



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*February 21, 2019*

## **Mike Harrington: Patience is no virtue for Jason Botterill as Sabres' collapse continues**

By Mike Harrington  
The Buffalo News  
February 20, 2019

TAMPA – Most of the NHL is fighting for the playoffs. Scrapping and clawing and doing everything possible to win a Stanley Cup.

So why does it seem like the Buffalo Sabres are happy to be in the Participation Trophy Division?

Embattled coach Phil Housley has to meet reporters every day. Twice on game days. He takes a lot of darts and plenty are of his own making. Many others are not.

So it was a breath of fresh air Wednesday in Amalie Arena when General Manager Jason Botterill decided it was time to endure some media volleys of his own.

The problem was that Botterill was preaching patience – exactly what this fan base is fresh out of.

What needed to be seen was anger and embarrassment. That's what the fans feel.

Instead, Botterill toed silly company lines. It was as if he practiced them on Terry and Kim Pegula in their suite Tuesday night in Sunrise during that dreadful third period against the Florida Panthers, and then repeated them to reporters four hours up the road about 14 hours later.

The Sabres are tied with Ottawa for the worst record in the Eastern Conference since Jan. 1 and have the fourth-worst mark in the entire NHL since Dec. 1. They've lost three straight to nonplayoff teams by a composite 14-5 score and now have to deal with the hornet's nest of playing the league-leading Tampa Bay Lightning here Thursday night.

Here was my simple question to Botterill: "The No. 1 message from fans is they want to see a coaching change. What's your reaction to that?"

His answer: "They want to see a coaching change?"

Yes, really. They do. The vast majority of fans think Phil Housley is over his head. That the GM was so taken aback by an inquiry about his coach was astonishing.

Now a huge aside here: I do not believe the Sabres should can Housley as of today. I reserve judgment to change that view if things continue to slide off the rails in the coming weeks.

Especially since the upcoming schedule over the next 15 games is downright scary. It's Tampa Bay, Washington, Toronto, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Toronto, Edmonton, Chicago, Colorado, Dallas, Pittsburgh, Carolina, St. Louis, Toronto and Montreal. Yikes.

No NHL team has ever won 10 games in a row and lost 10 in a row in the same season. The way the Sabres are playing right now and with the schedule they're facing, it actually seems possible.

Housley's team has been a complete no-show the last three games, when the playoff race was fully alive. That's on Housley, his assistants and the players. Not the GM.

But with all that as a backdrop, Botterill actually said he was happy the team was in games in the third period. He actually said he sees "growth" out of a team that's won 11 of its last 34 games and hasn't won two straight since December.

Growth? I would call that serious regression.

Botterill said the organization was "very proud of the accomplishment" of being first overall at the end of November, which has clearly proven to just be dumb luck. He said the Sabres have "made progress as an organization" compared to last year. That's no achievement when you start at 62 points and add the No. 1 overall pick.

He said he thinks the coaching staff has "done a very good job."

He must not be referring to Housley's bizarre overreliance on Vladimir Sobotka or his strange goaltending choices. Or the lack of impact of the assistants as the power play looks lost, the defense – including Rasmus Dahlin – can't get out of its own way most nights and the goaltending remains utterly spotty.

Some fine work all around indeed.

Roster construction is on Botterill and he's on his way to making a mess of things two years in a row. The Sabres have maddeningly low standards these days. Pegula came to town eight years ago this week talking Stanley Cups. Plural. The Sabres can't even get in the playoffs.

Slow rebuilds aren't the norm in the NHL. Look at New Jersey and Colorado going from last in their conference to the playoffs last season. Look at Montreal and the New York Islanders this year. Or the way St. Louis has exploded after firing coach Mike Yeo and replacing him with Craig Berube.

The Blues won their 11th straight game Tuesday night on an overtime goal by old friend Ryan O'Reilly. Botterill's most complicated trade to date is looking like a franchise-altering disaster to this point.

What should Botterill be doing now? He better not walk to the podium after the deadline Monday without some new players in tow. But he said it would be OK if that didn't happen and he waited until the summer.

It's not OK. At all.

The Sabres should be looking today at a waiver claim of Devante Smith-Pelly, who scored three goals in the Stanley Cup final last June for Washington. Center Charlie Coyle, who would have been a good fit here, instead went to Boston Wednesday night for the paltry price of Ryan Donato and a fifth-round pick.

Botterill said he's in a lot of conversations. They better pan out.

And one last point: Botterill and Housley need to zip it with the narrative they have a young team. They do, in fact, have NHL newbies like Dahlin, Thompson, Casey Mittelstadt and Lawrence Pilut.

But the core of Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart and Rasmus Ristolainen has combined to play nearly 1,000 NHL games. Zemgus Girgensons played in his 400th NHL game Tuesday night. Marco Scandella is over 500 games. Jeff Skinner and Zach Bogosian are both over 600, Kyle Okposo is over 700. Jason Pominville is over 1,000.

Only Pominville has played a playoff game with the Sabres and that one came eight years ago.

Eichel is 22 years old, Reinhart is 23, Ristolainen is 24. By comparison, Patrick Kane and Jonathan Toews were 21 when Chicago played in its first Stanley Cup final in 2010. So were Kris Letang and Evgeni Malkin with Pittsburgh in 2008. Sidney Crosby was 20 that year. There's plenty of examples like that the last 10 years.

The Sabres' alleged stars can't even get their team away from the bottom of the standings and in the playoffs. Of course, this was all going to be fixed by Botterill shedding O'Reilly, Robin Lehner and Evander Kane.

Looks like the Sabres will be home watching them on television this spring.

## **Feb. 21, 1974: Sabres fans mourn sudden death of Tim Horton**

By Ellen Przepasniak

The Buffalo News

February 21, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres and the team's fans awoke to somber news on Feb. 21, 1974.

Sabres defenseman Tim Horton had been killed in an early morning car crash on the QEW.

While driving back to Buffalo from a Sabres game in Toronto, he was clocked at over 100 mph on the highway. Police tried to pull him over for speeding when his car careened off the road and flipped several times.

Horton was 44 and considered an NHL veteran. He was credited with being a big reason the Sabres made the playoffs for the first time the previous season.

Seymour H. Knox III, the Sabres' then-president, said in The Buffalo Evening News that Horton "was only greater in one thing than being a hockey player and that was being a fine human being."

Read some of our archive content remembering Tim Horton:

Tim Horton: The name means more than doughnuts

Bruce Andriatch: A hard lesson from death of hockey great Tim Horton

Advertisement or not, Tim Horton statue adds to waterfront landscape

Take a look back at the front page of The Buffalo Evening News from that day.

## **Sabres GM Jason Botterill: Phil Housley's job is safe**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 20, 2019

TAMPA – With his team rapidly free-falling out of the playoff race, Buffalo Sabres general manager Jason Botterill said today he is not considering a coaching change and his focus remains on developing players on his roster to perform more consistently.

In a 10-minute chat with reporters from The Buffalo News, the Athletic and WGR Radio during practice in Amalie Arena, Botterill flatly said "no" when asked if replacing coach Phil Housley is on his radar as fan unrest over the team's performance continues to grow.

"We've made progress as an organization compared to last year. We've been in a position where we've been in games," Botterill said. "I see the results on the ice. I see the communication we're going through here. There's not going to be a coaching change."

Asked to evaluate Housley, Botterill pointed to Games 4-6 of the team's recently completed homestand, where Buffalo went 2-1 and allowed just five goals after giving up 17 in the previous three games.

"I think the coaching staff has done a very good job," he said. "They have communicated with our players, continued to work to try to find different methods to get their message across to them. I think you saw after the Carolina game (a 6-5 overtime loss on Feb. 7) more of a focus on trying to get back to defense and I thought we proceeded with three of our better games defensively. The communication is still going on there but like everything in the organization, we have to continue to improve."

"It's great support No. 1, but I don't really worry about that," Housley said after practice. "I just try to do my job as best I can. Jason and I talk on a day-to-day basis. About our players' situation, travel, just to name a few things. We have a very good line of communication. We have a good vision together and that's going to remain strong."

The Sabres have lost three straight games, including Tuesday's collapse at Florida in which they allowed four third-period goals in a 4-2 defeat. They are 28-24-7 for the season, but tied for the fewest points in the Eastern Conference since Jan. 1, and are just 11-18-5 since their 10-game winning streak in November. The Sabres have not won back-to-back games since Dec. 11-13 and have not won consecutive games in regulation since October.

The Sabres face a huge challenge Thursday night against the league-leading Tampa Bay Lightning, who are 46-11-4 and on a seven-game winning streak.

"We're disappointed with our results right now," Botterill said. "It's a situation where if you take a step back, we've made improvements in our organization. We like the development of some of our players but we are facing a new challenge here. It's a scenario where our players are playing games in the second half of the season that mean a lot. Intensity of NHL games in the second half ramp up and it's a challenge to win hockey games in the second half. That's right now what we're looking at trying to find solutions."

The Sabres are 3-6-1 in their last 10 games and the last three have been particularly troubling because they have been outscored, 14-5, in losses to the New York Rangers, New Jersey and Florida. All three of those teams are outside the playoff picture.

"You look at the last 10 games or so and we want better results, but it's a situation where we've put ourselves in spots to win games in the third period," Botterill said. "We just haven't gotten results."

With his team six points out of a playoff spot entering Wednesday's schedule, Botterill said he is continuing to work the phones in advance of Monday's NHL trade deadline, trying to find ways to improve the club.

"We are always looking to improve our team. We're always looking to make additions to help our players," he said. "We're not going to change our motto, our focus on trying to bring players in that are going to help this team, not only this year but for the future. That's what we're looking at right now."

Asked why he hasn't made any major moves while the team slid from first overall in the NHL's standing to 17th, Botterill said putting his players in difficult positions is part of their growth.

"We are always looking to make moves that are going to help our group. I'd also say we're going to trust our players," Botterill said. "We're going to trust our group. We've made a lot of changes to this group over the last year or so here. There's confidence in our group here and they've proven it in games with some of the top teams in the league at home or on the road. We've proven that we can be with the teams, but have we done it on a consistent basis? No. That's why the record is where it's at."

Botterill said the team's daily work and his attention to the trade deadline are still focused on making the playoffs this season.

"Of course, it's the goal for every team to start the year," he said. "But our situation right now, we have to focus within. I know our coaches and our players are focusing on our next game against Tampa Bay because it's going to be a very difficult game, but our goal generally is we have to start playing better. We have to be more consistent as an organization."

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Also from Botterill:

On why concussed winger Kyle Okposo traveled with the team to New Jersey and skated Sunday morning before his injury was diagnosed: "We were trying to be cautious, obviously with his history. Whether he was in Buffalo or he was in New Jersey, he was in constant communication with the doctors. With these things, symptoms come on at different times and eventually our doctors felt it was important to get him back to Buffalo."

On whether Okposo's latest concussion could be career-threatening: "We're going to continue to talk to our doctors about it. We're always concerned about our players for any injury. But right now we're just focusing on Kyle getting back with our team. It doesn't seem to be a situation like that. Look, a timeline on a concussion or anything like that we're not putting (one) on at all because there's different timelines for something like this."

On contract negotiations with Jeff Skinner for a long-term extension: "Both his group and ours have obviously continued our dialogue. We haven't done play by play in the media because that's the way we've wanted to go about things. Both sides continue to work to try to find a resolution."

## **Redmond returns gets No. 20 for Amerks**

The Buffalo News

February 20, 2019

Defenseman Zach Redmond scored his 20th goal of the season and the Rochester Americans produced the final three scores of the game for a 4-2 victory over the Cleveland Monsters Wednesday night at Blue Cross Arena.

Redmond playing his first game for the Amerks since Jan. 23 needed only 2:45 of the opening period to add to his team record for goals in a season by a defenseman.

Yannick Veilleux and Brendan Guhle assisted.

However, Cleveland scored the next two goals in a tough game that included 34 minutes in penalties in the second period alone.

Trailing, 2-1, the Amerks began their comeback on a power-play goal by Danny O'Regan, his 18th, at 18:18 of the second. Redmond picked up his 21st assist and Victor Olofsson his 25th on the goal.

Taylor Leier's goal at 6:15 of the third put Rochester in front to stay. REmi Eli and Andrew Oglevie assisted.

Wayne Simpson added an empty-net goal with 1:41 left. Scott Wilson and Kevin Porter had the assists.

Scott Wedgewood of the Amerks made 29 saves. Jean-Francois Berube of the Monster had the same number of stops.

The win enabled the Amerks to maintain their three-point lead over second-place Syracuse in the North Division standings of the American Hockey League. Rochester (32-16-5) had 69 points, Syracuse (31-16-4) had 66 points after defeating Laval, 4-2, on Wednesday.

## **Sabres' prospect Vasily Glotov's amazing goal goes viral**

By Bill Hoppe

The Buffalo News

February 20, 2019

Earlier this season, Buffalo Sabres prospect Vasily Glotov informed his coaches he planned to utilize his slick talents to score a tricky lacrosse-style goal.

Having successfully pulled it off once last season in junior hockey, the affable Glotov, 21, possessed the confidence he could do it again as an ECHL rookie with the Cincinnati Cyclones.

"I'm like, 'Hey, I'm going to do this one day,' " said Glotov, who lived up to his words Friday, lifting the puck behind the net and quickly whipping his stick around to score the winner with 50 seconds left in regulation against the Toledo Walleye.

With the game tied 1-1 – "I don't know the clock, I don't know the score," he said of his mindset as the play started – the Russian winger pounced on his opportunity.

"I got confidence at this point," Glotov said. "Sometimes in a game you're feeling it, and I was like, 'OK, I'm doing this right now.' I knew I'm going to do this and I knew it was going to go in somehow."

After Glotov grabbed defenseman Arvin Atwal's pass in the right corner, none of the Walleye defenders pursued him behind the net, giving him precious time and space.

"So I lifted my stick, which is probably the hardest part," Glotov said. "Sometimes there's snow or your tape is not well conditioned."

Then one quick, fluid motion, Glotov picked up the puck off the ice and stuffed it over goalie Pat Nagle's right shoulder.

"Totally high risk," Cyclones coach Matt Thomas said of Glotov's nifty move. "Fifty seconds left ... and you're going to have the presence of mind to think that might be something that will work, really shows how confident somebody has to be in themselves to do that."

When the puck went in, Glotov said he "absolutely freaked out."

Not only had he scored a highlight-reel goal, it put the Cyclones up late over their fiercest rival.

"I was like crazy excited," Glotov said. "I didn't know what to do. I was like blacked out, basically."

"My (celebration) was more wild because of (scoring the winner), not because of the goal."

On the bench, Thomas' jaw dropped.

"It was one of those ones, 'Did that just really happen?'" said Thomas, who added that the Cyclones devote the first 30 minutes of practices to skill development.

The excitement overwhelmed Glotov so much he zoomed by teammate Eric Knodel and took off down the ice.

Lacrosse-style hockey goals, of course, are incredibly rare. The most famous one, Mike Legg's goal for Michigan in 1996, inspired Glotov. He has practiced the fundamental parts of the move for years, trying to emulate Legg, but quicker.

The 5-foot-11, 174-pound Glotov said he had made a few attempts to lift the puck behind the net during games earlier this year.

Last season, his second and final in the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League, Glotov tried it a few times with the Shawinigan Cataractes.

"Every time I tried it, the puck didn't lift or (I) lifted the puck and lost it halfway through," he said.

Finally, Glotov scored one in Baie-Comeau. He figured the video of the goal would go viral.

"I was like, 'Oh my God, this is going to go wild,' " he said.

Then Glotov texted his father, who watches every game, and found out there was no video feed that day. One of Shawinigan's coaches sent Glotov a high angle shot of the goal.

Video of Friday's goal quickly spread on the internet.

"I just wanted to try it out," Glotov said of the move. "It worked out perfectly."

His dynamic skill has wowed crowds at development camps since the Sabres drafted him in 2016. Despite being a seventh-round pick from a past regime, the Sabres awarded him an AHL contract.

Glotov has earned ECHL All-Star honors and scored 11 goals and 33 points in 47 games as a rookie.

So what's holding Glotov back from playing in the American Hockey League on a regular basis?

Thomas said Glotov, who has played two games with the Rochester Americans, must get stronger.

"You can tell he's a late bloomer in terms of physically maturing," Thomas said. "I think ... in our league as well, if he gets stronger, it could be scary how good he will be."

## **Sabres' Rodrigues getting a chance with Eichel**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 20, 2019

Tampa, FL (WGR 550) - Evan Rodrigues was linemates with Jack Eichel at Boston University, but it hasn't happened all that much in the NHL. In practice on Wednesday, Rodrigues joined Eichel and Jeff Skinner. Rodrigues is happy to be back, "We've had some chemistry in the past and we seem to play well together when we are together so hopefully we can continue to do that."

Rodrigues played with Eichel for one game before he got injured last season. Phil Housley added, "We're just trying to mix it up again, we're not getting a lot even strength, but that's really not my concern, it's when we don't have the puck, that's going to give us the best chance to win, but Evan has been playing really well and it'll be interesting to see how that pans out."

Things are different when Eichel is on your line. Rodrigues said you have to expect anything, "I think always being ready. He can make such incredible plays that you can't ever be shocked by anything he does. I think one thing that gets overlooked is he's such a dynamic player that you try to get away from him on the ice and let him do his thing one-on-one so you pull guys away from him because when he gets a guy one-on-one there are very few that can stop him."

In that one season together in college, Eichel had 26 goals and 45 assists for 71 points in 40 games, while Rodrigues had 21 goals and 40 assists for 61 points in 41 games. Rodrigues said the connection between the two was immediate, "From the first game we played together it just seemed like we knew where each other was going to be, we knew how to find open ice,"

Rodrigues understands that they'll be facing the best team in the league on Thursday. He said, "You've got to get off to a quick start and you've got to be ready to defend. They're going to come out skating, so we've got to be 110-percent committed to defending and we can't force anything, we have to be ready for our chances."

Buffalo has won one of the three games against Tampa Bay this season and Rodrigues thinks playing the best can maybe spark their best, "Yes definitely and it shows the way we have to play against this team is the way we have to play against every team and that's the mindset that we have to have."

In practice, Nate Beaulieu was paired with Casey Nelson, but Housley wouldn't say if that'll be a pair against the Lightning.

Wednesday's lines:

Skinner - Eichel - Rodrigues

Sheary - Mittelstadt - Reinhart

Girgensons - Larsson - Pominville

Smith - Sobotka - Thompson

McCabe - Ristolainen

Dahlin - Bogosian

Beaulieu - Nelson

Pilut - Hunwick

## **Sabres GM Jason Botterill sets the record straight**

By John Vogl

The Athletic

February 20, 2019

TAMPA, Fla. — Let's first take a look at what Jason Botterill isn't doing: He's isn't changing coaches. He isn't looking for a quick fix. He's isn't losing faith in the guys he acquired.

So then what, exactly, is the Sabres general manager doing?

A 10-minute talk with Buffalo reporters Wednesday provided some answers or, at the very least, a few clues. Here are Botterill's key quotes, along with analysis of what they mean.

They want to see a coaching change? No. We've made progress as an organization compared to last year. We've been in a position where we've been in games. I see the results on the ice. I see the communication that we're going through here. There's not going to be a coaching change.

The GM is steadfast in his support of coach Phil Housley. The coach may have alienated fans with debatable roster decisions, passionless facial expressions and lack of results, but Botterill likes the communication between the staff and players.

In fact, he repeatedly stressed that.

I think the coaching staff has done a very good job. They've communicated with our players. They've continued to work at trying to find different methods of getting their message across to them. I think you saw after the Carolina game, more of a focus on trying to get back to defense, and I thought we proceeded with three of our better games defensively. So the communication's still going on there, but like everything in the organization, we have to continue to improve.

What our coaches and staff have to continue to do is keep communication with the players. I've liked the two-way interaction with our players coming to coaches. You look at after practice on the ice, off the ice, (you see) our coaches interacting with our players from a standpoint of their individual games and as a team concept.

While watching practice daily, it seems Housley is a good teacher. He's clear while drawing and explaining drills. If the Sabres aren't doing them correctly, he stops and blasts them to do it right — often with the fire and profanity that is lacking on game nights.

It's not clear what happens during video sessions and closed-door meetings, but assistant coaches stay on the ice with the players for extra work. Goalie coach Andrew Allen stops to talk with Linus Ullmark or Carter Hutton after every game.

Remember, owner Terry Pegula's mantra while hiring Botterill and Housley in 2017 was "discipline, structure, communication, character." The Sabres have the final two and are working on the first two.

We are always looking to improve our team. We're always looking to make additions to our group of players, to help our players out. We're not going to change our model and our focus on trying to bring players in that are going to help this team not only this year but for the future. That's what we're looking at right now.

Our management staff is looking very hard over the next week to making moves, and if it happens, great. If it's not, then we're looking over the next couple months to make moves.

Botterill said he never expected to have the NHL's first place team like he did in November. That success raised expectations, which certainly isn't a bad thing. Once the 10-game winning streak ended and the long slide started — Buffalo is 11-18-5 since losing in Tampa Bay on Nov. 29 — people looked to Botterill to throw his sinking team a lifeline.

He didn't. There have been 35 trades (and counting) since the Christmas roster freeze ended, and the only one involving Buffalo featured minor-leaguers Justin Bailey and Taylor Leier. Since taking the job, Botterill has been clear in his desire to add players who help for more than a few months. He didn't change that approach in an attempt to keep up with Montreal, Boston and Carolina — and all of them have blown past the Sabres in the standings.

Botterill will make deals at some point, though there may not be any substantial ones before Monday's trade deadline.

We've had a lot of conversations going on. Whether those things come to fruition over the next couple of days, it's always hard to predict. As I think we saw last year, sometimes you look at the draft and then things move into July 1 and then things move into the summer. I can't predict when it's going to happen. It's just we've continually looked at ways to improve our team.

The only move Botterill made at last year's deadline was shipping out Evander Kane, a pending unrestricted free agent. After no deals at the NHL Draft, the GM brought in Conor Sheary and Matt Hunwick in late June, dealt Ryan O'Reilly on July 1 and added Jeff Skinner in August.

Talks that are going on now may not reveal themselves until the offseason.

I'd also say we're going to trust our players. We're going to trust our group. We've made a lot of changes to this group over the last couple of years, the last year or so here. There's confidence in our group here. There's confidence, and they've proven it in games whether it's some of the top teams in the league, whether it's at home or on the road. We've proven that we can be with the teams. But have we done it on a consistent basis? No, and that's why our record's where it's at.

In less than two seasons, more than half of the Sabres' 21 players can be attributed to Botterill: Carter Hutton, Vladimir Sobotka, Lawrence Pilut, Rasmus Dahlin, Jason Pominville, Casey Mittelstadt, Sheary, Hunwick, Skinner, Tage Thompson and Nathan Beaulieu.

There were certainly some hits and misses, but no GM wants to admit the latter. Botterill is standing by his roster for now, hoping it will recapture the early season glory. In the short term, that's understandable. Former GM Darcy Regier did it over a long term, which compounded the organization's problems. It will be interesting to see how quickly (or slowly) Botterill fixes his mistakes.

As for the Sabres proving themselves against top teams, they are 14-12-5 against clubs who were holding a playoff spot Wednesday. Seven of those victories came during the 10-game winning streak. Buffalo is 11-15-3 on the road, including a paltry 3-11-2 in the last 16.

Look, we're disappointed with our results right now. If you take a step back, we've made improvements as an organization. We like parts of our game and the development of some of our players, but we are facing a new challenge here. It's a scenario where our players are playing games in the second half of the season that meant a lot, and the intensity of NHL games in the second half ramps up. It's a challenge to win hockey games in the second half, and that's right now what we're looking at and trying to find solutions.

Two themes of Botterill's talk were improvement over last year and new experiences for players. The Sabres are 28-24-7 and 17th overall. Through 59 games last season, they were 17-31-11 and in 30th place.

You see the growth with our team, especially when you take a step back from last year. Is there frustration sometimes from night to night? Yeah, but then you see even in recent weeks here, some of our performances whether it's against the Islanders or how we played against Detroit, I liked how we performed in those games. Even the game against Winnipeg, I thought we had a strong game until we just couldn't find a way to get over the hump against a very good team.

So it's something that we always want to have success. We always want to win, and that's why you look at that group and why there's frustration in our locker room right now is because guys want to have success for this organization, for this city.

If you look at it compared to last year, there's certainly growth.

The Sabres have improved their goal scoring (2.41 to 2.81 per game) and cut their goals against (3.12, down from 3.39). They are 15-7-7 in one-goal games after going 11-11-12 last season.

The problem is much of that growth can be attributed to the 17-6-2 start. The Sabres' current three-game skid features losses to teams in 23rd, 24th and 27th place. They haven't won two games in a row since Dec. 13. Clearly, Buffalo has regressed in the second half.

Because it's a lot harder to win games in the second half of the season. Teams are clamping down. When you put young players in the lineup, it's a physical drain. We have 18-, 20-year-old kids playing. It's very difficult. And not just playing but playing prominent roles.

We're putting players in roles that they're not used to. Some nights they're going to succeed in those roles. Sometimes they're not. I think you've seen our blueprint. You've seen when we've played well, when we've played assertive in the offensive zone, gone to the front of the net in the offensive zone, have played good defensive hockey, we've achieved results and we've been able to win hockey games. We haven't done that enough and on a consistent basis.

When you have players who haven't been in that situation and haven't been in playoffs, haven't been in a playoff run before, it's sometimes difficult to always have that consistency.

No one needs reminding that the Sabres are mired in a seven-year playoff drought. The minor-league team has missed the postseason in three of the past four years and hasn't won a series since 2011. The homegrown guys have little to no big-game experience.

The veterans are in a similar stage. Zach Bogosian has never played a postseason game. Neither has Skinner. While this is no solace to a fan base dying for a playoff berth, the only way to gain experience is through experience.

The players' initial exposure has not gone well, at all. There are 23 games left to turn it around and make the playoffs.

It's the goal for every team to start the year, but our situation right now, we have to focus from within. I know our coaches and our players are focusing on the next game against Tampa Bay because it's going to be a very difficult game, but our goal in general here is just we have to start playing better. We have to be more consistent as an organization.

Again, Botterill made it clear he will not waver from his long-term plan just to make the playoffs this season. While he understands the fans' pain, he doesn't feel it the same way. He didn't live through everything from No Goal to John Rigas to Drury/Briere to The Tank, just to name a few. It's the main difference between fans and management.

Sure, both sides want the Sabres to win, but Botterill can handle setbacks without decades of futility making them feel worse.

Both (Skinner's) group and ours have obviously continued our dialogue. We haven't done play-by-play in the media just because that's the way we wanted to go about things. Both sides continue to work to try to find a resolution.

It wouldn't be a surprise if Botterill's big move just before or after the deadline will be to re-sign Skinner. The left winger could wait to see if he scores 50 goals, which would drive up the price, but there haven't been any rumblings about hiccups in the negotiations. Both sides seem to want a deal.

A contract extension would certainly be an organizational boost near the end of the season. The team and fans could use one ... or two or a dozen.

## **Sabres GM Jason Botterill backs coach Phil Housley**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 20, 2019

Phil Housley's job is safe. General manager Jason Botterill backed his coach today, saying that despite their recent struggles, the reeling Buffalo Sabres have grown this season.

"We've made progress as an organization compared to last year," Botterill told reporters in Tampa Bay, where the Sabres play the Lightning on Thursday. "We've been in a position where we've been in games. I've see the results on the ice, I see the communication we're going through here. There's not going to be a coaching change."

The Sabres' once-promising season has completely fallen apart. When they played Nov. 29 in Tampa Bay, they roared into town riding a 10-game winning streak and ranked first overall.

Today, the Lightning have a 33-point lead on the 10th-place Sabres, who, incredibly, have won just 11 games since Tampa Bay ended their run.

The Sabres, who are six points out of the Eastern Conference's last playoff spot, have earned the third-fewest points (27) in the NHL since then.

"The coaching staff has done a very good job," Botterill said. "They've communicated with our players. They've continued to work at trying to find different methods of getting their message across to them."

## **Sabres GM Jason Botterill on Phil Housley: "there's not going to be a coaching change"**

By Matt Bove

WKBW

February 20, 2019

TAMPA BAY, FL (WKBW) — Phil Housley's job as head coach of the Buffalo Sabres is safe, at least for now.

While in Tampa Bay preparing for Thursday's game against the Lightning, Sabres general manager Jason Botterill spoke with reporters and said the team is not considering a coaching change.

"We've made progress as an organization compared to last year," Botterill told reporters. "We've been in a position where we've been in games. I see the results on the ice. I see the communication that we're going through here. There's not going to be a coaching change."

Botterill was also asked about the upcoming trade deadline, explaining he'll continue to explore options but is focusing on the development of players already within the organization.

"We're always looking to make additions to our group of players, to help our players out," Botterill told reporters in Tampa Bay. "We're not going to change our model and our focus on trying to bring players in that are going to help this team not only this year but for the future. That's what we're looking at."

The NHL trade deadline is Monday, February 25 at 3:00 p.m.

"Our management staff is looking very hard over the next week to making moves," Botterill said. "If it happens, great. If it's not, then we're looking over the next couple months to make moves."

Bove's Take:

What else is Jason Botterill supposed to say? Even if the team was considering a coaching change, Botterill wouldn't admit that to reporters with 23 games left in the regular season.

We really won't learn about Housley's future until the year-end press conference with Botterill at the end of the season.

While it sounds cliché, these last few weeks of the season are important. If the Sabres respond and show improvement, I understand Housley getting one more year to prove he's the guy to end the Sabres playoff drought. If they continue to plummet, the argument to make a coaching change grows even stronger.

## **Harding: Time for Buffalo Sabres to can coach Phil Housley**

By Robert Harding

Auburn Citizen

February 21, 2019

Three months ago, the Buffalo Sabres were riding high. The team was in the midst of a 10-game winning streak and held, briefly, the top spot in the NHL. A playoff spot — and the end of the franchise's seven-year playoff drought — appeared to be a lock.

Now, with the NHL season winding down, the Sabres are six points behind the Columbus Blue Jackets for the final wild card spot in the Eastern Conference. Erasing that deficit with 23 games remaining isn't impossible, but it's a tall task for a team that hasn't won consecutive games since mid-December. Since the beginning of 2019, the Sabres have won only seven games.

You can pass the blame around like a hot potato, but there is one individual who should be held accountable for the Sabres' collapse: head coach Phil Housley.

Housley took over as head coach prior to the 2017-18 season. In his first year, the Sabres regressed. The team finished last in the Atlantic Division with 62 points.

This season, the Sabres were expected to be much more competitive. Carter Hutton was signed to be the team's No. 1 goaltender and Rasmus Dahlin, the No. 1 overall pick in the 2018 NHL Draft, gave the struggling Sabres a legitimate two-way threat.

That didn't include what the Sabres already had — forwards Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart and Jason Pominville, along with defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen — and strong group of prospects. Before the season, Buffalo acquired Jeff Skinner, giving them another scoring threat.

The 10-game winning streak aside, the Sabres haven't met expectations. A big reason for that is the coaching. Housley doesn't seem to have an answer for why his team's defensive unit continues to struggle. The Sabres have allowed 3.12 goals against per game, the 11th-highest total in the NHL. They have also given up 32.4 shots against per game, the ninth-highest total in the league.

Housley was brought in, in part, to fix these problems. Before his arrival, the Sabres struggled defensively. The thinking was Housley, a Hall of Fame defenseman, could shore up the Sabres' defense and transform them into a playoff club. That didn't happen in 2017-18, and it's likely it won't happen this season.

The same problems continue. While there were some calls for Housley's firing after last season, most acknowledged it wouldn't be right to cut him loose after one season on the job. This year, with an improved roster, would be the true test.

So far, Housley has failed that test.

The Sabres' front office continues to stand by Housley. General manager Jason Botterill said Wednesday that Housley will remain head coach. Botterill also praised Housley and his staff for their communication and work to improve the defense, which ignores the Sabres' three-game losing streak and the 14 goals they've given up during the skid.

Whatever message Housley is delivering isn't getting through. It's time for the Sabres to move on from Housley and find a head coach who can build a winner.

## **Opinion: Botterill's time to shine**

By Austin Sauer

Niagara-Gazette

February 19, 2019

It is undeniable that the Sabres are much improved this year. Last year they ended with a league low 62 points. Entering Tuesday, they had already accumulated 63 points with 24 games remaining.

Where does the disappointment come from within the Sabres fan base? Is it the lack of depth scoring? Or perhaps the fall from first in the league to 15th? If the fans look at the big picture, there is much to be happy about.

The Sabres are further along than they many thought this year. With the addition of Jeff Skinner, who has been on pace for 50-plus goals practically the entire season, and the arrival of Swedish defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, the generational talent selected first overall in the 2018 draft, the Sabres have some very noteworthy bright spots.

Marty Biron, ex-Sabres Goalie and analyst, said, "This is a blue-collar community that really respects hard work and a no-quit attitude. That game really sent a good message to the fans," following a comeback victory over the Pittsburgh Penguins back in November. That was the attitude the Sabres displayed the first half of the season.

Things have changed since then. With the trade deadline looming on Feb. 25, it is an excellent time for general manager Jason Botterill to give the Sabres the spark they need to secure their first playoff appearance since the 2010-11 season.

The first thing Botterill could do would be to look to add from within. The Rochester Americans, the Sabres' AHL team, have at least three viable options that have the potential to give the Sabres the spark they need.

C.J. Smith has been up with Buffalo since the start of February. Smith can slide in on left wing, filling in a spot in the middle six. He brings an element of speed and skill that the Sabres seem to have been lacking after the top line.

Another name that could be called up is Alex Nylander. This is an interesting and rather controversial option. Nylander has never really filled his potential as the eighth-overall pick in the 2016 draft. He has struggled to become the elite sniper that he was drafted to be. This is no reason to give up on him, though. There is no doubt he has a high skill level and can start to put the puck in the net. He is only 20 years old. Having him come up to the big club on the right wing and seeing how he can perform would not hurt anyone.

The other possible choice to call up from the minors is Victor Olofsson. He looks to be the wildcard of the group but could be the best choice out of the three. Olofsson brings speed, skill and an elite shot. He could be an immediate fit on either wing in the top 9. Being a seventh-round pick, there was a lot of unknown surrounding Olofsson, but his 37 points in 40 games in his first year in the AHL speak for themselves.

A more intriguing option and perhaps a way to get more proven talent would be through trade. There are so many rumors that fly around with players from all different teams and all different talent levels. Botterill has stated he will not trade away young pieces for aging talent with short-term contracts. Once again, there are quite a few options.

A desperation target could be Tyson Jost from the Colorado Avalanche. Jost is a solid center that could possibly slide into the No. 2 role behind Jack Eichel. This is desperation because Jost is only 20 years old and has never really been able to crack the Colorado lineup consistently. This is not from a lack of talent, simply a lack of opportunity. Jost is a guy that could help the Sabres for years to come.

A more realistic target would be Charlie Coyle from the Minnesota Wild. Coyle is a big center with some term left on a very team-friendly contract. At 26 years old, Coyle is hitting his prime, and a change of scenery could be just what he needs to really breakout. This would be a great fit for the Sabres' No. 2 center spot, allowing some pressure to come off rookie Casey Mittelstadt.

Now for the dream target, which is one of the top names that has been floating around in rumors, Matt Duchene. Duchene is an elite center that would help any team. At only 26 years old, he has at least six more years of great hockey left. He is a free agent at the end of this year and is in for a pay raise. He will probably be sitting at about \$8 million over eight years. He is worth that contract, though it is tough to see the Sabres managing that with all the young players they have to pay over the next few years. However, if Botterill can work the proper contract without selling the farm, that is a very intriguing deal.

There are a plethora of options for the Sabres. It is now time to wait and see what the next move is, if there even is one. Sabres fans have grown accustomed to them losing. This year has changed that mindset and the fans are getting anxious to break into the playoffs after many years of struggling. The Sabres have an week ahead of them and will have to battle hard to hopefully break what is the second-longest playoff draught in the NHL.

Time to get to work, Botterill.

## **Sabres GM Botterill: Housley's job is safe**

TSN

February 20, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres have slipped out of a playoff spot over the past month, but general manager Jason Botterill said Wednesday that head coach Phil Housley's job is not in jeopardy.

Housley is in his second season with the Sabres and the team has already topped their point total from last season, when they finished last in the league with 62 points.

The Sabres have a 28-23-7 record this season and sit six points back of the final wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference. The team is in the midst of a three-game losing skid and has won just seven of 19 games since the turn of the calendar to 2019.

Botterill said Wednesday that he's open to adding players to the Sabres ahead of the trade deadline, but the focus remains on developing the team's young players.

"We're always looking to make additions to our group of players, to help our players out," Botterill said, per The Athletic. "We're not going to change our model and our focus on trying to bring players in that are going to help this team not only this year but for the future. That's what we're looking at."

The Sabres will visit the NHL-leading Tampa Bay Lightning on Thursday.

## **Botterill addresses media while Sabres practice in Tampa**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

February 20, 2019

TAMPA - Jason Botterill spoke with the media while the Sabres practiced at Amalie Arena on Wednesday afternoon, covering the current state of the team, the upcoming trade deadline and the status of contract negotiations with Jeff Skinner.

With the deadline less than a week away (3 p.m. on Monday), the Sabres general manager affirmed that he's continuing to pursue options to improve the roster while also expressing confidence in the current players and coaching staff.

"We've had a lot of conversations going on," Botterill said. "Whether those things come to fruition over the next couple days, it's always hard to predict. As I think we saw last year, sometimes you look at the draft and then things can move into July 1 and things can move into the summer.

"... We are always looking to make moves that are going to help our group," Botterill said. "I'd also say we're going to trust our players, we're going to trust our group."

The Sabres sit six points out of the second Wild Card spot, currently occupied by the Columbus Blue Jackets, after losing three straight games and four of their last five.

Botterill expressed disappointment with the team's current predicament while also echoing his coaches and veteran leaders in saying that the Sabres' young core is learning on the fly how games become more difficult in the thick of a playoff race.

"Look, we're disappointed with our results right now," he said. "It's a situation where we felt, if you take a step back, we've made improvements as an organization. We like parts of our game and the development of some of our players. But we are facing a new challenge here.

"It's a scenario where our players are playing games in the second half of a season that mean a lot. The intensity of NHL games in the second half ramp up, and it's a challenge to win hockey games in the second half. That's, right now, what we're looking at and we're trying to find solutions there."

The slim margin for error supports that outlook. Nine of the Sabres' victories during their 10-game streak in November were decided by one goal. All five of their losses in February have been one-goal games in the third period; they're simply coming out on the other side.

"We're putting players in roles that they're not used to," Botterill said. "Some nights they're going to succeed in those roles, sometimes they're not. I think you've seen our blueprint. You've seen when we played well, when we've played assertive in the offensive zone, we've gotten to the front of the net in the offensive zone, we've played good defensive hockey, we've received results. ... We haven't done that enough on a consistent basis."

Botterill complimented coach Phil Housley and his staff for their communication with players throughout the season.

"I've liked the interaction, two-way interaction, with our players coming to coaches," he said. "You look at after practice, on the ice, off the ice, our coaches interacting with our players from a standpoint of their individual games and as a team concept, to me those are the things that are at least allowing us to be in the situation to win games in the third period."

As for Skinner, the GM confirmed that negotiations regarding a contract extension are ongoing. The Sabres' leading goal scorer is due to become an unrestricted free agent at the end of this season but has said he's enjoyed his time in Buffalo thus far.

"We've, his group and ours, have obviously continued our dialogue," Botterill said. "We haven't done play-by-play in the media just because that's the way we wanted to go about things. Both sides continue to work to try and find a resolution."

#### Wednesday's practice

Matt Hunwick (lower body) was back on the ice after taking a precautionary day off in Florida on Wednesday. Housley continued to tweak his forward lines, moving Evan Rodrigues up to the right wing alongside Skinner and former Boston University linemate Jack Eichel.

Eichel and Rodrigues haven't played together often in the NHL, but the results have been positive when they have. The Sabres have outscored opponents 5-2 in 46:34 when the two have shared the ice at 5-on-5 over the past three seasons, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

Rodrigues was a senior when Eichel arrived for his freshman campaign at BU, and the two found quick chemistry.

"I think from the first game we played together, it just seemed like we knew where each other was going to be," Rodrigues said. "We knew to find open ice and we both like going cross-ice, so we tried to stay away from each other, give each other space and just tried to find an open area so that when we did get in trouble, we'd have a release."

The Sabres will be tasked with slowing down the NHL's top team in the Tampa Bay Lightning on Thursday, a team they've played closely through three matchups this season. The Sabres won the first meeting of the season, 2-1, then held third-period leads before dropping each of the last two contests.

"You've got to get off to quick start and you have to be ready to defend," Rodrigues said. "They're going to come out flying, they're going to come out skating. They're a fast team with a ton of skill so we have to be 110 percent committed to just defending, making sure our legs are ready to go."

"We can't force anything. We have to wait for our chances and just capitalize when we get them. If we do that we'll have a chance, because we've done it before."

Here's how the Sabres lined up on Wednesday:

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

19 Jake McCabe - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen  
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 4 Zach Bogosian  
82 Nathan Beaulieu - 8 Casey Nelson  
24 Lawrence Pilut - 48 Matt Hunwick

40 Carter Hutton  
35 Linus Ullmark