



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres' Jack Eichel: Rasmus Dahlin 'doesn't even know how good he is'

By Jason Wolf

The Buffalo News

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Rasmus Dahlin was frustrated.

The Buffalo Sabres' rookie defenseman was firing one-timers on the right flank of the power play, and unloaded four in one second-period stretch in what turned into a 4-3 overtime victory against the Los Angeles Kings on Tuesday night at KeyBank Center.

At the time, the Sabres trailed by one goal. Three of Dahlin's shots sailed wide of the net. The other was stopped by Kings goalie Calvin Petersen.

Dahlin ended the power play by leaning on his stick and snapping it half.

"When you can't score, it's pretty tough," Dahlin said after practice Wednesday. "So, yeah. Bad stick, so I wanted a new one. So I broke it."

Dahlin was a beast for much of the game against the Kings, though he was burned on a goal by Matt Luff in the first minute of the second period.

Dahlin had 13 shot attempts, eight of them on goal. He blocked three shots and had three giveaways in 28:34 of ice time, including just over 10 minutes on the power play.

The Sabres scored on two of eight power-play opportunities, rallying from a two-goal, third-period deficit to end their five-game winless streak.

Jack Eichel and Johan Larsson scored in the third period to tie the game and Jeff Skinner scored on the power play at 1:49 of overtime, giving the Sabres their first victory since Nov. 27.

Dahlin has two goals on 58 shots and has 12 assists in 31 games since the Sabres selected him with the No. 1 overall pick in the draft.

"His development has been pretty quick," Eichel said. "You see some of the stuff he does on the ice and it's just, we in the room laugh about it when he does stuff, and to think he's only 18 years old, he doesn't even know how good he is, to be honest with you. We realize it and we know how good he's going to be, but he's just getting better every day. He's such a good kid and he works hard on the ice. He's got a great attitude. We couldn't be luckier to have him."

Sabres coach Phil Housley called Dahlin a "tremendous competitor."

"He wants to do the right things, he's coachable, he wants to win and he expects a lot from himself," Housley said. "But at this point, I really like where his development is. He's getting more and more comfortable with our game, the North American game so to speak. He's attacking the game in the right way. He's trying to create.

"I just think some of the things through his development, his decisions with the puck, I think he's got to be harder with it, make stronger, harder passes. Sometimes he throws it to areas, and that's just part of his development. But for the most part, I'm really happy where he is."

Dahlin also drew attention Tuesday night for carrying the puck the length of the ice, controlling it from behind his net to behind the Kings' before looping around and returning to the blue line, waiting for a play to develop.

Dahlin brushed it off as no big deal, saying "nothing really happened," but Eichel said that as Dahlin has become more comfortable in the locker room, it has translated to the ice.

"I think he's more comfortable around the guys," Eichel said. "When he came in here, he was a little bit shy and didn't really talk too much, didn't say a whole lot. I think the more comfortable he's gotten, you've seen it in his game. Some of the stuff he does out there is pretty remarkable. And he's doing it against some of the best players in the world.

"I just think he's gotten comfortable with the guys in the room and I think that's been important for him, a young kid, just trying to make him feel at home. It's obviously a huge transition for him and I think he's made it pretty flawlessly. It speaks to his character and his personality."

After Dahlin broke his stick, Rasmus Ristolainen joked with him on the bench, trying to keep the mood light and ensure he remained focused.

"I don't even remember what he said," Dahlin said, "but he made me feel good again. ... I wasn't angry after he joked."

He said that helped a great deal.

"That's what teammates are for," Dahlin said. "When one man is down, make them happy again."

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Sabres defenseman Marco Scandella skated in practice Wednesday for the first time since heading to injured reserve with an upper-body injury. He's missed the last seven games.

"It wasn't a bump-and-grind type of practice, but I liked him when he was out there, moving the puck, getting involved, a little physicality at the end there," Housley said. "It was good to see him in a good practice."

Scandella said he has no timetable to return to game action, but Housley said there's a possibility he will play this weekend.

Scandella, who played in all 82 games last season, has been out since Nov. 24.

"We were on a winning streak when I got hurt," Scandella said, "so you never want to leave when everything is going well and being a part of something special. It was tough, and I'm just trying to get back right now."

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There's a "possibility" that goalie Carter Hutton will start against Arizona on Thursday, Housley said.

Hutton sat out Saturday's loss to Philadelphia with an "upper body injury" and backed up Linus Ullmark against the Kings.

"He's in a good spot, but we'll talk to the trainers and see where he is," Housley said.

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Kyle Okposo and Ristolainen received maintenance days and did not practice Wednesday.

Remi Elie replaced Okposo on a line with Casey Mittelstadt and Conor Sheary.

Scandella was paired with Lawrence Pilut, replacing Ristolainen.

Patrik Berglund, who has been sick, did not practice.

Housley clarified earlier comments, saying defenseman Casey Nelson has not yet started skating. He's on injured reserve with an upper body injury.

Sabres' Ristolainen showed he can be in front of either net using his strength

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

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Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Rasmus Ristolainen is one of the biggest and strongest players on the Sabres team. With that in mind, I was intrigued when Phil Housley parked Ristolainen in front of the net during the overtime 4-on-3 power play on Tuesday.

No. 55 did a terrific job in front. First of all, the Kings couldn't move him. Then, he battles for a puck and scoops it towards a wide open Jeff Skinner for the game-winning goal.

I remember when Lindy Ruff put Richard Smehlik in front of the net for about 10 games and the Sabres power play soared because Smehlik couldn't be moved. I wondered if having Ristolainen in front of the net is something we could see more of and Housley said, "No. I think it was a unique situation. If it's a 5-on-3 or 4-on-3 we can try to move some people around, give the defending team some different looks, make them make decisions and it was just a really good play where we sunk him down to the net and the guys read off it.

"It was just a play that L.A. had never seen from us."

Being in front of the net is not foreign to Ristolainen, but this was the first time he did it in the NHL, "Yes, I did it before back in Finland and if I would be forward, I would probably be standing there all game long, but yes, I liked it."

Since Ristolainen isn't used to being in front of the opponent's net, I wondered what was going through his mind. He said, "I wasn't really thinking much, just trying to screen the goalie and make some traffic and maybe confuse their D a little bit and try to get their attention more to me than to the other guys."

Ristolainen enjoys being on top on the power play and he set up Jack Eichel for the PP goal that pulled the Sabres to within one goal. Seven of Ristolainen's 20 points have come with the extra man. He's not concerned where they have him as long as he's out there, "I can be on top, I can be the guy for the one-timer position, I can be playmaker, I could be net-front, it doesn't matter."

After the Sabres' first power play, Rasmus Dahlin slammed his stick on the ice and then snapped it in half. Dahlin had fanned on a few great one-timer opportunities and got angry. Ristolainen chatted with him to calm him down, "I saw him come to the bench angry and I just told him that we did everything pretty well and if we stick with it, we're going to score and not to get too frustrated. It's good to be angry, but you know emotions can get too high or too low."

Ristolainen likes Dahlin back there on the power play with him. He said, "I think we can read off each other, we have five pretty good players, we can make plays, we can shoot, we can do pretty much everything."

Ristolainen and Kyle Okposo missed Wednesday's practice with maintenance days while Patrik Berglund was still sick.

Carter Hutton had another good practice and is ready to go when Phil Housley calls on him. He said he's been doing well and could've played Tuesday, but Housley wanted him to get another practice, "I'm ready to go, I don't know what their plan is, Howie can do the usual business that he does.

"It is what it is, I was ready to go because if I can sit on the bench, I can play, but we went with it and Linus played well."

Marco Scandella practiced for the second straight day and Housley said, "It's two good days in a row. We'll see how he reacts after the practice."

Housley said he'll talk to the trainers later Wednesday about Scandella's availability for Thursday.

Sabres' Zemgus Girgensons bounces back after getting scratched

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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BUFFALO – One play was a highlight-reel goal. Sabres winger Zemgus Girgensons didn't just steal the puck and outmuscle any ordinary defenseman to score a first-period goal Tuesday, he made former Norris Trophy winner Drew Doughty look silly.

The other play, while not as memorable, was just as critical to the Sabres' 4-3 overtime victory against the Los Angeles Kings. In the third period, Girgensons outraced Jeff Carter to negate an icing.

"It's little details like that in a game that result in a big win," Sabres goalie Carter Hutton said Wednesday of what he called the "turning point" in the game.

The Latvian's effort kept the puck in the zone, helping create linemate Johan Larsson's tying goal at 7:23.

"If he doesn't get up the ice and nullify that play ... that play doesn't happen," coach Phil Housley said after Sabres prepared for tonight's tilt against the Arizona Coyotes at KeyBank Center.

It wasn't surprising Girgensons enjoyed one of his best games this season Tuesday. In the Sabres' previous outing, Saturday afternoon's 6-2 loss to the Philadelphia Flyers, Housley scratched him.

"I think he was frustrated not playing the game before and he came out and was a difference-maker," Hutton said.

In his sixth NHL season, Girgensons, 24, has become an occasional healthy scratch for the first time, sitting out three games.

"He's swallowed his pride a little bit, but when he's come back, he's always had a great response," Housley said.

Some of the scratches can be traced to the Sabres' improved depth. But if Girgensons deserved one of the 12 forward spots every game, Housley would find a way to give him one.

"It (stinks) to sit out," Girgensons said. "I think I've been playing well. We have a deep lineup, it happens. I don't have that much to say about it."

Of course, it wouldn't be surprising if Girgensons, the 14th overall pick in 2014, stays in the lineup for the rest of the season. The former NHL All-Star possesses a work ethic few players can match.

"Everything he does is full-tilt," Hutton said.

Girgensons' tenacity might be his greatest asset.

"That's been one of my strengths since I came in," Girgensons said. "I ... rarely take days off. I think that's why I've been here for the six years. I keep doing it."

In his early days, based on his draft status and early production, Girgensons was expected to be a goal scorer.

But nearly 400 games into his career – right now, he's at 376 – Girgensons has settled into a checking role. He has scored seven goals in each of the last three seasons. He usually skates on the fourth line beside Larsson. Evan Rodrigues joined them Tuesday.

"We're pretty fast, we have a little bit of everything," Girgensons said. "(Larsson) can be physical, I can be physical. (Rodrigues) is good with the puck, he sees the ice, makes plays."

Their plays helped buoy the Sabres against the Kings, ending their five-game losing streak.

The Sabres' secondary scoring disappeared during their skid. Only the first line of captain Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart and Jeff Skinner scored in the four contests before Tuesday.

Girgensons has enjoyed this season more than any other. He endured a lot of losing in his first five years, never sniffing the playoffs. He said the Sabres' recent 10-game winning streak was the most fun he ever had.

"The win streak we had," Girgensons said, "it was a blast."

Sabres' Rasmus Dahlin showcases rare emotion, downplays dazzling shift

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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BUFFALO – After a particularly frustrating power play in Tuesday's 4-3 overtime win, Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin showcased some rare emotion, slamming his stick on the ice before snapping it.

"When you can't score, it's pretty tough," Dahlin said this afternoon inside KeyBank Center. "Bad sticks, I wanted a new one so I broke it."

After Dahlin's little outburst, Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen joked with the rookie on the bench.

While Dahlin couldn't remember what Ristolainen told him, he said it "made me feel good."

"That's what teammates are for," the first overall pick said.

Dahlin, 18, has acclimated to the NHL quickly, often turning heads during his first 31 games. He made some mistakes Tuesday, but Sabres coach Phil Housley still played him a whopping 28 minutes, 34 seconds against the Kings, a stunning number for a teenage defenseman.

"He's just a tremendous competitor, right?" Housley said of Dahlin snapping his stick. "He wants to do the right things, he's coachable, he wants to win. He expects a lot out of himself."

"At this point, I really like where his development is. He's getting more and more comfortable with our game, the North American game, so to speak. He's attacking the game the right way, he's trying to create."

In the first period against the Kings, he dazzled for about 22 seconds, carrying the puck from deep in his own zone through the center ice and behind the opposing net before circling back to the point and shooting.

"I just skated, had a lot of speed," said Dahlin, who dodged some defenders. "Nothing really happened, so it wasn't like a big deal."

Well, people are making a big deal about the jaw-dropping shift, which is all over the internet today.

Naturally, Dahlin said his confidence keeps growing.

"We have a great team so you can play your own game," Dahlin said. "Guys in the locker room are great, they're easy."

In other news, Sabres defenseman Marco Scandella, who has missed seven straight games with a lower-body, practiced today.

While he likely won't return for Thursday's home tilt against the Arizona Coyotes, the weekend is a possibility, Housley said.

"Really good day," Housley said. "That's two good days in a row. We'll see how he reacts after the practice. It wasn't as bump-and-grind type of practice, but I liked when he was out there, moving the puck, getting involved."

Meanwhile, Housley said Ristolainen and winger Kyle Okposo had maintenance days today.

Eichel has embraced leadership role, on pace for career year

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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It wasn't too long ago that Jack Eichel was an 18 year old beginning his NHL career, carrying the weight of being the No. 2 overall pick for a franchise that had experienced two straight last-place finishes. His defining quality off the ice might have been his sense of humor, which he wasn't afraid to show.

Nowadays, Eichel is the 22-year-old captain of a team with another uber-talented 18 year old on its roster. That sense of humor is still there, but listening to Rasmus Dahlin describe Eichel on Wednesday offered a glimpse into how things have changed.

"He's very serious," the rookie defenseman said. "He's passionate about the game and a great leader. Great guy and sick on the ice, of course. ... He's a leader. I think he was born a leader. He's the guy who needs the 'C.'"

In every sense, Eichel has embraced the responsibilities that come with being a captain and the face of an organization. He's set the tone with this work in games and in practices and made it a point to further his impact in the community.

Through 31 games, it's all culminated into the best season of Eichel's young career. First, a look at the numbers:

- With 10 goals and 28 assists, he's on pace to record the first 100-point season for the Sabres since Pat LaFontaine and Alexander Mogilny did so in 1992-93. No Sabre has even reached the 90-point mark since Daniel Briere in 2006-07.
- Eichel's on pace for 74 points at even strength, which would rank third in franchise history behind LaFontaine and Mogilny's marks of 83 and 78, respectively, in 1992-93.

Here's the list of players who have eclipsed 74 even-strength points in a single season since the 2004 lockout: Connor McDavid (84 in 2017-18), Henrik Sedin (83 in 2009-10), Evgeni Malkin (75 in 2011-12) and Alexander Ovechkin (75 in 2007-08).

- All of this has come despite an uncharacteristically low shooting percentage of 7.2, two percent lower than Eichel's career average. He leads the NHL with 138 shots, and they've begun to fall as of late, with five of his 10 goals having come in his last three games.

What's attributed to the consistent production? Age and experience, of course, as well as healthy contributions from linemates Jeff Skinner, Sam Reinhart and Jason Pominville. But the first word that came to mind when Eichel was asked on Wednesday was "work."

"I feel like I've made a conscious effort to just try and work," he said. "I think that when you're working, things come from it. It's that and just trying to be confident with making plays, just let my instincts take over. Obviously when I'm moving my feet, I think I'm playing my best so for me, it's just about worrying about the next game, doing everything I can now to play my next game at the best of my ability.

"I would just say that. It's been more consistent this year where I've been happier with myself after games, where I'm not questioning my game as much. I know I've just recently started to score but I felt like I was due for it with the amount of chances I was getting."

When Eichel was named captain at the end of training camp, Kyle Okposo offered this recipe for success: "As long as he's the hardest working guy day-in and day-out, he's going to be just fine. I have no doubt that he's going to be." Former Sabres captains Michael Peca and Danny Gare echoed those comments.

Watching these first 31 games, it's easy to see that the young forward has taken that responsibility to heart. The sight of him catching up to opponents with lesser skating ability on a backcheck has become a recurring image:

He's also more active than ever battling along the boards, where his combination of strength and skill makes him a difficult opponent.

"He's put the work in from day one, he gets his body ready and he's obviously a big presence," Reinhart said. "I think he's used that more to his advantage this year, just in the battle and protecting pucks. It's always been part of his game but as he matures a little more, you can just see the dominant force that he brings on a nightly basis."

For an example of Eichel's relentless work ethic, look no further than the third period of Buffalo's comeback win over Los Angeles on Thursday. Eichel played the entirety of an unsuccessful power play that ended with 27 seconds left in regulation. When the opportunity came for a change, he not only took it upon himself to finish the period, he did this to draw another penalty:

Eichel assisted on Skinner's winning goal on the ensuing power play in overtime. He finished with 10 shots, two points and a career-high 25:57 of ice time.

"He wants to win so bad and he wants to make a difference," Sabres coach Phil Housley said of that final shift in regulation. "... He's just trying to make a difference out there."

Housley credited Eichel with being the one who typically starts the drills at practice and sets the tempo with his work. It's common to hear him dish praise upon a teammate for a good play they made.

"With the leadership responsibility, you have to be ready to play every night," Eichel said. "You can't take nights off, you can't take practices off, you can't take days off. It has to be a constant, everyday thing. I've tried to make an effort to do that and bring a good effort every night, because obviously the best way to lead is by example.

"If I'm not working, how can I expect everyone else to work? I think that's been an important thing and an important mindset for me this year. I think it's been pretty contagious. I think our team's worked really hard.

"I think we've come in here with a good attitude every day and tried to get better, and I'm no different. I just try to come to the rink every day with a good attitude and work hard and push each other. I think we've done that."

When Housley, general manager Jason Botterill and owner Terry Pegula met with Eichel to inform him of the captaincy, the four spoke at length about his commitment to the city. He's taken that to new heights, too.

Images floating around on social media pegged Eichel at three different events on Monday alone. He stopped by a bowling event hosted by Best Buddies NY in the afternoon, went to a holiday party for Sabres employees and their families that evening and then went with Reinhart and Nathan Beaulieu to a party hosted by Roswell Park's Courage of Carly Fund.

"You know what, I just enjoy doing that," he said. "You look at the situation and sometimes I just sit back and think about how lucky I am to be doing what I'm doing and playing professional hockey and playing for such a great organization.

"I literally think to myself, I wake up and come to the rink and hang out with all my buddies and play hockey. ... It's a great way to think about it. In terms of the stuff I do off the ice, I've just been trying to become as much a part of this city as I can because this city's done so much for me and welcomed me with open arms.

"I just want to be as influential and make as big an impact on people outside of the rink as I do at the rink."

Wednesday's practice

Marco Scandella, who's missed the last six games with an upper-body injury, was a full participant at practice. Okposo and Rasmus Ristolainen took maintenance days, but both are expected to play against Arizona on Thursday.

Here's how the Sabres lined up, with Rem Elie taking Okposo's spot up front and Scandella filling in for Ristolainen alongside Lawrence Pilut.

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43 Conor Sheary - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 81 Remi Elie

72 Tage Thompson - 17 Vladimir Sobotka - 29 Jason Pominville

71 Evan Rodrigues - 22 Johan Larsson - 28 Zemgus Girgensons

6 Marco Scandella - 24 Lawrence Pilut

26 Rasmus Dahlin - 4 Zach Bogosian

82 Nathan Beaulieu - 5 Matt Tennyson

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