



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres ride longest winning streak of season into grueling stretch

By Jason Wolf

The Buffalo News

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The Buffalo Sabres bring a three-game winning streak, tied for their longest of the season, into a grueling stretch of the schedule.

They'll play six games in nine days, including three in the next four, beginning on Friday in Winnipeg. The road trip continues on Saturday at Minnesota and Monday at Pittsburgh before the Sabres return home and play another three games in four days.

"When you play 82 games, it's a long season," defenseman Jake McCabe said after practice Thursday at KeyBank Center. "You're going to have bumps and bruises. You're going to be banged up at times. You're going to be playing a lot of games in a short amount of time, and guys are playing through injuries every night.

"It's one of those things where every night is a grind. It's extremely hard to win in this league, let alone win games in a row. That's huge. And so we're going to continue to build on this little win streak we have now. Once you add those games up, it goes a long way towards the end of the year."

The Winnipeg Jets are 8-2-1 this season at Bell MTS Place, the rink with the league's smallest capacity and among its loudest environments. The Sabres are just 2-6 there since Winnipeg returned to the NHL in 2011.

The Sabres (10-6-2) have won three consecutive games for the second time this season, which ties the Jets for the third-longest active streak in the NHL. They're going for their first four-game winning streak since Dec. 9-15, 2014, which happens to have ended with a 5-1 loss at Winnipeg.

Both of the teams with longer winning streaks are Atlantic Division rivals. Florida has won five consecutive games, the longest active run in the league, while Detroit has won four in a row and is 7-1 in its last eight to get to .500 after a 1-7-2 start.

"I think momentum for sure carries over," forward Casey Mittelstadt said. "You kind of get going and you get on a roll. We've become a pretty resilient group. I think guys are sticking together in the room and we realize that we can score and that we're never out of games. It's important for us to keep doing that."

Veteran defenseman Zach Bogosian offered a different perspective.

"I don't know about momentum, but habits carry from game to game," Bogosian said. "I think if we're playing the right way, doing the right things, those things carry over. But every game is different. Every team plays different. But we have a good feeling in this locker room right now and we've just got to keep that moving forward."

The Sabres have spent years struggling to put together consistent efforts, and despite their recent success, haven't been playing their best hockey.

Buffalo rallied from a late two-goal deficit to defeat the Vancouver Canucks, 4-3, in a shootout on Saturday and topped the Tampa Bay Lightning, 2-1, on Tuesday despite being outshot 30-19 in the game.

"I think we've learned a lot in those last two games on what we need to do better and improve," coach Phil Housley said, "but it helps to win those games at the same time, even when you're not at your best, to build confidence that knowing if you do get down, there's a good chance we can get back into the game."

Berglund returns

Patrik Berglund will return to the lineup against the Jets after being a healthy scratch for the second time this season. The 30-year-old forward, who has two goals and two assists in 16 games, was held out of Tuesday's 2-1 home victory against the Tampa Bay Lightning. He also sat out Oct. 18 in San Jose.

Berglund skated on the third line with Vladimír Sobotka and Jason Pominville on Thursday, replacing Evan Rodrigues, and also joined the first power play unit with Jack Eichel, Jeff Skinner, Sam Reinhart and Rasmus Dahlin.

"We're just making changes," Housley said. "Obviously, I don't think we as a coaching staff or if you asked the players, that we were at our best against Tampa. We've changed the lineup before, (after) wins and losses, but I like what Patrik brings. He's going to get an opportunity (Friday)."

The Sabres have converted 17.7 percent of their power play opportunities this season, good for 18th in the NHL, but have recently struggled. They haven't scored on the power play in four consecutive games, going 0 for 10 in that span. They're 3 for 24 on the power play in eight games since their last three-game winning streak from Oct. 20-25.

Jets powerful power play

The Jets have the NHL's top power play unit, scoring 34 percent of the time (17 of 50) with the man advantage. That's far above the league average of 20.5 percent.

Jets forward Patrik Laine is second in the NHL with seven power play goals. He led the league with 20 last season. Mark Scheifele and Kyle Connor has each scored four power play goals, tied for seventh in the NHL.

"Number one, try to stay out of the box would be a good idea. But when we have to kill, we have to kill," Housley said. "We faced a good power play in Tampa, one of the top power plays, and we've faced good power plays before. We'll have our strategies and we'll have to do our best to execute those strategies."

The Sabres' penalty kill percentage (81.8 percent) ranks 11th in the league.

Crosby may miss Sabres game

Sidney Crosby appears unlikely to play against the Sabres on Monday in Pittsburgh. The Penguins superstar remains sidelined by an upper body injury, not a concussion, coach Mike Sullivan told reporters Thursday.

"Right now his status is day-to-day, but my sense is it's going to be a week," Sullivan said.

Crosby had two assists in the Penguins' 4-2 loss to the New Jersey Devils on Tuesday. He was on the ice in the final minute and spoke to reporters after the game, but did not practice Wednesday. Crosby skated on his own Thursday, before the team's morning skate, according to the team's Twitter account.

Sabres hit season-high rating for win over Lightning

By Alan Pergament

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It has been a year of TV revivals and the Buffalo Sabres' on-ice revival is becoming one of the most popular programs in Western New York.

The Sabres' turnaround has made their games must-see TV for local sports fans again.

The National Hockey League team's 2-1 victory Tuesday over a first-place Tampa Bay Lightning team hit a season-high rating of 9.7 on NBCSN, which was a half a point higher than the team received for its disappointing 4-0 season opening loss to Boston on MSG.

To put Tuesday's rating in even more perspective, the only program on a popular broadcast network night that had a higher rating Tuesday was "NCIS," which has long been one of the most popular hourlong programs nationally and in Western New York for years. It had a 10.1 live and same day rating on WIVB-TV (Channel 4). The previous original episode of "NCIS" had about a 13 rating at 8 p.m. Tuesday.

The Sabres game also beat NBC's most popular hour entertainment program, "This Is Us," which had a 7.9 live and same day rating on WGRZ-TV, the local NBC affiliate.

"The Conners," the ABC series that was spun off from last year's revival of "Roseanne," has lost steam locally. It had only a 4.7 live and same day rating at 8 p.m. Tuesday on WKBW-TV (Channel 7).

Of course, all the Tuesday entertainment programs can get hefty additional viewing up to seven days later via DVRs, On Demand and network websites.

Sporting events generally rely on live viewing and get little extra viewing afterward.

The Sabres now know what their roles are and they're embracing them

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

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Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Part of the Sabres success this season has been well defined roles and each player understanding what he needs to do. Players have been telling me how they've embraced the job that's been entrusted in them and Jake McCabe said, "Everyone is pulling the rope in the same direction this year and the biggest thing is we've seen success early on, especially when we do play the right way and guys are understanding what it takes to win in this league."

Zemgus Girgensons has taken on the role of checker and along with Johan Larsson, helped to shut down Steven Stamkos and Nikita Kucherov. Girgensons said, "Everyone knows their role, everyone agrees with it and they just play the game the way they have to, so the team needs that, the guys to understand what their job is and it makes it easier for everyone to play."

Phil Housley has better players and faster players this season. He thinks, "For me there's just more of a buy-in and a belief and when you have early success, it helps build that belief and confidence."

"We've come back in games which helped with the belief part, but we've shown some resiliency and we haven't had that in the past."

Another thing I've noticed is the players are having fun. They seem to be enjoying practice and even though we're not in the room for a long time, they are just sitting together talking and enjoying being there. McCabe said, "For sure, not to bring up last year, but Factor (Ryan O'Reilly) got a lot of heat for his comments at the end of the year, but it's not fun coming to the rink when you're losing, especially year after year and it's draining and even like today, we didn't skate yesterday so I was excited to come to the rink and get back to work with these guys. We have such a great group of guys in this room and it's fun to go to war with them every day."

Patrik Berglund centered Vladimir Sobotka and Jason Pominville during Thursday's practice. Evan Rodrigues stood around and did nothing for the first 20 minutes of practice, so it appears he will sit. Phil Housley said, "We're just making changes, I don't think we were at our best against Tampa, but I like what Patrik brings and he's going to get an opportunity."

The Sabres are currently sixth in the NHL with a .611 point percentage. On Friday, they play third place Winnipeg and then on Saturday, it's fourth place Minnesota. They wrap up the road trip in Pittsburgh and Housley said, "It's a great challenge for our group, we're playing some great hockey teams, so we just control what we can control. If we're on top of our game, we can have success, but it's going to take our best game."

Stimson: Analyzing where players excel to determine the Sabres' best offensive line combinations

By Ryan Stimson

The Athletic

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While people often focus on unsustainable percentages for players and teams early in the NHL season, it's best to ignore the noise. What's more important is to concentrate on what we would expect a player to score given their offensive contributions and give us a baseline going forward.

Early in 2017 I used the pre-shot movement from passing project data to build an expected primary points metric that was a better indicator of future scoring than simply using shots, goals, or points. Volume will always be important, but a better understanding of the types of plays players create improves our predictions. Why primary points? Because we want to focus on the player's direct contributions to goal-scoring.

Apart from direct shot contributions, players are regularly involved with the entry and exit phases of the game. Which players are best at getting into the offensive zone? Exiting the defensive zone? There's been more work done on entries than exits (this paper from Eric Tulsky and others is the most famous), but each factor is important when it comes to player evaluation.

Here, I'll take a deep dive into the forwards on the Sabres and what to expect the rest of the season. First, many thanks to Corey Sznajder for his tireless efforts to provide the community with more detailed data to better analyze hockey. I kindly ask you to support his work here, as I'll use his data throughout the year to provide deeper analysis on the Sabres. The data below was all courtesy of him and reflects the first twelve games of the season. Non-passing data is from OffsideReview or NaturalStatTrick. Let's get to it.

We'll start with the basics — shots, shot assists, and primary shot contributions, which is just the first two added together — and then normalize all of them on a per 60-minute basis.

Jack Eichel is still king of the shot contributions in Western New York. He's pretty balanced between shooting and setting up teammates and there is just so much offense that goes through him when he's on the ice.

Evan Rodrigues has been impressive early on this year as he builds upon last year's showing. With about 300 minutes under his belt, he comes out around 24 primary shot contributions per 60 minutes, comfortably providing second-line production based on league averages.

Sam Reinhart is off his career pace a bit, but still providing good production and some significant quality, which we'll get to in a moment.

Jeff Skinner, Johan Larsson, and Kyle Okposo round out the forward groups as the only ones over 20 shot contributions per 60 minutes, which is a rough cutoff for top-nine offensive involvement. The next couple of names are the complementary players that you'd expect to be contributors, but not the real shot generators on each line: Jason Pominville, Patrik Berglund, Conor Sheary, etc. Even playing on the top lines, like Sheary and Pominville have done and are doing, they can be effective as Eichel, Rodrigues, and Reinhart dominate more of the touches.

Towards the bottom we see players who have shuffled in and out of the lineup, like Tage Thompson and Remi Elie and one-dimensional Zemgus Girgensons. We also have Casey Mittlestadt sitting at just 15.7 primary shot contributions per 60 minutes. That's fourth line territory. Mittlestadt has been playing on a line with Sheary and Okposo recently and, we'll get to line combinations later on, but I don't think this is a line that can hold up long-term.

What about quality?

When I talk about quality, I often refer to shots preceded by passes from below the goal line and across the slot due to the stress this puts on the defending team and goalie. It's very difficult to stop what you can't see or anticipate.

All hail Reinhart, lord of the dangerous shot contributions. Reinhart is where you'd expect to find him given his track record over the years. He'll add some definite scoring opportunities onto any line. He's well-balanced in these chances, as well, meaning he's both making the pass to set them up for a teammate and getting in position.

Sheary is just after Reinhart and this, again, is expected. He was regularly involved in these types of plays in Pittsburgh and he's still generating a fair amount of them. His numbers are down a bit, but that's to be expected moving away from Sidney Crosby. He's still a skilled player getting involved in quality chances and you need players like him in the lineup.

Eichel's lack of dangerous chances partly explains his lack of goals. Based on the 1,000 minutes of data collected on Eichel over the last few seasons, he contributes to a little under five dangerous shot contributions per sixty minutes. So far this season, he's at about half of that, and severely lacking in the individual shot portion. In other words, he's contributing them at an average pace (still slightly behind his career rate), but he's not doing well at getting into those positions to receive a pass and take a shot from a dangerous area.

He's doing well at setting up teammates, but he's not getting open for passes in dangerous areas and then he's settling for wasteful shots at times. Observe the above shot plot and you'll see plenty of distance between where Eichel shoots from and the goal.

Putting it all together

Now we look at the volume plus the quality — basically a series of weights based on the likelihood of a player scoring or assisting on a goal. This is based off the preceding pass sequence. It's very simple, but helps cover a lot of what is missing in the NHL's play-by-play data.

Eichel's volume keeps him high on this list, but he's way down from his career number of 1.45 expected primary points per 60 minutes. As he starts to get into more dangerous shooting situations again, we should see this number rise toward his career level.

Sheary is second and part of that is due to his effectiveness in transition (more on that in a bit), but also the in-zone quality chances he generates. He's a bit under his career expected scoring rate, but even if he stays around this number, he should be fine.

Don't be fooled by Thompson's number here: It's boosted by odd-man situations and those tend to be less repeatable than a lot of the other metrics I use. We would expect his numbers to move significantly downward as he plays more.

Zone entries

Creating offense can be done a number of ways, and one way is off the rush and carrying or passing the puck into the zone with possession. Understanding which players excel in this area of the game can help craft optimal lines.

Certain players want to carry the puck in and have the skating and speed to do so with success. Getting the puck into the zone is the most important, but carrying opens the door to creating quality plays in transition. It's not too surprising that Mittlestadt, Eichel, Skinner lead the group here. The Pass% column refers to the percentage of entries the player makes a pass upon entry, removing those low-percentage shots from distance from the carry-in totals for the most part.

These plays are the building blocks of successful and dangerous transition plays. Mittlestadt, Sheary, and Reinhart are the best on the ice and, really, you want to balance out that skill and decision-making. Rodrigues and Eichel aren't bad either, but it's also important to consider the volume. Both make about 4.5 passes per 60 minutes off of entries, but that's about 40 percent of Rodrigues' carry-ins and only about 26 percent of Eichel's.

Eichel could stand to pass more considering he's not getting into dangerous shooting positions as much as you'd like, so this is still a part of his game that needs work. Putting Eichel and Skinner together is working, but that line won't shoot over 12 percent all year and, since neither of them excel in this area of passing in transition, it limits the line's effectiveness in that area.

All of this is to say that, while Mittlestadt's percentages look good, his overall rate of entries per 60 minutes doesn't, so it's important to keep that context in mind. When he attempts an entry, it's usually a good result, but why doesn't he attempt more? Is he deferring too much to teammates? One area we'll explore more later on, as Corey accumulates more data, is the entry share of forwards, which will help frame some of these questions. For now, you want Mittlestadt to demand more of the puck in transition.

Still, there are times when dumping the puck in is a good option. We all know what good transition plays look like, but there are situations where it can be less obvious when a dump-in would be preferred. Berglund, Reinhart, and Pominville are the best puck retrievers on the team. Let's look at some examples of the situations where puck recoveries off of dump-ins made for good plays.

Here the Coyotes have Eichel swarmed at their blue line. A quick dump-in allows the Sabres to gain ice position. Eichel pressures the defender that goes to retrieve the puck to break out, but is only able to throw it up the wall where Reinhart has gone in anticipation. Now they have possession from a seemingly dead situation.

When the defender has a tight gap, the offense can exploit him by forcing him to turn and hunt down the puck. Additionally, players dumping the puck can gain an advantage by getting to where the puck is going before the defenders.

Another advantage to timing a dump-in correctly is that you don't necessarily need to beat the defender to the puck, simply just box him out. Not only are you rewarded with a puck retrieval, but you are also in position to draw a penalty.

It takes smarts to quickly assess a transitional situation and make a quick play. You don't want to allow the team to set up in their neutral zone structure and, while there are times that circling back to maintain possession and trying to attack on the rush can be beneficial, creating off the forecheck can be highly effective in the right situation. That's really the goal of successful dump-ins: to transition from a vulnerable position in the neutral zone to an advantageous forechecking position.

Zone exits

Moving to the other end of the ice, which forwards excel at getting out of the zone with possession? I wrote over the summer on how effective forechecking can be for teams to create offense. The way I measured it was the percentage of controlled exits by the opposition, so having players that can exit the zone with possession more often than not is a way to nullify the opposition's forecheck.

Reinhart is notable not only for having the highest possession exit (percentage of exits that are with possession) share, but also for having a very low fail percentage. Fails are attempted exits that don't even get out of the zone. When you compare Reinhart with someone like Eichel, you can say they are quite close in their possession exit percentages, but Eichel fails significantly more often than Reinhart at getting the puck out of the zone. Most coaches would rather you get the puck out rather than turn it over or keep it in your end. However, you never want to stifle a player's creativity. Eichel wants the puck to try to skate it out into transition quickly — there are likely opportunities here for the team to coach him on when and where to use his skills to do that without a blanket "be smarter with the puck" lesson.

This is also a metric that means more for the backs than the forwards, as a lot of these numbers are influenced more so by the blue line corps' ability to execute a good breakout play. We'll spend more time on this when we do a deep dive into that position.

Shot suppression

Lastly, we come to how each forward has performed from a shot suppression standpoint. It's difficult to evaluate defensive play early in the season. I'd prefer to use relative-to-teammate metrics here, but considering it's only early November, the time away from players can lead to some wonky results. According to NaturalStatTrick, Berglund, Larsson, and Girgensons, the Sabres' fourth line Joe Yerdon wrote about two weeks ago, all lead the team in shots against per 60 minutes. If they can stay deployed in their own zone as much as they have been and keep their heads above water, they'll continue to have a positive effect on the rest of the lineup.

It's not great to use shots or relative shots against so early in the season, but it's all we have for the most part. We'll dig more into the defensive side of things in future articles.

Optimal line combinations and conclusions

Right now, the Sabres are riding the unsustainable scoring prowess of Eichel (with a 10.6 on-ice shooting percentage), Skinner (12.8 percent), and Pominville (12.6 percent). If practice is any indication, Phil Housley will reunite the top line from opening night and further damage the team's potential, as I laid out at the beginning of the season. I think the best situation is one in which the following lines are put together so the team's attack is balanced and the forwards can complement each other's skill sets:

Sheary – Eichel – Pominville

Skinner – Mittlestadt – Reinhart

Sobotka – Rodrigues – Okposo

Larsson – Berglund – Girgenson

Within the first line, Sheary is excellent in transition and can improve that area of the line's game. Eichel is going to dominate the shot contributions and both Sheary and Pominville can play off of him and feed him. Pominville does well at recovering dump-ins, so he can assist on the plays when Sheary and Eichel can't carry or pass the puck into the zone.

The second line provides strong play on the wings to support Mittlestadt, who can then focus on providing for Skinner and Reinhart. This line has players who are good at exiting and entering the zone.

The third line is where the team shows lack of depth. Rodrigues is definitely a bright spot on the roster in terms of his offensive involvement and reliable play, but isn't great at entries or exits. Sobotka does well exiting the zone, but Okposo lags behind in each area. So, this might be the line that needs tinkering. The question becomes, who do you move off of it and who is replacing them? It could become tryout line for AHL call-ups.

With respect to the fourth line, while people might not agree with paying Berglund almost \$4 million AAV to center a fourth line, that's the wrong way to think about it. The Sabres acquired him to fill the defensive minutes that Ryan O'Reilly gave this team. I imagine this line will be able to chip in a little now and then, but Housley can only optimize the team with what he has.

It's important to note that a player excelling in one area of shots, passes, entries or exits shouldn't completely alter your view of that player from his overall impact used in a regression-based approach like WAR, the EvolvingWild Twins' RAPM or Dom Galamini's HERO Charts. That said, research has suggested that specific metrics have a strong impact on a player's overall results.

Understanding where players excel allows us to pinpoint where they can improve, as there are few, if any, players that do everything well. Whenever players are traded, critics always emerge to accuse that trade subject of not being a complete player or to point out his flaws. What's more important is to know exactly where players excel and have limitations and then craft your lines in such a way to ensure each guy is balanced across all phases of the game.

A player may excel in transition and not be very involved in the offensive zone, and that's OK. Put them with players who need help getting into the zone but thrive once they are there, and now you have two pieces of a

unit that can feed off each other. Teams are always searching for chemistry between players; a way for coaches to cultivate that is to put players together who will complement each other well based on their existing skillsets.

Jeff Skinner could enjoy one of Sabres' greatest seasons ever

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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BUFFALO – Jeff Skinner tries to deflect credit for his recent scoring barrage. After all, the slick Sabres winger likes to point out, he has a terrific center in Jack Eichel and goals result from the players operating as a five-man unit.

"The line's played well, the team's played well," Skinner said Thursday inside KeyBank Center. "You're not going to be able to score unless all five guys are contributing. I think we've had that the last little while. I've sort of been on the right end."

Certainly, those things help. But the biggest factor in one of the greatest goal-scoring runs in Sabres history, of course, is Skinner's own talent.

Skinner, 26, showcases a tenacity few NHL players possess, relentlessly forechecking and backchecking. And despite his stature – the Sabres list him at 5-foot-11 – he consistently fights for position around the net, the so-called dirty area.

There's a common theme in the 13 goals Skinner has scored through 18 games this season.

"You look at all of his goals, they're all around the net," said Sabres winger Jason Pominville, Skinner's linemate earlier this season. "I don't know if he's scored any off shots from further out."

Skinner, a three-time 30-goal scorer, can be dynamic around the net and deep in the opponent's zone.

"He can be strong on his feet down low," coach Phil Housley said after the Sabres prepared for Friday's road tilt against the Winnipeg Jets. "He's tough to get off the puck, he's tough down low, he's tough to play against and he has a knack for finding that open area. Jack's done a really good job of finding him."

"He's not afraid to go to the net."

Only three players in franchise history have scored more goals through the Sabres' first 18 games than Skinner: Dave Andreychuk (17 in 1992-93), Thomas Vanek (15 in 2008-09) and Rick Martin (14 in 1972-73 and 1973-74).

Only Rick Vaive (14 in 1988-89) scored more goals in his first 17 outings with the Sabres.

Entering Thursday's games, Skinner ranked second in NHL goal scoring, five behind Boston Bruins star David Pastrnak. Skinner's nine goals in nine road games ranked first.

How special is the season Skinner has compiled so far? He has scored all of his goals in the last 14 contests. At his current pace, he would compile 59 goals over a full campaign.

A Sabre hasn't hit the 30-goal mark since Pominville in 2011-12. Vanek scored 40 times in 2008-09. The Sabres last had 50-goal scorers in 1992-93, when Alexander Mogilny scored a franchise-record 76 goals and Pat LaFontaine tallied 53.

A production bump from Skinner, who scored a career-high 37 goals in 2016-17, isn't too surprising. After the Sabres acquired him from the Carolina Hurricanes on Aug. 2, many observers felt Eichel could help elevate Skinner to a new level.

"He's one of the of the top centermen in the league," Skinner said. "He kind of dominates the play out there, he draws so much coverage and opens up so much space for everyone on the ice."

He added: "When you get one of the top centermen in the league, as a winger, it's not going to hurt you."

Of course, Skinner's aggressiveness helps.

"I just think that's sort of the way I have to play to be successful," Skinner said. "I don't know if you want to call it a style. ... I'm not going to blow by someone, I'm not going to overpower a goalie with my shot like some of the other top scorers in the league.

"For me, I think you try to find different ways to be successful and produce."

How long Skinner can keep producing in Buffalo is unknown. He will be an unrestricted free agent following the season and could command a long-term contract worth more than \$7 million a year.

Right now, Skinner, who said his camp hasn't had any extension talks with the Sabres, can't avoid questions about his future.

"The more it gets talked about, the more you sort of have to answer questions," Skinner said. "For me, I think you just focus on playing. It's sort of been my mindset playing here. It's been kind of easy, I think, especially so far, trying to adjust to a new situation, new teammates, new community.

"I think there's a lot going on. You don't have to sort of focus on other things that are out of your control."

Sabres' Patrik Berglund to return against Jets

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
November 15, 2018

BUFFALO – The Sabres' depth this season offers them flexibility and options they did not enjoy in recent years.

So fresh off Tuesday's 2-1 win over the Eastern Conference-leading Tampa Bay Lightning, Sabres coach Phil Housley plans to change his lineup for Friday's road tilt against the Winnipeg Jets.

Patrik Berglund, a healthy scratch Tuesday, will replace Evan Rodrigues at center beside Jason Pominville and Vladimir Sobotka.

"I don't think as a coaching staff, or if you ask the players, we were at our best against Tampa," Housley said this afternoon inside KeyBank Center. "We've changed the lineup before, wins and losses, but I like what Patrik brings. He's going to get an opportunity tomorrow."

Housley said he wasn't unhappy with Rodrigues' play.

"Not so much, just more healthy bodies," Housley said. "The whole part of the game (Tuesday), at times, I don't feel the whole team played well. It was indicative in the analytics, the shots on net, the scoring chances against versus the scoring chances for. It's not so much his play, it's just that we have healthy people."

Rodrigues has compiled zero goals and six assists in 15 games this season. Housley scratched him three times earlier this season.

Sabres goalie Carter Hutton enjoying starting role

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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BUFFALO – In his first nine pro seasons, Sabres goalie Carter Hutton hit the 50-game mark just once, in 2012-13 with the Rockford Ice Hogs, his final AHL campaign.

So while Hutton, 32, has enjoyed a solid NHL career tending goal for four teams, he has never really been the guy in the big leagues until this season.

Sure, he played a career-high 40 games as a rookie in 2013-14, but that was mostly subbing for injured Nashville Predators starter Pekka Rinne. Other than that, he has never played more than 32 times.

So this season has been a new experience for Hutton, who signed a three-year, \$8.25 million contract July 1 to join the Sabres.

Hutton has played 14 of the upstart Sabres' first 18 contests, going 7-6-1 with a 2.64 goals-against average and a .916 save percentage. At his current pace, he would make 64 appearances. A Sabres goalie hasn't eclipsed the 60-game mark since Ryan Miller played 61 times in 2011-12.

Naturally, Hutton would love to hit the 50- or 60-game milestone.

"It'd be cool, right?" Hutton said Wednesday inside KeyBank Center.

Hutton prefers staying in the moment, so he's not concerned about setting a new mark for appearances. Still, the opportunity to be the starter and carry the load "is why I came here," Hutton said.

"I wanted to play more, I wanted to get an opportunity," said Hutton, whose 2.09 goals-against average with the St. Louis Blues last season led the NHL. "This presented the best opportunity. ... Coming to the NHL level, you never dream of being a backup NHL goalie."

Transitioning into the starter's role hasn't changed much of Hutton's routine.

"It's just a matter of in between starts, how I'm managing my output, because you're still staying in shape," Hutton said. "But at the same time, I'm not going to stress myself as much about practice and extra conditioning."

Hutton has morphed into the Sabres' backbone in recent outings. During their current three-game winning streak, he has been a difference-maker.

In his last eight games, Hutton is 7-2-1 with a 2.16 goals-against average and a .925 save percentage. He was the Sabres' best player in Tuesday's tight 2-1 victory over the Tampa Bay Lightning, making 29 saves, including some critical ones in the waning minutes.

Clearly, Hutton's sound goaltending has instilled confidence in his teammates. He isn't prone to allowing bad goals like his predecessor, Robin Lehner, often did during his three seasons with the Sabres.

Helping spearhead the Sabres' transformation – they're 10-6-2 and have earned at least one point in nine out of the last 11 games – is meaningful to Hutton, who said he wants to be "part of something bigger than just yourself."

"We're a team here that's growing," Hutton said. "From the way things have been, obviously we want to be part of this turnaround. Just seeing the city get behind us, the crowd was rocking (Tuesday), it was fun. You think of that Vancouver game (Saturday afternoon), everybody was going nuts."

Before the Sabres eked out Tuesday's win, they roared back in the final minutes and won a 4-3 shootout against Vancouver and rallied to beat Montreal 6-5 in overtime.

"We're building confidence," Hutton said. "I think we're showing that we can win in all sorts of games, right? We have a big comeback win against Vancouver, and then this game we hold a 2-1 lead for the majority of the game and then we clamp it down with a great third period and we win a game, right? So we're kind of building different things here."

Sheary talks first impressions of Buffalo ahead of return to Pittsburgh

By Jourdon LaBarber

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Conor Sheary was a key acquisition in the Buffalo Sabres' roster makeover this summer, both for his scoring ability and the impact he could have in the dressing room.

The 26-year-old arrived in Buffalo with 48 goals and two Stanley Cups rings already under his belt in two and a half NHL seasons. He played in all but three of the Pittsburgh Penguins' playoff games in their back-to-back Cup runs in 2016 and 2017, often playing on Sidney Crosby's wing.

So far, he's performed as advertised. Sheary's tallied 10 points (6+4) through his first 18 games as a Sabre, including five in his last five games (3+2). He spoke with Sabres.com on Thursday ahead of the team's three-game road trip, which will culminate in his return to Pittsburgh on Monday night.

You were brought in over the summer when a lot of people we're talking about changing the culture. Carter Hutton has said that he felt a good vibe when he arrived in August. Did you feel that way?

I mean, most importantly, I think the guys they kept around over the summer were really good, character guys. They're our leaders in our locker room, guys we rely on. I think last year, everyone thinks that just because they were last in the league you have a lot of bad players.

There's a lot of really good players and a lot of really good leaders. I think with the new faces we brought in, a little bit of youth in our lineup, I think we've just come in with a little bit of a new energy.

Jason Botterill spent 10 seasons in the Pittsburgh front office. Whether it's the roster composition or the attitude in the dressing room, have you seen any similarities in how he's built this team?

It's hard to do. When you're in Pittsburgh you've got a lot of high-end talent that you don't find every day so it's hard to build it like that. But I think as far as the stuff that people maybe don't see, I think he's doing a good job of incorporating some things that they did that maybe make our team better. Good, character people I think is a thing he looks for. I think he's done a really good job of that.

Veterans have described the first day of camp this year as being one of the toughest practices they've been a part of. What was your initial impression?

It was a hard day. I might have had one of the highest heart rates on the team, but I think it's good for us. I think it was maybe a wake-up call that we need to work that hard throughout the year to be successful. After that day, I think it all got easier, so that's a good thing. But yeah, it was a pretty hard day.

Has that become the standard now?

Yeah, I think so. I think if we can bear down for an hour a day or not even that during our practices it can really translate into games. So far, early in the season, I think we've been doing a good job of that.

The Frozen Four is in Buffalo this year. Is UMass (Sheary's alma mater) going to be there?

It looks like it right now. They're playing really well. I mean, it's been a long time since they've been in the tournament so, as an alumni, it'd be nice to see them get in there.

Has anything about Buffalo surprised you away from the rink?

Surprised me? Wow. I mean, the food's really good in Buffalo. I always compare it to Pittsburgh because Pittsburgh had really good food but Buffalo's right there on par with it I think.

Would you take a plate of wings or a Primanti Bros sandwich if both were sitting in front of you?

Plate of wings, for sure. I didn't eat many Primanti sandwiches when I was there.

Have you given any thought to what your return to Pittsburgh will be like on Monday?

Yeah, I think it will probably be an emotional night for me. It's going to be different getting dressed and sitting on the other side of the rink. I talked to a former player who played there this year and he said it was just kind of a weird feeling, not being in a Pittsburgh uniform. Once you get that first one out of the way, I think it will be a lot better. But this first one will be special.

Wednesday's practice

Patrik Berglund appears set to return to the lineup after sitting as a healthy scratch against Tampa Bay on Tuesday. Berglund practiced on a line centering Vladimir Sobotka and Jason Pominville, replacing Evan Rodrigues.

Berglund also skated on the top power-play unit with Jeff Skinner, Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart and Rasmus Dahlin. It marks the third time Housley has tweaked the lineup during the team's three-game winning streak, which is reflective of the fact that the Sabres feel they can still clean up their game.

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 - 10 Patrik Berglund / 71 Evan Rodrigues - 29 Jason Pominville
28 Zemgus Girgensons - 22 Johan Larsson - 72 Tage Thompson

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

40 Carter Hutton
35 Linus Ullmark

*Extra forward skating on defense