



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres captain Eichel disagrees with NHL's 2-game suspension

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

March 11, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Jack Eichel will abide by the NHL's decision to suspend him two games for an illegal check to Colorado forward Carl Soderberg's head.

That doesn't mean the Buffalo Sabres captain has to agree with it.

"If you look at the hit and look at the rule book, I didn't think it matched up," Eichel said following practice Monday. "It's kind of frustrating."

Eichel was suspended Sunday following a hearing with the league's department of player safety.

He blamed Soderberg for lowering his head while the two raced for a loose puck along the boards during Colorado's 3-0 victory Saturday. He said Soderberg was reaching for the puck and that his head hit Eichel's back.

The NHL ruled Eichel was to blame because Soderberg didn't change the direction he was heading, while Eichel cut sharply in front of Soderberg to initiate contact.

"While we acknowledge Eichel's argument that Soderberg is low and reaching for the puck, this hit does not meet any of the criteria for unavoidable head contact," the league ruled. "Soderberg is in a low position and reaching out for the puck before Eichel changes his course to initiate this hit."

Eichel was penalized for an illegal hit. The suspension will cost him more than \$107,500 in lost salary.

Sabres coach Phil Housley backed Eichel, who leads the team with a career-best 72 points (25 goals, 47 assists) in 65 games.

"I don't agree with the decision, but we'll have to live with it, and that's all I'm going to say about that," Housley said.

Alexander Nylander is expected to replace Eichel in the lineup after the 2016 first-round draft pick was called up from the minors.

The Sabres host Dallas on Tuesday and have tumbled out of the playoff race by going 2-8-2 in their past 12 games.

Sabres' Alex Nylander hopes to stay in NHL beyond Jack Eichel's suspension

By Jason Wolf

The Buffalo News

March 11, 2019

Alex Nylander doesn't know whether he'll remain with the Sabres beyond Jack Eichel's two-game suspension, but the former first-round draft pick intends to make the most of the opportunity.

The forward, drafted eighth overall in 2016, has played just seven NHL games over the last two seasons, recording one goal and one assist.

"I'm just going to play my best and obviously I hope to be here for longer," Nylander said after joining the Sabres for practice Monday at KeyBank Center. "I'm just trying to play my best and work hard every single day I'm here."

Nylander, 21, skated on the second line with center Evan Rodrigues and forward Conor Sheary.

Casey Mittelstadt centered the top line alongside Jeff Skinner and Jason Pominville. Vladimir Sobotka centered the third line featuring Tage Thompson and Sam Reinhart.

Nylander also skated on the second power play unit with Mittelstadt, Skinner, Kyle Okposo and Brandon Montour.

In 49 games this season in Rochester, Nylander has career highs of 12 goals and 31 points, and his 19 assists equal a career high. He scored in each of his last four contests.

"I'd like to see the exact same things that got him an opportunity to come up and play for us," Sabres coach Phil Housley said. "I was just talking with (general manager) Jason (Botterill) and (Amerks coach) Chris Taylor. He's playing very well right now. Obviously, he's scoring, he's shooting the puck a lot more, and we want him to attack the game with that same focus that he's had when he's been in Rochester."

Nylander was promoted from the Amerks for the first time this season in the wake of Eichel's suspension for hitting Colorado Avalanche center Carl Soderberg with an illegal check to the head late in the second period of Saturday's 3-0 loss at Colorado.

Eichel will miss the next two home games, against Dallas on Tuesday and Pittsburgh on Thursday, giving Nylander at least a brief opportunity to show he belongs in the NHL.

"It's obviously an unfortunate situation," Sheary said. "Jack's kind of the heartbeat of this team. He makes our team go. To see him get suspended is tough. But these are the opportunities that young guys need to kind of crack this league and solidify a spot in the NHL, so hopefully he can take advantage of his time."

The Sabres have 14 games remaining in the regular season and have faded from playoff contention, going 2-8-2 in their last 12 games.

Nylander is only one of two players drafted in the top 10 in 2016 – the other being Vancouver defenseman Olli Juolevi, who has yet to make his NHL debut – to appear in fewer than 128 NHL regular-season games. He missed the first three months of last season, his second with the Amerks, with a severe groin strain.

"I just want to show that I can be here," Nylander said. "I know I'm ready for this. I'm going to take this opportunity that I get and do the best I can with it."

The Sabres announced that Jeffrey Cutler has been named the recipient of the 2019 J. Michael Duffett Memorial Award, presented each year to the coach or administrator whose contributions to amateur hockey in Western New York "best exemplify the knowledge, teaching, love of the game and gentle humanity of Mike."

Cutler is the 34th recipient of the award, which will be presented Tuesday at the Sabres' game against the Dallas Stars.

A native of Amherst, Cutler has coached youth hockey for 38 years. In 1993, he became one of the first sled hockey coaches in Western New York in hopes he could share his passion for hockey with his son, John, who was born with spina bifida. That same year, Cutler became a board member for WNY Physically Challenged Youth, a position he still holds.

Cutler has coached Brad Emmerson, Chris Manns, Al Salamone and Adam Page, who went on to play with Team USA at the national level and the Winter Paralympics. Cutler has won 22 championships, including the 2015 IPC Sled World Championship.

Sabres' Jack Eichel, coach Phil Housley disagree with NHL suspension

By Jason Wolf
The Buffalo News
March 11, 2019

Sabres center Jack Eichel and coach Phil Housley both disagree with the NHL Department of Player Safety's decision to suspend the Sabres' captain for two games after Eichel hit Colorado Avalanche center Carl Soderberg with an illegal check to the head late in the second period of Saturday's 3-0 loss at Colorado, they said after practice Monday at KeyBank Center.

Eichel will miss home games against Dallas on Tuesday and Pittsburgh on Thursday. In a corresponding move, the Sabres recalled Alexander Nylander from Rochester.

"It's tough. Obviously, you don't want to miss two games with the team," Eichel said. "It's the league's decision. Obviously, we have to stand by it. But I don't agree with it. Obviously, if you look at the hit and you look at their rule book, I just didn't think that it matched up. That's not an illegal hit. I don't move myself to lower it into him.

"If you watch the hit, he actually is at fault for dropping his head down there. It's a 50/50 puck that I'm trying to make a hockey play on. You see me, I had my eyes on the puck the whole time and then I actually make a play on the puck after, so, you know, it's kind of frustrating.

"If they're going to have a rule about headshots, it has to be pretty black and white. If all headshots are suspendable, suspend all headshots. But it's tough to see them picking and choosing what they feel is suspendable. But it's a decision you have to live with.

"If you watch it, it's a 50/50 puck that I'm trying to make a play on. My hit's not suspendable by their rule book. He puts himself in a vulnerable position and leans over, and if you actually watch the hit his head goes off my back. His head's on my number. So it's tough. It's frustrating."

Housley echoed Eichel's remarks in a brief press conference.

"I don't agree with the decision," Housley said, "but we have to live with it. And that's all I'm going to say about that."

Eichel received a penalty for an "illegal check to the head" at 14:48 of the second period after he and Soderberg were engaged in a puck battle in the neutral zone. Soderberg fell briefly on his stomach before heading to the bench. He played the rest of the game and appeared uninjured.

Eichel had a phone hearing Sunday with the NHL's Department of Player Safety, which issued the first fine or suspension of his four-year NHL career.

"With Soderberg reaching for the puck, Eichel cut sharply in front of him with his upper body hitting Soderberg's head and making it the main point of contact on a hit where such head contact was avoidable," the league said.

"While we acknowledge Eichel's argument that Soderberg is low and reaching for the puck, this hit does not meet any of the criteria for unavoidable head contact under Rule 48."

Under the terms of the Collective Bargaining Agreement and based on his average annual salary, Eichel will forfeit \$107,526.88. The money goes to the Players' Emergency Assistance Fund.

The league absolved Soderberg of contributing to the nature of the hit.

"His head and core move in a consistent manner," the league said, "and do not suddenly and materially change position in a way that changes the nature of this hit from a full body check to one that picks the head."

Eichel had been agitated after taking a late and high hit from former Sabres defenseman Nikita Zadorov in the first period. Zadorov received a minor penalty for roughing on the play, which came after a whistle for offsides. He is not facing supplemental discipline.

"I think it was a physical game, so that's what it required," Eichel said. "I don't think I was finishing my check. I finished more than just one check, but I don't think I was finishing a check there. It's a hockey play that unfortunately led to me getting suspended for two games."

Eichel is eligible to return Saturday at Carolina. Eichel has 25 goals, 47 assists and 72 points in 65 games this season. He missed three games earlier this season after suffering an upper-body injury.

"No one's going to be able to replace him," forward Sam Reinhart said. "That's just a fact with the talent he has, so I think either with him in the lineup or out of the lineup, I think at this time when things aren't going well for really anybody you've just got to play your game and take advantage of bounces hopefully and settle yourself down and play with some composure."

Is there anything Eichel can learn from this experience?

"I don't know," Eichel said. "What do you learn from a suspension? Avoid contact? It's tough, you know? It's a physical game and things happen really fast out there, so you're constantly required to make split-second decisions and that one, I'm bracing myself thinking contact's coming and he tries to poke it around me and go into the inside and his head goes off my back."

Sabres' Eichel is not happy with his suspension from the NHL

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 11, 2019

Buffalo, (WGR 550) - The Sabres aren't too happy about Jack Eichel's two-game suspension from the NHL. Eichel was suspended for a head hit to Colorado's Carl Soderberg. Eichel said, "You don't want to miss two games with the team, but it's the league's decision and we have to stand by it, but I don't agree with it.

"If you look at the hit and you look at the rule book, I just didn't think that it matched up."

Many are saying because Soderberg went low and reached out to get to the puck, that doesn't make it a head shot. Eichel said, "That's not an illegal hit, I don't move myself to lower into him. If you watch the hit he is actually at fault for dropping his head down there. He puts himself in a vulnerable position, leans over and his head goes off my back, his head's on my number.

"It's a 50/50 puck that I'm trying to make a play on. I had my eyes on the puck the whole time and actually make a play on the puck after, so it's kind of frustrating, if they're going to have a rule I think it needs to be pretty black and white. I mean if all head shots are suspendable then suspend all head shots and it's tough to see them picking and choosing what they think is suspendable, but it's a decision you have to live with."

Phil Housley was brief in his opinion. He said, "I don't agree with the decision, but we have to live with it, that's all I'm going to say."

So the Sabres must move on for two games without their captain. Sam Reinhart said, "No one tries to do too much, no one is going to be able to replace him, that's just a fact with the talent he has, so we need to settle ourselves down and play with some composure."

As far as the suspension goes Eichel's former roommate said, "From being behind the play and turning and seeing the hit occur, from my perspective it didn't look bad, but I hope the guy's alright and it's unfortunate the way it happened."

Many feel the Sabres are too soft and don't stand up to their opponents. Reinhart said, "There's times when we bring it and we have that element, but there's a consistency level that we have to get that up on a daily basis,"

With Eichel out and Alex Nylander up from Rochester, Housley had to do a lot of line shuffling. Here were Monday's lines:

Sheary Rodrigues Nylander

Wilson Larsson Okposo

Skinner Mittelstadt Pominville

Thompson Sobotka Reinhart

Hunwick Ristolainen

Dahlin Bogosian

Scandella Montour

Girgensons Nelson

Power play 1: Sheary, Rodrigues, Reinhart, Ristolainen, Dahlin

Power play 2: Skinner, Mittelstadt, Okposo, Nylander, Montour

Alex Nylander returns to Buffalo looking to make the offensive impact that few recalls have

By John Vogl

The Athletic

March 11, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. – From the moment Alex Nylander walked to the draft stage in the Sabres' arena, his goal was to make the building his home. He's getting his best chance yet.

"I just want to show that I can be here," the winger said Monday. "I know I'm ready for this."

Nylander has never been shy about expressing his NHL desires. The No. 8 overall pick from 2016 is certain he'll follow in the footsteps of his father, Michael, and his brother, William. After returning from injury last month in Rochester, he talked about playing well enough to earn a call-up and "not coming back down here."

The reeling Sabres recalled the prospect over the weekend, and he'll make his season debut Tuesday against Dallas. There are 14 games remaining and it wouldn't be a surprise to see Nylander in all of them.

Buffalo is merely playing out the string – and based on Saturday's no-show in Colorado, "playing" is a relative term – so it makes sense to give the 21-year-old a longer look than his first two seasons. He played in the final three games last year and the last four in 2016-17. A full month in Buffalo would give the organization a better gauge of Nylander's growth.

"I'm just going to play my best and obviously I hope to be here for longer," he said.

Nylander has earned this look. He scored in four straight games for the Amerks, giving him four goals and seven points in the last six outings.

"We want him to attack the game with that same focus that he's had in Rochester," said Sabres coach Phil Housley, who placed Nylander alongside center Evan Rodrigues and left wing Conor Sheary. "He's shooting the puck a lot more. He's creating a lot more. Obviously, he's scored four goals recently, which is the result of shooting the puck more."

During Nylander's four-game scoring run, he took 12 shots for an average of three per game. During his opening 45 games, he took just 77 shots, an average of 1.7 per game.

"I'm getting more to the scoring areas," Nylander said. "I know I have a good shot, so I've just got to keep shooting and making plays out there."

The winger's season in the American Hockey League can be broken down into three segments: a fine start, a midseason slump and a hot stretch.

Games	Goals	Assists	Points
19	6	11	17
24	2	5	7
6	4	3	7

"Obviously, I wanted to be here," he said. "But I just tried to take it and learn as much as I could down there, be more experienced in my third year to obviously be as ready as possible when I got called back up."

Few players in AHL history have gained as much as experience as Nylander at his age. He just turned 21 on March 2, and here is EliteProspects.com's all-time list of AHL games played by skaters under age 21.

The only forward to carve out a long NHL career was Prospal, who played in 1,108 games for Philadelphia, Ottawa, Florida, Tampa Bay, Anaheim, the Rangers and Columbus. He spent three full seasons in the minors before blossoming in his fourth year at age 21. He became a regular NHL player at age 24 and a 20-goal scorer at age 25.

Nylander hopes it doesn't take that long. The winger has already set career highs in goals (12) and points (31) in the minors, putting him a tie for 15th this season among AHL players under 21.

While Nylander wants to show he's ready for the big leagues, the Sabres need him to show it. During the past eight seasons, they've had only two forwards (Marcus Foligno and Brian Flynn) arrive from Rochester and make an offensive impact. It's been ugly.

In 666 games, the recalls have totaled 71 goals and 65 assists. That's an average of 0.2 points per game. Even excluding Matt Ellis, who was called upon to be a fourth-line role player, the recalls have averaged just 0.22 points per game (66 goals and 128 points in 577 outings).

This season, C.J. Smith, Scott Wilson and Danny O'Regan have combined for two goals and two assists in 20 games.

	Games	Goals	Assists	Points
Smith	11	2	0	2
Wilson	8	0	2	2
O'Regan	1	0	0	0

In 2017-18, Nick Baptiste, Justin Bailey, Kyle Criscuolo, Hudson Fasching, Nylander and O'Regan totaled eight goals and three assists in 64 games.

	Games	Goals	Assists	Points
Baptiste	33	4	2	6
Bailey	12	3	1	4
Criscuolo	9	0	0	0
Fasching	5	0	0	0
Nylander	3	1	0	1
O'Regan	2	0	0	0

In 2016-17, William Carrier, Bailey, Rodrigues, Baptiste, Cal O'Reilly, Cole Schneider and Nylander combined for 14 goals and 11 assists in 136 games.

	Games	Goals	Assists	Points
Carrier	41	5	3	8
Bailey	32	2	2	4
Rodrigues	30	4	2	6
Baptiste	14	3	1	4
O'Reilly	11	0	1	1
Schneider	4	0	1	1
Nylander	4	0	1	1

In 2015-16, O'Reilly, Tim Schaller, Dan Catenacci, Bailey, Phil Varone, Schneider and Rodrigues totaled six goals and eight assists in 65 games.

	Games	Goals	Assists	Points
O'Reilly	20	3	4	7
Schaller	17	1	2	3
Catenacci	11	0	0	0
Bailey	8	0	0	0
Varone	5	1	1	2
Schneider	2	0	0	0
Rodrigues	2	1	1	2

In 2014-15, Ellis, Varone, Mikhail Grigorenko, Zac Dalpe, Schaller, Jerry D'Amigo and Joel Armia combined for nine goals and nine assists in 141 games.

	Games	Goals	Assists	Points
Ellis	39	1	1	2
Varone	28	3	2	5
Grigorenko	25	3	3	6
Dalpe	21	1	2	3
Schaller	18	1	1	2
D'Amigo	9	0	0	0
Armia	1	0	0	0

In 2013-14, Ellis, Nicolas Deslauriers, Luke Adam and Varone had seven goals and three assists in 88 games.

	Games	Goals	Assists	Points
Ellis	50	4	2	6
Deslauriers	17	1	0	1
Adam	12	1	0	1
Varone	9	1	1	2

In 2012-13, Kevin Porter, Flynn and Adam totaled 11 goals and 10 assists in 61 games. Flynn led the way with a respectable showing.

	Games	Goals	Assists	Points
Porter	31	4	5	9
Flynn	26	6	5	11
Adam	4	1	0	1

In 2011-12, Corey Tropp, Zack Kassian, Foligno, Paul Szczechura, Travis Turnbull, Colin Stuart and Derek Whitmore combined for 14 goals and 19 assists in 91 games. Foligno caught fire alongside Tyler Ennis and Drew Stafford, cementing a spot in Buffalo for the next five seasons.

	Games	Goals	Assists	Points
Tropp	34	3	5	8
Kassian	27	3	4	7
Foligno	14	6	7	13
Szczechura	9	1	3	4
Turnbull	3	1	0	1
Stuart	2	0	0	0
Whitmore	2	0	0	0

Nylander can make his case to be a full-time NHLer during the next four weeks. He's been waiting for the shot, and it will be his best chance to date.

"I've been up now every single year since I came here," Nylander said. "I've just been waiting for my opportunity. I'm ready to take it now."

Sabres' Jack Eichel frustrated by suspension: 'I don't agree with it'

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 11, 2019

BUFFALO – Phil Housley wouldn't go there. The Sabres coach simply said he disagreed with the two-game suspension the NHL slapped on center Jack Eichel, his captain and leading scorer, and left it at that.

But an aggravated Eichel offered a detailed description of the illegal check to the head he laid on Avalanche forward Carl Soderberg in Saturday afternoon's 3-0 loss in Colorado.

The hit, Eichel said Monday, was legal and he shouldn't have been punished by the NHL Department of Player Safety.

"We have to stand by it, but I don't agree with it," Eichel said after the Sabres prepared for Tuesday's game against the Dallas Stars at KeyBank Center. "Obviously, if you look at the hit and you look at their rule book, I just didn't think it matched up. That's not an illegal hit."

As Eichel and Soderberg pursued a loose puck in the neutral zone, Eichel cut in front of Soderberg, drilling him in the head with his upper body.

Eichel received a two-minute penalty for an illegal check to the head 14:48 into the second period.

"I don't move myself to lower it into him," Eichel explained. "If you watch the hit, he actually is at fault for dropping his head down there. I mean, it's a 50-50 puck that I'm trying to make a hockey play on. You see me, I have my eyes on the puck the whole time and then I had to make a play on the puck after."

"It's kind of frustrating. If they're going to have a rule about headshots, it has to be pretty black and white. I mean, if all headshots are suspendable, then suspend all headshots. I mean, it's tough to see them picking and choosing what they feel is suspendable. It's a decision you have to live with."

He added: "That hit's not suspendable by the rule book. He puts himself in a vulnerable position, leans. If you actually watch the hit, his head goes off my back, his head's on my number. So it's tough, it's frustrating."

Earlier in Saturday's chippy affair, which featured a slew of hits, Avalanche defenseman Nikita Zadorov hit Eichel hard after the whistle, knocking him into the boards and ripping his helmet off.

Following the game, Eichel expressed frustration, saying he wanted to push back and protect himself.

"It was a physical game, so that's what it required," Eichel said Monday. "I think I was finishing my checks. I finished more than one check. But I don't think I was finishing a check there. It's a hockey play that unfortunately led to me getting suspended for two games."

Eichel, who will forfeit \$107,526.88 in salary, will miss Tuesday's contest and Thursday's home game against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

While Eichel practiced Monday, he skated as a spare. Based on the line and defense combinations in the session, winger Zemgus Girgensons and defenseman Casey Nelson could be scratched Tuesday.

Sabres, Roswell team up for limited-edition cap to raise money for cancer research

By Ashley Rowe

WKBW

March 11, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — The Buffalo Sabres have teamed up with Roswell Park Cancer Center to offer a limited-edition New Era cap, designed with the creative direction of Roswell's patients and staff.

The blue two tone cap has the word "hope" and a symbolic ribbon stitched onto its side. The front of the cap shows the Sabres' logo, encompassed by the words "Roswell Park" and "Buffalo Sabres."

The "Official Cap of Hope" will be available for purchase for \$25 at the Sabres Store inside KeyBank Center and at Buffalo-area Wegmans. Five dollars of the purchase price will go towards supporting cancer research at Roswell.

The hat's designers include patients Emmett Jakubowski and Kathleen Theal, and Assistant Professor of Oncology Adam Sumlin.

On Tuesday, Sabretooth will be visiting Roswell to deliver caps to patients.

Sabres' rebuild is still going nowhere

By Adam Gretz
Pro Hockey Talk
March 11, 2019

For about three weeks back in November the Buffalo Sabres had their fans fooled.

It was then that they went on an improbable 10-game win streak to record their best start in years and finally show some signs that their perpetual rebuild was going to produce a positive result.

This was going to be the year that all of the waiting, losing, and disappointment was going to be worth it.

Even if you were of the belief that the win streak was the product of some good luck and an unsustainable run of overtime/shootout and one-goal victories (which almost all of the wins were) it still seemed like they had done enough to give themselves a decent cushion to cover for whatever inevitable regression might follow.

The only thing that could undo it at that point was an epic failure on behalf of the entire team.

More than three months later it has become abundantly clear that the epic failure has happened. Given where the Sabres are coming from, should any of it be a surprise?

The whole thing was a mirage, a total fluke, and nothing more than a temporary and all too brief break from the miserable run of irrelevance that has plagued the Sabres organization for the better part of a decade.

The low point of the season probably came over the weekend when they played a Colorado Avalanche team that has been equally disappointing in the second half and was also playing without one of its best players in Gabriel Landeskog. In that game the Sabres put forth one of the sorriest efforts of the season by any team when they were outshot by a 43-18 margin in a 3-0 loss that was way more one-sided than the final score would have you believe. Keep in mind that with just under two minutes remaining in the game the shot clock had the Avalanche with a 42-12 advantage. It wasn't until the Sabres pulled their goalie for an extra attacker in a last ditch effort to do something that they were able to register even the smallest threat of offense.

What is worse is that it is hard to see why there should be much hope for better results in the immediate future with this organization.

We have spent a lot of time this season (and rightfully so, I might add) marveling at the incompetence of the Edmonton Oilers to build a successful team around Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl (and it truly is stunning), but keep something in mind about the Oilers — they at least made the playoffs once so far with McDavid, won a playoff series, and were a Game 7 loss away from being in the Western Conference Final.

Sure, everything that has been sandwiched around that makes that one season look like an outlier, but the Sabres don't even have that.

In a lot of ways this team is worse than the team that is widely regarded to be the most inept team in the league.

That is not good!

You might counter that by arguing that the Oilers have more high-end talent with McDavid and Draisaitl, and were also starting from a better place with a boatload of literal No. 1 overall draft picks. That would be a fair point. Sort of. But it's not like the Sabres haven't had a run of great draft picks in recent years.

When the Sabres tore their organization to the ground back in 2013 the intent was to stock up on premium draft picks (hopefully one that would land them Connor McDavid), rebuild the organization around the type of impact talent you can find at the top of the draft, and go from there.

The lottery balls were not always in their favor, but they were still in a good position to load the organization with talent.

They have not picked lower than eighth in draft since 2012.

They have had two No. 2 overall picks and a No. 1 overall pick.

One of those No. 2 overall picks produced Jack Eichel, and while he may not be on McDavid's level he is still a bonafide star and a player that should, by year four in the NHL, be the centerpiece of a playoff team.

The other one was used on Sam Reinhart, who was taken one spot ahead of Draisaitl.

The result of all of those top-10 picks and a full-scale rebuild is a team that is headed for its eight consecutive non-playoff season (and 10th in the past 12 years) and has not won a playoff series since 2007.

Things have been so bad this decade that if they maintain their current pace and reach 83 points it would be their best finish since 2012. Based on the current Eastern Conference playoff projections, that would keep them 12 points out of a Wild Card spot and 24 points behind the third place team in their own division.

Again, this is a team that two months into the season they had the best record in the league thanks in large part to that 10-game winning streak!

That is where the problems really start to show.

In the 58 games independent of that fluke run they playing at a 69 point pace over 82 games, which is just about on par with what every Sabres team has done over the past few years. And remember the context of that winning streak: Nothing about it was sustainable. Seven of those 10 games were won in overtime or a shootout, while nine of them were decided by a single goal. If even two or three of those games go in the other direction (which can easily happen when you rely on that many overtimes and shootouts) the season easily gets even worse.

And that is pretty much the point here. Six years into this process and the Sabres are on their third head coach (probably soon-to-be fourth), their second general manager, and are only marginally better than they were when the whole thing started. And that is after getting the franchise player, who has been just as good as advertised, that they so desperately needed to start the rebuild.

Once you get beyond Eichel, Reinhart, Jeff Skinner, and top pick Rasmus Dahlin the remainder of the roster is just so painfully bland that it is almost impossible to see where any short-term improvement can come from within, and that is before you consider the fact that Skinner is a free agent after this season. He very easily could — and probably should — test the open market this summer where he would probably be the second-best player available. He could pick his team and name his price given the season he has had.

If he goes? Well ... there is probably not another 40-goal winger that is a perfect fit alongside your franchise center that is going to be walking through that door.

For things to get dramatically better they need to keep Skinner. They need Dahlin to become a superstar (not just a good player, but an actual superstar on defense). They need Casey Mittelstadt to live up to the hype. They need Tage Thompson to just simply be passable or decent (and 12 points in 58 games isn't passable) to make it look like the Ryan O'Reilly trade wasn't a complete waste of everyone's time.

Even if all of that happens — and when you are talking about multiple young players it almost never works out exactly as you plan or hope with all of them — they still probably need five or six more quality pieces just to get back to wild card contention, let alone catch up to the powerhouse teams at the top of the Atlantic Division.

It is almost as if they need a rebuild from the rebuild.

That is not where anybody in Buffalo hoped, or expected, this team to be when the whole thing started five years ago. The whole thing has been a failure.

Nylander on recall: 'I know I'm ready for this'

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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Alexander Nylander had forced his way into the conversation to make the Sabres' roster out of training camp in September, opening eyes with his work ethic and attention to detail. It was a far cry from a year prior, when he missed the entirety of the preseason due to an injury.

The third-year forward was among the final roster cuts on Oct. 1, yielding the last forward spot to Tage Thompson. He went back to Rochester with his eyes set on earning another chance.

"I wanted to be here, but I just tried to take it and learn as much as I could down there, being more experienced ... to be as ready as possible when I get called back up," Nylander said.

Nylander earned his opportunity on Sunday, when he was recalled for the first time this season after scoring goals in four straight games with the Amerks. He joined the team for practice on Monday, skating on the right side of a line with Conor Sheary and Evan Rodrigues.

Sabres coach Phil Housley said he felt Nylander had a "terrific" camp, which he continued to build on throughout the regular season for the first-place Amerks. Through 49 games, he's set career-high totals in goals (12) and points (31).

Next home game: Tuesday vs. Dallas

Nylander credited his four-game goal streak - which began on his 21st birthday - to an increased willingness to shoot the puck. He took three or more shots in three of his last four games with Rochester.

"I'm getting more into scoring areas, shooting more pucks," he said. "I know I have a good shot, so I've just got to keep shooting, making plays out there and playing my game."

All four of Nylander's recent goals were worthy of his "snipe show" Twitter handle, coming from the high slot or above the right circle. Take a look:

"I'd like to see the exact same things that got him an opportunity to come up and play for us," Housley said. "Just talking to [general manager] Jason [Botterill] and [Amerks coach] Chris Taylor, he's playing very well right now.

"He's scoring, he's shooting the puck a lot more and we want him to attack the game with that same focus that he's had when he's been in Rochester."

The Sabres have 14 games remaining, and it appears Nylander will have every opportunity to show he belongs. In addition to skating on a line with Rodrigues, he practiced on a power-play unit with Jeff Skinner, Casey Mittelstadt, Kyle Okposo and Brandon Montour.

"I just want to show that I can be here," he said. "I know I'm ready for this. Like I said, I'm going to take this opportunity that I get and do the best I can."

Following a telephone hearing on Sunday, the NHL Department of Player Safety suspended Jack Eichel two games for an illegal check to the head of Colorado Avalanche Carl Soderberg on Saturday. The league explained its ruling in the video below.

The Sabres captain disagreed with the call when addressing the media after practice.

"It's a league decision. Obviously we have to stand by it, but I don't agree with it," Eichel said. "Obviously, if you look at the hit and you look at their rule book, I just didn't think it matched up. That's not an illegal hit. I don't move myself to lower it into him.

"If you watch the hit, he actually is at fault for dropping his head down there. I mean, it's a 50-50 puck that I'm trying to make a hockey play on. You see me, I have my eyes on the puck the whole time and then I had to make a play on the puck after. It's kind of frustrating.

"If they're going to have a rule about headshots, it has to be pretty black and white. I mean, if all headshots are suspendable, then suspend all headshots. It's tough to see them picking and choosing what they feel is suspendable. It's a decision you have to live with."

Rule 48 in the NHL rulebook reads as follows:

Housley said he disagreed with the league's ruling as well.

"I don't agree with the decision, but we have to live with it," he said.

Eichel will miss Buffalo's home games against Dallas on Tuesday and Pittsburgh on Thursday. It's the first suspension of his career.

Lines at practice

43 Conor Sheary - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 92 Alex Nylander
53 Jeff Skinner - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 29 Jason Pominville
72 Tage Thompson - 17 Vladimir Sobotka - 23 Sam Reinhart
20 Scott Wilson - 22 Johan Larsson - 21 Kyle Okposo

48 Matt Hunwick - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 4 Zach Bogosian
6 Marco Scandella - 62 Brandon Montour
28 Zemgus Girgensons* - 8 Casey Nelson

40 Carter Hutton
35 Linus Ullmark

*Extra forward skating on defense