



Buffalo Sabres

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Belief in team play nearly nonexistent for Sabres

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

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Phil Housley still believes.

"I believe in our system," the Buffalo Sabres coach said. "I believe in our structure. I believe when we play a brand of game that's the right way – we're on top of people and we're not cheating the game and we're doing things for the better part of the team – you can see we're a good hockey team."

Not enough people believed in playing the right way.

"We've just got to be better as a group," forward Nick Baptiste said Thursday as the team digested its 31st-place finish and prepared for its season-ending road trip. "We've got to trust the game plan and be more willing to win for one another. I think that's the biggest thing.

"We've got to understand that individually we're all talented players, but when we're a group it makes us a good hockey team."

The Sabres showed flashes, beating top dogs such as Boston, Washington, Toronto and Friday's opponent, Tampa Bay. But just like a broken clock is right twice a day, the Sabres' moments of synchronicity were fleeting.

The Sabres' longest winning streak was three games, accomplished during the January road trip to western Canada. They promptly lost the next three. They've won two in a row just three times, with a chance to reach four Friday in Tampa and Saturday in Florida.

"We'll have some good nights here and there, and then I feel like we can't really chain them together as consistently as we want," defenseman Casey Nelson said. "The good teams, they win one, two, three four in a row multiple times – multiple, multiple times – through the year. That's what it's about is consistency."

Tampa Bay is an extreme example given its standing as a top-four team in the NHL, but it would laugh at the Sabres' puny three-game winning streak. The Lightning won seven in a row once, five in a row twice and four in a row three times. They've had three three-game runs and four stretches of back-to-back wins.

Meanwhile, the Sabres would lament their injuries, effort and never-ending dilemmas.

"We can look for a lot of excuses, but we just didn't overcome the adversity," Housley said.

The adversity they'll face in Tampa is a team playing for something. The Lightning and Bruins are neck-and-neck for the Atlantic Division title. The winner plays a wild-card team in the opening round. Second place gets the Stanley Cup-contending Maple Leafs.

Clearly, the Lightning will be looking to win while the Sabres are merely playing out the string. They're 2-7 in the last nine games.

"There's no secret we're in last place, and it's a tough place to be," Baptiste said. "But there's only room for improvement. If we can as a group kind of look at ourselves in the mirror and figure out what it is as an individual that you can bring to the table to be better in a team sense, it will help us immensely and improve this team."

As Baptiste said, there's only room for improvement. The Sabres can't get lower than 31st – at least not until the NHL expands to Seattle in a few years.

Housley expects Buffalo to be out of the cellar by then.

"I believe in this organization," he said. "I believe in our management. I believe we're going to turn this thing around.

"It's been a tough year. It has been a very tough year, but I think there's some good people in our group here that are going to be part of that change."

Sabres Notebook: Gearing up for Amerks' postseason; Ullmark makes trip

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

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The Buffalo Sabres have two games left. Brendan Guhle, Casey Nelson, Nick Baptiste, Alex Nylander, Kevin Porter and Linus Ullmark have as many as 29 remaining.

That's fine by them.

After the Sabres close the NHL season Friday in Tampa Bay and Saturday in Florida, the organization will send the aforementioned players back to Rochester. The Amerks have five regular-season games remaining as a tuneup for the playoffs. They hope the postseason goes on for four rounds.

"We'd all want nothing more than to go win a championship," Nelson said Thursday in KeyBank Center. "You can almost call it a second chance for a few of us to go make some noise in the playoffs."

Rochester has clinched an American Hockey League postseason spot, but its first-round opponent has yet to be determined. The Amerks (34-20-17) are in third place in the North Division with 85 points, and Utica is in fourth place with 83. The third-place team will play Syracuse (43-20-7) while the fourth-place team will face Toronto (51-18-2).

No matter the opponent, the current Sabres and former/future Amerks see championship potential.

"We have a really good shot at making a good run and some noise," Nelson said. "Hopefully, we'll have the city of Rochester rocking."

The Amerks haven't made the playoffs since 2013-14. Buffalo's minor-league team hasn't won a playoff series since 2010-11, when the prospects played in Portland, Maine.

"It would be great to get some playoff experience," Baptiste said. "It's obviously something I haven't done in a couple years now, and it would be exciting to try and win with a great group of guys down there."

The Amerks have stayed afloat despite a litany of callups, including extended ones. To have Guhle, Nelson, Baptiste and Ullmark return will be a boost now and in the future.

"There's going to be four, five, six, seven guys from that team coming up here," Porter said. "If they're used to losing, it's going to continue up here. But if we can get down there and go on a long playoff run and hopefully win a Calder Cup, that experience for them is going to translate up here."

Ullmark, who has missed the Sabres' last five games with a concussion, joined the team for its season-ending road trip. It's possible he plays, though Chad Johnson and Adam Wilcox also flew to the Sunshine State.

Fellow goaltender Robin Lehner stayed in Buffalo, so his season is over because of a lower-body injury. Lehner went 14-26-9 with a .908 save percentage and 3.01 goals-against average.

Rookie Casey Mittelstadt started Wednesday's loss to Ottawa as the center for left wing Alex Nylander and right wing Kyle Okposo. Mittelstadt also took shifts as the left winger for center Jack Eichel.

"He makes the game a bit easier for everyone around him, so that's pretty nice," Mittelstadt said. "Like everyone said, he's got a ton of skill. He's one of the best skaters in the league and can make plays with the puck that very few guys can.

"Anytime you get to play with a guy like that it's pretty nice."

Sabres' Porter thinks the team's future is bright

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

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Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Kevin Porter played in the Sabres organization from 2012 through 2014. He played 43 games in Buffalo and 98 games in Rochester. Porter is 32 and he's been around. Jason Botterill brought him into Pittsburgh to help the young kids and to provide depth for the big club. Now that he's with Buffalo, Porter said it's nice to see guys like Brendan Guhle, Casey Nelson, Nick Baptiste and Linus Ullmark up and doing well, "I think it's pretty cool, they've been playing pretty well down there and then to come up here and play a lot of minutes in important situations is pretty cool."

Many more players have gotten time in Buffalo including Justin Bailey, Taylor Fedun, Hudson Fasching, Alex Nylander, Seth Griffith, Evan Rodrigues, Danny O'Regan, Kyle Criscuolo and Zach Redmond.

All those players are learning under head coach Chris Taylor. Porter thinks they really benefit from Taylor's pro experience, "He played the game for a long time and he knows the game really well, so I think he's great at teaching, he understands what players are going through, traveling and the hardships of hockey, so he's been really great down there."

The Amerks haven't had much playoff success lately, but this year they're back in. Porter said that experience for the kids will be invaluable, "They get that experience, there's going to be four, five, six, seven guys from that team coming up here and if they're used to losing, it's going to continue up here, but if we can go down there and get on a long playoff run and hopefully win a Calder Cup, that experience down there is going to translate up here.

"It happened in Wilkes-Barre and Pittsburgh and you see a lot of those guys that are now there that are fulltime NHL players that had a lot of playoff runs and learned how to win."

Many of the youngsters in Rochester look up to their captain. Porter has played 11 years since leaving Michigan. He said he has a way to lead, "I can be vocal when I need to be. I'm not going to come in and yell and scream every game.

"Hopefully they can watch me and see how hard I work, but if I need to sit a guy down and talk to him, I'll do that. Once in a while you have to come in and yell and scream a little bit and get the guys fired up."

People that have never played sports can't understand why Botterill puts so much emphasis on getting Rochester good. Pittsburgh, Chicago, Boston and Los Angeles have won Stanley Cups by providing a winning atmosphere for many players in the minors. Porter has lived it and he thinks players winning together in the minors, provides a culture for the big club, "That's just a whole different game I think, for them to get that experience and see how hard teams play in the playoffs, I think that'll be a great experience for those guys."

The Sabres worked off-ice on Thursday. The team did say that Linus Ullmark is going to travel with the team to Tampa along with Chad Johnson and Adam Wilcox.

Sabres will soon replenish Amerks for AHL playoff run

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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BUFFALO – [Casey Nelson](#) believes the opportunity offers a “second chance.” In a few days, after the Sabres complete their disastrous season, about eight players will return to the AHL and begin the Rochester Americans’ first playoff series in four years.

“We all want nothing more than to win a championship,” the defenseman said Thursday inside KeyBank Center after the Sabres prepared for tonight’s tilt against the Tampa Bay Lightning, the start of a two-game, season-ending road trip.

The Amerks’ solid season quickly became the biggest positive in a Sabres campaign widely regarded as the worst in franchise history. As big club stumbled out of the gate, losing seven of its first eight games, the Amerks roared, winning nine of their opening 15 contests.

But not surprisingly, attrition has hurt the Amerks. The Sabres have experienced injuries all season. They also want to examine some of their best prospects.

That’s why [top defenseman Brendan Guhle](#) has earned a 16-game look. [Goalie Linus Ullmark](#), meanwhile, played five times before suffering a concussion. Even [winger Alexander Nylander](#) was recalled Tuesday. The former first-round pick endured a miserable start before getting on track in February.

The Sabres’ new regime also wants to reward veterans, so they summoned [Amerks captain Kevin Porter](#), 32, with Nylander. They also recalled [defenseman Matt Tennyson](#) on Monday to provide depth.

So by next week, the Sabres should infuse the Amerks with 43 goals, 129 points and Ullmark, an AHL All-Star, and his backup, [Adam Wilcox](#). The goalies have combined for 31 of Rochester’s 34 wins this season.

Nelson, 25, and [winger Nick Baptiste](#), 22, have received the longest looks from the Sabres, becoming regulars during the second half. The Amerks placed both on their clear day roster, meaning they’re eligible for the AHL playoffs.

Very quietly, Nelson has become the Sabres’ biggest surprise, morphing into a defenseman so reliable coach Phil Housley regularly plays him more than 20 minutes.

Baptiste, meanwhile, has played 31 games, compiling four goals and six points in mostly a checking-type role.

“In certain situations, you got to do the necessary things to stay up there,” said Baptiste, who’s in the final season of his entry-level contract. “I think that’s part of the reason for why I’m still up here is that I’ve been able to use my speed, draw a couple penalties, be physical.”

The youngsters’ contributions haven’t stopped the Sabres from losing. The NHL’s worst team often defeats NHL heavyweights by operating as a cohesive unit. It falls apart against weak opponents, showcasing little effort and freelancing.

The Sabres demonstrated zero consistency all season, never winning more than three straight games.

“We’ll have some good nights here and there, and then I feel like can’t really chain them together as consistently as we want,” said Nelson, who has compiled three goals and eight points in 35 games. “You know the good teams win one, two, three, four in a row multiple times ... through the year. That’s what it’s about is consistency.”

Baptiste said the Sabres must “be better as a group.” That means trusting the game plan and “be more willing to win for one another.”

“That’s the biggest thing,” he said. “I think we need to understand that individually we’re all talented players. When we’re a group, that makes us a good hockey team. It’s no secret we’re in last place, it’s a tough place to be. But there’s only room for improvement.

“I think if, as a group, we can kind of look ourselves in the mirror and figure out what it is as an individual you can bring to the table to make to be better in a team sense, it’ll help us immensely and improve this team.”

In the near future, some Sabres will replenish Rochester’s roster. None of the organization’s prospects homegrown prospects have ever played in an AHL postseason game.

“That’s just a whole different game, I think,” said Porter, who won the Stanley Cup with the Pittsburgh Penguins in 2016. “For them to get that experience and see how hard teams play and guys play in playoffs, I think that’s going to be a great experience.”

Goalie Robin Lehner won't make Sabres' final road trip

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

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BUFFALO – Injured [goalie Robin Lehner](#) won't accompany the Sabres on their season-ending two-game trip to Florida, according to the team.

Lehner has an expiring contract and was acquired by the team's old regime, meaning his Sabres career could be over. A lower-body injury has sidelined him the last three contests.

In 53 games this season, Lehner went 14-26-9 with a 3.01 goal-against average and a .908 save percentage.

It's unclear who will start Friday's tilt against the Tampa Bay Lightning. Sabres coach Phil Housley didn't meet with the media today.

[Since goalie Linus Ullmark](#) will travel with the Sabres, perhaps he will play this weekend. The 31st-place team closes the season Saturday against the Florida Panthers. A concussion has sidelined Ullmark the last five games.

In the absence of Lehner and Ullmark, [goalie Chad Johnson](#) has started three straight games. The Sabres also have [backup Adam Wilcox](#), who has never played an NHL game.

The Sabres didn't practice today.

In other news, [Rochester Americans defenseman Zach Redmond](#) has been named to the 2017-18 AHL Second All-Star Team, the league announced today.

Redmond has established career highs with 15 goals, 31 assists and 46 points in 63 games. He's one of only three defensemen to lead his team in scoring.

Redmond, 29, ranks fourth among AHL defenders in scoring. He played three games with the Sabres earlier this season.

For several Sabres, second chance awaits in Rochester

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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Kevin Porter never put much thought into a recall to Buffalo, although he is happy to be here. The 32-year-old forward was too busy captaining the Rochester Americans, who are preparing to make a run in the Calder Cup Playoffs, to think about a call that was out of his control.

"That was really the main focus," Porter said of the impending playoff run. "I'm happy to be here, come up here and do what I can. It's always great to be back in the NHL. So, I'm not looking too much into it. If I get in the lineup I'm going to play hard, and that's about it."

If Porter dresses for one of Buffalo's last two games in Florida this weekend, it will be his first NHL game since April 9 of last year. Even if he doesn't, he still has the postseason to look forward to in Rochester, and he won't be alone.

The list of Sabres who are eligible to return to the Amerks for their postseason run includes forwards Alex Nylander Nicholas Baptiste; defensemen Brendan Guhle, Casey Nelson and Matt Tennyson; and goaltenders Linus Ullmark and Adam Wilcox.

Nelson's eyes lit up when asked about the thought of a playoff run.

"I want nothing more than to go win a championship," he said. "... I guess you can almost call it a second chance for a few of us to go make some noise in the playoffs."

While the Sabres' season will end upon the conclusion of their game in Florida on Saturday, what happens in Rochester in the coming weeks could one day have an impact on the future of the organization.

Building a winner in the AHL was always part of Jason Botterill's plan, from the moment he was introduced as general manager last May. It's why he brought in leaders like Porter and alternate captain Nathan Paetsch, players he was familiar with from past stops in his career.

Porter may not have played a game in a Sabres uniform this season, but that doesn't mean he hasn't affected the NHL club.

"He spent most of the season in Rochester, but it doesn't mean that he hasn't helped this team," Baptiste said. "From being in Rochester, he's developed so many young guys, myself included."

"... He's a guy that just keeps things light all the time. If things are going tough, he finds a way to lighten everybody up and get things right back on track. I can't say enough about what he's meant, not only to my season but also a lot of the young guys who have continue to come up here."

Porter saw first-hand how playoff experience in the AHL can translate to the NHL during his time in Pittsburgh, when regulars on playoff teams in Wilkes-Barre/Scranton were able to step in and become contributors to Pittsburgh's back-to-back Stanley Cup runs.

The Sabres will finish their season in last place after falling to Ottawa on Wednesday. But knowing the young players on the roster, Porter believes that many of the faces already in the organization can be a part of the turn-around. In that sense, their experience in this playoff run will be invaluable.

"They get that experience down there, there's going to be four, five, six, seven guys from there coming up here," Porter said. "If they're used to losing, it's going to continue up here. If we can get down there and go on a long playoff run and hopefully win a Calder Cup, that experience for them is going to translate up here."

When asked to name an MVP for the Amerks this season, many of the young players in the Sabres dressing room were quick to mention Porter's name. He was flattered by the sentiment, but thinks there's plenty of praise to go around.

"I think there's a lot of good players down there," he said. "We've all been playing well, we've been playing as a team. That's why we're getting to the playoffs and hopefully making a long run."