



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Sabres' Okposo sent home 3 days after being punched in face

Associated Press

February 18, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Buffalo Sabres forward Kyle Okposo has been sent home for further medical evaluation three days after being punched in the face during a fight with the New York Rangers' Tony DeAngelo.

Coach Phil Housley gave no details on Okposo's condition in providing the update after the Sabres practiced in Florida on Monday. Though the nature of the injury is unclear, Okposo did not return after being felled by DeAngelo's punch during the fight 7:51 into the third period of a 6-2 loss to the Rangers on Friday.

Okposo traveled with the team for the start of its three-game road trip at New Jersey, but did not play in the 4-1 loss to the Devils on Sunday.

The 30-year-old has a history of concussion-related troubles during his 12 NHL seasons.

He missed the final two weeks of the 2017-18 season and spent a week in a hospital after sustaining a concussion during what he called a routine hit in practice. He also missed a week last March after sustaining a concussion following a collision with Ottawa's Bobby Ryan.

Housley also announced defenseman Marco Scandella is listed week to week with an upper body injury.

The Sabres play at Florida on Tuesday night.

Nathan Beaulieu keeps practicing, waiting for Sabres to make their move

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 18, 2019

SUNRISE, Fla. – Nathan Beaulieu is well aware the countdown clock has, in fact, slipped under a week to go. By the time the NHL trade deadline hits next Monday afternoon, the Buffalo Sabres' defenseman is a good bet to have a new team.

Beaulieu is waiting for his phone to ring to get the go-ahead to play again. Until then, he practices with the Sabres knowing there's little chance he gets into another game unless the team is hit by a sudden epidemic of injuries on defense.

"I'm not going lie. I'm pretty frustrated. I don't really know what to tell you," Beaulieu said after yet another workout Monday in BB&T Center. "It's important for me to keep grinding away here. Time is ticking. There's not many games left and you want to get in as many as you can. But it's tough. You try to stay in shape and practice hard. It's tough but part of being a pro. I have to make the most of the situation I'm in."

The reeling Sabres look to snap an ugly two-game skid Tuesday night against the Florida Panthers. Beaulieu figures to be a spectator for the 22nd time in the last 26 games and the ninth game in a row.

Beaulieu had a rough night during the Sabres' 7-2 loss Jan. 14 in Edmonton – but who didn't? – and that was compounded by news emerging out of Quebec later that week that his agent had requested a trade to get him more playing time.

Since then, Beaulieu's career has become a bit of a political football. He hasn't played well enough at times to satisfy coach Phil Housley, and the trade rumblings clearly agitated General Manager Jason Botterill enough to the point he's been left to rot in the press box.

Beaulieu, in the final year of a deal that carries a \$2.4 million cap hit, has three goals and four assists with an even rating in 27 games. He has just one goal eight assists and was minus-19 last year in 59 games.

Housley has said multiple times he's happy with the way Beaulieu has prepared for practice, but that hasn't tipped the scales in favor of getting the 26-year-old back in the lineup. Rookie Lawrence Pilut played over Beaulieu and Casey Nelson rejoined the club from his conditioning assignment in Rochester on Monday, further pushing Beaulieu down the pecking order.

"Of course, I think I should be in the lineup every night," Beaulieu said. "But that's just me as a player being competitive and that's how we are. It's a difficult spot. Call it what you want. I don't really know what it is. I'm just trying to be a pro here."

Beaulieu said if a trade does happen, he'll be thrilled to get back on the ice, but saddened at the way his two years in Buffalo have ended.

"I've come to love these guys in this locker room and the biggest thing for me is to work hard," Beaulieu said. "Guys on this team can look to me as a leader. I take pride on being a good teammate and it's something I've worked hard at even though I never expected to be in this situation. When you're dealt a hand, you kind of just have to play it."

The Sabres only have two unrestricted free agents in wingers Jeff Skinner and Jason Pominville. Representatives for Skinner, who is second in the NHL with 36 goals, are working on a long-term deal with the team and it's not imperative it gets done before the deadline.

Skinner maintained his no-trade clause that came with him from Carolina and is not likely to waive it for a possible deal to a team higher up in the standings. His focus has been to stay on Jack Eichel's wing for multiple seasons.

Pominville, meanwhile, could draw interest if the Sabres agree to keep part of his \$5.6 million cap hit. Former GM Darcy Regier traded Pominville to Minnesota at the deadline in 2013 and Botterill reacquired him from the Wild in the summer of 2017. Pominville has a partial no-trade clause.

"Honestly I'm just trying to help the team win. This is where my mind and my head is at," Pominville said Monday. "You know how much I've always loved being here. I've always loved putting this jersey on. I don't envision myself playing anywhere else. All my focus and attention is here to try to turn things around and get us where we're hoping to be and where we've put a lot of work into. I'm hoping to be a part of that."

Housley wasn't interested in talking trade much Monday, preferring to keep the focus on the Sabres' long shot playoff chances and their game against the Panthers. They'll need a much better performance than Sunday's 4-1 loss in New Jersey, a game in which the Sabres rang up 35 shots on goal but never seem overly dangerous on offense.

"Obviously we can't control that," the coach said of the looming deadline. "What we can control is playing against a tough opponent tomorrow. ... We've got a big game and we have to come back and play a similar type game. Get more net-front presence, execute when we need to and capitalize on our opportunities. If we get the first goal, maybe that changes the complexion. That's what we can control."

Beaulieu is one of seven restricted free agents the Sabres have on their roster for next year. That list includes goalie Linus Ullmark, goaltender Jake McCabe and forwards Evan Rodrigues, Johan Larsson, Zemgus Girgensons and C.J. Smith.

Sabres Notebook: Kyle Okposo sent home for medical evaluation

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 18, 2019

SUNRISE, Fla. – Kyle Okposo answered the challenge of New York Rangers defenseman Anthony DeAngelo on Friday night and the resulting one-punch knockdown is now officially a major concern for the Buffalo Sabres.

Okposo, a veteran winger, has returned to Buffalo and get further medical analysis after taking a shot to the chin from DeAngelo during a brief fight in the third period of the Sabres' 6-2 loss.

Okposo took the team flight to New Jersey on Saturday and was seen talking to trainers and going into an examination room prior to Sunday's loss to the Devils at the Prudential Center in Newark. But he did not warm up and was a scratch from Buffalo's 4-1 defeat.

Okposo was not on the ice at practice Monday in BB&T Center as the Sabres prepared for Tuesday's game against the Florida Panthers.

"Kyle is back in Buffalo getting further evaluated," was coach Phil Housley's cryptic answer when asked about Okposo's status.

Pressed on his level of concern about the winger's health, Housley simply said, "I don't have any information up to this point but he went back to Buffalo to get further evaluated by our doctors."

Housley said Saturday that Okposo did not suffer a concussion as a result of the fight. That was initially a relief to the team, of course, because of the life-altering issues Okposo had in the summer of 2017 as post-concussion reactions landed him in the Neuro ICU unit of Buffalo General Medical Center.

The team has yet to say Okposo is again in any kind of concussion protocol, although he crumpled to the ice after absorbing the punch and skated slowly to the dressing room after it. There were audible gasps in the KeyBank Center crowd at the sight of Okposo down on the ice.

Okposo, 30, has 10 goals and 12 assists in 57 games for the Sabres this season, with Sunday's contest the first one he has missed this season. He is in the third season of a seven-year, \$42-million contract he signed with the Sabres in 2016.

In other injury news, Housley said defenseman Marco Scandella has been downgraded to week to week with an upper-body injury. Rasmus Ristolainen and Zach Bogosian did not practice for what the coach termed maintenance days.

The Sabres shuffled their lines at practice Monday, putting Jason Pominville back with Jeff Skinner and Jack Eichel after Sam Reinhart played in that spot Sunday.

Reinhart skated Monday with Conor Sheary and Casey Mittelstadt. Evan Rodrigues was centering the third line between C.J. Smith and Tage Thompson while the fourth line had Johan Larsson between Vladimir Sobotka and Zengus Girgensons.

Housley said he was looking for better balance in the lines, which seems to be the case when Reinhart plays down away from Eichel.

"I've been through it enough to know to just play my game and not worry about who you're playing with," said Pominville, who has struggled to score when he's not on Eichel's line. "Go out there, focus on what you have to do and what you have to bring. When you play with a guy like Jack, you want to not overdo things or just give him the puck constantly. You can get away from the things you do well, so I just try to focus on those and try to help him in that way."

In the face of their deepest struggles of the season, it's not a great time for the Sabres to face the Panthers. They snapped a seven-game losing streak against Florida with a 4-3 win Jan. 3 in Buffalo, but have dropped five straight in Sunrise.

The Panthers posted a 3-2 overtime win here on Nov. 30 on an Aleksander Barkov goal, and their five straight home wins over Buffalo are their most since joining the NHL in 1993.

Florida is 8-4 in its last 12 games, including Sunday's 6-3 win over Montreal. That game was highlighted by Barkov's spectacular between-the-legs goal against Canadiens goalie Carey Price.

Travis Yost's Sabre Metrics: Why Jonathan Huberdeau would be a perfect fit

By Travis Yost

The Buffalo News

February 18, 2019

Travis Yost has been involved in the world of hockey analytics for a decade and is currently part of TSN's Hockey Analytics team. Prior to joining TSN, Yost was a contributor at the Ottawa Citizen, the Sporting News and NHL Numbers, and has been a consultant for an NHL franchise. He will be contributing breakdowns on the Buffalo Sabres for The Buffalo News this season. Follow Yost on Twitter: @travisyost.

The Sabres should be strategically buying at the trade deadline. That doesn't mean a rental.

We often categorize teams at the trade deadline into "buyers" and "sellers," and that tends to be collinear with "teams chasing playoff spots" and "teams chasing lottery picks." But that's not necessarily true. A fully rebuilding team can buy up bad contracts while simultaneously accumulating picks and prospects, as one example. Another example would include targeting a player on the trade market that has term. This type of trade tends to happen during the offseason as opposed to the trade deadline, but then again, this trade deadline is unique in that it is flush with top-tier talent.

The Sabres are in a bit of a curious spot right now. They are in the playoff race, but the math continues to look increasingly unfavorable for them, to the point where it seems more likely than not that the Sabres will be moving players from their active roster for future assets if the opportunity presents itself.

That said, Buffalo's strategy at the deadline doesn't need to be binary. Last week, a very interesting name hit the rumor mill as potentially available: Florida's Jonathan Huberdeau. The 25-year old has four years left at an average annual value of \$5.9 million, and although it seems more likely than not that the Panthers will try to retain him as a core piece of their active roster, the mere fact that his name is out there suggests he has ventured out of "untouchable" territory. (You can weigh the probability of a Huberdeau deal as you see fit, but if you buy stories about the Panthers' interest in an Artemi Panarin and Sergei Bobrovsky package this summer, it would make sense that they would like to clear some additional cap space and bring in some picks and prospects of their own.)

In a vacuum, Huberdeau is obviously a sensible fit. Any time you can acquire a top-six winger, you consider it, doubly so if you are the Sabres and your rebuild trajectory is upward, relatively speaking. The Sabres need to find a way to obtain more talent beyond their impressive first line and a player such as Huberdeau – as would be true for most teams around the league – would slot in seamlessly.

So why Huberdeau? It is in the same realm as "Why Skinner?" This past summer, I wrote about why Skinner was a fascinating trade target, primarily because a career healthy with consistent production did not match a seemingly random downturn in performance during the 2017-18 regular season. In Skinner's case, there was a strong argument that his teammates were having an adverse impact on his play, and that a change in environment would likely juice his numbers. Everyone knows how the story ended up, but the key piece, I think, is that Buffalo really didn't give up as much as you would think for a legitimate first-line attacker. (Recency bias is omnipresent in hockey circles.)

Huberdeau's having a similarly weird season. His individual scoring rates (3.0 per 60 minutes in 2018-19) are the best we have seen over his career, but it hasn't done much at the team level. Huberdeau's line has been getting crushed all year, the team being outscored 37 to 25 (40 percent) with him on the ice at 5-on-5. That's driven his plus-minus into the ground, which curiously still acts as a precursor to many hockey trades despite it being utterly meaningless.

Especially when you consider what Huberdeau's actually doing at 5-on-5. Let's look at how Huberdeau drives shot differentials and expected goal differentials (shot volume adjusted for shot quality, via Corsica). If he and his linemates saw a performance drop, we would expect their territorial edge and their scoring chance volume to have diminished. If not, then there's likely something else going on. Here's his six-year career:

Like most top-six forwards, Huberdeau consistently sees favorable shot volume and favorable expected goals year after year. Both of those measures are very predictive of future goal differentials, which is imperative to keep in mind.

Now look at Huberdeau's goal percentages this season. They are abysmal, but inexplicably so. It's not as if the way in which Huberdeau and his linemates drive play has changed much, nor is it as if that shot volume isn't carrying the degree of quality needed to generate goals at the NHL level. You can see this sort of volatility does happen from time to time. In 2015-16, for example, Huberdeau enjoyed a ridiculous team shooting percentage while on the ice and spiked a goal percentage near 60.

So what's going on this season? The performance appears quality, so now we turn to the percentages. Shooting and save percentages are often fleeting and highly unpredictable, particularly in smaller samples. (Despite most hockey observers recognizing this as a tried and true hockey phenomenon, it is incredible how frequently roster decisions are made on these. More on this in a moment.)

Let's look at Huberdeau's shooting and save percentages over the years in the same manner.

That is a wild deviation and it's actually being driven on both fronts. Florida's getting below average goaltending with Huberdeau on the ice (which had never been the case before 2018-19). More notably, the Panthers are having a tremendous degree of difficulty converting shots and scoring chances into goals (which, again, had never been the case before 2018-19). Florida's 5.3 shooting percentage with Huberdeau on the ice is the second lowest for any qualified forward this season, only trumping Carolina's Lucas Wallmark.

To emphasize how random this is, consider Huberdeau, et al., as it pertains to finishing talent over the years. The below graph shows each player's 2018-19 shooting percentage with Huberdeau on the ice versus the three-year shooting percentage, along with Huberdeau's individual performance year-to-date. It is impressively deviant:

I mentioned that Huberdeau was 12 goals below break-even hockey at 5-on-5 this year. There's an argument to be made that he lost just about that on nothing but shooting percentage fluctuations. And knowing that both the shot volume and scoring chance generation haven't deteriorated, we should be quite comfortable that this will regress in a hurry going forward.

All this to say: Smart organizations know exactly when to vulture this type of player from weaker organizations. There is nothing wrong with Huberdeau, and if his name is out there, the Sabres should be doing everything they can to try and acquire him. The fact that he's in the prime of his career lends itself to being a sensible fit for a Sabres organization that should be prioritizing 2019-20 and beyond.

What Terry Pegula said when he bought Sabres eight years ago today

The Buffalo News

February 18, 2019

Monday marks the eight-year anniversary of Terry Pegula's purchase of the Buffalo Sabres.

The NHL approved the sale Feb. 18, 2011, and Pegula and the Sabres had a news conference Feb. 22.

Below is the front page of the Buffalo News from Feb. 23 with the quote from Pegula across the top: "The Buffalo Sabres' reason for existence is to win the Stanley Cup. We will aspire to be the best in the league at finding, developing and keeping players in the Buffalo Sabres family."

"If I want to make some money, I'll go drill a gas well," he also said. "I don't need to make it in the hockey business. Starting today, there will be no financial mandates on the Buffalo Sabres' hockey department. ... I'm going to make decisions based on winning the Stanley Cup and what is right for the fan base and the team."

The Sabres last made the playoffs in the 2010-11 season.

Interestingly, Pegula was asked whether he had interest in pursuing the Buffalo Bills.

"Nope," he said. "I've got too much going right here, right now to get this running the way we want, to inject the attitude we want into the organization to think or worry about football teams."

Of course, that view changed and Pegula helped keep the Bills in Western New York when he bought the team three years later.

At the news conference, new team President Ted Black said this of Pegula: "People are maybe thinking this is too good to be true, but sometimes things are too good to be true."

If the Sabres want to score, they have to start staying around the net

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 18, 2019

Sunrise, FL (WGR 550) - In the games where the Sabres storm the net, they score goals. In the games they don't, they wind up with close to nothing.

New Jersey was a great example of that. They got over 30 shots, but no traffic in front of Cory Schneider. Phil Housley said it's the way they do it that's the problem, "To me it's just we're getting there, but our timing when the puck's delivered, we're not staying right over on top of the goal.

"We've got to continue to focus on that because we've got to make it difficult where we have a guy there and just keep fighting for that space and then from there, we've just got to get a little dirty in front of the net, maybe those second and third opportunities and fighting for those things, but we're there and then we sort of leave when the shots arrive, so we don't have an opportunity."

Jason Pominville is a smaller player, but he's made a career of hanging around the net. He has 290 career goals and quite a few came from five feet away or less. Pominville said it's frustrating that the message isn't getting through to everybody, "I think it is for sure. A lot of guys in the past are guys that are half-wall guys, so it's realizing that it's a hard league to score in and you have to get there."

Pominville said once you get there, you have to be tenacious, "It is trying to get that second and third opportunity, those ugly goals around the paint, I mean that's where most goals are scored within five feet, so you've got to get there, you've got to pay a price to get there and stay there and usually if you do, you get rewarded for it."

Games that will affect the Sabres on Monday feature, Tampa Bay at Columbus, Washington at Los Angeles and Boston at San Jose.

Not practicing on Monday were Kyle Okposo, Zach Bogosian and Rasmus Ristolainen. Okposo has been sent back to Buffalo for further evaluation. Marco Scandella's injury is now week-to-week.

Monday's lines:

Skinner - Eichel - Pominville

Sheary - Mittelstadt - Reinhart

Smith - Rodrigues - Thompson

Sobotka - Larsson - Girgensons

Sabres' Okposo is not feeling right so he's back in Buffalo

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 18, 2019

Sunrise, FL (WGR 550) - Kyle Okposo was in New Jersey and skated Sunday morning, but something wasn't right and he was sent home. Okposo left the game on Friday after a fight with Tony DeAngelo. Phil Housley said, "Kyle's back in Buffalo getting further evaluated."

Housley said he didn't have any other information.

With Okposo being out, the Sabres have only 12 healthy forwards, so I wouldn't be surprised if there's a call-up from Rochester.

Marco Scandella is not coming back anytime soon as Housley said, "He's been upgraded to week-to-week with an upper-body injury."

Scandella goes to injured reserve, allowing the team to activate Casey Nelson.

Zach Bogosian and Rasmus Ristolainen did not practice on Monday. Housley didn't sound sure if they'd be available on Tuesday against Florida, "They're just maintenance days and we'll know more tomorrow."

Nelson re-joined in team in Sunrise for practice. He played five games during his rehab assignment in Rochester. He said, "I felt good, I think each one was a little different, but the last two against Syracuse were pretty up-pace,"

I wondered what Nelson meant by different and he was talking about the toughness of the AHL, "In different circumstances it's a tougher game down there, everyone is running around pretty wild, but that's what creates time up here I think."

Nelson said he really didn't think his injury would last two months, but he's just happy to be able to play now.

Kyle Okposo injury update: Sabres winger being evaluated for 'undisclosed' injury, misses road trip

By Arthur Weinstein

Sporting News

February 18, 2019

Sabres winger Kyle Okposo is being further evaluated for an injury he suffered in a fight against the Rangers Friday night, Buffalo coach Phil Housley said Monday.

The 30-year-old veteran was knocked down by one punch from Rangers defenseman Tony DeAngelo in a brief skirmish late in the Sabres' loss to New York.

Okposo did not return, and was a scratch from Sunday's loss to the Devils. The Sabres are in Florida preparing for Tuesday's game against the Panthers, but Okposo did not travel with the team, as expected. Although the Sabres reported Saturday Okposo did not suffer a concussion, he is officially considered day-to-day with an "undisclosed" injury.

"I don't have any information up to this point, but he went back to Buffalo to get evaluated by a doctor," Housley told reporters.

Okposo wrote a frank essay last year for the Players Tribune outlining his concussion-related struggles that sent him to the neurological intensive care unit at a Buffalo hospital in 2017.

In that essay, Okposo revealed that after suffering a concussion in a workout, he went undiagnosed for days, and was incoherent, paranoid and strained to recognize loved ones.

In his third season with the Sabres, Okposo has 10 goals and 12 assists in 57 games.

Nelson returns to practice while Okposo departs for further evaluations

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

February 18, 2019

SUNRISE, Fla. - Casey Nelson was back with the Buffalo Sabres for practice at BB&T Center on Monday after completing a five-game conditioning assignment in Rochester, providing a needed extra body on a day when three other defensemen were absent.

Zach Bogosian and Rasmus Ristolainen both took maintenance days. Their status for the Sabres' game against the Florida Panthers on Tuesday will be decided in the morning. Sabres coach Phil Housley also said that Marco Scandella is week-to-week with an upper-body injury.

The Sabres were also without Kyle Okposo after the forward returned to Buffalo to undergo further evaluations on an injury he sustained during a fight with New York Rangers defenseman Tony DeAngelo on Friday. Okposo had skated Sunday morning ahead of the team's game in New Jersey.

"Kyle's back in Buffalo getting further evaluated," Housley said. "I don't have any information up to this point, but he went back to Buffalo to get further evaluated by our doctors."

The statuses of Bogosian and Ristolainen will likely help determine whether Nelson steps right back into the lineup against the Panthers. Nelson recorded an assist and eight shots during his five games in Rochester, which he said helped restore his timing after an absence of more than two months.

"Yeah, absolutely, especially those last two games against a speedy team (Syracuse)," Nelson said. "I'm looking forward to whenever I get back in."

Nelson sustained his upper-body injury early in the Sabres' home game against the Toronto Maple Leafs on Dec. 4. He's missed 28 games since then, but said the toughest part came early when he was forced to spend his time away from the rink.

"It's the thing, is that you've got to just stay mentally strong," he said. "It was good. I saw the guys whenever I could, and they were very supportive. It was good to see them everyday at the rink finally when I got to come there."

The third-year pro had begun to carve out consistent ice time, having appeared in nine of Buffalo's last 10 contests prior to sustaining his injury. He's totaled five points (1+4) in 22 games this season.

"We'll know more tomorrow after we sort out everything," Housley said when asked about Nelson's status for the game in Florida. "But it's good that he's done his assignment, he's back with us. When he was in the lineup, I thought he did a terrific job."

Coverage of the Sabres' game against the Panthers on Tuesday begins at 6:30 p.m. with the GMC Game Night pregame show, or you can listen live on WGR 550. The puck drops at 7.

Another level

Sam Reinhart reached a new career-high in points (51) with his goal in New Jersey on Sunday, and it took him just 58 games. He had already set career-best marks in assists (37) and multi-point games (15) entering the game against the Devils.

Reinhart's proved of late that he can produce regardless of where he's placed in the lineup, giving Housley the option to remove him from the top line in favor of balanced scoring. He was back skating alongside Casey Mittelstadt and Conor Sheary on Monday, where he excelled earlier this month.

The Sabres have outscored opponents 5-1 in 74:46 with that trio on the ice at 5-on-5, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

"I really liked the way he responded when Sheary, Mittelstadt and Reinhart were together," Housley said. "He sort of took his game to another level. It's good to see him get rewarded. He goes to the net pretty hard.

"He makes plays around tight traffic and when he gets his body over the puck down low, he creates offense when he drives out of the cycle. It's great to see him do the things that are going to help us win."sn

Here's how the Sabres lined up on Monday, with Jason Pominville back on the right wing alongside Jeff Skinner and Jack Eichel:

53 Jeff Skinner - 9 Jack Eichel - 29 Jason Pominville
43 Conor Sheary - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 23 Sam Reinhart
49 C.J. Smith - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 72 Tage Thompson
17 Vladimir Sobotka - 22 Johan Larsson - 28 Zemgus Girgensons

Defensemen: 8 Casey Nelson, 19 Jake McCabe, 24 Lawrence Pilut, 26 Rasmus Dahlin, 48 Matt Hunwick, 82 Nathan Beaulieu

40 Carter Hutton
35 Linus Ullmark