



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

October 4, 2018

Buffalo Sabres award captaincy to center Jack Eichel

Associated Press

October 4, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Center Jack Eichel has been selected captain of the Buffalo Sabres.

The team announced the decision Wednesday, a day before its season opener against Boston. Eichel becomes the Sabres' 16th full-time captain, and first to wear the "C" since Brian Gionta handled the role from 2014-15 to 2016-17. Buffalo went with alternate captains the past two years.

Eichel is entering his fourth season since being selected with the No. 2 pick in the 2015 draft. The 21-year-old is also the franchise's highest-paid player with his eight-year, \$80 million contract kicking in this season.

Eichel leads the team with 73 goals and 177 points in 209 games during the past three seasons.

Forward Kyle Okposo and defenseman Zach Bogosian were picked alternates captains.

Sabres' early priority is to erase ghoulish October trend

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

October 4, 2018

So you think the Sabres can ease into things with Rasmus Dahlin on board for the first time and Casey Mittelstadt in the lineup full time?

Or that they can take a few weeks to let Carter Hutton get more comfortable as a starting goalie, have Conor Sheary work his way back from injury after missing almost all of training camp and have the Patrik Berglund/Vladimir Sobotka pair mesh into the lineup?

And what about the contributions from Alexander Nylander, Tage Thompson and Brendan Guhle? They're kids so you have to give them time too, right?

After all, the old cliché is that it's not how you start, but how you finish. But in the NHL at least, it seems you have to throw that one out.

There's a cold, harsh reality in play here. If you're not in a good spot in the standings by Halloween – when the Sabres will have only played about 14 percent of their schedule – you're most likely not going to the playoffs.

Research by Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman, a longtime host and insider on "Hockey Night in Canada," shows that teams that build early holes rarely climb out of them. In fact, Friedman keeps track of a remarkable stat each year on his "31 Thoughts" column that brings the point home.

Since the 2005 lockout, there have been 54 NHL teams that were out of a playoff spot by four points or more when they woke up on the morning of Nov. 1. Only seven of them, less than 13 percent, made the playoffs. One was the 2010-11 Sabres.

It doesn't seem like a lot to overcome a four-point deficit with several months left on the schedule, but it's rarely done. Even worse, if the deficit is five points or more on Nov. 1, only four teams have rallied to make the playoffs.

The reason is simple: So many NHL games turn into three-point affairs, where the losing team collects a point via an overtime or shootout loss. When you're trying to make up a deficit in the standings, you're often doing it one point at a time rather than two. And that makes a deficit difficult to overcome.

"It's a shocking stat if you think about it," Sabres winger Jason Pominville said. "Nov. 1 is well before Thanksgiving, when you've still played only about 20-25 games, and by the sound of that, very few teams get there."

"We all know our starts are critical," coach Phil Housley said. "It sets you up for future success and if you do have some adversity during the season. What we can control is how we work in practice, all the details and fundamentals and execution, so we'll have something to fall back on."

October woes destroy Sabres' hopes

So who's made the climb out of early holes to make the playoffs? The 2006-07 Calgary Flames are the champions of this cause, wiping out a seven-point deficit to make the playoffs. Coming back from six out were Anaheim (2015-16) and the duo of Dallas and Philadelphia in 2013-14, the only season to have two teams come back to make the postseason.

Minnesota made it last season after being four points out. So did the 2011-12 Boston Bruins and the 2010-11 Sabres, who closed the season 16-4-4 after Terry Pegula took over ownership of the club in February.

However, it seems none of these teams has much momentum left. All seven lost in the first round.

"We were behind the whole season, but you felt that boost after that and we just took off," Pominville recalled. "We played our best hockey at the end that year and were really confident so it was disappointing to lose that series."

The Sabres lost in seven games to Philadelphia in a series that saw Pominville suffer a sliced tendon from a skate blade in Game 5. He did not play after the injury. The Sabres haven't been in the playoffs since.

Since the '13 lockout, they have specialized in starting their seasons poorly and quickly building insurmountable holes.

The numbers are startling. Consider:

- The Sabres are the NHL's worst team in October since the 2013 lockout by a good margin. They have a 14-37-6 record in the month and a hideous .298 points percentage that's a full 100 points worse than the next-worse team (Carolina, .398).
- Blame October for this: The Sabres have gone 455 consecutive games without having more wins than losses (combining regulation defeats with those in overtime or shootouts). They haven't been on the good side at any point in any season since they were 2-1 on Jan. 25, 2013, less than a week into the lockout season.
- The Sabres are 0-4-1 in their last five October season openers (they won the 2013 lockout season opener in January). They haven't won the first game in October since beating Anaheim in 2011 in Helsinki, Finland. They haven't won one on this side of the pond since 2010 in Ottawa – and haven't won one in KeyBank Center since a 2008 shootout victory against Montreal.
- Here are more sobering stats heading into Thursday's season opener here against Boston: The Sabres are 1-3-2 in their last six season openers played downtown and 1-6-2 in their last nine home openers in the building. And that lone win, remember, was their January lockout year curtain-lifter against Philadelphia.

Worst NHL teams in October since 2012-2013 lockout

Team	Record	Pct.
Buffalo	14-37-6	.298
Carolina	15-25-9	.398
Arizona	20-30-5	.409
Edmonton	22-30-4	.429
Columbus	22-29-2	.434

'Desperation mindset' needed

So what's up with the Sabres in October? Talent has obviously been an issue, but even bad Buffalo teams in recent years have put together runs during their seasons at other times.

The 2014-15 tank squad put folks who were dreaming of Connor McDavid into panic mode with their 10-3 run that started in November and stretched into December (that 0-12 January took care of the patrons' fears).

The 52-point club of the previous season had one stretch in which it collected points in 12 of 17 games. Last year's 62-point mishmash looked like a Stanley Cup team during its first three-game sweep of a Western Canada road trip since 1998.

Being ready for the season is where the Sabres have struggled. The 2013-14 team had starts of 0-6-1 and 3-15-1. The 2014-15 team started 1-7, including a hideous 5-1 home loss to Anaheim that saw the team get outshot, 44-12, and left coach Ted Nolan to infamously muse, "That was like an NHL team playing against a Pee-Wee team."

Jack Eichel's first team in 2015-16 improved from 54 to 81 points, but it still struggled early on with records of 1-4 and 2-6 before managing to get to 8-8 but never getting over the top.

The 2016-17 team was 1-3-2 in the first six games. More of the same last year in Phil Housley's debut as coach. The record was 0-4-1 before the new coach's first win, a 3-1 triumph in Anaheim, and the team finished October 3-7-2.

"It's just coming in with a desperation mindset to start the season," Eichel said. "We can't wait for our season to be a few months in to start playing the way we need to play. Every game matters. Every game is the same, two points from here on out."

"The way you practice, the way your habits are is so important," Pominville said. "I see a big improvement in that area, in the communication and the pace of practice. We know it's important to get off to a good start. You have to feel good about your game going into the season."

Sabres in October

Year	Record
2017-18	3-7-2
2016-17	3-3-2
2015-16	4-7-0
2014-15	2-8-1
2013-14	2-12-1
Total	14-37-6

Another rugged opening schedule

The schedule has done the Sabres no favors in October and that will again be a major factor this season. Eight of the 12 games will be against clubs that made the playoffs last season, with two coming against defending Western Conference champion Vegas and an opener against a Boston team that is coming off a 112-point season.

The Sabres face a five-game Western road trip from Oct. 13-21 – their longest in the season's opening month since 2003 and their most consecutive games away from home ice without a return home to practice since March 2014.

It's the third consecutive year and fourth time in five seasons they've been sent out West in October. Their record on the three previous trips is 3-5-2.

The Sabres, however, also open with four home games for the first time in their history. Boston, Vegas and Colorado made the playoffs last year while the New York Rangers did not.

"It's a great opportunity for us to start out," Housley said. "The guys are really excited about where we are right now. We've just got to apply that excitement into the games."

"If you look at the teams that have made the playoffs consistently the last few years and are always in the hunt, the vast majority of them have good starts and have a good October," Eichel said. "It's important for us to do that."

Eichel said camp has put the Sabres in a good frame of mind to do that. It's simply up to the players to get the job done.

"It starts with how you prepared over the summer, how you're preparing in practice every day and what you're doing to get ready," he said. "The puck drops Thursday and we have to be ready. We jump out of the gate with good teams, then we go West for 10 days. Last year we got behind the eight ball and really never caught up."

In one 'really cool moment' that could impact years, Sabres hand 'C' to Eichel

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

October 3, 2018

Jack Eichel was in his waterfront townhouse cooking dinner on a routine night when his phone rang Tuesday. On the other end of the line was Buffalo Sabres coach Phil Housley. While that might not be all that unusual, the message was.

Come to the rink right now for a meeting.

That was a little strange. The Sabres took Tuesday off for practice but had been at KeyBank Center for a team skull session to discuss their upcoming season. Now Eichel was driving back and when he arrived, he found Housley with General Manager Jason Botterill and owner Terry Pegula.

Getting greeted by the owner, GM and coach often means bad news is coming. This was far from it. In fact, it was the words Sabres fans have been expecting to hear for months – Eichel was told he was being named the franchise's 19th full-time captain.

"I came in and sat down and had a chat with Phil and 'Botts' and Mr. Pegula and it was a really cool moment," Eichel said Wednesday as he stood in front of his locker in the team's dressing room at the arena. "I'm very thankful and honored to be the captain of this franchise."

"It was just a great intimate moment for him to accept the captaincy in front of the general manager and the owner and myself," Housley said. "There were some really good strong conversations about expectations and the way he's got to lead but we feel very confident about having Jack as our captain."

Eichel, 21, will be opening his fourth NHL season Thursday night when the Sabres host the Boston Bruins. Even as the team prepares to inaugurate the career of No. 1 overall draft pick Rasmus Dahlin, it is Eichel who remains the face of the franchise. He signed an eight-year, \$80-million contract extension with the team last October that kicked in three months ago.

"It's exciting not only for me and our players and our coaching staff, but our city," said Housley, one of the Sabres' standout players of the 1980s. "I think he represents everything we want as far as our organization goes."

Eichel will become the 27th player to represent the Sabres as a captain since they were born in 1970, as the club has had monthly captains in some previous seasons. He also continues the NHL trend of young stars taking over as captains of their teams.

Connor McDavid, who was taken first overall and one spot ahead of Eichel in the 2015 draft, is entering his third season as captain in Edmonton even though he's only 21. Just a couple weeks ago, the Florida Panthers decided to take the "C" away from 37-year-old journeyman Derek MacKenzie and award it to 23-year-old Finnish star Aleksander Barkov.

The Toronto Maple Leafs are not expected to name a captain this year but the role may go to Auston Matthews, the 21-year-old Arizona native who is a close friend of Eichel from their days together with USA Hockey teams. The Leafs join Vegas, Detroit, Ottawa, Vancouver, the New York Rangers and New York Islanders as teams currently without captains.

"It's an incredible honor," Eichel said. "And I don't think I would have been given this opportunity if it wasn't for the other leaders in this room that have pushed me to be better and taught me a lot about myself. It's an unbelievable feeling and I'm just excited about the season."

The Sabres tweeted the word about Eichel's appointment just as they finished practice Wednesday morning. Housley gathered the players at center ice and told the team of Eichel's new role. The players briefly cheered and several tapped Eichel with their sticks while others playfully patted him on the head.

The team then sent out a second tweet showing Eichel holding his new No. 9 jersey with the captain's 'C' on it – and announcing that Kyle Okposo and injured defenseman Zach Bogosian have been named alternate captains. Housley said either Marco Scandella or Rasmus Ristolainen will wear an 'A' in place of Bogosian, who remains day to day with a lower-body injury.

"It's a really special day for him," Okposo said of Eichel. "I know it's leadership by committee but when you wear the 'C' it's something different for sure. You just automatically have a certain aura around you. It's great to see. He's a young guy but he really wears his heart on his sleeve and he deserves it."

"He's going to be here for a while and he's ready to take that next step," said Jason Pominville, who captained the team from 2011 until he was traded in 2013. "I think he's learned and grown over the last few years. The biggest thing to me is to just be yourself. ... You've had success for certain reasons. Don't try to overdo that because guys can read through that. Be yourself and I've told him that and I think he will."

The Eichel announcement deflected some of the attention away from Dahlin, who was preparing for his first NHL game and dealing with a group of reporters from Sweden in town to cover his NHL debut.

"It's huge. He's our captain and I'm not surprised," Dahlin said. "He should be the captain. I'm very glad to be a part of it. He's very serious, takes good care of his body. He loves to compete. Everyone knows he's a skilled player but off the ice he's a great guy too. Just positive things."

Eichel repeatedly said he was humbled by the honor but the Boston-area native said it gets no added spice that he gets to wear the "C" for the first time against his hometown Bruins.

"It's cool it's your childhood team but I'm always excited to play against them," he said. "It's your first game of the year and I'd be excited to play anybody. ... I'm just so humbled and honored to be named captain of this organization. It's a great moment. I'll definitely remember it."

"I try to make the most of every opportunity of every day we have here. We've got to win a Stanley Cup and I want to be the guy who does it. Small steps first, but you've got to start somewhere and I think we're heading in the right direction. First step is tomorrow."

Mike Harrington: Opener with Bruins rekindles Danny Gare's memories of his first NHL goal

By Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
October 3, 2018

When they take the ice Thursday night in KeyBank Center, the Sabres will be staging their first season opener against the Boston Bruins since they met in Memorial Auditorium on Oct. 10, 1974. A bizarre piece of trivia to be sure, that their longtime rivals have not been the opening opponent for 44 years.

Sabres legend Danny Gare was surprised to hear it, too, while in town this week. Especially since he was there the last time, when his first night as an NHL player became a life-changing event.

Gare was 20 at the time, a second-round pick from Nelson, British Columbia, taken from the old Calgary Centennials of the Western League. He had a nice training camp and made the team. Not only that, he was thrust at right wing on a line with Don Luce and Craig Ramsay.

The Bruins were 2 1/2 years removed from winning the Stanley Cup and just five months from their loss to Philadelphia in the '74 Cup final. Go down their '74 roster and Sabres fans of a certain generation can recite the names. Admit it: You hated most of them.

There was Bobby Orr, Phil Esposito and Johnny Bucyk. Tough guys like Wayne Cashman, Ken Hodge and a young Terry O'Reilly. Veterans on defense like Dallas Smith, Carol Vadnais and Gary Doak. Gilles Gilbert in net. A relatively unknown coach had graduated from a three-year stint in Rochester to take over the bench for his first NHL game. His name was Don Cherry.

Luce and Ramsay made sure Gare understood what he was up against for the night.

"I was next to them in the dressing room and I said, 'So I guess we're starting?' and Luce turns to me and says, 'Oh yeah, we'll be checking the top line,' " Gare said. "So I go, 'You mean we're on against Cashman, Esposito and Hodge?' and he said we were. And then Rammer goes, 'And Bobby Orr and Gary Doak.' "

Gare, now 64, recalls the nervous energy filling his body as he waited to take the ice.

"I'm thinking 'Holy cow, this is unbelievable,' " he said. "You're anxious, nervous, excited, the whole thing. Sure enough, we go to center ice for the faceoff and there's big Wayne Cashman right next to me, there's Phil Esposito and Bobby Orr. I just watched them as a junior a few months before in the Stanley Cup final and now I'm out there against them. This is how I start my career. It was crazy."

Not as crazy as what would happen next.

Just after the draw at center ice, the Sabres got the puck into the Boston zone. Jim Schoenfeld used a spin move at the blue line to pump it into the corner from the left point and Luce used a quick backhand pass to get it to the slot. Ramsay was waiting and his shot beat Gilbert but hit the goalpost.

The puck dropped to the left of the crease as Gilbert was down and out. Gare swooped in – beating Orr to the puck – and drove it home for his first NHL goal just 18 seconds into the game.

It was three seconds off the NHL record for the fastest goal by a rookie off the opening faceoff in his debut, set when Toronto's Gus Bodnar scored after 15 seconds against the New York Rangers on Oct. 30, 1943. It remains the fastest goal by a Sabre in his debut from the game's start.

"I'll never forget it. Ever," Gare said. "The crowd got on its feet and was going nuts. Orr got the puck out of the net, took his stick and broke it right over the crossbar. 'Rammer' got the puck. I'm still so pumped and excited. I'm jumping up and down. Everything is happening so fast."

"So I go back and sit down on the bench and Rammer hands me the puck and I'm looking at it and I just said to myself, 'Well, maybe I belong.' "

Gare gave the puck to equipment manager Rip Simonick – then in his fifth season and now entering his 49th with the club – and Simonick marked it and handed it to Gare at his locker after the game.

"Still have it," Gare said. "It's one of those moments in your career, in your life. First game, you score and it's 18 seconds in. It was a big night for us. We built a lot of momentum and confidence as a team right away and we went all the way to the Stanley Cup final."

Indeed the Sabres' 9-5 victory that night easily remains the most goals they've ever scored in a season opener and set the stage for a 113-point season.

Gare wants this year's club to understand.

"Jack Eichel played behind me at Wanakah (during last month's season kickoff golf tournament) and I was telling him the story," Gare said. "Then my second year I had a two- and a three-goal game to start a year when I scored 50. A start is always so important for confidence, for momentum, for feeling good with each other.

"I was a rookie in '74-75 and I was still learning the ropes. But think about it. That was a really good team. You had the French Connection, you had our line. Peter McNab, Fred Stanfield, Larry Carriere, Billy Hajt, Jocelyn Guevremont. We had such a good team. They're building here."

One of the key building blocks, of course, is No. 1 overall pick Rasmus Dahlin. The '74-75 Sabres didn't have anyone like him and Gare is as intrigued as everyone else to see what the 18-year-old can do.

"He's a kid that's got all the tools," Gare said. "I felt I could play in the NHL because I had buddies who came before me like Bob Nystrom, Jimmy Watson and John Davidson who were playing in the NHL. He has to feel that same thing. All of the accolades, it's still up to Rasmus to go out there and do it and I know he will."

Gare said Sabres alums are thrilled to have one of their own coaching the team in Hall of Famer Phil Housley. Fellow alum Jason Botterill is the general manager. And Gare's former Edmonton teammate, three-time Cup winner Steve Smith, has joined Housley this year to tutor Dahlin and the defense.

"Phil has earned his right to be a head coach. He paid his dues," Gare said. "It's important for the organization and to the fans he was so well-liked but this is going to be a challenge, one of his biggest tests. He's a guy that wants to win for the team, the organization and the city."

Gare said Housley encouraged the team's video staff to shoot clips of Gare, Gilbert Perreault, Rene Robert, Larry Playfair and Rob Ray to do a video about what it was like to wear the Sabres logo and be a winner in this town.

"They showed it to the guys and he showed it to me and it was really awesome," Gare said. "The expectations are higher here but what Jason Botterill did in the offseason to get some offense, get him a No. 1 goaltender and adding the young kids, the sky's the limit. It's just a matter of how quickly they do it."

And if the Sabres burn the Bruins for a quick goal on the first shift Thursday night? Gare will smile and celebrate. And think about what it meant the last time the Sabres opened their season that way.

Sabres Notebook: Dahlin's lifelong wait ends with NHL debut

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

October 3, 2018

It will be just after 1 a.m. Friday back home in Sweden when Ramsus Dahlin's NHL career gets its opening faceoff Thursday night in KeyBank Center. Several media members from the homeland will be in town to cover the Sabres' game against the Boston Bruins and some made their way to practice Wednesday morning.

Dahlin is used to the attention. He's lived it the last two years and endured a circus atmosphere for nearly a month leading up to the draft in June. Then there was summer development camp, the Prospects Challenge, training camp and exhibition games.

Finally, it's time for the 18-year-old to play hockey for real.

"Right now, I'm just excited. I've been waiting for this my whole life," Dahlin said. "It's the NHL, the biggest thing I can do, and I'm super excited."

Dahlin said the biggest adjustment he's making is learning opposing personnel. The Sabres expect that may take him much of the season.

"It's going to take some time to learn all the players," Dahlin admitted. "Tomorrow I just want to go out there, play my game and do the best I can. I'm focused on the team, on what we can do, and I will learn how the other players play."

Dahlin will be opening the game on defense with Jake McCabe. He practiced Wednesday on his natural right side after spending most of preseason on the left. Coach Phil Housley used him on the right in Friday's preseason finale in Oshawa, Ont., against the New York Islanders.

"There's going to be another level of tempo. The pace is going to get ratcheted up," Housley said. "He's just going to have to get comfortable. After those first 2-3 shifts he'll be able to take a breath and settle in."

Winger Remi Elie, claimed on waivers from Dallas, was at practice Wednesday but skated only as an extra forward. There were no surprises on the lines.

Jack Eichel centered Jeff Skinner and Sam Reinhart, Patrik Berglund was between Conor Sheary and Tage Thompson, Casey Mittelstadt centered Vladimir Sobotka and Kyle Okposo while Evan Rodrigues was the fourth-line center, with Zemgus Girgensons and Jason Pominville on the wings.

Defenseman Zach Bogosian (lower body) continues to skate on his own. But because he was not put on injured reserve, he's listed as day to day and could play on the Sabres' four-game homestand to open the season.

Housley said winger Alexander Nylander and defenseman Brendan Guhle were sent to Rochester so they could play major minutes in the AHL, as opposed to minor roles in the NHL.

"Alex and Brendan had great camps. They did everything we asked of them and we still feel in their development, they're on the right track," Housley said. "They were disappointed and that shows that they care but we need to have them get valuable minutes down there, being in a top-6 role, being in a top pair, playing all of those situations to keep honing their game."

The Bruins opened their season Wednesday night in Washington as the opponent for the Capitals' Stanley Cup banner-raising night. Tuukka Rask was the starting goaltender in that game and coach Bruce Cassidy said earlier in the week that new backup Jaroslav Halak will start here against the Sabres.

Boston will be without standout defenseman Torey Krug, who is expected to be sidelined three weeks with an ankle injury.

The Sabres had a few scattered singles and pairs of tickets remaining at the box office for the game as of Wednesday afternoon and all signs point to the home opener being the usual sellout crowd of 19,070 even though the team acknowledged this week it has had a slight drop in season ticket sales.

Arena workers spent Wednesday putting T-shirts on every seat, alternating sections with blue, gold and white shirts to create a color-splash effect.

Sabres name Jack Eichel as new captain

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

October 3, 2018

The Buffalo Sabres have named Jack Eichel as their new captain.

The team tweeted the announcement shortly after practice ended Wednesday in KeyBank Center. Coach Phil Housley gathered the players at center ice and, although his words were not audible to the media, it was clear he was talking about Eichel.

The players briefly cheered and several tapped Eichel with their sticks while others playfully patted him on the head. The team then sent out a second tweet showing Eichel holding his new No. 9 jersey with the captain's 'C' on it -- and announcing that Kyle Okposo and Zach Bogosian have been named alternate captains.

Eichel, 21, is entering his fourth season in the NHL and starting an eight-year, \$80 million contract extension. He told reporters in the dressing room a few minutes after practice that he was cooking dinner in his waterfront townhouse Monday night when he received a call from Housley asking him to drive back to the arena for a meeting.

When Eichel arrived, he was greeted by Housley, General Manager Jason Botterill and owner Terry Pegula, and they gave him the news.

"It was a really cool moment," Eichel said. "I'm very thankful and honored to be the captain of this franchise."

"It's exciting not only for me and our players and our coaching staff but our city," Housley said. "I think he represents everything we want as far as our organization goes and it was just a great intimate moment for him to accept the captaincy in front of the general manager and the owner and myself."

"There were some really good strong conversations about expectations and the way he's got to lead, but we feel very confident about having Jack as our captain."

Speculation about Eichel becoming the captain has swirled for a year, since he signed his extension the night before last season's opener. The Sabres start this season Thursday night here against the Boston Bruins.

"It's an incredible honor," Eichel said. "And I don't think I would have been given this opportunity if it wasn't for the other leaders in this room that have pushed me to be better and taught me a lot about myself. It's an unbelievable feeling and I'm just excited about the season. More than anything, it's more or less me trying to be myself and continuing the things that make me the person that I am."

The Sabres did not have a captain last season, instead relying on a leadership group of four players that included Eichel. Before the Eichel announcement, the Sabres were one of eight teams in the NHL without a captain. That list is now reduced to seven and includes the New York Rangers, New York Islanders, Detroit, Ottawa, Vegas, Toronto and Vancouver.

"We felt Jack has made the right steps in his maturity and he's the right captain to lead our franchise," Housley said.

Brian Gionta, who officially retired last week, was the last Sabres' captain from the start of the 2014-2015 season through the end of the 2016-17 season.

Sabres' lines and defense pairs appear set for opener

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

October 3, 2018

The Buffalo Sabres are on the ice at KeyBank Center in their final practice before Thursday's regular season opener against the Boston Bruins. Owing to a rugged opening stretch of the season that sees four games in the first eight games – all at home – the team took Monday off.

The lines at practice today look like this:

Skinner-Eichel-Reinhart

Sheary-Berglund-Thompson

Sobotka-Mittelstadt-Okposo

Girgensons-Rodrigues-Pominville

Remi Elie, acquired on Dallas via waivers on Tuesday, is on the ice and skating as an extra forward.

The defense pairs are:

Ristolainen-Scandella

McCabe-Dahlin

Beaulieu-Nelson (Tennyson extra)

There is no sign of injured defenseman Zach Bogosian, whom the team continues to list as day to day. Bogosian, who was injured during the Sabres' exhibition last week in Clinton, was not put on injured reserve when rosters were set on Tuesday.

Goalies Carter Hutton Linus Ullmark are on the ice as scheduled.

Also:

- There are a few Swedish reporters in the house today covering Rasmus Dahlin's final practice before his NHL debut.
- The Bruins open Wednesday night in Washington as the opponent for the Capitals' Stanley Cup-banner raising. Tuukka Rask will start in goal in that game and coach Bruce Cassidy announced Tuesday that new backup Jaroslav Halak will get the call here against the Sabres.
- Boston will be without standout defenseman Torey Krug, who is going to miss at least three weeks with an ankle injury.

Sabres' Eichel is humbled to be their 19th full-time captain

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

October 4, 2018

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - In just his fourth season in the NHL, Jack Eichel has been named captain of the Buffalo Sabres. Phil Housley brought the team to center ice after practice to announce the move.

After Brian Gionta left last season, Phil Housley and Jason Botterill decided not to have a captain.

They carefully watched the growth of Eichel throughout the season and they felt the time is now right. Housley said, "We felt that Jack has made the right steps in his maturity and I think he's the right captain to lead our franchise."

It was easy to tell that Eichel will take his role very seriously. The new captain said, "It was a really humbling moment and I'm just so honored that I'm in the conversation, first of all being a leader with this group and to be the captain, it's an incredible honor."

Housley thinks Eichel will be the people's captain and when he called him back to the arena on Tuesday night to tell him, Housley said it was a nice moment, "I think it's exciting, not only for me, our players, but for our city. I think he represents everything we want as far as our organization goes and it was just a great intimate moment for him to accept the captaincy in front of the general manager, the owner and myself."

There has been a huge growth process for Eichel ever since he arrived as an 18-year-old. Housley said, "Just in the way he carries himself, day in and day out, but I think it started after last season with the things he said to the media and just his growth through the summer.

"He wants to win, he's a tremendous competitor and I think he's going to try to do everything in his power."

Eichel also talked about how much he's grown in three seasons. He said it's not just him, "I don't think I would've been given this opportunity if it wasn't for the other leaders in this room that have pushed me to be better and have taught me a lot about myself.

"We've spoken at length how invested I am in this city and this organization and it's just an unbelievable feeling."

Housley said, "A sign of a good captain is asking for help. It's going to be more leadership by committee." Eichel said he likes what he's seen since August, "I like where we've been at through camp. I think the overall morale and the room itself is changing and heading in the right direction."

Eichel wasn't ready to be captain last season. Housley thinks now he knows what he has to do, "The biggest thing is leading by example. He's got to set the tone not only in the practices, but in the games."

Eichel himself said, "Going through the last few years, I was able to learn a lot about myself as a person and nobody's perfect and I think I'm just trying to be a better person, more of a leader."

The team had Tuesday off and the call didn't come until evening. Eichel said, "I was actually cooking dinner last night at my house and he called me (Housley) and I came in and sat down and had a chat with him and Bots and Mr. Pegula, so it was a really cool moment."

The alternate captains are Kyle Okposo and Zach Bogosian.

The Sabres had one final practice before the season opener Thursday against Boston.

Thursday's lines:

Skinner Eichel Reinhart

Sheary Berglund Thompson

Sobotka Mittelstadt Okposo

Girgensons (Elie) Rodrigues Pominville

Scandella Ristolainen

McCabe Dahlin

Beaulieu Nelson (Tennyson)

It's Go Time!

By Jeremy White

WGR 550

October 3, 2018

I got an email from the Buffalo Sabres yesterday promoting tickets to the opener. I quickly deleted it because I'm still a season ticket holder at this point. Splitting my tickets with the usual group was a challenge, and I had to do some recruiting to keep things rolling along. I suspect many of you that are STHs found it harder to get people to bite this time around. Maybe you bailed, or dropped your allotment.

The Sabres need to light the fan fire again. They need desperately to have a mildly OK start to the season. They have to score goals. They have to be exciting. They have to be fun.

The fan base was engaged during the tank years. There was a clear path forward, which of course they lost along the way. Last year on opening night the team had 10 new skaters. They looked fast and peppered Carey Price with 43 shots. I was convinced, on opening night, that this team was about to play fast. Oops.

This year, there are nine new additions. Dahlin is Dahlin. Jeff Skinner and Connor Sheary give the Sabres speed on the wings. The bottom six looks respectable. The goaltender, Carter Hutton, is coming off a great year, and part of his job is to help bring along the Sabres' potential goalie of the future in Linus Ullmark. Better up front. Better on the blue line. Better in net.

Returning, is Phil Housley. Housley enters his second season behind the bench for the Sabs (Yes, we're saying Sabs, pronounced SABES). He came over from Nashville, a team that plays a style any NHL fan would want to watch.

He was touted as a coach that would activate the defense, but it didn't happen. Most would say the blue line didn't have the horses to run what he wanted, and that's probably correct.

We were told Housley could be the perfect mentor for Jack Eichel. Housley could help Jack because he understands what it's like to be a young player with pressure. Now we might suspect that Housley is the perfect coach to bring along future star Rasmus Dahlin... I sure hope he is. I'm not sure about whether or not Phil Housley is a good coach, but we're about to find out.

This team has to get a good share of shots at 5-on-5. This hasn't really ever happened since we started caring about it. The room has been altered. The speed upgrade is clear.

It's all there for Housley. He obviously doesn't have to win the Stanley Cup this year, and probably doesn't even have to make the playoffs. However, they've gotta be better, it's got to be obvious, and it has to happen quickly. Too many Octobers and Novembers have destroyed this team. Think back to the last year they made the playoffs... they rallied from last place.

The seat's not hot... yet.

They have to be better, faster, and God-willing... FUN.

We've waited long enough.

Eichel named captain of the Sabres

By Brayton Wilson

WGR 550

October 3, 2018

For the Buffalo Sabres' season opener on Thursday night, Jack Eichel will not only have a new number on his sweater, but will now have a new letter on his chest.

At the end of practice on Tuesday, head coach Phil Housley gathered his players at center ice and named Eichel as team captain.

The 21-year-old becomes the 19th full time captain (27th with rotating captains) in franchise history replacing Brian Gionta, who last captained the team in the 2016-17 season. Eichel was named as an alternate captain to start the 2017-18 season along with Zach Bogosian, Kyle Okposo and Ryan O'Reilly, but the team went without a captain.

Bogosian and Okposo will remain as alternate captains as the team heads into the 2018-19 season.

Eichel is entering his fourth season of his NHL career after the Sabres took him with the second overall pick in the 2015 NHL Draft. In 209 career games with the Sabres, Eichel has scored 73 goals and registered 177 points. Last year, Eichel set a career-high in goals (25), assists (39) and points (64) in 67 games played. He is also entering the first year of an eight-year, \$80 million deal he signed last summer.

Here is the complete list of captains in franchise history:

Floyd Smith - 1970-71
Gerry Meehan - 1971-74
Jim Schoenfeld - 1974-77
Danny Gare - 1977-82
Gilbert Perreault - 1982-87
Lindy Ruff - 1987-89
Mike Foligno - 1989-91
Mike Ramsay - 1991-92
Pat LaFontaine - 1992-97
Alexander Mogilny - 1993-94
Michael Peca - 1997-2000
Stu Barnes - 2001-03
Miroslav Satan - 2003
Chris Drury - 2003, 2004, 2005-07
James Patrick - 2003
J.P. Dumont - 2004
Daniel Briere - 2004, 2005-07
Jochen Hecht - 2007, 2008
Toni Lydman - 2007
Brian Campbell - 2007
Jaroslav Spacek - 2008
Jason Pominville - 2008, 2011-13
Craig Rivet - 2008-11
Thomas Vanek - 2013
Steve Ott - 2013-14
Brian Gionta - 2014-17
Jack Eichel - 2018-Present

The Sabres kick off the 2018-19 season against the Boston Bruins on Thursday night at KeyBank Center. Faceoff is set for 7 p.m. and can be heard on WGR Sports Radio 550 with Rick Jeanneret and Rob Ray on the call.

Jack Eichel has earned the Sabres' 'C.' Now how does he compare with the last guys to do it?

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

October 3, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. — It felt like it was a long time coming and a matter of destiny being fulfilled, but at last, Jack Eichel was named captain of the Buffalo Sabres.

The announcement was made public via Twitter, but was very obviously made on the ice at the conclusion of the Sabres final practice before their season gets started Thursday against the Boston Bruins.

As the team huddled together at center for the practice-ending stretch, Eichel led the way in the middle, as he has done more often than not the past few years. After the pump-up and huddle break, coach Phil Housley had a few more words and let the team know that No. 9 would be wearing the "C" from here on out.

"It's a really humbling moment," Eichel said. "I'm so honored to be in the conversation as a leader of this group and obviously being the captain is an incredible honor. I don't think I would've been given this honor if it wasn't deserved. The other leaders in this room that have pushed me to be better and have taught me a lot about myself and just the other guys I've been with and been around over the years.

"It's a great honor and in the direction that we're going we spoke at lengths about how invested I am in this city and this organization. It's an unbelievable feeling and I'm just excited about the season. I think more than anything it's just me trying to be myself and continue to do the things that make me the person that I am and just continue to develop. There's a lot I still have to learn and there's a lot of guys in here I can learn from and coaches. So I'm just excited about the opportunity and very humbled and honored."

Time has a tremendous effect on us all, but it's been Eichel's evolution as a person through his young career that brought him to this moment.

At this very point two years ago, during the final practice before the start of the season, Eichel experienced one of the darker moments of his career when he turned his ankle sideways in front of the net. The incident was a foreboding omen for what turned into a dreadful season, ending with Eichel visibly frustrated and airing out his grievances to the media in a way that showed he still had some growing up to do.

It was October 3 a year ago when Eichel signed his eight-year, \$80 million extension to stay with the Sabres long-term, essentially indicating the day he'd be designated the leader would come.

"I know it's not going to change him the way he conducts himself nor should it," said Eichel's best friend and line mate, Sam Reinhart. "He's kind of worn that and took it upon himself anyways and that's the way you should treat it. I think we're all excited and just excited to start tomorrow."

But time creates change and the change in Eichel's demeanor and actions exemplify what it means to be a captain, especially a leader of the Sabres.

He takes charge of a scrum with the media and handles questions the way you'd expect from a leader like Brian Gionta. He has the affability and personality to joke around with his teammates and keep things light the way Steve Ott would, but also the fire to keep guys honest. He's also got the talent to lead the way on the ice by scoring like Thomas Vanek and Jason Pominville did.

How does he compare with the recent captains? Eichel is his own person and he'll do things his way, but since he's the 27th captain in Sabres history it's worth taking a look at recent history.

Brian Gionta

Eichel is entering his fourth season in Buffalo and the only captain he's known during his tenure is Gionta. When Gionta signed as a free agent in 2014, he was brought in as a veteran who knew what it was like to grow up in

the area and have success. He'd won the Stanley Cup, scored 48 goals in a season and was the captain of a legendary franchise for a time in Montreal.

Gionta was also 35 years old when he signed and essentially wound up finishing his career in Buffalo. Becoming a captain of the Sabres at that time was almost necessary to help navigate the franchise out of darkness and offer a guiding hand to the host of younger players on the way up, including Eichel for his first two seasons. It's clear he had a positive effect on Eichel, as he made sure he was in the room when Gionta announced his retirement.

At 21 going on 22 years old, Eichel is in a much different spot in his career and life comparatively.

Thomas Vanek/Steve Ott

The 2013-2014 season was a strange one not just because Vanek and Ott split the captaincy, but because they came together to form a dual-captainship that made sense, though it was short-lived.

Vanek was the scorer and the easy-going presence in the locker room as well as one of the smarter offensive players in Sabres history. Ott was a fiery competitor and not one to hold back his opinion. The two weren't really a good cop/bad cop combo, but they had the run of the room. Of course, that season saw Vanek traded to the New York Islanders at the end of October and Ott to the St. Louis Blues along with Ryan Miller in February 2014. It's not the best-remembered or longest captaincy, but it provides a good dynamic for comparison.

Eichel has the elite scoring ability and vision on the ice not seen since Vanek's prime in Buffalo. Like Ott, Eichel makes his feelings known when things aren't going well. You could chalk up early outbursts to frustration with losing or not being mature enough to that point, but the focus he's showing now makes him more ready to lead the way.

Jason Pominville

For two seasons, Pominville was the Sabres captain — in 2011-2012 and the lockout-shortened 2012-2013, in which he was traded to the Minnesota Wild. His time as captain in Buffalo came at a crossroads of sorts. He was in the prime of his career but at the end of a run with the Sabres, at a time when the playoffs were no longer a regular occurrence and then-GM Darcy Regier decided to introduce a rebuild.

With the NHL getting progressively younger, you could argue that Eichel is in his prime right now, which puts him in a similar position to the one Pominville was in — just on the opposite end of the spectrum. While Pominville led the way as the Sabres started to plummet, Eichel is stepping into the captaincy as the team's climb out of gutter begins in earnest.

At the very least, having a former captain in the room — Pominville returned to the Sabres in a 2017 trade — has to be a boon.

Stimson: The Sabres' top line is fun, good, and a statistically bad idea

By Ryan Stimson

The Athletic

October 3, 2018

Since Sam Reinhart and the team agreed on a bridge deal, he has found himself at right wing on the Sabres' top line, along with Jeff Skinner and Jack Eichel. This has the potential to be a fantastic unit, full of play-driving, scoring, and all around excellence. However, there is significant risk in loading up a top line for extended periods of time due to the diminishing returns that has on not only that line's performance but also the cascading effect on leaving other lines more exposed. Today, we're going to look at this decision by Phil Housley and whether or not there are better alternatives available. Let's get to it.

Back during the 2016 RIT Hockey Analytics Conference, Dawson Springings, now with Kroenke Sports and Entertainment, presented on the idea of maximizing player usage by optimizing lines. The slides and video are linked, but to sum up: teams stand to gain more overall by balancing their forward lines rather than loading one up. This makes a lot of sense in that one line may dominate the opposition, but will still only be out there for fifteen to twenty minutes a night, leaving long stretches where weaker lines are out.

Let's talk about the first aspect of this: the diminishing returns. Below is a table of the top ten lines last season by shot differential. Only lines with more than 300 minutes played as an intact line are included. The data is 5v5 situations and from Corsica.

Even some pretty top-heavy lines like Boston's Marchand – Pastrnak – Bergeron line will only control about 59% of the shots while on the ice. Due to the random nature of hockey, it's impossible for a line to dominate at 70 or 80 percent shot share for an extended period of time. Being mindful of this randomness should factor into how a coach constructs his lines. Observe the below slide from Springings' presentation. Also, this would be a good time to brush up on my stats primers (one & two) because we're about to get into some stats, ya'll.

Springings used a player's Shots For Percentage Relative to Teammates as a measure of talent for each player on the ice. He summed these and divided by three to arrive at the line's estimated shot percentage. Running a regression with the line's actual shot percentage as the dependent variable provided the coefficients you see above. What does this all mean?

It means that as the line's talent increases, you would see a lower increase in their actual shot percentage. For example, if the talent measure of a line was 30 (each player had a 10 % Relative to Teammate shot percentage and was deemed a good player) you would only see an increase of 15 rather than 30 because the coefficient essentially halves the expected impact. However, if you had all average players (say a collective talent measure of 10), then you'd get that same 15 impact because the coefficients would increase the expected shot differential by about 50% (1.58 coefficient).

This isn't to say that three average players are just as good as three good players, but the expected impact they would have starts to decrease as quality players are grouped together. This is what we mean by diminishing returns.

Sam Reinhart can carry a line

I know, sounds crazy, right? It's not.

So, then, what should the Sabres' lines be? Looking at how players drive play when accounting for teammates, competition, zone starts, score state, and all the contextual factors that go into a player's production provides us with a clearer picture between the play drivers and the passengers. Naturally, we'd want to separate the strongest performers in hopes that they could drive a line's production. We commonly think of centers driving a line's performance, but there are many examples of wingers doing the same thing: Patrik Elias, Jaromir Jagr, Nino Niederreiter, Taylor Hall, etc.

This means that Reinhart can be a center or wing and still have a solid impact. He's the best play driver the team has. Don't believe it? Take a look.

This is from Micah Blake McCurdy's recent talk in Ottawa (you can hear us talk about it on my podcast). What Micah does here is isolate a player's results based on the contextual factors I mentioned above. The top part is offense and the bottom is defense. The percentages are change from average "threat" which is a simple expected goals model. So, Reinhart's raw offensive results produce a negative 4.1% threat compared to league average. This makes him seem bad!

But, when Micah isolates Reinhart's performance we see an exemplary result compared to his teammates. We realize that his teammates are truly what's been dragging him down over the last three seasons. The Sabres seem intent on starting Casey Mittlestadt with the big club and I can't think of a better linemate than Reinhart to pair with him to give him the best support possible. A second line of Sheary/Skinner and then Mittlestadt and Reinhart isn't a bad option.

You can review these types of charts for each and every player via Micah's writeup. Just scroll down.

Here we see Eichel with noticeably less impact than Reinhart at both ends of the ice. Eichel is a very skilled forward who will score a ton of points, but if he truly wants to ascend to the elite status of forwards in the league, he'll have to improve upon these results. Note that his teammates, while still not great offensively, are better than Reinhart's, and the competition the two face is fairly close together. Ideally, Eichel would get a play-driving winger and a fast, skilled winger to maximize scoring and defensive responsibility.

Building the lines

In addition to a player's talent level, measured by their shot differential relative to teammate, there are also stylistic questions. You want players to complement each other well and feed off each other. Having two players who want to carry the puck all the time, for example, may not have the best overall output compared to two players who'd rather share it. It's a simplistic example, but you get the point.

Chemistry is a tough thing to try and quantify, so I think a better way is to look at skill sets and see which ones complement each other better. This is something I've researched a bit in the past. It is something I plan on exploring further this year. But, based on individual playing styles, that top line could have as high as a 55% expected goal share based on my model. That sounds awesome, until you realize that the second line is just above 50%, but the others would be below average. I don't have data on rookies, obviously, so there's definitely some unknowns, but I'm penciling them in as average.

Ideally, the Sabres should roll something like this against Boston (using players from Monday's practice lines):

Sheary – Eichel – Pominville

Skinner – Mittlestadt – Reinhart

Rodrigues – Berglund – Okposo

Elie – Sobotka- Thompson

Casey Mittlestadt needs someone like Reinhart on his line to help drive play. Skinner and Eichel on separate lines maintains two strong goal-scorers in the top six. The added dimension of that second line enables Berglund to play on a decent third line. Berglund is an impact player and Rodrigues showed scoring potential last season. With Pominville, Reinhart, and Berglund all on separate lines, you have arguably the three best play drivers on the team on the ice as much as possible. That creates extra possessions in the offensive zone and allows the scorers on the team that can't drive play to that extent to flourish.

The addition of Remi Elie to the team is an exciting one. Not that he's a world beater or has shown flashes of being the next coming of Sidney Crosby, but he represents the type of calculated risk teams should take more often. I wrote a little about him in my debut piece here over the summer. Basically, for his age group, Elie was involved in creating offense an awful lot. His on-ice numbers aren't flattering, but he does draw a fair amount of penalties, generating more impact per sixty minutes in these area than Tyler Seguin.

Young players who tend to be involved with shot creation are the ones you want to roll the dice on rather than one-dimensional veterans who have hopped from team to team. You can sign bottom six players at any time over the summer to come in and soak up minutes and have good shot suppression. Teams should take more chances on players who might be good or bad rather than continue playing players who don't possess the same upside.

Elie is the type of player that likely won't drive a line, but has the skills and pace to complement a top end talent. This allows a coach to move someone else down a line and not have a huge drop off in scoring.

Limitations & future work

The primary drawback to looking at line performance is sample size. Only 44 lines spent more than 300 5v5 minutes together last season according to Corsica. Springings' work was excellent as always, but with another couple of seasons of data available, it might be interesting to explore this again and look at different permutations of lines (i.e. is it better to ice two good players and one bad or 1 good and two average players?) and possibly add in more data.

Conclusions

Loading up a top line can be useful late in a game or in certain situations, but over a period of time, it starts to have diminishing returns and affects your team's overall performance. In looking at two approaches to optimizing roster based on talent and playing styles, balancing out the lineup is the smarter play. The Sabres have plenty of options here, but have to be smart about how they use them. What may be best for one line may not be best for the team.

Depth? Charge! Sabres have what it takes to move forward

By John Vogl

The Athletic

October 3, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. – Word on the street is the Sabres have their deepest team in years. Those streets are smart.

In addition to a real, honest-to-goodness top line, Buffalo boasts scoring threats up and down the roster. There are forwards with 20-goal seasons on all four lines. The third defense pairing features a guy who was on the No. 1 unit last season.

Now it's up to the players to reach their potential individually and as a team.

"The depth and the competition within spots on the roster is higher than it's been the last few years, which is great," Sabres captain Jack Eichel said. "You can talk about all these new guys and everything we've tried to change, but it's up to the guys in the room. It's up to all of us to go out there and put a product on the ice and win games consistently."

The first chance comes Thursday when Buffalo hosts Boston in the season opener. Though coach Phil Housley can always change his mind, this is the expected lineup in front of starting goalie Carter Hutton:

Left wing	Center	Right wing
Skinner	Eichel	Reinhart
Sheary	Berglund	Thompson
Sobotka	Mittelstadt	Okposo
Girgensons	Rodrigues	Pominville

Left defense	Right defense
Scandella	Ristolainen
McCabe	Dahlin
Beaulieu	Nelson

The buzz is building. That group might be enough for the Sabres to end a seven-year playoff drought. After all, it's a more potent team than any of the ones that missed the postseason. Let's take a look at the opening-night lineups going back to 2011-12.

Here's the group from 2017-18, which stumbled to a 25-45-12 record:

Left wing	Center	Right wing
Kane	Eichel	Pominville
Pouliot	O'Reilly	Okposo
Girgensons	Reinhart	Griffith
Larsson	Josefson	Nolan

Left defense	Right defense
Beaulieu	Ristolainen
Scandella	Tennyson
McCabe	Antipin

This is the team from 2016-17, which went 33-37-12 after opening the year without the injured Eichel and Kyle Okposo:

Left wing	Center	Right wing
Kane	O'Reilly	Reinhart
Ennis	Larsson	Foligno
Deslauriers	Grant	Gionta
Moulson	Girgensons	Fasching

Left defense	Right defense
Gorges	Ristolainen
McCabe	Bogosian
Nelson	Franson

And the squad from 2015-16, which finished 35-36-11:

Left wing	Center	Right wing
Moulson	O'Reilly	Ennis
Kane	Eichel	Reinhart
Girgensons	Larsson	Foligno
Deslauriers	Legwand	McGinn

Left defense	Right defense
Gorges	Pysyk
Colaiacono	Ristolainen
Weber	Franson

These opening-night players in 2014-15 contributed to a 23-51-8 mark:

Left wing	Center	Right wing
Moulson	Ennis	Stafford
Foligno	Girgensons	Stewart
Gionta	Hodgson	Reinhart
Deslauriers	McCormick	Mitchell

Left defense	Right defense
Gorges	Myers
Meszaros	Benoit
Weber	Ristolainen

In 2013-14, the Sabres stumbled to 21-51-10 after starting with this:

Left wing	Center	Right wing
Vanek	Hodgson	Stafford
Leino	Ott	Ennis
Girgensons	Grigorenko	Flynn
Porter	McCormick	Kaleta

Left defense	Right defense
Tallinder	Myers
Ehrhoff	Pysyk
Weber	Ristolainen

Buffalo had a 21-21-6 record during the lockout-shortened 2012-13 season:

Left wing	Center	Right wing
Vanek	Hodgson	Pominville
Foligno	Ennis	Stafford
Hecht	Grigorenko	Ott
Scott	Ellis	Kaleta

Left defense	Right defense
Regehr	Myers
Leopold	Sekera
Ehrhoff	Sulzer

The Sabres went 39-32-11 in 2011-12 but still missed the playoffs:

Left wing	Center	Right wing
Vanek	Adam	Pominville
Gerbe	Roy	Stafford
Leino	Ennis	Boyes
McCormick	Gaustad	Kaleta

Left defense	Right defense
Leopold	Ehrhoff
Regehr	Myers
Sekera	Gragnani

All those teams had flaws. Usually, they were big ones. This edition of the Sabres has question marks. We'll explore those while comparing each line and defensive pairing to its predecessors.

FIRST LINE

Year	Left wing	Center	Right wing
2018-19	Skinner	Eichel	Reinhart
2017-18	Kane	Eichel	Pominville
2016-17	Kane	O'Reilly	Reinhart
2015-16	Moulson	O'Reilly	Ennis
2014-15	Moulson	Ennis	Stafford
2013-14	Vanek	Hodgson	Stafford
2012-13	Vanek	Hodgson	Pominville
2011-12	Vanek	Adam	Pominville

While Kane had a scoring touch to go with his physical side, Jeff Skinner is the most lethal sniper in the lineup since Thomas Vanek left. Skinner is a pending unrestricted free agent, wants to bounce back from an OK year (dropped from 37 goals to 24) and is skating with the best playmaking center he's ever had. That's three strikes against opposing goalies.

Eichel is eager to start his eight-year contract extension in the right way. He averaged .85 points per game during his entry-level deal – good for 34th in the NHL over that span – and is poised to take a step up with Skinner.

The Sabres hope Reinhart will grow into Jason Pominville, who recorded 30 goals and 73 points in 2011-12.

Analysis: Based on the offensive-zone time in the preseason, this year's top line could leave the previous seven in their ice shavings.

SECOND LINE

Year	Left wing	Center	Right wing
2018-19	Sheary	Berglund	Thompson
2017-18	Pouliot	O'Reilly	Okposo
2016-17	Ennis	Larsson	Foligno
2015-16	Kane	Eichel	Reinhart
2014-15	Foligno	Girgensons	Stewart
2013-14	Leino	Ott	Ennis
2012-13	Foligno	Ennis	Stafford
2011-12	Gerbe	Roy	Stafford

When general manager Jason Botterill traded for Conor Sheary, folks pegged the left winger as Eichel's running mate. Then Skinner came along, bumping Sheary to the second line. That's a nice spot for a guy who skated with

Sidney Crosby on the Penguins, and it's certainly a big jump from Benoit Pouliot, Nathan Gerbe and the infamous Ville Leino.

Patrik Berglund, who had 17 goals in 57 games last season, has made a big first impression on the Sabres.

"We've got a lot of young Swedes, and it's good to have a guy like Bergy here, a Swedish guy who has played in the NHL for a long time," Eichel said. "I've been calling him the Godfather. All the Swedes kind of just follow him around, but it's good for them, and he's helpful. Obviously, he's helpful for all of us, too. He's been on a lot of winning teams with St. Louis."

After a stellar Prospects Challenge and good training camp, Tage Thompson is an intriguing player. The 20-year-old has one of the best shots in the lineup, and he'll get a chance to stay in the top six. Toronto's Auston Matthews sees his former teammate becoming very dangerous.

Analysis: The 2015-16 trio of Kane-Eichel-Reinhart will be tough to beat. But the big-bodied Berglund – seriously, the 6-foot-4, 219-pounder is huge – could combine with his wingers to form a shutdown line that has major pop. Sheary had 23 goals in 61 games two years ago.

THIRD LINE

Year	Left wing	Center	Right wing
2018-19	Sobotka	Mittelstadt	Okposo
2017-18	Girgensons	Reinhart	Griffith
2016-17	Deslauriers	Grant	Gionta
2015-16	Girgensons	Larsson	Foligno
2014-15	Gionta	Hodgson	Reinhart
2013-14	Girgensons	Grigorenko	Flynn
2012-13	Hecht	Grigorenko	Ott
2011-12	Leino	Ennis	Boyes

Casey Mittelstadt looked lost at times during the preseason, but he's still the guy who had five points in six NHL games at the end of last year. The prospects gurus for The Athletic – Corey Pronman and Scott Wheeler – are certain the 19-year-old will shine.

As anyone who read Tim Graham's epic piece on Okposo knows, it's been an unbelievably tough two years for the winger. But when the Sabres signed him to a seven-year deal in 2016, they envisioned Okposo as their longtime No. 1 on the right side. He's determined to be the player who put up 27 goals and 69 points in 2013-14. If he comes close, that's mighty fine third-line production.

Sobotka, who will likely be the Sabres' go-to faceoff man, can agitate opponents and keep them away from Mittelstadt despite his relatively small size (5-10, 184 pounds). He typically falls in the 10-goal, 20-assist range.

Analysis: Do we really need one? This line should put the Derek Grants (no goals in 40 games), Seth Griffiths (three points in 21 games) and Brian Flynn's (six goals, seven assists in 79 games) in its rearview mirror by Columbus Day. For anyone without a calendar, that's this Monday.

FOURTH LINE

Year	Left wing	Center	Right wing
2018-19	Girgensons	Rodrigues	Pominville
2017-18	Larsson	Josefson	Nolan
2016-17	Moulson	Girgensons	Fasching
2015-16	Deslauriers	Legwand	McGinn
2014-15	Deslauriers	McCormick	Mitchell
2013-14	Porter	McCormick	Kaleta
2012-13	Scott	Ellis	Kaleta
2011-12	McCormick	Gaustad	Kaleta

Evan Rodrigues was second to Eichel in points per 60 minutes last season, and his 2.24 average ranked with the likes of Nashville's Ryan Johansen, Ottawa's Mike Hoffman and Columbus' Cam Atkinson. The 25-year-old is trending up after 18 assists and 25 points in 48 games following a thumb injury.

Pominville is a role player as his 36th birthday nears, but he's still a double-digit scorer who rarely makes mistakes in the defensive zone.

Zemgus Girgensons is ... Zemgus Girgensons. He's got seven goals in each of the past three seasons and plays hard on the penalty kill. Buffalo's waiver claim of Remi Elie could make Girgensons the extra forward.

Analysis: No other fourth line in Buffalo comes close in terms of skill. Rodrigues and Pominville were regulars on the top two lines last year. Jamie McGinn, David Legwand and Nicolas Deslauriers filled their roles well in 2015-16. But if that group and this one had a game of three-on-three, this unit would run up the score like LeBron James going one-on-one with LaVar Ball.

FIRST DEFENSE PAIR

Year	Left defense	Right defense
2018-19	Scandella	Ristolainen
2017-18	Beaulieu	Ristolainen
2016-17	Gorges	Ristolainen
2015-16	Gorges	Pysyk
2014-15	Gorges	Myers
2013-14	Tallinder	Myers
2012-13	Regehr	Myers
2011-12	Leopold	Ehrhoff

Every year, the Sabres say they'll help Rasmus Ristolainen by cutting down his minutes. Every year, he's on the ice more than nearly everyone in the league. It eventually gets to him. If the plan finally comes to fruition this year, he could be more reliable in the defensive zone. The team has come to expect around seven goals and 35 assists in the offensive zone.

Marco Scandella was one of the few to show pride last season. He may fit better on the second pair, but he can hold his own most nights.

Analysis: Robyn Regehr and Tyler Myers look decent on the screen, but they had a rough year on the ice. Josh Gorges took plenty of heat during his tenure, but that's because he was misused as a No. 1 guy. The best pairing was Jordan Leopold and Christian Ehrhoff, who combined for 15 goals, 56 points and a plus-2 rating. Ristolainen and Scandella should strive to top those numbers.

SECOND PAIR

Year	Left defense	Right defense
2018-19	McCabe	Dahlin
2017-18	Scandella	Tennyson
2016-17	McCabe	Bogosian
2015-16	Colaiacono	Ristolainen
2014-15	Meszaros	Benoit
2013-14	Ehrhoff	Pysyk
2012-13	Leopold	Sekera
2011-12	Regehr	Myers

The hockey world will be watching whenever Rasmus Dahlin steps on the ice. The No. 1 draft pick should quickly become the Sabres' best defenseman in decades. He will, of course, have his share of rookie mistakes as an aggressive thinker, but it'll be fun to watch the 18-year-old.

McCabe might have been the MVP of the preseason for Buffalo. He was slowed (majorly) by a shoulder injury last year, and a rebound looks probable.

Analysis: The Sabres traded Leopold midway through his season. Ehrhoff had one foot out the door. This might be the first time Andrej Meszaros and Andre Benoit don't have a minus next to their names. The previous second pairs should be looking up at Dahlin and his Calder Trophy by June.

THIRD PAIR

Year	Left defense	Right defense
2018-19	Beaulieu	Nelson
2017-18	McCabe	Antipin
2016-17	Nelson	Franson
2015-16	Weber	Franson
2014-15	Weber	Ristolainen
2013-14	Weber	Ristolainen
2012-13	Ehrhoff	Sulzer
2011-12	Sekera	Gagnani

Nathan Beaulieu descended rapidly from the first pair to the doghouse last season. If each player was assigned a Halloween costume, he'd be the Riddler because of his omnipresent question marks. The 25-year-old has a lot to prove.

Casey Nelson has shown flashes of being a shutdown guy, but he was also minus-14 in 37 games last year.

Analysis: The 2012-13 pairing of Ehrhoff and Alex Sulzer was the ideal third unit. Ehrhoff could put up points and Sulzer was sound defensively. Based on the past, Beaulieu and Nelson will have to cover for each other often. We'll see how they do while waiting for Zach Bogosian to get healthy.

GOALTENDERS

Year	Starter	Backup
2018-19	Hutton	Ullmark
2017-18	Lehner	Johnson
2016-17	Lehner	Nilsson
2015-16	Lehner	Johnson
2014-15	Enroth	Neuvirth
2013-14	Miller	Enroth
2012-13	Miller	Enroth
2011-12	Miller	Enroth

Hutton is eager to be a No. 1 goalie for the first time. During his opening month in Buffalo, he's shown he has the right mindset. He wins close games, stops breakaways and makes lethal outlet passes. Those are things the Sabres have needed.

Linus Ullmark has earned the promotion after being a workhorse in Rochester for two seasons. He showed kinks in his armor during a subpar playoff series with the Amerks, but matching his career NHL numbers (9-13-2, .917 save percentage) would be just fine for a backup.

Analysis: Ryan Miller is second only to Dominik Hasek on Buffalo's all-time list. It'll be tough for Hutton to eclipse that, but the newcomer has a clear path to the second spot in this group.

So, yes, the overall depth is better than it's been in a long time. In many cases, it's miles and miles and miles better. The next step is proving it.

Sabres' Rasmus Dahlin on NHL debut: 'Waiting for this my whole life'

By Bill Hoppe

October 3, 2018

BUFFALO – Long before the Sabres drafted Rasmus Dahlin first overall in June, he possessed more skill than most NHL players.

The Swede, 18, has been called the best defense prospect in decades. If rules allowed it, he probably could've thrived in the NHL even a year ago.

So Dahlin, who will make his long-awaited NHL debut tonight against the Boston Bruins in the season opener at KeyBank Center, will likely immediately contribute to the Sabres.

"Right now, (I'm) just excited," Dahlin said Wednesday of his first NHL game. "I've been waiting for this my whole life. It's (the) NHL and that's the biggest thing I can do."

The high expectations for the rookie should probably be tempered a bit, at least early on. Dahlin, after all, is just a kid. Nearly everyone he faces this season will have much more NHL experience.

Sabres coach Phil Housley believes Dahlin's biggest adjustment might be knowing his opponents.

"Their characteristics, what they do, when they're forechecking, what they do offensively when they have the puck," Housley explained. "Just those little ins and outs and details, that's going to take some time, it's going to take some experience."

For example, in a preseason tilt against the Toronto Maple Leafs, 535-goal scorer Patrick Marleau, 39, stripped the puck from Dahlin at the blue line and zoomed off on a breakaway.

Housley expects Dahlin to shake off any jitters early and feel comfortable.

"Rasmus hasn't been in a lot of difficult situations in his young career," Housley said. "It's going to be those first two or three shifts, you're going to struggle to breath. It's going to be exciting. I have confidence he'll settle in."

In the opening games of Dahlin's career, Housley said he simply wants the youngster to keep everything simple.

"Let his talent and his instincts take over," Housley said. "This is an instinctive game. Just make the simple plays, keep it simple. I think he's doing a terrific job working with (assistant coach) Steve Smith with his defensive zone reads, he's learning that part of the game."

After spending just a few weeks with him, Dahlin's new teammates are confident he'll enjoy a successful career.

"Just through our skates that we had early on, you could tell that he was a great skater, great puck handler and you could tell he was going to have all the tools to be a successful D-man," Sabres winger Jason Pominville said. "He's still a kid, it's crazy."

Dahlin will be paired with defenseman Jake McCabe tonight.

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Housley said defenseman Zach Bogosian, who's day-to-day with a lower-body injury, skated on his own Wednesday. He doesn't know when the veteran could start practicing.

Bogosian, 28, played only 18 games last year and underwent season-ending hip surgery in February. The Massena native hasn't played a regular-season game since Jan. 9.

The Sabres eased Bogosian into training camp, keeping him out of some practices early. He was hurt Sept. 25 in a 4-2 preseason loss to the Columbus Blue Jackets.

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Housley on Remi Elie, a winger the Sabres claimed on waivers from the Dallas Stars on Tuesday: "I'm excited about Elie. He's a tenacious forechecker, he can get on the forecheck, he finishes checks."

Elie practiced Wednesday as a spare forward. He will likely be a fourth-liner when he plays.

While Elie only has seven goals and 21 points in his 90-game NHL career, Housley believes he could provide some secondary scoring.

"A lot of people don't give him credit for what he feels offensively," Housley said. "He knows what he's going to do before he gets it. He can make plays in tight areas."

"Top Six" Reasons Sabres had to name Jack Eichel Captain

By Greg Vorse

Spectrum News

October 3, 2018

- 1.) Money Talks: Eichel is at the beginning of his 8-year, \$80 million deal. Being the highest paid player carries weight regardless if the "C" is on your sweater or not.
- 2) Production: In 209 career games the center has given the Sabres 177 points (73+104) which is good enough for .85 points per game. He has been far and away your best player since drafting him in 2015.
- 3.) You Tanked for him: Speaking of the 2015 draft, you were awful and played one of the worst rosters ever in 2014 to guarantee you'd get either Connor McDavid or Jack Eichel.
- 4.) The Players Listen: When were at practice, whether on the bench or in the crowd, it is clear that the other members of the Sabres listen to Eichel. So, C or not, he has the team's attention.
- 5.) He's already a vet to Buffalo: You usually don't associate "veteran" with a 21-year-old, but Eichel has already played in 209 games in the blue and gold which is more than all but 5 members of the Sabres.
- 6.) 4 Alternate captains was silly: If you have 2 quarterbacks you have none, so if you have 4 "captains" what does that say?

Jack Eichel named Sabres captain

By Ted Goldberg

Spectrum News

October 3, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. - Jack Eichel has been named the Sabres team captain on the day before he begins his fourth professional season. Eichel says he held back emotions when he heard the news.

"[Being named captain was] a really, really humbling moment," he says. "I'm so honored obviously that I'm in the conversation. Just to be a leader in this group."

When Eichel was drafted out of Boston University, he was a can't-miss prospect and the consensus second-best NHL prospect behind Connor McDavid.

"I'm a lot more mature now than I was then," Eichel says. "Back then, I was a skilled player with a lot of aspirations but not too much of a direction. Just extremely happy to be in the position I was. A lot of people say you need to learn how to lose before you learn how to win. I've never been on a losing team before until the last few years. It was something new for me. just trying to get to the bottom of it."

Eichel's teammates weren't surprised to hear the news - each player I spoke with says Eichel deserves the captaincy.

"I think everyone's excited for him," says Jason Pominville, who served as Sabres captain over parts of three seasons. "I feel like he's ready for this. I don't think it should be any surprise for anyone about the decision the team made."

"It was great to see," says Kyle Okposo. "He's a young guy and he wears his heart on his sleeve. He's a great guy, and I'm happy for him."

"Naturally, he's become a little bit more vocal and a little bit more comfortable," says linemate Sam Reinhart. "That's his personality, that's the way he is. That's the way he came in from the beginning. He demands that respect with the way he approaches the game and the way he shows up to work every day."

Eichel says his goal as captain is simple - help the Sabres win the Stanley cup. He'll have plenty of time, since this season is the start of an 8-year contract extension worth \$80 million.

Jack Eichel named Buffalo Sabres captain

WKBW

October 3, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - The Buffalo Sabres have named forward Jack Eichel as captain.

Sports reporter Matt Bove happened to capture the moment Eichel was named team captain today.

Last year, the star forward scored 25 goals and posted 39 assists in 64 games. He has a total of 177 points with the Sabres in three years with the team.

The forward signed a long-term deal with Buffalo last year.

Eichel was drafted by the Sabres in 2015. He went second overall.

Sabres' Eichel vows to continually grow and earn captaincy

By Matt Bove

WKBW

October 8, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) - Jack Eichel never got a chance to finish cooking his dinner.

On Tuesday night Eichel's phone rang while he was cooking at his house, with Buffalo Sabres head coach Phil Housley on the line. The Sabres bench boss asked Eichel to come to the rink.

When Eichel arrived to KeyBank Center he was greeted by Housley, Sabres GM Jason Botterill and owner Terry Pegula. Moments later they shared the news -- the 21-year-old center was selected to be the 19th full-time captain in franchise history.

"It was a really humbling moment and I'm just so honored obviously that you know I'm in the conversation," Eichel said Wednesday morning. "First of all, to be a leader in this group and to be the captain, it's an incredible honor. "

"I think it's exciting, not only for me, our players, our coaching staff but our city," Housley said after practice. "I think he represents everything we want as far as our organization goes."

The team also named defenseman Zach Bogosian and forward Kyle Okposo alternate captains.

"I'm just excited about the opportunity and really humbled and honored," Eichel added.

Buffalo Sabres offering free home game tickets for military members

By Kaley Lynch

WIVB

October 3, 2018

(WIVB) - Buffalo Sabres defenseman Zach Bogosian will provide a pair of seats to a member of the military during every home game for the 2018-19 season through the Tickets for Troops program.

Original Pizza Logs is also donating four 100-level tickets to a local member of the military at each Sabres home game. The winning veterans will be recognized on the ice prior to the national anthem.

All active or veteran military personnel are eligible to register.

SABRES SEASON PREVIEW: CAN CAPTAIN JACK LEAD THE WAY?

By Stan Fischler
MSG Networks
October 3, 2018

IN THE IFFY LEAGUE, YOU NEVER WIN OR LOSE.

Like it or not, that's the prognosis in Buffalo for the Sabres.

Or, to put it another way, in terms of hockey in 2018-19 the "Ifs" outweigh the "Plus" and "Minuses" because — well — because there's so much uncertainty about Western New York's favorite hockey team.

Mostly it surrounds the club's two first-round selections this year and their ability to play to their preseason reviews.

Defenseman Rasmus Dahlin and center Casey Mittelstadt ooze talent. But that does not necessarily mean that they'll be able to suddenly live up to their clippings.

Goaltending once more is an Iffy proposition, not to mention sophomore coach Phil Housley who's on the spot as much as any NHL mentor.

That said, there's plenty of reason for hope if the Ifs turn into aces. Here's my Sabres outlook:

GOAL: Arithmetically, Carter Hutton is the answer to GM Jason Botterill's prayers. With St. Louis, Hutton possessed a .931 save percentage, best of NHL goalies with more than 30 appearances. Then again, Hutton never played more than 40 games in a season. Should Hutton fail, Linus Ullmark will be pushed into the top slot.

DEFENSE: Asking Dahlin to fortify the blue line corps will be a challenge among challenges for a rookie blueliner. The good news is that his mentor will be reliable Rasmus Ristolainen. If somehow Zach Bogosian can stay healthy, some good can come out of the Buffalo backline brigade. Otherwise, the likes of Marco Scandella, Jake McCabe and Nathan Beaulieu will have to do.

OFFENSE: Compensating for the loss of Ryan O'Reilly will require deft juggling not to mention the leadership of Jack Eichel. What Connor McDavid means to Edmonton is roughly equivalent to Eichel's importance in Buffalo, even more striking now that Eichel has been named the captain. (Interestingly, neither star made the playoffs last year either.) Ergo, Joltin' Jack can't do it alone. He'll have Conor Sheary on the left and Sam Reinhart on the right side. It looms as a formidable unit but the lines after the top trio raise eyebrows. The best bet would be a superior season from Casey Mittelstadt, a rookie who impressed after six late-season games. Hopefully, good guy Kyle Okposo can find the game that had made him such a valuable performer on Long Island.

SPECIAL TEAMS: The power play needs work as does the penalty kill. 'Nuff said.

INTANGIBLES: How the refurbished Sabres react to coach Housley will go a long way toward determining if this is a playoff team or not. Then there's the matter of how much leadership Eichel can provide. Big Jack is the club's leader on the ice, and wearing the "C" puts a lot more responsibility on his shoulders.

ROOKIES: Here's how The Hockey News puts it: "With Dahlin, Mittelstadt and Brendan Guhle, the Sabres potentially have their best rookie crop ever."

X-FACTOR: The new faces will determine the Sabres' future. If Hutton delivers in goal and Dahlin is as good as touted, Buffalo could surprise and make the postseason.

PREDICTION: With brand-new faces on the roster, Buffalo will need time to come together. But don't be surprised if they're in contention at the end of the season.

Buffalo Sabres name Jack Eichel as their newest captain entering 2018-19 season

By Pete Blackburn

CBS Sports

October 3, 2018

Captain Jack is now officially leading the ship in Buffalo. The Sabres announced Wednesday afternoon that Jack Eichel will wear the captain's "C" this season and beyond. The 21-year-old Eichel, who was selected by Buffalo with the second overall pick in 2015, is entering his fourth NHL season. He's also entering the first year of an eight-year, \$80 million contract extension.

Sabres' coach Phil Housley made the announcement at practice on Wednesday morning.

Eichel becomes the 19th full-time captain in Sabres history. Buffalo left the captaincy vacant following Brian Gionta's departure following the 2017 season.

Despite only playing 67 regular season games last year, Eichel finished with the team lead in goals (25) and points (64) for the last-place Sabres in 2017-2018. He's regarded as an elite young talent across the league but still has room to grow as his team looks to establish some relevance.

Buffalo clearly has faith in him to lead the team on and off the ice as they look to start establishing some positive momentum in their rebuild. That momentum could start taking shape this year, as the Sabres had a strong offseason and should have a chance to be competitive in an Atlantic division that is extremely top heavy.

Captain Jack Begins New Sabres Era

By Anthony Sciandra

The Hockey Writers

October 4, 2018

Oh captain, my captain.

Yesterday in a long-awaited and long-overdue announcement, the Buffalo Sabres named Jack Eichel as their captain for the 2018-19 season. Since the organization selected Eichel second overall in the 2015 NHL Draft, speculation has taken place regarding when the right time would be to bestow him with this honor.

Last season, the organization held-off on naming a captain, instead opting to dress four alternates. That decision was poetically fitting for a Sabres team that lacked direction en route to their third last-place finish in the past five years.

The Sabres will ice a new-look roster that features several new-additions as they attempt to finally right the ship. With the improvements they've made, Eichel can finally lead a team that is on the upswing. Jason Botterill has things headed in the right direction after a roster upheaval that drew rave reviews from the fanbase this summer. The onus is now on the 21-year-old to lead his team to the playoffs and end the league's second-longest postseason drought.

Eichel's Expectations

Since arriving in Western New York, fans of the blue-and-gold have placed immense expectations on Eichel to be the harbinger of success following some of the darkest years in franchise history. His first three seasons in the league have been quite good despite missing significant time due to injury. Over the past two seasons, he has been sidelined for a total of 36 games. If the Sabres plan on making a marked improvement in the standings, they will need a healthy captain moving forward.

Since 2016-17 Eichel has shown that he is capable of producing at nearly a point-per-game pace. Even more impressive is his ability to create offense with a wide assortment of different linemates as both Dan Bylsma and Phil Housley played musical chairs with their forward lines.

He'll start the 2018-19 campaign with the two most talented wingmen he's had since turning pro in new acquisition, Jeff Skinner and his returning partner-in-crime, Sam Reinhart. As an elite scoring presence, Skinner will be a more than adequate replacement for Evander Kane who was dealt to the San Jose Sharks at the trade deadline last season.

After recently signing a bridge-deal as a restricted free-agent, it lends to reason that Reinhart will be playing with a chip on his shoulder in order to show the team (and the rest of the league for that matter) that he's worthy of a long-term contract two years from now.

So what does all of this mean for Eichel? If Housley can resist the urge to re-concoct his forward group on a game-by-game basis, it could very well lead to a level of chemistry and consistency that has been missing from the Sabres' top-six. Should that manifestation take place, it's not unreasonable to anticipate career-high point production for Eichel. Landing somewhere in the 85-90 point range isn't out of the realm of possibility.

Point production is one thing, but his task is actually much greater. The Sabres are fielding a very young roster this season. With that comes the need for a singular voice to turn to in times of adversity, something Eichel is no stranger to. Expectations remain high for the franchise center, but given his new role and the ever-improving locker room morale at KeyBank Center, he is now better suited to manage them. Perhaps waiting until now to award him the captaincy was the right move after all.

Strength Amid Struggle

It's no secret that the Sabres have dealt with their fair share of hardship over the past five years, both on and off the ice. Like it or not, extended periods of perpetual failure take a toll on player psyche. Ryan O'Reilly's

comments about losing his love for the game were indicative of a team that experienced soul-crushing futility as they desperately tried to salvage a disastrous 2017-18 campaign. Even prior to Housley's arrival in Buffalo, Eichel's frustration with the state of the team was palpable. Following a locker room cleanout interview following the 2016-17 season, the then 19-year-old was standoffish with the media while vocally expressing his disapproval of missing the playoffs in his second season.

Jack Eichel Sabres

Eichel is no stranger to adversity in Buffalo. (Amy Irvin / The Hockey Writers)

The jokes came pouring in after that. Irritated portions of the fan base accused him of having a bad attitude, citing him as the primary reason for Bylsma's ousting. They also questioned his ability to be a catalyst for change in a Sabres locker room that had reportedly become toxic and uncommunicative, ever deteriorating, leading the team further into obscurity.

Eichel's ability to remain positive and display maturity amid his team's continued struggles last season (which actually produced worse results than the season prior), should be commended. Now that Botterill has been afforded the opportunity to put his stamp on the roster, ridding himself of the "old core" while adding skilled, high-character contributors, Eichel can now lead a fresh set of faces who all want to bring Buffalo back to the promised land.

For the first time, the Sabres roster is full of players who can help carry the leadership burden. Several of them come from organizations that have experienced their share of success and failure. That experience and added support will prove vital in Eichel's ability to unify his team and keep everyone on the same page, even if they begin to struggle early on.

Alternate Captains

Along with officially handing the leadership reigns to Eichel, the Sabres also announced that winger, Kyle Okposo and defenseman, Zach Bogosian would serve as alternates this year. The two veterans are both coming off of tumultuous campaigns with a newfound determination to re-assert themselves as top-end players in the NHL.

After battling through what resulted in a horrific post-concussion ordeal, Kyle Okposo got off to a rough start last season. Though he did serve as one of the team's alternates, he had a great deal of trouble appearing on the scoresheet in the early going, posting a pedestrian 11 points in his first 26 games back. Fortunately, he was able to rebound, finishing the year with 25 points in his final 36 contests.

In a recent article for The AthleticNHL, Tim Graham spoke to Okposo who provided an in-depth look at his road to recovery after spending an extended period of time in the hospital following a head injury he suffered toward the end of the 2016-17 season.

"Coming into last training camp, you better believe I was scared to go on the road and whether I would go to sleep," Okposo said (from 'Back From the Abyss: Kyle Okposo Opens Up About the Darkest Days of his Life', The AthleticNHL – 9/24/18)

It's reasonable to assume that what he went through required a longer adjustment period to return to form. Hopefully, he will come out firing on all cylinders this season and appear more like the Kyle Okposo who fans were treated to during his time with the New York Islanders.

Bogosian is another story entirely. Since coming to Buffalo via trade with the Winnipeg Jets during the 2014-15 season, he has missed a whopping 108 games due to a variety of different injuries. Last year he only dressed in 18 games while also serving alongside Okposo as an alternate captain.

The Sabres' decision to let him retain the "A" came as a bit of a surprise to fans. With a "new core" that has a heavy emphasis on youth, a wholesale changing of the guard was expected. Given the strong Swedish presence in Buffalo, newcomer Patrik Berglund was seen as one of the odds-on favorites to receive a letter this season, but the team instead opted to put their faith in Bogosian to resurrect his career and help lead one of the least experienced rosters in the league.

Zach Bogosian Sabres

Bogosian will look to stay healthy in 2018-19. (Kevin Hoffman-USA TODAY Sports)

After Botterill and Housley decided to send up-and-coming blueliners like Lawrence Pilut and Brendan Guhle back to Rochester to start the year, their faith in the veteran blueliner became evident. Many feel that his career may be coming to a close, but the organization obviously sees things differently.

Should Bogosian fall to injury, Housley confirmed that defensemen Rasmus Ristolainen and Marco Scandella will alternate wearing his letter while he recovers.

Sabres name Eichel captain

TSN

October 3, 2018

The Buffalo Sabres named Jack Eichel captain on Wednesday ahead of his fourth season with the team.

Eichel was drafted second overall by the Sabres in 2015 and led the team in points in each of the past two seasons.

The 21-year-old scored a career-high 25 goals and 64 points in 67 games with the Sabres last season.

"It's really humbling," Eichel said Wednesday. "Just to be in the consideration would be an honour. It's a huge honour. Obviously, I've shown how invested I am in this city and I'm excited for the future."

Eichel is entering the first season of an eight-year, \$80 million contract with the team. He will turn 22 later this month.

The Sabres had been without a captain since Brian Gionta left the team in 2017.

Is Rasmus Dahlin another Nicklas Lidstrom? He leads Calder Trophy candidates

Kevin Allen

USA Today

October 3, 2018

Buffalo Sabres star Jack Eichel said what you don't see in rookie defenseman Rasmus Dahlin is as important as what you do see.

No panic. No wasted energy. No indecision.

"What I've noticed is how effortless it is for him," Eichel said. "How smooth he is, catching a pass and shooting the puck. He reminds me of (Nicklas) Lidstrom a little bit."

Eichel knows that will raise eyebrows because Lidstrom is a one of the greatest of all-time.

"It's a crazy comparison," he said. "But (Dahlin) isn't physical, and he gets his stick on a lot of pucks and reads the play well. To me, it's about how he sees everything."

Dahlin, the No. 1 pick from this past draft, may be the NHL's most talked-about rookie defenseman since Denis Potvin was drafted No. 1 in 1973. Even though only one defenseman has been named rookie of the year in the past eight years, Dahlin is our preseason pick to win the Calder Trophy.

The Five NHL Players We're Most Excited to Watch on New Teams

The Ringer

October 3, 2018

This offseason was NHL musical chairs. Big dominoes like Erik Karlsson finally changed teams, and longtime prospects like Rasmus Dahlin will get their first chance to make a mark on the league. So given all that roster turnover, The Ringer's resident hockey fans selected the five players we're most excited to watch this season in their new situations.

Rasmus Dahlin: Buffalo Sabres

Megan Schuster: I first became privy to the Legend of Rasmus ahead of the 2018 Winter Olympics. With NHL players barred from competing in the international contest, I was searching for a reason to get invested in what is usually my favorite part of the competition. Colleagues pointed me in the direction of the Swedish team, specifically toward the 17-year-old defenseman who was expected to become the NHL's no. 1 pick just a few months later. So, naturally, I opened up YouTube, searched "Rasmus Dahlin," and became hooked immediately. Look at your new pimple-faced god:

Dahlin didn't play much in the Olympics, but the Buffalo Sabres drafted him no. 1 overall in June, and so far the returns sound incredible. He scored his first official goal for the team in their last preseason contest (though he notched more in the 2018 Prospects Challenge). He's expected to make an immediate splash among the Sabres' top-four defensemen. In September practices, he was playing on a power-play unit that consisted of Dahlin, Jack Eichel, Kyle Okposo, Jeff Skinner, and Jason Pominville. Given all those reports, I am the most in I could possibly be, and I fully expect Rasmus SZN to take Buffalo and its fans by storm.

Casey Mittelstadt: Buffalo Sabres

Michael Baumann: The Buffalo Sabres have remade their roster over the offseason, and after years of fruitless futility, they might actually be ... kind of fun in 2018? But of all the additions to the club, my favorite isn't Dahlin or real-life Kenny Wu Jeff Skinner, but 2017 first-rounder Casey Mittelstadt.

This is cheating, because Mittelstadt did manage to get into six games with the Sabres last year, but this will be the 19-year-old's first full season in the NHL. Mittelstadt is, not to put too fine a point on it, an absolute wizard on the puck. He leaves a lot to be desired physically—he's only 6-foot-1, 202 pounds, and isn't a burner—but he has eyes in the back of his head and can stickhandle through just about any traffic he'll encounter, just loping through defenders, keeping the puck just close enough so he doesn't lose it, but no closer. Anyone who's heard me talk about Oilers center Leon Draisaitl knows how much I love that kind of player. Here are some of Mittelstadt's highlights from this year's World Junior Championships, where he was the tournament MVP and leading scorer.

Mittelstadt's international performance is important, because while the Sabres are becoming increasingly fun, they're also becoming increasingly American. In addition to Mittelstadt, they boast defenseman Jake McCabe, who captained Team USA to gold at the 2013 World Juniors and tallied three points in their semifinal win over Canada. The head coach of Team USA that year was current Sabres coach Phil Housley. Team USA next won gold in 2017, thanks in part to current Sabre Tage Thompson, a gigantic center acquired over the summer from St. Louis for Ryan O'Reilly, a grouchy and overrated Canadian. The Sabres' best player is 21-year-old Jack Eichel, who serves as one of the team's three alternate captains along with fellow Americans Kyle Okposo and Zach Bogosian. Will the Sabres be good? Maybe not. But they'll be American, and that's what really matters.