sabres winger Kyle Okposo returning from a concussion for Monday's home tilt against the Nashville Predators.

"I would think so," a smiling Okposo said this morning inside KeyBank Center. "I practiced with a line, practiced on the power play."

Still, Okposo, who said he has been cleared to play, wouldn't officially say he's back.

"I don't know, you guys make up your own mind," he said, still smiling.

Okposo, who has missed three games, will almost certainly play Monday. He probably just didn't want to jinx anything.

"All signs looking like a go," Sabres coach Phil Housley said.

After practicing at defense Friday, Okposo skated at right wing this morning beside center Evan Rodrigues and Seth Griffith.

These final weeks have meaning for Okposo.

While Okposo had recovered from the scary concussion he suffered late last season in time for training camp, he started slowly. The 10-year veteran eventually caught fire offensively, although his minus-29 rating is one of the NHL's worst.

Okposo said he has endured a "down year," compiling 11 goals and 38 points in 65 games.

"I got a personal number I'd like to hit with goals, assists, points and shots," he said. "It's been a real struggle personally for me this year."

In other news, the Sabres sent winger Justin Bailey back to Rochester Americans today. Housley said they might recall the Williamsville native again soon. Bailey must serve a one-game AHL suspension, meaning it's likely a paper transaction.

Bailey has looked impressive in recent games, showcasing his speed and scoring a goal.

"He's just got to continue to do what he's doing, definitely using his speed, being a little bit heavier in the battle," Housley said. "When he's first on the forecheck, he creates a lot of things. I just liked that goal. He was down there early, getting a lot of hits. I like the way he shoots the puck."

In other news, defenseman Casey Nelson, who missed Saturday afternoon's 5-3 win against Chicago with a lower-body injury, practiced today and could play Monday.

Housley also said winger Zemgus Girgensons is day-to-day with an undisclosed injury.

Nick Baptiste stars in rare Sabres win over Blackhawks

Olean Times Herald

Bill Hoppe

March 17, 2018

BUFFALO – On a Sabres team filled with, well, not exactly the fastest players, winger Nick Baptiste’s speed stands out.

Slick skating has helped the 6-foot-1, 205-pound Baptiste finally earn regular NHL action three years into his pro career. But the former third-round pick has played 12 straight games because he has evolved and started figuring what can make him successful.

“He’s a big guy and he needs to get to the net,” Sabres coach Phil Housley said after Baptiste keyed Saturday afternoon’s 5-3 come-from-behind win over the Chicago Blackhawks in center Jack Eichel’s return from an ankle injury.

In a span of 15:47, Baptiste scored twice – the tying and winning goals – by tipping shots past goalie J-F Berube from, you guessed it, in front of the net.

“That’s been a focus of our team that last little while, is just getting shots to the net, getting bodies to the net and scoring some ugly ones,” Baptiste said. “We got a couple tonight. That’s what it takes to score goals in this league and win.”

For Housley, Baptiste, 22, must keep getting to the net – the so-called dirty area – to score.

“That’s where he’s going to get rewarded like you saw (today),” Housley said. “We need more of that. He’s continued in a good direction with his development.”

After Baptiste’s first career game-winning goal with 1:56 left, he pumped his arm, yelled and couldn’t stop grinning.

“Just jacked up,” Baptiste said of his celebration. “It’s a goal in the last two minutes of the game, a potential winner. It’s pretty exciting stuff for me.”

The goals, the sixth and seventh of his 36-game career, ended a 12-game drought and doubled his production this season. They were extra special for another reason.

“Mom and brother in town, too, so it’s the first time they’ve seen me score live in the NHL,” said Baptiste, who showcased his speed beside center Evan Rodrigues and Justin Bailey, two other fast youngsters. “It’s been a good weekend for me.”

It was a good weekend for the entire team. Eichel, their leading scorer, recorded an assist in his first appearance since suffering a high right ankle sprain Feb. 10.

The Sabres, incredibly, beat the Blackhawks for the first time since Dec. 11, 2009, ending a 0-9-3 skid.

For one of the few times this trying season, the Sabres responded well to adversity. After captain Jonathan Toews put the Blackhawks up 3-2 just 20 seconds into the third period, the Sabres battled back before the capacity crowd of 19,070 inside KeyBank Center.

“We never backed down,” Housley said. “I thought the guys responded in the right way.”

Baptiste scored his first goal at 2:17, tipping in defenseman Nathan Beaulieu’s shot. He later got a piece of defenseman Marco Scandella’s shot.

It’s no coincidence the Sabres hit the five-goal mark for only the sixth time this season with Eichel back from his 15-game absence.

Eichel looked comfortable while skating 18 minutes, 14 seconds. He assisted on center Ryan O’Reilly’s second-period power-play goal.

During a third-period power-play, Eichel tweaked his injury, something he learned would happen when returned from the same injury last season.

“It feels good now,” Eichel said. “But yeah, you can tweak it here and there and it stings for a minute, but it comes back around.”

Eichel displayed his speed late, zooming to the net and drawing a hooking penalty.

Following Friday’s practice, his third of the week, Eichel said he decided to play.

“This was kind of the next test for me,” he said. “It’s not easy ... to take that much time off, come back and feel like yourself. I thought before I got hurt I was playing some of my best hockey, and obviously you miss five weeks, you come back and you’re not as sharp as you want to be, your game’s not where you want it to be exactly.

“But you can’t be too picky. Obviously, (I had) a little bit of rust out there and a couple things I want to clean up.”

Housley said Eichel played a “great game.”

“After being out that long and getting a pretty tough assignment against their second line, I think it was a good test for him,” he said. “He responded the right way. I thought he was playing with speed at times. For being out, he had a shot mentality.”

Winger Sam Reinhart’s empty-net goal, part of a three-point game, sealed only the Sabres’ 11th home win and their first afternoon victory (1-6-2) this season. Winger Benoit Pouliot scored the other goal.

Sabres notes: Nathan Beaulieu ‘big believer in fighting’

Olean Times Herald

Bill Hoppe

March 17, 2018

BUFFALO – In his NHL career, Sabres defenseman Nathan Beaulieu has fought 12 times, or an average of once every 23 games.

Speed and other skills, of course, helped Beaulieu reach the big leagues. Still, he believes fighting is a vital part of his repertoire.

“I’m a big believer in fighting in hockey,” Beaulieu said prior to recording an assist in Saturday afternoon’s 5-3 win against the Chicago Blackhawks. “I feel like there’s a place for it and I feel like there’s a lot of guys that are in the league that they should be because of it.

“It’s an intense part of the job that not a lot of guys like doing, but it’s just part of my DNA. I like sticking up for my teammates.”

Beaulieu, 25, fought for his teammates Thursday, challenging Toronto’s Matt Martin with the Sabres down two goals early in their 5-2 loss.

Battling one of the league’s toughest customers sparked the Sabres, who got back in the tilt.

“It was really courageous what he did,” Sabres coach Phil Housley said inside KeyBank Center. “He stepped up, tried to provide our team with energy.”

But 52 games into his Sabres career, Thursday’s fight might be Beaulieu’s greatest highlight. The former first-round pick has endured a rough season.

Housley awarded Beaulieu a spot beside No. 1 defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen on opening night. But he struggled and quickly lost it. An injury and two illnesses have also sidelined Beaulieu.

“He’s had a tough year,” Housley said. “Starting he was put in responsibility early and things didn’t work out for him early on. I think his confidence was lacking and then the injuries mounted. So he never really had any rhythm.”

Perhaps that’s why Beaulieu has fought a career-high four times this season, according to hockeyfights.com. Since he hasn’t provided offense – he has one goal, eight points and a minus-19 rating – he’s probably trying to contribute in other ways.

“I don’t go looking for it all that often, but when I feel like there’s a time and a place for it and there’s a willing opponent, it sometimes just gets you involved,” Beaulieu said. “If you’re not playing well, it gets the team more involved, gets the fans involved. I feel like it’s a big aspect of the game. ...

“I’m not a fighter, but if there’s something that needs to be done, I’m not afraid to do it.”

Lately, Housley said, Beaulieu has been “finding his game.”

“He’s just got to continue to focus on the defensive side of his game,” he said. “I think you can see the offensive side of his game is coming.”

Six poor months hasn’t sapped much of Beaulieu’s confidence. He has often been critical of his own game, saying he knows he can be better, something he repeated Saturday.

“It’s just being honest with yourself,” said Beaulieu, who compiled a career-high 28 points last season. “For me, I know what I’m capable of doing, I’ve done it. It’s not a secret, I’m not looking for something that isn’t there, it’s been done before. The biggest thing is being honest with yourself. If you’re not going to evaluate yourself and not be honest with yourself, you’re only cheating yourself.

“I know that this has been a tough year for me and a tough year for our team. I want to be part of the solution.”

xxx

Sabres center Jacob Josefson missed the game with a lower-body injury and is week-to-week, Housley said.

Josefson battled an ankle injury earlier this season.

Meanwhile, a nagging lower-body injury sidelined defenseman Casey Nelson. Housley expects him to play Monday when the Sabres host the Nashville Predators.

Defenseman Justin Falk replaced Nelson.

xxx

Getzville's Emily Pfalzer, fresh off winning an Olympic gold medal with Team USA at the Pyongyang Games, dropped the ceremonial first puck between Sabres center Jack Eichel and South Buffalo's Patrick Kane, a three-time Stanley Cup winner with the Chicago Blackhawks.

Notes: Sabres winger Zemgus Girgensons left the game early and didn't return. Housley had no update. ... After scoring Saturday, center Ryan O'Reilly has hit the 20-goal mark in all three of his seasons with the Sabres. Winger Sam Reinhart, meanwhile, has eclipsed the 40-point mark in his three NHL campaigns. With one goal and three points Saturday, Reinhart has compiled 12 goals and 29 points in the last 27 contests. ... Sabres goalie Chad Johnson made 37 saves. Recent recall Linus Ullmark backed him up, meaning Robin Lehner, the starter all season, was scratched.

5 Observations: Sabres top Blackhawks 5-3

WKBW

Matt Bove

March 17, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - Where were you in December of 2009? Believe it or not, Saturday was the Buffalo Sabres first win against the Chicago Blackhawks since 2009. Buffalo pulled away in the final minutes with Nick Baptiste's second goal of the night to make it a 4-3 game. Sam Reinhart scored again moments later [empty net] to give the Sabres a 5-3 win.

Five observations from Saturday's win:

Jack's Back

It was unclear whether or not we would see Jack Eichel back in the lineup again this season after he suffered a serious ankle injury in early February. After days of hints and practices, Eichel returned to the lineup on Saturday afternoon, answering those questions from last month.

With 11 games left in the season, Eichel will have a great chance at surpassing his career-best 57-point mark, set last season. Despite missing 15 games, Eichel leads the Sabres with 54 points, thanks to an assist in his first game back.

So how'd he look?

As you would probably expect, Eichel made some plays on Saturday that no one else on the Sabres can make. At one point he cycled the puck around the offensive zone all by himself, juking around anybody that was going to get in his way. He then slid the puck between his own legs, firing a backhand just over the net. If the shot would've gone in, it would've been one of the prettiest goals scored by a Sabres player this season.

@Matt_Bove

Eichel said after the game he was rusty but overall feels pretty good. He decided he was going to play yesterday #Sabres @WKBW

But with the good came the not so good. Eichel at times didn't look as quick as we've come to expect and made a few careless plays in the defensive zone. That said, the good outweighed the bad and it certainly looks like Eichel is at least close to 100-percent. He admitted he felt a bit rust but overall thought he played well.

Big game Baptiste

It would be safe to say that Saturday was one of the best games Nick Baptiste has played in the NHL. Baptiste scored the game tying goal in the third period and the game-winner with less than two minutes to play, helping the Sabres get a much needed win. After the game, Baptiste told reporters that his parents were in the stands and they've never seen him score a goal in the NHL until Saturday afternoon. Sabres head coach Phil Housley was equally impressed and said Baptiste had a great game.

@Matt_Bove

Nick Baptiste's parents had never seen their son score a goal in the NHL. This afternoon they were in the stands and watched him score not once, but twice #Sabres @WKBW

Homecoming

Every time Patrick Kane has played in Buffalo he picks up at least one point. On Saturday his first assist came in the second period as Kane sent an absolutely perfect pass to Jordan Oesterle to tie things at one. Kane added another tally just 20 seconds into the third period, picking up assist number 44 (!) on the year.

Reinhart stays hot

With a goal and two assists, Sam Reinhart now has 29 points in the Sabres last 27 games. For those keeping track at home, Reinhart now has 42 points this season, just five behind his career best mark [47] set last season. When you consider his terrible start to the season, Reinhart is proving to be one of the few bright spots of the season.

Looking ahead for the Sabres: Fix the blue line, get Housley some help

ESPN

Greg Wyshynski

March 17, 2018

What went wrong

EDITOR'S PICKS

Contender kryptonite: Biggest weaknesses on NHL's top 20 teams

The Lightning's penalty kill. The Wild's trouble away from Xcel Energy Center. Every NHL contender has a weakness that could lead to its ouster from the Stanley Cup playoffs if it's not corrected. We identify the top one for 20 teams still in the mix.

Weekly Reader: Evgeni Malkin is NHL's most underappreciated superstar

Despite being one of the NHL's best players, Evgeni Malkin doesn't get as much love for the Hart Trophy as we think he should. Plus, Jersey Fouls of the Week, Sidney Crosby's potential future as a coach, the intersection of wrestling and hockey, and more.

Stanley Cup Playoffs Watch Daily: Playoff chances, tragic numbers and more

Which teams have the best shot at locking up a playoff spot? Who's earning a better shot at the No. 1 overall pick? Here are the latest projections for both, along with critical matchups to watch today and much more.

The Buffalo Sabres entered the season with their second franchise reset in three years, as GM Jason Botterill and coach Phil Housley brought in a sense of renewed optimism.

Alas, by the end of November, the Sabres were once again an also-ran: 6-15-4 for 16 points, tied for last in the NHL, and it didn't get much better. Buffalo was the third-worst defensive team (3.22) and the worst offensive team (2.38) this season. It became quickly apparent that the Sabres were in some sort of weird "Inception"-esque rebuild within a rebuild, and another Jack Eichel season (0.96 points per game) ending without a playoff appearance.

Keys to the offseason

1. Change the roster and the culture.

Botterill was blunt about Buffalo after what was a quiet trade deadline, outside of an underwhelming return for Evander Kane. "The group that we have right now is not working," he said.

The general manager has now had a full season to see what works and what doesn't, which players fit his plan and which do not. At this point, Eichel should be the only untouchable on the current roster.

2. Address the blue line.

Housley was responsible for a dominant defense corps with the Nashville Predators, but it's clear he's not a miracle worker. Rasmus Ristolainen is developing nicely and Marco Scandella was Botterill's first big acquisition; but with due respect to Zach Bogosian and Jake McCabe, everything else about the defense is in flux, as it should be.

Do they make a trade? Do they offer the moon to an unrestricted free agent like John Carlson? Do they perform several dozen voodoo rituals in the hopes that their lottery ball comes up and they can throw Rasmus Dahlin at this problem?

Housley's forte is the defense. Give him some horses to train, and build from the crease outward.

3. Help for Housley.

There's every chance Phil Housley becomes an excellent NHL coach. But in his rookie season, too many players tuned him out without fear of repercussions. Would the Sabres consider adding a veteran assistant to the bench?

Look no further than Botterill's former team, the Pittsburgh Penguins, who had Jacques Martin adding gravitas to the staffs of both Dan Bylsma and Mike Sullivan. It's a move that would help Housley and the Sabres.

Realistic expectation for 2018-19

First, the good news. The Sabres have a goalie of the future in Linus Ullmark, who is ready to take over the crease. They have forward Casey Mittelstadt on the way, a player who could be the Mathew Barzal to Eichel's John Tavares or the Leon Draisaitl to his Connor McDavid, depending on your preferred point of comparison.

And, of course, they have Eichel. The realistic expectation for next season is to not dwell in the NHL's basement again and to have Botterill aggressively shape the team in his preferred image this offseason. At least that would be realistic for most observers.

There's no telling what the expectations are for Terry and Kim Pegula, the former of whom said that "the Buffalo Sabres' reason for existence will be to win a Stanley Cup." That was in 2011.

Housley sees Predators as model for Sabres

NHL.com

Mike Zeisberger

March 18, 2018

BUFFALO - Nine months after coming two wins shy of hoisting the Stanley Cup, Phil Housley once again will be behind the bench for a Nashville Predators game.

Only this time, he'll be trying to beat them.

Having served as a Predators assistant from 2013-17, Housley, 54, was named as coach of the Buffalo Sabres on June 15, 2017. He'll face his former team for the first time when Nashville plays Buffalo at KeyBank Center on Monday (7 p.m. ET; MSG-B, FS-TN, NHLTV).

When it comes to jersey colors, the Predators and Sabres predominantly wear blue and gold. There are no such similarities between Nashville and Buffalo when it comes to the NHL standings.

Nashville leads the League with 104 points (47-14-10) and became the first team to clinch a berth in the 2018 Stanley Cup Playoffs with a 4-2 victory against the Colorado Avalanche on Friday.

NHL Tonight: Predators Clinch

07:26 • March 17th, 2018

Buffalo, with 58 points (23-36-12), is 46 behind Nashville. Only the Arizona Coyotes, with 57, have less than the Sabres, who were eliminated from the playoffs on Saturday.

"I know there are a lot of differences between the two teams," Housley said. "That's obvious.

"But to tell you the truth, this version of our team has a lot in common to the one in Nashville during my first year there in 2013."

The Predators missed the playoffs in 2013-14 but made them in each of the following three seasons. Nashville reached the Final for the first time in franchise history in 2017, losing 4-2 against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

"I look at Nashville the first year I got there and I see a lot of similarities to this team," Housley said. "I mean, our record is a little bit different. But the development of the young players, the guys going up and going down, and the subsequent development, those are the things I can relate to dating back to my early days in Nashville.

"I like to think I've helped in the development (of Predators players). I think it's a terrific D-corps. And the forwards have done a terrific job. But a lot of those guys have had to come up the hard way and I think they appreciate that.

"I'd like to think I've had a hand in some of their success. But when Monday comes, well, we're trying to win hockey games."

Indeed, when the puck is dropped, friends will become foes, especially when Housley looks over at the Predators bench at coach Peter Laviolette. Housley was a member of Laviolette's coaching staff for his final three seasons in Nashville.

PITTSBURGH, PA - MAY 31: Peter Laviolette of the Nashville Predators speaks during a press conference after Game Two of the 2017 NHL Stanley Cup Final at PPG Paints Arena on May 31, 2017 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Pittsburgh Penguins defeated the Nashville Predators with a score of 4 to 1. (Photo by Matt Kincaid/Getty Images)

"I just think I had two really good mentors," Housley said. "Working with Barry Trotz in my first season there, I learned about preparation and the technical part of the game. And Lavy, he was equal to the same. He was a very good motivator. At the same time he was a very good technical coach as well.

"I just tried to listen and watch and absorb as much as I could. Those are guys who have been in the League a long time and understand what it takes to win. You can see it in their success as coaches. And right now Nashville under Lavy is really playing good hockey."

Housley is not surprised that the Predators have overcome the heartache of coming so excruciatingly close to winning the Stanley Cup. In his opinion, the resiliency and determination of Nashville is a reflection of general manager David Poile.

"I think the front office is a key," Housley said. "David did a really good job of trying to make our team better in Nashville. And you could see the result last year. Even though we got in as the 16th team, we were playing really good hockey at the time we got into the playoffs.

"It's just a really good group in there. From a players perspective, they play for each other, they hold each other accountable, and there's really good leadership. You don't see too many lows during the season. It says a lot about the players and how David has tried to make them better, including the deals he's made this year. And their guys have done a terrific job of keeping focussed."

Using the Predators model as a blueprint, Housley has seen improvement in his Sabres in the past six weeks. Buffalo has gone 9-8-1 in its past 17 games, a run that includes victories against upper-echelon opponents like the Tampa Bay Lightning, Boston Bruins and Toronto Maple Leafs.

One player who has started to thrive under Housley's tutelage is Sabres forward Sam Reinhart, 22. In his past 27 games, Reinhart has 29 points (12 goals, 17 assists) including a three-point performance in Buffalo's 5-3 victory against the Chicago Blackhawks on Saturday.

Reinhart's tap-in PPG
01:03 • March 15th, 2018

"You get used to people as you are around them on a daily basis," Reinhart said. "I'm starting to understand what (Housley) wants out of everyone. More importantly, I'm understanding what's expected of me and the amount of freedom that lets me play my game where I'm comfortable to how he wants me to fit in.

"We had a lot of personnel changes on and off the ice in the past year. It takes some time to get used to. We're hoping these last couple of weeks will be a step in the right direction and we can move forward and finish off strong."

Getting a win for Housley against the Predators would be a good start.

Eichel has assist in return, Sabres top Blackhawks

NHL.com

Joe Yerdon

March 17, 2018

BUFFALO -- Jack Eichel had an assist in his return and Nicholas Baptiste scored two goals, including the go-ahead goal late in the third period, to give the Buffalo Sabres a 5-3 win against the Chicago Blackhawks at KeyBank Center on Saturday.

Baptiste scored with 1:56 remaining to give the Sabres a 4-3 lead, deflecting a shot by Marco Scandella for his fourth goal of the season.

"That's what it takes to score goals in this league and to win in this league," Baptiste said. "I was fortunate enough to get to the net and make a couple of good plays."

Ryan O'Reilly, Benoit Pouliot and Sam Reinhart scored, and Chad Johnson made 34 saves for the Sabres (23-36-12).

Eichel missed the past 15 games with a high-ankle sprain.

"It was just a lot of fun to get out there and play again," Eichel said. "That was the biggest thing. I just really enjoy it. I enjoy playing the game, no matter what time of the year it is, who we're playing, where we're playing. It's just a lot of fun to be out on the ice with these guys. It just feels great to get back out there and compete."

Eichel appeared to tweak his ankle during a power play in the third period and went to the bench in pain, but remained in the game.

"Last year dealing with the injury and what goes with it, you know you're going to tweak it," Eichel said. "It's not an 'if' thing, it's a 'when' thing. You just want to get it to the point where you're not thinking about it on the ice."

The Sabres, who defeated the Blackhawks for the first time since Dec. 11, 2009 - they were 0-9-3 - were eliminated from Stanley Cup Playoff contention when the New Jersey Devils defeated the Los Angeles Kings 3-0 on Saturday.

"It's nice to beat these guys," O'Reilly said. "They're not having the greatest year but still they're a great team with a lot of talent. For us to get this win, it's a huge one for us."

Jonathan Toews, Tomas Jurco, and Jordan Oesterle scored and J-F Berube made 27 saves for the Blackhawks (30-34-8) who remained 16 points behind the Dallas Stars for the second wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs from the Western Conference.

Toews bats in puck out of midair

00:43 • March 17th, 2018

"It's been a common theme here for a while," Blackhawks forward Patrick Kane said. "A lot of the games, it even seems we're scoring the first goal and we can't come up with anything. It's kind of been that way all year. It's disappointing, it would've been nice to get the win here today."

Baptiste tied the game 3-3 in the third period 1:57 after Toews scored his 20th goal, 20 seconds into the period.

Reinhart, who also had two assists, scored an empty-net goal at 19:21 to make it 5-3. He has 29 points (12 goals, 17 assists) in his past 27 games.

O'Reilly gave the Sabres a 2-1 lead at 11:07 of the second period with a power-play goal when he poked in a loose puck after Berube saved a shot by Eichel that was tipped by O'Reilly for his 20th goal.

Jurco made it 2-2 at 14:15 of the second when his shot was saved by Johnson but bounced off Rasmus Ristolainen and into the net.

Pouliot gave the Sabres a 1-0 lead at 18:10 of the first period when he batted a puck that went off Oesterle.

Pouliot opens the scoring
00:55 • March 17th, 2018

Oesterle made it 1-1 at 8:15 of the second period he received a backhand pass from Kane for his fifth goal.

Goal of the game
Baptiste's goal at 18:04 of the third period

Baptiste's go-ahead PPG
01:07 • March 17th, 2018

Save of the game
Johnson's save on Brandon Saad at 3:39 of the first period

Johnson's big save on Saad
00:11 • March 17th, 2018

Highlight of the game
Oesterle's goal at 8:15 of the second period

Oesterle finishes Kane's feed
00:47 • March 17th, 2018

They said it

"For the first part of the year we were pretty good and recently we've had, I think, three or four games where we've had leads and didn't come up with points, so that's tough. That's one of those things whether it's predictability, doing the right things with the puck in the right times of the game, a combination of things, taking a penalty with a couple minutes to go, and it's in our net, so it's not the same way all the time." -- Blackhawks coach Joel Quenneville

"It's so nice to have him back. Gosh, he's just ... the little things he does when he gets the puck, you feel like the whole building is like, 'OK, what's he going to do?' The other team has to be so sharp when he's out there and it makes us a more dangerous team." -- Sabres center Ryan O'Reilly on the return of Jack Eichel

Need to know

Toews has scored 20 or more goals in each of his 11 NHL seasons. ... Eichel has 35 points (15 goals, 20 assists) in his last 30 games. ... Sabres forward Zemgus Girgensons left the game at 11:19 of the first period with an undisclosed injury.

What's next

Blackhawks: Host the St. Louis Blues on Sunday (7:30 p.m. ET; NBCSN, NHL.TV)

Sabres: Host the Nashville Predators on Monday (7 p.m. ET; MSG-B, FS-TN, NHL.TV)

Sabres season defined by key injuries, offensive woes

NHL.com

Mike Morreale

March 18, 2018

The Buffalo Sabres (23-36-12, 58 points) were eliminated from contention in the Stanley Cup Playoffs when the New Jersey Devils defeated the Los Angeles Kings 3-0 on Saturday.

The Sabres have not made the playoffs since 2010-11 when they lost against the Philadelphia Flyers in seven games in the Eastern Conference Quarterfinals. Depending on the NHL Draft Lottery results, they could select among the top four picks in the first round of the 2018 NHL Draft on June 22 in Dallas.

Here's a look at what happened in 2017-18, and why things could be better in 2018-19:

The skinny

Potential UFAs: Benoit Pouliot, LW; Jordan Nolan, C; Jacob Josefson, C; Josh Gorges, D; Casey Nelson, D; Justin Falk, D; Chad Johnson, G.

Potential RFAs: Sam Reinhart, C; Nicholas Baptiste, RW; Seth Griffith, RW; Scott Wilson, LW; Victor Antipin, D; Robin Lehner, G.

Potential 2018 Draft picks: 7

What went wrong

Sputtering offense: Just five players have scored at least 13 goals, and Evander Kane, who scored 20, was traded to the San Jose Sharks on Feb. 26. Jason Pominville (12 goals) has only six since Halloween, Johan Larsson has four (two into an empty net), Zemgus Girgensons has seven in 65 games and no defenseman scored a goal until December. Buffalo is 30th in the League in scoring, averaging 2.41 goals per game despite ranking sixth with a 51.8 face-off percentage. It ranks 24th (17.5 percent) on the power play after finishing first (24.5 percent) in 2016-17.

Zemgus Girgensons #28 of the Buffalo Sabres looks to control the puck against the Calgary Flames

Home ice woes: There were hopes of building upon a 20-15-6 record at KeyBank Center last season, the team's first 20-win season on home ice since 2011-12. Instead, they have the fewest home wins (11-20-5) in the League this season.

No lead safe: They rank 31st in the League in winning percentage when leading after one period (.555), and 28th when leading after two periods (.750).

Reasons for optimism

Jack Eichel: Despite missing 15 games because of an ankle injury, Eichel, 21, showed why he is the future by leading the team in goals (22), assists (32) and points (54) in 56 games.

Eichel's slick far-side wrister

00:56 • February 8th, 2018

Help on way: There are high hopes for several prospects, including forward Alexander Nylander, who is playing for Rochester of the American Hockey League, and University of Minnesota center Casey Mittelstadt. Mittelstadt was voted MVP of the 2018 IIHF World Junior Championship with the United States, and ranked second at Minnesota in scoring with 30 points (11 goals, 19 assists) in 34 games as a freshman.

Drafting Dahlin: They are 30th in the standings, one point ahead of the Arizona Coyotes, and could have a good chance to select defenseman Rasmus Dahlin of Frolunda (Sweden) in the draft.

Okposo practices again, expected to play Monday

Sabres.com

Jourdon LaBarber

March 18, 2018

Kyle Okposo was back on the ice again for practice with the Buffalo Sabres on Sunday morning, and it appeared to be all systems go for the forward. Whereas he skated as an extra on defense upon returning to practice on Friday, this time he was a regular on the power play and on a line with Seth Griffith and Evan Rodrigues.

In other words, he looked ready to play. He said he felt ready as well, and Phil Housley said he expects Okposo to be in the lineup against the Nashville Predators on Monday night assuming he responds well to practice.

"I think we should expect to see Kyle depending on today and how he handled the practice," Housley said. "All signs look like a go but we'll evaluate that tomorrow."

Okposo has missed three games since sustaining a concussion on Oct. 8, the latest setback in what he described as a down season personally. He's scored 38 points (11+27) in 65 games this season after scoring 45 points (19+26) in an equal number of contests last year, his first as a Sabre.

After using his week away from the ice to reset and evaluate what he needs to do moving forward, Okposo said he still has goals he'd like to accomplish this season with 11 games remaining.

"I've got a personal number I'd like to hit with my own goals, assists and points and shots," he said. "It's been a real struggle personally for me this year. ... I'm just trying to work as hard as I can and try to make a positive impact on this group, and just try and lead by example with my work ethic and my preparation."

Getting back to top form, Housley said, starts with his physicality.

"He's a power forward, use that down low in the offensive zone," Housley said. "Get your body over it, hang onto it, get to the net."

With Okposo's return, the top of Buffalo's lineup will be as healthy as it's been since early February. Jack Eichel returned from a 15-game absence due to a high-ankle sprain in the team's win over Chicago on Saturday and scored an assist.

The Sabres are still without Zemgus Girgensons and Jacob Josefson at forward. Girgensons is day-to-day after sustaining an injury against Chicago, while Josefson is week-to-week with a lower-body injury.

Just as Okposo has his own goals for the rest of the season, he said the team is focused on using their remaining time to improve.

"I think you have to prove yourself every night in this league," he said. "Obviously, we're not going to make the playoffs and you can say that, 'Oh, these guys have nothing to play for.' But every night you get to play in the National Hockey League is special and you can't take that for granted because it goes by pretty quick."

Housley expects 'emotional' game on Monday

Housley spent the past four seasons as an assistant coach with Nashville, including a memorable run to the Stanley Cup Final last season. Monday night will mark his first time coaching against his former team, and he said he expects it to be an emotional experience.

"There's going to be a lot of emotions, mixed emotions," he said. "I'm just glad the game's here to start out, and it's been so far into the season it's going to be a little bit easier being in your own rink. I spent a lot of time in that organization, they gave me a start in the NHL. We sort of grew together, the players and myself as a coach."

During his tenure in Nashville, Housley was credited with assisting in the development of defensemen such as Mattias Ekholm and Ryan Ellis. The Predators lead the NHL with 104 points this season and became the first team to clinch a playoff berth with a win over Colorado on Sunday. They've allowed a league-low 2.42 goals per game.

Okposo said he heard from players who played with or against Housley that the defenseman visibly wanted to be the best, and it didn't take him long to see those same qualities in his coach. While Housley may be calm and reserved speaking to the media, Okposo described him as "fiery" behind the scenes.

"I think he really wants to win," Okposo said. "His passion for the game is very noticeable and he really gets fired up if things aren't going the way that he wants them to. You can tell that he's one of the best defensemen of all time, just in the way that he's so fiery."

Bailey assigned to Rochester

The Sabres assigned Justin Bailey to Rochester on Sunday morning, although it may not be long before we see him back in Buffalo. Bailey is due to serve a one-game suspension in the AHL for an illegal check to the head against Syracuse last Sunday, and Housley said there's a chance he's recalled.

If he does come back, Housley said he wants to see more of the same from the young forward. Bailey skated 10:44 against Chicago on Saturday and it was his net-front presence that helped lead to Nicholas Baptiste's game-tying goal in the third period.

Baptiste's redirection goal
00:50 • March 17th, 2018

"He's just got to continue to do what he's doing, definitely using his speed, being a little bit heavier in the battle," Housley said. "When he's first on the forecheck, he creates a lot of things. I just liked that goal. He was down there early, getting a lot of hits. I like the way he shoots the puck. And just his wall play, dependable and being reliable and trustable in that area."

Sunday's practice

Casey Nelson was back on the ice after missing Saturday's game due to an injury and is possible to play on Monday. Here's how the full lineup looked at practice:

20 Scott Wilson - 90 Ryan O'Reilly - 23 Sam Reinhart
67 Benoit Pouliot - 15 Jack Eichel - 29 Jason Pominville
25 Seth Griffith - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 21 Kyle Okposo
17 Jordan Nolan - 22 Johan Larsson - 13 Nicholas Baptiste

6 Marco Scandella - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
45 Brendan Guhle - 41 Justin Falk
82 Nathan Beaulieu - 93 Victor Antipin
4 Josh Gorges - 8 Casey Nelson

31 Chad Johnson
35 Linus Ullmark

Sabres rally past Blackhawks in Eichel's return

Sabres.com

Jourdon LaBarber

March 17, 2018

Jack Eichel knew it had been a long time since the Buffalo Sabres had beaten the Chicago Blackhawks.

Exactly how long he wasn't sure, but Eichel was quick to point out following a win at KeyBank Center on Saturday afternoon that it was the first time he had been a part of a victory against the franchise with three Stanley Cups in the last decade. For him, it was just icing on the cake.

Eichel tallied an assist and skated 18:14 in his return from a 15-game absence due to a high-ankle sprain while a pair of third-period goals from Nicholas Baptiste propelled the Sabres to a 5-3 win over the Blackhawks. Afterward, he expressed how happy he was just to be back on the ice, competing with his teammates.

"It was just a lot of fun to get out there and play again," Eichel said. "That was the biggest thing. I just really enjoy it. I enjoy playing the game, no matter what time of the year it is, who we're playing, where we're playing. It's just a lot of fun to be out on the ice with these guys. It just feels great to get back out there and compete."

Jack Eichel Postgame (3/17/18)

03:08 • March 17th, 2018

Chicago took a 3-2 lead just 20 seconds into the third period on a goal from Jonathan Toews, who broke for a 2-on-1 rush off the opening draw and buried his own rebound past Buffalo goaltender Chad Johnson. It could have set a familiar stage for the Sabres, who last beat the Blackhawks on Dec. 11, 2010, when Patrick Lalime was in net.

Instead, Buffalo's leadership group on the bench reinforced the message that there was still ample time to right the ship. Baptiste credited the team's veterans with steering the game in the right direction, but it was a trio of players that spent time in Rochester this season that ultimately got the job done.

The line of Baptiste, Evan Rodrigues and Justin Bailey provided the Sabres with speed and energy in the third period, and all three players were on the ice when Baptiste scored to tie the game less than two minutes after Toews' goal. Nathan Beaulieu took a shot from the point with both Baptiste and Bailey positioned in front of Blackhawks goalie J.F. Berube, and Baptiste was able to connect on the deflection.

Baptiste's redirection goal

00:50 • March 17th, 2018

"I thought we were flying, we were really going in that third period," Baptiste said. "It's exciting, we're all three guys who are trying to establish ourselves in the NHL. We're ... hard to defend against. You have lots of movement like that and now we're making plays, it's hard to stop."

Baptiste had his mom and his brother in the stands, and it was the first time either had seen him score an NHL goal in person. He decided to double down on that with 1:56 remaining when, upon the conclusion of a Buffalo power play, he was able to deflect a Marco Scandella shot past Berube for the game-winning goal.

Sam Reinhart scored into an empty net with 38.4 seconds remaining.

"That's been a focus of our team that last little while is just getting shots to the net, getting bodies to the net and scoring some ugly ones," Baptiste said. "We got a couple tonight. That's what it takes to score goals in this league and win."

Buffalo and Chicago traded goals in the first two periods. Benoit Pouliot opened the scoring for Buffalo on a feed from Rasmus Ristolainen with 1:50 remaining in the first, while Ryan O'Reilly buried the rebound of a shot on the power play from Eichel in the second. Jordan Oesterle and Tomas Jurco scored for Chicago.

O'Reilly, who has now scored 20 goals in all three of his seasons as a Sabre, said Eichel's presence could be felt throughout the game.

"It's so nice to have him back," he said. "Gosh, he's just, the little things he does when he gets the puck, you feel like the whole building is like, 'OK, what's he going to do?' The other team has to be so sharp when he's out there and it makes us a more dangerous team. ... It's tough coming back off an injury like that and he did well, it was big."

O'Reilly's gritty PPG
01:10 • March 17th, 2018

The Sabres had a brief scare in the third period when Eichel appeared to tweak his ankle, but he was able to recover in time for his next shift. He finished the afternoon with a game-high 11 shot attempts, including five shots on goal.

"Last year dealing with the injury and what goes with it, you know you're going to tweak it," he said. "It's not an if thing, it's a when thing. You just want to get it to the point where you're not thinking about it on the ice. I thought maybe in the first period I was a little hesitant, it's my first game in five weeks, but I thought as the game went on I started to feel more comfortable, started to kind of forget about it and just play."

Eichel said he made the decision to play after practice on Friday, his fourth time on the ice with the team. He was cautious not to come back too soon, but Phil Housley had stressed all along that Eichel's intention was always to come back and play before the end of the season, if possible.

Seeing the joy on his face after the game, it was easy to see why. Earning a win over Chicago made it that much better.

"Obviously, I love the outcome," he said. "It's a big win."

Girgensons leaves with injury

Zemgus Girgensons left the game with 8:41 remaining in the first period and did not return after sustaining an injury during a collision along the boards. Housley had no further update on the forward's condition after the game.

Girgensons has 12 points (7+5) in 64 games this season. The Sabres are already without Kyle Okposo (day-to-day, concussion) and Jacob Josefson (week-to-week, lower body) at forward.

Reinhart stays hot

Reinhart is one player who stepped up his game in Eichel's absence, and he didn't slow down on Saturday. The forward tallied a pair of assists in addition to his empty-net goal, giving him 29 points (12+17) in his last 27 games and 42 points overall. It's his third-straight season scoring 40-plus points.

Pfalzer drops the puck

Olympic gold medalist and Buffalo native Emily Pfalzer was on hand for a ceremonial puck drop, joined by USA Hockey alums Eichel and Patrick Kane. She joined Brian Duff to discuss her path to the Olympics and her experience in PyeongChang, which you can watch below:

Emily Pfalzer with Duffer 3/17/18
02:40 • March 17th, 2018

Up next

Phil Housley will face his former team for the first time when the Sabres welcome the Nashville Predators to KeyBank Center on Monday. Coverage on MSG-B begins at 6:30 p.m., or you can listen live on WGR 550. Puck drop is scheduled for 7.

Eichel returns to lineup against Blackhawks

Sabres.com

Jourdon LaBarber

March 17, 2018

Jack Eichel will be back in the lineup for the Buffalo Sabres when they host the Chicago Blackhawks at KeyBank Center on Saturday afternoon. Eichel has missed the past 15 games due to a right high-ankle sprain that he sustained in Boston on Feb. 10.

Eichel has been skating with the team since Tuesday, a span that included three full practices and a morning skate.

"Talking to our doctors and trainers, his practice, the way he progressed all week, he checked all the boxes off," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "He's ready to play, he wants to play, he wants to get back in the lineup, so we feel that we're comfortable putting him back in."

Preview: CHI at BUF (3/17/18)

01:20 • March 17th, 2018

Despite his long absence, Eichel leads the Sabres with 22 goals and 53 points this season. He had scored 34 points (15+19) in 29 games since the beginning of December prior to sustaining his injury.

Eichel dealt with the same injury in his left ankle last season, causing him to miss the first 21 games. He scored a goal and an assist in his return, followed by a two-goal performance in his second game back.

"The skill, that sort of thing, comes back pretty quickly," Eichel said after practice on Friday. "I think, obviously, like reads and having the game come to you, I think takes a little longer. But, I mean, I think that's something you expect with an injury like this, going through it last year it's a good experience for me, this rehab process. It's not something you want to rush through and set yourself back."

Eichel will enter the lineup in place of Jacob Josefson, who is week-to-week with a lower-body injury. The Sabres announced on Monday that defenseman Casey Nelson is day-to-day, also with a lower-body injury, although Housley said he expects Nelson to be ready to play against Nashville on Monday. Justin Falk will replace Nelson on defense.

Chad Johnson will start in net for the Sabres, while Linus Ullmark will serve as his backup.

Phil Housley Pregame (3/17/18)

03:41 • March 17th, 2018

The Blackhawks have had an uncharacteristic season, with their streak of nine-straight playoff appearances about to come to an end. That said, they still boast their usual offensive threats in forwards Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews.

"They're a deadly transitional team," Housley said. "We have to know, even when we're in the offensive zone, that any possession change they're going to try to stretch the ice on us. Our D are going to have to keep everybody in front of them."

"They're a great rush team, number one team off the rush in shots, so our guys coming back into our zone have to pick up players."

Coverage on MSG-B begins at 12:30 p.m., or you can listen live on WGR 550. Puck drop is scheduled for a 1.

Sharpen Up: March 17, 2018

Sabres.com

Chris Ryndak

March 17, 2018

Happy St. Patrick's Day. It's a game day at KeyBank Center as the Sabres take on the Chicago Blackhawks. It's a 1 p.m. faceoff, but get to the rink early to check out Buffalo's St. Patrick's Day-themed warmup jerseys that will be auctioned off online after the game.

For \$20, you can also purchase special autographed pucks in the 100 Level concourse. All proceeds will go directly to the Buffalo Sabres Foundation.

Jack Eichel may suit up today, but we'll know for sure after we hear from Phil Housley later this morning.

If you're not coming to the rink, be sure to catch the GMC Game Night pregame show starting at 12:30 p.m. on MSG. RJ is back and will have the call with Rayzor after a ceremonial faceoff featuring Olympic gold medalist Emily Pfalzer.

Here's what you need to know.

Yesterday's practice

Sabres Now (3/16/18)
01:46 • March 16th, 2018

From the Ice Level Practice Report...

Kyle Okposo feared the worst, just like the rest of us.

When Okposo stayed down on the ice following a collision with Ottawa Senators forward Bobby Ryan on March 8, it was hard not to think back to a year ago, when a concussion cost the forward the final six games of his season and eventually landed him in the Neurosurgical Intensive Care Unit at Buffalo General.

Okposo, too, thought back to last season. But while he was diagnosed with a concussion following the collision with Ryan, he quickly noticed that his symptoms weren't as severe. Reports from Phil Housley were positive, and on Friday Okposo was back on the ice with the Buffalo Sabres as a full participant at practice.

"Yeah, that kind of runs through your mind, 'Oh no, I hope it doesn't happen again,' and, 'Here we go,'" Okposo said. "But it wasn't really like that. I didn't have many symptoms. Mood wasn't affected, sleep wasn't affected, so I saw the people that I needed to and feeling good and ready to get back at it."

Okposo left the door open for a potential return to the lineup against Chicago on Saturday, but Housley said he remains in concussion protocol and still must be cleared.

"This was a first really good step today in practice to see where he's at," Housley said. "I really like what he brought today, sharp and clean."

Here's how the lineup looked at practice

Phil Housley (3/16/18)
05:35 • March 16th, 2018

Housley named Chad Johnson the starting goaltender for today's game.

Jacob Josefson, Casey Nelson and Rasmus Ristolainen stayed off the ice for maintenance days. Robin Lehner left the ice shortly into practice, which Housley said was also for a maintenance issue. All are expected to be ready come Saturday.

20 Scott Wilson - 90 Ryan O'Reilly - 23 Sam Reinhart
28 Zemgus Girgensons - 15 Jack Eichel - 29 Jason Pominville
67 Benoit Pouliot - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 13 Nicholas Baptiste / 25 Seth Griffith
17 Jordan Nolan - 22 Johan Larsson - 95 Justin Bailey
21 Kyle Okposo

Defense: 4 Josh Gorges, 6 Marco Scandella, 41 Justin Falk, 45 Brendan Guhle, 82 Nathan Beaulieu, 93 Victor Antipin

40 Robin Lehner
31 Chad Johnson
35 Linus Ullmark

Jack Eichel (3/16/18)
03:33 • March 16th, 2018

Today's matchup
From the Game Notes...

This is the second of two meetings between the Sabres and Blackhawks this season.
Last meeting: Chicago defeated Buffalo 3-2 (OT) in Chicago on Dec. 8, 2017
The Sabres are 0-7-3 in their last 10 games vs. the Blackhawks; 3-5-2 at home.

The Sabres are looking to snap a 12-game winless streak (0-9-3) against the Blackhawks that includes a five-game winless streak (0-4-1) at home.
Buffalo's last win against the Blackhawks was a 2-1 victory at home on Dec. 11, 2009. Their last road win in Chicago came on 10, 2007.

Sam Reinhart has totaled 26 points (11+15) in his last 26 games.
Rasmus Ristolainen has 25 points (6+19) in his last 33 games dating back to Dec. 29. Ristolainen's 25 points during that span tied for eighth among NHL defensemen entering play Friday.
Though he missed five games from March 2 to 10, Evan Rodrigues has totaled 11 points (4+8) in his last 12 games played and comes into today's game with points in a career-best three straight appearances (2+3).
Scott Wilson has recorded a point in three of his last four games (1+2).