



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres hope to have that refreshed look for Saturday's matinee

By Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
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A little R&R. And some real live actual practices.

Things have been quite a bit different for the Buffalo Sabres the last few days as they finally got a chance to catch their collective breath after an intense stretch of hockey that lasted nearly a month.

When they hit the ice for Saturday's 1 p.m. game against the Philadelphia Flyers in KeyBank Center, the Sabres should actually be refreshed. It will be nearly four days since their last game, Tuesday's overtime classic against Toronto.

Most important, the team won't simply be trying to power through another game. That's what happens when you have five back-to-backs since the start of November and 11 games in a 19-day stretch that ended Tuesday.

Frankly, it was monumental to squeeze an 11-3-1 November and 10-game winning streak into this part of the schedule. The current 0-2-2 stretch was an outgrowth of compacted games against rugged opponents.

"A lot of times you lose practice time and we understand that," winger Conor Sheary said Friday in KeyBank Center after the Sabres completed their first back-to-back practice days since Nov. 14-15. "So when you get these kind of days here and you want to take advantage of them, really work on your special teams and your 5-on-5 play and get better at them. It's definitely good for us."

"It's been refreshing," added defenseman Zach Bogosian. "It's good to see a little slowdown of pace in the schedule. It doesn't mean the games are going to be any less intense but it's nice to get a few days between games and throw a day off in there too."

Among the tasks the Sabres completed Friday was tinkering with their slumping power play, which is 1 for its last 13. On the top unit, the Sabres put Tage Thompson at a point with Rasmus Ristolainen while moving Jack Eichel from his off wing to his natural side. On the other unit, Kyle Okposo was put in the net-front position.

"During the win streak, we got away with a couple things — slow starts, maybe sitting back a little bit — and we still found ways to win," said Okposo, who is slated to play his 700th career NHL game. "That's great because at the end of the day what matters is getting two points, but we really want to get back to our process, our identity, the way we can play every night. That's going to create a lot of success."

The Sabres were giving up too many quality scoring chances and too many shots in general as the streak wound down, and through their losses in Tampa Bay and Florida. They cut back on those quite a bit in the losses at Nashville and against the Leafs, whom they outshot, 41-30.

"We were winning games when we were getting outchanced, but we were opportunistic and resilient and stuck with the game," Sheary said. "We've actually played pretty well these last couple games. We were one shot away from a win the last game against Toronto and one from tying it in Nashville. You just have to stick with it."

The visit by the Flyers will conjure up memories of perhaps the zenith of the streak — the four-goal first-period blitz here Nov. 21 that wowed a national television audience and set the stage for a 5-2 win, No. 7 on the run.

"You can never underestimate your opponent, and in this league it's tough to win," said coach Phil Housley. "The start we had against Philly — they're going to have their horns up, so to speak, ready to play. We understand that, but we have an opportunity to control what we can control and that's our start."

The Sabres have to be ready from the opening faceoff now. Opponents know all about the streak. They check the standings and see where Buffalo is, and it's a place many of them aspire to reach. Quite a bit different than the last few years.

"That's a part of growing up, a part of changing a mindset," Okposo said. "You have to know you're going to get everybody's best. Teams aren't going to come in and sleep the first couple periods then try to turn it on and win it in the third. That's just not going to happen. They're going to be ready to play."

"We're not going to change our game, depending upon who we're playing or if we think they're going to come at us," Sheary said. "We're going to have the mentality we're going to go at them, be on our toes and be the aggressor in the situation. It's exciting to be in the spot we're in, but we've still got a lot to prove and a lot to do. It's just a start for us."

After Saturday's game, the next one is not until Tuesday against Los Angeles at home. Arizona comes to town Thursday. In total, that means just three games in a nine-day stretch. With injuries piling up, especially on defense, this couldn't come at a better time.

"It's invaluable the rest that we're getting," Housley said. "We've been working hard and turned up the tempo in practices, but they haven't been real long because we're trying to use this time to boost our energy. I think the guys are in a good place right now."

Sabres Notebook: With Hutton down, Wedgewood called up; Flyers recall ex-Buffalo prospect Varone

By Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
December 7, 2018

The injury bug that has spread through the Buffalo Sabres' defense corps has now reached its starting goaltender.

Carter Hutton, who is tied for third in the NHL in wins and was a key cog on the team's recent 10-game winning streak, is out of the lineup with an unspecified upper-body injury and will not play in Saturday's matinee against Philadelphia in KeyBank Center.

Coach Phil Housley said after practice Friday that Hutton is listed as day to day. The injury apparently happened during Monday's 2-1 loss in Nashville and Housley said Hutton got stiff on the bench while serving as the backup during Tuesday's overtime loss to Toronto. Hutton had what was termed a maintenance day off the ice Thursday and did not skate Friday.

The Sabres have called up Scott Wedgewood from Rochester to serve as Linus Ullmark's backup.

"We're just being cautious with it, giving him a maintenance day yesterday," Housley said Friday when asked about Hutton. "He's still day to day and he hasn't really skated. We want to get him a practice or some ice before" a potential return to the lineup.

Hutton is 12-8-1 this season with a 2.60 goals-against average and .917 save percentage. But he was sensational during the team's winning streak, going 8-0/1.97/.936.

"It's unfortunate to hear about what's going on with 'Hutts' right now," Wedgewood said. "Obviously hoping for a quick recovery from him, so I'll enjoy my time here and make the most of it."

The Sabres also recalled defenseman Matt Tennyson after having sent him to Rochester on Wednesday to play in the Amerks' win over Utica. It's expected that Tennyson will make his season debut in the NHL Saturday because Jake McCabe and Casey Nelson are listed as week to week with their upper-body injuries and Marco Scandella, who remains day to day, has not practiced due to his ailment and has been out of the lineup the last five games.

Jack Eichel and Zach Bogosian, who both were on maintenance days Thursday, returned Friday and practiced fully.

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The Flyers recalled former Sabres farmhand Phil Varone from Lehigh Valley and he could make his Philadelphia debut in Saturday's game.

Varone, 28, is second in the AHL in scoring with 28 points in 22 games, collecting 11 goals and 17 assists. He was the AHL's most valuable player last season after compiling 23 goals and 47 assists to finish second in the league in scoring with 70 points.

Varone spent 5 1/2 years in the Sabres organization and led the Rochester Amerks in scoring in 2010-11 (11-41-52), 2013-14 (18-43-61) and 2014-15 (15-29-44). He had five goals and four assists in 42 career games with the Sabres before he was traded to Ottawa in 2016.

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The Sabres enter the game 9-2-2 at home this season and 7-0-2 in their last nine. They have not had a 10-game point streak at home since going 6-0-4 from Dec. 13, 2011 to Feb. 10, 2012. ... Thirteen of Buffalo's last 14 games have been one-goal affairs, including the last seven (3-2-2). The Sabres have played eight straight

decided by one goal or tied only one time in franchise history, going 3-3-2 from March 15-April 3, 1999. ... The Sabres are 4-0 in matinees and Saturday's game is the fifth of 11 scheduled this season, home and away.

Sean Kirst: For Sabres legend Joe Crozier, there was glory in coaching — and in stepping away

By Sean Kirst

The Buffalo News

December 8, 2018

Joe Crozier's memories were established over almost 90 years. A few, in mysterious ways, explode toward the surface.

One tale is especially dominant, three words he shared last week, repeatedly, even as I shook his hand.

Thank you, Sabres.

"Oh, it was the greatest thing going, the greatest thing ever," said Crozier, 89, about five years into treatment for dementia.

His son, Rich Crozier, an educator and longtime hockey coach at St. Joseph's Collegiate Institute, suggested the interview for fundamental reasons. Rich wants the community to understand the appreciation that he and his brother Greg feel toward their dad. He wants to emphasize the love and gratitude their mother Bonnie lives out every day, when she brushes Crozier's hair or buttons his shirt or reassures him if the world seems overwhelming.

"He took care of us," Bonnie said. "He went to work for us. He sacrificed for us. Taking care of him now? That's an honor for me."

The tale of the "thank you" chant brought Crozier forward in his chair. He was coach of the Sabres in the 1972-73 season, succeeding hockey legend George "Punch" Imlach, the team's general manager. Imlach was both a friend and a tumultuous mentor. The Sabres were in their third season, at a time when expansion clubs were historically awful.

A drawing that shows former Buffalo Sabres coach Joe Crozier with then-general manager Punch Imlach, taken from the Buffalo Evening News, is framed on the Croziers' living room wall. (Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News)

It was different in Buffalo. Crozier put together three brilliant guys on a line that came to be known as the French Connection. His team won 37 games and made the playoffs, earning a kind of competitive booby prize against a Montreal club that had lost only 10 games all year.

The Canadiens won three straight and seemed prepared to sweep. But the Sabres pulled out a 5-1 win at home and a 3-2 overtime win at the Forum in Montreal. The startled sports world took notice.

In the sixth game, at the old Memorial Auditorium, the soon-to-be-champion Canadiens finished the deal, 4-2. In the final minutes, in a lasting image in Buffalo sports history, a chant boomed from the sellout crowd. Buffalo was caught up in some hard economic times, and the crowd expressed how this team had served as a tonic.

Thank you, Sabres.

Crozier was focused on the game, frustrated by impending defeat, when the full power of those words soaked in.

"They would not stop," he said. In a sense, the chant never left his head. It was enough, years later, to make him glad to return to this city that embraced him.

"Anyone who goes to Buffalo, they're the happiest people in the world," Crozier said.

He was born in Winnipeg, one of eight children. His father died when he was a teenager, and life often equated to struggle. Crozier and his friends played hockey on frozen roads, creating makeshift shin pads from Sears catalogs, using frozen horse droppings as pucks.

This silver puck given to Crozier by the Knoxes after the 1972-73 season. (Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News)

At 18, Crozier joined the Brandon Wheat Kings, a juniors team, as a defenseman, the first stop in a playing career that included a quick appearance with the Toronto Maple Leafs. By 1963, he was a coach, a profession that led to three Calder Cup championships with Rochester of the American Hockey League.

The playoff run with the Sabres represented a new peak. Yet he left a year later to become general manager, and then coach, of Vancouver of the upstart World Hockey Association.

That league and his career were soon engulfed by tumult, touching off another multi-city pilgrimage that included a short return to the NHL with the Leafs, and winning the Memorial Cup, a juniors championship, in Kitchener, Ont.

"He was always a teacher," said Bonnie, who met Crozier decades ago, when she worked behind the desk at Toronto's Royal York hotel. Years later, what began as a conversational friendship turned into something else when the then-Bonnie Sheehan asked the coach for a character reference.

How could he speak to her character, Crozier wondered, if he barely knew her?

They went to lunch, beginning a courtship that led to their 1974 wedding. It was a second marriage for Crozier, who has three older children. Bonnie would soon give birth to their two boys. Greg grew into a standout hockey career that included an NHL appearance with the Pittsburgh Penguins, before he settled in Rhode Island.

Rich became a teacher, then an assistant principal at Smallwood Drive Elementary School in Amherst. He also coaches at St. Joe's, where his teams have won five state championships. Before every game, his father — a believer in the power of ritual — puts on a St. Joe's jersey and Bonnie texts the image to their son.

In his living room, at the stage of dementia where emotions are an open book, Crozier looked up as Rich described some lessons from his father, who took it in last week and said exactly what was on his mind.

"I love you very much," Crozier told his son.

Bonnie and Rich speak frankly of how Crozier sometimes struggled with depression, a condition for which he eventually sought treatment. They hope that experience underlines just how prevalent depression is, that it helps others going through the same thing, and the tale made a larger point:

While they were surrounded by hockey mementos and photographs, Rich Crozier was not really there to discuss hockey. He wants people to know about his father's lasting and selfless gift.

Rich was born amid a professional whirlwind that caused Crozier to take eight different jobs in 13 years. Finally, in 1983, Sabres coach and general manager Scotty Bowman asked Crozier to again coach in Rochester, and then brought him back to Buffalo as an assistant.

In 1986, Bowman was fired. Crozier, at 57, faced a hard decision about whether to hit the road again. "He gets to a point in life where everything is hockey, everything is about winning," said Rich, who knows his dad dreamed of a crescendo involving the Stanley Cup.

Instead, he looked at his wife and sons and stepped away.

"I knew it was time to go into other things," said Crozier, who acknowledges the pain of that decision. Buffalo sports historian John Boutet speaks of Crozier as a central figure in lifting the early Sabres into hockey prominence. Since he was a boy, his entire life was built around fierce competition.

In his late 50s, Crozier let it go. Rich was in elementary school. He said some of his childhood classmates are still among his closest friends, one example of how his father's choice gave the family a new and enduring normalcy.

Crozier remained with the Sabres. He did some scouting and then moved into the ticket office. He never formally retired, working until his health made the job impossible. He and Bonnie remain loyal to the club — they were as overjoyed as anyone by the early season winning streak — and they are astounded at how many people around Buffalo recall their name.

"The hockey's all past," Crozier said, "but they know who I am."

Joe Crozier, 89, is a former Sabres coach and a longtime hockey figure. Photographed with his wife and son at his home in Amherst, Tuesday, Dec. 4. He's with his son Rich, who is thankful that his father for giving up his hockey career for the sake of the family. (Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News)

Many graying players keep close tabs on their coach. Bonnie and Rich noted how Gilbert Perreault, the great Hall of Famer, drove 10 hours for a visit not long ago. As for the fans, a clerk in a store asked Bonnie the other day if she is related to Coach Crozier, and she replied that she married him. The kid's face made her realize:

He was speaking of her son.

Rich said a day will come when he retires from education, and he dreams about carrying on the family legacy as a coach at that point, on the pro level.

For now, his mission is giving new power to the words so vivid in his father's mind. More than 45 years after a chanting crowd inside the War Memorial realized that champions do not need to win it all, a son has a simple message for a dad who left the bench:

He says thank you to Joe Crozier, for knowing when to stop.

Sabres call up Wedgewood, Tennyson from the Amerks

BY Brayton Wilson

WGR 550

December 7, 2018

The Buffalo Sabres are currently facing some significant injuries on the blue line. Jake McCabe and Casey Nelson out on a week-to-week basis with upper-body injuries, while Marco Scandella and Matt Hunwick are both day-to-day with upper-body injuries.

With the depth on defense looking thin in Buffalo, the Sabres have brought back Matt Tennyson from the Rochester Americans.

This is the third time Tennyson has been in Buffalo this season, but he has yet to appear in a game this season.

However, it does appear as though he will be suiting up for his first game on the season on Saturday when the Sabres host the Philadelphia Flyers at KeyBank Center. Sabres head coach Phil Housley said after practice on Friday that Hunwick is still not ready to play, which leaves the Sabres with just six healthy defensemen. Tennyson was consistently working in with Nathan Beaulieu on the third defensive pairing, which is an indication that he will play against the Flyers.

In eight games this season with the Amerks, Tennyson has one goal and a pair of assists.

Jack Eichel and Zach Bogosian returned to practice on Friday after they were both given maintenance days from practice on Thursday.

Carter Hutton was also given a maintenance day from practice on Thursday, but he was not present for Friday's session. Housley said following practice that the 32-year-old netminder is now day-to-day with an upper-body injury, and that the team is taking caution with his injury. He also said that Hutton he will not be ready to play on Saturday against Philadelphia.

That preempted the Sabres to call up goalie Scott Wedgewood from the Amerks earlier in the morning.

Wedgewood is up on his first call up from Rochester this season. The 26-year-old has played well this season for the Amerks, despite his numbers telling a different story. In 14 games played this season, Wedgewood has posted an 8-4-1 record with a 2.91 goals-against average, a .907 save percentage and two shutouts.

Last season, Wedgewood got into 20 NHL games with the Arizona Coyotes, posting a 5-9-4 record with a 3.45 goals-against average, an .893 save percentage and a shutout. Overall, in 24 NHL games with the Coyotes and New Jersey Devils, he has put up a 7-10-5 record with a 3.05 goals-against average and a .903 save percentage.

Here is how the lines looked at practice on Friday:

Forwards:

Skinner - Eichel - Reinhart

Sheary - Mittelstadt - Pominville

Sobotka - Rodrigues - Okposo

Thompson - Larsson - Berglund

Defense:

Dahlin - Bogosian

Pilut - Ristolainen

Beaulieu - Tennyson

Hunwick

Remi Elie and Zemgus Girgensons were working in with Hunwick as the extra defensemen.

Here is also how the power play units looked on Thursday:

PP1: Skinner - Eichel - Reinhart / Thompson - Ristolainen

PP2: Rodrigues (Pominville) - Mittelstadt - Okposo / Dahlin - Sheary

The Sabres and Flyers will drop the puck shortly after 1 p.m. on Saturday with pre-game coverage on WGR beginning at 12 p.m. with Brian Koziol.

Sabres' Sam Reinhart showcasing scoring prowess around net

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
December 7, 2018

BUFFALO – When the puck slid back to the point late in Tuesday's second period, Sabres winger Sam Reinhart moved from the left circle into the slot and began jockeying for position with Toronto Maple Leafs defenseman Ron Hainsey.

As defensemen Nathan Beaulieu and Rasmus Ristolainen passed the puck to each other, Reinhart kept battling Hainsey, moving from one side to the other.

Finally, with Reinhart still in the slot and winger Jeff Skinner behind him, Beaulieu unleashed a wrist shot from the left point.

Reinhart reached out and deflected the puck by goalie Frederik Andersen, his fourth consecutive game with a goal and the Sabres' first score in their 4-3 overtime loss.

"That kind of defines what Sammy is around the net," Beaulieu said Friday.

Reinhart, 23, is enjoying a career-long goal-scoring streak entering this afternoon's tilt against the Philadelphia Flyers inside KeyBank Center.

Not surprisingly, the former second overall pick has done most of his damage around the crease, showcasing why he's one of the NHL's best net-front presences.

Still, fresh off a monster second half in 2017-18 – he compiled 18 goals and 37 points over the final 38 games – Reinhart struggled to score goals earlier this season. He finally netted his first in the 10th game and only had two through 16 contests.

"It's funny, you're doing the right things, you're not getting rewarded and things aren't going in for you," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "But he's really stuck to his game. That's going to the net, making those plays in tight areas, finding a way to tip a puck or get a shot off in tight."

Now, Reinhart has caught fire, compiling six goals and 10 points in the last eight tilts. While he has scored five times during his four-game run, the Sabres are 0-2-2.

"They started to fall, then you build confidence, and right now, he's a very confident player," Housley said.

Reinhart carries so much confidence he rarely changes during his slumps. Instead, he simply sticks to what made him successful in the past.

"If you look at the start, my opportunities were really there," Reinhart said. "Not much changes, to be honest. But ... a couple go in the net and you start holding onto the puck a little bit longer, start making more plays. ..."

"At the start of the year they weren't going in. I think looking back, the first couple games I've had more opportunities than I've had the last couple, but for whatever reason they've gone (in)."

So far, Reinhart has compiled eight goals and 24 points in 29 games, a 23-goal, 68-point pace over a full season. He set career highs with 25 goals and 50 points last season.

"You get a couple bounces and it doesn't hurt the confidence," Reinhart said. "You got to take advantage when they come. Over a long season, you're going to go through times where it doesn't go in the net as much for you."

Reinhart has already registered 16 assists, putting him on pace for a career-high 45.

"I think I was creating a lot, both for myself and my linemates, when the puck wasn't in the net for myself," said Reinhart, who has been playing with Skinner and top center Jack Eichel.

Two months into his fourth season, Reinhart's increased playmaking is a sign of growth. So is the "overall consistency" he said he possesses.

"As you gain experience, you learn how to prepare yourself for the grind that much better," Reinhart said. "On a nightly basis I've felt that much better about my legs, my mind and kind of everything wrapped around. I think that's really helped my consistency."

That all probably contributes to a greater scoring prowess around the net.

"It's all positioning, reading the play," Reinhart said of what makes him effective in the so-called dirty area. "I'll tell you, (Skinner) will tell you, a lot of time it's bounces, reading the bounces and getting a little bit of puck luck.

"It's a really fine line in this league of getting an empty-net tap in (and) the puck getting turned over and going the other way."

Sabres goalie Carter Hutton out Saturday; Scott Wedgewood recalled

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
December 7, 2018

BUFFALO – With Sabres goalie Carter Hutton day-to-day with an upper-body injury and out for Saturday afternoon's tilt, according to coach Phil Housley, the Sabres recalled Scott Wedgewood this morning.

What happened to Hutton? The starter finished Monday's 2-1 loss in Nashville and backed up Linus Ullmark for Tuesday's 4-3 overtime loss here to Toronto.

Housley said Hutton had a maintenance day Thursday.

"It was sort of formed the last three or four days," Housley said this afternoon inside KeyBank Center. "During the game, it just stiffened up, his upper body. So we're just being precautious with it."

Housley said Hutton could've played Tuesday.

Wedgewood, 26, has been the Rochester Americans' starter this season, going 8-4-2 with a 2.91 goals-against average, a .907 save percentage and two shutouts in 14 games.

Wedgewood has 24 games of NHL experience with New Jersey and Arizona. He spent most of last season with the Coyotes, playing 20 times.

"It's always exciting," Wedgewood said of returning to the NHL. "This is the best hockey league in the world and you want to be here all the time. I got a good chunk of it last year, started off well in Roch.

"(It's) unfortunate to hear what's going on with Hutts right now."

In addition to goalie Adam Wilcox, the Amerks have prospect Jonas Johansson, who was recalled from the ECHL on Monday. Johansson played in Wednesday's 5-2 win over the Utica Comets.

The Sabres also summoned defenseman Matt Tennyson, who was sent to the AHL on Wednesday, from the Amerks today.

With three defensemen sidelined – Jake McCabe, Casey Nelson and Marco Scandella all have upper-body injuries – Tennyson could play Saturday against Philadelphia.

Housley said defenseman Matt Hunwick, who's practicing again after missing more than two months with a neck injury, isn't ready yet.

Defenseman Zach Bogosian and captain Jack Eichel practiced today after having maintenance days Thursday.

Sabres recall Scott Wedgewood, Matt Tennyson from Amerks

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 7, 2018

BUFFALO – The Sabres recalled goalie Scott Wedgewood and defenseman Matt Tennyson from the Rochester Americans this morning.

Stay tuned for more details. The Sabres practice at 11 a.m.

Goalie Carter Hutton missed Thursday's practice for maintenance, Sabres coach Phil Housley said.

The Sabres also have three injured defensemen: Jake McCabe, Casey Nelson and Marco Scandella.

AFTER SOME LEAN YEARS, IT'S FUN TO BE THE BUFFALO SABRES AGAIN

By Ryan Kennedy
The Hockey News
December 7, 2018

BUFFALO – The ascendancy of the Buffalo Sabres has been one of the better storylines of the 2018-19 NHL campaign so far. Sure, a lot of us figured they would much-improved and, dare I say it, scrappy, but a 10-game win streak? A playoff position in the top-heavy Atlantic Division, and better than the wild card? That's something.

The reasons for Buffalo's results are varied, from a healthier lineup (though that has changed recently) to great acquisitions by GM Jason Botterill. On top of rookies Rasmus Dahlin and Casey Mittelstadt, the Sabres also have a new scoring sensation in Jeff Skinner, who was snagged in a trade with Carolina – one that looked a little dubious for the Hurricanes in the first place and is only getting worse with every goal that Skinner notches with the Sabres.

But how is it feeling in Buffalo right now? Keep in mind; the Sabres were the worst team in the league last year and not much better the season before that.

"It's different, for sure," said right winger Kyle Okposo. "We have a belief in ourselves and everyone in this room trusts each other and knows they're going to do the right thing. If a guy makes a mistake, he's the first one to do the right thing next time; everyone is holding each other accountable and holding themselves accountable. It's a lot better."

The combination of youth and vets in Buffalo seems to be in sync. Okposo plays on a line with fellow Minnesota native Mittelstadt, who is coming along in his rookie NHL campaign. On the back end, first overall 2018 draft pick Dahlin has been on a defensive pairing with veteran Zach Bogosian. While Bogosian doesn't take anything away from the character of last year's team, he does believe that things feel a bit different this season.

"Winning helps," Bogosian said. "We were a pretty close group last year too, but winning is the biggest difference. It's nice to see us get rewarded as a group."

The key now is to keep the good-time train going. The Sabres had a 10-game win streak in November, with victories over quality teams such as Tampa Bay, Winnipeg and, most crucially, an overtime thriller against Pittsburgh. Okposo believes the Sabres got away with the win on some of those nights – sitting back at times or starting off slow – and guarding against those bad habits will be important from here on out. Buffalo has lost four in a row right now, but the team has also had some time off after an intense game schedule of late.

"It's been a nice mental reset," Okposo said. "The past month was kinda crazy with how many games we were playing and being all over the place – one at home, one on the road – it was a lot. To have a little bit of normalcy is nice."

Watching the Sabres practise, you can tell they are having fun at the rink and working with purpose. Coach Phil Housley and his staff seem to have a pretty good pulse on this crew and it's obvious that the Sabres did not enjoy being doormats. Having said that, the Buffalo crew is aware that with better results come expectations and opponents are respecting them more this season – which means the Sabres have to be ready every night, too.

"You have to know you're getting everybody's best," Okposo said. "You're not going to get teams come in and sleep for a couple periods and try to turn it on in the third for the win; it's not going to happen. They're going to be ready to play."

But with captain Jack Eichel leading the attack and a great mixture of skill, youth and veteran leadership, the Sabres aren't making it easy for the enemy anymore.

Sabres ready for Philadelphia following 'mental reset'

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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It might not seem like a lot, but three days at home have made for a refreshed atmosphere in the Buffalo Sabres' dressing room. The team took the day off on Tuesday, then held back-to-back practice days on home ice in preparation for their game against Philadelphia on Saturday.

To understand what that time has meant, consider the stretch they just finished: 11 games in 19 days, with just one day off at home in that span. They navigated their way through four back-to-back sets, all of which required travel.

"It's been nice to not practice and spend a normal day at home, just kind of see the kids and hang out," alternate captain Kyle Okposo said following practice on Friday. "It's been a nice mental reset.

"I felt like the last month was kind of crazy in how many games we were playing and just kind of [being] all over the place. ... It was a lot. Just to have a little bit of normalcy, have a couple days between games, it's nice. When we do play tomorrow against Philly, we're going to be ready to go."

With that mental reset, Okposo said, comes a chance for the Sabres to re-establish their game. They managed to go 7-2-2 during that busy 11-game stretch, which began amid their NHL-best 10-game winning streak. That said, they're 0-2-2 in their last four contests, all one-goal losses.

Ironically, their most recent game - an overtime loss to Toronto on Tuesday - is more indicative of the way they want to play than some of the games during their winning streak. The Sabres dominated at the start of that contest and outshot one of the league's best teams, 41-30.

Tickets for Tuesday vs. Los Angeles

Mini-Packs are still available

"I think during the win streak, we got away with a couple things," Okposo said. "Slow starts, maybe sitting back a little bit, and we just kind of found ways to win. That's great, because at the end of the day that's what matters, is getting two points. But we really want to get back to our process, our identity, the way that we can play every night. I think that's going to create a lot of success.

"You've got to really enjoy [the winning streak] because it doesn't happen very much. You have to take the good and really enjoy it but also learn from what you're not doing well."

The Sabres had another strong start in their last meeting with the Flyers, a 5-2 win at home on Nov. 21. With that game fresh on both teams' minds, they're expecting an opponent that will be rearing to go come Saturday afternoon.

"The start we had against Philly, they're going to have their horns up, so to speak," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "We understand that. But we have an opportunity to control what we can control, and that's our start. I think our guys are in a good place right now. You can see the energy out there in practice."

More notes from Friday's practice:

Tennyson, Wedgewood recalled

Carter Hutton and Marco Scandella were both absent on Friday and remain day-to-day with upper-body injuries. The Sabres recalled defenseman Matt Tennyson and goaltender Scott Wedgewood in their absence.

Tennyson will play Saturday, which will mark his first NHL appearance since April 2. He averaged 15:08 in 15 games with the Sabres last season. Wedgewood is likely to serve as Linus Ullmark's backup against the Flyers.

Here's how the lineup looked in its entirety, with Jack Eichel and Zach Bogosian back after taking maintenance days on Thursday:

53 Jeff Skinner - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
43 Conor Sheary - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 29 Jason Pominville
17 Vladimir Sobotka - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 21 Kyle Okposo
10 Patrik Berglund - 22 Johan Larsson - 72 Tage Thompson
Extra: 28 Zemgus Girgensons, 81 Remi Elie

24 Lawrence Pilut - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 4 Zach Bogosian
82 Nathan Beaulieu - 5 Matt Tennyson
Extra: 48 Matt Hunwick

35 Linus Ullmark
31 Scott Wedgewood

Changes on the power play

The Sabres are 1-for-13 on the power play in their last five games, prompting Housley and his staff to tweak both units at practice.

The first group of five included Eichel playing on his strong side with Tage Thompson on the opposite flank, Jeff Skinner in the middle, Sam Reinhart at the net-front and Rasmus Ristolainen at the point.

Eichel has played primarily on the left this season, with one of the goals for the power play being to set him up for one-timers on his off-side. Playing his strong side opens the door for Eichel to distribute, with another dangerous shot still lurking on the left in Thompson.

"It gives me a couple options for one-timers," Eichel said. "You've got Reino in the middle for one-timers and as a support guy who I think makes a lot of really good plays. ... You've got Skinny around the net, who's obviously shown how good he can be there and Tommer on the backside shooting one-timers, which I think can be very dangerous for us. Then Risto's up to top with the opportunity to shoot the one-timer as well.

"I think it can present a lot of different threats to the opposing team, which is what we want to do. For me, it's distributing and knowing the right times to attack."

The second unit consisted of Okposo, Casey Mittelstadt, Conor Sheary and Rasmus Dahlin, with Jason Pominville and Evan Rodrigues rotating reps. One notable change on this unit had Okposo playing the net-front, a spot he hasn't been in much since joining the Sabres.

"When power plays are going well ... if you're a net-front guy, I feel like you score a lot of goals," he said. "You just clean up a lot of the garbage around the net. It's just about working hard and getting back to just hunting pucks and making sure that everyone's got the puck in their hands and can make plays."

"Well, he tipped three pucks in yesterday on the power play, so I was happy to see that," Housley added. "He's a big guy, he's hard to move, he's got good eye-hand coordination, he can make a good low play."