



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*March 21, 2018*

## Three years after infamous game, it's still bottoms up for Sabres, Coyotes

The Buffalo News

By John Vogl

March 20, 2018

Chad Johnson remembers his introduction to the Buffalo Sabres. How could he not?

"It was really rock bottom at that point as an organization and franchise," the goaltender said Tuesday.

Johnson arrived via trade in March 2015. The Tank was firing at full strength, and it was about to unleash its deadliest weapon. The Sabres hosted the Arizona Coyotes on March 26, 2015, and the fans in KeyBank Center cheered for the Coyotes.

The Sabres lost the battle of the bottom-feeders, falling six points behind Arizona and eventually finishing last overall. It earned them the No. 2 pick in the draft and franchise center Jack Eichel.

Three years later, the Sabres and Coyotes will meet again in Buffalo. Not much has changed. Buffalo is last with 58 points, Arizona is 30th with 59, and Wednesday's game could help determine the NHL's worst team.

It was not supposed to be this way.

"At the start of it, you evaluate the team, the team that's on paper," Johnson said of returning to Buffalo this season. "You talk to different people in the organization about where it's at, where it's heading.

"I talked to everybody, and I don't think anybody really expected it to be where we're at."

As the Sabres and Coyotes ready for another basement bout, it's a chance to reflect on how bad things have been. It's staggering.

This season, Buffalo is last in the NHL in goal differential (minus-64), goals (171), first-period goals (38) and winning percentage when the opponent scores first (.128), among other categories.

Since the start of the 2013-14 season, Buffalo is last in the NHL in points, wins, goals and winning percentage in one-goal games, among other categories. The Sabres have the most regulation losses, of course, with their total of 212 hardly rivaled by anyone. Arizona is the second-worst team with 198.

"It's definitely not fun year after year kind of having the same feeling," said Sabres center Johan Larsson.

Somewhat amazingly, Larsson, Johnson and defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen are the only healthy players who remain from that infamous game against Arizona. Johnson was the backup to Matt Hackett. Ristolainen manned the blue line with Andrej Meszaros, Andre Benoit, Mike Weber, Nikita Zadorov and Zach Bogosian. The list of forwards included Cody Hodgson, Zac Dalpe, Mikhail Grigorenko, Matt Moulson and Phil Varone.

Similar turnover awaits because of the lingering troubles.

"You never know what happens in summer," Ristolainen said. "A lot of guys can be gone, but if you finish strong, get the confidence, you never know.

"It's frustrating, but there's not much you can do. Just try to get better, play hard and there's always next year."

While the Sabres and Coyotes are still looking toward next year, the atmosphere at their game will be different. In 2015, the last-place team was guaranteed the first or second spot in the draft. That meant Connor McDavid or Eichel.

The NHL has since tweaked the rules, and the last-place team can draft as low as fourth. The league has also lowered the odds of winning the lottery, with official numbers coming after the regular season. Last year, the last-place team had an 18 percent chance of winning. The 29th-place club had a 12.1 percent chance.

Neither won as the New Jersey Devils jumped from fifth to first. Philadelphia vaulted from 13th to second, and Dallas leaped from eighth to third.

As a result, Sabres fans will be cheering for the Sabres and not the Coyotes.

"I don't think it's going to be the same," Larsson said. "I want them to cheer for us, for sure. We're going to do everything to win it."

As rough as things have been for the Sabres and Coyotes, both teams see light. Arizona is 11-5-1 in its last 17 games. Buffalo is a more pedestrian 11-11-3 in its past 25, but that counts as progress after a 6-17-4 start.

Plus, Johnson says, it just feels different than when he first arrived. The change to General Manager Jason Botterill and coach Phil Housley has helped in many places, though not the standings.

"Now there's good people in the organization that have won at this level," Johnson said. "The pieces are there. You've just got to get experience. You've got to have a high standard.

"I think that we're there. I think you see that late in the season when we've played to a basic standard and could compete in games."

## Sabres' Eichel has an answer for anyone wondering why he's playing

The Buffalo News

By John Vogl

March 20, 2018

It's a question that's been asked often among fans. It's been asked to Jack Eichel himself.

Why would the Buffalo Sabres' franchise player come back, play out the meaningless few weeks and risk reinjuring his ankle?

"It's a bit frustrating for myself to get that question from people because it's a pretty simple answer to be honest with you: I'm playing because I'm a hockey player," Eichel said Tuesday in KeyBank Center. "It's kind of ridiculous for somebody to think the fact that we're out of the playoffs and we don't have an opportunity to really do anything with our season that I would just pack my year in. It's not who I am as a person. It's not who I've ever been and not who I am as a hockey player."

"At the end of the day, I love to play hockey. Whether we're in first place or last place in the league, it doesn't matter to me. I like to put my equipment on, go out there, play hockey. That's why I'm playing. I love to play it. I have a lot of fun doing it. It's what I look most forward to in my day. There's not really quite a feeling like it. I enjoy it every day. I'm a competitor. I want to be out there competing. I want to play, so that's why I'm playing."

After missing five weeks and 15 games, Eichel will play his third straight game Wednesday when the Sabres host the Arizona Coyotes. They're the two worst teams in the NHL, and Eichel will be out there.

"I think there should be a lot more questions asked if I decided I did want to pack it in and end my season because I had an ankle injury," the 21-year-old said. "I looked at my rehab process as if I was coming back to compete to try and get to the playoffs. Obviously, that's not the case, but I tried to put myself in the best position to come back and impact this team in a positive way."

"That's all part of us just building a culture around here. We should all want to be out there every night, and I think that's important."

The third-year pro wants no part of guys who feel differently.

"At some points, some people can lose a love for the game at this level," Eichel said. "It's stressful, obviously, and it takes a toll on you mentally, and there's a lot that goes with it."

"But at the end of the day, you have to take a step back here and there and realize that we get to play a game that we love every day. I couldn't be more fortunate to do it, and that's kind of the way I try and look at it."

Eichel returned to the lineup Saturday against Chicago.

"I felt like a kid on Christmas on Friday night," he said. "You're just waiting to play Saturday. The same thing for Sunday night. I'm just looking forward to playing. You wake up Monday, and you look forward to your game and you look forward to everything that goes into it. Just preparing yourself, everything you do throughout that day, the excitement, I get excited for every game."

"Not a lot of people get to do what we get to do playing in the NHL, so I'm going to enjoy it as much as I can."

It's clear the ankle is strengthening rapidly. He winced in pain during Saturday's victory. He blew past premier Nashville defensemen P.K. Subban and Roman Josi at different times during Monday's loss.

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"I think I did a great job in terms of not rushing it," Eichel said of the injury. "There's a lot more hockey that I hope to play in my career. This is not something that I want to continue to deal with over the summer and affect my training, affect my preparation for next season.

"These are conversations that you have with a doctor, you have with the trainers and you have with the people in your corner, your agents, you family. I did it just like anybody else would. At the end of the day, I'm not really risking anything at this point. Every time you go on the ice you risk an opportunity of getting injured, but nobody really thinks about that.

"I go out there to compete every night, and I go out there and enjoy myself. I tried to get back as quickly as I could, and I tried to get myself to the best shape, the best I could feel. I just wanted to get back on the ice."

## **Sabres' Eichel thinks coming back to play from his injury is not controversial**

Eichel feels he should be questioned if he didn't try to come back

WGR550

PAUL HAMILTON

MARCH 20, 2018

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - A big topic of conversation surrounding Jack Eichel is, why is he playing? Many, and I mean many, fans have asked me why is he risking reinjuring his ankle by playing in a season where there are no playoffs.

I told Eichel I have been trying to explain it to fans as best as I can, but I am also not a NHL player so his words are going to mean a lot more than mine.

Eichel of course has heard the chatter too and he said, "It's a bit frustrating for myself to get that question from people because it's a pretty simple answer to be honest with you. I'm playing because I'm a hockey player.

"It's kind of ridiculous for someone to think that the fact that we're out of the playoffs and we don't have the opportunity to really do anything with our season that I would just pack my year in. It's not who I am as a person, it's not who I have ever been and it's not who I am as a hockey player."

There's no question at all that Eichel has a huge love for the game of hockey. He looks forward to games and everything that surrounds a game. Eichel said, "At the end of the day, I love to play hockey and whether we're in first place or last place it doesn't matter to me, I like to put my equipment on and go out there and play hockey. It's what I look most forward to in my day because there's no other feeling like it.

"We get to play a game that we love every day and I couldn't be more fortunate to do it and I felt like a kid on Christmas on Friday night just waiting to play on Saturday and the same thing for Sunday night, you wake up on Monday and you look forward to your game and you look forward to everything that goes into it, preparing yourself, the excitement, so I get excited for every game."

As Eichel said, he wonders why folks are questioning why he's playing. He actually thinks it should be the other way around, "I think there should be a lot more questions asked if I decided that I did want to pack it in and end my season."

Eichel knew what was ahead of him after the injury because of the high ankle sprain he had last year. He said he approached the rehab with vigor, "I looked at my rehab process as if I was coming back to compete to try to get into the playoffs, so I tried to put myself in the best position to come back and impact this team in a positive way.

"That's all just part of us building a culture around here and we should all want to be out there every night and that's important."

Many folks who don't know the situation think Eichel came back too soon. He said he would not hurt his career to do that, "I think I did a good job of not rushing it. There's a lot more hockey I hope to play in my career. The Sabres have some great resources here in trainers and the people that helped me get back to healthy, but these are conversations that you have with the doctor, you have with the trainers, you have with the people in your corner, your agents, your family and I did it just like anybody else would and at the end of the day, I'm not really risking anything at this point."

Phil Housley only had a couple of the players skate on Tuesday as they get ready for Arizona on Wednesday. Many fans feel since this team is in last place in the NHL, they have nothing to play for. Johan Larsson is playing for his NHL life, either here or with another team. He said, "We've got a lot to play for. We've got to play for the fans, play for our teammates, coaches and to have some pride in the city and the logo on your chest."

The Sabres have four games in six nights this week. That ends in Madison Square Garden on Saturday night.

## **Sabres' Jack Eichel scoffs at notion he should've ended season after injury**

Olean Times Herald

Bill Hoppe

March 20, 2018

BUFFALO – Hearing the question frustrates Jack Eichel. Despite the Sabres' sorry state, the center wanted to return badly from the high right ankle sprain he suffered last month.

For Eichel, 21, shutting down his season because the Sabres are out of the playoff race – some fans believe his prolonged absence would improve the team's draft status – wasn't an option.

So Eichel, who played Saturday afternoon following a 15-game absence, doesn't like getting asked why he returned this season.

"It's a pretty simple answer, to be honest with you," Eichel said passionately this morning. "I'm playing because I'm a hockey player. It's kind of ridiculous for somebody to think we're out of the playoffs and we don't have an opportunity to really do anything with our season that I would just pack my year in. It's not who I am as a person, it's not who I've ever been, it's not who I am as a hockey player.

"At the end of the day, I love to play hockey. Whether we're in first place or last place in the league, it doesn't matter to me. I like to put my equipment on, go out there and play hockey. That's why I'm playing. I love to play and I have a lot of fun doing it. It's what I look most forward to in my day. There's not really quite a feeling like it, so I enjoy it every day.

"I'm a competitor, I want to be out there competing. I want to play, so that's why I'm playing."

Eichel said "there should be a lot more questions asked if I decided I did want to pack it in, end my season."

"I looked at my rehab process as if I was coming back to compete to try to get to the playoffs," he said. "Obviously, that's not the case, but I try to put myself in the best position to come back and impact this team in a positive way. That's all part of us building a culture out there. We should all want to be out there every night. I think that that's important."

Of course, the Sabres' leading scorer and only NHL All-Star was smart about his injury, the second high ankle sprain he suffered in two seasons.

"I think I did a great job in terms of not rushing it," Eichel said. "I think at the time of the injury, if you ask me how quick I would've played, I probably took a little more time to be safe, be cautious. That's being smart. There's a lot more hockey that I hope to play in my career. This is not something that I want to continue to deal with over the summer."

He added: "I'm not really risking anything at this point."

Check back later for more on the Sabres, who held an optional practice today inside KeyBank Center.

## **Sabres could utilize speedy line of youngsters in future**

Olean Times Herald

Bill Hoppe

March 21, 2018

BUFFALO – In parts of three AHL seasons together, Sabres forwards Justin Bailey, Nick Baptiste and Evan Rodrigues never skated together as linemates.

Bailey and Baptiste both played right wing with the Rochester Americans. Meanwhile, Rodrigues, a center these days, mostly skated as a winger.

So while the three prospects became close friends, they never showcased their talents together on the ice until Saturday afternoon.

When Sabres coach Phil Housley formed the line – Rodrigues at center, Bailey on the left and Baptiste on the right – the chemistry they shared was quickly evident.

Baptiste scored the first of his two third-period goals with his new linemates, buoying the Sabres' 5-3 come-from-behind win against the Chicago Blackhawks. In Monday's 4-0 loss to the Nashville Predators, the trio utilized its speed to create offense and forecheck.

Chances are Housley will keep the line intact for tonight's tilt against the Arizona Coyotes at KeyBank Center, a meeting of the NHL's two worst teams.

"We're just keeping it simple and using our speed," Rodrigues said Tuesday. "We all have kind of the same approach of just wanting to get pucks to the net and kind of hound the net, and we've been doing a pretty good job of that."

At the 72-game mark, on a team certain to undergo a significant offseason overhaul, it can be difficult to see lines that have a future. It's often hard to peg the Sabres' bottom trios because a few look like the third or fourth lines.

Yes, their time together has been short. But Housley could keep calling on Bailey, Baptiste and Rodrigues next season or beyond.

The youngsters all possess speed, probably the most important asset in today's NHL.

"They're both really fast wingers and I like to make plays," Rodrigues said. "So we're trying to play fast hockey, put pucks in space and let them skate into it. After that, once we get in the O-zone, just funneling pucks to the net. We're not trying to be too cute. We've gotten very close, especially the last game."

Bailey said his line is "all on the same page."

"We're doing the things we know we need to do to be successful, and that's keeping things simple, getting on the forecheck and making it a tough night for the other team's D," he said.

To Baptiste, when you're close to someone off the ice, you develop chemistry on it.

Baptiste and Bailey, both 22, lived together during their first two seasons in Rochester and have known each other since the Sabres drafted them one round apart in 2013. Bailey was in Rodrigues' wedding last summer.

"We know each other so well off the ice, that on the ice, we kind of know each other on the ice," Baptiste said. "Instinctively, I know what Justin's going to be doing because he plays a similar style to me. Evan, he makes such great plays out there, he's the one that finds pucks."

Bailey said: "We know exactly most of the time what each other's going to do so we're one step ahead of the defense. I think it definitely makes a difference when you're playing with guys you have chemistry with."

Rodrigues said the familiarity makes you "hold onto your stick a little bit looser."

“You trust them and you’re not worried to make a mistake,” he said. “We have each other’s back. I think it also gives you a little bit of a boost, it’s a little bit of fun and it puts a bit of extra giddy-up in your step.”

Thanks to his speed, smarts and versatility, Rodrigues, 24, seems to have locked up a spot for next season. If he hadn’t broken his hand during the preseason, he likely would’ve stayed up all year.

But these final 10 games are critical for Bailey and Baptiste, whose entry-level contracts expire following the season. The Sabres also have a totally new regime, the third since they were drafted.

“I wasn’t sure whether or not I’d get back up here this season so I want to make sure, going into these next few games, that I leave everything I have out there and leave the best impression I can on the coaches,” Bailey said.

## Young trio finds quick chemistry as linemates

by Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 20th, 2018

While they waited for an optional practice to begin at KeyBank Center on Tuesday morning, the trio of Justin Bailey, Evan Rodrigues and Nicholas Baptiste warmed up on the same end of the ice. The three forwards laughed and joked with one another as they took shots on an open net.

The three players have spent quite a bit of time with one another as of late. Before games they can be found sitting together on the home bench, looking out onto the ice. Their stalls in the Buffalo Sabres dressing room are situated next to each other: Bailey on the left, Rodrigues in the middle and Baptiste on the right.

Coincidentally, that same arrangement has clicked on the ice for the Sabres over the past two games. Phil Housley put Bailey, Rodrigues and Baptiste on a line together in the third period of the team's win over Chicago on Saturday, and the trio used their speed on the forecheck to combine for the game-tying goal:

Baptiste's redirection goal

00:50 • March 17th, 2018

"We're having fun," Baptiste said. "We're all pretty young guys that are just having fun out there, enjoying our time with each other."

The fun continued against Nashville on Tuesday, their first full game together as linemates. They didn't score this time around, but their speed and tenacity on the forecheck was evident from the get-go. Rodrigues said they're trying to simplify their game, working hard to wear down the opposing team in their own zone.

That approach very nearly led to a goal during their first shift of the game. After a long possession in the offensive zone, Rodrigues was quick on the backcheck and forced a turnover. Casey Nelson made a long breakout to Baptiste, who sped past the defense to take a quick shot on Pekka Rinne while Bailey and Rodrigues crashed the net, just missing an attempt at a bouncing puck in the crease.

On their next shift, the trio's forechecking led to a hooking penalty drawn by Rodrigues for Buffalo's first power play.

"I think we're pushing the pace," Bailey said. "We're trying to play fast, we're trying to play the way we need to play to be successful. We're getting on top of guys in their end and keeping guys in their D-zone longer than they want to so that when they come out, they don't have too much energy left to play offense."

Sabres Now (3/20/18)

02:02 • March 20th, 2018

The three players complement each other with their skillsets - Bailey and Baptiste offer blends of speed and size on the wings, while Rodrigues considers himself a playmaking center - but they also benefit from a comfort formed off the ice.

Bailey and Baptiste were both selected by Buffalo in the 2013 draft and have been part of development camps with the organization ever since. They were joined by Rodrigues in 2015-16, when all three were rookies with the Rochester Americans.

Since then, Bailey and Baptiste spent two seasons living together in Rochester, and Bailey was in Rodrigues' wedding last summer. Ironically, the first time all three of them played together on the same line at the same time was in Buffalo on Saturday.

All three players said that sharing the ice gave them a confidence boost.

"I think it makes you hold onto your stick a little bit looser when you're playing with guys you've played with a few years," Rodrigues said. "You trust them, and you're not worried to make a mistake. We have each other's back. I think it also gives you a little bit of a boost, it's a little bit of fun and it puts a bit of extra giddy-up in your step."

"I think we're pretty predictable to each other, not to the other team but to each other," Bailey added. "We know exactly most of the time what each other's going to do so we're one step ahead of the defense. I think it definitely makes a difference when you're playing with guys you have chemistry with."

Bailey, Rodrigues and Baptiste are just a few of the players who began the season in Rochester and are now playing integral roles in Buffalo. Nelson and Brendan Guhle both skated 18-plus minutes on defense Monday, while Linus Ullmark started in net.

Bailey said that the changed culture in Rochester, where the Amerks are close to clinching a berth in the Calder Cup Playoffs for the first time since 2013-14, had translated to the NHL.

"For me the culture in Rochester the last few years was tough, just with the team not being successful and a lot of moving parts around the organization," Bailey said. "I think this year they brought in a really good group of guys and I think a lot of the success that comes down there aside from working hard - aside from having really good, skilled players - comes from the family-like atmosphere and wanting to win for your teammates."

"I think that's something that the guys who are getting called up here were trying to bring, that family atmosphere that we have down there."

Eichel's answer

Jack Eichel has heard the questions regarding his return from a high-ankle sprain with just 12 games remaining in the Sabres' season, with some wondering why he would come back to play as opposed to shutting himself down until the summer.

The answer, he said, should be a no-brainer.

"It's been frustrating for myself to get that question, because it's a pretty simple answer, to be honest with you," he said. "I'm playing because I'm a hockey player. It's kind of ridiculous for somebody to think we're out of the playoffs and we don't have an opportunity to really do anything with our season that I would just pack my year in. It's not who I am as a person, it's not who I've ever been, it's not who I am as a hockey player."

"At the end of the day, I love to play hockey. Whether we're in first place or last place in the league, it doesn't matter to me. I like to put my equipment on, go out there and play hockey. That's why I'm playing, and I love to play and I have a lot of fun doing it. It's what I look most forward to in my day. ... I'm a competitor, I want to be out there competing. I want to play, so that's why I'm playing."

Eichel said he took all the necessary precautions before returning to ensure there was no added risk of injury.

"I think I did a great job in terms of not rushing it," he said. "I think at the time of the injury, if you ask me how quick I would've played, I probably took a little more time to be safe, be cautious. That's being smart. There's a lot more hockey that I hope to play in my career. This is not something that I want to continue to deal with over the summer, effect my training, effect my preparation for next season. I tried to handle it the best way I could."

Arizona up next

The Sabres continue their homestand against the Arizona Coyotes on Wednesday. Coverage on MSG-B begins at 6:30 p.m., or you can listen live on WGR 550. The puck drops at 7.

## Sharpen Up: March 20, 2018

by Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

March 20th, 2018

Last night, the Sabres dropped a 4-0 decision to the league-leading Nashville Predators. Nashville is now 14-0-1 over their last 15 games and have not lost in Buffalo since Dec. 1, 2008. Jack Eichel fired a team-high five shots on Pekka Rinne, but Rinne made 35 saves to earn his 40th win of the season.

The Sabres host the Arizona Coyotes tomorrow. Faceoff is scheduled for 7 p.m.

Here's what you need to know.

About last night

Sabres blanked by Predators, 4-0

03:31 • March 19th, 2018

From the Ice Level Practice Report...

Behind the bench of the Nashville Predators for the past four seasons, Phil Housley was the benefactor of many a strong performance from goaltender Pekka Rinne. Facing his former organization for the first time on Monday, he found himself on the opposite side of that equation.

The Buffalo Sabres outshot the NHL-leading Predators but were ultimately stifled by Nashville's All-Star goaltender in a 4-0 loss. Rinne made 35 saves for his league-leading eighth shutout of the season and extended his personal win streak to 11 games.

Phil Housley Postgame (3/19/18)

03:02 • March 19th, 2018

"You saw it tonight, he makes some really big-time saves," Housley said. "We had some really golden looks he made look really easy."

Eichel, playing his second game back from a high-ankle sprain, had as many chances as anyone. He generated a game-high 11 shot attempts, including five shots on goal.

Jack Eichel Postgame (3/19/18)

02:51 • March 19th, 2018

"Give him credit. He's one of the best goalies to ever play in our league for a reason," Eichel said. "Obviously in a game like that I think you've got to find one, and I thought we had a little bit of a hard time doing that."

"Whether it's the second and third opportunities or, you don't want to make the extra pass but against a goalie like that maybe you're thinking about it because of how calm he is in there. He doesn't leave a lot of pucks hanging around his crease, he gobbles a lot of stuff up. He made it tough for us, but we competed hard. You've got to like the effort but at the end of the day, it's a 4-0 loss."

Linus Ullmark Postgame (3/19/18)

01:37 • March 19th, 2018

Linus Ullmark started in net for Buffalo, making 28 saves. It was his second appearance of the season.

"I really liked Linus' game," Housley said. "I feel bad there was four goals, because the last two were sort of mistakes that we made. But he stood tall, he made some big saves when he had to. It's just unfortunate. I really liked the way he played tonight. I thought he was really in control."

Kyle Okposo Postgame (3/19/18)  
02:03 • March 19th, 2018

Alumni Wine Fest returns March 28

13th Annual Alumni Wine Fest  
01:57 • April 3rd, 2017

The Buffalo Sabres Alumni Association will host the 14th annual Sabres Alumni Wine Festival on Wednesday, March 28 at KeyBank Center from 6 to 9:30 p.m. The event, co-sponsored by KeyBank, Niagara Fallsview Casino Resort, Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center and John W. Danforth, will feature wineries and restaurants from Buffalo, Niagara-on-the-Lake and beyond.

Attendees will have a chance to sample some of the finest wines and food that Western New York and Southern Ontario have to offer while socializing with Sabres legends and their wives. The festival will include music, auctions and raffles with unique items from the Buffalo Sabres and Sabres Alumni

Tickets are \$75 each and are available at here, the KeyBank Center Box Office, or by calling Nick Fearby at 716-855-4452. All proceeds from the event will benefit breast cancer care in Western New York.

All attendees are asked to dress in business attire for the evening. There will be complimentary parking in the ramp adjacent to KeyBank Center and guests can use the 100 level bridge entrance to enter the event.