



# **Buffalo Sabres**

**Daily Press Clips**

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## **Sabres need their silent scorers to start making some noise**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 10, 2018

Until Saturday's third-period collapse against Philadelphia, it had been more than seven weeks since the Buffalo Sabres had lost a game by four goals. That's when everything changed.

The Sabres gave up four power-play goals and lost, 5-1, on Oct. 18 in San Jose. It was their third defeat in four games, all of the losses featuring just a one-goal output. The next day, at a practice in suburban Los Angeles, coach Phil Housley revamped his entire corps of forwards and put Jack Eichel with Jeff Skinner.

It was a move that changed the season, and perhaps franchise history moving forward. The Sabres responded with a 5-1 win over the Kings that was highlighted by a Skinner hat trick and started a 14-2-2 run that was their best in 12 years.

The team starts this week facing a similar scenario. The Sabres are 0-3-2 in their last five games and have become strictly a one-line club when it comes to offense. And who's the opponent coming to KeyBank Center on Tuesday night? It's the Kings.

There is one difference. Housley worked his team hard Monday in HarborCenter but didn't put the lines through the blender. Instead, he opted to sprinkle some change.

Housley had Tage Thompson on the third line with Vladimir Sobotka and Jason Pominville, returned Kyle Okposo to the second line with Conor Sheary and Casey Mittelstadt and gave Rasmus Dahlin a chance at the point on the top power play with Rasmus Ristolainen.

"We've changed lines even when we've been winning games," Housley said. "We're trying to find the right balance just moving some guys around and we'll see how that plays out tomorrow."

Housley needs to see some results. The club has eight goals over the last four games, all by Eichel (4), Reinhart (3) and Skinner (1). In fact, Eichel has four straight Buffalo goals and no other Sabre has scored in the team's last 91 minutes of play.

Culprits are numerous. Okposo has no goals in the last 12 games. Pominville has one goal in 14 games. Sheary has no goals in his last 10. Mittelstadt has none in his last seven. In the 15 games since Nov. 8, the team has gotten a total of three goals out of a group that consists of Patrik Berglund, Sobotka, Johan Larsson, Zemgus Girgensons and Evan Rodrigues.

Even the defense, which was pushing the NHL leaders, has gone dry by scoring in just one of the last nine games.

"You can't dwell on it, you just have to work yourself out of it," Okposo said. "You've got to trust yourself and just go to the net. I went to the net last game and had a few opportunities at the doorstep, so they'll come."

"Nobody puts more pressure on me than myself. That's how I've always been and how I'll always be until I stop playing hockey. I expect a lot out of myself. I had a really good summer and I feel good on the ice. It's just pucks aren't going in right now. I have to be more confident with it offensively."

Pominville, who has lost his top-line spot on the wing to Reinhart and has seen his power-play time limited, said the team has to avoid getting discouraged.

"It's happened to everyone. You have to keep working, keep shooting," said Pominville, who is tied with Eichel for second on the team with nine goals. "I was on the power play, getting special-teams time, so that helps, but with the rest you just go out and play. Hopefully you get a bounce, go to the net and hopefully get rewarded for it."

Mittelstadt also felt he had some scoring chances against Philadelphia. While four goals in 30 games is a pace he's not used to, he has been facing difficult defensive matchups as the team's No. 2 center in recent games and has been trying to keep his head above water at that end of the ice.

"It's been slow for me, something new I guess," Mittelstadt said. "But it's going to come. I had a few good chances the last game and I've got to just start putting them in. If the chances aren't coming, that's when you start getting worried. You keep getting chances, eventually they'll start going in."

Housley put the team through a tough practice Monday, spending an hour on battle drills, 2-on-2 rushes and power-play workouts. The Sabres talked things out off the ice Sunday and knew they had to be ready to work hard Monday.

They've already snapped one slump this season. The prevailing feeling they have is there's no reason they can't do it again.

"It's one of those things where we can't squeeze our sticks," Housley said. "We've got to go play without the puck and when we do have it, we'll have the opportunity to attack."

"Once you do it once, I think it's easier to get back there," Okposo said. "It's when you don't have that foundation, then you don't really know what to do and how to get out of it. I think we do know how to get out of it."

## **Sabres Notebook: As Carter Hutton's return looms, Cal Petersen might start for Kings**

By Mike Harrington  
The Buffalo News  
December 10, 2018

It's uncertain if Carter Hutton can get the call for Tuesday night's game against the Los Angeles Kings in KeyBank Center, but coach Phil Housley made it pretty clear after practice Monday that his starting goaltender will be back sometime this week.

Hutton, who sat out Saturday's game against Philadelphia with an upper-body injury, skated on his own Sunday and returned to full workouts with the team on Monday, taking shots in all drills.

Hutton was upbeat about returning but tight-lipped about his timetable.

"Just a little maintenance, a little banged up. We'll be all right," said Hutton, who is tied for fifth in the NHL among goalies with 12 wins. "The skate went well. For now, we'll just go with that."

"It's good to see him back on the ice. He looked really good," said Housley. "We'll talk to the trainers after today and see where he is tomorrow. It was good to see him back battling. He looked like his old self back there. I'm sure he was glad to be back out on the ice after this little stint."

Housley said Hutton would "definitely" be back this week, barring any setbacks. The Sabres have three other upcoming games – here Thursday against Arizona as well as road games Saturday at Washington and Sunday at Boston.

Hutton had much more say when asked about the state of the team, which is in an 0-3-2 slide after its 10-game winning streak.

"Things were just rolling and it seems like it was easy but it wasn't easy," Hutton said. "It was really hard. All of those games we won were really tough and I think we just have to get back to the grind of it and appreciate how hard it is in this league."

"We're not far removed from being the hottest team in the league. It's the ebbs and flows but we don't want to be a streaky team in that sense. We want to be a team that's consistent every night and that's what we've got to pride ourselves with."

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The Sabres' power play, in a 1-for-14 rut, produced some new looks at practice Monday. Chief among them was Rasmus Dahlin going to the point on the top unit with Rasmus Ristolainen.

"That's part of our secondary scoring too, right?" Housley said. "When you look at it, we've struggled with that and we've got to simplify it by putting some guys in some different spots. We're trying to get as many looks at guys playing on the flanks, getting some shots, getting a feel for it and we'll see when the coaches talk where that's going to go."

Dahlin and Ristolainen were with the line of Jeff Skinner, Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart. The second unit had Casey Mittelstadt and Lawrence Pilut at the points, with Evan Rodrigues, Tage Thompson and Kyle Okposo up front.

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The Kings played Monday night in Detroit and Jonathan Quick got the start in goal. That could mean former Sabres prospect Cal Petersen could get the call in Buffalo. Petersen is 4-4 with a 2.41 goals-against average and .929 save percentage since being called up from Ontario of the AHL.

Petersen, 24, was the Sabres' fifth-round pick in 2013 and attended multiple development camps while playing three seasons at Notre Dame. But Petersen opted for free agency rather than staying with Buffalo and instead signed a two-year deal with Los Angeles on July 1, 2017.

The Kings posted a 4-2 win here in February and are seeking consecutive wins in Buffalo for the first time since Feb. 9, 1992, and March 15, 1993. Since then, the Sabres are 14-2-1 in their last 17 home games against Los Angeles and have outscored them here, 69-29.

Buffalo's 5-1 win over the Kings on Oct. 20 was their first in Staples Center since 2003.

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In other ex-Sabres goaltending news, Chad Johnson was placed on waivers Monday by the St. Louis Blues. Johnson, who was Robin Lehner's backup in Buffalo in both 2015-16 and 2017-18, was just 2-6, 3.55/.884 for the Blues this season. His save percentage was third from the bottom in the NHL among goalies with at least 10 appearances.

The Blues have struggled all season in goal and the final straw apparently was Sunday's 6-1 home loss to Vancouver, with starter Jake Allen yanked after giving up three goals in the first six minutes and Johnson giving up three more goals.

The Blues called up goalie Jordan Binnington from San Antonio after that game and sent Johnson packing on Monday. Johnson, 32, had a 33-save shutout Nov. 9 against San Jose but has been terrible in the five games since (5.05 GAA/.832 save percentage).

With Linus Ullmark on the rise, the Sabres were not interested in keeping Johnson after last season, when he went 10-16-3/3.55/.891.

## **Travis Yost's Sabre Metrics: Why December success is so important to Sabres**

By Travis Yost

The Buffalo News

December 10, 2018

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

A 10-game winning streak put the Buffalo Sabres in prime position to steal their first playoff berth since the 2010-11 season. But the fan base is still uneasy, and understandably so.

This is uncharted territory for a core part of this roster, and there are going to be ebbs and flows over the course of the regular season. Case in point – the Sabres followed up that unbelievable winning streak with a five-game (and counting!) losing streak. And in the matter of two weeks, the Sabres have already dropped from being in the Eastern Conference's pole position to third place in the Atlantic Division, just one win up on the chasing Boston Bruins. The Sabres play in Boston on Sunday.

If you thought burning standings equity from this five-game losing streak was bad enough, I bring additional bad news. The schedule ahead for the Sabres is, in one word, grueling.

With about two months of the regular season wrapped up, we have a pretty good understanding of team quality by now. And at this point of the season, strength of scheduling analyses can be quite informative. To that end, I have went ahead and built up every team's schedule by expected opponent quality through the remainder of the season by Adjusted Corsi%. (Adjusted Corsi% is not only considerate of home/away splits, but also back-to-back scenarios where team performance is known to degrade. And at the 25-game mark, Corsi% is actually one of the most robust measures we have in predicting future win percentage.)

Here is a table showing strength of schedule by month, where the higher number indicates more difficult opponents (with the associated rank relative to every other team's strength of schedule off to the right). Pay specific attention to January and February of 2019:

Any deviation from 50 percent is notable, particularly because a team can play anywhere from 10 to 15 games in a calendar month. So when you see that the average Sabres opponent in January will carry just less than 52 percent of the play, that's terrifying. (52 percent shot advantage teams, by and large, reach the playoffs; 48 percent shot advantage teams, generally speaking, will miss the playoffs.)

No team has a tougher schedule than Buffalo in the month of January. Their average opponent carries about 52 percent of the play, and the Sabres will actually only play three games the entire month at the KeyBank Center. They also have a scheduling disadvantage in January, where they will play two games – Tampa Bay on Jan. 12, and Dallas on Jan. 30 – where they will play the second leg of a back-to-back against a rested opponent.

And guess what? The schedule really doesn't lighten up in February. The Sabres have the seventh-hardest schedule in that month – a busier month that will see them play a ridiculous 13 games in 26 nights, most of those coming against relatively quality opponents.

The next table shows the 23-game schedule from Jan. 1, 2019, to Feb. 26 that will ultimately make or break this Sabres season.

As you can see, the Sabres really hit the trifecta here: (A) a wave of quality opponents; (B) a healthy serving of road games, particularly in the month of January; and (C) scheduling disadvantages, where the Sabres will play more "schedule loss" games than their opponent will.

The saving grace here? Buffalo's end-of-season schedule is much more kind. That's kind of the beauty of the 82-game schedule – every team, at some point in time, will go through a difficult stretch. The only issue for the Sabres is it appears to be longer than usual in nature and is on the imminent horizon.

Buffalo, truthfully, cannot afford to sacrifice more points in the standings in December. Doing so will put them at tremendous risk of falling out of the playoff picture when the schedule stiffens.

## **Hutton back at practice, likely to return to Sabres' lineup this week**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 10, 2018

Good news from the Buffalo Sabres Monday in HarborCenter: It seems like Carter Hutton's absence is going to be a short-term one.

The team's starting goaltender participated fully in practice over both rinks and is on target to return this week. Hutton has been nursing an upper-body injury and had not been on the ice with his teammates since taking the morning skate prior to Tuesday's overtime loss to Toronto.

He was not dressed for Saturday's loss to Philadelphia as Linus Ullmark made his second-straight start. It's unclear if Hutton will start Tuesday night in KeyBank Center against Los Angeles but the Sabres have three other games this week -- here Thursday against Arizona as well as road games Saturday at Washington and Sunday at Boston -- and it seems like Hutton will be ready for duty in those.

"It's good to see him back on the ice. He looked really good," said coach Phil Housley. "We'll talk to the trainers after today and see where he is tomorrow. It was good to see him back battling. He looked like his old self back there. I'm sure he was glad to be back out on the ice after this little stint."

Hutton was cryptic when asked about his situation.

"Just a little maintenance, a little banged up. We'll be all right," said Hutton, who is tied for fifth in the NHL among goalies with 12 wins. "The skate went well. For now, we'll just go with that."

Hutton had more to say when asked about the team's five-game losing streak, which seemed to come to a head with the third-period collapse in Saturday's 6-2 loss to the Flyers. Buffalo is now 0-3-2 after its 10-game winning streak.

"Things were just rolling and it seems like it was easy but it wasn't easy," Hutton said. "It was really hard. All of those games we won were really tough and I think we just have to get back to the grind of it and appreciate how hard it is in this league."

"The parity in this league, you take a few minutes off and teams make you pay. It's something we have to embrace a little bit more, the grind of it. Get back to what we were doing."

The Sabres did not make any major shifts in personnel Monday. Housley had Tage Thompson on the third line with Vladimir Sobotka and Jason Pominville, returned Kyle Okposo to the second line with Conor Sheary and Casey Mittelstadt and gave Rasmus Dahlin a chance at the point on the top power play with Rasmus Ristolainen.

"We've changed lines even when we've been winning games," Housley said. "We're trying to find the right balance just moving some guys around and we'll see how that plays out tomorrow."

## **Hutton returns to practice on Monday**

By Brayton Wilson

WGR 550

December 10, 2018

The Buffalo Sabres returned to the ice for practice on Monday for the first time since Saturday's 6-2 blowout loss to the Philadelphia Flyers at KeyBank Center.

On Sunday, the team held a meeting to address what went wrong on Saturday, and to talk things over on how they can learn from the loss and be better as a group. Saturday's loss to the Flyers was the Sabres' fifth consecutive loss after the team went on a 10-game winning streak to jump to the top of the standings.

After Jack Eichel had helped spring Buffalo to an early 2-0 lead in the first period, Philadelphia responded with six unanswered goals to send the Buffalo fans home disappointed with the outcome. Sabres goalie Carter Hutton is hoping that a loss like this one will be a wake up call for the team.

"We'll have to see how we bounce back here, but I think in this room, we communicated what was wrong there," Hutton said following practice on Monday. "We've taken so much pride in playing well at home here and creating a tougher atmosphere to play in. To play like that on a Saturday in front of a packed house is obviously disappointing, but we have to move on. It is what is is. In that sense, I think we just to re-collect ourselves. We're a younger team here, so the older guys have to really take control here and communicate what we need to do better."

Hutton was back on the ice for the Sabres on Monday after sitting out of Saturday's game with an upper-body injury. The 32-year-old netminder suffered the injury last Monday when the team was in Nashville to face the Predators, but it didn't start to flare up until Thursday when he was originally given a maintenance day by head coach Phil Housley. When he was unable to practice on Friday, the Sabres went forward and called up Scott Wedgewood from the Rochester Americans to backup Linus Ullmark in goal.

All three goalies were on the ice for the Sabres on Monday, but there is no telling yet whether or not Hutton will be ready to dress on Tuesday when the Los Angeles Kings make their only trip to Buffalo this season.

"We're going to see how [things go]," Hutton said. "The skate went well today, and that's all. Right now we're going to go with that. We'll see how tonight goes."

"It's good to see him back on the ice," Housley said of his veteran goalie. "He looked very good. We'll talk to the trainers after today and see where he's at tomorrow."

"It was good to see him back battling and he looked like his old self back there. I'm sure he was glad to be back on the ice after this little stint, but again, we'll have to see how he reacts after today and we'll see tomorrow."

Even though the Sabres continue to struggle to create offense, the lines did not change for the Sabres on Monday. Here's how they looked:

Skinner - Eichel - Reinhart

Sheary - Mittelstadt - Okposo

Thompson - Sobotka - Pominville

Rodrigues - Larsson - Girgensons

Dahlin - Bogosian

Pilut - Ristolainen

Beaulieu - Tennyson

Hunwick - Elie

Patrik Berglund was working in on the fourth line and swapping in and out with Zemgus Girgensons and Johan Larsson.

Depth scoring has been an issue for the Sabres lately as Jack Eichel's line has been the line primarily scoring for the team. In the five-game losing streak, his line has scored nine of the 11 goals that came at even strength. Housley understands that the depth scoring has not been there for the Sabres, but he knows that if the team plays better without the puck, the offense will eventually come naturally to his squad.

"It's been difficult," Housley said. "We've sort of rode Jack's line for a while here. I think they've scored 10 of the last 12 goals. Obviously these guys want to contribute and be a bigger part and sometimes it doesn't happen. If we continue to check and play away from the puck better, I think they'll have opportunities with it. I think we got away from that last game. Obviously we'd like to get contributions from a lot of guys, but again, I talk about getting to Zone 1 and keeping the game simple. If we can get there more often, things are going to happen. Kyle [Okposo] had a lot of good looks the last game, [Jason Pominville] is obviously a scorer that wants to contribute along with our other players. We can't squeeze our sticks, we have to play without the puck so when we do have it, we'll have an opportunity to attack."

Housley did alter with the power play units at practice on Monday. Here is how the units looked:

PP1: Skinner - Eichel - Reinhart / Dahlin - Ristolainen

PP2: Sheary - Rodrigues - Okposo / Mittelstadt - Pilut

Tage Thompson was working in on the second unit as well, switching in and out with Casey Mittelstadt.

The Sabres will return to the ice for Tuesday's morning skate at around 10:30 a.m. Faceoff with the Kings on Tuesday is set for 7 p.m.

## **Sabres suddenly lack secondary scoring**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
December 10, 2018

BUFFALO – After starting slowly this season, Sabres winger Kyle Okposo found a groove around late October, scoring five goals and 12 points over an 18-game stretch.

Not surprisingly, Okposo's production coincided with the Sabres' surge to the top of the NHL. The veteran usually skates on the second or third line, so his offense provided some critical secondary scoring.

Then like most of the Sabres, Okposo, 30, suddenly stopped scoring. Since their 10-game winning streak ended, he has recorded zero points in five straight losses (0-3-2).

"I expect a lot more of myself offensively," said Okposo said Monday after the Sabres prepared for tonight's tilt against the Los Angeles Kings inside KeyBank Center. "I don't think I'm playing poorly. I think for me, personally, I just have to work that much harder to get out of it and just trust myself, trust my instincts. I've gone through a lot of periods in my career like this. I find that you can't just dwell on it."

Not too long ago, scoring depth was one of the Sabres' strengths. Sure, like many teams, they were a little top heavy, with captain Jack Eichel and winger Jeff Skinner providing a big chunk of the offense.

Still, Okposo was on his normal 20-goal, 45-point pace. Thanks to some time on the first line, winger Jason Pominville, 36, looked like he might hit the 30-goal mark again.

Most notably, the defense, which needed 25 games to score its first goal a year ago, kept scoring and producing offense. Every regular defenseman recorded a goal by Nov. 19.

Having scored 88 goals through their first 30 games, a healthy 2.93 goals an outing, the Sabres are on pace to score 241 times. It would be their most prolific offensive season since scoring 240 goals in 2010-11. They haven't even cracked the 200-goal mark since 2011-12.

But in the last four games, the Sabres' first line – Eichel, Skinner and Sam Reinhart – has scored all eight of their goals. Eichel has scored the last four goals. During their five-game skid, those players have accounted for 10 of the team's 12 goals.

"It's been difficult," Sabres coach Phil Housley said of the lack of secondary scoring. "Obviously, we've sort of rode Jack's line for a while."

Consider some of the current struggles:

- Pominville is pointless in his last six outings and goalless in his last eight. Overall, he has compiled nine goals and 18 points in 28 games.
- Rookie center Casey Mittelstadt has just one assist in the last seven games and one goal in the last nine.
- Winger Conor Sheary is goalless in his last 10 contests after scoring in three straight games.
- Forward Patrik Berglund, who began the season as the No. 2 center, has scored just two goals in 24 games this season.
- Forward Evan Rodrigues has scored one goal in 24 appearances this season.

"We have the depth to be able to create more," Pominville said. "We should want to create more and want to score more as long as it doesn't prevent us from defending well. ... We're also giving up too much. I don't know if it's from us trying to score and thinking about it maybe a little bit more."

As Pominville said, the Sabres' defense has sometimes become porous during their skid. After falling 4-3 in overtime to Toronto last Tuesday, they broke down again and again in Saturday afternoon's 6-2 loss to Philadelphia.

"In the last couple games, we're giving up too many odd-man rushes," Pominville said. "Playing against Toronto and Philly, who are two great rush teams, they'll make you pay, and they did. So I think it's having a fine line of wanting to create more but also being more responsible defensively."

Housley said: "If we can continue to check and play away from the puck better, I think they'll have opportunities with it. We got away from that last game."

Given the recent struggles, Monday seemed like a day Housley might overhaul his lines. After he did that Oct. 19 in Los Angeles, the Sabres won 14 of their next 18 games.

But Housley only made minor changes to his forward combinations during Monday's practice inside HarborCenter.

Okposo took Pominville's spot at right wing beside Mittelstadt and Sheary. Meanwhile, Pominville skated beside center Vladimir Sobotka and Tage Thompson, who had been on the fourth line.

"We've changed lines even when we've been winning games," Housley said. "We're trying to find the right balance, just moving some guys around."

Housley also promoted rookie Rasmus Dahlin to the top power-play unit beside defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen.

The power play has struggled over the last six games, converting just one of 14 opportunities. The Sabres aren't even drawing many penalties.

"When we're on the attack, our neutral zone transition's a lot faster and ... that will ... maybe force some other teams to take penalties," Housley said.

## **Sabres goalie Carter Hutton practices, should play this week**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 10, 2018

BUFFALO – After an upper-body injury forced him to miss Saturday afternoon’s 6-2 home loss to Philadelphia, Sabres goalie Carter Hutton was back practicing this morning inside HarborCenter.

Coach Phil Housley said he “definitely” expects his No. 1 netminder to return this week. The Sabres host Los Angeles on Tuesday and Arizona on Thursday before playing road games Saturday and Sunday.

“It was good to see him back battling,” Housley said inside KeyBank Center. “He looked like his old self back there. He was glad to be back on the ice after this little stint.”

Hutton said of his absence: “Just a little maintenance, little banged up. We’ll be alright.”

Backup Linus Ullmark subbed for Hutton against the Flyers. No. 3 goalie Scott Wedgewood also practiced today.

In other news, the Sabres who have lost five straight contests (0-3-2) after their 10-games winning streak, only made minor tweaks to the forward lines today.

Kyle Okposo took Jason Pominville’s spot at right wing beside center Casey Mittelstadt and Conor Sheary. Meanwhile, Pominville skated beside center Vladimir Sobotka and Tage Thompson, who had been on the fourth line.

Check back later for a story on the Sabres’ lack of secondary scoring.

## **Sabres regroup after ugly loss: ‘That can’t happen’**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
December 10, 2018

BUFFALO – When you rattle off win after win, especially in dramatic, come-from-behind fashion, the euphoria of victory can often overshadow any problems that materialize.

The Sabres morphed into a powerhouse during their recent 10-game winning streak, earning nine one-goal victories and roaring back from late deficits again and again.

Those thrilling wins probably hid some of their deficiencies and allowed other problems to creep into their game.

“We just probably should’ve done a better job during that win streak of really taking an honest look and fixing some things as we go,” Sabres winger Kyle Okposo said Sunday.

After their most rollicking stretch in more than 12 years ended, the Sabres lost four one-goal contests (0-2-2) before imploding Saturday afternoon, allowing six unanswered goals in a 6-2 loss to the Philadelphia Flyers at KeyBank Center.

“That can’t happen,” Okposo said of the Sabres’ fifth straight loss. “We’ve been pretty good at home this year. I think that that game might’ve been coming for a little bit. That’s unacceptable. We’ve addressed it and we feel like we have a pretty good plan in place for how to deal with it and how we’re going to come out on Tuesday (against Los Angeles).”

The Sabres rank third in the Atlantic Division with 38 points. Still, before their Nov. 29 tilt in Tampa Bay, they trailed the first-place Lightning by one point. Today, they’re nine points behind the Lightning.

“We’re in a good position, and it’s not to discount anything we’ve done over the first 30 games, but we probably were trending in the wrong direction,” Okposo said. “You could say before the last game it didn’t feel like we had lost four in a row, but there were some signs that we weren’t going in the right direction.

“We should’ve nipped it earlier but we’re here now and we’re addressing it and we’re going to fix it.”

Sabres winger Sam Reinhart said: “We feel a couple things have crept in our game more than we’d like. Maybe it did happen at the end of the streak, but the most important thing there was we were finding ways to win.”

The Sabres found ways to win because they developed supreme confidence to complement a foundation they had built, Okposo said.

“No matter what happened, we had this confidence that we were going to pull through and win the game,” Okposo said. “That’s something that comes and goes. But the foundation and the way we need to play, that shouldn’t come and go. That started to crack a little bit.

“You have to control the things you can control, that’s our work and our attitude.”

So what deficiencies have crept into the Sabres’ game?

“Our overall urgency on the puck,” Reinhart said. “I think we’re giving too much time and space to opposing teams. There’s so much skill in this league, when you do that, teams are going to make plays. I think reloading on top of guys, closing on guys quicker in our own end and helping our goaltender is important.”

The Sabres hardly helped goalie Linus Ullmark on Saturday. Ullmark dazzled early, making a few huge saves. Overall, the Swede made 35 stops.

If Ullmark hadn’t bailed his teammates out, the Flyers could’ve blown the doors off the Sabres.

The Sabres' checking and defensive zone play was awful.

"We're just giving up way too many scoring chances, giving up scoring chances in front of the net, and we need to do a better job of helping out our goaltenders," Okposo said.

Some secondary scoring would also help the Sabres. In the last four games, only three players – Reinhart, captain Jack Eichel and winger Jeff Skinner – have scored goals.

Those players comprise the Sabres' first line. Over the season, they've scored 37 of the team's 88 goals, a whopping 44 percent.

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Instead of practicing Sunday, the Sabres held a team meeting. Only a few players skated. Goalie Carter Hutton, who missed Saturday's game with an upper-body injury, went on the ice.

Sabres coach Phil Housley has said Hutton is day-to-day.

## **The Sabres Are Restoring Hope in Buffalo, but for How Long?**

By Curtis Rush

The New York Times

December 10, 2018

BUFFALO — Outside KeyBank Center, home of the Buffalo Sabres, three bronze statues of the so-called French Connection line recall a time when Rick Martin, Gilbert Perreault and Rene Robert led the team to its first appearance in the Stanley Cup finals in 1975.

Since then, the Sabres have been back to the finals only one other time, in 1999, and the specter of Brett Hull's foot-in-the-crease, Stanley Cup-winning goal for the Dallas Stars that year still haunts this team and the city.

The Sabres have finished last in the N.H.L. standings three times since the 2013-14 season. They have not made the postseason since 2011.

Even the Bills, the Sabres' N.F.L. neighbors who wrote the book on sports heartbreak with four straight Super Bowl losses in the 1990s, ended a 17-year playoff drought last season.

But hope, as shaky as it can be here, returned under Coach Phil Housley after a franchise-record-tying 10-game winning streak last month.

Housley, the second-year coach, said the fans "got that excitement and energy back, which is great for us because we feed off their energy."

But the fact is, the N.H.L. season is a marathon at 82 games. Buffalo (17-9-4) stumbled to five losses in a row after its win streak ended on Nov. 29 against the league-leading Tampa Bay Lightning.

Signs that the winning streak might be a mirage were present. The Sabres won nine of those games by one goal, and seven victories came in overtime or in shootouts.

And long regular-season winning streaks are not often markers of champion teams. Six times N.H.L. teams have had winning streaks of 14 games or more. Only the 1981-82 Islanders turned that momentum into a Stanley Cup, although most of those teams still had a strong playoff run.

Marc Stein's Newsletter

Marc Stein has covered Jordan. He's covered Kobe. And LeBron vs. the Warriors. Go behind the N.B.A.'s curtain with the league's foremost expert.

One exception was the Columbus Blue Jackets, who in the 2016-17 season were one win from tying the N.H.L. record of 17 straight victories. But down the stretch, the Blue Jackets lost six straight and were defeated in the first round of the playoffs.

Look at the Sabres' own history with 10-game winning streaks, a feat they had accomplished twice before.

In 1983-84, Buffalo fell into a six-game winless streak soon after rolling up 10 straight wins. That team lost in the first round of the playoffs. In 2006-7, the Sabres started the season with 10 wins in a row and made it to the conference finals, losing to Ottawa.

But Martin Biron, a former first-round draft pick by Buffalo, said this year's Sabres had won the hearts of the city with their grit, pointing to a 5-4 comeback win over the Pittsburgh Penguins last month.

"They were down, 4-1, in Pittsburgh and battled back," said Biron, a former goaltender and now a television analyst with the Sabres. "This is a blue-collar community that really respects hard work and a no-quit attitude. That game really sent a good message to the fans."

The longtime Sabres forward Jason Pominville, who was reacquired last season, said he noticed the excitement around Buffalo when he took his 9-year-son, Jayden, to his hockey practices or games.

"When I walked in, everyone's like: 'Nice job, nice job. Keep it up, it's been fun,'" Pominville said. "I usually get recognized, but now it's at another level."

This season is a sharp contrast to how last season ended in April, with center Ryan O'Reilly saying that the team was stuck in the mind-set of being "O.K. with losing."

Within months, O'Reilly was traded to the St. Louis Blues for three players and two draft picks, including a first-rounder.

The Sabres' fortunes turned around, according to Pominville, when the club won the draft lottery and selected the Swedish defenseman Rasmus Dahlin No. 1 over all.

General Manager Jason Botterill overhauled the roster, adding forwards Vladimir Sobotka, Patrik Berglund and Tage Thompson in the O'Reilly trade and acquiring forwards Jeff Skinner and Conor Sheary and goaltender Carter Hutton. Skinner has 20 goals, entering Monday's games two behind the league leader, Alex Ovechkin of Washington.

"You could tell guys were excited because they were in town early before training camp, skating together, hanging out together," Pominville said.

The rebuilt Sabres are young, with 12 players 25 and younger, including 22-year-old Jack Eichel, the No. 2 pick over all in 2015, who leads the team with 36 points.

Housley, a first-round draft pick of the Sabres in 1982 as a defenseman, talked with each player this past summer and then leaned on a few alumni for help in changing the culture of the team.

He asked them to appear on camera in a video message to be delivered at training camp.

Housley took aside Danny Gare, a two-time 50-goal scorer, at the annual Sabres alumni golf tournament and asked if he would talk about what it was like to make it to the Stanley Cup finals in his rookie year in 1974-1975.

Gare spoke about the reception the team received after beating the Montreal Canadiens in the semifinals.

"I remember coming back from Montreal and there were 10,000 fans waiting for us at the airport," he said. "It was unbelievable. The big part of the video was to let the players know that this is a good town to play hockey in, if you're winning."

In another move to reconnect to the past, photographs of Sabres greats were posted above each player's locker stall.

Housley continues to set the tone. In mid-October, after a 4-1 loss to the Vegas Golden Knights, he called a team meeting the next day in San Jose, Calif.

"He was brutally honest with us," Pominville said. "He held us accountable. I think it was good, and the boys responded the right way."

Although the Sabres lost to the Sharks, Housley's message sank in. The next game, the Sabres routed the Los Angeles Kings, 5-1, which kicked off a three-game winning streak.

"We slowly started playing better, and it led us to having that long winning streak," Pominville said.

The Sabres, who have the third-best record in the East, remain in playoff contention. But going into Tuesday night's home game against Los Angeles, they understand there are emotional risks if their slide lasts much longer.

"We don't want to get those feelings back that we had last year," Pominville said.

Hutton, though, sees a difference in how teams prepare for the Sabres.

"The days of taking the Buffalo Sabres lightly," he said, "have come and gone."

## **'We should've nipped it earlier:' Sabres hold team meeting amid skid**

TSN.com

December 10, 2018

The Buffalo Sabres, who have followed up their 10-game winning streak with a five-game losing skid, held a team meeting Sunday to try to get themselves back on track.

The Sabres lost 6-2 to the Philadelphia Flyers on Saturday night, allowing six straight goals after taking an early 2-0 lead. The team was outshot 41-30, and forward said the team, which had lost their previous three games in overtime or a shootout, was probably due for a letdown.

"We've been pretty good at home this year and I think that that game might've been coming for a little bit," Okposo told the Buffalo News on Sunday. "That's unacceptable. We've addressed it and we feel like we have a pretty good plan in place for how to deal with it and how we're going to come out on Tuesday.

"We've just got to get back to being us and we've got to learn from that game for sure."

Okposo said the Sabres had "tough conversations" on Sunday to address the issues behind their current skid. He noted that the Sabres likely glossed over similar issues during their winning streak, which included seven wins outside of regulation time.

"I think we just probably should've done a better job during that win streak of really taking an honest look and fixing some things as we go," Okposo said. "Yeah, we're not going to practice as much because we've played so much hockey, but you can still talk about it. You can still fix it. That's been addressed. We're going to get back to work tomorrow in practice and just get back to being us."

The once-surging Sabres still sit third in the Atlantic Division, but the Boston Bruins have closed the gap between the two teams to down to two points.

"We should've nipped it earlier but we're here now and we're addressing it and we're going to fix it," Okposo said.

The Sabres will host the Los Angeles Kings on Tuesday before closing their four-game homestand on Thursday against the Arizona Coyotes.

## **Hutton optimistic following Monday's practice**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

December 10, 2018

Carter Hutton was back on the ice for practice with the Buffalo Sabres on Monday, skating for the second day in a row. The goaltender's status for Buffalo's game against Los Angeles on Tuesday has not been determined, but his recovery from an upper-body injury is trending in the right direction.

"We're going to kind of see," Hutton said. "The skate went well today and that's all. Right now, we're just going to go with that. We'll see how tonight goes."

Sabres coach Phil Housley said he expects Hutton to be ready to play at some point this week.

Hutton has already developed a reputation as having a knack for looking at the big picture during his short time in Buffalo. He offered a practical assessment of the Sabres' current situation after practice.

"I think you've just got to stay in the grind," Hutton said. "It's kind of one of those things. You win a bunch of games and things are just rolling. It seems like it's easy, but it wasn't easy. It was really hard. All those games we won were really tough, I think we've just got to get back into the grind of it, appreciate how hard it is to win in the league and the parity in this league."

"If you take a few minutes off, teams will make you pay. I think it's something that we have to embrace a little more in here, just the grind of it, and get back to what we were doing to win those tight games."

Tickets for Tuesday vs. Los Angeles

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The Sabres didn't look like a team winless in its last five games on Monday. Practice was vocal, the pace was high, and players were in good spirits afterward. It was the response they wanted after holding a team meeting on Sunday to address their 6-2 loss to Philadelphia.

"There's no reason to get negative," Hutton said. "We're still in a really great place. Obviously winning games and banking points is important. We could've not had such a great month of November, but we did. We move forward. I think the attitude in here has been great."

"Everybody's upbeat and they're excited for tomorrow. We're going to have a good challenge here."

The Sabres have lacked secondary scoring as of late, with 10 of their 12 goals over the last five games coming from their top line of Jeff Skinner, Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart. Housley has allowed his forwards to work through it, leaving the top lines unchanged while making minor tweaks to the bottom six.

Here's how the lineup looked on Monday, with Tage Thompson swapping lines with Evan Rodrigues:

53 Jeff Skinner - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart

43 Conor Sheary - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 21 Kyle Okposo

72 Tage Thompson - 17 Vladimir Sobotka - 29 Jason Pominville

71 Evan Rodrigues - 22 Johan Larsson / 10 Patrik Berglund - 28 Zemgus Girgensons

26 Rasmus Dahlin - 4 Zach Bogosian

24 Lawrence Pilut - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen

82 Nathan Beaulieu - 5 Matt Tennyson

48 Matt Hunwick - 81 Remi Elie\*

40 Carter Hutton

35 Linus Ullmark

31 Scott Wedgewood

"Obviously, these guys want to contribute and be a bigger part and sometimes it doesn't happen," Housley said. "If we can continue to check and play away from the puck better, I think they'll have opportunities with it. We got away from that last game."

The Sabres did make notable changes on the power play, where they're now 1-for-14 over their last six games. Housley put both of his Rasmi on the top unit, with Rasmus Ristolainen manning the point and Rasmus Dahlin on the right flank. Eichel, Skinner and Reinhart rounded out the group of five.

Rookie Lawrence Pilut was added to the second unit, which also consisted of Kyle Okposo at the net-front, Conor Sheary in the middle, Evan Rodrigues on the right flank and Casey Mittelstadt rotating with Tage Thompson on the left.

"Power play, that's part of our secondary scoring too," Housley said. "Obviously, we've struggled a little bit. I think we've got to simplify that. But putting some guys in some different spots, we've tried to get as many looks [as possible] with guys playing on the flanks, getting a feel for it."

Coverage of Buffalo's game against Los Angeles on Tuesday begins at 6:30 p.m. with the GMC Game Night pregame show on MSG-B, or you can listen live on WGR 550. The puck drops at 7.