



Buffalo Sabres

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Mike Harrington: Time to see how Sabres respond to a huge test

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

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Through 17 games, the Buffalo Sabres are on a pace for 96 points. Seriously. Do the math. I almost fell off my chair, too, when I realized it Monday morning.

They're also in a playoff spot. Pittsburgh and Washington – who have combined to win the last three Stanley Cups – are not.

It's right to feel optimistic. The Sabres can actually score. Jeff Skinner for Cliff Pu is feeling like their biggest heist since Daniel Briere for Chris Gratton. Rasmus Dahlin is 18 going on 25. Zach Bogosian might be playing his best hockey since he was a 19-year-old in Atlanta. The goaltending is improved. And it seems Phil Housley's hunches just keep working.

How about Housley pulling Carter Hutton for an extra attacker down two goals with 3:10 left Saturday, and having the game tied with 1:47 to go? That's some Midas touch work there.

Now for a little water to douse the party: Check out the schedule. It's about to turn downright nasty. You want a litmus test? Pay attention to the next week.

Eastern Conference leader Tampa Bay is in KeyBank Center Tuesday night. Then comes a rough road trip: Friday in Winnipeg, Saturday in Minnesota, Monday in Pittsburgh.

No one was looking past the Lightning much after practice Tuesday. And with good reason. Tampa Bay is 12-4-1, atop the Eastern Conference by three points and leading the league in scoring.

"This is going to be a great test for us," said Housley, who will be coaching his 100th NHL game. "I don't think we've played a really complete 60 minutes of hockey lately and this is going to test us. It's going to be tight and we're going to be in adverse situations where we're just going to have to stay the course and let the game bring us something."

For all the fan and media comparisons between the Sabres and Toronto Maple Leafs, fostered in part by the additions of Jack Eichel and Auston Matthews to the rivalry in consecutive years, everyone in the Atlantic Division should be measured against Tampa Bay.

The Lightning lost the Stanley Cup final to Chicago in 2015. They fell in Game 7 of the East final in both 2016 (Pittsburgh) and 2018 (Washington), losing to the eventual Cup champion. And just look at some of the names on that roster.

Steven Stamkos, Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point, Yanni Gourde, J.T. Miller and Tyler Johnson up front. Defending Norris winner Victor Hedman, Ryan McDonagh, Anton Stralman, Mikhail Sergachev among the blueliners. Andrei Vasilevskiy in goal. And a thoroughbred behind the bench, too, in coach Jon Cooper.

"You're going to have to play good hockey against that team," Housley said. "Sooner or later, it has to go through them I believe. They don't beat themselves. It's very rare that they do. They attack the team. When their transitional game is going, they're tough to play against."

It wasn't tough to find agreement in the locker room.

"They set the bar on our side," Jason Pominville said, referring to the Atlantic Division. "Other teams are trying to match that."

"They have quite the depth, a fine-tuned machine there," added Hutton. " ... They're a team that thought last year they didn't get it done in the playoffs. And in the Eastern Conference, they're one of the favorites, if not the favorite."

One story line for Tuesday's game is the Sabres' success at home, where they are 5-2-1. Remember, they won 11 games here last season. They could be more than halfway to that total a week before Thanksgiving.

Saturday's comeback win over Vancouver had the building rocking like we've rarely heard in recent years. But Tampa Bay doesn't get frazzled on the road. The Lightning, in fact, are 6-1 in their last seven visits here and the Sabres are just 3-12-1 against them in the last 16 meetings overall.

"Tampa is a very veteran team," Housley said. "Balance up front, skill up front, experience, defense, goaltending. We're going to have to play a very clean game and not get anxious when it is tight. When it is 0-0, 1-1 or 2-2. Just stay the course."

Once Tampa Bay is gone, things will get dicier when the Sabres hit the road. Winnipeg is 7-2-1 at home while Minnesota is 5-0-2. The Wild are 10-2 overall in their last 12 games.

Pittsburgh has been having an oddly terrible time at home this year (3-4-1), but the Sabres have lost eight straight in PPG Paints Arena and don't have a win there since 2013.

"Tampa is the best in our conference," Pominville said. "Winnipeg and Minnesota have been playing really well and Pittsburgh is Pittsburgh even as they're trying to get back on track. You don't want to look too far ahead, but it is going to be an interesting week or so."

Sure is. This is some big boy hockey coming up. Time to see if the Sabres are ready for it.

Travis Yost's Metrics: Sabres are winning possessions battle for first time in years

By Travis Yost

The Buffalo News

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Travis Yost has been involved in the world of hockey analytics for a decade and is currently part of TSN's Hockey Analytics team. Prior to joining TSN, Travis was a contributor at the Ottawa Citizen, the Sporting News and NHL Numbers, and has been a consultant for an NHL franchise. He will be contributing breakdowns on the Sabres for The Buffalo News this season. Follow Travis on Twitter: @travisyost.

For the first time in a long time, the Buffalo Sabres are taking the game to their opponents.

Over the last few weeks, we have seen encouraging signs from Phil Housley's group. The biggest development has undoubtedly been the shaping of an electric first-line – a trio of attackers (Jeff Skinner, Jack Eichel and Jason Pominville) who can consistently drive the puck north and apply consistent pressure in the offensive zone. Merely the development of one credible line would have been a welcomed deviation from where this organization was two years ago when it felt like every group of forwards and defensemen were fighting a war of attrition.

Make no mistake, the top line is the primary reason why the Sabres are off to an encouraging start. That unit is playing close to 30 percent of games and generally getting the better of their opponents. But it isn't the only reason why the Sabres have become competitive.

Across the lineup, more Sabres players are spending more time in the attacking third. Not only does that mean marginally more scoring opportunities that really didn't exist during the "decade of darkness," but it also means more relief for their goaltenders Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark. After all, the only tried-and-true way of eliminating opponent scoring is to own the puck. The less time of possession the other team has, the less shots a team will take. The less shots a team takes, the less it will score over time.

Let's look at a simple distribution of Sabres skaters season-to-date by shot share (or Corsi percent). We would consider 50 percent "breaking even" – for every shot they give up defensively, they match with one shot offensively. High performing top-six units can sustain percentages north of 52 percent, generally outscoring their opponents by way of shot volume and shot quality. Reliable bottom-six groups tend to float around 48 to 50 percent, generally due to seeing some of those minutes coming against top-six units around the league.

Here is how Buffalo shapes up this season:

Twelve Buffalo skaters have outshot their opponents head-to-head, with a median performance of 51.4 percent. Keep in mind that about 20 percent of the regular season has already elapsed and most of these skaters have at least 200 minutes of ice time, so we aren't dealing with particularly small samples anymore. Core team strengths – like the above-referenced first line – are obvious here, with players such as Skinner and Pominville getting 55 percent of the shot share while on the ice. (Remaining team weaknesses are, too. As much as Buffalo has improved, the blue line remains a substantial work in progress. And this will likely be a theme through the entire regular season.)

But the area I really want to emphasize here concerns Buffalo's "middle-six." The Sabres feel like a top-heavy team because of how many goals have come from their first unit, but their second and third lines are doing well to drive north, too. Johan Larsson, Zemgus Girgensons, Patrik Berglund, Kyle Okposo and Casey Mittelstadt are all seeing 51 percent or more of the shot share, and not one of those players has seen but spot minutes with the team's most talented forwards. And so while it feels like Buffalo is a much improved product because of all of the wondrous goal-scoring from the team's most skilled attackers, there's a secondary layer of improvement within a number of depth players in the Sabres organization.

Not all of those players have turned those shot advantages into goals just yet, but some have. And that's really the rule of the game. Win the shot battle long enough and you'll start to see the goals fall in line.

If we look at how that relationship has played out this season, you see some encouraging results. Nine skaters are both outshooting and outscoring their opponents. Another four skaters are outshooting their opponents, but

just haven't had the goal luck. And only two players – forward Vladimir Sobotka and defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen, both used in more defense-oriented roles this season – are really seeing poor results on both fronts. (Great performance would see a player land in the top-right quadrant here; poor performance would see a player land in the bottom-left quadrant.)

This only serves to reemphasize that the shot advantages are paying dividends when it comes to winning on goal differential and, correspondingly, that such a goal differential are driving early wins into the standings.

Maybe by now you are convinced that this Sabres team is, to some degree, improved. But how much different is this season's iteration than what we have seen in all those futile seasons predating 2018-19? Again, let's focus on the shot-share piece here. The below graphs show rolling shot averages since the 2011-12 season over 10-game intervals. And to me, it illustrates precisely why Buffalo is legitimately in a playoff race as we head toward Thanksgiving:

That little inflection point at the end? That's where Buffalo has started outshooting their opponents on a regular basis. And the wild part here is we can look back seven years – seven years! – and struggle to find another instance in which Buffalo looked like the better team from the shot share battle.

This will be the trend to watch as the season progresses. If Buffalo can sustain this, particularly with its depth players, there's a real shot that the Sabres can break an ugly, ugly playoff drought.

Sabres Notebook: Sam Reinhart's hot hand earns call to top line

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

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Sam Reinhart's hot hand has earned him a promotion.

Reinhart got a chance to play with Jack Eichel and Jeff Skinner in the third period Saturday and the trio produced two late goals that got the Sabres even in their eventual 4-3 shootout win over Vancouver. The line practiced together Monday in HarborCenter and will get the call in Tuesday's game against Tampa Bay in KeyBank Center.

Jason Pominville, who had combined with Eichel and Skinner to form one of the NHL's top trios the last three weeks, is joining Evan Rodrigues and Vladimir Sobotka.

Reinhart has a goal, three assists and a plus-4 ranking the last three games while Pominville had just one assist and is minus-4 in the same span. Reinhart has two goals and 10 assists on the season and his 12 points are fourth on the team behind Eichel (19), Skinner (19) and Pominville (15).

"Things have been going well lately," Reinhart said. "I'm trying to play the same way regardless where I am in the lineup. The last few games, [Rodrigues and Sobotka] and I played well together but this is a different opportunity for me, too."

The other lines have Casey Mittelstadt centering Conor Sheary and Kyle Okposo, with Johan Larsson between Patrik Berglund and Tage Thompson. Zemgus Girgensons may be a healthy scratch for the second straight game. Remi Elie is an extra forward.

"I'm fine with whatever line I'm on," Pominville said. "We know lines can change after wins or after losses and they'll change again. 'Roger' [Rodrigues] and I have had success. And 'Sobi' [Sobotka] is a smart player, fun to play with. We can jell well and be a reliable line. And we have two guys who take faceoffs too."

Coach Phil Housley said he was hoping to get a little more balance from his forward group and to take advantage of Rodrigues' improved play the last two games at center.

"I like the way he's been playing up the middle," Housley said. "He's shown his speed and you've got two really experienced guys on the wings."

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Hall of Famer Dominik Hasek visited the Sabres' dressing room Monday and who did he stop to meet for the first time? New Buffalo starting goaltender Carter Hutton.

"It was cool. That was obviously a legend, a guy I grew up watching a lot of," Hutton said. "I don't think I can emulate him too well the way he played. He's a legend here and one of the greatest goalies to play the game."

Hasek, who now lives full-time in the Czech Republic, comes to Buffalo a few times a year to meet with friends and advisers of his Hasek's Heroes. He was en route to Toronto for Monday night's Hockey Hall of Fame induction ceremony.

Hutton was in St. Louis when the Blues celebrated their 50th anniversary in 2017 and said it's been interesting to watch Housley put a big emphasis on the Sabres' history. Photos of many old Sabres, including Hasek, were added above the team's dressing room stalls this season.

"It definitely was an important thing for us to get some of the younger guys to understand the meaning of what being a Sabre is and the alumni that comes with it, what this city is built on," Hutton said. "That's part of the passion. A big backing of that is having pride in wearing the jersey, what it means to be a Sabre and what this team and city have been through as an organization and as a whole in Buffalo."

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Former Sabres goaltending prospect Cal Petersen was recalled Monday by the Los Angeles Kings from Ontario of the AHL after Jack Campbell went down with a torn meniscus. With Campbell and Jonathan Quick both out, Petersen and Peter Budaj will share the Los Angeles net.

Petersen, 24, was just 2-3-1 with a 4.29 goals-against average and .881 save percentage at Ontario. But he was solid there last year as a pro rookie (23-14-2, 2.58/.910).

The Notre Dame product was the Sabres' fifth-round pick in 2013 but opted not to sign with Buffalo and moved on to Los Angeles as a free agent in 2017.

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Housley was teammates with two players getting inducted into the Hall tonight, spending 22 games in front of New Jersey goaltender Martin Brodeur in 1995-96 and parts of two seasons with Martin St. Louis in Calgary (1998-99 and 1999-2000) before the undrafted forward's career blossomed in Tampa Bay.

Housley, of course, was inducted into the Hall in 2015 and said he understood what this year's class was going through a few hours before the ceremony.

"You're never ready until you get up on the stage," said Housley, who famously used his 1980s-era Jofa helmet as a prop during his speech. "You prepare and think about your speech and all of a sudden, it just hits you like a ton of bricks. This is actually happening. So it will be funny to see how they adjust from that presentation until they get to the podium because I know once you got up on stage, it just hit you."

Thoughts on Our Thoughts: On Leafs breakouts, the Sabres righting the ship, Caps fans for Pittsburgh and more

By Justin Bourne

The Athletic

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For years now, I've been very grateful to Elliotte Friedman of Sportsnet for allowing me to write the feature "Thoughts on Thoughts," which as many of you know, is me sharing a handful of his "31 Thoughts" article, and then sharing my take on said point. It's always been well received, and certainly couldn't be done without his reporting and writing.

This morning, as I do many Monday mornings, I opened up The Athletic's app and dove in ... and instantly morphed into a Twitter retweet machine. As usual, I found article after article providing quality insights and interesting information. Knowing the volume of content produced each weekend on this site, I figured Mondays would be a good day to do a "Thoughts on Athletic Articles" style post (hence "Thoughts on Our Thoughts") to help you quickly scan through some of the great stuff our writers have produced and hopefully add some additional insight as well.

Let's get too it!

Down Goes Brown weekend power rankings: Early season reckoning arrives for Hawks, Penguins and others
By Sean McIndoe, read here.

On Sunday night I tweeted about how this year, there doesn't really seem to be a ton of "great" teams beyond Nashville and Tampa. There's another couple in the Atlantic that can hang (Toronto and Boston), and another two in the Central that are making some noise (Winnipeg and Minnesota), but beyond that, nobody in the Pacific seems to be all that great, and same goes for the Metro. (We'll obviously wait and see on teams with top talent like Washington and Pittsburgh, of course, but they've been pretty blah to date.)

Here's who DGB chose to fill out his top-5, his words:

5. Minnesota Wild (11-4-2, +9) – Yeah, it's probably time to start taking them seriously.

Honestly, this is probably too low for the Wild, who are one of the hottest teams in the league. That's not some short-term streak – after losing four of their first five, they've gone 10-2-0 to move into second spot in the Central, two points back of the Predators. They just finished a brutal seven-game road trip, coming away with 10 of 14 points and now they're home for six of the next seven.

They're doing with it with contributions from the older veterans and Vezina-caliber goaltending from Devan Dubnyk. That's not always the most sustainable model, but if they need to make adjustments, Bruce Boudreau can handle it. He's pretty good at this.

Here's the thing. He's absolutely right. They've been killing it, they're chasing down the Preds, don't look now folks, here comes the Minnesota Wild, etc. etc.

I just. Can't. Buy in. Not yet, anyway. I 100 percent buy in that they're a good team. I like their top four D and they have quality forwards all throughout. But I tend to think of power rankings – and everyone does it differently – as "teams who've most convinced me they can win the Cup." And the top end guys on that Wild team just aren't top end enough for me. I'm sure that's going to go over swell, it's just ... we haven't seen a team win on "quality all around!" since Carolina in 2006. Teams today generally have at least a few of the best 10-15 players in the league.

And then there's the whole Bruce Boudreau thing. He's been a Hall-of-Fame quality regular season coach ... but it just hasn't panned out in the postseason. Maybe there's nothing to that, maybe there is. But it's just another dangling factor for me that I can't overlook.

When a good deed gets better: Story behind Capitals' raffle to benefit Pittsburgh shooting victims

by Chris Kuc, read here.

This was an amazing story that I'm so happy came to light. We all need more feel-good stories in our lives these days, don't we? The short form is that the Washington Capitals decided to give their half of the 50/50 one game to the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh in the wake of the tragic synagogue massacre.

Caps fans learned of this, and spent way, way more than usual. And then something even more special happened.

Here are a few paragraphs:

The prize pool reached \$38,570, the largest of the season, and when the winning number of 131066 was drawn, the father, a 53-year-old Washington, D.C., lobbyist, discovered he held the winning ticket.

He knew exactly what he would do with the winner's share: donate it back to the foundation to help those in Pittsburgh in need.

The father and son that made this decision asked to remain anonymous, saying the point of the donation was never about anything other than getting more help to those who need it. As Kuc mentioned, "The full prize pool of \$38,570 went to the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh." From a rival organization, that's quite a meaningful gesture.

Why Marlies' top defenceman Calle Rosen is here to stay
By Scott Wheeler, read here.

There's always a ton of debate around the fringes of the Toronto Maple Leafs roster, and this year the defence seems to be where most of the speculation lies. The team just doesn't seem content with what they have there. While Igor Ozhiganov, Justin Holl and Martin Marincin are all hanging around and vying for minutes, it seems that Calle Rosen's stock is rising in the AHL to a degree that could make those three even more uncomfortable.

As Wheeler notes, sometimes Sheldon Keefe has guys that grow on him, and once they take root, he really advocates for their advancement. It happened with Zach Hyman, Andreas Johnsson, and even Justin Holl, to some extent. Well, here's a quote from Wheeler's article discussing Calle Rosen's game of late:

"I just find when you're playing the bigger ice, a lot of times you'll skate the puck to the outside and when you have the type of speed that (Rosen) does you can escape a lot of pressure," Keefe explained. "When you do that on the smaller ice in North America, you run out of space real quick. As he learned to navigate the ice a bit better it opened up the game defensively for him in terms of distributing the puck to the forwards, in terms of using his speed in the right areas of the ice.

"And then, just in terms of how we want to defend, with his skillset and his speed it really lends itself to being a great defenceman for us with real tight gaps, making it hard on the opponent. He doesn't have to rely on physicality and strength necessarily. He can utilize his speed to be on top of guys and that makes life a lot easier for him."

Seems he likes him!

If I had to pinpoint the guys that find their way to Keefe's heart, I'd say he falls for players who don't let the other team have the puck. I know that sounds obvious, but it's not, really. It's not so much about being a skilled dangler, or a speedster, or a playmaker, or whatever. It's that from top to bottom, the Leafs organization believes that as long as the other team doesn't have the puck, nothing bad can happen and only good things can.

With that in mind, they place tremendous value on the guys who facilitate that. Again, Hyman, Johnsson, Holl, Dermott, Brown ... the guys who move up generally play in a manner (energetic work, within structure, good sticks) that prevent the opponent from getting to play with the puck. They play tight on guys. They play in a way that, even when they're not producing offence, they're contributing. Seems like Rosen has been just that for the Marlies this season.

'Leo's there to level me out': How Mathew Barzal is benefitting from a favorite Barry Trotz locker-room strategy
By Arthur Staple, read here.

Locker room dynamics are a funny thing. Teams and players tend to place high value on their importance, coaches worry about it regularly, while I'm sure fans are a little unsure about the importance of their value. But there's a lot of time spent in that room, and your work environment certainly changes your mood, your effort and your enjoyment based on if it's good or bad.

This article focused on the idea that sometimes young guns need a stabilizing force, and how Leo Komorov has been assigned a stall next to Mat Barzal to help keep him level, share insights when it's time to be serious, and well ... be Leo when it's time to be Leo.

Barzal understands his own youthful traits. "Maybe the highs are too high and the lows are too low for me sometimes," he said. "Leo's there to level me out, put a smile on my face before a game when I'm a little too serious."

In practice the chirps come out. Barzal's power-play unit against Komarov's penalty-killers. And almost always Komarov will call out to his young counterpart.

"I'm opening my book to chapter 13, that's a favorite of his," Barzal said. "Or, 'I have my playbook open to page 13, I know how to read you.' It's nonstop."

Dressing room stalls are assigned, as they should be. If friends sat by friends, they'd stay in their own cliques, information wouldn't get shared as it should, and the team would suffer. It sounds like the Leo/Barzal combo is working just fine for the Islanders.

If they can't sign William Nylander, the Leafs should let him sit out the season – not trade him
By Jonas Siegal, read here.

I made a similar point in my last Thoughts on Thoughts (albeit via some tweets), basically saying I just can't see Kyle Dubas getting bullied into a bad trade or bad contract. Everyone has been so focused on the Leafs being the best they can be this season (bringing about JUST SIGN HIM and JUST TRADE HIM panic), they seem to have forgotten who holds the cards – they don't owe Willy a contract or a trade. And Dubas can be a pretty stubborn guy! But Jonas goes deep on the idea, reminding us what Brendan Shanahan et al. have said all along:

The Leafs are supposed to be about not only now under Brendan Shanahan's leadership, but three, four, five and six years down the line. It's about competing for Cups, not just a Cup.

"You can't take for granted the opportunities and the years that you have in front of you and you have to focus on the present," Shanahan said on the first day of the regular season, "but it's been our goal – and it's been Mike Babcock's goal and it's been Kyle Dubas's goal – to do this in a manner in which we can sustain it over a period of time.

"Once you become a contender, once you become a legitimate contender, it only gets harder. That's why you want to be a contender for as long as you can sustain it."

Jonas makes the point that trading a potential superstar for two good players doesn't really make them much better, or more likely to contend, so much as it – my words here – turns them into the Minnesota Wild. And you know my thoughts on the Wild from above. You don't come across "elite" often, not without years of utter failure; the Leafs likely won't find another truly elite player for years to come. (They aren't signing another Tavares any time soon.) So they should probably hoard all the elite they can, even if it hurts them this season.

You need stars to win. If Willy wants to play chicken here, he might just get run over.

Tulloch: The value of the stretch pass and how the Leafs can better utilize it
By Ian Tulloch, read here.

You would think that me cribbing the "conclusion" on this post, which could operate as a "tl;dr" ("too long; didn't read) of sorts, would discourage you from reading the article, but it should do the opposite. Here are the three points he concluded with:

This is a really well done post, fans of other teams could definitely learn from it too. My contribution to the conversation here would be that at one point Tulloch asks the questions whether the issue with some of the Leafs struggles when forcing the stretch pass is the result of system or personnel. I'd lean more the former ... assuming you believe it's a problem at all, which I'm not sure the Leafs coaches do.

They would be well aware of what the numbers say on this, they likely just interpret the numbers differently. One thing you hear Mike Babcock say incessantly in interviews is that they want to play fast. That doesn't mean skating fast, as I've said many times before. They simply don't want their D-men standing still holding the puck, their feet in quicksand, scanning the ice for an open receiver while the opposition gets in their structure. If there's an available stick blade, they want that puck moving up ice before the D can get set-up. They want their D moving their feet before they even have a thought, and to figure it out – which is to say, find a stickblade – as fast as possible. If there isn't one, keep skating til there is.

The belief is that they want puck confrontations as far from their net as possible, so when forwards see the D get the puck in a regroup, they're to take off and get available. There's more structure to their breakouts, but on regroups, they're told to just get up ice so that even if they can't catch the pass, the puck either gets tipped into the opposing zone or there's a puck battle far from the Leafs net. (I should note: once the D don't play fast on regroups, then the forwards will comeback and there are structured plans.)

With the breakout (as in the video where Rielly stops behind the net for a set breakout), there are football style routes, and guys do have to come back. Rielly can't go until the structure is in place. But for the most part, the Leafs poor stretch pass numbers likely just come from them forcing the puck up as quick as possible and believing the result of a failed completion still puts them in a spot they're comfortable with.

(And yes, when it comes to personnel, they're probably thinking "Listen Marincin, don't overthink this. Get the puck, fire it up to one of our talented forwards and let them deal with it.)

And finally ...

Sabres built bonds with each other and the past, and it's showing in the results
By John Vogl, read here.

Don't look now but the Sabres are a hockey team again. This adds to the point I made about the dressing room dynamic, and how much of a difference having a group pulling together can make. From Vogl:

So during the offseason, the Sabres made a point to create trust. Players called and met with each other. Coach Phil Housley visited players and alumni. General manager Jason Botterill brought in new guys and talked with the holdovers.

Slowly, a bond formed. When the Sabres went to the West Coast for 10 days and learned they could beat established teams, the trust grew. When Buffalo rallied from two goals down in the final three minutes Saturday to beat Vancouver, the cheering fans saw the growth firsthand.

It wasn't easy and certainly didn't happen overnight, but the Sabres are a team again.

This is a really insightful look at what's changed in Buffalo. You have to be happy for their fans – they've felt the pain for a long time, so let's hope this team really is as good as they've looked so far.

Versatile Vladimir Sobotka quietly key contributor to Sabres' strong start

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
November 12, 2018

BUFFALO – Vladimir Sobotka's arrival here was mostly overlooked. Of course, that isn't surprising given the Sabres acquired the Czech forward in a blockbuster trade just hours after free agency opened.

The Sabres signed a few new players, including starting goalie Carter Hutton, early on July 1. Then they dished former NHL All-Star Ryan O'Reilly to the St. Louis Blues for three players and a first-round pick that night.

Winger Tage Thompson, perhaps the biggest piece of the deal, was a former first-rounder the Sabres insisted the Blues include. They also received forward Patrik Berglund, a three-time 20-goal scorer.

So in the excitement that accompanied trading O'Reilly on the busiest day on the NHL calendar, Sobotka's acquisition barely registered.

Fast forward to today, and Sobotka, 31, has quietly been one of the biggest surprises during the Sabres' strong 9-6-2 start, showcasing his versatility while moving around the lineup.

"He's kind of like a Swiss Army Knife, he can do it all," said Hutton, who played with Sobotka in St. Louis. "I think he's shown that every night."

Entering Tuesday's tilt against the Tampa Bay Lightning inside KeyBank Center, Sobotka has scored three goals in 14 outings, more than Berglund (two) and Thompson (zero) have combined and just one less than top center Jack Eichel.

"He's very steady and reliable," said Sabres coach Phil Housley, who has utilized Sobotka at center and wing.

Right now, the 5-foot-11, 197-pound Sobotka is a left winger beside center Evan Rodrigues and Jason Pominville. Sobotka also kills penalties, takes key faceoffs and occasionally plays on the power play.

"He's a really strong guy, he's extremely stable, he's really good in the corners," Sabres winger Kyle Okposo said. "He's played a long time. He does a lot of the little things right you don't really notice. (He's) just a smart player, can kind of play up and down your lineup."

Sobotka also possesses offensive upside. He compiled a career-high 11 goals and 31 points in 81 games last season.

In Thursday's 6-5 overtime win Montreal, Sobotka scored twice in the first period.

"He's very reliable and dependable," Housley said. "We probably could get him some more power-play time, but he's doing such a good job on the penalty kill. He's important in D-zone with the draws on the left dot, and he just brings a workmanlike approach to the game.

"He's very consistent. We'd like him to contribute more offensively like he did in Montreal."

Still, Sobotka often isn't cast in an offensive role. Taking draws in the defensive zone, Hutton said, usually doesn't set you up to score goals.

"We were just joking around sometimes those players are the guys they get the puck out and then they get a faceoff in the offensive zone and then they change for the top guys to come out, right?" Hutton said. "Not everybody's going to be the guy putting pucks in the back of the net.

"You need all those versatility players to make the engine run. I think he's definitely a key part of that. He does have offense."

Sobotka showcased his offensive prowess during a three-year run in the KHL, compiling 27 goals and 102 points in 138 contests.

In 2014, after recording a career-best 33 points, Sobotka bolted from the NHL to sign a three-year contract with Omsk Avangard, a Siberian team.

"That was just my personal thing," Sobotka, who was a restricted free agent then, said of why he left the Blues

After his KHL contract expired, Sobotka returned to St. Louis late in the 2016-17 season, playing one game before earning regular duty in the playoffs.

"I tried something new," Sobotka said of his KHL stint. "What it did to help me or not, I never regretted it."

Sobotka, as his answers might illustrate, is "a quiet guy," Hutton said.

"He's a family man, he's a really good teammate," Hutton said. "He's got a dry sense of humor. I think once you get to know him a little better he opens up."

Okposo said: "He's soft-spoken at first, but now that he's comfortable, he's pretty funny."

Okposo said Sobotka is an "old-school NHL guy," an assessment Hutton said is true.

"He's got a real bite to him, you know what I mean?" Hutton said. "He's a guy that's not going to shy away from anything. If guys want to mix it up, he's going to be right in there headfirst."

Sabres' line changes create balance

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
November 12, 2018

BUFFALO – By now, after 99 games as Sabres coach, Phil Housley knows his group well enough he's confident making line changes.

Three weeks ago, when Housley put wingers Jeff Skinner and Jason Pominville beside top center Jack Eichel, the Sabres went on a tear. The line quickly morphed into one of the NHL's best.

"It's definitely an experience with the group and how they play and ... realizing when they are going, to try to reward them with more minutes," Housley said of how he makes changes. "It's just one of those things that maybe I've been fortunate that things have worked out well. I know in the past we've tried to do it, tried to spark in between periods, change the lines up.

"We don't want to (tinker) too much with it, I really like the balance where it is, but you always try to give your team a spark in some way or another."

Housley helped spark the Sabres by breaking up Eichel's line, a trio some have dubbed "J Crew," on Saturday afternoon. In the third period of their 4-3 shootout win against the Vancouver Canucks, Housley promoted Sam Reinhart to Pominville's spot at right wing.

"We played about, what, 10 minutes together?" Reinhart said. "I think we all know each other's game by now, we all know what each other bring."

The move paid almost instant dividends, as Reinhart helped the Sabres roar back in the final 2:27 of regulation, assisting on Skinner's goal before tying the game.

Housley kept them together for this morning's practice inside HarborCenter.

"Third period, after about the first five minutes, just needed to make a change to boost our guys and trying to look for a spark for somebody," Housley said inside KeyBank Center. "I thought Reino was going well. Reino's played with Jack before, obviously. We're just trying to find balance throughout our lineup."

Housley likes the balance Saturday's changes created. Right now, the Sabres have three intriguing scoring lines. Pominville moved beside center Evan Rodrigues and Vladimir Sobotka. Casey Mittelstadt centers Conor Sheary and Kyle Okposo on what could be considered the second trio.

In other news, Tuesday's home tilt against the Tampa Bay Lightning kicks off a rough stretch in which the Sabres play four of the NHL's heavyweights – the Winnipeg Jets, Minnesota Wild and Pittsburgh Penguins – on the road.

"This is going to be a great test for us," Housley said. "I don't think we've really played a complete 60 minutes of hockey lately, and it's going to test us, because it's going to be tight, we're going to be in adverse situations where we're just going to have to stay the course and let the game bring us something if there is something to bring us, and not go searching for it. ...

"(It's) just taking what's given, because Tampa's a very veteran team."

Tampa Bay has been a powerhouse for years. If the Sabres ever move up in the Atlantic Division, they'll likely have to take down the Lightning.

"You're going to have to play good hockey against that team, because sooner or later it has to go through them, I believe," Housley said.

Skinner providing finishing touch for resurgent Sabres

By Nicholas J. Cotsonika

NHL.com

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BUFFALO -- The Buffalo Sabres trailed by two late in the third period at KeyBank Center on Saturday. They pulled their goalie. Then forward Jeff Skinner saw the puck ring around the boards and started to sneak from the right circle into the slot.

Skinner crept behind Vancouver Canucks center Elias Pettersson, found a soft spot and kept his stick blade low while goaltender Jacob Markstrom and defenseman Christopher Tanev worried about center Sam Reinhart holding the puck behind the net.

Reinhart sent the puck past Tanev and onto Skinner's tape. In a flash, in tight, Skinner lifted the puck over Markstrom's right shoulder and into the upper left corner. It was 3-2 with 2:27 to go. Buffalo had life.

"I think he gets to the net really well," center Jack Eichel said. "Obviously he has a knack for scoring goals. You see it there at the end of the game where he gets that one, puts it up top pretty quick. That's a great goal by him."

That's why the Sabres got him.

After acquiring Skinner from the Carolina Hurricanes on Aug. 2, general manager Jason Botterill said the exciting thing was that the trade was not about futures. It would help the team immediately and excite the players.

The Sabres had finished last in the NHL for third time in five seasons, and as part of an offseason overhaul, they gave up a prospect (forward Cliff Pu) and three draft picks (a second-rounder in the 2019 NHL Draft, a third and a sixth in the 2020 NHL Draft) for a goal-scorer entering the last season of his contract.

The early returns are promising. Skinner's goal Saturday was his 11th in 10 games and sparked a comeback. The Sabres won 4-3 in a shootout. With 12 goals this season, Skinner is tied for second in the NHL behind Boston Bruins forward David Pastrnak (16). At 9-6-2, the Sabres are five points behind the Atlantic Division-leading Tampa Bay Lightning, who they play at home Tuesday (7:30 p.m. ET; NBCSN, NHL.TV).

"He's in the right spot, right time, gets rebounds that bounce to him, but that's having a knack for knowing where to go," forward Jason Pominville said. "He's good around the net. He probably knows where the puck's going to go and finds a way to get there. He's been fun to watch."

Skinner has scored 216 goals since entering the NHL in 2010-11, 16th in the League in that span. He has scored 169 at even strength, tied with Brad Marchand of the Boston Bruins for seventh in the NHL in that span.

The Sabres get a finisher, and Skinner gets to play with Eichel (four goals, 15 assists), whom he called one of the best centers in the League. They have developed chemistry as linemates and are tied for the team scoring lead with 19 points each.

Oh, and Skinner is plus-11. He was minus-27 last season and hasn't had a positive rating in a season since he was plus-3 in 2010-11, when he had 63 points (31 goals, 32 assists) and won the Calder Trophy as NHL rookie of the year. He has been put in a position to succeed by often starting shifts in the offensive zone.

"Any time the team's playing well, I think individuals start to have success," Skinner said. "For me, I think the team's played well, the line's played well and I've been sort of on the right end of some of the plays."

Skinner knew he wasn't part of Carolina's long-term plans and waived his no-trade clause to come to Buffalo, which is relatively close to family in his hometown of Toronto.

"I didn't know exactly when [the trade] was going to happen," Skinner said. "I think there was a good feeling that it was going to happen. For me, fortunately Buffalo sort of gave me the opportunity. I'm pretty grateful for that."

The Sabres have been pleased with his energy in practice and how it has raised the level of competition, and with how, at 26, he has developed relationships with younger players like 18-year-old rookie defenseman Rasmus Dahlin and 19-year-old rookie forward Casey Mittelstadt.

"It's hard to look back," Skinner said. "There's so many variables and so many things going on. It's hard to play the sort of what-if scenarios, because there's an infinite amount of them. For me, I think the change of scenery happened, and so far, it's gone well."

Now he has to keep it up, and we have to see what happens with his contract. Skinner is shooting 21.1 percent, almost double his career average of 11.0 percent. Odds are, he will cool off. But he knows.

"There's a long way to go," he said. "I think you work to keep getting better. I think it's the same if you get off to not a great start. You keep working, keep getting better, and realize it's a long season."

Minnesota goalie on Mittelstadt's go-to move: 'It's so hard to stop'

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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Eric Schierhorn still recalls situations when the Minnesota Golden Gophers were tied or trailing late last season, and an 18-year-old Casey Mittelstadt - playing his first and only season of college hockey - would skate by the net to offer reassurance.

"He'd come skate by me if there was a faceoff in our end and be like, 'Hey, we're going to get you one. I'm going to get you one,'" Schierhorn, now a senior goaltender at Minnesota, said by phone Monday. "He's putting it on his shoulders that he's going to win us the game. He wants to be that guy."

Mittelstadt was that guy for the Buffalo Sabres in their win over Vancouver on Saturday, beating Canucks goalie Jacob Markstrom on his first NHL shootout attempt. He insisted afterward that he wasn't nervous. His skills, he said, were polished from a year of practice shootouts in college.

For Schierhorn, his opponent in those practices, the goal was a familiar sight.

"The goal was unreal," he said. "I've seen that one out of him a lot. That's kind of his go-to move, that one or a quick backhand shelf. It was pretty sick. But playing with him all year last year, it kind of became the norm, know what I mean? It was sweet."

Mittelstadt said he had the move planned from the beginning - puck moving quickly as he approached the net, a quick cut to his backhand near the edge of the paint followed by an equally fast switch back to his forehand.

The move to his backhand drew Markstrom just enough to his left to provide space for the puck to be tucked in behind the goalie's skate.

"I think it's, one, how dangerous his backhand is and how quickly he can get it up, so you've got to stay true to that," Schierhorn said. "When he brings it to his backhand before he kind of does that hard cut to his forehand, you've got to honor that."

"I think he gets guys to bite on that and then he just moves so quick back to his forehand to tuck it by. I mean, it's so hard to save. There are so many aspects of it that are so good."

Tickets for Tuesday vs. Tampa Bay

Mittelstadt credited Schierhorn and fellow Gophers goalie Mat Robson with helping him hone his shootout moves last season. The two goaltenders embrace the competitive aspects of shootout drills and enjoy chirping teammates who are unable to get one by them.

Mittelstadt won those battles more often than not. Schierhorn estimates it took all of 10 minutes for him to be taken back by the freshman's skill when they first shared the ice. As for the rookie's confidence - Schierhorn doesn't think he's bluffing when he says he's doesn't get nervous.

"Yeah, I believe it," he said. "He's a stud, he's a gamer. So, he wants the pressure. He wants to be the guy who scores the goal. He sees it as an opportunity to succeed or make a big play. He doesn't see it as an opportunity to fail, if that makes sense."

Fair to say it makes sense to anyone who watched on Saturday. Now, onto notes from Monday's practice.

Lineup changes

Phil Housley's decision to swap Sam Reinhart and Jason Pominville in the third period proved to be a key factor in the Sabres erasing a two-goal deficit on Saturday. Reinhart assisted on Jeff Skinner's goal to cut the deficit in half, then buried a rebound himself to force overtime.

Reinhart remained on a line with Skinner and Jack Eichel on Monday, while Pominville skated alongside Vladimir Sobotka and Evan Rodrigues.

"I thought Reno was going well," Housley said. "Reino's played with Jack before, obviously. We're just trying to find balance throughout our lineup."

The trio of Skinner, Eichel and Pominville were one of the league's best since joining together on Oct. 20. Skinner ranks third in the NHL with 16 points in that span, while Eichel and Pominville are tied for seventh with 14 apiece.

Housley said that Pominville's success on a line with Rodrigues to begin the season was another factor in the decision.

"Pommer, I'm excited about that line as well, with Sobotka and Rodrigues," he said. "[Rodrigues] has been playing really well. I like the way he's been playing up in the middle, he's shown his speed and he's got two experienced guys on his wings."

Here's how the full lineup looked at practice:

53 Jeff Skinner - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
43 Conor Sheary - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 21 Kyle Okposo
17 Vladimir Sobotka - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 29 Jason Pominville
28 Zemgus Girgensons - 22 Johan Larsson / 10 Patrik Berglund - 72 Tage Thompson

19 Jake McCabe - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
6 Marco Scandella - 4 Zach Bogosian
82 Nathan Beaulieu - 26 Rasmus Dahlin
81 Remi Elie* - 8 Casey Nelson

40 Carter Hutton
35 Linus Ullmark

*Extra forward skating on defense

The road ahead

The matchup with Vancouver kicked off a difficult road for the Sabres to end the month of November. Look at their next four games: at home against Atlantic Division leading Tampa Bay on Tuesday, back-to-back road games against two of the Central Division's top three teams in Winnipeg and Minnesota this weekend, and a visit to Pittsburgh to meet Sidney Crosby and the Penguins on Monday.

That stretch is followed by three games against teams that are within four points of Buffalo in the standings (Philadelphia, Montreal and Detroit).

Carter Hutton said the Sabres are looking forward to the challenge presented by the Lightning. After that, they'll take it one day at a time.

"Every team's really good in this league," Hutton said. "I think any team on any given night can play really well and can test you. These are teams with winning records. We're at home here then we've got to go out to a few tough buildings and play.

"It'll be a good experience for guys and I think for us, we can't really get too overwhelmed with the bulk of the games. We've just got to keep what's in front of us. We've got a challenge tomorrow against Tampa and we get our rest tonight and we focus for that, then we move forward from there."