



Buffalo Sabres

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How the Sabres have found success when playing beyond regulation

By Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
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ST. LOUIS – The Buffalo Sabres have had a lot of practice playing past regulation time this season and have enjoyed plenty of success.

More than a third of the Sabres' games have stretched into overtime or shootouts. The total is an NHL-high 13 of the first 37 games and Buffalo is 8-5, also leading the league in victories after 60 minutes.

Last season, Buffalo played 18 games beyond regulation for the season, going 6-12 overall and just 5-10 in overtime decisions.

Asked in recent days for some of the secrets to the team's play in extra time, coach Phil Housley doubled down on taking the pulse of a game and going with the players who are hot. But a closer look at the numbers shows Housley, in fact, has made some clear conclusions about his personnel when it comes to overtime.

If things are tied at the end of regulation when the schedule resumes Thursday night in Enterprise Center against the St. Louis Blues, definite patterns will be on display.

Housley gives heavy usage in overtime to Jack Eichel, Rasmus Ristolainen and Rasmus Dahlin, and any reasonable coach would do that. Sam Reinhart also gets a good deal of ice time. The Sabres have played nearly 39 1/2 minutes of overtime thus far, almost two-thirds of the way to an extra game, and those four players are the only ones who have compiled more than 10 minutes.

Eichel has played 21:49 of the 39:23, more than 55 percent of the available ice time. Ristolainen is at 19:17 and Dahlin at 18:25, after playing just 1:23 of the first three OTs before Housley started to go with him. Reinhart clocks in at 13:42.

Skinner doesn't see much ice

Where things get murky is when you consider the usage of top-line left winger Jeff Skinner, who leads the team with 26 goals overall and has three of its five overtime winners. He's tied for the league lead in that department with Calgary's Johnny Gaudreau, Winnipeg's Mark Scheifele and Detroit's Dylan Larkin – but don't expect to see him on the ice much at all unless the Sabres get a power play.

Housley has not shown much faith in Skinner when the numbers are equal and the room is plentiful in OT. Skinner took an offensive zone penalty in the Nov. 10 shootout win against Vancouver and committed a grievous turnover at the Toronto blue line in the Dec. 4 loss to the Leafs, and those two plays have seemingly tipped Housley's hand.

Skinner has played just under 9 1/2 minutes in OT – and only 3 minutes, 25 seconds at even strength in the extra periods. That's less than Conor Sheary (8:31), Casey Mittelstadt (6:20), Evan Rodrigues (5:11) and Vladimir Sobotka (5:00), who all would be considered substantially less dangerous when it comes to scoring.

But the Sabres' success in OT is rooted in possession, and it seems Housley feels that's an area where Skinner is lacking. The Sabres have outshot opponents in OTs, 36-14, and out-attempted them, 54-24.

Skinner was diplomatic when recently asked if he's surprised he hasn't had more chances in 3-on-3 play.

"It's not my call, but you just try to do as best you can," he said. "I'm part of the puzzle here. There's a lot of guys that can play well here in any situation. You get your chance, you try your best."

"It's a little bit of feel for the game, how the game is going," Housley insisted. "Obviously, we'd love to have him out there. He has played before. That's just a feel."

This was a topic the normally affable Skinner was clearly uncomfortable talking about. And it was obvious he was aware of the numbers, even as he tried to deadpan the conversation away.

"For me as a player, I don't read into those things," Skinner said. "I have only one person to worry about, myself. That's the way I try to keep it. That's as much as I can handle right now. I don't have kids. I don't have a wife. I worry about me, being ready for the next shift and doing my best to prepare for the next one."

But has he brought up the subject to Housley?

"Like any coach and player, you have a dialogue throughout the season," Skinner said. "But look, he's got 23 people to worry about. I've got just one. Me. There's a lot of stuff that goes on through the course of a game. You can pick any number of situations that pop up, whether it's matchups, people that are tired. You can come up with so many things."

Better at shootouts

The Sabres have been much improved in shootouts this year, posting a 3-1 record. They were just 5-15 the last three years, with former starting goaltender Robin Lehner's troubles getting lots of attention. But Buffalo shooters never did much in the skills competition, either.

Both of those areas have been cleaned up this season.

The shooters are 8 for 21, with Eichel and Mittelstadt both going 2 for 4. Eichel had been just 1 for 9 in the first three years of his career. In net, goalies Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark have combined to stop 15 of 21 shots. Hutton is tied for fourth in the league with nine shootout saves, while Ullmark went 6 for 7 in his one appearance, the Nov. 24 victory at Detroit.

Housley is starting most shootouts with Eichel and then using Mittelstadt and a combination that's included Pominville, Tage Thompson and Conor Sheary. Again, no Skinner and the numbers bear it out: Skinner is 0 for 1 this season and just 6 for 36 in his career.

Speed and possession game

Speed matters. Older players don't get the call much from Housley. Kyle Okposo has played just 45 seconds in OT and Jason Pominville has yet to appear. Before he took off on the team and had his contract terminated, Patrik Berglund had not been on the ice in OT, either.

Overtime is a puck possession game and the Sabres have excelled at winning faceoffs and keeping the puck. They've won 20 of 33 faceoffs in OT, a 60.6 percent success rate that's well better than their 47.6 mark in regulation. It's a key reason they have a startling 72 percent of the shots on goal and 69.2 percent of the shots attempted in their overtimes.

The Sabres went 7-0 in OTs and shootouts during their 10-game winning streak that tied the franchise record. And with underlying numbers like those above, you can easily make the case they should be better than 5-4 in games decided by an overtime goal.

But they lost their Nov. 30 game in Florida on an Aleksander Barkov goal after holding the puck for nearly the first two minutes of play. They got beat in the Toronto game by an Auston Matthews laser with 2.7 seconds left in overtime when Sobotka backed in on the play instead of attacking the puck with the clock ticking away, and lost in a shootout Dec. 15 in Washington after an OT that saw them dominate with seven shots on goal and nine attempts – even though Skinner never saw the ice.

Ristolainen, in particular, is strong defensively and hard on the puck but is always thinking offense as well. He has four overtime winners in his career, including the Nov. 8 slapshot that beat Montreal's Carey Price and got Buffalo the first victory of its 10-game winning streak.

Ristolainen, best known back home in Finland for the Golden Goal in OT that won the 2014 World Junior Championship, is the franchise leader among Buffalo defensemen with four OT winners.

"I love overtime. I'm always looking to score," Ristolainen said. "There's a lot of room and you have a chance to make big plays for your team."

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Working overtime

Key numbers from the Sabres' NHL-high 13 overtime games this season:

Total ice time: 39:23

W-L: 8-5 (5-4 OT goals, 3-1 shootout)

Shots on goal by Sabres/opponents: 36-14

Shot attempts by Sabres/opponents: 54-24

Faceoffs W-L by Sabres/opponents: 20-13

Shootout goals: 8-21

Shootout saves: 15-21

Individual ice times (All)

Jack Eichel 21:49

Rasmus Ristolainen 19:17

Rasmus Dahlin 18:25

Sam Reinhart 13:42

Jeff Skinner 9:22

Conor Sheary 8:31

Casey Mittelstadt 7:50

Zach Bogosian 6:27

Evan Rodrigues 5:22

Marco Scandella 5:00

Vladimir Sobotka 5:00

Tage Thompson 3:19

Johan Larsson 2:38

Kyle Okposo 0:45

Jake McCabe 0:30

Individual ice times (3-on-3)

Jack Eichel 14:59

Rasmus Ristolainen 12:23

Sam Reinhart 12:23

Rasmus Dahlin 12:17

Conor Sheary 8:31

Casey Mittelstadt 6:20

Evan Rodrigues 5:11

Vladimir Sobotka 5:00

Zach Bogosian 4:20

Jeff Skinner 3:25

Tage Thompson 3:19

Marco Scandella 2:53

Johan Larsson 0:46

Jake McCabe 0:30

Kyle Okposo 0:04

Source: Buffalo News research via NHL.com

Sabres Notebook: Ryan O'Reilly again producing for losing club

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 26, 2018

ST. LOUIS – Ryan O'Reilly will be in a familiar spot Thursday night in Enterprise Center, albeit against an unfamiliar opponent. He's on another losing team and again putting up big numbers.

When O'Reilly's St. Louis Blues meet the Buffalo Sabres for the first time since the team's blockbuster July 1 trade, they'll do it with O'Reilly leading a club that has to be considered one of the NHL's biggest disappointments this season.

The Blues are 14-16-4, stand 13th in the West and are just one point out of the NHL basement. It's not what O'Reilly expected.

O'Reilly has 13 goals and 32 points in 34 games, on pace for career highs in both goals (31) and points (77). He's fourth in the NHL in faceoff percentage (59.4) and victories (461). His Corsi rating of 51.3 percent is the highest it's been in six years and he has a plus-minus rating of plus-3, which is remarkable on a losing team and a huge improvement from his career-worst minus-23 last year in Buffalo.

So what's wrong with the Blues? They fired coach Mike Yeo after 19 games (7-9-3) and replaced him with Craig Berube, getting modest results to date (7-7-1). They've had big injuries, with defensive stalwart Alex Pietrangelo (hand) and forward Robby Fabbri (shoulder) both out at least until early January.

They've gotten just 11 goals, 22 points and a minus-15 rating from star Vladimir Tarasenko (\$7.5 million cap hit) and a 7-15-22/-9 season from center Brayden Schenn – who had 28 goals and 70 points last season. Free agent signee Pat Maroon (two goals in 28 games) has been a bust. And the goaltending of Jake Allen and former Sabre Chad Johnson has combined for a goals-against average of 3.20 and save percentage of .895. Johnson was waived and picked up earlier this month by Anaheim.

The Blues struggled out of the gate at 1-4-2, won just two of their first nine games and have been in an uphill climb ever since.

"We all expected more but that happens," O'Reilly said last month prior to a game in Chicago. "We were struggling to find an identity with all the changes but it's slowly coming. ... The start wasn't what we wanted and it's taken a while to feel comfortable.

"We were in so many of these games, had leads and lost them. We didn't have the consistency in games. Bad period here, blow a lead, couple bad shifts there. It wasn't the hockey we needed to win."

O'Reilly is one of three former Sabres on the St. Louis roster. Winger Jordan Nolan, who played for Buffalo last season, has two assists in eight games and defenseman Chris Butler (2008-11) has one goal and one assist in 10 games. The St. Louis native was called up from the minors on Dec. 5.

The Sabres, meanwhile, bring back two pieces from the trade in center Vladimir Sobotka and winger Tage Thompson as well as free agent goalie Carter Hutton, who was signed from the Blues last July. Veteran center Patrik Berglund, a former 20-goal scorer with St. Louis, flamed out in Buffalo and had his contract terminated last week after going AWOL on the Sabres by skipping practices and a flight.

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The Sabres have had a terrible time against St. Louis for many years. They're just 3-17-4 against the Blues since 1999, only 1-9-2 in the last 12 meetings and have not won here since a 5-3 victory on Dec. 27, 2009.

Since then, Buffalo is 0-4-2 in the building that used to be known as Scottrade Center and has scored just nine goals in the six games. The Sabres suffered a 3-2 overtime loss here last season on a Tarasenko goal.

While Allen has struggled mightily this season in the St. Louis net, he's been an ace in his career against the Sabres (5-1, 1.47/.943) in six career starts.

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The players' collective bargaining agreement prohibits games or travel on Dec. 26, so the Sabres will take a rare game day morning flight here on Thursday and head right to the arena for a pregame skate.

They ended the pre-Christmas portion of their schedule with four players on the injured list and winger Jason Pominville, who has missed three games with what's believed to be a concussion after colliding with teammate Rasmus Ristolainen, seems to be the closest to returning.

Scott Wilson (ankle surgery) has been skating with the team but has yet to have a full practice. Ditto for Nathan Beaulieu (lower body). Casey Nelson (upper body) remains out on a week-to-week basis.

Former Sabre Ryan O'Reilly producing for Blues amid losing season

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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Not much has changed for ex-Sabres center Ryan O'Reilly in St. Louis. The Blues utilize him constantly, relying on him to play big minutes. Just like in Buffalo, the versatile center quickly seized his opportunities, morphing into perhaps his new team's best player.

And just like in Buffalo, O'Reilly has endured a lot of losing.

The Blues, one of the NHL's heavyweights for years, just missed the playoffs last season, earning 94 points. When they acquired O'Reilly, 27, from the Sabres in a trade July 1, they hoped the man nicknamed "Factor" would put them over the top.

But the blockbuster deal has been a massive bust for the Blues, who have earned only 32 points (14-16-4). They enter tonight's home tilt against the Sabres, O'Reilly's first meeting against his old club, mired in sixth place in the Central Division and just one point out of the NHL basement.

Firing coach Mike Yeo after a 7-9-3 start and replacing him with Craig Berube has failed to ignite the Blues, who look destined for a rebuild given their age.

The Sabres, meanwhile, have become perhaps the NHL's biggest surprise without O'Reilly, starting the season 21-11-5. After finishing dead last a year ago, they're on track for their first playoff appearance since 2011.

"I feel for him being in that situation again. It's hard," said former Sabres goalie Chad Johnson, who played 10 games with St. Louis earlier this season. "Everybody looks like garbage when you're on a losing team. When everyone wins, everyone looks great. It's a tough situation for him.

"He's been really good for that team, best player there for sure."

Of course, O'Reilly wanted to be dealt after three rough years with the Sabres. Following last season, he shocked the hockey world, saying the constant losing sapped his love for the game at times.

O'Reilly said then the Sabres became "stuck in this mindset of just being OK with losing." The trade to St. Louis, he said July 2, made him feel a "spark."

Now, O'Reilly will likely miss the playoffs for the eighth time in his 10-year career.

"Everybody sees his work ethic and what he does and his preparation," Johnson said. "You're only one person, you're one guy. It takes really a group and a team to help everyone have success."

Having compiled 13 goals and 32 points in 34 games, O'Reilly would set new career highs with 31 goals and 77 points over a full season. He has also won 59.4 percent of the 776 faceoffs he has taken, the highest percentage from a player who has taken more than 400 draws.

The Blues' struggles have only heightened the belief O'Reilly, while a terrific player, isn't a so-called "winner" or brings problems to his team. The latter has never been proven, but it has become a popular opinion following his exit from Buffalo.

Unless O'Reilly's departure radically transformed the dressing room, the trade hasn't hugely impacted the Sabres. Yes, general manager Jason Botterill unloaded the remaining five years of O'Reilly's contract and his \$7.5 million salary cap hit.

But it was mostly a futures deal for the Sabres. They received a first-round pick in 2019, a second-rounder in 2021 and forwards Patrik Berglund, Vladimir Sobotka and Tage Thompson.

The first-rounder, which is lottery-protected and could be deferred a year, and Thompson were the keys for the Sabres.

Berglund, having quit on the Sabres earlier this month, is already gone. So is his hefty \$3.85 million cap hit. Sobotka offers the Sabres some decent depth. Thompson, 21, is raw and often skates on the fourth line.

Still, the 6-foot-6 Thompson possesses plenty of skill. The former 26th overall pick could be a 20- or 30-goal scorer in the future. He occasionally showcases the talents of a top power forward.

Thompson has compiled four goals and seven points in 30 appearances this season.

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Four Sabres prospects – defenseman Oskari Laaksonen (Finland), goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen (Finland), forward Matej Pekar (Czech Republic) and defenseman Mattias Samuelsson (USA) – are representing their countries at the World Junior Championship, which kicked off Wednesday in British Columbia.

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The Sabres had the past four days off for Christmas and will fly to St. Louis on Thursday morning.

Former Sabres goalie Chad Johnson happy with Ducks

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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BUFFALO – When former Sabres goalie Chad Johnson entered free agency and began studying teams he could potentially join, he zeroed in on the St. Louis Blues.

Johnson, 32, examined the Blues on paper, talked to people familiar with them and did enough homework to feel comfortable signing a one-year, \$1.75 million contract July 1.

“I thought it was going to be a good fit,” Johnson, who endured a rough season with the Sabres in 2017-18, told the Times Herald on Saturday.

The veteran backup lasted 10 games with Blues, who quickly morphed into arguably the NHL’s biggest disappointment this season.

“It was just kind of a different situation again, sort of like the Buffalo situation, just kind of from what you thought it would be, right?” Johnson said prior to the Anaheim Ducks’ 3-0 loss inside KeyBank Center.

On Dec. 11, the Blues waived Johnson. A day later, the Ducks, who needed a goalie with ex-Sabres star Ryan Miller sidelined by a sprained MCL, claimed him.

The Ducks are Johnson’s eighth NHL team.

“Was I surprised? At this point, kind of what I’ve been through so far, nothing really surprises me,” Johnson said of getting waived. “But was I disappointed? Absolutely. I think at the end of the day, I knew there was going to be change in those situations.”

The Blues usually rank among the league’s heavyweights. While they missed the playoffs last season, they still earned 94 points. They retooled during the summer, adding center Ryan O’Reilly from the Sabres in a blockbuster trade.

Right now, having earned just 32 points through 34 games, the Blues stand 28th overall.

“It was just that inconsistency, I think,” Johnson said of the Blues. “One night you could go and beat Colorado or a top-ranked team and play a good hockey game. But then the next night you come out and you’re flat, you get down a goal and everyone just kind of shuts it down.

“They don’t have that 10-out-of-10 effort. They have that eight-out-of-10 effort, and that just doesn’t cut it.”

The Blues already fired their coach Mike Yeo, replacing him with Craig Berube. Johnson said after the coach is jettisoned, the goalie often goes next.

“At the end of the day, the explanation was they needed to wake some people up,” Johnson said, who was replaced as Jake Allen’s backup by Jordan Binnington, an AHL veteran with 13 minutes of NHL experience.

Johnson went 2-6-0 with a 3.55 goals-against average, an .884 save percentage and one shutout with the Blues.

The last two years have been rough on Johnson, who rejoined the Sabres in 2017-18 following a season with his hometown Calgary Flames.

A sense of unfinished business, among others things, lured Johnson back to Buffalo a year ago. He enjoyed a terrific 2015-16 season, morphing into the team’s backbone. His teammates even voted him the Sabres’ unsung hero.

Johnson wanted to help the Sabres reach the playoffs again last season.

But the Sabres played dreadfully, finishing dead last. Johnson started slowly, registering his second win 99 days after his first.

He performed well throughout much of the winter. Still, his overall numbers – 10-16-3, 3.55 and .891 in 36 contests – were weak.

When the Sabres cleaned out their lockers in April, Johnson basically said he regretted re-signing here, saying he “wouldn’t have put my career in a situation like that after having a lot of success and doing well.”

“It was frustrating,” Johnson said Saturday. “Looking back at it, you’re sour about the situation. It wasn’t a good year, it wasn’t a fun year. It was the most disappointing season I was a part of. I think everybody feels that same way looking back on last year.”

These days, Johnson seems refreshed by his new gig backing up Ducks starter John Gibson.

“I was just ecstatic,” Johnson said of getting claimed by the Ducks. “It’s just been a tough two years, tough situations to be in. It’s been hard, especially when you feel like your career is moving forward and upwards.”

The Sabres’ resurgence this season – they’re 21-11-5 and have already compiled 47 points – doesn’t surprise Johnson.

“I knew it was a good team,” he said.

Jack Eichel Wants It All as the Sabres Rediscover Relevancy

By Alex Prewitt

Sports Illustrated

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Setting down his turkey burger, Jack Eichel gazes through the windows of a downtown Buffalo restaurant and once again imagines the future. He sees a surrounding riverside area choked with game-day traffic, blue-and-white Sabres jerseys shuffling toward KeyBank Center beneath an early-summer sky. He pictures live music blaring and cameras panning overhead, broadcasting crowd shots to a national audience. He hears chants—LET'S! GO! BUFF-A-LO!—and smells beer. After all, Eichel notes, "Buffalonians don't mind the tailgate."

He visualizes because that is how he has always pursued goals. Growing up in North Chelmsford, Mass., Eichel would tack articles about local athletes receiving college scholarships to the walls of his family's basement, extra motivation while cranking out deadlifts before middle school. Even when the 2015 draft was years away, the background image of his iPod Touch was a picture mosaic of highly regarded prospects, including the only one who would actually get picked ahead of him, Edmonton's Connor McDavid. He also programmed the device to deliver a daily reminder along with his morning alarm: HOW BAD DO YOU WANT TO MAKE THE NHL?

Now that Eichel is there—not to mention captaining the insurgent Sabres at age 22, burnishing his Hart Trophy credentials with 48 points in 37 games, averaging 20:16 per night of all-situation hockey, and generally realizing his potential as the savior for one of pro sports' most woebegone cities—he is singularly focused on an even loftier goal. "Constantly thinking about what it'd be like," he says, nodding toward the nearby waterfront. "First of all, to be in the playoffs. Then to get a good run going would be awesome."

Awesome. Eichel uses that word a lot these days. Thirteen times, to be precise, during an hour-long lunch following a recent Sabres practice. It was awesome living at home in North Chelmsford last summer, crushing his mother Anne's pasta salad and watching Red Sox games with his father, Bob. It was awesome when Buffalo won the 2018 draft lottery and brought aboard dynamo Swedish defenseman Rasmus Dahlin. Ditto for his recent decision to hire a personal chef, who whips up health-conscious dishes (fish, chicken, etc.) but also satisfies Eichel's massive sweet tooth, recently baking an awesome chocolate caramel cake topped with whipped cream and toffee.

Of course, the most "awesome" thing lately is the love Eichel has felt in Buffalo now that its hockey team has rediscovered relevancy: tied for third in the Eastern Conference at 21–11–5 through Christmas break, four wins shy of its 2017–18 season total. Fervor peaked as the Sabres reeled off 10 straight victories from Nov. 8 through 27, tying a franchise record; Eichel was especially impressed by a Twitter video from the World's Largest Disco Party on Nov. 24, where dancers at Buffalo Convention Center stopped to watch the Sabres' shootout triumph over Detroit on a projection screen.

"Everyone's going out of their way to stop you and tell you how proud they are," he says. "Even when things were bad, I really credit this city for being patient. I'm from Boston. It's not that way there at all." Indeed, Eichel was born into a generation practically baptized with champagne. The Curse of the Bambino was broken on the eve of his eighth birthday and nothing was ever the same. "I saw the Sox win in '07 and '13, the Celtics when they had the Big Three, the Patriots win a million times," Eichel says. "The equipment guys here joke that I grew up spoiled."

In reality, Bob managed the warehouse of a plumbing supply company before recently retiring. Anne still pulls 12-hour shifts as a nurse at Boston Medical Center, often rising before dawn. "Buffalo is a blue-collar, hockey-loving town," Anne says. "So I think Jack fits in there." And besides, Eichel has already received a blunt education about life in the land of Wide Right and Skate in the Crease. After finishing 23rd, 26th and 31st overall in the three years since Eichel arrived, the Sabres drew boos following the first period of their season-opening shutout loss to Boston on Oct. 4. (O.K., so maybe not patient.)

Since then, though, Buffalo has been the biggest surprise of the NHL's first half, on track to make the playoffs for the first time since 2010–11. And leading the way is the curly-haired center who can't stop dreaming about them finally getting there. "We have a lot of great stories going on with our team right now," general manager Jason Botterill says, "but they usually start with Jack."

And where does Eichel's story in Buffalo begin? Consider the 157-foot, \$35 million luxury yacht with four-deck elevator service and a spa Jacuzzi. Or, as Bob Eichel puts it, "a big-ass boat."

It was a Saturday in late June 2015, the night after then-GM Tim Murray all but dropped the mic announcing the second pick of the draft: "Buffalo selects Jack Eichel." Docked in the harbor of nearby Boca Raton, Fla., the big-ass boat—actual name: Top Five—belongs to Sabres owners Terry and Kim Pegula, who were hosting Eichel's family and representatives for a celebratory dinner. Red wine was poured. Filet mignon was served. Toasts were made. "A very welcoming tone," agent Peter Fish says. "But it was serious: We think you're the guy who's going to help us win."

More than most, Terry Pegula understands the urgency. The oil-and-gas magnate first moved to western New York in 1975, right after the Sabres lost in the Stanley Cup finals to the Flyers. He held four season tickets at the old Buffalo Memorial Auditorium, two reds and two blues almost 180 degrees apart, until selling them before the '97–98 season. The team won the Eastern Conference title the following year. "Everybody told me that I must've been the jinx," Pegula says.

During the press conference after he purchased the Sabres in February 2011, Pegula was moved to tears at the mere sight of French Connection center Gilbert Perreault. And so it is not without serious regard for history that he includes Eichel in the same breath today as the Hall of Famer. "The team was new then, and it came on rather fast with Perreault as one of the cornerstones," Pegula says. "And now we're rising again."

The reason for his optimism? As he always told his wife, president of the Sabres and the Buffalo Bills, whenever she expressed concern over the last three years:

"Hey, don't worry, we've got Jack."

Relative to McDavid, the grand prize in the Great Tankathon of 2014–15, Eichel exhibits a subtler version of on-ice superstardom. He can still twist ankles with toe-drag, like how he undressed Capitals defenseman Dmitry Orlov before scoring his second goal in a 4–3 shootout loss against the defending Stanley Cup champs on Dec. 15.

But the 6'2", 200-pound Eichel also employs a remarkably efficient stride, keeping his upper body upright and knees bent deep, pumping his long arms for extra propulsion. Botterill says Eichel skates like he is using an old NordicTrak machine. Buffalo winger Jason Pominville chooses a different machine: "Like Lemieux. He's kind of effortless. You don't think he's going fast, but he's buzzing. He can fly." (Turns out this also holds true on land; two summers ago, Eichel posted 10- and 20-yard sprint times that matched up favorably against NFL receivers Wes Welker and Julian Edelman, according to Brian McDonagh, who has trained all three.)

At his best, Eichel is a one-man breakout factory, stealthily fishing pucks from defensive-zone scrums with the toe curve of his 105-flex Bauer stick; smoothly weaving past backcheckers with those NordicTrak gallops; easily warding away pressure with the same strength that 16-year-old Jack once displayed in a YouTube video by power-cleaning 300 pounds. "He's a freak," says trainer Ben Bruno, who oversaw Eichel's workouts for four summers. "There's really no other way to put it."

In this way Eichel is an avatar for the modern-day, two-way NHL centerman, "as well-rounded a player as I've ever seen," says Buffalo defenseman Zach Bogosian, an 11-year vet. "You can't say one bad thing about his game." But to finally point toward a promising future, the Sabres needed more than just Jack.

First, they had to make a connection with their past.

Bill Wippert/NHLI via Getty Images

The game at the Aud had already ended on April 9, 1983, but still Sabres fans stuck around. The ovation swelled for five ... 10 ... 15 minutes, cheers to celebrate a first-round sweep over Montreal, chants to BRING! ON! BOSTON! in the divisional finals. Down on the ice, the youngest player on the home team looked around gobsmacked. "They didn't leave the building," says Phil Housley. "I'll never forget that. When you're winning, there's no place better."

Then 19, Housley would anchor the Sabres blue line for seven more seasons. After a 21-year, Hall-of-Fame career, which he finished as the highest-scoring American player ever (since dethroned by Mike Modano), Housley returned to Buffalo as head coach in June 2017, fresh off a Cup finals appearance as an assistant with Nashville. His homecoming season was a debacle. The team won just 25 times, finishing dead-last by five points. Eichel, meanwhile, missed 14 games with a high-ankle sprain suffered two weeks after his first All-Star Game. "When things were bad, everyone distanced themselves from one another," he says. "We weren't able to build those relationships that we wanted. I think we took some good steps this summer, and it translated."

As a freshman at BU, Eichel won a Hobey Baker Award under David Quinn, a communicative players' coach now leading another New York rebuilding effort (the Rangers). Housley appears to be similarly wired. He organized a July round of golf at Minnesota's Windsong Farm with locally based players ("I think I won") and a late-September visit to a Rochester, N.Y., welding facility, where the entire roster hammered and forged an actual sabre. Before the season, Housley also invited the team's leadership group, including Eichel, on a bonding trip to North Carolina. Activities ranged from working out with military personnel to delivering reports about recent books that they had read; Eichel brought a dog-eared copy of "Legacy," author James Kerr's deep dive into the dynastic New Zealand All Blacks. "A lot of good stuff about how to be a leader, how to form a good culture inside of a group," he says.

For Eichel, leading on the ice has never been an issue; since coming to Buffalo, he has either scored or assisted on 32% of the team's goals. "He has such an impact on our team," Botterill says. "They feed off his energy." But this cut both ways in the past. Unfamiliar with chronic losing, Eichel often let his body language do the talking. "When hockey's good, I'm probably a better person," he says. "When hockey's bad, I'm a little bit bitter and pissed off.... [But I've learned] it's important to worry about being a good teammate, making sure your relationships stay strong through poor times, especially at the rink. I think I can have a really big impact. It's about seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, trying to be as positive as you can, knowing that you change it."

Since becoming captain on Oct. 3—Terry Pegula recalls Eichel welling up with pride upon receiving the news in Housley's office—he has taken a hands-on approach. Earlier this month he treated the team to dinner in Nashville. After Dahlin mishit several one-timers against Los Angeles on Dec. 11, Eichel spent 10 minutes offering technique tips after the next practice, reminding the rookie to keep his elbows bent. "He's over at my house all the time," Bogosian says. "He plays Barbie dolls with my daughter. For a guy of that stature to be a normal person, that goes a long way. He's taken the time to understand what drives everyone and tries to tap into what makes them tick."

By signing an eight-year, \$80 million extension in October 2017—not to mention the waterfront townhouse that he purchased from ex-Bills GM Doug Whaley—Eichel has already made his big commitment to Buffalo. "I thought the team was bound to get better, and I wanted to be the guy here," he says. "I wanted to be the reason that things changed. I didn't want to get out and jump ship. I want to help the Sabres to better days." As such, Eichel instructed his agents to only discuss max-term deals during negotiations. "I feel like I'm more a part of this city than Boston by a long shot now," he says. "I'm emotionally invested. I'd feel guilty leaving these people."

Surrounded by talented new teammates like Dahlin, second-line center Casey Mittelstadt, goalie Carter Hutton (.917 save percentage) and twinkle-toed left winger Jeff Skinner (25 goals), Eichel feels closer to his goal—the traffic, the TV cameras, the tailgating—than ever. All rebuilding efforts must deal with growing pains, such as the five-game losing skid that followed the Sabres' 10 straight wins. But then there are days like Dec. 16, when Eichel scorched his hometown Bruins with two no-look assists to Skinner from behind Boston's net, one laser wrister over goalie Tuukka Rask's short-side shoulder, and an empty-netter that clinched a 4–2 win at TD Garden.

It was the kind of day when there is no need for Buffalo to worry.

After all, they've got Jack.