



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

November 29, 2018

How Rasmus Dahlin helped solve one of the Sabres' greatest weaknesses

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

November 28, 2018

Even Phil Housley couldn't help himself. When Rasmus Dahlin made a play to set up Jeff Skinner's backhanded overtime goal Tuesday night beat San Jose 3-2 and clinch a 10-game win streak, Housley pumped his fist in joy and celebrated with his coaching staff.

It was the Buffalo Sabres' seventh overtime or shootout win during the streak, and Skinner became the first player to repeat as the hero. During the streak, 17 players have scored in regulation or overtime, and six have scored the winning goal in overtime or the shootout.

Since the Sabres beat the Montreal Canadiens 6-5 on Nov. 8, Skinner has scored 10 of his team-leading 19 goals and he is tied with Jack Eichel with a team-high 11 points. But no player has participated in more on-ice goal celebrations than Dahlin. It was the 18-year-old's play against defenseman Erik Karlsson, a two-time Norris Trophy winner and fellow Swede, that set the stage for Skinner.

Dahlin, the first overall pick five months ago, has helped solve one of Buffalo's greatest weaknesses – playing 5 on 5 – and has been at the center of some of the streak's finest moments.

"Now it's not bad," Dahlin said when asked about knowing he was going to join the league's worst team. "So, yeah, this is the best thing that can happen. I just try to bring myself in. It seems like everyone else wanted to change here, too. We want to change this together."

Dahlin leads NHL rookie defensemen with 13 points – two goals and 11 assists – in 25 games. He also ranks fourth among Sabres defensemen in average ice time and is tied for fourth on the team with five power-play points. Vancouver Canucks rookie center Elias Pettersson, Dahlin's former teammate at the World Junior Championship, is generating Calder Trophy buzz with 13 goals among 21 points.

However, Dahlin helped transform the Sabres' attack at 5 on 5 and had them atop the NHL with 36 points entering Wednesday's games. They've generated 60 shots per 60 minutes at even strength with Dahlin on the ice, which ranks first among Buffalo defensemen and is second only to Skinner. The Sabres scored the fewest 5-on-5 goals in the NHL last season and allowed the fifth most.

Their 47.16 Corsi for percentage, which measures shot differential, illustrates how opponents have had more quality scoring chances during 5-on-5 situations.

Adding Skinner and Dahlin has made Buffalo one of the most dangerous teams in the league. That improvement, Housley said, has been the catalyst for change.

"The differential and everything that goes with it, that's a big part of our game," Housley said.

During the streak, Dahlin has been on the ice for more unblocked shot attempts and scoring chances than his teammates. He's also been on the ice for a team-high 12 goals in the 10 games.

Dahlin has made his share of mistakes. His nine giveaways during the streak lead the team, but he has the awareness and skating ability to recover from his mishaps. He doesn't lack confidence, either.

Dahlin came to Buffalo expecting to win. He didn't care about the past. Facing elite players hasn't rattled him. Dahlin handled his matchup Nov. 10 against Pettersson with grace and expressed excitement last month in San Jose when he was able to face Karlsson.

Dahlin outplayed one of the league's best defensemen in overtime Tuesday night. He beat Karlsson to a loose puck on the right-wing boards, passed behind his back with Karlsson in pursuit and poked at the puck near the slot to draw Sharks goalie Martin Jones out of the crease.

Skinner skated in to grab the puck and fooled Jones with a backhander for the game-winning goal.

"Ras made a great play going to the net," Skinner said. "Made their goalie commit. I just kind of walked into one that was in the slot."

Dahlin wasn't starstruck when he walked into Little Caesars Arena last Saturday, even though Nicklas Lidstrom, the best Swedish defenseman in NHL history, and many other great players from his country, played in Detroit. Instead, Dahlin was overjoyed to play against Red Wings winger Christoffer Ehn, a decade-long friend who grew up in Dahlin's neighborhood.

"Very special moment," he said smiling.

Dahlin isn't solely responsible for how well the Sabres are playing. Carter Hutton has eight consecutive wins, the penalty kill is among the league's best, Eichel's play has reached another level and Buffalo is receiving secondary scoring. Oh, and Skinner's on a one goal-per-game pace during the streak. But Dahlin has executed Housley's system to near perfection.

Dahlin and Rasmus Ristolainen give the Sabres elite puck-moving defensemen – unprecedented depth considering they were without Zach Bogosian for all but 18 games last season. Like his teammates, Dahlin hasn't been afraid to step in front of a shot, blocking six over the past 10 games.

Housley also trusts him on the power play and during overtime, when teams skate 3 on 3. Dahlin ranks ahead of Ristolainen, Bogosian and Jake McCabe in time spent in the offensive zone, leading to scoring chances. Of all that has changed since a last-place finish in April, adding the teenage defenseman might have altered the course of the franchise.

"We are like this right now," Dahlin said, putting his hands together. "I don't know how to describe it. Everyone sticks together. We go out there and it's a war. Everyone's does everything they can to win."

With Sabres in the playoff hunt, count Sean McDermott among their fans

The Buffalo News

November 28, 2018

Last January when the Bills broke the 17-year playoff drought, Sabres coach Phil Housley and his players were effusive in their praise and talked of wanting to experience the same thing and end the Sabres' struggles.

With the Sabres' having tied a franchise-record 10-game winning streak, Bills coach Sean McDermott is returning the sentiment — and feeling the #Buffalove.

"Last night, I was there through regulation (on TV), and after that I had some things to do," McDermott said Wednesday. "Another great win for the Sabres."

Bills quarterback Josh Allen said he was at the game at KeyBank Center. "It was electric," Allen told reporters. "They're really exciting to watch and it's awesome to see this city rally behind them."

The Sabres head to Tampa Bay on Thursday night and then play Florida in Friday. The Bills visit the Dolphins on Sunday.

"It'll be a great Buffalo weekend in Florida," McDermott said. "The energy around our city because of what Phil [Housley] and Jason [Botterill] have done over there, and their players and that organization and team, and what we're doing with these young players. ... I think there's great excitement around our city right now for sports in Buffalo."

Sean Kirst: Fans prove faith in Sabres is stronger than coldest wind

By Sean Kirst

The Buffalo News

November 28, 2018

Francesca Morabito was among thousands of Buffalo Sabres fans pushing Tuesday into fierce and biting gusts that came straight off Lake Erie. The wind got a running start on Scott Street and was enough to stop a 5-year-old in her tracks. It seized little piles of snow and transformed them into crazy dancing twisters, and the only way to get beyond it was for the child to hold her brother's hand, and muscle forward.

The little girl wore a surgical mask above her winter coat to protect herself from catching a cold. Yet in the moments after the end of the game, her Tinker Bell cap pulled down over her forehead, she reacted to the wind in exactly the same way as everyone around her.

Francesca was laughing.

"Did you have to do this?" she asked, speaking of the noise she had just experienced from a sellout crowd of 19,070 in the KeyBank Center, and she reached up and covered her ears.

The Sabres defeated San Jose, 3-2, on a Jeff Skinner goal in overtime. That makes it 10 wins in a row. Francesca, of Sloan, is in treatment for leukemia. She went to the game with her 12-year-old brother, Gabriel. They received a couple of tickets from Camp Good Days and Special Times, a summer camp that provides services for families touched by cancer, and they were part of the "Hockey Fights Cancer Night" at the arena.

After the game, the joyous Sabres – still as excited as little kids themselves – signed autographs for the children. Jack Eichel put his name on Gabriel's jersey, which pretty much made the sixth-grader's life. Eichel also autographed a card for Francesca, who clutched it like a treasure while her brother suggested there was wisdom in keeping it out of the snow.

His little sister, however, has long experience in practicing grace against the wind. Her family learned she had leukemia when she was 3. Much of her childhood has been spent going through such treatments as chemotherapy and blood transfusions, but you would not know it from the way the kindergartner approaches the world.

Her mom, Justine, works at Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center, and her dad, Dominic, works a night shift. While they could not go to the game, they trust Gabriel. Dominic's mother, Doreen Morabito, steered her vehicle through bumper-to-bumper game-night traffic to drop Gabriel and Francesca at the arena door, and a longtime family friend, Keith Hamann Jr., promised to drive them home.

Hamann was there with a friend, Rod Zizzi, and with his own parents, Keith Sr. and Lori of West Seneca, longtime Sabres fans "who have only seen it like this two or three times before," as Lori put it. Remembering the tension in the stands before Skinner scored his goal, Francesca looked up at Keith Jr. and asked, "Did you pray?"

Yes, he told her. Absolutely.

As for Lori Hamann, doing her best to ignore that banshee wind on Washington Street, she used words that in their own way were a prayer by themselves.

"You know," she said, "I'd love to see one Stanley Cup."

The wind kept coming, fierce and cutting, but above it rose this sound, this spontaneous wail of happiness, from fans streaming to their cars or toward the Metro Rail.

Chris and Sarah Burger of Depew were so caught up in the win they barely noticed the sting of a wet and driving snow. "It feels like a party down here," Chris said, offering that festive thought despite standing in the absolute bull's-eye for a rocket blast of lake effect air.

Here, too, was Tom Balthasar, an IT director from West Seneca, who attended his first game of the year with his 12-year-old daughter Amanda. To the seventh-grader, it felt like a belated Thanksgiving because her favorite player, Skinner, was the guy who scored the winning goal.

Tom, whose Sabres memories go back to the 1970s and the legendary "French Connection," captured a feeling growing day by day in this town.

It has been a long time since either the Bills or the Sabres had that truly electric ability to score. It has been an even longer time since either squad projected that most intangible quality, the threshold when a team has so much talent, will and energy that even when things go wrong, you actually expect the players to find a way to win.

Tom Balthasar and his daughter Amanda: Who cares about the wind? (Sean Kirst/Buffalo News)

For years, the general belief was that a Sabres team that saw a 2-0 third-period lead become a 2-2 tie had invariably turned into what Bruce Springsteen might call a downbound train, a team doomed to lose.

These Sabres?

"It's the offense," Tom Balthasar said. "They just have so much chemistry, and they believe in each other."

Because of that, speaking for himself and Amanda, he said: "We have faith."

The victory carried lifetime meaning for Donald and Deana McArthur of Sloan, who brought along Leon George McArthur, their 9-month-old son. Donald works in concessions at the arena, while Deana bought a ticket and watched overtime play out with their baby on her lap. Her son also received a certificate from the Sabres for attending his first game, which will always be associated with triumph, even if Leon is too little to remember it.

Afterward, Donald and Deana put the little guy in his stroller and pushed him to the Metro Rail station, where they kept his face safely beneath the blankets while they waited for the train. Seeing such a landmark game with their infant son, they agreed, symbolically captured the general direction of their lives.

"Since he's been born," Donald said of Leon, "he's turned my life around." He grew emotional trying to define what the infant - named for both his grandfathers - has meant in the way of a renewed sense of purpose, while Deana explained how a doctor had told them some physical obstacles might prevent them from having a child.

At 9 months old, Leon George McArthur's first Sabres game was a big win. (Sean Kirst/Buffalo News)

The doctor was wrong. The proof is Leon, whose arrival early in 2018 was the greatest news of their lives. His parents were both stunned by the way Tuesday's game turned out, but they said their confidence did not waver when San Jose tied it up. In an arena where it felt like the sound alone was shaking loose the roof, they joined many other fans in turning toward a similar explanation.

"This is Buffalo," Donald McArthur said. "It's how everything happens here. You've just got to have faith."

The couple was delighted to make Leon available for a family photograph, which required extricating him from his pile of blankets. In the cold night, Donald and Deana got busy until their baby's face emerged. He wore big red mittens and a warm blue coat, and it was as if the little guy knew how everyone else in that cold wind was feeling.

Forget the snow. Ten in a row. Leon was smiling.

The bandwagon is filling up: Sabres hit season-high TV rating for 10th straight win

By Alan Pergament
The Buffalo News
November 28, 2018

Buffalo Sabres games continue to be the highest-rated prime time programs in Western New York.

The Sabres' 3-2 overtime victory over the San Jose Sharks Tuesday night had a season-high 14.0 rating on MSG, topping the previous season high of 13.8

The rating hit a 17.0 in overtime when Jeff Skinner's goal gave the team its 10th straight win.

For comparison, NBC's most popular entertainment program, "This Is Us," had an 8.6 live rating Tuesday on WGRZ-TV (Channel 2) and "Rudolph The Red Nose Reindeer" was the night's most popular CBS program on WIVB-TV (Channel 4) with a 7.2 rating. NBC's "The Voice" had a 6.4 rating on Channel 2 and ABC's "The Conners" had a 5.5 rating on WKBW-TV (Channel 7).

It is rare for any prime-time entertainment program to get a live double-digit rating these days, though viewership increases later via On Demand and DVRs.

Sabres jerseys selling faster than stores can keep up with

By James Groh

WKBW

November 28, 2018

Cheektowaga, N.Y. (WKBW) - Stores are having trouble keeping up with merchandise demands as Sabres continue to win.

"I've compared the numbers from this year to last year, and we are up about 40 percent," Michael O'Hara, the district manager of Laux Sporting Goods at the Walden-Galleria said.

O'Hara has had to order extra shipments of Sabres gear because the demand is so high.

"We are playing catchup a little. Pretty much catchup with the jerseys," he said.

He got a shipment of merchandise on Monday. Two days later, he received even more containers with Sabres gear.

"It's fandamonium with them right now," he said.

The hottest jersey is captain Jack Eichel's jersey. Behind his jersey are hats, cups, banners, and other accessories.

However, despite how hot the Sabres have been over this 10-game stretch, O'Hara said Bills gear is still a little more popular.

"Right now it's pretty close still because people like Josh Allen," O'Hara said.

With the holiday season in full swing, O'Hara said he expects both teams gear to continue to fly off the shelf.

Red-hot Skinner enjoying life with surging Sabres

TSN

November 28, 2018

Jeff Skinner was answering questions after practice earlier this week when it was mentioned long-suffering Buffalo Sabres fans would probably like to see the pending unrestricted free agent stick around beyond this season.

All he could do was smile.

"I know, I've heard," said the red-hot forward. "I'm having a lot of fun."

And so is a hard-luck sports city craving a winner.

It was widely assumed that Buffalo, a team thought to be at least one season from legitimate playoff contention, would flip Skinner at the NHL trade deadline after acquiring him in a deal with Carolina in August.

But 25 games into the schedule, the Sabres sit 17-6-2, have won 10 straight games and were first in the overall standings ahead of Wednesday's action.

Skinner, meanwhile, is tied for the league lead with 19 goals and is on pace to score 62 times this season.

"My team's playing well, so individuals start to have success," he said conservatively. "I'm thankful Buffalo gave me an opportunity to get a fresh start."

That reset has come on Buffalo's top line with captain Jack Eichel and veteran winger Jason Pominville.

Skinner scored 204 goals and added 175 assists for 379 points in 579 games over eight seasons with Carolina — a tally that led to exactly to exactly zero playoff appearances.

The Toronto native has those 19 goals (with five coming in his last four games) this season to go along with eight assists for 27 points, one back of Eichel's team-leading 28 (five goals, 23 assists) and 10 ahead of Pominville's 18 (nine goals, nine assists).

There were some parting shots vaulted Skinner's way after he left Carolina, but the 26-year-old insists there are no hard feelings toward the club that picked him seventh overall at the 2010 draft.

Instead, he's happy to fit in on a team that finished last in 2017-18 and has missed the playoffs seven straight springs, but is now on a 10-game winning streak for the first time since the Sabres claimed the Presidents' Trophy with the NHL's best regular-season record in 2006-07.

"You're not going to have success unless all five guys on the ice are pulling the same rope," said Skinner, who has a salary cap hit of US\$5.75 million and will likely be due a hefty raise if Buffalo want to retain his services.

Nine of the 10 victories in the Sabres' current run — the longest in the NHL since Columbus won 16 straight in 2016-17 — have been by one goal, with seven coming after 60 minutes, including Tuesday's 3-2 overtime decision against San Jose that saw Skinner grab the winner.

Buffalo's defence was boosted by the arrival of Rasmus Dahlin, the first pick in the 2018 draft, while free-agent goalie Carter Hutton has steadied a troublesome crease for a franchise that is already just eight wins short of last season's total.

"Every night there's a guy stepping up making a big play at a big moment," Skinner said. "Everyone talks about the parity in the league and how tough it is to win and what the margin of error is."

The Vegas Golden Knights stunned the hockey world last season as a 109-point expansion team that made an improbable run to the Stanley Cup final.

It's still early, but these Sabres are starting to have that type of feel.

"There's a lot of one-goal games, a lot of overtime," Skinner continued. "The trick is to try and find a way to come out on top of more of those than you don't."

While the NFL's Bills made their first playoff appearance in 18 years last season, the Sabres have not won a post-season series since 2007. Buffalo would go on to lose in the Eastern Conference final that year, miss the playoffs twice and then fall in the first round in both 2010 and 2011 before going on the franchise's current seven-year drought accented by three last-place finishes.

For a part of the world that endured four consecutive Super Bowl losses and Brett Hull's controversial toe-in-the-crease goal that ended Buffalo's last trip to the Cup in 1999, the surprising Sabres are keen to end their fans' string of heartbreak.

"They've been desperate for a winner," Eichel said. "It's a great sports city."

Buffalo's Rasmus Ristolainen goes between-the-legs for the score and ridiculous celebration as the hottest team in the NHL wins again

Meredith Cash

Business Insider

November 28, 2018

The Buffalo Sabres are no longer the joke of the NHL.

With a 3-2 win against the San Jose Sharks Tuesday night, the Sabres capped a 10-game winning streak to tie a franchise record previously set in January 1984 and October 2006. They also lead the NHL with a 17-6-2 record and have taken everyone by surprise with their recent success.

Perhaps even more enthralling than Buffalo's rapid rise to the top is the flair with which its top players are doing so. Sabres left wing Jeff Skinner currently sits in a three-way tie to lead the league with 19 goals on the season, 18 of which he has scored in Buffalo's last 18 games.

Skinner scored the game-winner with 1:41 left in overtime Tuesday night, but it was the Sabres' Rasmus Ristolainen who stole the show with a Sports Center top-10 finish.

Nearly 15 minutes into the second period, teammate Tage Thompson connected with the Finnish defender across the ice on the left wing. Ristolainen maneuvered the puck between his legs and blew past Sharks defender Brent Burns en route to the first goal of the game and his third of the season.

The goal landed at No. 1 on Sports Center's Top-10 plays of the day, but it was Ristolainen's stick celebration that got fans buzzing on social media.

Despite his silly celebration, Ristolainen got serious for a moment during his postgame comments. The NHL dedicated the night to fighting cancer and raising awareness, so the crafty defender dedicated his goal to his late grandfather who passed away last year.