



Buffalo Sabres

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Islanders continue division drive as Sabres look to gain in wild-card race

By Mike Harrington

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The penultimate contest on the Buffalo Sabres' seven-game homestand comes Tuesday night, and the visitors are one of the big stories of the season in the NHL.

The New York Islanders will be in KeyBank Center for a 7 p.m. game, looking to maintain their hold on first place in the Metropolitan Division, while the Sabres continue to desperately grab points in the wild-card race.

Both teams were off Monday after playing back-to-back sets over the weekend. The Islanders swept Colorado and Minnesota to push their winning streak to three games, while the Sabres beat Detroit and lost to Winnipeg, derailing their eighth straight bid for a two-game winning streak.

The Sabres (27-21-7) enter Tuesday's game four points behind Pittsburgh for the final Eastern Conference playoff spot after the Penguins won Monday at Philadelphia, 4-1. The Sabres have a game in hand. Buffalo is 2-2-1 on the homestand, which wraps up Friday night against the New York Rangers.

The Islanders are 33-16-6, two victories shy of last season's totals with 27 games still to play. They have a three-point lead over defending Stanley Cup champion Washington after the Caps' 6-4 win Monday against Los Angeles. They are second in the Eastern Conference and fifth overall in the NHL standing.

While the Sabres started to seriously cool off in mid-December, shortly after their 10-game winning streak ended, the Islanders have taken off with a 19-4-2 burst since Dec. 15 to claim the top spot in the Metro.

The Islanders have finished no higher than third in a division since 2002 and haven't won a title since taking the Patrick Division crown in 1988. It's a remarkable turnaround season, certainly unexpected in the wake of captain John Tavares' departure to Toronto in free agency.

But new General Manager Lou Lamoriello lured Barry Trotz from Washington to be his coach after Trotz could not agree on an extension with the Caps following their Stanley Cup season. And Trotz has received impeccable goaltending while splitting duties virtually down the middle between ex-Sabre Robin Lehner (17-8-4, 2.05/.930) and Thomas Greiss (16-8-2, 2.28/.927).

Lehner made 39 saves in the teams' first meeting, a 3-1 Islanders victory here on New Year's Eve. It was his first appearance in Buffalo after the Sabres walked away from his deal as a restricted free agent in June. Lehner revealed in September he had been treated over the summer for alcohol abuse and bipolar disorder.

The Islanders lead the league with the fewest goals against (133), while Lehner leads the league in both goals-against average and save percentage among goalies who have played at least 20 games. Greiss is second in both categories.

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In the midst of a difficult defensive day that saw him on the ice for all three Winnipeg goals, Rasmus Dahlin continued to climb up the rookie scoring leaders Sunday.

Dahlin's assist on Jack Eichel's goal was his 31st point of the season, tying him with Jim Benning (Toronto, 1981-82) and former Sabre Doug Bodger (Pittsburgh, 1984-85) for the third-most by an NHL defenseman at age 18. Only Housley (57 for the Sabres in 1982-83) and Bobby Orr (41 for Boston in 1966-67) have tallied more.

Dahlin is second in the NHL in rookie scoring and tied for the lead in assists with 25. Vancouver's Elias Pettersson also has 25 assists and leads first-year players with 50 points.

Travis Yost's Sabre Metrics: How badly is Vladimir Sobotka performing?

By Travis Yost
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If I asked you who was the fourth-most utilized forward in average ice time at five-on-five for Phil Housley this season, how many responses would it take for you to land on Vladimir Sobotka?

The checking-line forward has become something of a favorite for the Sabres' head coach. Season to date, he is averaging a shade more than 12 minutes per night in five-on-five situations, which trails only Jeff Skinner, Jack Eichel, and Sam Reinhart on the Sabres, according to Natural Stat Trick.

Housley tends to utilize Sobotka in the team's tougher minutes, laced with heavy defensive zone starts (he starts only 33 percent of his shifts in the offensive third) and against some of the opponent's toughest scoring talent.

Sobotka has carried a reputation of being a shutdown centerman since his years with the St. Louis Blues, and for a team that's limited on talent down the lineup, it's somewhat understandable that the coaching staff would lean on him more than usual.

But there's a far cry between being the team's defensive center and being the team's fourth-most utilized forward. For a point of comparison, I went and pulled every forward who is fourth in usage with his respective team.

As you can see, there is an awful lot of talent on this list, and Sobotka jumps off the page as an outlier. If you look at just scoring rates for each of these players, it's clear that these defense-oriented players who still exist around the league just don't get quite this type of usage. Not in a slot this important:

Since most of this list comprises first-liners who missed time and second-liners who are frequently flexed up into a first-line role, it's not surprising to see that there's so much scoring talent. The average forward in this group — again, just as a preliminary point of reference — scores about 1.8 points per 60 minutes. The only other player who looks remotely similar to Sobotka here is Los Angeles' Jeff Carter — a noncompetitive team that has struggled to score goals for effectively three years. So the Sabres are sacrificing quite a bit with how much they are using Sobotka here.

But individual scoring isn't everything. What we ultimately care about is how well a player drives shot differentials or scoring chance differentials, and how those translate to favorable goal differentials.

So let's take this same sample of 31 forwards around the league with similar usage and identify expected goal differentials (shot volume, adjusted for quality, and, most importantly, blind to goaltender effects) for each player. What does it look like?

Again, Sobotka is a pretty substantial outlier here. The average No. 4 forward around the league gets just more than 50 percent of the expected goals, and that correlates pretty strongly with reality. No. 4 forwards have outscored their opponents 916 to 891 while on the ice this season (50.6 percent), so we have confidence that our expected goal measure is strongly tied to actual performance.

Sobotka is at 38 percent, which is frankly stunning. There is even a larger gap between him and the 30th-ranked forward in the league (Vancouver's Jake Virtanen at 43 percent). There's no doubt in my mind that Sobotka is getting a bit tougher minutes than the average forward itemized here, but it cannot possibly explain just how variant the results are. Especially since Sobotka has played with very similar defensive usage in the past, and his performance — before this season — had been there:

What we have here is a triumvirate of issues: Sobotka appears to be playing too much, he's underperforming relative to his peers in those minutes, and he is underperforming his career norms despite being utilized very similarly in prior stops with St. Louis (and even prior to that, in Boston).

We have long recognized this team to be top-heavy, and there aren't a lot of good alternative options for Housley and the coaching staff. The front office, assuming they are serious about contending for a playoff spot this year, should be in the trade market to find ways to push Sobotka's minutes down.

Either that means finding a better checking line center for the coaching staff to use, or that means finding a more talented player more generally who will artificially push Sobotka's minutes into more of a third- or fourth-line role.

I will end on one final note: This is not completely out of Housley's control. Even a team-level review shows players further down the lineup delivering more desirable results. With a relatively young roster inclusive of some players Housley might want to insulate, it's a tricky item to maneuver.

To that end, there should be pressure on both the front office and coaching staff: find additional resources to push underperformers down the lineup, while simultaneously giving additional minutes to some of the younger players on the roster who have exemplified themselves as more likely to drive performance than the older Sobotka at this point of his career.

Mike Harrington: After Flight 3407 crash, emotional Sabres victory helped the healing

By Mike Harrington
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Buffalo Sabres winger Jason Pominville never has forgotten the phone call.

It was just after 10 p.m. on Feb. 12, 2009. Pominville's wife was out of town, and he was lounging on his couch, watching a movie. His cellphone beeped and he didn't answer. It beeped again and he noticed he had a voicemail. It was from Sabres backup goaltender Patrick Lalime. Thinking it was an odd call to get at that time of night, Pominville grabbed the phone and played the message.

"He's in a full-out panic on it," Pominville recalled after practice last week. "He says, 'Oh my God, you should see it. There's a plane crash.' And he's talking about how they saw the plane. So I call him back and they had already gone to see.

"His brother-in-law was at their house at the time and was bringing stuff inside from the driveway. He started running away because he thought the plane was going right at them. They called 911 right away but people already knew what happened."

What happened, of course, was the crash of Continental Connection Flight 3407 into a home on Long Road in Clarence.

Tuesday will mark the 10th anniversary of the crash, and the Sabres will hold a moment of silence in memory of the 50 victims prior to their game against the New York Islanders in KeyBank Center.

The crash came close to the homes of many members of the team who lived in Clarence Center. And they were shaken to the core when they reported to work the next morning, Feb. 13, for the pregame skate to that night's game against the San Jose Sharks.

For a time that morning, there was doubt the game would go on. Sabres officials first made sure they had no connections to anyone who was lost on the flight, then consulted with the NHL before moving ahead to play the game.

As it turned out, the game had healing powers for a grieving community. The Sabres blew a three-goal lead but rallied to tie it on a Pominville goal with 3.9 seconds left and went on to win, 6-5, in a shootout.

"You came to the rink and there was sheer disbelief," former Sabres captain Craig Rivet recalled last week. "How did this happen? To us in our community? You hear bad things on the news but you never think it would happen to you. Hockey was so minimal. The emotions in our dressing room were tough. Many of our guys were a quarter of a mile away from where that was.

"Your first thought was why are we doing this? But by the time we went out for the game, we realized this was the best thing for everyone. If we can help a little bit by being athletes to entertain these people for a minute or an hour or whatever, that's what we needed to do."

An emotional morning

The players reported for the pregame skate like any other game day, but this was far from a normal morning.

Many had stayed up deep into the night watching news bulletins about the crash. Others, especially those who didn't live near teammates in the Spaulding Lake section of Clarence, woke up with no knowledge of the incident.

Defensemen Toni Lydman and Jaroslav Spacek had to calm the fears of worried relatives in Finland and the Czech Republic, respectively, who had seen "Clarence" on news reports of the crash and sent frantic texts to make sure they were OK.

The homes of Lalime and defenseman Teppo Numminen were the closest to the crash site.

"I heard the plane coming," a somber Numminen said that morning as he sat in his locker. "I was in my bed, and I heard it and thought it sounded really weird, really close to us. Then I heard a little 'poof' afterwards. I was in my bed and I was thinking, 'That doesn't sound good, doesn't sound right.' So I looked out of my window and I saw the red sky, so I knew something was wrong."

Alerted by his brother-in-law, Lalime was the only Sabre who saw the full aftermath of the plane's impact.

"He saw it coming, coming down. It was pretty low. He came in. We didn't hear a noise or anything," Lalime said that day, telling the story several times as various reporters inquired. "We thought something would happen and a couple seconds later, we saw a big ball of fire not even a mile down the road. As we went back outside we saw fire everywhere and we called 911 to make sure. They already knew what happened."

Rivet, now a Sabres analyst on MSG's "The Instigators," remembered how coach Lindy Ruff struggled to find words during his first meeting with the team that morning.

"Lindy had lived in that area many, many years. You could see a very strong man look like he was ready to cry," Rivet said. "You knew this was just so tragic and big. Everybody had that pit in their stomach. I remember before we went on the ice we didn't know what to expect. The whole city was in mourning."

When Ruff met reporters after the skate, his voice was halting and his eyes were red-rimmed. He said he heard the sirens heading to the crash and was watching news bulletins until 1:30 a.m. Reporters spoke barely above a whisper in asking him questions.

"It was incredible," Ruff said. "Surreal at times you know? You think maybe it's just something small, to ending up being as big as it was. I've just got tremendous feelings about an area as small as where we live and all of our players in that area. And then you think about the number of times you fly. It affects my kids. It affects a lot of things. It's tough."

Sheer quiet to sheer joy

A sellout crowd filed into then-HSBC Arena for the game. Before it began, the arena lights and Jumbotron were dimmed and there was a moment of silence in honor of the victims. Most people who have been coming to the arena since its 1996 opening will tell you it's the quietest moment they've ever heard in the building.

"Not a word from anyone," Pominville said. "For it to happen so close to us, it made you take a step back and realize how things can change pretty quick. Pretty emotional time."

"You could hear a pin drop," center Derek Roy said after the game. "You heard nothing. No fans talking or coughing. No players moving their feet or tapping a stick at the bench. Just nothing."

Then it was time to play and fans, clearly needing a communal gathering place, started to roar. The Sabres responded, with Rivet getting the game's first goal and Buffalo building a 4-1 lead in the second period.

"So we're up 4-1 and the building is rocking and people are all here going crazy and trying to forget this tragedy for a few hours," Rivet said. "But we were playing probably the best team in the league at the time. People are sitting there thinking, 'This is amazing.' Lo and behold, the powerhouse came back."

Rivet had spent the last 1 1/2 seasons with the Sharks, so he wasn't surprised there was pushback. But it was fierce. San Jose scored four straight goals to take a 5-4 lead and the building was quiet as the clock ticked inside the final minute.

The Sabres had pulled goalie Ryan Miller for an extra attacker and the puck was in the San Jose zone. The clock ticked under 10 seconds, with Roy and Pominville battling to get it. It was finally pushed to Rivet, all alone at the right point.

"I was thinking, 'I'm wide open at the point. Please get me this puck so I can pound it as hard as I can,' " Rivet said. "I put my head down and let it go."

It was a low shot and Pominville deflected it ever-so-slightly, sending it past goalie Evgeni Nabakov to tie the game with 3.9 seconds left.

"You saw me on the blue line when the puck went in the net. You remember. I exploded," Rivet said. "It was one of the best goals that I was a part of. There wasn't a better feeling. It was magical to be a part of that. That was one of the better moments of my career for what it meant."

"For us to come back and tie the game late like that, you could tell the emotion was so high in the city and the building," Pominville said. "Just that roar. It was a pretty cool comeback for us."

The Sabres won the game as Roy scored the deciding goal in the fifth round of the shootout and Miller made the clinching save on Milan Michalek, tossing the final puck to the side as his teammates poured on the ice and the crowd let out one more massive cheer.

"At first, I was sad we played the game and I wondered why but I'm obviously extremely happy that we did," Rivet said. "That sound of us winning that game was one of two big ones I remember from all the years I played. The fans that night were like they were in Montreal the night Saku Koivu came back from cancer. Those two nights stick out more than anything."

Raw reactions

Like the Sabres, the Sharks were troubled by images of the Continental crash. And they were spooked a little more because they had trouble getting out of Pittsburgh two days earlier. Their flight was canceled and they waited out winds that gusted to 92 mph before finally leaving the day before the game.

"Their community is in mourning right now," Sharks coach Todd McLellan said. "It was an entertaining game. Anybody who came here probably got their mind off very serious issues."

The Sabres were thrilled by the big win and the crowd's reaction. But the real world awaited and emotions were still raw.

"Once you start to play, you seem to really kind of forget everything if you play and really enjoy something," Rivet said. "You forgot. Then it was over, we won, we went and congratulated all our guys and we all had smiles."

"We're in the dressing room and I remember [Sabres PR official] Chris Bandura coming and saying the media was coming. That's when it hit you again, the loss of people, what had happened in Buffalo. I just remember being in that room feeling like I wanted to cry for the people who had lost their loved ones. Terribly emotional right there."

The players noticed how the crowd responded to the game, as if they needed some place to go have a group yell to unleash their grief.

"We said this morning we're going to play for the City of Buffalo and we came out and put a great effort in," Roy said that night. "In times like these, where people rally behind a local team, we came out strong. Then we had all that emotion at the end, which was great."

Roy was looking straight ahead as he talked. Then he stopped and looked directly at me. There were no cameras around. Just the two of us.

"You're from here, too. You know," Roy said. "There was no way we were not going to tie this game and win it for these people. No way."

As pleased as he was by winning a hockey game, Ruff's voice during his postgame news conference was nearly as somber as it had been in the morning.

"Ever so small as this event was, it turned out to be a positive event," Ruff said. "I know that from a man to man in that room, our prayers and our thoughts were still with our community, which was even more important. ... It really isn't about the game. We'll play it, but we'll leave our thoughts somewhere else. I thought we did a good job of playing it but still being considerate of what went on.

"It was a happy ending. It was what we needed. We needed a fairy-tale ending and I thought we got a little bit of that. Although it was a hockey game, it was a good ending, a positive feeling. It's nice. We needed it. I think our fans needed it."

Sabres' Jack Eichel earning more ice time than ever

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
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BUFFALO – In his four-year NHL career, center Jack Eichel has never consistently earned more ice time than in the past three weeks. The Sabres' most meaningful games in seven seasons have prominently featured their captain.

Other than Saturday afternoon's 3-1 win, a game the Sabres controlled, allowing Phil Housley to rest Eichel a bit for Sunday's tilt, the coach has utilized his leading scorer a lot. Eichel has skated at least 20 minutes, 57 seconds in the other eight outings since Jan. 16.

Entering Tuesday's tilt against the New York Islanders inside KeyBank Center, Eichel has averaged 22 minutes, 4 seconds over that nine-game span.

"He was a force out there when he had the puck," Housley said following Sunday afternoon's 2-1 loss to the Winnipeg Jets. "I like when he comes down and starts thinking shot instead of passing it."

Eichel, 22, scored the Sabres' lone goal, extending his point streak to five contests. Since enduring a season-long five-game point drought from Dec. 31 to Jan. 14 – an upper-body injury sidelined him three games in that stretch – Eichel has compiled four goals and 12 points in 10 contests, only going pointless once.

Having scored 18 goals and 59 points through 52 games, Eichel is on pace for 27 goals and 90 points this season. The former first overall pick would be the first Sabre to crack 90 points since Daniel Briere enjoyed a 95-point campaign in 2006-07.

"(Eichel) is maturing as a leader and as a "go-to guy" every night," said one NHL scout who has watched Eichel regularly this season.

While Eichel was on the ice for Blake Wheeler's winning goal, it's hard to pin it on him. The Jets kept cycling the puck before Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin lost his man in front.

Housley, of course, wouldn't be able to rely on Eichel so heavily if the former first overall pick hadn't developed the defensive side of his game.

"(His) play away from the puck has improved," the scout said. "(He) needs to play as hard without puck as he does with it on a consistent basis. But he has taken strides in this area."

He added: "He is an elite offensive player who could grow into an excellent two-way center without sacrificing his offense because of his skating ability and hockey IQ."

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Sabres goalie Carter Hutton enjoyed a nice bounce-back outing against the Jets, making 26 saves.

Most importantly, Hutton, who has lost playing time to Linus Ullmark over the last month, looked more composed than in other recent outings.

"He's maybe attacking it too much, really trying to get out on his angle instead of trying to letting the puck hit him like they were," Housley said prior to Sunday's tilt, Hutton's first appearance since getting yanked from a 7-3 loss to the Chicago Blackhawks on Feb. 1. "When he's on his game, there's not a lot of rebounds, he squeezes up everything."

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The Islanders beat the Minnesota Wild 2-1 on Sunday afternoon, their third straight win and ninth in the last 12 contests. Since starting the season 3-4-1, they've gone 30-12-1, roaring into first place in the Metropolitan Division.

After years of mediocrity, the Islanders have quickly morphed into a powerhouse under coach Barry Trotz, who left the Washington Capitals after winning the Stanley Cup last season.

Former Sabre Robin Lehner and Thomas Greiss have been the Islanders' backbone, forming a dynamic goaltending tandem.

Lehner, 26, has become one of the NHL's best goalies, going 17-8-4 with a 2.05 goals-against average, a .930 save percentage and three shutouts in 30 appearances.

Lehner leads the league in goals-against average and save percentage.

Greiss, meanwhile, has compiled similar numbers – 16-8-2, 2.28, .927 and three shutouts – in 29 games.

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The Sabres had Monday off.