



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Barkov, Reimer help Panthers top Sabres 4-1 for 5th straight

Associated Press

Paul Gereffi

March 3, 2018

SUNRISE, Fla. (AP) — The surging Florida Panthers are edging closer to a playoff spot.

Aleksander Barkov scored his 24th goal of the season, James Reimer made 24 saves in his first start in six games and Florida beat the Buffalo Sabres 4-1 on Friday night.

The Panthers have won five straight and are 12-3-0 in their past 15. They moved within one point of Columbus and Carolina for the second Eastern Conference wild card.

Colton Sceviour, Aaron Ekblad and Mike Matheson also scored for the Panthers. Evgenii Dadanov and Nick Bjugstad each had two assists.

“We’re having a heck of a run here,” Bjugstad said. “Anything can happen at the end of the year. A spark has been lit here.”

Reimer filled in admirably for Roberto Luongo, who has won four straight but was given the night off in the second of back-to-back games.

“He was sharp,” Panthers coach Bob Boughner said about Reimer. “It was nice to get four goals for him, but I think he looked real comfortable in the net.”

Sam Reinhart scored for the Sabres, and Robin Lehner made 26 saves.

“I think we had effort today, but they got some breaks and we didn’t,” Lehner said. “It was a solid game but things were just clicking for them.”

Barkov stretched the Panthers’ lead to 3-1 when he flipped the puck over Lehner’s shoulder at 6:49 of the second period. Barkov has six goals and nine assists in his past 10 games and is tied with Vincent Trocheck for the team lead in goals.

Sceviour made it 4-1 when he poked in a rebound with 8:44 left in the second.

“They capitalized on their opportunities and we didn’t,” Sabres coach Phil Housley said.

Florida’s previous four games were decided by one goal, but the Panthers took a 4-1 lead into the third period.

“We don’t get a lot of those games,” Boughner said.

Ekblad put the Panthers ahead 2-1 after he took a cross-ice pass from Keith Yandle in the right circle and wristed it past Lehner with 3:19 left in the first.

Matheson gave Florida a 1-0 lead 1:25 in when he corralled the puck in the high slot and fired a shot that beat Lehner on the stick side. The goal was Matheson’s ninth but first on home ice.

Reinhart tied the score at 1 when he swept the puck in from the right side at 5:34 of the first.

NOTES: The Panthers have scored first in 11 of their past 13 games. ... Reinhart has 21 points in his past 21 games. ... Sabres forward Kyle Okposo returned after missing Wednesday’s game at Tampa Bay due to the birth of his third child.

UP NEXT

Sabres: Host the Toronto Maple Leafs on Monday.

Panthers: Host the Philadelphia Flyers on Sunday.

In game 66, Sabres finally get a chance to meet Maple Leafs

The Buffalo News

Mike Harrington

March 4, 2018

Jason Pominville is an alum of the days when the Buffalo Sabres and Toronto Maple Leafs played eight times a season. So what's gone on this year has been a head-scratcher to him.

The Sabres play game 66 of their season Monday night in KeyBank Center, exactly five months after the campaign began. And it's the first time all year they meet the Leafs. But the longtime rivals will quickly grow sick of each other again, as they will stage all four of their meetings over Buffalo's next 14 games.

"I can't believe it. It's weird the way the schedule is built," Pominville said after practice Sunday downtown. "We always played them late a little bit but to have not played them home or away at this point at all is definitely different and something we're not used to. For me, it's been a while so I'm interested to see if it's still the same way where their fans manage to get tickets in here and be pretty loud. So it should be a good atmosphere again."

Pominville has not played the Leafs in a Buffalo uniform since he was traded to Minnesota at the deadline in 2013. He said he has vivid memories of a lot of wins – Buffalo is 34-12-2 at home against the Leafs since 2000 and 16-4 since 2010 – and a lot of intense games.

Pominville also quickly recalled the comical 2006 incident when Sabres tough guy Andrew Peters was ejected after mimicking a golf swing toward late Leafs enforcer Wade Belak, sending a message that the Sabres were prepping for the playoffs while the Leafs were simply headed for the links.

"I do remember Petey's golf swing," said a smiling Pominville. "That's definitely something that made the guys laugh. That was a while ago. There were a lot of battles and good games. We were able to win a lot and it was nice to be on the good side of things."

The Sabres haven't been on the good side of much this season, of course, but they have five of their 20 wins over Tampa Bay and Boston. And they can either help or hurt the Leafs' chances of finishing second in the Atlantic Division if they can steal a few wins against them here.

"It would be nice to be battling with a playoff spot or be competing with them," said Sabres winger Kyle Okposo. "But any time you play Toronto it's a little different feel and it's going to be fun. I'm looking forward to it. The building is electric, definitely fun games to play in. They're coming off a few games they've probably like to have back so we know we're probably going to get their best and we're looking forward to it."

The Leafs are 0-1-2 in their last three games and coming off Saturday's 5-2 loss to Washington outdoors at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md. Coach Mike Babcock ripped the club after that game, promising a hard practice here Sunday, and he delivered a high-tempo workout.

"To me, it's a regroup time," Babcock said. "We have a Buffalo team that would be sick and tired of hearing about the Toronto Maple Leafs, so they're going to play hard tomorrow and we've got to be ready to play hard. Our guys will be disappointed with what happened last night and disappointed in themselves."

"I'm disappointed in myself for the way it happened and I didn't like it. The bottom line is Washington has a real good team and played good. But we're way better than we showed. ... When you don't put your best foot forward, that's not good enough."

The Leafs fell behind, 3-1, in the first period and never caught up in the game, allowing Washington's big guns to hurt them offensively.

"They started on time and we didn't," forward Mitch Marner said here Sunday. "They started hot and we kind of chased the game the rest of the way. When you're chasing the game, it's usually never good for your team."

The Sabres are chasing the Leafs on Rebuild Road as Toronto made the playoffs last year and has 34 more points than Buffalo this year. Neither star is currently playing as Leafs phenom Auston Matthews (shoulder) and Sabres stud Jack Eichel

(ankle) are both sidelined by injuries. Nonetheless, the comparisons between the teams continue and it's not a pretty one as far as the Sabres are concerned.

"Obviously I thought we got fortunate in the lottery draft, which is a real good thing and one of the things we couldn't control," Babcock said. "It was beyond our control and worked out for us. Most of the stuff is within your control: How you go about doing your job every day, how you scout, how you trade, how you control your cap, how you manage your product. Those things are in your control.

"To me, you're not hoping to get lucky there. You're hoping to do it right, work hard and be smarter than the next guy or the next organization and get ahead. That's what it's all about."

Pominville knows the Sabres have to be wary after the Leafs faced Babcock's wrath following Saturday's game.

"They're deep, they're a fast team, defend extremely well and make it hard on their opponents," Pominville said. "Their depth and scoring, they're pretty young too but have some good veterans. They're a team that's definitely elite on our side."

Story topics: Buffalo Sabres/ Jason Pominville/ Mike Babcock/ Toronto Maple Leafs

Eichel, Matthews still sidelined but both are skating

The Buffalo News

Mike Harrington

March 4, 2018

Jack Eichel and Auston Matthews remain sidelined by their injuries but the franchise players for the Buffalo Sabres and Toronto Maple Leafs have both returned to the ice to skate on their own.

The good friends and All-Star Game teammates won't be going head to head Monday in KeyBank Center and it's probably unrealistic to think they will do so here March 15 as well. But Matthews is certain to be back from his shoulder injury in advance of the Leafs' run to the playoffs and the Sabres remain hopeful Eichel will play at some point in the wake of his second high ankle sprain in two years.

Eichel skated on his own Saturday for the first time since suffering his injury Feb. 10 in Boston, coach Phil Housley said after practice Sunday in KeyBank Center. Eichel, however, is still not ready to practice with the team and there's no timetable for any sort of return to action.

"We don't want to put him under that sort of pressure," Housley said. "He has skated. He started skating yesterday so that's good to see him start making progress."

Eichel remains the Sabres' leader in goals, assists and points with 22-31-53 in his 55 games. The team is 4-5-1 in the 10 games Eichel has missed. Buffalo won the Feb. 10 game in Boston that saw Eichel suffer the injury and sit out the final 46 minutes.

The games against the Leafs, which will also be held March 26 and April 2 in Air Canada Centre, are big ones to Eichel. He has quickly taken to the rivalry and likes the competition with Matthews, his close friend from USA Hockey and Team North America of the World Cup. So he definitely wants to return.

"That's the goal. But you never know how these things react," Housley said. "You don't want to put any timeline on it but it's good to see him skating and that's a step in the right direction. Obviously, he wants to play some games before the end of the year."

Matthews injured his shoulder against the New York Islanders on Feb. 22 and has been out of the lineup since, with the Leafs going 1-1-2. Matthews has missed 14 games this season due to this injury as well as a concussion and back trouble. He leads the Leafs in goals (28) and is second on the club in points (50)

"The great thing about the injury this time around is he can skate," Toronto coach Mike Babcock said after practice here Sunday. "He'll be in top-notch shape when he gets back, be ready to step in and get going."

Story topics: Auston Matthews/ Buffalo Sabres/ Jack Eichel

Sabres Notebook: Guhle, Criscuolo get the call; Okposo struggling at minus-29, Johnson in net

The Buffalo News

Mike Harrington

March 4, 2018

A couple of hours after coach Phil Housley held his daily post-practice media briefing Sunday in KeyBank Center, the Sabres made a couple of surprise callups from the Rochester Amerks. It's uncertain what impact the arrival of defenseman Brendan Guhle and forward Kyle Criscuolo will be for Monday's game against the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Defenseman Marco Scandella, who missed the final two periods Friday in Florida, practiced fully on Sunday and did not look hindered by the upper-body ailment he suffered taking a tumble into the boards in that game. All seven blueliners were on the ice at practice. Guhle may simply be a better option against the Leafs' speedy forwards.

"I went in pretty awkwardly last game and didn't feel too good," Scandella said of the hit by Florida's Nick Bjugstad. "But it's progressing day to day so I felt like I could skate today. Went out there, felt pretty good."

Scandella, acquired in a summer trade, has yet to play in a Sabres-Leafs game and said he's intrigued to compare the rivalry to Minnesota-Chicago battles he's been in the last few years.

"I've been waiting all year for this game," he said. "I know there's a huge rivalry with the Leafs. We haven't played them all year. I've been on the team for 65 games and we haven't played them yet so I've been itching for this one."

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Guhle, the organization's top defense prospect, recorded his first NHL point with an assist during a two-game run with the Sabres in January. The 20-year-old has eight goals and 16 assists in 47 games at Rochester.

With Evan Rodrigues still not back from his upper-body injury suffered Wednesday in Tampa, Benoit Pouliot was out of position at center on Sunday. Housley indicated after practice the team was not calling up a forward, but that decision was apparently reconsidered.

Criscuolo leads the Amerks with 15 goals and is tied for second on the team with 34 points, including 10 in his last 10 games. He did not have a point in eight games with the Sabres earlier this season.

The Amerks were playing at home Sunday against Laval but don't play again until Friday, when they open a three-games-in-three-days-set at home against Providence.

* * *

Plus-minus can be an admittedly fickle stat at times. But when it's an extreme, it can be a window into a player's season. That's where things stand right now with winger Kyle Okposo.

It's been a struggle offensively for Okposo this year with just 11 goals and an even bigger problem defensively at a minus-29 – the worst figure in the league among NHL forwards entering Sunday.

"Frustrating. It's something that's gross. Absolutely gross," Okposo said. "It's something where, whether the goal is my fault or not, it just seems like it's been going in this year. It's something I wanted to get better at. It's something that is very disappointing for me, something that I want to change, I want to fix. I've got 17 games left and I want to be a plus player the rest of the way."

Okposo was only minus-7 in 65 games for the Sabres last season and hasn't been below minus-10 since posting a minus-15 for the New York Islanders in 2011-12.

"Just his awareness defensively and having a respect away from our net defensively has got to be better," said Housley. "I'm sure he's thinking about that but he's got to go out and show it. He's pretty hard on himself so I think he'll be able to respond in the right way."

Okposo has just two goals in his last 15 games and is minus-12 in that stretch. He was minus-2 in Friday's 4-1 loss in Florida, the fourth time in the last 10 games he's been minus-2 or worse, and failed to corral Panthers defenseman Mike Matheson on a goal that opened the scoring just 85 seconds into the game.

"My number is what it is. I own that," Okposo said of his rating. "It's not something I'm saying, 'Oh, it's not my fault and whatever.' It's something that's disappointing to me. It sucks being there but I have to try to improve it. I have to try to do everything I can to keep the puck out of my net and put the puck in their net."

* * *

Housley said Chad Johnson will start in goal Monday night. Robin Lehner got the call and took a 4-1 loss Friday in Florida even though Johnson has been red-hot of late, going 5-2 in his last eight outings with a 1.92 goals-against average and .930 save percentage.

In his previous two games, Johnson had allowed just one goal apiece in wins over Boston and Tampa Bay. Lehner, meanwhile, is just 1-4-1/3.86/.887 over his last six games and has fallen to 13-24-8 on the season. Johnson is 6-10-3.

"We had a lot of games coming up here and we knew that Chad was playing well but we had to get Robin back in the net," Housley said. "Safe to say Chad will be playing tomorrow. We just wanted to alternate them."

Both goalies are going to see action during a busy week for the club. After Monday's game, the Sabres host Calgary on Wednesday, play Thursday in Ottawa and host Vegas here Saturday afternoon.

Story topics: Brendan Guhle/ Buffalo Sabres/ Chad Johnson/ Kyle Okposo/ Robin Lehner/ Toronto Maple Leafs

Nothing to see with Sabres the rest of the way? Not really

The Buffalo News

Mike Harrington

March 3, 2018

So now the calendar has moved into March, the final full month of a Buffalo Sabres season that was cooked by Thanksgiving. What's left to watch for?

Actually, more than you might think.

The standings are mostly irrelevant unless you're an outlier still thinking a last-place finish is all that meaningful for draft lottery purposes. Even if the Sabres finish last, their chances of getting the No. 1 pick would be around only 18 percent. That, of course, would mean they would have a more than 80 percent chance of losing the Rasmus Dahlin lottery, a fate with which they're all too accustomed.

The Sabres were off Saturday and return to the ice Sunday morning. The final 17 games kick off Monday in KeyBank Center against Toronto, the first game of the season against the Maple Leafs.

Some items to look for as the schedule moves on:

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Jack Eichel: The Sabres have issued no medical updates on their franchise center, who suffered a high ankle sprain Feb. 10 in Boston. He's been on the shelf for three weeks now and has yet to skate, although he has been seen around the arena not wearing a boot on his foot. Eichel would certainly want to be on the ice for the matchups against the Leafs but even those games will lose some luster with his former Team USA/Team North America buddy Auston Matthews sidelined by a shoulder problem. The betting here is Eichel returns at some point in mid- to late March to skate in the final 8-10 games of the season. He has 22 goals and 53 points in the 55 games he has played to date.

Rivalry with the Leafs: The teams meet in Buffalo March 5 and March 15, and play in Air Canada Centre on March 26 and April 2. The Leafs are comfortably in a playoff spot but still battling Tampa Bay and Boston for the Atlantic Division championship. It remains to be seen how many Eichel vs. Matthews games there will be this year, a loss for the league in the wake of their "good goal" choreography that was the talk of the All-Star Game in Tampa.

Home record: You might say these games are meaningless but they're clearly not going to be to General Manager Jason Botterill, who was steamed with the media again last week when recounting his anger during the dreary Feb. 17 loss to Los Angeles and about the team's home record in general. The Sabres are 9-18-3 downtown this year. That's the worst home record in the league and still two wins shy of tying the franchise low of 11 home wins set in 1971-72 at Memorial Auditorium.

There are 10 games left and there's no question Botterill wants the paying customers to get better showings. There are 12 NHL teams that entered Saturday with 20+ home wins this season and two other teams were at 19. This team is going nowhere until it starts racking up points at home like most playoff teams do.

Playoff impact: The Sabres aren't in the playoff race, but they'll be involved in it. Ten of the remaining games are against teams currently in a postseason slot or hot on the chase for one. You wonder if the April 7 finale at Florida could turn into a do-or-die game for the streaking Panthers, who posted a 4-1 victory over Buffalo Friday night in Sunrise to dump the Sabres for the third time this season.

Sweet Golden Knights: The upstart expansionites from Vegas make their first visit to town for a matinee Saturday at 1. It will be their fourth game on a five-game Eastern swing that opens Sunday in New Jersey. The Knights suffered a 5-4 home loss

Friday night to Ottawa, equaling their season high with their third straight defeat. They entered Saturday four points behind Nashville for the Western Conference lead but eight points ahead of San Jose atop the Pacific Division, having already shattered expansion-year records for points and wins.

Housley meets his old team: Coach Phil Housley was an assistant the last four years in Nashville, serving a key role in helping the Predators get to the Stanley Cup final last spring. He meets the Predators for the first time as Sabres coach here on March 19, and then will likely get a warm salute from the crowd when he returns to Bridgestone Arena on March 31.

Stats to watch: Ryan O'Reilly (18) and Sam Reinhart (15) are closing in on 20-goal seasons. ... Improving defenseman Victor Antipin has nine assists in 40 games but has yet to register his first NHL goal. ... Goaltender Chad Johnson was just 1-8-3 until late January, but is 5-2 in his last seven decisions. Starter Robin Lehner is just 1-4-1 in his last six and 2-6-2 in his last 10. ... The Sabres have had just one shootout this year and that was their opening night loss to Montreal. They are just 4-14 in shootouts the last three seasons -- after going 15-10 in them during their two tank campaigns.

Story topics: Buffalo Sabres/ Jack Eichel/ Ryan O'Reilly/ Sam Reinhart/ Vegas Golden Knights

Inside the Sabres: It comes down to a matter of respect

The Buffalo News

John Vogl

March 2, 2018

During the 11 years that we "worked together," Ryan Miller and I had two big arguments. One was relatively infamous because it was on camera after a 7-6 home loss in February 2011. The other came to mind on deadline day after listening to Jason Botterill talk sternly about the Sabres' need for "compete and preparation."

It was December 2008 and Buffalo had lost eight of 10 games. After a 2-1 defeat in Florida, coach Lindy Ruff called out Miller. He said "you've got to get saves there" in reference to both goals and added the first one was "an easy play for Ryan to read."

The next day, Ruff put the entire team, goaltenders included, through a skate-heavy practice in Tampa. With sweat pouring down Miller's face, the goalie closed his tense and terse interview with what seemed like a shot at Ruff.

"Well, I guess I'm going to have to read better," he said as he bolted for the team bus.

I looked at Paul Hamilton of WGR-AM 550, and we both said (and wrote) the same thing: Wow, he's obviously not happy about getting called out.

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After the Sabres beat the Lightning, Miller refused to talk to me, other than yelling a few words.

We had a long, calm chat after returning to Buffalo. Miller insisted he wasn't calling out Ruff, and he was very adamant as to why.

He was scared of the coach. He said Ruff was in charge of his career and playing time. Miller was worried if he crossed him, he could be benched or shipped out of town.

I was flabbergasted. With the Bills lacking star power, Miller was easily the most popular athlete in Buffalo. He'd backstopped the team to consecutive appearances in the conference finals. He was the Great American Hope with the Vancouver Olympics a couple of years away.

I thought it was crazy Miller would be worried about the coach. If anything, I figured Ruff should be worried about losing a power struggle to Miller. But back then, the Sabres had players who respected the coach and the organizational hierarchy.

My, how things have changed.

Too many Sabres either don't care or think they're in charge. Coach Phil Housley has a great knack for forecasting exactly what the opponent will do, and he explains it clearly in the morning. When the puck drops, the opponent follows the blueprint and the Sabres stand there and get run over.

The players don't listen or, even worse, don't feel they even have to listen. It's a major reason why the Sabres are bottom-feeders once again.

In all sports nowadays, athletes have more power than before. But if Miller, one of the most-loved players in Buffalo, can show respect for coaches and the organization, some of the most-loathed athletes in Buffalo should probably follow suit.

"Sometimes guys think they're playing hard, but they're not playing hard enough and they have to work," Housley said. "I think that's the bottom line for a lot of guys."

Nelson has options

Casey Nelson chose Buffalo once. The Sabres need him to do it again.

The defenseman, who has become a key component on the top two pairs, will be an unrestricted free agent. It's a rarity for a 25-year-old player finishing just his third professional season, but he'll fall under the "Group VI" category. It states that anyone 25 or older who has played three seasons but fewer than 80 NHL games is a UFA.

Nelson played seven games in Buffalo after signing out of college in 2016. He played 11 games last year and is at 21 this year. That's a total of 39, and only 17 remain. At most, he'll play 56 through three seasons.

Hence, he'll be free to sign anywhere.

"Some weird rule where I didn't meet the number of games," said Nelson, who didn't know of his pending status until recently. "I don't really think about that. We'll worry about that after the season."

Nelson has carved out a solid role in Buffalo, one that other teams surely have noticed – especially the teams that also watched him at Minnesota State.

"I love it here, but we'll worry about that after the year," Nelson said.

Nothing left

With Evander Kane gone and Benoit Pouliot expected to leave after the season, the Sabres have a serious depth problem at left wing. They have only Zemgus Girgensons, Alex Nylander and departed Matt Moulson under contract for next season. Scott Wilson and C.J. Smith will be restricted free agents. There are no other prospects ready for the leap.

Toronto's James van Riemsdyk heads the list of pending UFA left wingers, joined by Kane and Vegas' David Perron.

Inside the NHL: Final words on the complex Evander Kane puzzle

The Buffalo News

Mike Harrington

March 2, 2018

Evander Kane has to rate as one of the most complex personalities to ever walk through the Buffalo Sabres' dressing room. But his time here was clearly over. Having watched his first two games with the San Jose Sharks, you're blown away by what he could mean to a good team, especially what he could bring to a playoff run.

This corner has so many thoughts on Kane that they're tough to organize. He was just a difficult guy to comprehend at times. Here's what stands out in the wake of the trade:

1. Kane had to go to a veteran team that would direct him and tell him in no uncertain terms how things were going to be run. He was reportedly picked up at the airport in San Jose in a limo by Joe Thornton. The roster includes guys like Joe Pavelski, Brent Burns, Logan Couture, Marc-Eduard Vlasic and Joel Ward. These guys have played a lot of hockey in May and June, when Kane has long been on a beach somewhere. He darn well better listen.
2. Kane's speed was really on display during the games against Edmonton and Chicago as the Sharks rang up 12 goals. His motivation was just about shot during his final few weeks with the Sabres and we rarely saw those bursts on the ice like we did in October and November. You can chalk it up to selfishness and you can chalk it up to human nature, too. The Sabres didn't want Kane anymore and he knew it. Why risk himself for them?
3. When Kane arrived here in 2015, you expected an ogre to deal with given everything you heard out of Winnipeg. The reality was far from it. He was almost always a pleasant interview subject and had plenty to say. And especially on the road with no cameras around, travel and baseball often became conversation points. Kane knew he had to remake his image here with the media and he did a good job of it. But no reporter was naive to what was going on either.
4. Sabres players bemoaned the loss of Kane's offense. But at least publicly, there weren't a lot of well-wishes either in person or on social media toward him. It continues to feel like Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart were his two biggest boosters on the club and the rest of the team didn't have much use for him at times. You worry about what kind of influence Kane has had on Eichel as a leader and potential captain going forward. Still, good players are often the biggest divas on teams. Why is so much credibility handed to a journeyman like Justin Falk calling Kane "selfish" during a practice tiff? Even if other players agree with him, how many of them are going to be around here anyway?
5. The Sabres' lack of leadership was unable to corral Kane when it was needed. Brian Gionta and Josh Gorges are super humans but the decline in their play as they got older made their ability to lead difficult. Kane and the Sabres' young core in general didn't listen much to either one of them and there were no other real veterans in the room to direct traffic. Like Tim Murray said, Kane needed to stop showing up just before the team's report time for games and practices and interact with his teammates more. He didn't.
6. Kane's image off the ice, of course, continued to take a beating in Buffalo. His reputation with women was left in tatters by the two very public incidents he had early in his tenure here and you saw a lot of good-riddance social media posts from female Sabres fans after the trade. Seems like they were willing to accept rooting for him to a small degree when he was still on the team but were more than happy to see him go. Understandable.
7. Kane's image off the ice II: He genuinely loved his interaction with children here, something he specifically mentioned in his farewell video. The holiday shopping spree at Target, the dinner at Tempo, the visits to hospitals and schools are all commendable. They were greeted with a fair amount of skepticism by some, again as image-building moments in the wake of Winnipeg. Certainly there had to be some of that, but Kane made numerous visits and not all of them got publicized either.
8. GM Jason Botterill had to think he was getting more than he did for Kane. It just shows you how little other teams thought of a guy who was only 26 years old and on his third straight 20-goal season. NHL GMs aren't big on personality and Kane has lots of panache. Only a team like San Jose full of veterans could reasonably take a chance on him. Anaheim, with a similar room featuring the likes of Ryan Getzlaf, Corey Perry, Ryan Kesler and old friend Ryan Miller, was reportedly also a top contender.

Botterill probably should have pushed harder to make a move on Kane earlier in the season when he was super hot and the Sabres were already toast but back then, who's taking a chance on a rental in, say, December? Too many teams don't know if they're buyers or sellers so the GM's hands may have been tied. But in general, Botterill has done too little during the season to try to fix the Sabres. Maybe they were unfixable in his mind, but the lack of activity has been a huge disappointment.

9. What happens during free agency? The Sharks would likely be interested if Kane has a good playoff run. Still, reputations are hard to shake. A goal scorer like Kane at age 26 should probably get a deal of five to six years at \$6 million to \$7 million per season. At 28, the Sabres gave Kyle Okposo seven years and \$42 million. You wonder what Kane thought watching Okposo on the ice at times the last two years. Kane will struggle to get four years come July unless he blows up deep into May. The bet here is San Jose keeps him on or Kane signs on for a trip home to Vancouver.

10. True to social media, Kane has quickly changed the banner photo on his Twitter page to one of him skating through the Shark mouth on to the ice at SAP Center. It's maybe the best team intro in the league.

[View image on Twitter](#)

[View image on Twitter](#)

Evander Kane



@evanderkane_9

Great first game with the @SanJoseSharks Big thanks to the fans for the warm welcome!

2:38 AM - Feb 28, 2018

4,715

691 people are talking about this

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St. Louis slumped at just the wrong time, going 0-5-1 and getting shut out in their final two games prior to the deadline. It prompted management to recoil some, with GM Doug Armstrong getting a first-round pick in the surprise deal of center Paul Stastny to Winnipeg.

That brought a rare admonishment from player to front office courtesy of center Brayden Schenn.

"Really one or two points out and move a guy that does a lot for us," Schenn said. "I didn't expect Stastny to be moved, but I guess with his contract expiring, them getting picks to be used elsewhere or to draft, you kind of just go from there and we'll see what happens ... Maybe it will fire guys up, give guys more opportunity to do more and that's one way you can look at it. Teams that are one or two out are kind of loading up right now and we're one or two out and we kind of ... went the other way."

It got even worse for St. Louis in an 8-3 loss Tuesday in Minnesota but the seven-game skid finally ended with Wednesday's 2-1 win over Detroit. Following the Minnesota game, coach Mike Yeo was fuming.

"You know what? It's a matter of pride as far as I'm concerned," Yeo said. "You give up eight goals, c'mon. We've given up 16 in the last three games. We've always been one of the top defensive teams. The turnovers that we have and the lack of respect that we have for our goaltenders and for the game of hockey — that's ridiculous."

Gostisbehere to salute Stoneman Douglas

Flyers defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere, who attended Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School for two years, has invited members of the school's state championship hockey team to visit with him prior to Sunday's game at Florida. Gostisbehere didn't play hockey at the school, where 17 students and adults were killed in the Feb. 14 mass shooting, because he attended prep schools in Connecticut to play hockey. But he was impressed with how players persevered to win their title — and then returned to school to hang their championship medals around a memorial to the victims.

"The way they handled themselves was pretty cool to see," Gostisbehere told the Philadelphia Inquirer. "Obviously the circumstances were a little rough. And what they did with their medals, bringing them to the school for the memorial, was pretty cool. They handled themselves like adults."

Gostisbehere said he's also impressed by the way students at the school are speaking out on the need for change in gun laws.

"I'm not the biggest political guy there is," he said. "But it is my old school. My hometown. And it's cool to watch these guys stand up for what they truly believe. Obviously, they want some change. It's cool to see how some of the kids who survived are coming through it."

Around the horn

* The Predators took over first place in the Western Conference with Thursday's 4-2 win in Edmonton that allowed General Manager David Poile to carve a slice of NHL history. The victory, a season-high sixth straight for the Preds, gave Poile the most wins for a GM in NHL history at 1,320, one more than Glen Sather. Poile, the GM in Washington from 1982-97, has been at the helm of the Preds since their inception in 1998.

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A look at David Poile's road to 1,320 wins – the most ever by an NHL GM. #NHLStats

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* The Blackhawks are just 5-13-2 in their last 20 games and were particularly putrid during Thursday's 7-2 loss in San Jose. Wrote Sun-Times wordsmith Mark Lazerus: "After scoring first on an Artem Anisimov snipe just 2:12 into the game, the Hawks fumbled and stumbled through a truly awful defensive performance. The Sharks scored on a 4-on-2, a 2-on-0, a scrambling and sliding mess that resembled a Benny Hill sketch, a redirect (the only normal goal of the bunch) and a 2-on-1." Guess that about covers it.

* The countdown to Seattle is on. A season-ticket drive took just 12 minutes on Thursday – yes, 12 minutes – to get 10,000 deposits for a new team. The total passed 26,000 later in the afternoon. There's no team name yet and there's not even an approval for expansion but it seems like it's just a formality now, with play starting in 2020 or 2021 at a rebuilt Key Arena. By comparison, it took Las Vegas a month to get 10,000 commitments for its ticket drive in 2015, although the club only took local buyers and Seattle stretched into Canada and even Alaska.

* The Jack Johnson saga in Columbus continues to be bizarre. The standout defenseman asked for a trade, then started negotiations with the club on an extension, then waited for a trade, then wasn't dealt. So he'll be an unrestricted free agent come July but remains open to re-signing with the Blue Jackets. Columbus, like other teams, will have to pay: Johnson, 31, is looking for a big payday after his parents scammed him out of much of his career earnings and forced him into a bankruptcy settlement.

* Sour Grapes of the Week Award is an easy one. In an interview with Fox 5 television in New York, Barclays Center CEO Brett Yormark had this to say about the Islanders and how their move to Brooklyn has been less than stellar: "Unfortunately, it didn't work. We had great hopes that moving the Islanders to Brooklyn would work. Unfortunately, they were like a rent-a-team. This team never really embraced Brooklyn, unfortunately. Their fan base resides in Long Island. They have a great, avid fan base in Long Island. Brooklyn just didn't gravitate to the team as I had hoped they would."

A rent-a-team? Just about anyone not in Brooklyn could have told you this wasn't going to work because the Nassau County fan base was largely going to get lost. The Isles are going to be splitting time the next couple of years at Barclays and NYCB Live, the refurbished Nassau Coliseum. Their planned arena by Belmont Park is targeted for the 2021-22 season. Can't come fast enough.

Sabres punch back too late against Panthers

The Buffalo News

John Vogl

March 2, 2018

SUNRISE, Fla. – When the puck drops for a defensive-zone faceoff, the wingers head to the blue line to make sure the defensemen don't get free.

Florida's defensemen got free, and it paid off.

Buffalo had breakdowns on two faceoffs Friday night, and the Panthers scored on both to dart to a 4-1 victory.

"Those are killers," Sabres coach Phil Housley said in BB&T Center. "They can really take a lot of wind out of your sails."

The Panthers opened the scoring with 1:25 gone when they won the faceoff in Buffalo's zone. Defenseman Mike Matheson danced around Kyle Okposo for a shot that beat goaltender Robin Lehner.

"I've got to have that guy," Okposo said.

After the Sabres rallied to tie, it happened again. Benoit Pouliot went to the blue line, but he didn't stop Aaron Ekblad from going past him for a cross-ice pass and goal.

"We can't give up two defensive-zone faceoff goals against," Housley said. "That's attention to detail. We talked about that before the game. That's just awareness and not picking up our checks."

The Sabres had played a solid team game in establishing a 5-0-1 run against Atlantic Division opponents and a 6-1-1 run on the road. The Panthers added a loss to both those categories.

"It was a bit of a frustrating game, but they're fighting for their playoff lives," Okposo said. "That would have been a good game to win for us. Those are the barometer games. If we're going to do that right now this late in the season, those are the games that we have to set our bar at."

The difference in the second period was simple. One team scored. The other didn't.

After 40 minutes, the shots were 20-20. The score was 4-1.

"We had our opportunities at key times of the game," Housley said. "They capitalized on theirs, and we didn't."

There was a five-minute span of the second period when the game featured end-to-end action. Florida goaltender James Reimer turned away the Sabres' prime chances. The puck quickly went up ice and got past Buffalo netminder Robin Lehner.

"It wasn't really bouncing for us," Lehner said. "They got some breaks, and we didn't."

Lehner allowed four goals on 30 shots as his save percentage dropped to .887 in the last eight appearances. His teammates took on the blame.

"If I bury a couple more, we're right back in that game," said right wing Sam Reinhart, who scored once on four shots. "I gave myself a lot of looks, and that could have changed the game a little bit.

"The chances they did create were Grade A ones, so we could have done a little bit better job in that."

The loss got to the Sabres late. Nathan Beaulieu dropped the gloves to fight Colton Sceviour with 22 seconds left. After the other players inched toward the tussle, Okposo threw down his gloves for a tilt with MacKenzie Weegar.

It was reminiscent of the teams' meeting in Buffalo last month, a 4-2 victory for Florida. They combined for 66 penalty minutes in the final 2:01. This time, there were 46 minutes in the final 22 seconds.

It shows the Sabres don't go down without a fight. It also shows they have to fight because they're down.

"I think we should have our aggression at the start of the game and playing heavy and finishing checks more than at the end of the game," Housley said.

Reinhart concurred.

"You saw it last game we played against these guys, and unfortunately they got the better of us both times," he said. "It's unfortunate from our point of view that it's happening at the end when we're kind of out of it."

He noted the teams have one more meeting April 7 in Florida for the season finale.

"Hopefully," Reinhart said, "we can bring that energy to start with."

Sabres Notebook: Nelson, Antipin pair well; Rodrigues injured

The Buffalo News

John Vogl

March 2, 2018

SUNRISE, Fla. – The Buffalo Sabres couldn't wait to see their new-look defense corps prior to the season. Due to a barrage of injuries and ineffective play, the pairings weren't as competent as anyone hoped.

Coach Phil Housley feels he's found a solid one.

Casey Nelson and Victor Antipin formed the Sabres' second pairing Friday night against Florida, the third straight time they shared the blue line. The first two were victories over Boston and Tampa Bay, games in which Buffalo held potent offenses to just one goal each.

"They've been doing a really good job since they've been put together," Housley said in BB&T Center. "They've played against some really good competition. The better teams that we're facing here have good second and third lines, so they've risen to the challenge."

They've enjoyed the challenge.

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"It's been going great," Nelson said. "I think we both move the puck pretty well, help each other out."

Each member of the duo has speed and passing ability, which allows them to find breakouts in the defensive zone and join offensive rushes.

"I really like their puck movement," Housley said. "I like the way they're getting up the ice and into the play."

The players clearly like the opportunity they're getting. Nelson played his 21st straight game since being recalled from Rochester. Antipin, who sat out 16 of 18 games in December and January, has reversed those numbers. He played for the 16th time in 18 games.

"My game has improved," Antipin said. "I'm feeling it's good. I have more patience."

Housley has noticed.

"I really like what I've seen from Victor lately," the coach said. "He's in control. His defense is really good. He's got a good stick and closes quick on guys."

"It just feels he's been playing with a lot more confidence."

Antipin, a Kazakhstan native who continues to work on his English, relies heavily on video for his lessons. They seem to be sinking in.

"He's got a lot of ability," Nelson said. "He can do many things, is a very smart player. I think we're working better and better together."

The Sabres were missing an offensive catalyst. Center Evan Rodrigues, who has been playing well in an expanded role with Jack Eichel injured, sat because of an upper-body injury.

Though Housley did not announce how Rodrigues was injured, the center took a hard hit early in the third period of Wednesday's 2-1 overtime victory in Tampa Bay. He remained in the game and scored the tying goal. His ribs were wrapped in the dressing room following the game.

"I just know that he woke up Thursday with an upper-body soreness, so we're just being cautious with it," Housley said. "He got banged up. He's got a little upper-body injury. It's more of a day-to-day situation with him."

Rodrigues has four goals and nine points in his past 11 games.

Kyle Okposo wore an extra piece of equipment. He had a medical bracelet on his wrist, allowing him to visit his wife and newborn daughter in the hospital once he gets back to Buffalo.

The Okposos welcomed their third child Tuesday, and the right winger missed the game against Tampa Bay. He flew to Florida on Thursday.

"I came here, skated, took a nap and then slept a lot," he said. "Everything went well. Long labor, but got it done. Really happy, just proud."

Zemgus Girgensons alternated between center and wing during his first five seasons in the organization. He played in the middle for one of the few times under Housley because of Rodrigues' absence. When Girgensons was asked about the switch in the dressing room, Sam Reinhart overheard the query.

"I've been there!" shouted Reinhart, who has flip-flopped positions throughout his career.

Story topics: Casey Nelson/ Evan Rodrigues/ Victor Antipin

The Wraparound: Panthers 4, Sabres 1

The Buffalo News

John Vogl

March 2, 2018

SUNRISE, Fla. – Marco Scandella hit the boards hard. That was essentially the end of his night.

Buffalo lost its top-pair defenseman and the game Friday. Scandella missed the second and third periods with a lower-body injury, and the Florida Panthers skated to a 4-1 win BB&T Center.

With five minutes to go in the first, Panthers forward Nick Bjugstad tossed Scandella into the back boards. Scandella took a five-second shift after that but didn't skate again.

"Marco will be OK," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "Lower-body bumps and bruises, so we just held him out."

The defenseman sat on the Sabres' bench for the opening half of the second period, but he retreated to the dressing room and didn't come back.

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Playoff push: The Panthers are making a hard run at the playoffs. They won their fifth straight, improving to 8-2 in the last 10 games and 12-3 in the last 15.

Florida pulled within one point of Columbus for the final wild-card spot heading into the Blue Jackets' late game in Anaheim. The Panthers have played three fewer games.

Quick goal: The Panthers needed just 1:25 to take a 1-0 lead. They won a draw in the Sabres' zone, getting the puck to defenseman Mike Matheson at the blue line. He stepped around Kyle Okposo for a clean look at the net, and he easily beat goaltender Robin Lehner to the stick side.

Tie it up: Sam Reinhart continued his extended run on the score sheet, making it 1-1 with 5:34 off the clock. Sabres defenseman Victor Antipin plunked Florida forward Aleksander Barkov with a hard shot, and Ryan O'Reilly scooped up the loose puck. He quickly moved it to Reinhart before the Panthers could react.

The goal was the 15th of the season for Reinhart, who has eight goals and 21 points in the last 21 games.

Familiar result: Once again, the Panthers won a faceoff in the Sabres' zone. Four seconds later, it was 2-1. The puck moved to defenseman Keith Yandle, who took a few strides up the left boards. Benoit Pouliot failed to pick up defenseman Aaron Ekblad on the right side, and Ekblad buried the cross-ice pass with 3:19 left in the opening period.

Speed thrills: Barkov accepted a pass near center ice, got defenseman Justin Falk leaning the wrong way and split Falk and defenseman Nathan Beaulieu. Barkov then lifted a close-range backhand over Lehner's shoulder, putting the Sabres in a 3-1 hole with 6:49 gone in the second.

Rebound: Florida made it 4-1 on another rush. Lehner stopped a spinning backhand by Bjugstad, but the rebound off his pad went to a driving Colton Sceviour. The forward pounded it home with 8:44 to go in the second.

Sort of even: The shots were 20-20 after 40 minutes, but the Sabres went to intermission in a 4-1 hole.

Rematch: The Sabres' Jordan Nolan and Florida's Micheal Haley dropped the gloves with 3:23 to go in the first. Nolan earned a win over Haley when they battled in November, but Haley scored a takedown Friday.

It was Haley's 18th fight of the season. The Sabres moved to 11 as a team when Beaulieu fought with 21.4 seconds to play.

Line changes: Center Evan Rodrigues missed the game with an upper-body injury, so coach Phil Housley changed his top three lines. Ryan O'Reilly centered for left wing Benoit Pouliot and right wing Sam Reinhart. Zemgus Girgensons was in the middle of Nick Baptiste and Kyle Okposo. Johan Larsson was between Scott Wilson and Jason Pominville.

The fourth line of Jacob Josefson centering for Jordan Nolan and Seth Griffith remained intact.

Break time: Sabres Hall of Fame announcer Rick Jeanneret, who called the game, is staying in Florida with family for a couple of weeks.

Next: The Sabres play their first game of the season against the Toronto Maple Leafs at home Monday. The archrivals meet four times in four weeks.

Story topics: Marco Scandella

Sabres' Chad Johnson irons out his wrinkles in the crease

The Buffalo News

John Vogl

March 1, 2018

TAMPA, Fla. – With the Tampa Bay power-play unit on the ice, sniper Steven Stamkos lined up for one-timer after one-timer. The sellout crowd was roaring, and Buffalo's penalty-killers were scrambling.

Not Chad Johnson. The goaltender calmly moved from side to side, staying with the action and knocking away pucks.

The Sabres scored twice in the next 10 minutes, including the overtime winner for a 2-1 victory, and Johnson was earning celebratory head taps. It's finally become a regular occurrence.

After opening the season just 1-8-3, Johnson is 5-2 in his last seven starts. He has a .932 save percentage and 2.00 goals-against average during the run, improving his confidence and the trust his teammates have in him.

"Like any goalie, the more you play the better you feel, and guys will be more confident," Johnson said. "The team is playing really well in front of me. That's why we're seeing the results.

"We're not giving up two-on-ones, three-on-tuos. We're not getting really Grade A's all the time, maybe one per game. That's why you're going to see the results I'm getting."

While the team game has improved in front of him, Johnson is playing better, too. It wouldn't be a surprise to see him in the crease Friday night when the Sabres visit the Florida Panthers in Sunrise, Fla.

"Chad was really calm," Sabres coach Phil Housley said after Wednesday's win. "He was just letting the puck hit him. He's just really square to the puck and in position. He's been playing really well for us lately."

He's also playing. He's started five of the last 10 games, splitting the crease with Robin Lehner after being the clear backup for the first four months.

"It is nice to get more," Johnson said. "That was my goal at the start. It just didn't happen, so just try and take advantage of it."

Though Johnson has insisted all season he's better than his numbers, the stats are beginning to be more palatable. Before the run started in Johnson's hometown of Calgary on Jan. 22, he was 1-8-3 with an .878 save percentage and 3.85 GAA. Now he's 6-10-3 with an .896 and 3.18.

Those aren't sparkling, but they're definitely better.

"It's just that time of the year now where I think everything's coming together," said the 31-year-old, who will be an unrestricted free agent this summer. "We're finding a little bit of our identity. It's that last little stretch here. A lot of guys have things to prove whether it's contracts, won't be here next year or whatever it is.

"There's a lot to prove, and we're trying to build an identity all the way to the end here. I think you're seeing that now."

Sabres' Rodrigues making most of Eichel-less opportunity

The Buffalo News

John Vogl

March 1, 2018

TAMPA, Fla. – Evan Rodrigues knew when Jack Eichel got hurt, it meant more playing time for him. Rodrigues slid up to the second line and watched his minutes and role increase.

The Buffalo Sabres center is taking advantage.

Rodrigues has goals in two straight games, closing a solid February with the tying goal late in Wednesday's 2-1 overtime win in Tampa Bay. The center has four goals and nine points in the last 11 games.

"My confidence continues to grow day in and day out," he said. "I'm getting put in some good opportunities to succeed."

Rodrigues had just two goals and seven points in his opening 24 games. His season didn't start until December because of a broken hand suffered during the preseason, but the third-year pro seems to be finding his way.

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When Eichel went down with a high-ankle sprain Feb. 10, Rodrigues was averaging 12:51 of ice time per night. He's skating 16:22 in the last nine games. Rodrigues had nearly three minutes of power-play time against Tampa.

"I think everything is just starting to click," the 24-year-old said. "I'm just starting to get rolling and hopefully keep it going here."

Story topics: Evan Rodrigues

Newcomer Dan O'Regan hopes comfort with Amerks leads to spot with Sabres

The Buffalo News

John Vogl

March 1, 2018

TAMPA, Fla. – Dan O'Regan walked into the Rochester dressing room, and it was more reunion than morning skate.

Over there was Colin Blackwell, who was O'Regan's roommate last year in San Jose. In that corner was Sahir Gill, a former teammate at Boston University. One pack included Kyle Criscuolo and Sean Malone, who played at Harvard with O'Regan's brother, Tommy. There were five others who joined O'Regan at Evan Rodrigues' wedding last summer.

"I'm really comfortable in the locker room," O'Regan said.

He and the Buffalo Sabres hope that comfort leads to more development.

The Sabres' newest prospect made his debut with the Rochester Americans on Wednesday, recording no points or shots in a 2-1 overtime loss to Bridgeport. The right winger skated with Gill and Amerks captain Kevin Porter after flying in from San Jose following Monday's trade that sent Evander Kane to the Sharks.

"Joining the Sabres' organization, there's a lot of good young players," O'Regan told the Rochester media. "You see Rochester's doing well this year, and they've just got a good core of young guys. I'm just excited to hopefully make an impact on the team."

The 24-year-old has made an impact during his two professional seasons. He was the American Hockey League Rookie of the Year last season, putting up 23 goals and 58 points in 63 games. He had seven goals and 25 points in 31 minor-league games this year, plus no goals and four assists in 19 NHL games.

Sabres General Manager Jason Botterill said he'll let O'Regan get settled in Rochester before contemplating a call-up, which could be good for the forward's mind.

"I was up and down a lot," O'Regan said of this season's recalls. "I was up and down maybe four or five times, and that can sometimes take a toll on you mentally, just kind of adjusting, transitioning, getting excited and then let down a little.

"But I think everything that has happened this year has helped me develop and gotten me ready for hopefully a good end of the year here."

The Sharks selected O'Regan in the fifth round of the 2012 NHL Draft, and he spent the next four years producing at BU. He had 66 goals and 154 points in 154 games, including 23 goals and 50 points in 41 games as linemates with the Sabres' duo of Rodrigues and Jack Eichel in 2014-15.

They were among those to reach out after the trade, which came while O'Regan was on the ice practicing with the San Jose Barracuda.

"Just packing up your whole life and leaving some of it in San Jose is tough, but I'm just excited," said the Massachusetts native. "I'm closer to home, so I've got some family that's maybe only a six-hour drive instead of a six-hour flight now."

O'Regan is excited to see the Amerks firmly in a playoff spot despite a 3-7-8 slide. He had four goals and seven points in 15 playoff games for San Jose last year.

"Who knows?" he said. "Maybe I'll provide a spark for the guys."

If he does, the 5-foot-10, 185-pounder could make a visit to Buffalo before the end of the year and reunite with Eichel and Rodrigues.

"That's the goal eventually to try to get up there," O'Regan said. "If that line ever happened again, that'd be fun. Right now I'm in this locker room looking around. There's a lot of great players, and nothing's going to be given to anyone.

"While there's a lot of opportunity, I've definitely just got to work hard and earn it."

Sabres agree that KeyBank Center needs an extreme makeover

The Buffalo News

Mike Harrington

March 1, 2018

No firm plans have been made, no dates established. But the Buffalo Sabres agree with the groundswell of complaints from fans that work is needed in KeyBank Center.

Complaints about the condition of the arena have exploded on social media this season as the prices of tickets, concessions and merchandise continue to rise. And while most observers agree fan discontent may grow when the team is playing poorly – at 9-18-4, the Sabres are on pace for their worst home record in a season since 1972 – the volume of discontent with the building itself has reached an all-time high.

Most fans sit in their seats with winter coats on and some sport toques, gloves or scarves because the seating bowl is so chilly. That is not the norm in NHL arenas. The seats themselves are the original ones from 1996 and many are dirty or damaged. Cup holders are broken and rusted. Floors are dirty and sticky. Some fans say many bathrooms, particularly on the 300 level, have not had hot water for many years.

The Sabres are in the midst of their budgeting process so their offseason plans remain uncertain. Rumblings continue that the Sabres may be targeting some renovations for the 2019-20 season, which is expected to be the celebration of the club's 50th anniversary. That, however, would be after the next major event in the building: The NCAA Frozen Four championships in April 2019.

The building opened in 1996 as Marine Midland Arena. It is controlled and operated by Pegula Sports and Entertainment, but it's owned by Erie County and sits on City of Buffalo land. The Sabres' lease runs through 2022.

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Pegula Sports and Entertainment's views are contained in a statement released to the media that says it is studying what to do with the arena.

"While winning championships is our primary focus, our most important business goal is creating enjoyable fan experiences," the company said. "Ensuring our venues provide all the modern amenities commonplace in other professional sports venues around the country is a key element in creating our home field and home ice advantage.

"We are currently renovating the premium clubs at New Era Field using private dollars, while working closely with the city of Rochester to make improvements at Blue Cross Arena using both public and private funds.

"We are aware KeyBank Center is in need of significant upgrades. We will be working diligently to find the right solution to bring the arena up to modern professional sports standards as we begin to approach the end of the current lease."

Peter Anderson, spokesman for County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz, said the county has not been approached for any renovation funding. He added that the county would work with the Sabres if they indicated renovations were needed.

KeyBank Center is one of 18 NHL arenas constructed during the league's building boom from 1993-1999. Virtually all of those have undergone major renovation projects in recent years, and New York's fabled Madison Square Garden (which opened in 1968) underwent a \$1 billion transformation over three summers, from 2011-2013, that made it virtually a new venue.

Rogers Place in Edmonton opened last year and two other facilities, Las Vegas' T-Mobile Arena and Detroit's Little Caesars Arena, opened this season. All three have played to rave reviews for their massive technological and amenity upgrades that leave the '90s buildings far behind. Of course, those come with a price. Little Caesars cost \$863 million to build and Rogers Place and its surrounding district checked in at \$613.7 million (Canadian) while T-Mobile was done on a much smaller footprint and cost just under \$400 million.

When it opened in September, 1996, KeyBank Center was built for \$127.5 million.

Sabres President Russ Brandon has visited several NHL arenas, in part on a fact-finding mission to see what has been done to upgrade those facilities, and Pegula Sports is known to have had input from architects and contractors about what can be done with their arena.

There has been speculation that the team may eventually relocate its office space from the arena to nearby 79 Perry St. as part of the ongoing Labatt Brewhouse project in the building PSE bought last year. The team offices inside the arena would then be renovated into a new gathering place for club- and suite-level ticket-holders.

Kim Pegula also traveled extensively shortly after her husband bought the Sabres in 2011 to study player amenities. That led to the \$6 million locker room expansion project for the team in the summer of 2011. That project transformed 30,000 square feet of space on the building's service level for use by the Sabres, shrinking the previous rooms used by the visiting team and media.

News Staff Reporter Sandy Tan contributed to this story.

Story topics: Buffalo Sabres/ KeyBank Center

Sabres getting ready to face Toronto for the first time this season

WGR550

Brayton Wilson

March 4, 2018

Through 65 games this season, the Buffalo Sabres and Toronto Maple Leafs have yet to face off against one another on the schedule. On Monday, both teams will square off in their first meeting of the season.

The tale of the tape has been quite opposite for both teams this season, with the Sabres sitting near the bottom of the NHL standings and the Leafs getting set for another playoff run.

While it is strange that the Sabres have not faced the Leafs this season, head coach Phil Housley is looking forward to taking on the team he rivaled for years as a player, now as a coach in the league.

"It's always a great rivalry," Housley said after practice on Sunday. "Just knowing where our opponent is at, they've lost their last three and the coach came out and said they're going to practice [hard] today. We've got to be well aware that they're going to be ready to go, and we've got to rebound from our last game. I think there were areas we needed to improve on going into tomorrow, and we recognized that and showed them. We've got to be ready to play."

The Leafs are coming off of their Stadium Series game with the Washington Capitals on Saturday, in which Toronto lost the game 5-2 in Annapolis, Maryland. After the game, Leafs head coach Mike Babcock was disappointed in his team's effort and canceled Sunday's scheduled day off.

After winning four straight games and nine of their last 10, the Leafs have since gone 0-1-2 and have fallen three points back of the Boston Bruins for second in the Atlantic Division standings. Despite their recent losing ways, Housley knows that this young team can play with the best of them.

"They're a good rush team, and any transitional plays, they're going to try to stretch the zone on us," Housley said. "They like to play that fast game. We have to be ready to make good puck decisions going through the neutral zone, and do like we did against Boston and Tampa. I thought we came out, moved the puck quickly, got in on the forecheck, sustained a lot of offensive time and tried to make them defend as much as possible."

Maybe the last time the rivalry between both teams was anywhere near meaningful was back after the NHL Lockout of 2004, when the Sabres were a team on the rise in the Eastern Conference and the Maple Leafs were fringe contenders, just missing out on the postseason.

Jason Pominville was a part of those rosters during that time, and remembers those meaningful games against the Leafs vividly.

"We won a lot of games," Pominville said. "I do remember [Andrew Peters'] golf swing at one point, that's definitely something that made the guys laugh, but that's a while ago. But there was a lot of battles, a lot of good games. We were able to win a lot, which was nice to be on the good side of things. Hopefully we can do it again."

Pominville has had a great deal of success against the Maple Leafs in his career. In 58 games against Toronto in his time with the Sabres and the Minnesota Wild, Pominville has 19 goals and 31 assists. Knowing the history the Sabres and Leafs have had against one another, Pominville finds it odd that both teams have yet to meet this season.

"It's weird the way the schedule is built," Pominville said. Usually in the past, it feels like we have played them always late a little bit, but to not play them at this point, home or away, is definitely different and something we're not used to. For me, it's been a while, so I'm interested to see if it's still the same way where their fans manage to get tickets in here and be pretty loud. Should be a good atmosphere again."

The Sabres have struggled this season at home, sitting with a league-worst 9-18-4 record on home-ice. However, the Sabres have had a recent string of success against teams in the playoff hunt.

For instance, Buffalo took their season series with the Boston Bruins last Sunday after a 4-1 win at KeyBank Center. The Sabres went 2-1-1 overall this season against Boston, with their only loss coming back in December on home-ice. Buffalo has also had success against the Tampa Bay Lightning this year, going 2-1-0 in three games played. Their final matchup will come on April 6th when the Sabres travel to Florida one last time to close out the season.

Tampa Bay currently sits atop the Atlantic Division standings with 94 points through 66 games, while the Bruins are right behind them with 88 points in 63 games played.

Pominville is hoping that their string of success against some of the best teams in the NHL can continue.

"I feel like it's happened to us a bit where we've played teams that have come off losses and are looking to bounce back," Pominville said. "It's gonna happen, but when you hear things like that, it makes you want to prepare even more and get yourself ready even more to go because you know they're in the hunt for their position. We have to make sure we're ready to play."

As of late, the Sabres and Leafs rivalry hasn't meant as much to the Sabres with their struggles to contend in the Eastern Conference. As for the Leafs, they appear ready to return to the postseason for a second straight season.

Kyle Okposo is currently playing in his second season with the Sabres, and has gotten a taste of what the rivalry is all about. However, he is no new stranger to rivalries. He spent parts of nine seasons playing for the New York Islanders, who have a heated history with their cross-town rivals in the New York Rangers. Okposo has learned though that the Sabres and Leafs rivalry certainly has its moments in comparison to the Islanders and Rangers rivalry.

"It's got that same type of intensity, especially when it's here," Okposo said following practice on Sunday. "The building is electric, and they're definitely fun games to play in. They're coming off a few games that they'd probably like to have back, so we know that we're going to get their best. We're looking forward to it."

It has been a tough season for Okposo, but his game is starting to come around over the past couple of months. However, the Sabres had been out of contention for a playoff spot long before Okposo started to turn things around in his season.

Okposo looks at this young group the Maple Leafs have, and he certainly has been impressed with the way they're built from top to bottom.

"I've watched a lot of hockey, and I've seen them play a lot," Okposo said. "They're young and an exciting team to watch. They play a pretty structured game, so it will be a really good test for us. We played them in the preseason and they were all over us, they waxed us pretty good."

"They have three lines that can really hurt you, every time they're on the ice. Their fourth line is good too, so they have a lot of guys that, on any given night, they can be the catalyst for their team. It's a pretty unique situation for them to be in, and it's going to be a fun test."

The Leafs have been able to step up their play even without the services of Auston Matthews. The 20-year old has been out of action since February 22 with a shoulder injury, but he has also missed other portions of the season due to injury. Matthews has been stellar for the Leafs in his short tenure with the team. In 135 games with Toronto, Matthews has scored 68 goals and has registered 119 points as their future franchise center.

Even without their young center available, Sabres defenseman Marco Scandella knows that Toronto is a well built team that can have success with or without him in the lineup.

"It's a well coached team, a lot of skill," Scandella said on Sunday. "They play the right way, the right system. It's gonna be a tough game. A fast, physical game. I'm just excited to see what they rivalry is like. We're so close to each other that there is a rivalry, and it's going to be an interesting game. It's fun to be a part of."

Scandella has yet to play a single game of the Sabres and Leafs rivalry, but was part of the rivalry that the Wild had with the Chicago Blackhawks for several years. Scandella has heard all the stories of Buffalo's rivalry with their neighbors from the North, and has had Monday's game circled on his calendar for quite some time.

"I've been waiting all year for this game," Scandella said. "I know that there's a huge rivalry with the Leafs, and we haven't played them all year. I've been on the team now for 65 games, and we haven't played them yet. So I've been itching for this one."

After leaving Friday night's game against the Florida Panthers with an injury, Scandella was back on the ice for the Sabres on Sunday skating with Rasmus Ristolainen. The 28-year old defenseman says that he's feeling better, and is hoping that he will be better enough on Monday to face the Leafs in Buffalo.

"I went in pretty awkwardly [into the boards] the last game," Scandella said. "I didn't feel too good, but it's progressing day-to-day. I felt like I could skate today, went out there and felt pretty good. It's just day-to-day from now on."

"He had a pretty good practice," Housley added. "We'll see how he responds after today, and we'll find out more tomorrow."

Here's how the lines and defensive pairings looked:

Girgensons - O'Reilly - Reinhart

Wilson - Larsson - Pominville

Pouliot - Griffith - Baptiste

Nolan - Josefson - Okposo

Scandella - Ristolainen

Antipin - Nelson

Gorges - Falk / Beaulieu

The Sabres did not have Evan Rodrigues back on the ice on Sunday after suffering an upper-body injury on Wednesday in Tampa Bay. However, Rodrigues was seen from the bench watching practice, and he is still considered day-to-day. Housley said that he thinks that Rodrigues will return to the ice at some point this week.

With Rodrigues not practicing and Scandella uncertain for Monday's matchup, the Sabres called up Kyle Criscuolo and Brendan Guhle after practice on Sunday.

Buffalo will return to the ice on Monday for the morning skate before their matchup with the Leafs at 7:30 p.m.

Eichel skating again; Guhle called up from Rochester

WGR550

March 4, 2018

The Buffalo Sabres play the Toronto Maple Leafs for the first time all season on Monday night at KeyBank Center. Monday will be the first of four meetings with the Maple Leafs, this all coming with 17 games left in the 2017-18 season.

The Sabres did get some good news on Sunday as head coach Phil Housley told the media that Jack Eichel skated for the first time since his high-ankle sprain back on February 10th in Boston.

"There's no timeline on [his recovery]. We don't want to put that pressure [on him]," Housley said after practice. "He has skated, he started skating yesterday. That's good to see him making progress."

Eichel's original timeline for a return to the lineup was four-to-six weeks, and he has just passed the three-week mark of the recovery process. The hope for Eichel and the Sabres is to get him back on the ice for some portion of the final stretch of games.

"That's the goal, but you never know how these things react," Housley said. "We don't want to put any timeline on it, but it's good to see him skating. I think that's a step in the right direction. Obviously he wants to play some games before the end of the year."

On Sunday, the Sabres did have Marco Scandella back on the ice after leaving Friday's game in Florida with an injury. Scandella says he felt good after practice, but the team will evaluate where he is at after Monday's morning skate.

Buffalo did not have the services of Evan Rodrigues on Friday, who is listed as day-to-day with an upper-body injury. He was not on the ice Sunday morning at practice, however he was watching the session from the Sabres' bench.

With Scandella and Rodrigues banged up, the Sabres have called up defenseman Brendan Guhle and center Kyle Crisuolo from the Rochester Americans.

Guhle was called up once earlier this season, playing in two games and registering an assist and five shots on goal. So far in his rookie season with the Amerks, Guhle has eight goals and 24 points in 47 games played. However, Guhle has struggled lately, being held pointless in seven straight games.

Crisuolo was also called up once before this season, but failed to find the scoresheet in eight games. In 50 games this season in Rochester, Crisuolo has produced 15 goals and 34 points. The 25-year old forward has played well recently down on the farm, scoring three goals and eight assists in his last 11 games.

Faceoff from KeyBank Center on Monday night is set for 7:30 p.m.

Panthers dump Sabres 4-1

WGR550

Pat Malacaro

March 2, 2018

Sam Reinhart scored the lone Buffalo Sabres' goal in a 4-1 loss to the Florida Panthers on Friday night at BB&T Center.

Michael Matheson opened the scoring just a minute and a half into the game for the Panthers. The came after Florida won an offensive zone face-off, and moved the puck from one side of the ice to the other. Jamie McGinn and Jared McCann assisted on Matheson's ninth goal of the season.

However, four minutes later the blue and gold would answer. Good passing by Buffalo resulted in Sam Reinhart's 15th goal of the season. Ryan O'Reilly made the pass that helped get James Reimer out of position, both O'Reilly and Victor Antipin were given assists on the goal that made it 1-1 in the opening period.

Another offensive zone face-off win by Florida helped the team score late in the opening period to take a 2-1 lead over Buffalo. Aaron Ekblad received a pass from fellow rear guard Keith Yandle to score his 13th goal of the season. Yandle and Evgenii Dadonov received assists on the goal.

Buffalo's first power play of the night did not yield the game's tying goal. However, minutes later the Panthers extended their lead to two goals thanks to Aleksander Barkov. The forward scored his 24th goal of the season just under seven minutes into the middle frame to make it 3-1 in favor of the home team. Nick Bjugstad and Dadonov assisted on the goal. Colton Sceviour scored five minutes later to extend Florida's lead to 4-1 midway through the game.

Johan Larsson was called for the Sabres' first minor penalty of the game. A roughing minor was called on the forward, but Florida failed to score. The Panthers had a 5-on-3 chance for under a minute when Rasmus Ristolainen was penalized for slashing. However, again Buffalo was able to survive unscathed.

However, Buffalo could not beat Reimer in the final frame. Several players, including O'Reilly and Kyle Okposo, were involved in a scrum with under a minute to go in regulation. Nathan Beaulieu ended up with a fighting major, along with Sceviour.

Scoring Summary

Goal Summary:

First Period:

BUF: 5:34 - Sam Reinhart (15) (Ryan O'Reilly, Victor Antipin)

FLA: 1:25 - Michael Matheson (9) (Jame McGinn, Jared McCann). 16:41 - Aaron Ekblad (13) (Keith Yandle, Evgenii Dadonov)

Second Period:

BUF: NONE

FLA: 6:49 - Aleksander Barkov (24) (Nick Bjugstad, Evgenii Dadonov). 11:16 - Colton Sceviour (8) (Nick Bjugstad, Derek Mackenzie)

Third Period:

BUF: NONE

FLA: NONE

Penalty Summary:

First Period:

BUF: 16:37 - Jordan Nolan (5 min., fighting)
FLA: Michael Haley (5 min., fighting)

Second Period:

BUF: NONE

FLA: Vincent Trocheck (2 min., slashing). 8:47 - Nick Bjugstad (2 min., tripping). 12:12 - Alex Petrovic (2 min., delay of game)

Third Period:

BUF: 4:50 - Johan Larsson (2 min., roughing). 6:07 - Rasmus Ristolainen (2 min., slashing). 13:14 - Jordan Nolan (2 min., unsportsmanlike conduct). 19:38 - Nathan Beaulieu (2 min., roughing). 19:38 - Nathan Beaulieu (5 min., fighting). 19:38 - Kyle Okposo (2 min., roughing)

FLA: 13:14 - Mackenzie Weegar (2 min., unsportsmanlike conduct). 19:38 - Colton Sceviour (5 min., fighting). 19:38 - Mackenzie Weegar (2 min. roughing)

Shots on Goal:

BUF - 25 (9, 11, 5), FLA - 30 (11, 9, 10)

Goalies:

BUF: Robin Lehner - 26 saves
FLA: James Reimer - 24 saves

Power Plays:

BUF: 0 for 3 (0%)
FLA: 0 for 3 (0%)

Three Stars:

Aaron Ekblad
Nick Bjugstad
Aleksander Barkov

What's Next:

The blue and gold return home for a meeting with the Toronto Maple Leafs on Monday night at KeyBank Center for the first time this season. Buffalo and Maple Leafs drop the puck at 7:30 p.m. on the flagship home of the Sabres Radio Network - WGR Sports Radio 550. Pre-game coverage with Mike Schopp and the Bulldog begins at 6:30 p.m. from (716) Food and Sport.

Girgensons had to change positions again

WGR550

Paul Hamilton

March 2, 2018

Sunrise, FL (WGR 550) - Zemgus Girgensons was drafted as a center, but for the past few years, he's been mostly a left winger. He has bounced back and forth many times in his 335 games NHL career. He said, "It's not a bad thing, I've just got to fill in a spot, we lost E-Rod so I was the best option I guess and we'll see how it goes."

Phil Housley said Evan Rodrigues has an upper-body and is day-to-day.

Girgensons has played both positions in one game before. He said, "I feel comfortable playing both. Maybe the first couple of shifts will be hard to get into as a center, but I'm used to it, so it's pretty easy to adapt." By the third period he was OK as he even covered for the pinching Justin Falk.

Most players say one end of the ice is more difficult to adapt to when you're playing center. Girgensons agrees, "Probably more defensive zone cause you've got to play low and I do like playing low, but if you play enough games on the wing, you kind of get away from the center mindset, so I've just got to watch a couple of shifts before the game and refresh the memory."

During the game, Girgensons centered Kyle Okposo and Nick Baptiste. On his first shift Girgensons lost his only faceoff of the period and the puck wound up in the net. Girgensons did what he's supposed to do when you lose the draw, he stayed with the centerman, but they both wondered in front of Robin Lehner screening him for a goal.

It didn't take him long to get used to the breakout as he got the puck out fast. He kept going up ice getting a good tip in front of James Reimer.

In the second, Girgensons made a good play on Aleksander Barkov coming through the neutral zone, it's the only time the Sabres stopped Barkov all night.

After two periods, Girgensons played 8:44 and was minus two. He had only won three of seven faceoffs, none in the second period.

Girgensons had a good penalty kill in the third period. He led a 3-on-2 rush up ice, but had his shot deflected.

Nick Baptiste had a rough go of it playing the off wing on this line, so Seth Griffith took over in the third period. Baptiste looked much better on the Josefsen line.

At the end of the game, there was a big scrum where a couple of different fights broke out. Robin Lehner even dropped his stick and came out of his crease to make sure it was even. It was pretty disappointing that Girgensons was the only one that didn't drop his stick and gloves to help out.

Girgensons played 14:56 and was on the ice for two goals. Phil Housley was very upset they gave up two faceoff goals and Girgensons lost one of those draws. He was four of nine on faceoffs winning only one draw after the first period. Girgensons had no shots and one hit.

I did think he was strong on the penalty kill where he played 2:21.

From the Locker Room: Sabres-Panthers

WGR550

March 2, 2018

The Buffalo Sabres fell at the hands of the streaking Florida Panthers on Friday evening to the tune of a 4-1 final.

Sam Reinhart stayed hot in 2018, netting his 15th goal in the first period, but the blue and gold gained no traction following his tally. Florida registered the final three goals of the evening en route to a victory on home ice in Sunrise, Florida.

Go inside the locker room to hear from Robin Lehner, Sam Reinhart, Kyle Okposo and Phil Housley following the loss.

Robin Lehner:

Puck luck: "They score two off the faceoff in the first. It wasn't really bouncing our way tonight. Solid game, but the puck was clicking for them more than us."

On Barkov: "Falk played him very well. He doesn't have much to work with, but it goes off my stick and up off the bar and in."

AUDIO: <http://www.wgr550.com/media/audio-channel/3-2-robin-lehner-post-game>

Sam Reinhart:

Chances all night: "If I bury a couple more we're right back in that game. I thought I gave myself some good looks and was unable to capitalize on them."

Offense clicking, not finishing: "We were strong on the puck. Offensively we were able to factor in the defense. O'Reilly made a ton of good plays, but it was unfortunate it didn't go our way in the end."

AUDIO: <http://www.wgr550.com/media/audio-channel/3-2-sam-reinhart-post-game>

Kyle Okposo:

Florida playing for something: "They're fighting for a playoff spot and that was their best. They came out and took it to us the majority of the game. They played hard and they played desperate."

Grade-A chances all night: "They had a lot of chances tonight. Bit of a frustrating game, but they're fighting for their playoff lives. That would've been a good game to win for us. Those are the type of barometer games. If we're going to do that this late in the season, those are the type of games that we have to set our bar at."

AUDIO: <http://www.wgr550.com/media/audio-channel/3-2-kyle-okposo-post-game>

Phil Housley:

Attention to detail brought to forefront with struggles: "We can't give up two defensive zone faceoff goals against. That's just attention to detail. We talked about that before the game. That's just awareness and not picking up our checks."

On the late-third period scrums: "Guys are just playing with some emotion down 4-1. We should have that aggression more at the start of the game, it would help us finish some checks early on."

AUDIO: <http://www.wgr550.com/media/audio-channel/3-2-phil-housley-post-game>

Is there anything left to this Sabres season?

WGR550

Howard Simon

March 2, 2018

The trade deadline has come and gone. Evander Kane went with it. Jack Eichel is still sidelined by ankle injury. But there's still 18 games left in the Sabres season. Is there anything worth keeping an eye on? Of course there is.

I'm not going down the tanking road again but let's face it, the race for last overall and a guaranteed top-four draft pick is on. Arizona is last in the NHL with 48 points and 19 games left. The Sabres, going into Friday's matchup in Florida, have 51 points with 18 games remaining.

As a reminder, the team that finishes last overall has an 18-percent chance of winning the lottery and ending up with the top pick in the draft. That top pick is expected to be star in the making defenseman Rasmus Dahlin. Since you can't drop more than three spots in the order, the worst team drafts no lower than fourth. A big Sabres-Coyotes showdown is looming March 21st at Key Bank Center.

Will the Sabres play better at home? Their home record/performance led general manager Jason Botterill to release a little anger on the door of a suite in the press box recently. They've picked up 35-percent of points available in home games so far (9-18-4). On the road the Sabres have earned 43-percent of the possible points (11-15-7).

How will they fare against the top teams on their schedule? Did you know the Sabres beat playoff bound teams Boston and Tampa Bay a combined four times last month? Eight of their remaining 18 games are against teams that are currently in a playoff spot including all four season meetings with Toronto. Buffalo also faces Nashville twice and Vegas and Tampa once each. A strong record against those teams might ease some of the pain from this season.

Can Ryan O'Reilly and Sam Reinhart both keep up their strong play? O'Reilly has 21 points (9 goals, 12 assists) in his last 23 games. This after getting 25 points (9 goals, 16 assists) in his first 40 games.

Through the first half of the season, Reinhart looked like a guy who was playing himself out of Buffalo. But the former second overall draft pick has turned it up a few notches. He has 20 points (7 goals, 13 assists) in the last 20 games. In the first 44 games, Reinhart was almost invisible with just 13 points (2 goals, 11 assists).

There are some other questions as well like whether or not Eichel is able to get back and play before the season comes to a close. Saturday marks three weeks since he suffered a high-ankle sprain.

How does Casey Nelson look? The Sabres overhauled defense group has struggled mightily this season but Nelson has provided a solid, steady presence back there of late. He could solidify a top-six spot for next season.

Speaking of next season's band of blueliners, will it include Victor Antipin? Can he actually play on a regular basis for the next month? Antipin, who is on a one year contract, has played in just 39 of 64 games.

Does anyone come up from Rochester for a look? There are some likely candidates like C.J. Smith (when he's healthy), Justin Bailey, Hudson Fasching, Brendan Guhle and newly acquired Daniel O'Regan, but my guess is the Sabres brass will do everything they can to leave the Amerks roster alone as they prepare for the AHL playoffs.

There's one big question that doesn't involve anyone in Buffalo or Rochester right now. Does Casey Mittelstadt turn pro? The Sabres' first round pick in last year's draft is having a good initial season for the University of Minnesota and performed very well for Team USA during the World Juniors. Hopefully he decides to leave college and is wearing Sabres blue and gold on opening night in October.

Sabres finally renew long rivalry with Maple Leafs

Olean Times Herald

Bill Hoppe

March 5, 2018

BUFFALO – When the NHL scheduled the only four tilts between the Sabres and the Toronto Maple Leafs over a 28-day late-season stretch, the league likely envisioned the fierce rivals would be battling for playoff spots or positioning.

Sixty-six games into another lost season, the last-place Sabres finally play the Leafs tonight at KeyBank Center, their first meeting since April 3, 2017.

The Sabres, of course, are playing for pride. The Leafs, meanwhile, are firmly positioned in the Atlantic Division's third playoff spot.

Even the stars will be missing tonight.

A high right ankle sprain will sideline Jack Eichel, the Sabres' slick center, for the 11th straight game. The Leafs will also be without their dynamic pivot, Auston Matthews, who's battling a shoulder injury.

Still, tonight's contest hasn't lost all its pizzazz.

Sabres-Leafs games rarely disappoint. Sabres old and new know the rivalry means something, no matter where the teams are positioned. The atmosphere could be electric tonight, with the loud Leafs fans who gobble up tickets likely making up a majority of the raucous crowd.

"I've been waiting all year for this game," Sabres defense Marco Scandella said Sunday. "I know that there's a huge rivalry with the Leafs and we haven't played them all year. I've been on the team for how many games now, 65 games? And we haven't played them yet. So I've been itching for this one."

Sabres winger Jason Pominville has been waiting a long time for tonight's game. During his first stint in Buffalo, he experienced the rivalry at perhaps its peak following the 2005 lockout, when the Sabres consistently throttled the hapless Leafs.

After five seasons with the Minnesota Wild, Pominville will face the Leafs with the Sabres for the first time since March 21, 2013, a 5-4 Buffalo shootout win.

Before the NHL's changed its scheduling format, Pominville played the Leafs eight times a season and later six. The veteran got used to seeing them all year. So waiting five months to face Toronto has been odd.

"I can't believe it," Pominville said. "It's weird the way the schedule is built. In the past it feels like we have always played them late a little bit, but to have not played them at this point home or away is definitely different and something we're not used to."

"For me, it's been a while, so I'm interested to see if it's still the same way where their fans manage to get tickets in here and be pretty loud. It should be a pretty good atmosphere."

Until recently, the rivalry was pretty lopsided. The Sabres still lead the all-time series (113-67-18-8) by a significant margin.

One memory stands out to Pominville. When the teams met for the final time in 2005-06, Pominville's rookie season – the playoff-bound Sabres went 6-1-1 against Toronto – tough guy Andrew Peters mimicked a golf swing on the ice during a 6-0 dismantling, a message the Leafs could get ready for the offseason.

"We won a lot of games," Pominville said. "I do remember Petey's golf swing at one point, that's definitely something that made the guys laugh but that's a while ago. There was a lot of battles, there was a lot of good games. We were able to win a lot."

These days, the roles are reversed. The Leafs, who rebounded from a 30th-place finish to make the playoffs last season, have already accumulated 39 wins and 85 points. With 214 goals scored through 67 games, they rank fourth in scoring.

“They have three lines that can really hurt you every time they’re on the ice,” Sabres winger Kyle Okposo said. “They’re fourth line’s good, too. They have a lot of guys on any given night they can be the catalyst of their team.”

But they’ve struggled a bit recently, losing three straight games, including a 5-2 defeat in Saturday’s outdoor game against the Washington Capitals.

Following that loss, Leafs coach Mike Babcock essentially canceled a day off, saying his team would put the work in Sunday at practice in Buffalo they didn’t during the game.

“Just knowing where your opponent’s at, they lost the last three and the coach came out and they’re going to practice today, so we got to be well aware that they’re going to ready to go,” Sabres coach Phil Housley said.

Okposo said: “We know we’re going to get their best.”

Sabres' Kyle Okposo on minus-29 rating: 'It's absolutely gross'

Olean Times Herald

Bill Hoppe

March 4, 2018

BUFFALO – Sabres winger Kyle Okposo heard the question coming and groaned, likely out of embarrassment.

The veteran owns a ghastly minus-29 rating, the NHL's worst number among forwards.

"It's gross, it's absolutely gross," Okposo said this morning inside KeyBank Center. "It's something, whether the goal's my fault or not, it just seems like it goes in, they're just going in this year. It's something I wanted to get better at. It's something that's very disappointing for me. It's something I wanted to change, I want to fix."

"We got 17 games left, I want to be a plus player the rest of the way. But in saying that, it's not something you can completely control. You have to look at it with a grain of salt. But still, it's not good."

Okposo, who has compiled 11 goals and 37 points in 62 games, hasn't mustered a plus outing since Jan. 23. In his last 10 contests, he's a minus-11.

The American has generated a positive rating in a full season just once – a plus-3 way back in 2011-12 – since entering the league 10 years ago. He was a career-worst minus-22 in 2009-10. Last season, his first with the Sabres, he was a minus-7

"My number's what it is," Okposo said. "I own that. It's not something I'm saying, 'Oh, it's not my fault and whatever.' It's something that's disappointing me. It (stinks) being there. I have to try to improve it."

Right now, Okposo must try to improve it on a non-scoring line. While Sabres coach Phil Housley refused to call it the fourth line, Okposo skated at right wing beside center Jacob Josefson and Jordan Nolan during this morning's practice.

"His awareness defensively and having a respect away from our net defensively has got to be better," Housley said of Okposo. "I'm sure he's thinking about that, but he's got to go out and show it. He's been pretty hard on himself, so I think he'll be able to respond in the right way."

In other news, Sabres defenseman Marco Scandella, who left Friday's 4-1 road loss in Florida after getting hit into the boards, practiced today and could play in Monday's home tilt against Toronto.

"I went in pretty awkwardly last game," Scandella said. "I didn't feel too good, but it's progressing day-to-day. I felt like I could skate today, went out there and felt pretty good."

Eichel back on skates

Rochester First

Thad Brown

March 4, 2018

Buffalo, NY - After leaving the ice with ankle injury nearly a month ago, Sabres star forward Jack Eichel began skating over the weekend, head coach Phil Housley told reporters on Sunday.

“There’s no timeline on it. We don’t want to put him on that sort of pressure,” Housley said after practice. “He has skated. He started skating on (Saturday). That’s good to see him making progress.”

Before exiting the Sabres’ 4-2 win over the Boston Bruins on February 10, Eichel had scored 53 points (22 G, 31A) in 55 games, and remains the team leader despite missing the last ten games. The Sabres are 4-5-1 without him in the lineup.

The centerman’s goal, Housley said, was to return at some point before the 2017-2018 campaign comes to a close.

“You never know how these things react. You don’t want to put a timeline on it,” he added. “It’s a step in the right direction but obviously he wants to play some games before the end of the year.”

Guhle, Criscuolo recalled by Sabres

WIVB

Nick Filipowski

March 4, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – Despite Sabres head coach Phil Housley telling reporters he didn't expect any call ups from Rochester after the team practiced Sunday at Keybank Center, the team recalled defenseman Brendan Guhle and center Kyle Criscuolo.

Criscuolo is currently second on the Amerks with 34 points and leads the team in goals, with 15. Guhle, who recorded his first NHL point with the Sabres in January, has eight goals in 47 games with Rochester.

The Sabres host the Leafs Monday at 7:00 p.m.

Eichel begins skating after suffering ankle injury

WIVB

Nick Filipowski

March 4, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – After leaving the ice with ankle injury nearly a month ago, Sabres star forward Jack Eichel began skating over the weekend, head coach Phil Housley told reporters on Sunday.

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Sabres stumble on the road, fall 4-1 to Panthers

WIVB

Shannon Shepard

March 3, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – After a successful recent stint on the road, the Sabres fell to the Florida Panthers on Friday night.

Before the loss, the Blue and Gold had been 6-1-1 on road trips in the last eight games.

Florida scored the first goal, when Michael Matheson lit the lamp just 1:25 into the game.

The Sabres countered shortly after, with a perfect feed from Victor Antipin to Ryan O'Reilly eventually leading to a Sam Reinhart goal.

But, that was where the offense stopped for Buffalo as Florida scored three unanswered goals on Robin Lehner, en route to a 4-1 win.

Kyle Okposo returned to the Sabres line up after welcoming his baby daughter earlier this week. But, Evan Rodrigues missed the game with a day-to-day upper body injury.

Next up, the Sabres host the Toronto Maple Leafs for the first time the season on Monday night.

Sabre Ryan O'Reilly to hold social event for fans

WKBW

March 3, 2018

AMHERST, N.Y. (WKBW) - Lovers of the Buffalo Sabres -- Alternate Captain Ryan O'Reilly is set to appear at Top Friendly Markets to talk to you!

For one hour, O'Reilly will sign autographs and talk to fans about the season.

He is expected at the Tops on Maple Road in Amherst on March 6th at 5:00 p.m.

Don't forget to wear your gear!

Bove: A way too early 2018-2019 Sabres roster projection

WKBW

Matt Bove

March 2, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - If at any point you've started to wonder what the 2018-2019 Buffalo Sabres lineup might look like, you're in the right place.

First things first, I'm aware this won't be correct. Predicting how the roster could shake out for next season in March is way too early. But sometimes you start jotting names on a blank piece of paper and before you know it, four lines, three defensive pairings and two goalies are written down.

There are a ton of factors that could change this projection but as of March 2nd, this is my best guess.

Forwards:

ADVERTISING

1) Patrick Maroon - Jack Eichel - Sam Reinhart

With the struggles they've had, it's hard to imagine the Sabres making a huge splash in free agency this summer. Maroon has had a nice season and while he's not a traditional first line player, he would benefit greatly from playing with Eichel and Reinhart. Signing Maroon wouldn't be cheap but it also shouldn't break the bank. When looking at the top unrestricted free-agent left wingers, names like James Van Riemsdyk, Rick Nash, Evander Kane, James Neal and Daniel Sedin top the list. Maroon could be a sneaky smart signing in Jason Botterill's second season as Sabres GM.

That said, the emergence of Alex Nylander would have been huge for the Sabres and allowed them to avoid searching the free agent market. But based on his struggles in Rochester, it's hard to imagine Nylander will be ready to step right into the NHL next season.

As for Reinhart, I'd expect the Sabres to try and sign their 2014 first-round pick to a two or three-year bridge deal in the offseason worth somewhere around \$4M per year. Maybe that's too much, maybe it's not enough, but I'd be shocked if the Sabres let Reinhart walk in the summer.

2) Casey Mittelstadt - Ryan O'Reilly - Kyle Okposo

Obviously, this all hinges on two things:

- Mittelstadt signing his entry-level contract
- Making the Sabres out of training camp

Another year developing in either Rochester or Minnesota would pay dividends but many people I've spoken with believe Mittelstadt is ready for the NHL. Without Kane, the Sabres need some talent on the left side of their lineup and starting Mittelstadt at wing could allow him some time to learn the NHL game, rather than throwing him at center right away.

3) C.J. Smith - Evan Rodrigues - Jason Pominville

I'm not sure what to expect out of C.J. Smith. If he can produce at half the rate he did this season with the Amerks, the Sabres will be thrilled. Or will he be like Derek Grant and thrive in the AHL while struggling in the NHL? We'll have to wait and see.

4) Scott Wilson - Zemgus Girgensons - Nick Baptiste

In his first few months with the Sabres, Scott Wilson has made his case to be re-signed in the offseason. He won't wow anyone with his offensive production or his scoring touch but he's a smart and versatile player who can likely be signed for a bargain.

Both Girgensons and Larsson remain under contract next season.

Extra - Johan Larsson

Defense:

1) Jake McCabe - Rasmus Ristolainen

In 2016-2017 both McCabe and Ristolainen played their best hockey as a pair. Unless the Sabres win the 2018 NHL Draft lottery and select Rasmus Dahlin or make a play at John Carlson in the summer, they'll likely be without a true number one defenseman yet again.

2) Marco Scandella - Casey Nelson

Nelson has been a pleasant surprise since he was recalled from Rochester a few months ago. He still has his flaws but is starting to look like he could make the team out of camp next season.

3) Brendan Guhle - Zach Bogosian

In his two games with the Sabres this season, Guhle was one of the best players on the ice. He'll make the team and be a regular next season. Bogosian once again saw his season cut short because of injuries. With two more years left on his contract, Bogosian likely isn't going anywhere.

Extra(s): Nathan Beaulieu/Victor Antipin

Goaltenders:

1) Linus Ullmark

2) Chad Johnson

Sabres GM Jason Botterill made sure the Vegas Golden Knights couldn't choose Ullmark in the expansion draft last summer. Barring a big surprise, Ullmark will be the guy next season. While Robin Lehner has been fine, it's hard to imagine that he'll sign a deal in the summer knowing that he'll be a backup. The same can't be said for Johnson, who could provide familiarity and guidance for Ullmark as he becomes the number one guy.

***In December, NHL commissioner Gary Bettman told reporters at the league's board of governors meeting that the salary cap would be somewhere between \$78M-\$82M next season. For reference, the above roster comes in around \$72M.

It's another year of starting over for struggling Sabres

Toronto Star

Kevin McGran

March 4, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y.—It was just a couple of years ago that the Buffalo Sabres' rebuilding plan seemed to be ahead of that of the Maple Leafs.

The Sabres had pocketed a number of high draft picks — notably Jack Eichel, the No. 2 selection in 2015, and Sam Reinhart, No. 2 a year earlier. They had surrounded their young players with productive and still young veterans such as Ryan O'Reilly and Kyle Okposo.

But they have gone nowhere, backwards even.

The general manager brought in to put the plan in place, Tim Murray, was fired and replaced by Jason Botterill. The coach brought in to nurture the young stars as he had done before in Pittsburgh, Dan Bylsma, was fired and replaced by Phil Housley.

“Certainly it shows bottoming out in the standings doesn't guarantee anything, getting top picks and all that stuff,” Leafs winger James van Riemsdyk said. “Things still have to go your way. Even the year we did finish last, I think we had a lot of good pieces. We had some injuries, but lots of things have to go your way to be a good team in this league. That certainly isn't lost on guys who have been around for a while. You're not just guaranteed to be good when you finish low and hopefully get a high draft pick.

The Leafs face the Sabres on Monday, the end of a four-game road trip in which Toronto has yet to register a win (0-1-2). The geographic rivals are facing each other for the first time this season and will now see each other four times in three weeks. At the beginning of the season, this stretch looked like it could have huge playoff implications. It will, but only for the Leafs.

The teams are trending in opposite directions. The Sabres will be in the draft lottery again, having shipped out Evander Kane to San Jose at the trade deadline with Botterill telling reporters in Buffalo how disappointed he was in his team. The Sabres are eighth in the eight-team Atlantic Division for the fourth time in five years. They were seventh the other season.

“The group that we have right now is not working,” Botterill told The Buffalo News. “I think the conversations set up well for the draft and the summer. We're going to improve our team again and certainly make adjustments to our group.

You might be interested in

Coke conveyors near the blast furnaces at U.S. Steel's Granite City Works in Granite City, Ill., in an Oct. 21, 2015, file photo. U.S. President Donald Trump's announced 25 per cent steel tariff echoes one George W. Bush imposed in 2002. It was not a clear success.

Bush's steel tariffs in 2002 didn't crush the economy, but they didn't work for him either

The rumours about Prince Harry's parentage are obviously false as he looks exactly like Prince Philip here, saying something he probably shouldn't have said. Get used to it Meghan.

Meghan Markle's already a blushing bride-to-be: Stargazing

This undated photo provided by Central Michigan University shows James Eric Davis Jr., who police identified as the shooting suspect at a Central Michigan University residence hall on Friday, March 2, 2018.

Michigan student who allegedly killed parents at dorm used dad's gun: police

“We all know exactly where we are. You look at the standings, and we know where we are, and there needs to be a lot of improvement in this organization across the board. The beauty of our league right now, it's a very competitive league. You can look at teams such as Colorado, such as New Jersey, they made the adjustment really quickly.”

The Avalanche and the Devils were the last-place teams in their conferences last season, and are in the middle of the pack this year. The Leafs were last two seasons ago, in the middle last year, and among the league's elite teams this season.

There is more to it than just Mike Babcock, who chose the Leafs over the Sabres when he left Detroit in 2015.

“We got fortunate in the lottery draft,” Babcock said, of Auston Matthews being available at the top of the 2016 draft. “It was one of the things that was beyond our control and it worked out for us.

“But most of the stuff is within your control: how you go about doing your job every day, how you scout, how you trade, how you control your cap, how you manage your product. To me, you’re not hoping to get lucky there. You’re hoping to do it right, and work hard, and be smarter than the next guy and get ahead.

“That’s what it’s all about. That’s why you want to be in the best league, because you want to compete against the best. There are 31 teams that are trying to be the best they can be, just like us. You’ve got to do a better job than they do; otherwise, you can’t get to the top and stay there.”

The Leafs are far from perfect. This winless road skid is one example of the lows they can go through. Matthews is hurt (like Buffalo’s Eichel). Goalie Frederik Andersen, has been wobbly lately, though he showed no ill effects in practice Sunday of the hard hit he took from Morgan Rielly in Saturday’s 5-2 loss to the Capitals.

“We’re a work in progress,” Babcock said. “Washington slapped us, which goes to show you. We don’t spend a lot of time worrying about the other teams. We worry about what we’re doing. If there’s something to learn from, we learn from the other teams that are doing well.”

Panthers top Sabres for fifth straight win

NHL.com

March 2, 2018

James Reimer made 24 saves, and Aaron Ekblad scored his 50th NHL goal to help the Florida Panthers defeat the Buffalo Sabres 4-1 at BB&T Center on Friday.

The Panthers' fifth straight win matches their longest streak of the season and moves them one point behind the Columbus Blue Jackets and Carolina Hurricanes for the second wild card into the Stanley Cup Playoffs from the Eastern Conference.

"It's nice for me as a coach when you see guys get on rolls and the team gets on a roll," Panthers coach Bob Boughner said. "It's an easy buy-in. They understand the way we need to play to be successful. I think now they are reaping the rewards. They go into every game and know how important it is and expect to win. That's a great identity."

[WATCH: All Sabres vs. Panthers highlights]

Mike Matheson, Aleksander Barkov and Colton Sceviour also scored for the Panthers (31-25-6), who are 12-3-0 in their past 15 games. Reimer bounced back after giving up seven goals in his last start, a 7-2 loss to the Winnipeg Jets on Feb. 18.

"I think that's what it takes to be able to get yourself into the playoffs and then have success in the playoffs," Matheson said. "You can't rely on the same two players or the same two lines every single night. You need contributions from everyone."

Sam Reinhart scored, and Robin Lehner made 26 saves for the Sabres (20-34-11), who lost for the first time in three games. Buffalo is 18 points behind the Blue Jackets and Hurricanes for the second wild card.

Reinhart taps home feed
00:54 • March 2nd, 2018

"I thought we had our opportunities at key times in the game and they capitalized on theirs and we didn't," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "The game's 2-1 and we're getting really good looks there; 2-on-1s, odd-man rushes, and really some opportunities to make a difference and we weren't opportunistic at that time and I think that's where the game stood."

Matheson gave Florida a 1-0 lead at 1:25 of the first period, but Reinhart tied it 1-1 at 5:34. It was Matheson's ninth goal of the season and first at home.

"I guess that's just how it goes sometimes where it can just happen where you end up not scoring for a little while at home or even on the road, whatever the case may be," Matheson said. "So I didn't give it too much thought, but it's nice to get it." \

Matheson's early strike
00:45 • March 2nd, 2018

Ekblad made it 2-1 at 16:41 after he received a pass from Keith Yandle and took a shot from the right face-off circle. It was his 13th goal of the season.

Barkov pushed the lead to 3-1 at 6:49 of the second period when he received a pass from Nick Bjugstad and skated between Sabres defensemen Justin Falk and Nathan Beaulieu and chipped a backhand shot to the top corner for his 24th goal.

Reimer's strong pair of saves
00:12 • March 2nd, 2018

Sceviour made it 4-1 at 11:16 when he scored his first goal in 13 games on a rebound of a shot by Bjugstad for his eighth of the season.

"Our entire lineup has been contributing and that's been the big difference," Bjugstad said. "You know, we are having a heck of a run here and we got to keep it going. We can't stop here."

Goal of the game

Ekblad's goal at 16:41 of the first period.

Ekblad's smooth top-shelf tally

00:45 • March 2nd, 2018

Save of the game

Reimer's save on Jacob Josefson at 11:09 of the second period.

Reimer's solid kick save

00:16 • March 2nd, 2018

Highlight of the game

Barkov's goal at 6:49 of the second period.

Barkov's slick backhand tally

00:50 • March 2nd, 2018

They said it

"I liked the way we responded, we tied it up right away. And we give [up] that other goal, again, on the face-off. Those are killers and they can take a lot of wind out of your sails, but even at that point we had a lot of opportunities to tie up the game." -- Sabres coach Phil Housley

"We knew we had to get on a run like this. Obviously, the way we started wasn't ideal, but anything can happen at the end of the year. A spark has been lit here and we're meshing well. There's no stopping here, we still have a lot of games to play and we can't rely on other teams to help us out. It's got to be us." -- Panthers forward Nick Bjugstad

Need to know

Sabres defenseman Marco Scandella left after the first period with a lower-body injury. Housley said he is day-to-day. ... Barkov extended his point streak to five games (four goals, four assists) and has 15 points (six goals, nine assists) in his past 10 games.

What's next

Sabres: Host the Toronto Maple Leafs on Monday (7:30 p.m. ET; NBCSN, TSN4, NHL.TV)

Panthers: Host the Philadelphia Flyers on Sunday (3 p.m. ET; TVAS, FS-F, NBCSP, NHL.TV)

Sabres look forward to renewal of rivalry with Leafs

Sabres.com

Jourdon LaBarber

March 4, 2018

Marco Scandella was back on the ice for practice at KeyBank Center on Sunday morning after sustaining a lower-body injury in Florida on Friday night. Scandella went into the boards awkwardly on a hit from Florida's Nick Bjugstad and did not return after the first period.

Whether or not Scandella will be ready to return to the lineup when the Buffalo Sabres host the Toronto Maple Leafs on Monday depends on how he reacts to practice. Hearing him talk about the matchup, however, it's safe to say his preference is to play.

"I've been waiting all year for this game," Scandella said. "I know that there's a huge rivalry with the Leafs and we haven't played them all year. I've been on the team for how many games now, 65 games? And we haven't played them yet. So, I've been itching for this one."

Thanks to a scheduling anomaly, Monday's matchup will be the first of the season between the Sabres and their rivals to the north. That means they'll have a steady diet of one another moving forward, with four head-to-head matchups from Monday through April 2.

Jason Pominville last experienced the rivalry on March 21, 2013, a 5-4 shootout win for Buffalo at KeyBank Center. He's intrigued to see how it's held up five years later.

"It's weird the way the schedule is built," Pominville said. "In the past it feels like we have always played them late a little bit, but to have not played them at this point home or away is definitely different and something we're not used to."

"For me, it's been a while, so I'm interested to see if it's still the same way where their fans manage to get tickets in here and be pretty loud. It should be a pretty good atmosphere."

The Maple Leafs are currently without star center Auston Matthews, out for the last four games with a shoulder injury. They are winless in their last three contests, including a 5-2 loss in their Stadium Series game against Washington on Saturday.

Speaking to reporters after the game, Maple Leafs coach Mike Babcock let it be known that he was displeased with his team's effort, saying they would make up for their lack of work in practice on Sunday.

The Sabres, then, know to be prepared for an emotional opponent.

"It's knowing where your opponent's at for sure," Pominville said. "I feel like it's happened to us a bit where we played teams that come off losses and they're looking to bounce back. It's going to happen. But when you hear things like that it makes you want to prepare even more."

Monday's game will be broadcast nationally on NBCSN, or you can listen live on WGR 550. Puck drop is scheduled for 7:30.

Eichel returns to the ice

Jack Eichel has taken a step forward in his recovery from a high-ankle sprain. Eichel began skating on Saturday, according to Sabres coach Phil Housley, and is moving forward with the goal of returning to the lineup before the end of the season.

Eichel leads the Sabres with 53 points despite missing the last 10 games with the injury.

"That's the goal, but we never know how these things react," Housley said. "We don't want to put any timeline on it. It's good to see him skating. I think that's a step in the right direction. Obviously, he wants to play some games before the end of the year."

HOUSLEY: After Practice

04:03 • March 4th, 2018

In other injury-related news, Evan Rodrigues was absent from practice on Sunday and remains day-to-day after sustaining a rib injury in Tampa on Wednesday. Housley said he expects Rodrigues to return to the ice at some point this week.

Johnson to start against Maple Leafs

Chad Johnson has been the hot hand in net for the Sabres of late, with wins in five of his last seven starts. While Johnson earned the win in Tampa last Wednesday, Housley said the decision was made to start Robin Lehner in Florida on Friday because of the amount of games coming up on their schedule.

"We knew that Chad was playing well," Housley said. "We had to get Robin back in the net. Safe to say that Chad will be playing tomorrow. We just wanted to alternate them. We've got a back-to-back situation coming up this week, so we'll see about that next game on Wednesday."

Lines at practice

28 Zemgus Girgensons - 90 Ryan O'Reilly - 23 Sam Reinhart

20 Scott Wilson - 22 Johan Larsson - 29 Jason Pominville

17 Jordan Nolan - 10 Jacob Josefson - 21 Kyle Okposo

25 Seth Griffith - 67 Benoit Pouliot - 13 Nicholas Baptiste

6 Marco Scandella - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen

93 Victor Antipin - 8 Casey Nelson

41 Justin Falk / 4 Josh Gorges - 82 Nathan Beaulieu

40 Robin Lehner

31 Chad Johnson

Sabres unable to make it 3 wins in a row with loss to Florida

Sabres.com

Chris Ryndak

March 3, 2018

SUNRISE, Fla. - The Buffalo Sabres found themselves in an early hole on Friday and while they were able to tie it up and show some real emotion in the game's dying seconds, it was the Florida Panthers who capitalized on quality scoring chances to pick up their fifth straight win in a 4-1 victory over the Sabres at BB&T Center.

The Sabres, coming off back-to-back wins over Boston and Tampa Bay were obviously disappointed with the result.

"It was a just bit of a frustrating game. They're fighting for their playoff lives. That would've been a good game to win for us," alternate captain Kyle Okposo said. "Those are the type of barometer games that if we're going to do that right now this late in the season, those are the types of games that we have to set our bar at."

The Panthers scored on the first shot of the game when defenseman Mike Matheson wristed in a shot from the point to beat Robin Lehner blocker side 1:25 into the game. Jared McCann won a faceoff to Lehner's right and then Jamie McGinn knocked the puck back to Matheson, who let the shot go through traffic.

Sabres fall to Panthers, 4-1

03:39 • March 2nd, 2018

"We let that easy goal go in early, but I liked the way we responded. We tied it up right away and we give [up] that other goal again on a faceoff. Those are killers," coach Phil Housley said. "They can really take a lot of wind out of your sails but even at that point, we still had opportunities to tie up the game."

Buffalo answered 4:09 later thanks to a goal from Sam Reinhart. Victor Antipin took a point shot that was blocked in front by Aleksander Barkov. Ryan O'Reilly quickly scooped up the puck and fed it to Reinhart, who put it home past James Reimer for his 15th goal of the season.

Reinhart taps home feed

00:54 • March 2nd, 2018

"I thought we had our opportunities at key times in the game. They capitalized on theirs and we didn't," Housley said. "The game's 2-1, we're getting really good looks. They're 2-on-1s, odd-man rushes and really some opportunities to make difference. We were not opportunistic at that time. That's where the game stood.

"[If] we tie it up, we get some momentum, but in retrospect, we can't give up two defensive zone faceoff goals against. That's attention to detail. We talked about that before the game. It's just awareness and not picking up our checks."

Florida regained the lead with 9:19 left in the first off a faceoff immediately after a fight between Jordan Nolan and Michael Haley. The faceoff was once again to Lehner's right and after Barkov won the draw, the Panthers worked the pick over to Aaron Ekblad, who one-timed it in from the right wing.

Barkov made it 3-1 when on the rush, he split the defensive pairing of Nathan Beaulieu and Justin Falk and roofed a backhand over Lehner's shoulder 6:49 into the second.

"The way it feels like for me, if I bury a couple more, we're right back in that game," Reinhart said. "I thought I gave myself a lot of looks so that could've changed the game a little bit too. But the chances they did create were Grade A ones so we could've done a bit better job of that."

Then with 8:44 left in the middle frame, the Panthers tallied again as a result of a breakout. Once the Panthers made it into the Sabres zone, Nick Bjugstad put a backhander on net and Colton Sceviour scored on the rebound, putting Florida ahead 4-1.

While the teams entered the third period tied with 20 shots each, Florida outshot Buffalo 10-5 in the third. Lehner finished with 26 saves while Reimer made 24 stops.

Last-second emotion

With 21.4 seconds to play, a scrum broke out in the Sabres zone that resulted in 46 combined penalty minutes (19 for Buffalo - a roughing minor and a fighting major to Beaulieu, a roughing minor to Okposo, and a 10-minute misconduct to Falk - and 27 for Florida).

Every skater on the ice was involved and Lehner inched closer and closer as it progressed to make sure his teammates were all right.

"Lately, everyone's been kind of doing their part. And that kind of shows everyone's bought in," Reinhart said. "Everyone's going to bat for each other."

While Housley liked the show of emotion, the timing or the overall situation was not ideal.

"I think we should have our aggression at the start of the game and playing heavy and finishing checks more than at the end of the game," he said.

Scandella 'OK' after hit into boards

Marco Scandella did not play after the first period. With 5:04 left in the first period, as he tried to cut in on James Reimer, he was crushed into the end boards by Bjugstad. Scandella would play one more shift, but it ended after five seconds (with 3:23 remaining in the first) because of the Nolan-Haley fight.

"Marco will be OK," Housley said. "Lower-body, bumps and bruises, so we just held him out."

Up next

The Sabres will return to practice on Sunday so stay tuned to Sabres.com for full coverage of that. Then on Monday, Buffalo and Toronto play each other for the first time all season. That'll happen at KeyBank Center at 7:30 p.m.

Rodrigues to miss tonight's game in Florida, but Okposo draws back in

Sabres.com

Chris Ryndak

March 2, 2018

SUNRISE, Fla. - The Sabres will have Kyle Okposo back in the lineup for their game against the Florida Panther tonight, but they will be without the services of center Evan Rodrigues.

Rodrigues was absent from the morning skate and is dealing with an upper-body injury. Coach Phil Housley said they're going to be cautious with it.

"He got banged up. He's got a little upper-body injury so it's more a day-to-day situation with him, but he won't be playing tonight," Housley said.

Preview: BUF at FLA (3/2/18)

02:06 • March 2nd, 2018

Rodrigues had posted three points (2+1) in his past two games, including a goal in Buffalo's 2-1 overtime win in Tampa on Wednesday. He'd also been settling in on the top power-play unit in Jack Eichel's absence.

Okposo, meanwhile, missed the game against Tampa because he stayed back in Buffalo to attend the birth of his daughter. He arrived in South Florida yesterday, skated, and then got some much-needed rest.

He was able to watch Wednesday's game and thought that the team did a good job of not deviating from their game plan. That strategy will also likely apply to playing a Panthers team that is trying to make the playoffs.

"They have a lot of skill. Their D like to jump up in the play and they're pretty heavy down low," Okposo said. "We know what position they're in so we know we're going to get their best. They feel like they have to win all these games to get into the playoffs. So it's going to be a fun test for us. I'm looking forward to the game. It's going to be a good one."

Faceoff from BB&T Center is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Tune in to the GMC Game Night pregame show starting at 7 on MSG. Then RJ and Rayzor will have the call of the action on MSG and WGR 550.

Projected lineup

67 Benoit Pouliot - 90 Ryan O'Reilly - 23 Sam Reinhart
13 Nicholas Baptiste - 28 Zemgus Girgeosons - 21 Kyle Okposo
20 Scott Wilson - 22 Johan Larsson - 29 Jason Pominville
17 Jordan Nolan - 10 Jacob Josefson - 25 Seth Griffith

6 Marco Scandella / 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
93 Victor Antipin / 8 Casey Nelson
82 Nathan Beaulieu / 41 Justin Falk

40 Robin Lehner
31 Chad Johnson

Scratches: 4 Josh Gorges, 71 Evan Rodrigues

With Rodrigues out, Zemgus Girgeosons will move to center.

"It's not going to be a hard transition for him," Housley said. "He does a lot of the heavy-duty work down low when he's playing as our low forward so we've moved him into the middle."

Robin Lehner will start in net.

Recent success on the road and in the division

The Sabres enter tonight's game with a 6-1-1 record in their last eight road games. Buffalo is seeking its first road win against the Panthers since Nov. 12, 2015.

Buffalo has had success against Atlantic Division opponents lately. They're 5-0-1 record in their last six games against division rivals opponents and have an 8-6-3 record against the division this season. Their last two wins were against Boston and Tampa and they'll go for three in a row tonight.

One of the keys has been the players gaining more and more familiarity with the coaching systems.

"We've been playing pretty simple. We haven't been trying to do too much. And [we're] playing a really structured game," Okposo said of their road games in particular. "I think our structure is starting to be second nature to us. And on the road, it just seems like we follow that structure really well and just play pretty simple. That's been definitely a bright spot.

"It's not a case of, 'Oh, what do I need to do here?' You just do it. You know. And then you're able to read the play and your hockey sense can take over once those systems become second nature for you."

The Panthers are three points out of the final Wild Card spot in the Eastern Conference. They beat the New Jersey Devils 3-2 last night at BB&T Center.

"We've just got to be ready because it's going to be a physical game. They're a team that likes to finish checks and we have to be prepared for that," Housley said. "We have to have a good pushback when they push. I think we did a really good job of that against Tampa. We were playing fast, we were getting pucks in, we didn't let them set up in their forecheck.

"In essence, we were coming off the rush, getting shots to the net and that's going to be key tonight. I think that's one area that we're going to focus on - is getting pucks in early."

Sharpen Up: March 2, 2018

Sabres.com

Jourdon LaBarber

March 2, 2018

It's a game night in Sunrise, Fla.

The Sabres will be looking for their third-straight victory when they visit the Florida Panthers tonight to conclude a two-game road trip in the Sunshine State. Coverage on MSG-B begins at 7 p.m., or you can listen live on WGR 550. Puck drop is scheduled for 7:30.

Here's what you need to know.

Tonight's game

Kyle Okposo is expected to be back in the lineup after missing the team's win in Tampa on Wednesday to be with his wife as she went into labor (the couple had a baby girl). The Sabres are coming off wins over the Eastern Conference's top two teams in Tampa Bay and Boston.

Their next challenge is a Panthers team in the midst of as strong a playoff push as any. The Panthers are 11-3-0 in their last 14 games and picked up their fourth-straight victory against New Jersey on Thursday. They sit three points out of the second wild card spot with three games in hand.

As for the Sabres, here are a few notes from Sabres PR:

- The Sabres enter tonight's game with a 5-0-1 record in their last six games against Atlantic Division opponents and an 8-6-3 record against the division this season.
- The Sabres enter tonight's game with a 6-1-1 record in their last eight road games. Rasmus Ristolainen has recorded 13 points (4+9) in his last 13 road games, while Sam Reinhart has totaled nine points (3+6) in his last nine road games.
- Chad Johnson is 4-1-0 with a .939 save percentage in his last six appearances. He's stopped 78 of 82 shots faced in his last three road games (.351), winning all three of those contests.
- Evan Rodrigues has nine points (4+5) in his last 11 games after scoring the tying goal in Tampa on Wednesday.

Americans Made

The latest episode in our Americans Made series focuses on Chris Taylor and his first season as head coach of the Amerks. Check it out below:

Americans Made: Chris Taylor

04:38 • March 1st, 2018

The Amerks return to action in Toronto at 4 p.m. on Saturday,

On Tap

The Sabres will take the ice for their morning skate in Sunrise around 11:30 a.m. Stay tuned to Sabres.com and @BuffaloSabres for lineup info, including tonight's goaltender, and more.

Sharpen Up: March 1, 2018

Sabres.com

Jourdon LaBarber

March 1, 2018

Well, that's one way to end a scoring drought.

For three periods on Wednesday night, not much had changed for Jason Pominville. Goalless in 20 games entering the Buffalo Sabres' matchup with the Tampa Bay Lightning, Pominville had been held without a goal yet again despite having taken a team-high six shots on Lightning goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy.

Then overtime came, and Pominville's seventh shot - a power-play one-timer from atop the left faceoff circle - found it's way past Vasilevskiy, sealing a 2-1 win for the Sabres. It was their second win in a row and their second in the past month over the NHL-leading Lightning.

Pominville wins it in OT with PPG

01:03 • February 28th, 2018

The Sabres will conclude their road trip against the Florida Panthers on Friday.

Here's what you need to know.

About last night

Facing a 1-0 deficit in the third period, Evan Rodrigues scored to tie the game on an assist from Pominville with 8:13 remaining in regulation. The Sabres outshot the Lightning 34-22 but had been stifled by the play of Vasilevskiy to that point.

Chad Johnson made 21 saves, including a pair of stops on Adam Erne to maintain the one-goal deficit in the second period:

Johnson's quick pad saves

00:17 • February 28th, 2018

The star of the game afterward, however, was Pominville. From our Lexus Postgame Report:

"I was definitely getting a little frustrated, but I don't want to show my emotions. I don't want to let my teammates know. But, yeah, it was starting to get to me," he said. "I was getting looks and wasn't able to find a way to put them in. It was nice to have a chance to get out there and pull through for the guys."

Pominville discusses OT winner

02:37 • February 28th, 2018

Pominville, who has been serving as an alternate captain since Jack Eichel went down with an ankle injury earlier in the month, has made sure that even though the points weren't coming, he's been helping the team in other ways.

"I know I can contribute offensively. I've always done it but I was brought in probably for that reason and for other reasons. The offense probably wasn't the only thing. So I want to make sure I bring the other things to the table as well," he said.

"But to be able to contribute is always nice. Definitely nice to get a winner, but I don't want to only focus on offense. I want to bring the other things, whether it's habits, practice, try to change the culture and get moving in the right direction as a team and as an organization. Even though I wasn't producing, I wanted to stick to the other things I did well."

Pominville now has five overtime goals as a Sabre, tying him with Daniel Briere for third place in franchise history. Derek Roy and Thomas Vanek hold the record with six overtime goals apiece.

Inside the dressing room

Pominville Postgame (2/28/18)
02:59 • March 1st, 2018

Evan Rodrigues Postgame (2/28/18)
02:05 • March 1st, 2018

Chad Johnson Postgame (2/28/18)
03:07 • March 1st, 2018

Phil Housley Postgame (2/28/18)
03:27 • March 1st, 2018

Bogo's Kancer Jam

Zach Bogosian was on set with Brian Duff and Martin Biron during the first intermission last night to talk about his upcoming "Kancer Jam," a Kan Jam tournament to benefit the Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Registration for the event, which will take place on March 10, is still open. Watch Bogo's conversation with Marty and Duffer to learn more:

Bogo talks Kancer Jam
05:19 • February 28th, 2018

Bald for bucks

Thanks to everyone who donated to the Sabres' Bald for Bucks initiative in February. Here's a look at the impact you helped make:

Up next

Coverage of Buffalo's game in Florida on Friday begins at 7 p.m. with the GMC Game Night Pregame Show on MSG-B, or you can listen live on WGR 550. Puck drop is scheduled for 7:30.

The Sabres return home on Monday, March 5 for the first of four meetings with the Toronto Maple Leafs.