



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*December 29, 2018*

## **Sabres frustrated by struggles since winning streak, readying for difficult road ahead**

By Lance Lysowski  
The Buffalo News  
December 28, 2018

Rasmus Dahlin swung his stick not once, but twice at the boards following an intense practice drill in HarborCenter. That powerful display of raw emotion was the culmination of a trying one-hour on-ice session for the Buffalo Sabres' rookie defenseman.

"That was a pretty stupid move, but sometimes you get angry," Dahlin lamented Friday afternoon. "It's a way to get the frustration away."

That also illustrated how he and his teammates felt following a 4-1 loss in St. Louis one night earlier. The Sabres, 21-12-5 with 47 points for third place in the Atlantic Division, have only four wins in 13 games since their 10-game win streak was halted Nov. 29, and again had a letdown against a struggling opponent.

While the improvement from a 25-win season in 2017-18 is still remarkable, the standard has changed in Buffalo. All involved arrived Friday morning intent on fixing the problems in time for a Saturday prime-time game against the Boston Bruins in KeyBank Center.

"Our next handful of games are against teams that are right there with us," Jason Pominville, who could return from injury Saturday, said. "You want to make sure you push them back. But the biggest thing for us is worrying about our game and getting back to playing the way we know we're capable of and playing the way that led to us having success. We've slipped away a little bit from it."

Pominville watched as his teammates allowed three second-period goals against the Blues, who are sixth in the Central Division and own a negative-15 goal differential. St. Louis had 19 of the game's 23 shot attempts during the first 11 minutes of the second period.

Again, the Sabres allowed too many scoring chances and did not generate enough, particularly their bottom three lines. Since the win streak ended one month ago, the Sabres are 4-6-3 with a negative-7 goal differential and negative-29 shot differential.

While there are concerns about secondary scoring – the top line has accounted for 16 of the team's 22 5-on-5 goals since the streak ended – several Sabres said the team's play away from the puck is to blame for the struggles.

Since Nov. 29, an inability to forecheck and backcheck have contributed to Buffalo having the NHL's sixth-worst Corsi-for percentage, which measures the percentage of shots attempted by a team during 5-on-5 play.

"We just have to stick to our game and make sure that we're working away from the puck," winger Kyle Okposo said. "I know that's a really big thing for our team. When we're playing well, everybody's working away from the puck, hunting guys down and getting back, being good defensively."

The Sabres also are giving opponents too much time and space in the defensive zone, as displayed Thursday when Sam Reinhart allowed St. Louis defenseman Jay Bouwmeester to skate forward for an uncontested slap shot on Carter Hutton. Such breakdowns were pointed out by coach Phil Housley and his staff during a film session Friday morning. All involved came to a consensus the Sabres failed to respond when the Blues played desperate for the final 40 minutes.

"We've done a great job up to this point," Housley said. "We've put ourselves in a great position, but it is going to get harder. It's going to get tougher. Time and space, there's not going to be a lot of it, so we need to continue to focus and stay the course and not break at times."

As a result, the Sabres' ramped up the intensity in practice Friday. There were 3-on-1 and 2-on-2 drills to start. Housley tweaked his lines, except Jack Eichel's first line, and made his players practice forechecking and backchecking. Still, he did not appear to be overly concerned about his team's play.

After all, they lost by one goal in Washington on Dec. 21 before beating Anaheim, 3-0, last Saturday. Buffalo also had to travel Thursday morning to St. Louis because of the collective bargaining agreement-mandated holiday break, which Housley said contributed to some of their struggles against the Blues.

The Sabres hold a three-point lead over the Bruins in the division and have one of the most potent top lines in the NHL. Eichel is playing the best hockey of his career, Jeff Skinner has 26 goals and Reinhart is having an exceptional season with 37 points in 38 games.

Okposo, who was reunited on a line with Casey Mittelstadt and Conor Sheary during Friday's practice, has not scored a goal in 20 straight games. Sheary's only goal in 18 games was an empty-netter. The drop in production is in stark contrast to when 17 different players scored during the win streak.

The Sabres' forwards are receiving less time and space to generate chances. Simply put, they are no longer surprising anyone in the NHL and Housley wants them to respond.

"It's just going to get harder, but we're up to the challenge," Okposo said. "You just have to make sure that you're doing the right things every day."

## **Sabres Notebook: Jason Pominville a 'possibility' to return against Boston**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

December 28, 2018

When the Buffalo Sabres returned to practice Friday, they were joined by one player who could provide the secondary scoring they have lacked since their 10-game winning streak ended nearly a month ago.

Jason Pominville, who has missed three games since colliding with defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen during the third period of a 5-2 loss to Florida on Dec. 18, practiced Friday at HarborCenter and could play Saturday night against the Boston Bruins.

Though Pominville participated in line rushes during practice, coach Phil Housley would not commit on the possibility of the 36-year-old winger returning against the Bruins. Additionally, Ristolainen and winger Zemgus Girgensons missed practice for "maintenance," while emergency goalie Ryan Vinz joined the team because Linus Ullmark is ill.

"It's tough because with our schedule we haven't had a lot of practice time coming off the break," Housley said in KeyBank Center. "[Pominville] had a good practice today. I liked the way he responded out there, so he could be a possibility to play tomorrow. ... I liked what he brought to practice today."

Pominville, who also missed two games because of injury earlier this month, has nine goals among 18 points in 33 games this season. However, he has averaged only 12:09 of ice time while being without a goal over his past 13 games.

If Housley's practice lines were any indication, Pominville will skate with Vladimir Sobotka and Tage Thompson against the Bruins.

"I feel ready," Pominville said. "I haven't gotten confirmation about anything, but the way the lines were set up today, I would expect to be playing. I've been able to skate and stay active."

The Sabres are in desperate need of secondary scoring, particularly at even strength. Jack Eichel, Jeff Skinner and Sam Reinhart have combined for 16 goals during 5-on-5 play over the past 13 games, while the rest of the team has only eight. Pominville has struggled to produce since being bumped down from Eichel's line, but he presents an upgrade over Remi Elie, who skated on the Sabres' second line in a 4-1 loss in St. Louis on Thursday night.

Ristolainen played 20:56 against the Blues and led the Sabres with 24 total shifts, but he previously has missed practice for "maintenance." Housley might have opted to rest Ristolainen since Buffalo now has eight healthy defensemen, including Nathan Beaulieu and Matt Hunwick.

Girgensons was a minus-1 in 14:03 against the Blues, but he and Johan Larsson have accounted for four of those 5-on-5 goals by players not on the top line. Ullmark, meanwhile, did not participate in the morning skate prior to the Dec. 18 loss to Florida because of an illness but returned that night to serve as Carter Hutton's backup.

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Winger Scott Wilson also returned to practice with the Sabres and is getting close to game action, Housley said. Wilson, who was acquired from Detroit last December, has not played in the regular season after undergoing surgery to repair a broken ankle Oct. 2.

Wilson was an extra during line rushes Friday, but he was the first on the ice at HarborCenter and participated in other drills. The 26-year-old had six goals among 14 points and a minus-17 rating in 49 games for Buffalo last season.

Like Pominville, the Sabres' limited practice time has slowed Wilson's progress.

"He's getting there," Housley said of Wilson. "He's been out a long time, so slowly get him progressed in our practices. Again, we haven't had a lot of quality practice time. We should be able to do that as we move through our schedule, but I like how he's getting close and he's getting ready. It's good to see him out there."

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Bruins coach Bruce Cassidy told reporters Friday that winger Brad Marchand is unlikely to play against the Sabres and defenseman Charlie McAvoy has been ruled out.

Marchand, who has 12 goals among 41 points in 38 games, suffered an upper-body injury Thursday against New Jersey. Cassidy said Marchand was also not feeling well entering that 5-2 loss to the Devils.

McAvoy did not play against New Jersey and was placed on injured reserve Friday with a lower-body injury. Winger Patrice Bergeron, defenseman Zdeno Chara and defenseman Kevan Miller have recently returned from injuries for Boston, which is three points behind Buffalo for third place in the Atlantic Division.

## **Rick Jeanneret heading back to the broadcast booth for Saturday's Sabres game**

The Buffalo News

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Legendary Sabres broadcaster Rick Jeanneret says he will be back in the booth for Saturday's home game against the Boston Bruins.

"I will be doing the game Saturday and all the remaining games on my contract," Jeanneret texted News' television critic Alan Pergament on Friday. "I'm looking forward to dipping my toe in the playoff pool for the first time in seven years."

Jeanneret put quite a scare into Sabres fans and the hockey world during the third period of the team's 3-0 win over Anaheim on Saturday night when his voice became low and he went silent before analyst Rob Ray and then game host Brian Duff took over the play-by-play duties. Jeanneret was taken from the arena on a stretcher. He was released from Buffalo General Medical Center on Sunday.

He was not scheduled to work Thursday's game in St. Louis, so he will be back to work without missing a game.

In an interview Sunday, Jeanneret thanked the fans for their support.

"I continue to be amazed so many people really care about me," he said. "God bless them. They got me through cancer and getting a pacemaker, and they are getting me through this. I'll be fine."

## **Friedman: Sabres are not trading a first round pick for a rental player**

By Joes Dibiase

WGR 550

December 28, 2018

The Buffalo Sabres are in a very good position with the NHL Draft over the next two years. The team will have a total of four first round picks combined in the 2019 and 2020 NHL Draft, with the chance of having three first round picks this upcoming year. However, if the St. Louis Blues miss the playoffs and have a top-10 pick in the draft, their pick could become a first round pick in the 2020 draft, giving the Sabres two first round picks this year and two next year.

With the Sabres currently in pretty good shape to make the playoffs, despite some recent struggles, fans are now wondering whether they'll trade any of these picks for help right away on the roster. If there is a glaring need for the Sabres moving forward, it is with secondary scoring behind the line of Jeff Skinner, Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart. Over the last 13 games, the Sabres have had just seven goals at even strength from players that are not a part of the team's top line.

Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman was on 630 CHED in Edmonton on Friday. He says that the Sabres are not willing to start trading away their first round picks for help in the short-term.

"Here's the Sabres, they've got a great chance of making the playoffs, they've really improved this year and they're going in the right direction," Friedman said with Bob Stauffer on the Oilers NOW show. "They have four first round picks in the next two years, and I heard that they were thinking of moving one of those picks to give them a better shot this year.

"I looked into it and I was told that it wasn't happening. That they're not doing it for a rental. Now if you want to do it for a 22- or 23-year-old player that they're going to have under control for a while, that they would consider giving up a first rounder for, then they would consider it. But, they're not doing it for a rental."

Several big name rentals such as Wayne Simmonds and Mats Zuccarello are likely to be available before the February 25 NHL Trade Deadline, but it sounds like the Sabres, for now, won't be in the mix on them.

It would make sense that before looking at rentals, the Sabres might want to get a look at player with the Rochester Americans that could potentially fix their issues with secondary scoring. C.J. Smith, Alex Nylander, and Victor Olofsson have all shown flashes for the Amerks this year, but haven't received any call ups.

## **Pominville nearing a possible return on Saturday**

By Brayton Wilson

WGR 550

December 28, 2018

Buffalo Sabres forward Jason Pominville has missed the last three games due to an injury sustained after a nasty collision with defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen in a 5-2 loss to the Florida Panthers on December 18.

On Friday, Pominville was back on the ice with his teammates and skating on a line with Tage Thompson and Vladimir Sobotka. The 36-year-old looked like he was preparing as though he was ready to return to the lineup on Saturday when the Boston Bruins pay a visit to KeyBank Center. While he says he feels ready, Pominville is just waiting for the confirmation that he will be back in the lineup.

"The way the lines were set up today, I would expect to be playing. I've been able to skate and stay active," Pominville said after practice.

"It was a tough stretch, unfortunate couple injuries. But what can you do? It's part of the game? I guess I've been lucky enough to not have to deal with this too much. It's kind of caught up in a couple-week span. But it's good to be back."

Pominville and Ristolainen collided near center ice when the winger was coming on to the ice for a shift. He says that he did not see Ristolainen coming before they collided, nor did Ristolainen realize he was running into his teammate.

"Obviously, we didn't see each other, we would've tried to get out of the way," Pominville said. "[Conor Sheary] cut in the middle of us and we just never really saw each other and end up hitting, pretty much, a Finnish wall over there. So it's a tough guy to hit if you're going to pick one."

Pominville is hopeful to return to the lineup after the Sabres lost on the road to the St. Louis Blues on Thursday following the Christmas break. The Sabres have yet to find any secondary scoring behind the top line of Jeff Skinner, Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart. Eichel was Buffalo's lone goal scorer on Thursday, but his goal came in the second period while the Sabres were on the power play.

Since the Sabres' 10-game winning streak last month, the team has gone 4-6-3 in 13 games, but have managed to maintain a top-three spot in the Atlantic Division. However, the Sabres have only gotten seven goals at even strength from players outside of Skinner, Eichel and Reinhart in that span. Those goals have come from Johan Larsson (2), Zemgus Girgensons (2), Evan Rodrigues, Casey Mittelstadt and Tage Thompson.

A number of Sabres players are currently stuck in some significant scoring slumps:

Kyle Okposo has no goals in 19 games (last goal on November 13 against Tampa Bay) and no points in 12 games

Vladimir Sobotka has just one point in 21 games

Conor Sheary's empty-net goal on Saturday against Anaheim snapped a 16-game goalless drought

Casey Mittelstadt has two points in 14 games

Tage Thompson has one point in 11 games

Evan Rodrigues has two points in 15 games

As for Pominville, it has been since November 13 in Minnesota when he scored his last goal, and he has not registered a point in 11 games.

The 14th-year veteran knows that the team has to stick to what has made them successful, and eventually the work will result in some more depth scoring.

"I think we've given up too much of the rush. Being heavier on the puck in the offensive zone, getting to zone one, the danger area in front of the net," Pominville said. "If you want to score, that's where you got to go. If you look at some of the goals last night, that's where they were scored. When we're going well, we're heavy on the puck, we defend well and we go to the dirty areas to get that primary chance and then those secondary opportunities as well."

As of Friday, the Sabres currently sit three points ahead of the Bruins in the Atlantic Division with 47 points after Boston and Buffalo lost on Thursday night. Buffalo currently trails the Toronto Maple Leafs for second in the Atlantic by five points. Tampa Bay is running away in the Eastern Conference, leading the Sabres by 13 points for first place.

The Montreal Canadiens are just one point behind Boston as they sit in the second and last wild card spot in the East. They will play the Florida Panthers in Sunrise, Florida on Friday night.

Over the next seven games before heading out for a three-game road trip through Western Canada, Buffalo will face teams that are all fighting for a playoff position, including another matchup with the Bruins on January 5, and a matchup with the Lightning on January 12.

Pominville knows that the next handful of games will be a challenge, and that points won't come so easy if the team can't improve their secondary scoring.

"We're in a good spot, we've worked hard to get to this spot, but it's only going to get harder," Pominville said. "Games are going to be tighter, opponents are going to be harder, they're going to be more desperate as the season moves along here. We've earned the right to be where we're at. But at the same time, there's still a lot of work to be done. It'll be fun to see the team grow through this adversity, challenge of seeing teams ready to play us. Maybe at the start when we were winning we might've caught teams off guard a little bit. But now that they know they come in here, they're going to face a good team, they're going to face a team that plays well and plays hard. You got to make sure you rise to the occasions and it's going to be a challenge."

"You want to make sure you push them back. But the biggest thing for us is worrying about our game and getting back to playing the way we know we're capable of and playing the way that led to us having success. We've slipped away a little bit from it."

At practice on Friday, Zemgus Girgensons, Rasmus Ristolainen and Linus Ullmark were all given maintenance days by Sabres head coach Phil Housley. The Sabres head coach also said that Saturday is a possibility for Pominville to get back into the lineup.

"It's tough because with our schedule, we haven't had a lot of practice time coming off the break," Housley said. "He had a good practice today, I liked the way he responded out there. He could be a possibility to play tomorrow. We'll see and check with our trainers later on in the day."

Here is how the lines looked for the Sabres on Friday:

Skinner - Eichel - Reinhart

Sheary - Mittelstadt - Okposo

Thompson - Sobotka - Pominville

Elie - Larsson - Rodrigues

Scandella - Dahlin

Beaulieu - Bogosian

McCabe - Hunwick

Lawrence Pilut was working in on the Nathan Beaulieu-Zach Bogosian pairing, and was also doing some work on the power play. It would appear that the 22-year-old may be a healthy scratch for Saturday's game if Ristolainen is back for the Sabres.

Scott Wilson was also practicing again with the team, but he served as the extra forward.

Here is how the power play units looked at practice:

PP1: Skinner - Eichel - Reinhart / Pilut - Dahlin

PP2: Sheary - Mittelstadt - Okposo / Beaulieu - Rodrigues

The Sabres will return to the ice on Saturday for the morning skate around 10:30 a.m.

## **How to cure a case of the zips: Sabres players will try just about anything to end a goal drought**

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

December 28, 2018

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Falling into a goal-scoring funk is no fun for any player. More than a few Buffalo Sabres forwards know this feeling all too well these days. Going about trying to fix that is a balancing act of sorts.

You always hear the clichés about a player “squeezing his stick” when the goals dry up and pressing hard to get one. Heck, the relief we saw when Conor Sheary scored an empty-net goal against Anaheim last week that ended a 16-game goal drought is enough to show that any goal will do in such a situation.

But outside of Jeff Skinner, Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart (though Reinhart hasn’t had a goal in nine games himself), the goals have been hard to come by for a while for more than a few forwards. So, what does a player do when the pucks aren’t going in and he’s more than well aware of how long it’s been?

“You just talk to some people and figure out more ways to get more touches, to get more opportunities. If you get positive touches, it’s going to lead to more offense and more opportunities,” said right wing Kyle Okposo, who has gone 20 games without a goal.

Okposo has been through goal droughts before, but nothing like the one he’s in now. In 2009-10 and again in the lockout-shortened 2013 season, he went 18 straight without a goal. During 2011-12, he didn’t score until his 16th game of the season. In 2014-15, he had a stretch of 16 goal-less games. Last season in Buffalo, he had two 10-game stretches without finding the back of the net. If there’s a guy in the Sabres’ room who knows how to get out of a funk, it’s Okposo.

“I just grind harder. You have to stick with it, and you talk to different people,” Okposo said. “I’ve got some people that basically watch every game I’ve played the last five years, and I talk to them. We talk about some different things and trying to do different things to get more puck touches and feeling good, and that’s going to create more offense for me and create more opportunities. You have to trust that it’s going to go in and I keep playing my game, keep getting better, and just working. I think that’s the main thing is focus on myself a little more and make sure that I’m doing everything on and off the ice I can to get out of it. You just put your nose to the grindstone and go.”

Even guys like Skinner and Eichel will go through spells where the puck isn’t going in. For them, the message isn’t too different from how Okposo handles things.

“I just try to focus on getting opportunities and getting that confidence back because a lot of it is confidence,” Skinner said. “If it’s not going in, sometimes you think that the confidence is a little low. And when you get back on track, it starts to come back and that’s when you start burying it.”

“I know if I’m going through something, I’ll try to change something,” Eichel said. “I’ve changed my tape a few times this year, different things. It’s just about keeping it simple. If you’re getting chances, it’s one thing. But if you’re not getting chances, that’s when you start to worry. If you’re getting opportunities, and I can only speak for myself and how I prepare for it, the best way to score is to get to the net. Goalies are so good it’s tough to score from the outside without a screen. So I think if you’re struggling, just try to get to the net. Try to find the soft areas. If you’re getting chances, you’re getting chances. If you’re not, you have to simplify it and get pucks to the net. Something could go in off somebody, and it could spark you.”

Wait, what was that about changing the tape?

“I like to use white tape, then I went to black tape, but now I’m back to white tape,” Eichel said. “I just bounced it around for a little, just change it up. I see a few guys do it in the league. And if you get a good stretch going with one thing, I usually try to stick with it. Just bounce it around and see if it works and what doesn’t.”

It's not just other guys around the league changing their tape up to fix their mojo; it's the guys in the Sabres' room, too, and a lot of thought can go into it.

"I (changed tape) twice this year. I went to black and scored and went to white and scored, both in my first game (with the new tape). So actually, it might be coming," Casey Mittelstadt said with a laugh. "I feel like I like the white tape better, so I'll stick with it. It's been that way my whole life. I used black for a little bit, but, yeah, stick with it and make a few plays."

Equipment switches aren't for everyone, but there's a method to everyone's madness in the NHL.

"Sometimes I'll change the way I tape my stick, but I'm usually keeping it the same all the time," Tage Thompson said. "I don't usually change much; I know a lot of guys do. A lot of superstitions. They'll tape their stick a different color. They'll wear their socks different. I don't know; everyone has their own thing, right? I'm not too superstitious; I just stick with the same stuff."

For guys like Mittelstadt and Thompson, going through a goal drought can be more difficult because of the pressure it puts on them day by day to get off the schneid. Mittelstadt has gone through a stretch without a goal this season, and Thompson has gone 12 straight without one. With the middle six hurting for offense and the focus pointing at them more often than not, the pressure can be a lot to handle.

"I think the biggest thing is not thinking about it. The more you think about it, the more it gets in your head and then you start getting frustrated," Thompson said. "The biggest thing is just staying positive. As long as you're getting scoring chances, that's all that matters. If you're getting scoring chances, you're doing things right and you know eventually one of them is going to go in. Once that happens, you start feeling confident and you keep going. The biggest thing is just staying positive and making sure you're getting chances every night."

A positive mindset goes a long way. And, as Skinner said, so does confidence. Keeping that confidence up when the goals aren't coming as often can be difficult, but that's when a routine comes in handy.

"I think it's important to stick with what got you here and what made you a good player," Mittelstadt said. "It's been a pretty tough stretch for us. But at the same time, stick to what you've been doing. For me, there's a lot of things I've done ritually, so I'll stick to my rituals. They've gotten me to this point. There's some things you can work on in practice: getting a few more touches, shooting the puck a little more. Rituals-wise, you just stick to what you're doing. And usually, once you get one or two, it starts coming and then all of a sudden you start playing better. You start scoring more."

## **Teams will be gunning for upstart Sabres rest of season**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
December 28, 2019

BUFFALO – The Sabres' playoff hopes are usually long gone by now. Incredibly, they haven't held a postseason spot on this date since 2009.

So dealing with the expectations that accompany their hot start – right now, they have 47 points and rank third in the Atlantic Division, three points ahead of tonight's opponent, the Boston Bruins – could be a difficult experience for their young roster.

Only one player, winger Jason Pominville, has played a postseason game with the Sabres. Sixteen players have never appeared in an NHL playoff tilt.

Earlier this season, fresh off a disastrous campaign in which they finished dead last, some teams probably took the Sabres lightly. Not anymore.

Suddenly, teams are gunning for the Sabres, who haven't made the playoffs since 2011.

"We're in a good spot ... but it's only going to get harder, games are going to be tighter, opponents are going to be harder, they're going to be more desperate as the season moves along here," Pominville said Friday inside KeyBank Center. "We've earned the right to be where we're at. ...

"It'll be fun to see the team grow through this adversity, (the) challenge of seeing teams ready to play us. Maybe at the start when we were winning we might've caught teams off guard a little bit. But now they know they come in here, they're going to face a good team, they're going to face a team with depth that plays well."

But the Sabres haven't showcased much consistency over the last month. They've cooled off and started showing signs of inexperience. Since their 10-game winning streak ended Nov. 29, they're just 4-6-3.

They'll certainly endure more adversity over the final 44 games.

So how do the Sabres embrace the challenge of becoming a playoff team? To coach Phil Housley, they need to stay in the moment and forget about the big picture.

"We don't get too far ahead of ourselves," Housley said. "We're still in the process. We're trying to develop young players and continue to focus on areas of improvement and working on our game. ...

"The players have really taken ownership in this process. We've done a great job up to this point. We've put ourselves in a great position, but it is going to get harder."

As Pominville said, NHL games become tougher and tougher down the stretch as teams try to push up the standings.

"Time and space, there's not going to be a lot of it, so we need to continue to focus and stay the course and not break at times," Housley said. "(We need to) feel comfortable, which we have at times in games. When we get in that position again we'll know what to expect."

Simply fighting for a playoff spot would've been considered progress at the beginning of the season. But at this point, anything short of a postseason berth would be a massive disappointment.

"That's the expectation now," Sabres winger Kyle Okposo said of the playoffs. "I just think ... we put ourselves in a good position and that's really all you can do at this point."

The Sabres play the Bruins, who just got future Hall of Famers Patrice Bergeron and Zdeno Chara back from injuries, twice over the next four games. Their next six opponents are all Eastern Conference teams below them in the standings.

"You want to make sure you push them back," Pominville said. "But the biggest thing for us is worrying about our game and getting back to playing the way we know we're capable of and playing the way that led to us having success. We've slipped away a little bit from it."

Still, the Sabres, who are 2-3-1 in their last six contests, haven't been playing as poorly as it might look, according to Housley.

"You look at our body of work here the last three or four games, we played some really good hockey," Housley said.

Housley said the Sabres, who flew to St. Louis Thursday morning following a four-day Christmas break, started strongly in their 4-1 road loss before the Blues scored three quick second-period goals.

"Just coming off that break, travel, yeah, that had something to play in it," Housley said. "But I really liked our first period. We were the faster team, we executed, we had quality looks. We didn't get rewarded for that, so we get into the second period and we got away a little bit from our game."

## **Sabres' Jason Pominville close to playing after hitting 'Finnish wall'**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
December 28, 2018

BUFFALO – Of all the guys Sabres winger Jason Pominville could've collided with two weeks ago, it had to be 6-foot-4, 215-pound defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen.

"(I) end up hitting pretty much a Finnish wall over there," the 5-foot-11, 180-pound Pominville said following this afternoon's practice inside HarborCenter. "So it's a tough guy to hit if you're going to pick one."

Pominville has missed three straight games since his teammate accidentally steamrolled him during a line change Dec. 18. The Sabres haven't revealed Pominville's injury.

Naturally, Pominville said he and Ristolainen "just never really saw each other."

"It's a tough guy to hit if you're going to pick one," Pominville said.

Pominville, 36, could return for Saturday's tilt against the Boston Bruins at KeyBank Center. He practiced today beside center Vladimir Sobotka and Tage Thompson.

"The way the lines were set up today, I would expect to be playing," Pominville said.

Still, the Sabres had four days off for Christmas before Thursday's 4-1 loss in St. Louis.

"We haven't had a lot of practice time coming off the break," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "He had a good practice today. I liked the way he responded out there, so he could be a possibility to play tomorrow."

Pominville's durability has been a huge asset throughout his Sabres career. Only a concussion he suffered early in 2010-11 cost him any notable time, just nine games.

But he has endured two injuries – an upper-body ailment cost him two contests earlier this month – in a short span.

"It was a tough stretch, unfortunate couple injuries," said Pominville, who has missed five of the last 11 games. "But what can you do? It's part of the game. I guess I've been lucky enough to not have to deal with this too much. It's kind of caught up in a couple-week span. But it's good to be back."

Meanwhile, Housley said Ristolainen, winger Zemgus Girgensons and goalie Linus Ullmark all had maintenance days today. Housley said Ullmark is sick.

Winger Scott Wilson, out since breaking his ankle late in training camp, skated on some line rushes today.

"I like how he's getting close and getting ready," Housley said.

## **Sabres veterans embracing tough road ahead**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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Following practice at Harborcenter on Friday afternoon, Kyle Okposo and Jason Pominville echoed a phrase used by coach Phil Housley and captain Jack Eichel on Thursday to describe the road ahead for a young Sabres team with high expectations.

It's only going to get harder.

"You have this next little bit here where you're still in that midpoint of the season and then all of a sudden it gets to be the stretch run," Okposo said. "That's when teams are fighting, they're really clawing for every point. But points now are the same as points then.

"You're going to have teams that have kind of separated themselves on the other end where they don't have a shot or they're out of the playoffs and they may have some young guys ... we've been there in that position where you beat some good teams. So, you have to be aware of everything."

The Sabres find themselves in unfamiliar territory nearing the second half of the season. They remain in third place in the Atlantic Division with 47 points and have a seven-point lead over the first team out of the playoffs, the New York Islanders.

The week ahead presents an opportunity to extend that cushion. They play the Boston Bruins, who sit three points back in the first Wild Card spot, twice: in Buffalo this Saturday and then in Boston the following Saturday.

In-between those games, the Sabres host the Islanders on New Year's Eve and another opponent looking to claw its way back into contention in the Florida Panthers on Thursday.

Doubleheader Offer: Get free admission to Beauts game with tickets to Sabres vs. Bruins

"It's fun hockey," Okposo said. "Every game means something. Every point is big. Just the way that we've started and the way that we've grown, yeah, that's the expectation now. I just think it's a long season. We still have a long way to go, over halfway to go, but yeah, we put ourselves in a good position and that's really all you can do at this point.

"... There's some teams that are in good positions right now and there's some teams that are still in it. It's just going to get harder, but we're up to the challenge. You just have to make sure that you're doing the right things every day."

The Sabres will be looking for a response from their 4-1 loss in St. Louis on Thursday, which saw them surrender three straight goals in the second period after starting strong.

The Bruins, meanwhile, are coming off two straight losses and are expected to be without forward Brad Marchand and defenseman Charlie McAvoy.

The stakes were similar when the two teams last met, a 4-2 Sabres win in Boston on Dec. 16 that came on the heels of a shootout loss in Washington. Jack Eichel tallied four points in that game.

"We've earned the right to be where we're at," Pominville said. "But at the same time, there's still a lot of work to be done. It'll be fun to see the team grow through this adversity, challenge of seeing teams ready to play us.

"Maybe at the start when we were winning, we might've caught teams off guard a little bit. But now that they know they come in here, they're going to face a good team, they're going to face a team that plays well and plays hard. You've got to make sure you rise to the occasions and it's going to be a challenge."

Friday's practice

Pominville was back with the team for the first time since sustaining an injury in a collision with teammate Rasmus Ristolainen against Florida on Dec. 18. Housley left the door open for the forward to return from his two-game absence on Saturday.

Pominville recounted the open-ice collision with Ristolainen as an unfortunate accident.

"We just never really saw each other and end up hitting pretty much a Finnish wall over there," he said. "It's a tough guy to hit if you're going to pick one."

Ristolainen took a maintenance day, as did forward Zemgus Girgensons and goalie Linus Ullmark.

Housley made minor tweaks to his forward lines, which included reuniting the trio of Conor Sheary, Casey Mittelstadt and Okposo. They had been playing together earlier this month, and Okposo felt like they were close to an offensive outbreak.

"I thought we were," he said. "We did some good things. I thought Casey and I did some good things last night and it's just not happening right now. It will. I just told him to stay with it. I thought he was really moving his feet last night. He made some really good plays. It's going to come for him and myself too. We just have to keep pushing."

Here's how the team lined up at practice:

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

6 Marco Scandella - 26 Rasmus Dahlin  
82 Nathan Beaulieu / 24 Lawrence Pilut - 4 Zach Bogosian  
19 Jake McCabe - 48 Matt Hunwick

40 Carter Hutton

## **Alumni Spotlight: Vaclav Varada**

By Brian Duff

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From 1995-96 to 2002-03, Vaclav Varada played in 376 regular-season games with the Sabres, recording 144 points (46+98). He added 20 points (8+12) in 54 playoff games, trailing only Alexei Zhitnik and Richard Smehlik in postseason appearances by Buffalo players during that time.

We caught up with the former Sabres forward as he prepares to coach the Czech Republic in the 2019 IIHF World Junior Championship.

Your first game as a Buffalo Sabre was the team's final game at the old Memorial Auditorium. What do you remember most about that day/night?

I still have that game on my mind. I was surprised that I got called up as a junior to have the opportunity to play that game. It was really special. The Aud was full of people that really cheered so I have great memories. I can say I remember both Sabres' buildings so it's really special to have that opportunity.

Varada was born in Vsetin, Czech Republic in 1976 and moved to North America in 1994 to play Major Junior hockey with the Tacoma/Kelowna Rockets. In his first WHL season he scored 50-38-88 in 68 games. In 1995-96, he produced 85 points (39+46) in 59 games during a season in which his NHL rights were traded from San Jose to Buffalo.

The Sabres won that final night at The Aud 4-1 over Hartford. Varada, who wore No. 9 in his debut, finished the game with two shots on goal, but no points.

You were the youngest player to appear in all 36 Sabres' playoff games over 1998 and 1999. How did you earn that trust from your coaches and teammates to become such a meaningful contributor?

The first half [of 1997-98], I had a great season in Rochester\* and finally I got called up. I thought I had a great finish to the year in the regular season.\*\* And in the playoffs, like all the other players, I stepped up my game and we really had a good run.

I'm thankful to have had the opportunity from the coaches and they really knew what they can use me for and what kind of player I am.

[In 1998-99], we had a great team. I thought Dominik Hasek played awesome throughout that season and he had a stretch in the playoffs that he was really dominating. We played as a team, and we really battled hard. It's too bad we didn't win it all in the end, but it was a great season and I think the fans enjoyed the hockey that we played and showed.

I have great memories, even though we ended on a sour note. I will never forget that time.

\*56 points (30+26) in 45 games

\*\*11 points (5+6) in 27 games

Now wearing No. 25, Varada was one of only six Sabres skaters to play in all 36 games those two playoff seasons, producing eight goals and eight assists for 16 points. His eight goals were second only to Dixon Ward's 10 during that time.

During your time in Rochester and Buffalo, you played for coaches such as John Tortorella, and Lindy Ruff. What did you learn during those years that would help shape you as a coach years later?

I think both of them are awesome veteran NHL coaches right now. They really pushed me hard to be a better player in the defensive zone, to battle hard every shift I was on the ice, and really helped my career to become the player I was.

What can you say about our friend and Sabres broadcaster Rob Ray?

Robbie, he's one of the guys that from the beginning, he made it a little difficult for me to hop in, but once he knew what kind of guy I am and what kind of player I was, I thought we really had a good bond and we were good teammates.

He liked guys that gave their all and I was one of the guys. And that helped me. I haven't seen him in a long time, but I believe Robbie is a great team person and he was one of the leaders for a long, long time in a Sabres uniform.

You left the NHL at age 30 and continued playing in Europe for eight more years. Why did you leave North America when you did?

After my third season in Ottawa, my contract expired and I was really deciding on where to go. And to help me make that decision was that I had some family troubles. My mom was really sick and I wanted to be with her and I chose to go a little bit closer to my mom.

I'm grateful I had three or four months from the beginning of the season in Switzerland that I could go home and see her before she passed away.

Varada spent the 06-07 season with HC Davos, and the 07-08 season with SC Langnau in Switzerland before playing his final years for HC Vitkovice in the Czech Elite League.

At what point in your career did you take an interest in coaching?

It happened three or four years before I finished my career as a player. I had some time off to think about where my steps are going to be. I had to take school to become a coach because it's not like here where once you are done as a player, you could be one of the coaches.

At that time, I was still playing and I was studying to go with that. It was really difficult, but it was an easy transfer for me from the player point of view to the coaching position.

Varada has been the head coach of HC Ocelari Trinec in the Czech Elite League the past two seasons. Trinec finished as runners-up last year, and currently sit atop the standings through 29 games this season.

6 Nov 1999: Vaclav Varada #25 of the Buffalo Sabres smiles and looks on from the ice during the game against the New York Islanders at the Marine Midland Arena in Buffalo, New York. The Sabres defeated the Islanders 2-1. Mandatory Credit: Rick Stewart /Allsport

6 Nov 1999: Vaclav Varada #25 of the Buffalo Sabres smiles and looks on from the ice during the game against the New York Islanders at the Marine Midland Arena in Buffalo, New York. The Sabres defeated the Islanders 2-1. Mandatory Credit: Rick Stewart /Allsport Rick Stewart

You are the head coach for the Czech Republic at the 2019 IIHF World Junior Championship in Vancouver. What does this opportunity mean to you?

I'm really happy to have this opportunity to coach this team. The last three or four years, I coached Under-18 team, Under-19 team and I've had those guys that came up with me.

To have the opportunity to represent my country is a special honor and I feel a great responsibility towards Czech Republic and I'll do my best to help my team to have that shot for success!

Varada won gold as a player for the Czech Republic in the 2000 and 2005 World Championships. He also played in two World Junior tournaments (1995 and 1996) scoring 11 goals in 13 games. The Czechs have not medaled at the World Juniors since 2005.

Sabres prospect Matej Pekar was drafted 94th overall by the Sabres in 2018 out of Muskegon in the USHL. This season, the 18-year-old forward is excelling with the Barrie Colts of the OHL (coached by Dale Hawerchuk) and has posted 33 points (12+21) in 30 games. He's currently on the Czech team at the World Junior Championship.

How would you describe Czech-born Buffalo Sabres prospect Matej Pekar, and how big a role do you see for him at the tournament?

Well, Matej is having a really good season. He's scoring lots of goals and creating lots of chances. Over the past two or three years, I didn't have the opportunity to coach him yet so for me I'm trying to get to know him a little bit better. He's still fighting for a place in the four scoring lines. I'm seeing in him really that he's having a really good shot.

He has that spark. My players, they should have that spark that Matej has! But he still also has to play in the back end and we will see how it's going to end up. I believe that he could become the player the Sabres see in him.