



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*November 21, 2018*

## **Mike Harrington: Feelings of Sabres' 2005-06 season are starting to creep in**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

November 20, 2018

So when the casual what's-this-been-like question was posed to Jason Pominville around the noon hour Tuesday, he didn't answer at first. He laughed. Not at the question, mind you. But at the shocking way the Buffalo Sabres seem to be getting through every game.

"It's been fun, a lot of fun," Pominville said of the six-game winning streak that suddenly has propelled Buffalo into the high-rent district of the NHL standings. "I'll tell you what, it's been wild how we're finding ways to win. We didn't have many leads but we battled back to have them at the right time. Different guys stepped up, our goalies played great and the resiliency we've shown is pretty crazy."

After a seven-day stretch in which the Sabres beat Tampa Bay, Winnipeg, Minnesota and Pittsburgh, they're up to fourth overall in the NHL. They're three points behind Presidents' Trophy-leading Nashville, two behind Atlantic Division-leading Toronto after Monday's Houdini act in Pittsburgh, where a 4-1 deficit became a 5-4 overtime victory.

They're seven points inside the playoffs -- yes, inside them. Five points ahead of defending Stanley Cup champion Washington. Ten points ahead of Sidney Crosby-less Pittsburgh. Nine points ahead of the flying Connor McDavid's in Edmonton and 11 in front of poor Ryan O'Reilly, now losing again in St. Louis. And those two teams sent coaches Todd McLellan and Mike Yeo packing within the last day.

Maybe this is blasphemy, but it's sure starting to feel like 2005-06 around here.

No, not the way that season ended one win shy of the Stanley Cup final. The ending to the story is months away from being written. But it certainly feels like the way it began.

There were no expectations on the '05 Sabres, just like in the fall of 2018. Thirteen years ago, fans were fed up and empty seats were plentiful as the NHL returned from its yearlong lockout. Same thing this year, as fans were clearly in show-me mode after seven straight years of non-playoff hockey that included three last-place finishes.

Three times this year, the announced tickets-sold count has been under 16,000. You'd be hard-pressed to say there were even 10,000 people in the building for the Oct. 30 overtime loss to Calgary. Veteran observers agreed it was the smallest non-snowstorm crowd they've seen downtown since early in '05.

Don't imagine that will be repeated anytime soon. If this continues, there will be a storming of the KeyBank Center gates just like we saw 13 years ago. The night before Thanksgiving is a big one anyway. But the sense is that fans are ready to leap feet-first onto the bandwagon and the Philadelphia Flyers might have some noise — and lots of fannies in seats — to deal with here Wednesday night.

(And you wonder how many season ticket-holders are now regretting the sellout job they pulled dumping their tickets for the Black Friday matinee against Montreal. Tsk, tsk.)

"This will be a fun atmosphere here the next two games," Pominville said. "Thanksgiving, families come back in town. A lot of relatives will be here and there's hype around the team so I'm sure the building will be rocking. It will be fun. Guys have already talked about that."

"The atmosphere should be one of a kind for tomorrow night," added Sam Reinhart. "It's something I haven't experienced. We know the passion, both good and bad, our fans bring. Hopefully they'll be there right from the warmups getting us into it."

You can feel things building here just like in 2005, and it was around this time when the Sabres got rolling. A six-game winning streak and 10-2-2 burst now, a seven-game run and 15-1-1 burst then.

The fans started pouring back into the building, rekindling the spirit for the game they had in the 70s, 80s and 90s but suddenly lost because of the lockout and the franchise's bankruptcy seasons. Times have been tough in the post-tank era as well but it seems like Wednesday could be the first time longtime fans and another generation can again connect with the club thinking it has a real chance.

For the first time in years, the Sabres can score so they're never out of a game. Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark are getting the job done in goal, often keeping things close until the offense gets in gear. Rasmus Dahlin eased into the first 10 games of his initial season and is now suddenly tied for the scoring lead among rookie defenseman and is tied for fifth among rookies overall.

The Sabres are 7-0-2 in one-goal games. They've already won five games when trailing after two periods -- second in the NHL and a figure that equaled the number they won all of last year. The 2005-06 team had a good group of veterans with some emerging leaders and strong prospects. So does this one, although it overall trends younger with Reinhart at 23, Eichel at 22 and kids like Casey Mittelstadt and Dahlin still teenagers.

"We're excited where we're at, obviously, and the vibe around town, they (the fans) are showing their appreciation of the work," coach Phil Housley said Tuesday after his team met and had an optional skate in the arena.

Housley then understandably stayed coachy, pointing out the Flyers will be "desperate" as they hit town on an 0-2-1 lull with AHL callup Alex Lyon in goal, and that the Sabres have to start games better.

OK, he's got a point there. There are concerns. You can't come back every game and the Sabres have to start answering the opening faceoff. The season goal differential of plus-5 is low for a team this high in the standings, largely because there have been three blowout losses mitigated only by the 9-2 win over Ottawa.

And there have been no major injuries yet. The rest of the Atlantic Division, meanwhile, is taking body punches with the losses of Andrei Vasilevskiy, Auston Matthews, Zdeno Chára and Charlie McAvoy. Florida's Vincent Trocheck was stretchered off the ice Monday in Ottawa with a bad-looking leg or ankle injury and Boston announced Tuesday that center Patrice Bergeron is out at least four weeks with a rib injury.

It's easy to forget how quick this can turn. Before the current stretch, the Sabres were just 1-2-2 in their previous five games. But they have enough young players and newcomers who really don't know any better.

"They don't have some of the scars that the other guys have," said winger Kyle Okposo. "The guys who know what we've been through the last couple years really appreciate this, and the amount of effort and amount of work it takes to do this. I think we're just scratching the surface. ... There's still a lot to learn but we're definitely taking time to enjoy this too."

## **Sabres Notebook: First goal with Buffalo a reward for Thompson's work**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

November 20, 2018

The Sabres have ignored those outside their walls who said Tage Thompson would be best suited to develop in the AHL. They kept him in the NHL, often as a healthy scratch, to work in targeted post-practice drills and heavy video sessions.

They got some reward Monday with Thompson's first goal of the season opening Buffalo's scoring in a 5-4 overtime win at Pittsburgh. The 6-foot-5 Thompson blistered home a snap shot after a pass from Sam Reinhart, who had done heavy forechecking in the Pittsburgh zone.

"It definitely feels good getting that monkey off your back," Thompson said Tuesday. "You're going through games and haven't scored, it can be in the back of your mind and take away from other parts of your game. Getting that helps you build a little more confidence. I have to keep doing the little things right and I'll keep getting rewarded."

"I thought his game is getting better each and every game," coach Phil Housley said. "Not because he scored, but because of the physical element, the puck protection, the things he's really, really good at and can continue to develop. Just the way he's attacking the game."

Why keep Thompson in Buffalo and not try a similar in-the-NHL approach with a different Rochester player? Thompson, of course, was acquired from St. Louis in the Ryan O'Reilly trade, and while the Sabres might be trying to show off some of their wares, the fact remains he's only been in their organization since July and this gives them a chance to add to his development.

At only 21 years old, he's played 55 NHL games, so he's not completely foreign to what it takes to be in the NHL. Thompson had three goals and six assists in 41 games last year for St. Louis and he has a goal and an assist in 14 games for the Sabres.

"I need to win puck battles, be in the right spot defensively," he said. "You do those things and the rest can take care of itself and I'm starting to see that. Being scratched isn't a punishment. The coaches are working with me, trying to develop me and better my game. It's not like they're trying to punish me in any way. They want me to succeed and do better. If this is how it takes to get me to the next level, so be it."

Thompson also said he's had plenty of talks with his father, former NHL defenseman and current AHL Bridgeport coach Brent Thompson.

"He's had to scratch guys. He's been scratched. Most guys in the game have been through it at some point," Thompson said. "It's not a thing against you. They want you to be better and help you out. Stay positive is the biggest message and it's hard to do. It's not easy."

"Everyone wants to play and you don't want to be the guy out of the lineup. When you're not, the biggest thing for me was staying positive and staying ready, knowing my time was going to come."

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The status of Sabres defenseman Marco Scandella is unclear after he took an Evgeni Malkin shot to the outside of the knee and missed the third period Monday night.

Housley said Scandella would be a game-time decision prior to Wednesday's game against Philadelphia. The Sabres already have six healthy defensemen, so he wouldn't necessarily need to make a recall from Rochester for the game.

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The Flyers hit town for Wednesday night's game in an 0-2-1 lull. They had scored just two goals in eight periods until exploding for four in the final 10 minutes of regulation Saturday to wipe out a 5-1 deficit and force overtime against Tampa Bay in an eventual 6-5 loss.

With regular goaltenders Brian Elliott and Michal Neuvirth sidelined by injury and fill-in Calvin Pickard woefully ineffective (4.60/.852), Alex Lyon is likely to get his first start of the season.

Lyon, 25, was called up from Lehigh Valley of the AHL last week after posting a 3.54 GAA and .910 save percentage there. Lyon was 4-2-1, 2.75/.905 in 11 games for the Flyers last season.

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Cincinnati goaltender and Sabres prospect Jonas Johansson has been named ECHL Goaltender of the Week after allowing one goal in two games. Johansson had a 23-save shutout in a 9-0 win over Greenville and then stopped 30 of 31 shots in a 4-1 win over Ft. Wayne.

Johansson is on a four-game win streak to improve to 5-2-1 and has a 1.51 goals-against average and a .947 save percentage in that stretch. For the season, his numbers are 2.76 and .903.

Johansson, the Sabres' third-round pick in 2014, was 14-11 last year for the Cyclones with a 3.13/.909. He went 4-3, 3.89/.861 in seven games in Rochester.

## **Phil Housley keeps Sabres on task as they push into top five of NHL standings**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

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The Buffalo Sabres may be living in the high-rent district of the NHL standings, but coach Phil Housley isn't going to let them fall off task.

The giddiness is building through the fan base after Monday's 5-4 overtime thriller in Pittsburgh that gave the Sabres their first six-game winning streak since 2010. They can get to seven for the first time since 2006 when the Philadelphia Flyers come to KeyBank Center for a nationally televised game Wednesday night.

"We're excited where we're at, obviously, and the vibe around town, they (the fans) are showing their appreciation of the work," Housley said Tuesday after his team met and had an optional skate in the arena. "But we've got to come to work tomorrow. This is going to be a desperate team we're playing. We don't have to change anything. We've just got to play our game, control what we can control.

"We have to have better starts, and that's about preparation and your daily routine. We don't want to get behind the 8-ball. It's always good to know you can come back, but I just feel that if we can execute right away, establish our game, we'll be much better for it."

The Sabres (13-6-2) are proving to be the NHL's comeback kids, wiping out multigoal deficits in the last two games to post victories and already winning five times when trailing after two periods — equaling their number from all of last season.

"It's been fun," winger Jason Pominville said. "I'll tell you what, it's been wild how we're finding ways to win. We didn't have many leads, but we battled back to have them at the right time. Different guys stepped up, our goalies played great, and the resiliency we've shown is pretty crazy."

"We never changed the way that we played, and that's one thing that's been really good this whole season," added winger Kyle Okposo. "The times we have changed, we've addressed it. Now we've gotten to a point where we know we can be successful if we do the right things the way that we want, so we just don't change."

The Sabres are fourth overall at 28 points, just three points behind NHL leader Nashville and two behind Atlantic Division-leading Toronto.

"You never want to get too far ahead of yourself, but I credit the guys and our coaching staff for putting in the work and preparing our players, trying to give them every detail heading into a game," Housley said. "Our guys are just doing the work, and obviously we're seeing some of the rewards of that and where we are, but we can't get complacent.

"As a coach, you're always trying to get better, always trying for perfection. Obviously, you're not going to be perfect, but we want to keep pushing the envelope and try to get better each and every day."

## **What's up with the Atlantic Division?**

By DEREK KRAMER

WGR 550

NOVEMBER 20, 2018

The Buffalo Sabres are generating all sorts of hype as a surprise team in the National Hockey League as they're currently fourth in the league in points (28) at the quarter-mark of the season.

While Buffalo is just two points out of the top spot in the Eastern Conference, the Atlantic Division is still going strong. Five of the top-10 teams in the NHL are from Buffalo's division, while the Sabres are still just third in their own division. The team is looking up at the Toronto Maple Leafs (30) and the Tampa Bay Lightning (29) in the standings, while the Montreal Canadiens (26) and Boston Bruins (25) are right behind. Even the Ottawa Senators, sixth in the Atlantic, are shocking the league by keeping pace with 21 points, which would be good for fourth in the Metropolitan and Pacific Divisions.

What is going on with the entire Atlantic Division? Will the Sabres be able to keep their pace up? Which Atlantic Division teams will taper off?

Time to take a look around the Atlantic and see what Buffalo's rivals have been doing this season:

**Toronto Maple Leafs - First in the Eastern Conference, first in the Atlantic Division (30 points)**

Toronto has been widely perceived as a team that will win track meet-type of games 5-3 on a constant basis. However, in addition to being third in the league in goals for (74), Toronto has been surprisingly stout defensively with a goals-against that is fifth in the league (53). While Toronto has a defensive corps that can be suspect, goaltender Fredrik Andersen has been a steady presence in goal for Toronto.

The Leafs are so dynamic and deep that they're still so potent offensively without injured center Auston Matthews and winger William Nylander holding out for a contract. Matthews is expected to still miss another two weeks with his shoulder injury. The Leafs have more questions surrounding Nylander, who may sit out the entire season. He has until December 1 to sign a contract or he will not be allowed to play this season.

Toronto looks like the scariest team in the East, but luckily Buffalo still tends to play their hated rivals so well, despite their lack of success recently. If Buffalo drew the Leafs in the postseason, the rivalry would be revived and kicked up to a whole new level of hatred. The two teams will open their season series on December 4 at KeyBank Center.

**Tampa Bay Lightning - Second in the Eastern Conference, second in the Atlantic Division (29 points)**

The defending division champs and Stanley Cup contenders have not missed a beat with another deep lineup and one of the best top-to-bottom rosters in the NHL. Tampa is, once again, the most dangerous with the puck, leading the league in goals for (76). However, Tampa may now have a problem with goaltending as Vezina Trophy finalist Andrei Vasilevskiy suffered a broken foot and will miss another 4-5 weeks.

Despite the injury to Vasilevskiy, the Lightning still have a stellar roster featuring Steven Stamkos, Nikita Kucherov, Brayden Point, Victor Hedman and Ryan McDonagh. Tampa is not only star-studded, but can roll four lines for any situation.

Buffalo beat Tampa in their first meeting this season, but it wasn't pretty. Buffalo had to hold on to take a 2-1 win over the Lightning on November 13 at KeyBank Center.

**Montreal Canadiens - Fifth in the Eastern Conference, fourth in the Atlantic Division (26 points)**

Many pundits expected Montreal to drop off due to a weakened roster that saw the Canadiens trade away Max Pacioretty and Alex Galchenyuk during the offseason. However, Montreal has gotten scoring from the newcomers in those trades: Max Domi (25 points) and Tomas Tatar (17 points). Montreal is also getting scoring from plenty of other players, including Jonathan Drouin, defenseman Jeff Petry and rookie center Jesperi Kotkaniemi.

While the Canadiens are known for having an elite goaltender in Carey Price, the defense is rather leaky. Montreal is fifth worst in the league in goals against (70). Montreal is clearly missing defenseman Shea Weber, who is close to returning from injury and looking at a potential December return.

The Sabres have already beaten the Canadiens twice this season, while Montreal got one point in an overtime loss. The two teams will play again on Friday afternoon at KeyBank Center.

Boston Bruins - Sixth in the Eastern Conference, fifth in the Atlantic Division (25 points)  
Boston frustrated the Sabres on opening night, sending the fans into a spiral before the season could get rolling. While the Bruins are a solid team with a defensive structure, they're now looking at several big injuries to important players in their lineup. Top center Patrice Bergeron is out for at least a month, along with defensemen Zdeno Chara.

Boston still boasts the league's stingiest defense with only 49 goals allowed on the season. However, the Bruins look like a top-heavy team in their scoring, relying on Bergeron, David Pastrnak and Brad Marchand to carry the offensive output. With Bergeron out, Boston's already poor scoring depth will be tested.

Boston's goaltending has been solid, but that has been more due to the surprise play of Jaroslav Halak, who has out-performed starter Tuukka Rask and started the majority of Boston's games this season.

Boston is 1-0 against Buffalo after the season opening 4-0 beat down by the Bruins.



## **Girgensons is happy to be part of a winning team**

By BRAYTON WILSON

WGR 550

NOVEMBER 20, 2018

It's hard to believe that Zemgus Girgensons is already one of the longest-tenured players on this Buffalo Sabres roster.

The 24-year-old is already suiting up for his sixth season with the Sabres, and is quietly having a decent season.

Throughout his career, Girgensons has been part of some pretty deplorable rosters where winning has not been much of a discussion in the locker room.

However, that is starting to change with this season already out to a hot start. Through the first 21 games of the season, the Sabres are 13-6-2 with 28 points in the standings, and currently sit as the fourth-ranked team in the entire National Hockey League. In addition, the Sabres are currently riding a six-game winning streak, which is the longest stretch of wins the team has seen since the 2009-10 season.

It is a feeling that Girgensons has been waiting for.

"It feels great. It's been [some time] without even having that many wins in a row," Girgensons said on Tuesday. "It's something that's fun now and it's exciting. It's a different vibe when you start feeling that.

"We are finding ways to win. We stick through it for a full-60 [minutes], and there's no give up in the team. It's definitely fun. I know we've struggled in past years, so I know all the downs. At this point and moment, you don't want to get too high emotionally with this win streak. You just have to keep going."

This season has not been a flashy one on the scoresheet for the native of Latvia as he has just one goal and five points in 20 games. To this point, Girgensons is on pace to score four goals and pick up 16 assists in 81 games, which would be his highest point total in a season since he scored 30 points (15+15) in the 2014-15 season.

However, Girgensons is not changing anything with his style of play, and it has been playing to his benefit. He has always been a grind it out type of player, who is willing to get his nose dirty and find different ways to make a play for his team. Girgensons has been finding more consistency in his overall game this season, and has found his niche on the fourth line as a suitable depth player playing alongside Johan Larsson and Patrik Berglund.

When you look at the Berglund-Larsson-Girgensons line, it is a combination that has gotten a majority of its zone starts in the neutral zone or defensive zone. The trio has not combined for many points together offensively, but they have been very good at getting the puck into the offensive end, creating scoring chances and sustaining some good zone time. When you look at the advanced stats, all three players are in the top-eight percentage of shot attempts (Corsi) this season, with Girgensons being fifth overall at 52.50-percent.

This has given head coach Phil Housley some added confidence in that line combination, and he has been very pleased that they are finding ways to produce in a positive way.

"I think they're a tight group. They talk a lot after each shift, and they're just reliable," said Housley on Tuesday. "You've got three centermen, if you want to look at it that way. Even Zemgus can take draws, he's been really good. Their dependability and their reliability says a lot. They don't get a lot of offensive zone starts, they're starting mainly in the defensive zone, but they're doing the little things, the detailed things, and it's helping them as they moving forward. When they get in the offensive zone, they might not get the looks as other lines get, but they're certainly wearing down other teams' defenses and making them spend a lot of energy in that area."

"I think it has been good. We've been generating chances," Girgensons said of his line. "We wish [the puck] would go in a couple more times, but as long as we're getting those chances, the time will come.

"When you're getting multiple chances a game, it's a good sign. It shows that something is brewing. Hopefully we can get on the board tomorrow."

If the Sabres can come away with a win on Wednesday night over the Philadelphia Flyers at KeyBank Center, the Sabres will extend their winning streak to seven straight games. That would give the Sabres their longest winning streak since the 2006-07 season when the team started the year with 10 straight wins.

Girgensons knows that the crowd will be bringing it on Wednesday with the team playing in front of the national spotlight on NBCSN.

"I think it will be awesome. The fans are always great here, so I hope it will be a packed house here again."

The Sabres held a team meeting on Tuesday at KeyBank Center, followed by a team stretch and some players electing to skate afterwards.

Housley also provided an update on defenseman Marco Scandella, who left Monday's game against the Pittsburgh Penguins after blocking a shot in the second period. He said that Scandella has a lower-body injury and will be a game-time decision for Wednesday night's game against the Flyers.

The Sabres will return to the ice on Wednesday for the morning skate at 10:30 a.m.

## **Sabres report card: Where Buffalo stands one-quarter of the way through the regular season**

By John Vogl

The Athletic

November 20, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. – Sabres fans just wanted a competitive team, one that wouldn't embarrass itself. They've gotten so much more.

They've got a winner with confidence, heart and charisma.

With one-quarter of the season down, Buffalo is among the top storylines in the NHL. The longtime loser has rapidly ascended into the top five, beating Stanley Cup contenders on the way to a 13-6-2 record. They're fun to watch and fun to be around, a massive change from the previous seven seasons.

The impressive part is they're winning despite not playing their best. They've used timely scoring to pull out stunning victories.

Just 10 teams have scored a go-ahead goal in the final two minutes, and Buffalo is the only one to do it twice (Oct. 25 versus Montreal and Saturday in Minnesota). The Sabres scored twice in the final three minutes against Vancouver to force overtime and win in a shootout. They overcame a three-goal deficit Monday in Pittsburgh to earn a 5-4 overtime victory, giving them their first six-game winning streak since 2010.

They simply don't quit. As we evaluate the first quarter, it's no surprise the grades are good.

Still, as those rallies suggest, there are times when the Sabres get into trouble by falling behind. The lack of secondary scoring has been worrisome.

But taking the previous years into consideration, this team gets an A-plus-plus.

### High Honors

Jeff Skinner – There were so many reasons to expect a big year. His play was called into question by his former team. He was getting a playmaking center. He was entering the last year of his contract. He was looking to rebound from a down season.

But 14 goals in 21 games? And a plus-12 rating to boot? No one expected that.

Only four players in franchise history have scored more goals through 20 games than Skinner: Dave Andreychuk (17 in 1992-93), Rick Martin (16 in 1972-73 and 15 in 1973-74), Danny Gare (15 in 1975-76) and Thomas Vanek (15 in 2008-09). Andreychuk is in the Hockey Hall of Fame, Martin and Gare have their jerseys retired in the rafters, and Vanek could go into the team's Hall of Fame one day. That's nice company.

At some point, Skinner and the Sabres need to decide if this should be a long-term marriage. But for now, just savor the pairing.

Jack Eichel – The center always said he was more of a playmaker than a scorer. With 19 assists, he's fifth in the NHL and proving his point.

Few people are as confident with the puck as Buffalo's No. 1 center. He carries it into the zone with ease. He waits for plays to develop. He's making his linemates better.

He has room to improve. After scoring at least 24 goals in his first three seasons, he's not on pace for 20. As Ryan Stimson wrote for The Athletic Buffalo, Eichel's shot selection leaves something to be desired.

But watching him celebrate with teammates after his overtime winner in Pittsburgh, it's clear the captain is leading this run. Eichel is moving toward the elite status that was predicted.

Jason Pominville – He played his 1,000th game this month and looks like a guy who played his 100th. The right winger benefits from skating alongside Eichel and Skinner, but he's earned the role by burying his chances. His shooting percentage of 18.4 is nearly double his career average.

The goals may eventually dry up, but he's proved he can contribute in a checking role, too. It's been a remarkable start for Pominville, who turns 36 on Nov. 30.

Jason Botterill – Owner Kim Pegula said the general manager used last season to see what needed to be fixed and acted accordingly. The moves – bringing in Skinner, Carter Hutton and Conor Sheary, shipping out Ryan O'Reilly – have worked.

If the Sabres keep winning and – gasp – become a buyer at the trade deadline, Botterill has draft picks and prospects to use as ammunition.

#### Merit Roll

Rasmus Dahlin – The Sabres have let the rookie ease into the NHL. He's fifth among the defensemen in ice time (18:27) while playing on the third pairing and second power play. He's earned a bump up.

Dahlin creates offense with his accurate passing, and he's clearly gaining confidence with the puck. He has one goal and five points in the last five games, numbers that could have started trending for the 18-year-old. He's realizing the highlight-reel moves he made in Sweden work here, too.

Carter Hutton – Buffalo was plagued by bad, deflating goals last season. Hutton has been solid (or better) in nearly all of his 15 starts, making the saves he's supposed to make while adding a few dandies. His love of playing the puck and connecting on long passes have forced teams to be wary.

We knew before the season that his success in one-goal games would help immensely, and he's off to a 6-0-1 start in the close ones.

Linus Ullmark – The backup netminder has the Sabres' lone shutout and is leading Hutton in save percentage (.922 to .917). Oh, he's also 4-0-1. Successful teams don't have a letdown when the backup goes in, and the Sabres are thriving with Ullmark providing relief.

#### Performing Satisfactorily

Kyle Okposo – As he detailed to our cohort Tim Graham, Okposo dealt with more than anyone knew during the past couple of seasons. He's bouncing back.

Okposo is in line to become a 20-goal scorer again. He was on the ice for 47 goals against at five-on-five last season – tied for third-worst among Sabres forwards – but he's lowered that pace with 11 so far (including two against the Penguins).

Zemgus Girgensons and Johan Larsson – These two longtime whipping boys are shining together on the fourth line. Though they have just one goal between them, they're creating chances and keeping the puck in the opponents' zone as well as Skinner and Pominville.

Phil Housley – The coach rewarded Pominville for hard fourth-line work by promoting him to the first line, and it turned around the season. He scratched Patrik Berglund early, risking alienating the acquired veteran, but it was the right call. He hasn't yet found chemistry for the second and third lines, but it's not from lack of trying.

Conor Sheary – He's been a go-to guy on the power-play unit, tying for the team lead with three goals. He's been good at getting the Sabres into the opponents' zone, as Stimson points out.

Jake McCabe – His career was projecting up before last year’s injury-plagued season, and a return to health has coincided with a return to form. He gets overzealous at times and leaves his defensive position, but he’s scoring (two goals), passing (seven assists) and blocking shots (team-high 36).

Penalty kill – The Sabres rank sixth after finishing 22nd last season. Zach Bogosian has 10 short-handed blocked shots, ranking 16th in the NHL, and McCabe is tied for 22nd with nine. Marco Scandella (58:40 this season) and Girgensons (56:28) lead the Sabres in short-handed ice time and have just three goals against. Larsson (2:48 per game) has been on for just one goal against.

#### Needs Improvement

Sam Reinhart – There are a lot of analytics that say he’s had a very good season. He’s second on the team with 12 assists. He does the little things that don’t end up on the stat sheet. But Buffalo needs Reinhart to score goals, and he has two in 21 games.

Casey Mittelstadt – The rookie had as many points in his six games last year (six) as he did in 20 games this year. He has three goals after starting with none in the opening 10 games. The center is starting in the offensive zone 69 percent of the time, yet he’s getting outshot.

The good news is he hasn’t been a liability, skating for eight goals against at even strength while helping generate 11. He is starting to get a handle on the learning curve.

Rasmus Ristolainen – His main flaw is inaccurate passing, and it’s become more noticeable next to the pinpoint Dahlin. Too many chances disappear when Ristolainen is off the mark. He’s admittedly made poor decisions – such as turning over the puck behind the opponents’ net in overtime to give up odd-man rushes – but he’s also tied for the team lead with two game-winning goals.

Power play – The Sabres were 20th last season with a 19.1 percent success rate. They’re 22nd this year at 17.4 percent.

The disparity this season comes at home and on the road. In Buffalo, they’ve gotten just 27 power-play chances, the third-lowest home total in the NHL. They’ve scored on six (22.2 percent). They’ve also scored six times on the road, but they’re clicking at just 14.3 percent after getting 42 opportunities, the third-highest total in the league.

#### Stay after class

Tage Thompson – The prospect acquired in the O’Reilly trade was a bystander until scoring his first goal Monday in Pittsburgh. He’s been scratched seven times and has one assist to show for his 14 games. The Sabres are banking on video and one-on-one tutoring to help him catch up. There’s no denying his elite shot.

Patrik Berglund – There are times he’s just not sure what to do or where to be. He started the season as the second-line center but has been playing alongside Larsson and Girgensons on the fourth. It’s hardly the worst spot, but Buffalo expected more from the veteran.

No one could have expected more from this team. It’s early, but they’re conjuring comparisons to the 2005-06 squad that came out of nowhere to become a Cup contender. If the midterm report card is as good as this one, contender status will be a reality.

## What historical statistics currently tell us about the Sabres' playoff chances

By Ryan Stimson

The Athletic

November 20, 2018

The Sabres are off to their best start in years. It's been a long road, but fans are whispering the "P" word. Can this team get back into the playoffs? Currently holding down the third spot in the Atlantic Division, what do the Sabres need to do to get back into playoffs for the first time since a seven-game first-round loss to the Philadelphia Flyers in 2011? Today, we'll look at what history says about the Sabres' chances this far into the season. Let's get to it.

For several seasons now, the analytics community has used American Thanksgiving as a barometer of sorts for evaluating a team's playoff chances. The reason this fits so conveniently is because it's around the 20 – 25 game mark where we can start to be a little more confident in assessing a team's talent level from a shot differential standpoint. If we are more confident in a team's shot metrics, we can then get a better idea of what to expect from them going forward.

Over at hockey-graphs a few years ago, the anonymous Petbugs wrote a lengthy piece on this topic. He plotted a team's adjusted shot and expected goal percentages on December 1st and looked at where teams finished at the end of the season. There was much more emphasis on a team's shot share than expected goal share at the time.

This difference is noted when looking at teams that only were greater than 50 percent in one or the other. Of all the teams with greater than 50 percent shot share and under 50 percent expected goals for, 70 percent still made the playoffs, but when you reverse that (teams <50 percent shot share but >50 percent xGF share) only 29 percent made the playoffs. To make the playoffs, you want to be on the right side of 50 percent from a shot share perspective. However, there is an interesting twist from his study.

When we look at the full season's results and compare to which teams made the playoffs or not, we see that advantage of shots over expected goals if a team was over 50 percent in one or the other narrows quite a bit. We are more interested in predicting what will happen, but this will be useful to remember in just a moment.

This year's Sabres

Buffalo is sporting a 5v5 shot share of just over 49 percent with an expected goal share of just over 50 percent (data from OffsideReview). Right now they would be one of those 29 percent from petbugs' chart above. That's never the bucket you want to be in.

Last season on December 1st, the Sabres had an expected goal share of 44.8 percent and a shot share of 46.8 percent. The year before (2016 – 2017) on December 1st, the team had an expected goal share of 51.2 percent and a shot share of 49.2 percent. So while it's good to have exciting and fun hockey to watch again in the area, there is still a ways to go as far as consistent, sustainable performances.

The team hasn't been unlucky either, with a PDO of 101. As Carter Hutton started to cool off from his torrid start, the team started to score more. Rarely are both percentages high at the same time and they tend to even out in the long run.

The same goes for special teams. Their power play is due to start scoring more (only shooting nine percent) and their penalty kill is due to start yielding a few more goals, but not too many (currently have a 88.5 save percentage on the penalty kill, whereas league average is around 87 percent).

What else can we look at?

The same way that we can look at expected points like I did in my deep dives into the forwards and backs, we can look at what the team would expect to score given the types of passing plays they generate and allow. When I analyzed this last year, it predicted team performance better than many existing team metrics. Again, even a little information on how teams move the puck can improve our forecasting.

Right now, through the 12 games Corey Sznajder has tracked, the Sabres' expected passing goal share is only 47.5 percent. The main culprit has been a lack of offense created from below the goal line and across the slot, which jives with their high danger percentages over at NaturalStatTrick. You can get by with a lower shot share if you're controlling the high danger areas, but it's a risky bet. Right now, the Sabres aren't doing either.

## Conclusions

While they are in a playoff spot, it would be prudent to acknowledge the average performance of the team and know that improvement is needed if they want to continue challenging to make the playoffs. It's also important that Jason Botterill doesn't make moves to try and accelerate the rebuild by taking advantage of some early season success. This is still a very young team and staying the course means not trading away picks for rentals. If anything, the Sabres should keep the long term goals of the franchise in mind rather than burn draft capital for short-term success. This season isn't a failure if the team doesn't make the playoffs – sure it would be great to see, but it's not required for the season to be a success. That being said, they are close to having the numbers to make that a reality if they can improve ever so slightly. How can they do that?

While the fans are excited, and rightfully so, at how the team's top line has been tallying the goals, there's a concerning trend with regards to the team's performance when they are together. In the 55 minutes Phil Housley has put them together, the Eichel – Skinner – Reinhart line has a 43 percent shot share while the rest of the team has a 45 percent shot share. The top line out in Colorado can put up tons of points and still just about break even in shot share (49.7 percent). When you're ahead, you'll likely give up more shots, but 43 percent is really low. Additionally, teams never want to depend solely on one line.

In order to improve the shot metrics and improve the odds of making the postseason, the Sabres likely will have to address their lineup deficiencies at some point. Of course, they must do this with the bigger picture in mind and do all they can to improve from within. Housley looks to have taken the first step to correcting that already.

The Sabres are a fun, competitive team and that was the goal for the season. It's always important to take stock of where the team is at and there have been positive signs through the first seven weeks of the season. Enjoy the ride, Sabres fans. You've earned it.

## **Sabres have grown close, don't want to let each other down**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
November 20, 2018

BUFFALO – Early in Monday's come-from-behind victory in Pittsburgh, Sabres winger Kyle Okposo knew he was struggling.

As the Penguins built a 4-1 lead, Okposo was on the ice for the second and third goals.

"I wasn't having a very good game," Okposo acknowledged Tuesday after the Sabres prepared for tonight's tilt against the Philadelphia Flyers inside KeyBank Center.

A slew of factors have contributed to the Sabres' thrilling six-game winning streak, a run that includes five victories in which they rallied from third-period deficits.

The Sabres are young, fast and look built for the modern NHL. Through the first 21 games, they've consistently showcased the same demeanor and become a resilient group.

Right now, the 13-6-2 Sabres rank fourth overall with 28 points and are on the verge of their first seven-game winning streak since opening the 2006-07 season 10-0-0.

One overlooked aspect of the Sabres' torrid stretch? How the tightness they've developed as a group helps buoy them.

After a rough opening 25 minutes in Pittsburgh, Okposo, 30, said he "just tried to turn it up."

"I knew it wasn't good enough and I knew I didn't want to let my teammates down," Okposo said. "I didn't let the guys down."

Okposo created defenseman Casey Nelson's critical goal late in the second period to narrow it to 4-3 and center Casey Mittelstadt's tying score in the third.

"They don't want to let their teammate down, the guy they're playing next to, and that's where the tightness of the group comes into play," Sabres coach Phil Housley said.

After captain Jack Eichel's goal 45 seconds into overtime secured Monday's unlikely 5-4 win, he spoke about how the Sabres are "doing it for each other" and how no one wants to "let the guy next to them down."

"Our team feels close from top to bottom, closer than it ever has," Sabres winger Sam Reinhart said. "That's certainly something that drives the locker room, the belief and the passion we have for one another. ... That's something that I don't see changing anytime soon."

Okposo said: "There's a big trust factor in that room and we're all trusting each other."

Building that trust involves more than goals and assists.

"It's little things like getting the puck deep, getting the puck out, blocking a shot," Okposo said. "Those little things are being appreciated so much more by everybody in the room and they're expected. And when you don't do it, you do feel like you're letting the guys down and you want to be better.

"That's what good teams do. They do the little things right."

The Sabres, a team with about 10 new faces, worked to become a tight bunch. Of course, having a core group of players who have spent years together helps.



"We've had enough guys here for a certain amount of years that are close," Sabres defenseman Zach Bogosian said. "When you have that foundation of people that were already here in the room and you add the new guys, I don't think it's that hard for everyone to fit in and jell and feel comfortable."

Still, they knew they had to change following their wretched last-place finish a year ago. So they talked more during the offseason. In the summer, Housley, Eichel and the Minnesota-based players spent a day together golfing.

"It's a combination of a lot of things," Okposo said. "We did some things off the ice as a group that we won't talk to you guys about, probably, but they had a really big impact on us. We knew that there needed to be a lot of changes that needed to be made and, to a man, everybody's bought into that and everybody is on the same page."

"Now we're starting to see some growth as a group that can have the makings of something pretty special, but we're just kind of taking it a day at a time and really enjoying each other."

## **Upstart Sabres generating buzz**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

November 20, 2018

BUFFALO – For the first time in years, the upstart Sabres are generating buzz. Their six-game winning streak has ignited a fan base beaten down by season after season of losing.

Sure, it's still early, just 21 games into the season. But the 13-6-2 Sabres seem legit. Right now, their 26 points rank third in the ultra-competitive Atlantic Division and fourth overall.

During their run, they've knocked off some NHL heavyweights, roaring back from deficits five times on the road.

In Monday's 5-4 overtime victory in Pittsburgh, they rallied from 4-1 second-period deficit to defeat the Penguins.

This is quickly becoming the most exciting Sabres team to watch since perhaps the rollicking 2006-07 edition that won the Presidents' Trophy.

"We're excited where we're at, obviously," Sabres coach Phil Housley said this afternoon. "The vibe around town, they're just showing their appreciation of the work. We've got to come to work tomorrow, this is going to be a desperate team. We don't have to change anything."

The Sabres host the Philadelphia Flyers on Thursday at KeyBank Center.

Housley, of course, doesn't want the Sabres to get too far ahead of themselves.

"But I credit the guys and our coaching staff for putting in the work and preparing our players, trying to give them every detail heading into the game," Housley said. "Our guys are just doing the work. Obviously, we're seeing some of the rewards of that in where we are, but we can't get complacent.

"As a coach, you're always trying to get better. You're always trying to look for perfection. Obviously, we're not going to be perfect, but we want to keep pushing the envelop."

Check back for more on how the Sabres have become a tight-knit group.

In other news, Housley said defenseman Marco Scandella, who left Monday's game after blocking Evgeni Malkin's shot, has a lower-body injury will be a game-time decision Wednesday.

The Sabres mostly did off-ice work today.

## Five reasons the 2018-19 Buffalo Sabres are for real

By Matt Larkin

The Hockey News

November 20, 2018

It was the kind of sequence Buffalo Sabres fans were used to seeing go the other way: a turnover by Evgeni Malkin leading to an odd man rush, where Jack Eichel's shot somehow trickled through Casey DeSmith to give Buffalo a comeback overtime victory over the Pittsburgh Penguins.

It felt symbolic, didn't it? The struggling Pens remained sprawled on the Eastern Conference's basement floor. The Sabres, winners of six consecutive games, improved to 13-6-2. It felt like two teams passing each other, one ascending toward heavenly playoff contention, the other descending toward hockey hell with Sidney Crosby's upper-body injury still keeping him out of the lineup.

Maybe the Penguins will bounce back. They've done it before. Or maybe, like we've seen in recent seasons with the Los Angeles Kings and Chicago Blackhawks, the empire is finally crumbling. As one team fades out of relevance, however, another must take its place. The Sabres got win No. 13 on Nov. 19. Last year, they got it Jan. 23. The season prior: Dec. 27. The last time they reached 13 wins this early in a season: 2006-07. So it sure feels like something special is taking place with this long-suffering franchise. Have the Sabres finally paid their dues? Can we trust this team to remain a playoff contender all season?

"Contender" might be a loaded word, but for starters, let's say we can at least see legitimate signs of improvement right now. Here are five reasons why.

### 1. They have their best possession numbers in years

The Sabres don't utterly dominate their opponents, but they at least battle them to a standstill most nights in terms of game flow. In 5-on-5 play, they rank just 22nd in shot attempts per 60 minutes, but they allow the ninth-fewest attempts per 60 minutes. They're attempting their most shots per game in eight years and allowing their fewest attempts per game in three years. They're in more contests because they have the puck more.

### 2. Their goaltending has stabilized

Carter Hutton played over his head last year. He wasn't going to post a .931 save percentage again. But he was a sensible, short-term veteran signing by GM Jason Botterill to pair with riser Linus Ullmark. They've combined for a .919 SP as a tandem so far this season. Last season, Sabres goalies posted an aggregate SP of .904. Hutton and Ullmark haven't been Vezina-Trophy-caliber elite, but they've been good, and "good" is a significant upgrade. The team's 5-on-5 SP has combined with a shooting percentage north of eight percent to give Buffalo its highest PDO (puck luck indicator, essentially) in the statistic's 12-year existence. Luck favors you when your goalies stop the puck.

### 3. Their biggest off-season additions have delivered

Thanks, Captain Obvious. But it's true! Did people underestimate Jeff Skinner? Because he was so young in his 31-goal, Calder Trophy-winning rookie season, it's easy to forget Skinner is still just 26 despite being in his ninth NHL campaign. His excellent speed plays better in today's slashing-free NHL than it did even a few years ago. He's never had more space on the ice. Skinner also never had an elite No. 1 center feeding him pucks as a Carolina Hurricane. Yes, he spent some time with Eric Staal – but not peak, 100-point Eric Staal. In Jack Eichel, Skinner has the equivalent of 2005-06 Staal for a No. 1 center. That's a massive step up in linemate quality.

And Skinner isn't the only off-season addition bearing fruit. First overall pick Rasmus Dahlin was expected to vault right into the lineup and transform this team's blueline, and it's happening. We all know he possesses an Erik Karlsson-like potential as an offensive defenseman, but his former coaches told me all summer they felt his physical shutdown game was underrated and would bloom first. Dahlin affects the play every time he's on the ice. Among the seven blueliners to suit up for Buffalo so far this season, he has the second best Corsi relative to his teammates. He leads the whole D-corps in defensive zone start percentage and sits among the top four in quality of competition, too, so his minutes haven't been sheltered.

Speedy Conor Sheary has contributed six goals already. And while Patrik Berglund and Vladimir Sobotka, acquired along with Tage Thompson in the Ryan O'Reilly trade, haven't posted big offensive numbers, they're starting more shifts in the D-zone than most of the team's forwards, and both play a lot on the penalty kill, which is operating at 82.3 percent, sixth-best in the NHL.

#### 4. Jack Eichel

High ankle sprains in consecutive seasons robbed Eichel of gaudy full-season totals, but he was progressing into a point-per-game center. He's still just 22 years old. He hasn't followed the supernova trajectory of Connor McDavid or flashed the goal-scoring prowess of Auston Matthews, but Eichel was considered a top-three worldwide prospect, mentioned in the same breath as those two, when drafted in 2015. Eichel's ceiling may not be "generational talent" but it absolutely is "franchise-altering superstar," and he may elevate to that status this season. Since the start of 2016-17, he averages more points per game than Matthews, Alex Ovechkin, John Tavares and Artemi Panarin. It'll be fun for the sport if we get to meet Playoff Jack Eichel for the first time this spring.

#### 5. They aren't picking their spots on the schedule

The Sabres aren't propped up by a marshmallow-soft slate of opponents so far this year. They've played 12 road games versus nine home games, and their seven road victories are the third-most in the league. Their current six-game streak includes wins over the formidable Tampa Bay Lightning and Winnipeg Jets. They beat the Jets in Winnipeg and the Wild in Minnesota, triumphing in what some would call the league's two toughest buildings to win in as a road team. The Jets and Wild are a combined 73-17-14 at home since the start of last season.

So while we can't crown the Sabres a breakout Cup contender just yet, all the signs are positive. Botterill has put the work in, and the Sabres look like a team that can remain competitive all year. We could be looking at this season's version of the 2017-18 Colorado Avalanche and New Jersey Devils – except I'd argue the 2018-19 Sabres are deeper than both those teams.

## **Reinhart's skill draws from multi-sport upbringing**

By Chris Lomon

NHLPA.com

November 20, 2018

Before he settled on hockey as his No. 1 sport, Buffalo's 23-year-old centre was holding court on the tennis court, a hard-hitting lefty that netted his share of hardware.

Hockey isn't the only sport that's come up aces for Sam Reinhart.

Before he settled on hockey as his No. 1 sport, Buffalo's 23-year-old centre was holding court on as a hard-hitting lefty that netted his share of hardware playing tennis.

"I always played tennis growing up," said Reinhart now in his fourth full NHL season with the Sabres. "I played with my friends and my brothers. But I haven't played as much over the past few years because it's so tough on your body."

Reinhart has plenty of reminders of his past tennis triumphs, including some impressive wins during his high school days in Vancouver.

"Especially in high school, when I'd get back from junior, those are the best memories I have of the game," said the second overall pick in 2014, whose father, Paul, played 648 NHL games as a defenceman. "Being able to play on the tennis team with my friends was great. I won a couple of provincial titles with my buddies, so that's something you'll never forget."

Tennis wasn't the only sport Reinhart excelled in.

He also played baseball, soccer and lacrosse before hockey became the primary focus.

"I played pretty much every sport you could name and I think you can draw on skills you learn from every one," said Reinhart, who was selected 15th overall by the Kootenay Ice in the 2010 Western Hockey League Bantam Draft. "For me, I wasn't pushed into playing hockey. I was never forced to play – it was just a love for the game. It was around eighth grade when I had to make up my mind. I knew that time was going to come, to have to stick with one sport that I'd hopefully excel at."

The Sabres are certainly glad he opted for hockey.

Reinhart, who made his NHL debut on October 9, 2014, against the Columbus Blue Jackets, became the sixth-youngest Sabres player in history, at 18 years, 338 days. His first NHL point, an assist, came 16 days later against the San Jose Sharks.

He scored his first NHL goal on October 17, 2015, against the Tampa Bay Lightning. In 2015-16, he scored 23 goals and joined Jack Eichel (24) as the first Sabres rookie tandem to record 20-goal campaigns since Danny Gare and Peter McNab in 1974-75.

These days, Reinhart and his teammates have their sights set on an Eastern Conference playoff spot. Buffalo's last post-season appearance came in 2010-11.

"That's the goal," said the forward who has had several memorable international hockey moments with Team Canada, including winning gold at the 2015 World Junior Championship. "We're all striving towards that."

For now, any thoughts of reliving his tennis glory days aren't on the radar.

"Maybe one day I'll get out there again," said Reinhart. "Especially with my brothers... let's just say it gets competitive when we play. Hopefully, we can get back into that some day."

## **How improved habits have factored into Sabres' winning streak**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

November 20, 2018

Kyle Okposo felt he needed to pick up his game, for the sake of his teammates.

The Sabres alternate captain felt he was having an off night on Monday, with his team pushing to erase a three-goal deficit against the Pittsburgh Penguins. He reached to find an extra gear, the sort that could lead to a play like this:

And then, on the same shift, a play like this:

"I just tried to turn it up because I knew it wasn't good enough and I knew I didn't want to let my teammates down," Okposo said. "I didn't want to let the guys down."

Okposo's play in Pittsburgh was a microcosm of a greater sense of accountability that has translated to a 13-6-2 start for the Sabres, including wins in their last six games. Five of those victories have required third-period comebacks, a testament to both mental fortitude and improved conditioning.

To understand how far the Sabres have come, consider this quote from general manager Jason Botterill's end-of-season press conference in April, following a season in which they went 11-10-12 in one-goal games:

"To me in those tight situations, those tight games, we did not have a lot of confidence," Botterill said. "Someone can always say, 'Oh, once you win a few of those games, you'll build confidence as a group.' But it's hard finding a way to win those games. That's what we need to improve on."

"We need to improve our habits. They don't come natural to us right now. What I mean by that is practice days, our intensity in practice, taking care of ourselves, communication with coaches and players. We have to do more of that so when we get in those situations and those tight games, we have more confidence to find a way to win."

Their record in one-goal games so far this season: 7-0-2.

So, what's changed? Jack Eichel cited the team's willingness to play for each other following his overtime goal against the Penguins, something Okposo alluded to again on Tuesday. It began with leadership exercises, which brought the team closer together in the summer.

Adverse situations often caused the Sabres to deviate from their game plan last season. Now, players take pride in doing the little things right, be it getting the puck deep upon entry or breaking out as a five-man unit. They play the same way regardless of the score.

"We knew that there needed to be a lot of changes that needed to be made and, to a man, everybody's bought into that and everybody is on the same page," Okposo said. "Now we're starting to see some growth as a group that can have the makings of something pretty special, but we're just trying to take it a day at a time and really enjoying each other."

Tickets for Wednesday vs. Philadelphia

Sam Reinhart agreed that while the Sabres have always considered themselves a tight-knit group, this season has been different.

"It's tough to put into words or anything," he said. "It's just a feel that, like I said, from the time before training camp everyone kind of went out of their way to come in early. For the guys that have been here for a couple years, it's nothing new to come into a locker room for us and have about 10 new faces."

"But this year, it certainly felt different. Our team feels close from top to bottom, closer than it ever has. That's certainly something that drives the locker room, the belief and the passion we have for one another. ... That's something that I don't see changing any time soon."

Playing for each other helps explain Buffalo's resiliency as of late, but there's also an endurance aspect to the team's ability to erase three third-period deficits on the road in four nights. The Sabres outshot their opponents by a combined margin of 37-23 in their last three third periods.

Desperation is part of it, but so is the foundation they've laid during practices.

"I think guys made a big commitment during the summer," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "That was part of our change, is our conditioning. It needed to be better. We had systems in place, so we really focused on having a tough training camp.

"I think that's helped us throughout these games where we've come back. Also, our practices, they're at a much higher pace. ... I feel that when it's called upon on a tough work day, [after] having a day off, they've come to work and approached it the right way."

"Our practices as a whole have been a lot sharper, a lot crisper," Okposo added. "Guys have really bought into working hard in practice and then it becomes second nature in a game. That's just what you do, that's not really a negotiable thing. Hard work is something that translates, for sure."

The Sabres aren't comfortable. Housley, Okposo, Reinhart and Zach Bogosian all stressed the need to improve their starts moving forward when they spoke on Tuesday.

At the same time, they'll carry a six-game winning streak into their home game against Philadelphia on Wednesday. You can bet they're going to enjoy it.

"There's some guys who haven't been here for everything and don't have the scars, and there's other guys that have," Okposo said. "I think the guys who know what we've been through the last couple years ... they really appreciate this and the amount of effort and amount of work that it takes to do this.

"I think we're just scratching the surface. I've talked about it all year, there's a process to this and we're still going through that process. We still have a lot to learn. But we're definitely taking some time to enjoy this, for sure."

#### A familiar feeling

Okposo smirked when he was asked if the start to this season feels in any way like his 2012-13 campaign in New York, when the Islanders went 24-17-7 in a lockout shortened season and snapped a five-year playoff drought.

"Uh, yeah," he said. "Yeah, talking to a couple guys about it, that season was pretty special for us. But it's different, too. That one we didn't really know what we were doing, just all of a sudden, we started winning games. This one we really put the work into doing it.

"This one feels a little bit more like two years later, where we had 101 points. But we're still in the beginning stages of that. You're going to go through ups and downs. We're a quarter of the way through and there's going to be bumps on the road, for sure. But I really like where we're at in the process. I really like what's going on in the room."

#### Injury report

Marco Scandella will be a game-time decision against Philadelphia, Housley said Tuesday. The defenseman was injured blocking a shot by Evgeni Malkin during the second period in Pittsburgh.

Scandella ranks fifth on the Sabres with an average ice time of 19:00 this season.