



Buffalo Sabres

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Mike Harrington: Ex-Sabre Evander Kane hopes San Jose delivers wins Buffalo couldn't

By Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
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SAN JOSE — Evander Kane said here Wednesday that he's looking forward to playing against the Buffalo Sabres Thursday night in SAP Center.

At least, what's left of the Sabres that he knows.

In the nearly eight months since Kane was told to find the way to San Jose at the NHL trade deadline, his old team has undergone an extreme makeover. And it's been widely noticed how GM Jason Botterill's moves excised all three of predecessor Tim Murray's top acquisitions in Kane, Ryan O'Reilly and Robin Lehner.

"I don't know if he was trying to remove Tim's legacy, the players he brought in. Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't," Kane told The News after the San Jose Sharks' practice at Solar4America Ice. "It's really just kind of making your decision on who you want to go with. He made his decisions. Only time will tell. But I'm happy where I am now and enjoying my career."

Kane's new team has Stanley Cup aspirations since the September trade acquisition of Erik Karlsson from Ottawa but is only 2-3-1 through six games. Kane has a team-high four goals and is tied for the team lead with five points.

But while Kane is looking ahead at a long push toward the Cup, he understood this game means there will be lots of rehashing of his three years in Buffalo. And while there were a couple well-documented missteps off the ice, there was also plenty of charitable work, hospital visits and Secret Santa-type interactions with children.

"The fans and community treated me fantastic, no matter what was going on," he said. "It made it easy for me to enjoy my time."

Kane provided the Sabres with lots of offense as well.

"I just wish we would have had a lot more team success, that I would have been part of more winning and longer seasons there," he said. "But I enjoyed my time there and was able to find some personal success. It was tough to be part of losing seasons but at the end of the day, I loved the city. The fans were great to me and the organization treated me very well."

Kane was acquired in 2015, two months before the Sabres finished last and earned the right to draft Jack Eichel, but couldn't play for that portion of the 2014-15 season due to shoulder surgery. He played the next 2 1/2 years, compiling 68 goals in 196 games.

The way the Buffalo offense has struggled for several years, three straight 20-goal seasons is a good accomplishment. And the Sabres currently have no one to succeed at 5-on-5 play the way Kane did for them.

"He attacks the game the right way," said Sabres coach Phil Housley. "He plays the game the right way. That's obviously why San Jose wanted to acquire him. He's going to be amped up for the game and we're well aware of that."

"Management, coaches, players could never really get on the same page there. It's tough," Kane said. "You're bringing in 10 different players, getting rid of 10 players. Then you've got a new coaching staff. They like certain players. Then you get a new GM. It's hard when there's no consistency in any facet, on the ice or off. They seem to be on the right path now. Time will tell."

The Sabres weren't going to pay Kane long term and his play, especially at even strength, made him marketable. The Sharks gave him seven years and \$49 million, far more than the Sabres ever would have.

"He's been awesome. If not our best forward, in that conversation from day one," said San Jose coach Peter DeBoer. "Plays all situations. PP, PK. He's a 200-foot player who works both ends of the ice and it doesn't affect his scoring."

"The one thing I didn't know was how he keeps people honest on the ice for other guys on our team. If they're thinking about taking a liberty, he's the first guy skating over there or talking to them from the bench. He's been fantastic."

Eichel was one of Kane's closest friends on the Sabres and Kane said he was happy to hear the Sabres made Eichel their captain at the end of training camp.

"I know that's something he wanted," Kane said. "You could tell he wanted it. I'm sure he was really happy to get that."

Kane and Eichel got reacquainted last month at the NHL Player Media Tour in Chicago, where national outlets get a rapid-fire chance to interview the league's top stars. In one setup, former NHL player Paul Bissonnette was doing a gag for the league's social media accounts where he asked what was in a box as the player entered his room.

As the story goes, Bissonnette greeted each player at the door with a large yellow Anaconda around his neck. Eichel was famously outed at the 2015 draft by NHL.com for being deathly afraid of snakes and Kane knew what would happen when his friend saw the giant boa.

"I was waiting for the other guy in the room (Columbus' Seth Jones) and he didn't tell me what was in there," Kane said. "So I go in there and I had never been around a snake that big. I was freaking out. I didn't want to touch it, didn't want it on me."

"I came out and Jack walked in and he literally ran out squealing. He freaked out and left and they had to put the snake back in the box. I was giving it to him for that."

Told after practice Wednesday in SAP Center that Kane had let the snake story out of the box, Eichel rolled his eyes and had a good laugh.

"You know I'm not really a big fan of snakes, or reptiles for that matter," he said. "They kind of surprised me with one there. I didn't really like it. So I chose not to participate in their video."

But turning serious, Eichel said Kane was an asset to his early years in the NHL.

"I always had good experiences with Evander. He was always nice to me, always took care of me, brought me to dinner with him, invited me to things," Eichel said. "I can't say anything bad about Evander. I go off my relationship and experiences with him and it's been a great one."

"He's his own person. Maybe at times he can be misunderstood but I wish him all the best. I liked Evander and I'm happy to see him having success and doing well out here."

Kane got to play in a pair of playoff series last year for the Sharks, the first of his career. San Jose's Cup path ended in a second-round loss to Vegas, preventing a Western Conference final showdown between Kane's new team and his first team, the Winnipeg Jets.

"It was a great, an experience I thought about for a long time," he said. "To have the opportunity to be part of the playoffs was exciting. I came here and we still weren't solidified in the West. Being part of the race was fun too. It was third-last game to get that spot."

The Sharks have struggled to score this year. Their power play is just 2 for 21 and only in an 8-2 win at Philadelphia has the offense truly fired properly. But most observers except San Jose to get things together. The Sharks are second in the league in shot attempts with more than 38 per night.

"It's been so long I've been on a team like this with those expectations and it's a lot of fun," he said. "We were all about winning. We felt we had the group to do it and this year we think we're even better."

Kane has also had no problems fitting into a dressing room with a lot of outsized personalities (think Joe Thornton and Brent Burns) and several standout veterans.

"You need different personalities, guys accepted for roles," he said. "That's why the culture here has been so good for so long. They've had success in terms of being competitive for a long time."

Sabres fourth-round pick Matej Pekar signs entry level contract

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Matej Pekar, the Buffalo Sabres' fourth-round pick in June, has signed his three-year entry level contract, the team announced.

Pekar, a center selected 94th overall, has spent the first 10 games of this season with the Barrie Colts of the OHL. He has six goals and 11 points.

He took part in Sabres development camp after the draft and was committed to play college hockey for Miami University in Ohio. Five days after the draft, he was selected 108th overall by the Colts in the OHL Draft.

Pekar initially said he planned to return to the Muskegon Lumberjacks of the USHL. He was named the USHL Rookie of the Year last season, tying for the league lead among rookies with 54 points (10 goals and 46 assists) in 56 games. But after visiting Barrie, he opted to sign with the Colts.

He also played for the Czech Republic during the World U18 Championships and the Hlinka Memorial Tournament.

Sabres Notebook: Sluggish offense gives Housley plenty to talk about

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

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SAN JOSE — Coach Phil Housley did a lot of talking before, during and after the Buffalo Sabres' practice here Wednesday.

There was video work prior to the workout. On the ice, there were a lot of one-on-one chats. Following practice in SAP Center, Housley summoned players out of various rooms in the underbelly of the arena and brought them all into the locker room.

They sat behind closed doors for more than a half-hour for more words. A big topic was offense, or lack of it. While the Sabres are 3-3, they've only scored 12 goals in six games and are tied for 29th in the NHL at two goals per game.

At 5 on 5, it's just six goals, or one per game, against 10 given up.

Housley's basic points?

"The way we attack the game," he said. "Especially entering the offensive zone, getting more pucks to the net and more people there, stopping and paying a price to score some goals.

"You're going to hear a lot from me about 5-on-5 differential because it's the difference between winning and losing. Your special teams have to play an important role but you can't count on them all the time. It's not going to happen all the time. Five-on-five is something we can control. Getting to the net with more traffic was a big focus today."

The power play got plenty of attention during the workout as well. The Sabres have already had two huge flameouts this season, with an 0-for-7 in last week's loss to Colorado and the 0-for-6 showing Tuesday in Vegas.

"It's finding that consistency where it's not an 0-for-6 night and then a night you win a game for the team. Last night it just wasn't there," said Jack Eichel. "I think it's a mental thing. It's knowing when you step over the boards you have to do a job on the power play.

"I thought we were maybe overthinking it. Sometimes the most successful power plays are the simplest ones that get just shots to the net. Things have to happen quicker. We have to understand where our outs and supports are. It's going a little too slow right now. We have to be thinking about the next play."

For the season, the Sabres are tied for 20th in the NHL at 16.7 percent (3 for 15 at home, 1 for 9 on the road)

Center Patrik Berglund, who dropped coverage on Jonathan Marchessault on Vegas' first goal Tuesday night, was not on a line in practice Wednesday but Housley said he was nursing bumps and bruises. Berglund played a season-low 9 minutes, 37 seconds Tuesday.

Matej Pekar, the Sabres' fourth-round pick in June, signed his three-year, entry-level contract on Wednesday. It would kick in after he completes his junior career with Barrie of the Ontario Hockey League.

Pekar, a center selected 94th overall, has six goals and 11 points for Barrie. His coach is former Sabre and Hockey Hall of Famer Dale Hawerchuk.

He took part in Sabres development camp after the draft and was committed to play college hockey for Miami University in Ohio. He was selected by Barrie in the OHL draft and opted to play for the Colts rather than attend

college or return to Mukegon of the USHL, where he was named Rookie of the Year last season after collecting 54 points in 56 games.

Sabres sign prospect Matej Pekar to entry-level contract

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

October 17, 2018

Just 10 games with the Ontario Hockey League's Barrie Colts was enough to convince the Buffalo Sabres center Matej Pekar has a future in pro hockey.

The Sabres have signed Pekar to a three-year, entry-level contract, the team announced today. They drafted the Czech in the fourth-round earlier this year, 94th overall.

The OHL rookie has already compiled six goals and 11 points this season.

Pekar originally planned to return to the junior United States Hockey League, where he earned top rookie honors in 2017-18, this year. But a visit to Barrie, which selected the Czech in the Canadian Hockey League Import Draft, helped him change his mind.

Pekar, 18, has quickly developed a reputation as an agitator, getting underneath the opponent's skin.

Okposo feeling benefits of healthy offseason

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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SAN JOSE - Kyle Okposo burst into the offensive zone as if he had been shot out of cannon. With the Buffalo Sabres trailing 2-0 in the second period against the Vegas Golden Knights on Tuesday, their alternate captain took it upon himself to set the tone and turned in the shift of the night.

Okposo sped through the neutral zone and chipped the puck in deep, then rushed past Cody Eakin and Brad Hunt to secure it along the end boards. He maintained possession as he swung behind the net and cut to the slot, where he created a scoring chance for linemate Casey Mittelstadt.

When Mittelstadt's shot went wide, Okposo was again the first to retrieve it behind the net, this timing proceeding to carry it all the way to the blue line for a cycle with defenseman Jake McCabe, which nearly created another scoring chance.

"I think we just needed a shift," Okposo said. "I tried to take it upon myself to score a goal. I thought I gave us a little life, I thought we had some good shifts after that. We've just got to do that more, just try and take control and not think so much. Just play."

The Sabres lost the game, 4-1, but Okposo's play might mean as much in the big picture. The images on that second-period shift and others throughout the game were reminiscent of his first season in Buffalo, one that earned him a spot on the Atlantic Division All-Star team prior to a season-ending concussion.

The effects of that concussion bled into the summer, preventing the forward from crucial aspects of his offseason regiment that affected him throughout last season. Okposo entered camp this year with a full summer of training under his belt and the desire to prove he can still be elite.

Six games in, he said he can feel the difference.

"I feel good," he said. "I mean, I feel exponentially better than I did last season. I think it's there. It's just getting over that hump and breaking through. I think that it's coming. I just have to try and up the intensity and make sure I'm bringing it every shift. But that base is there."

You could see that base in Vegas. When Okposo has been on his game in the past, he's been able to use his body to win battles on the forcheck ...

... and box out defenders as he creates lanes to the net:

The next step for Okposo is finding the back of the net. His three points this season are all assists; the one goal he did score was overturned for goalie interference. But he's generated plenty of grade-A chances since joining a line with Jeff Skinner and Mittelstadt in Arizona on Saturday.

Okposo ranks third on the team with 14 shots this season and fourth with a Corsi-for percentage of 51.61, an indicator he's spent more time in the offensive zone than not. (Skinner ranks second on the team at 54.36 percent, per NaturalStatTrick.com.)

"I think we had a lot of good shifts," Okposo said. "I thought our line played really well yesterday, we just couldn't get over that hump to score a goal. It's been a while.

"... We're working and we're getting some opportunities. The puck's going to go in. We've just got to keep shooting and keep working like we are."

"Yeah, definitely," Mittelstadt added. "I think there was a lot of chances and getting the first one is by far the hardest. We'll find one soon and build off that. Like I said before, once you get one it seems to all open up."

Wednesday's practice

The Sabres took the ice at SAP Center in preparation for their matchup with the San Jose Sharks on Thursday. The message from Phil Housley: To score more at even strength, they're going to need to get bodies to the net.

"Five-on-five differential, you're going to hear that a lot from me, but that's the difference between winning and losing," Housley said. "Obviously, your special teams have to play an important role, but you can't count on them all the time because it's not going to happen all the time.

"Five-on-five is something we can control, and I think just getting to the net, getting more traffic there was a big focus today."

The Sabres were 0-for-6 on the power play in their loss to Vegas, something they also spent ample time on in practice on Wednesday. But they also didn't score at even-strength until Vladimir Sobotka crashed in to clean up a rebound in the game's final minute.

That goal, Housley said, was an example of what the team should be doing from the get-go.

"We come, we enter the zone wide, we put a puck in the net, we get a middle-lane drive and we score a goal," he said. "It's a very simplistic game, but when we do it well and we're playing fast, we're a very good hockey team."

Patrik Berglund was limited in practice due to a minor injury. Remi Elie took the majority of reps on a line with Sobotka and Tage Thompson in his place. Berglund's playing status for Thursday has not been determined.

Here's how the team lined up in full on Wednesday:

43 Conor Sheary - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
53 Jeff Skinner - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 21 Kyle Okposo
81 Remi Elie / 10 Patrik Berglund - 17 Vladimir Sobotka - 72 Tage Thompson
28 Zemgus Girgensons - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 29 Jason Pominville

6 Marco Scandella - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
19 Jake McCabe - 26 Rasmus Dahlin
82 Nathan Beaulieu - 4 Zach Bogosian
22 Johan Larsson* - 8 Casey Nelson

*Extra forward skating on defense

'Pesky' Pekar enjoying early success in Barrie

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

October 17, 2018

It hasn't taken long for Matej Pekar to make an impression on both fans and members of the Buffalo Sabres organization. The 2018 fourth-round pick was a standout at his first development camp in June, where he scored two goals in the French Connection Tournament and got under the skin of 2017 top pick Casey Mittelstadt.

He said he tries to emulate a style similar to that of Boston Bruins pest Brad Marchand and so far, with that mindset, he's had early success with the OHL's Barrie Colts.

Pekar has 11 points (6+5) through his first 10 games.

"He's a gamer all the time," Barrie coach Dale Hawerchuk said. "He's a gamer at the gym, he's a gamer at practice, he's a gamer in the game. The kid lives and breathes the game."

Last season, Pekar posted 54 points (14+40) in 56 games for the Muskegon Lumberjacks of the USHL. The Colts selected Pekar, a Czech native, in the second round (108th overall) of the 2018 CHL Import Draft so he decided to make the move to the OHL this year, where the competition is known to be fierce. His tenaciousness has left an impression on his opponents.

"There's more skilled guys so some guys, they just don't like to see that on other teams, which helps me get in their heads if I can. Nothing changes," Pekar said. "Just play hockey."

"He's really a dedicated hockey player on and off. He works hard off the ice. He's got a real engine on the ice. He's just one of those 'never-quit' guys," Hawerchuk said.

"...He's pesky. He's on pucks. He wants to turn pucks over. If he loses it, he wants to get it back as fast as possible. The rebounds to the corners, he wants to be the guy who retrieves it and makes sure the team keeps possession. He's got a hunger and a desire that not a lot of guys have in the game."

Pekar spent about a week at Sabres training camp this September before being assigned to Barrie. Watching star players up close and working with an NHL staff helped him come into the regular season with a lot of poise.

"Confidence wise and overall, I feel great," he said. "When you're facing players like Jack Eichel and Jeff Skinner, all these guys, you come to the OHL and you feel so confident. You just try to bring it from the camp to the OHL, what you learned from those guys."

As the season progresses, Pekar said he's going to continue to work hard in the gym and he'll also be focusing on his footwork and technique, particularly when it comes to digging pucks out of the corners.

He's learning a lot from Hawerchuk, the Sabres Hall of Famer who posted 385 points in 342 games with Buffalo in the early '90s. Hawerchuk played 1,188 NHL games and was elected to the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2001. He's been the coach at Barrie since 2010.

"He's teaching us the NHL-type of game - all the little details," Pekar said. "He loves the game and definitely knows the game really well."

Hawerchuk is using Pekar on special teams as well, and Pekar has been able to produce no matter the situation. Of his six goals, two have come on the power play and two have come shorthanded.

"He's real versatile. We use him in all situations," Hawerchuk said. "He's one of the go-to guys, that's for sure."

"...There might be nights where maybe he doesn't have the hands or whatever - like we all go through at times where we don't have our best stuff - but that never deters his effort. He's very consistent. Night in, [night out,] day in, day out, he's bringing it."

He has visions of winning a championship with Barrie and, on a personal level, getting better every day.

"I just want to play my game as much as I can and try to produce as much as I can," he said. "My biggest goal is to develop into an NHL player as soon as I can."

Barrie is set to play a trio of games on the road this weekend. They'll be in Windsor on Thursday, in Saginaw on Friday, and in Flint on Sunday.

UPDATE (3 p.m.): The Sabres have signed Pekar to a three-year, entry-level contract.

Across the pond

Defenseman Linus Lindstrand Cronholm (2018, fourth round) collected his first points of the season for IK Pantern of the Swedish league Allsvenskan. He tallied an assist last Wednesday against AIK and scored against Leksands IF on Friday.

Class is in session

Linus Weissbach's (2017, seventh round) sophomore season at Wisconsin is off to a good start as he collected a goal and an assist in his second game of the year, a 7-5 win over Boston College. In that same game, BC's Christopher Brown (2014, sixth round) racked up a pair of assists for his first points of the year.

Sabres prospects will be going head-to-head again in the college ranks when Philip Nyberg (2016, fifth round) and UConn battle Jacob Bryson (2017, fourth round) and Providence on Friday.