



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*March 28, 2019*

## **Sabres face the Red Wings on 4-game slide**

Associated Press

March 28, 2019

Detroit Red Wings (28-38-10, seventh in the Atlantic Division) vs. Buffalo Sabres (31-36-9, sixth in the Atlantic Division)

Buffalo, New York; Thursday, 7 p.m. EDT

**BOTTOM LINE:** Buffalo heads into the matchup with Detroit after losing four games in a row.

The Sabres are 9-12-4 against the rest of their division. Buffalo scores 2.7 goals per game, the fewest in the Eastern Conference. Jeff Skinner leads the team with 37 total goals.

The Red Wings are 7-14-4 against the rest of their division. Detroit has scored 33 power-play goals, converting on 16.4 percent of chances. In their last meeting on Feb. 9, Buffalo won 3-1.

**TOP PERFORMERS:** Skinner leads the Sabres with 37 goals and has totaled 59 points. Brandon Montour has recorded one goal and four assists over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

**LAST 10 GAMES:** Red Wings: 5-5-0, averaging 2.3 goals, 3.6 assists, 2.9 penalties and 5.8 penalty minutes while giving up 2.9 goals per game with a .920 save percentage.

Sabres: 1-8-1, averaging 1.6 goals, 2.7 assists, 3.5 penalties and 7.3 penalty minutes while giving up 3.5 goals per game with a .898 save percentage.

**Sabres Injuries:** Zach Bogosian: day to day (undisclosed), Rasmus Ristolainen: day to day (illness), Jake McCabe: out (upper body).

**Red Wings Injuries:** Jacob de la Rose: out (upper body), Michael Rasmussen: out (upper body), Mike Green: out for season (illness), Thomas Vanek: day to day (middle body), Justin Abdelkader: day to day (undisclosed).

## **While Phil Housley, management take analytics 'seriously,' some Sabres remain skeptical**

By Lance Lysowski  
The Buffalo News  
March 27, 2019

Phil Housley and his Buffalo Sabres players were at a loss for words after one of their more bizarre losses during their free fall. Analytically, they were the far superior team in a 3-1 loss to the lowly New Jersey Devils in Prudential Center on Monday night.

The Sabres had 20 more shot attempts during 5-on-5 play, and was better in nearly every other statistical category, including high-danger scoring chances. Their on-ice performance passed the eye test, yet their only goal came on Sam Reinhart's dump-in from center ice.

The game powerfully illustrated the sport's ongoing challenge of relying on numbers to evaluate performance. After all, the Sabres committed two egregious defensive errors. Still, analytics have become a pillar of every NHL organization, helping general managers construct organizations and coaches prepare players for each game.

Hockey's information age has led owners to hire based on who is well-versed in analytics and accepting of how data can create a competitive advantage. Still, those numbers have not been accepted by those who are measured.

Buffalo Sabres winger Jason Pominville, a 36-year-old with 16 years of NHL experience, gave a blank stare when broached with the topic of analytics. Neither he nor most of his teammates pay attention to shot-attempt differential or any of the other available statistics. Most players don't even know where to find the data.

They leave that up to the coaching staff and management, who use a vast amount of information – some of which is not available to the public – to determine an opponents' weaknesses or construct a lineup.

"I'm not sure what they really mean," Pominville said. "To be honest, I don't really look at them. I'm sure most guys are the same way. To me, analytics show shots but it doesn't show battle, compete, those types of things. It doesn't really mean much."

That stance is in stark contrast to the one held by many players around Major League Baseball, which has used analytics in some form since 1971. The innovation of Statcast, a state-of-the-art tracking technology that collects a remarkable amount of data that can be viewed in real time, has allowed Major League pitchers and positions players to discover how to enhance their play or better prepare for an opponent.

Universal acceptance did not happen overnight in baseball. There was resistance when data analysts were first involved in scouting meetings and their findings led to significant changes, such as infield shifting. Now, those employees travel with the team and have the ear of players and managers.

On the other hand, the NHL is still learning how to best use analytics. Players are not given data-driven scouting reports, and they typically have no interest in knowing their own production or usage. Each team's analytics department uses the information to help coaches game plan and identify trends to help put players in the best position to succeed. Pertinent information for an upcoming opponent is then relayed to players.

Teams can measure specific tendencies such as 5-on-5 shot attempts from the slot, or offensive-zone possession time per player. Unlike baseball, the NHL does not have tracking technology to alleviate the need for in-depth film study, and the sport's physicality adds a different element when measuring player performance.

Like traditional hockey stats, some analytics can paint an incomplete picture, as Sabres goalie Carter Hutton explained.

"I think the traditional save percentage is kind of going extinct a little bit, too," Hutton said. "You have to see games. Quality of chances are so different for each team depending on defensive structure. I think from a goalie's standpoint you can probably dive in a little more to find out performance-wise, team-wise, (the quality of chances) given up."

"It's the same league but teams play such a different game. I think you need to watch video of games to really have an assessment of guys."

The most well-known analytics only touch the surface of player or team performance. Much like plus-minus, Corsi, a measurement of 5-on-5 shot attempt differential, can be deceptive since the performance of one player can affect teammates on the ice. The same goes for Fenwick, which is similar to Corsi, except blocked shots are not part of the equation.

Both stats have been enhanced in recent years with adjustments that provide context. For example, a player's Corsi can be measured relative to his teammates, which can reveal who has the most positive outcome on a team's performance. There is also a way to measure statistics per 60 minutes, which accounts for ice time.

While Corsi and Fenwick are starting to become part of discourse among fans, neither takes into account shot-attempt quality, which is important when measuring a team's success during 5-on-5 play. "Expected goals" is a metric that measures unblocked shot attempts by the quality of chances – location, second chance, etc. – though it isn't necessarily indicative of future performance.

While management finds the information beneficial, most players prefer to only pay attention to data that can help prepare for an opponent.

"You try not to look at it too much," center Evan Rodrigues said. "I think it kind of just gets in your head a little bit. Media, stats, that's more stuff to think about than going out and playing your game. For me, personally, that stuff gets in my head more than I'd like it to. I try to ignore the outside noise, all the numbers, all the things like that, and go play my game."

Whether presented in numerical form, bar graphs or heat maps, data has become increasingly available in recent years, despite NHL teams plucking many independent analysts for front office jobs.

For example, with save percentage a flawed statistic, goalies can now be measured by "goals saved above expectations," which takes the league's average save percentage and applies it to the amount of shots a particular goalie has faced.

Though many NHL players admit that a statistic such as plus-minus can be bothersome, most don't pay mind to analytics they perceive as flawed data that can create a false narrative among fans or media who can't always pay attention to the nuances of each game.

"Personally, I think it's looked at a little bit too much," Sabres winger Conor Sheary said. "At the end of the day, it's about results. It's not about Corsi or – I don't even know the deeper analytics that people use. I think they're good indicators, but I don't think they impact the outcome as often as some people might think."

In addition to revealing tendencies, basic analytics can reveal player usage, such as defensive-zone starts. That information can be resourceful for in-game strategy, particularly when having the second line change at home.

Unlike their players, the Sabres' coaching staff, management and analytics department pays close attention to Corsi since 5-on-5 goal differential is indicative of overall success. Entering Monday's games, not one of the 16 teams holding a playoff spot had a negative differential, and the Sabres had success in that regard when they were sitting atop the NHL on Nov. 28.

There is not an overreliance on data. Sabres coach Phil Housley and the rest of the team's staff marry the numbers with the eye test and film study. Together, those elements help construct forward lines and defensive pairings, while helping with in-game strategy.

"There are so many different ways to go about analytics," Housley said. "There is so much information out there. We try to piece it together where we look at an individual's Corsi rating, a team's Corsi rating, chances for from the inner slot or on matchups, whether it's D pairings or line matchups during games. The biggest thing for me, Corsi does tell a story. It shows what is going on at the other net compared to what is coming at our net. When

you're on the plus side, a lot of good things are going on. Sometimes during the game it doesn't tell the whole story, but it certainly gives you a good indication where the play is at and where our team is at."

When offering a brief scouting report to reporters on an upcoming opponent, Housley will briefly cite data, such as scoring chances from the slot or 5-on-5 shot and goal differential. The latter two points often illustrate his "shot mentality" coaching philosophy. He wants his players to put pucks on the opposing net, while creating traffic in front of the other goalie.

"You marry it with what you see with your own eyes, you marry it with the film," Housley said. "Certainly you look at those analytics after the game with matchups, zone starts and all of those things that are indicators. If we're on the plus side that means we're doing some good things well. ... When it's coming back and you're below, there are a lot of things coming at you. We take analytics very seriously."

The conversation about data grew louder when NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman announced in January the league planned to deploy puck and player tracking technology next season.

The technology will include 14-16 antennae installed in the arena rafters; four cameras to support the tracking functionality; one sensor placed on the shoulder pads of every player on each team; and 40 pucks manufactured with a sensor inside for each game. All information will be provided to fans in real time.

The league wants to provide viewers additional insight into the sport, however, like the data that's being used to construct and manage organizations, the process will be met with some skepticism by the sport's traditionalists.

"I think it's good for the game," Pominville said. "It's something for the fans to enjoy. But again, it won't necessarily show the entire picture. It can show that Connor McDavid is this fast, but it can't show how well a guy forechecks or that sort of thing."

## **Mike Harrington: It should be obvious to Pegulas what to do with Sabres**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

March 27, 2019

This latest debacle of a Buffalo Sabres season doesn't rest solely on the shoulders of coach Phil Housley. Or General Manager Jason Botterill. It's not the fault of Vladimir Sobotka or Marco Scandella or Rasmus Ristolainen either, no matter how many times fans want to take those three names in vain.

Like the other derailed campaigns of the recent past, it starts at the top. The very top.

This is no newsflash, but the bottom line is that Terry and Kim Pegula don't know what they're doing in running a professional sports franchise and have proven that over and over.

They're business people, and pretty good ones in multiple ventures. But as for running the Sabres and the Buffalo Bills, they're fish out of water.

They've been impatient when they should have stayed the course, and now two-team president Kim Pegula said Tuesday night in Arizona she needs to be more patient – exactly when it's time for some bold changes to be made with the Sabres.

Terry Pegula then followed Kim by saying "something has to change, we don't know what." Well, what they should do is simple: Botterill should fire Housley and if he doesn't want to, he can leave as well. Botterill should then be told a president of hockey operations is going to be hired, just like the Ottawa Senators announced they were doing last week to assist GM Pierre Dorion.

And after that, the Pegulas should get out of the way and spend their time figuring out the issues with their football stadium and how to fix their dumpy arena.

A disclaimer here: The 30-minute media session with the Pegulas came in the early part of the Sabres' game at Ottawa. The questions certainly would have been even harsher and perhaps the answers would have been different had the interviews taken place with that game in the rearview mirror.

The 4-0 loss to the Senators – easily the most dysfunctional team in pro sports this side of the Miami Marlins or New York Knicks – was an all-timer for a Sabres team quitting on its coach, its fans and its city.

What happened to Jack Eichel's play-for-the-city speech Saturday in Montreal? Guess that lasted one game, the 46-shot loss Monday in New Jersey, where the Sabres dominated but could only score on Sam Reinhart's bouncer from center ice.

Even that game is rife with embarrassment. Devils goaltender Cory Schneider, mostly rendered a has-been by injuries and poor play, is 2-0 vs. the Sabres this year with a 1.00 goals-against average and .975 save percentage, stopping 79 of 81 shots in the two games.

Against the rest of the NHL this season? Schneider is 4-12-3, 3.29/.894. The Sabres made him look like a Vezina winner.

It's just going to keep getting worse for a team that's won just 14 of its last 51 games and has the NHL's worst record since Nov. 28. Detroit is in town Thursday night and it will be interesting to see a) how many people show up to KeyBank Center and b) how surly their mood gets if things go badly again.

While the Sabres essentially have packed their sticks and skates and gone home, the Red Wings have won four of five and are coming off a Western road trip that included wins at Vegas and San Jose. Yeesh.

The Sabres then play Saturday night in NYCB Live, the refurbished Nassau Coliseum, against the New York Islanders and have home games Sunday and Tuesday against Columbus and Nashville, respectively.

All three of those teams are desperate for points in the playoff race and will smell blood in the water against a Buffalo team counting the days to tee times.

No matter what Botterill said in boxing himself into a corner last month in Tampa and no matter what the Pegulas said Tuesday in Phoenix, the New Jersey and Ottawa games have to be the last straw for Housley.

They can't possibly bring him back now. This team, led by Eichel, has quit on its second straight coach. No two-game winning streak since December, no two-game streak in regulation since October and a humiliating 13-game road winless streak.

Guess it wasn't Dan Bylsma's fault after all.

The Pegulas should have had a president of hockey a long time ago. Enough of the Ted Blacks and Russ Brandons of the world. But they got spooked when Terry Pegula hired Pat LaFontaine in November 2013, and Kim Pegula ran him out before Easter the following spring in some sort of warped power struggle that's never been fully explained.

Of course, there's never much of an explanation from Kim Pegula for the litany of people she's fired with her two teams or at Pegula Sports and Entertainment, which has long reeked of a frat house/soap opera mentality while the bosses live mostly in Boca Raton, Fla., and try to run things via Skype and video conferencing.

Yet another sign of how backwards the Pegulas have things. They should be running the business and staying away from the teams.

In the last five years, they've clearly grown to love the notoriety and celebrity status of being NFL owners, freely cavorting on sidelines before games and visiting the locker room afterward, while continuing to allow the hockey team to get run into the ground.

The good news is they can still fix things. A knowledgeable president of hockey can really help. By my count, the NHL is pretty split on this issue. There are 28 team presidents in the NHL right now (none in Ottawa, Vancouver or Winnipeg), with 13 "hockey people" and 15 that were predominantly from the business side.

The hockey folks included plenty of names you would know, like Cam Neely (Boston), Brendan Shanahan (Toronto), Glen Sather (Rangers), John Davidson (Columbus) and Luc Robitaille (Los Angeles). Four GMs – Lou Lamoriello on Long Island, Don Waddell in Carolina, David Poile in Nashville and Doug Armstrong in St. Louis – do both jobs, although that's not happening here.

The Pegulas might say Botterill is already getting help and it's true he's hardly working alone. Assistant GM and Amerks GM Randy Sexton, 59, was one of the founders of the Ottawa franchises and has served as a GM for both the Senators and Florida Panthers. Fellow assistant GM Steve Greeley, 38, is on the radar to someday be a GM himself. But more help is needed for a first-time GM.

Former Los Angeles GM Dean Lombardi, who won two Stanley Cups, could have been a presidential candidate when Tim Murray was fired as GM in 2017. Lombardi's doing consulting work in Philadelphia and apparently locked in through 2020. That's the kind of person the Pegulas need.

Someone who can advise on trades, signings, a real development model and not the bizarre decisions being made this year with Lawrence Pilut, Alex Nylander, Casey Mittelstadt and Tage Thompson.

For his part, it's not a great look that Botterill has accepted a job to be part of the three-headed group running Team Canada at the World Championships next month in Slovakia. He's going to be joined by deposed NHL GMs Ron Hextall and Ron Francis, who will have plenty of time on their hands.

Botterill does not. He has to figure out who to hire as his coach. He has to prepare for the draft (and maybe actually even take a Canadian junior or two this time). He has to get Jeff Skinner re-signed and retool what's become his second straight wretched roster. It might be his final chance at it, too.

Sad as it might be for Botterill's professional development, lots of work for Team Canada and a multiweek field trip to Slovakia aren't a great idea right now.

Of course, the Pegulas will probably just tell him to Skype and video conference in when he's needed.

## **Sabres recall winger Victor Olofsson from Rochester**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 27, 2019

After watching the Buffalo Sabres score only one goal in road losses to New Jersey and Ottawa, General Manager Jason Botterill recalled Rochester's leading scorer, winger Victor Olofsson, on Wednesday.

Olofsson, 23, has a team-high 60 points, including 27 goals, in 64 games during his first season with the Amerks. He will likely be in the Sabres' lineup when they host the Detroit Red Wings in KeyBank Center on Thursday night.

The Sabres have been hit with a rash of injuries and illness over the past four days, forcing them to recall defensemen Lawrence Pilut and Will Borgen from Rochester. It remains unclear what led to Olofsson's promotion.

Evan Rodrigues left after being hit in the second period during Tuesday's 4-0 loss in Ottawa but returned to take six shifts in the third period. Tage Thompson also left early for the dressing room in the second period, only to finish the game with six shifts over the final 20 minutes.

Sabres defensemen Zach Bogosian (lower body) and Matt Hunwick (upper body) were unavailable during the two-game road trip because of injury, while an illness prevented Rasmus Ristolainen from playing Tuesday night.

There is also the possibility that Botterill wants to see if Olofsson can help the struggling Sabres. They are amid a 13-game winless streak away from KeyBank Center, have not won back-to-back games since Dec. 13 and were shut out in four of their previous nine games.

The Sabres' only goal during the road trip was Sam Reinhart's dump-in from center ice Monday in New Jersey. Though they had 46 shots on goal in a 3-1 loss to the Devils, the offense barely threatened Ottawa goalie Craig Anderson on Tuesday night.

A previous recall, winger Alex Nylander, has contributed since being promoted on the even of Jack Eichel's two-game suspension this month. Nylander, 21, has two goals and two assists with a plus-2 rating in eight games but was called for a pair of minor penalties in the shutout loss to the Senators.

Olofsson has blossomed since beginning his career in North America. A seventh-round draft pick in 2014, his stock rose significantly last season, when he scored 27 goals as a teammate of Rasmus Dahlin with Frolunda HC of the Swedish Hockey League.

Olofsson's left-handed shot has terrorized opposing goalies since he joined the Amerks. He is tied for the AHL lead with nine-game winning goals and ranks in the top 10 in points and goals. Olofsson signed his two-year, entry-level contract with the Sabres last April after finishing with 60 goals in 200 career games in the SHL.

The timing is unfortunate for the Amerks, who are three points behind Syracuse for first place in the AHL's North Division with nine regular-season games to play. Rochester hosted Lehigh Valley on Wednesday night and has two games this weekend.

## **Sabres call up Olofsson from the Amerks**

By Brayton Wilson

WGR 550

March 27, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres announced on Wednesday that the team has called up forward Victor Olofsson from the Rochester Americans.

The 23-year-old has had a fantastic first season in the American Hockey League with the Amerks, scoring 27 goals and registering 33 assists in 64 games played. As of Wednesday, Olofsson was tied for fifth place in league scoring with his 60 points, was ninth in the league with 183 shots on goal, and 23 points on the power play.

Olofsson started his 2018-19 season with 15 points (5+10) in the first 10 games, which earned him the honor as the CCM/AHL Player of the Month of October. Since then, his role on the team has grown drastically as he has found himself playing some key minutes on the power play, penalty kill and in key last minute situations. He has found a majority of his success playing this season on Rochester's second line with Rasmus Asplund and Danny O'Regan.

This move is likely a chance for Olofsson to showcase himself with the Sabres in the final handful of games in the regular season. Buffalo has six games remaining in the 2018-19 season, while the Amerks have nine remaining in the regular season.

The Amerks can clinch a playoff berth in the Calder Cup playoffs on Wednesday with a win over the Lehigh Valley Phantoms and a Belleville Senators loss to the Syracuse Crunch.

Last season in the Swedish Hockey League with the Frölunda Indians, Olofsson scored a league-high 27 goals in 50 games before signing his entry-level contract with the Sabres on April 24. He was originally selected by the Sabres as a seventh round pick (181st overall) in the 2014 NHL Draft.

## **How a Tuesday night in December set a fateful tone for the rest of the Sabres' season**

By John Vogl

The Athletic

March 28, 2019

"Tire fires exist in two forms: as fast-burning events, leading to almost immediate loss of control, and as slow-burning pyrolysis which can continue for over a decade." – Wikipedia

That about sums it up, right?

The Sabres are a tire fire. They've been burning for eight years. It seemed they finally had it under control this season, but the flames ferociously reignited and the stench was unmistakable.

So when did the latest flare-up and flameout begin? It's easy to point to the end of the 10-game winning streak. It makes for a simple transition from "playoffs" to "draft lottery." And there are certainly thin wisps of smoke starting with the 5-4 loss to Tampa Bay on Nov. 29.

But Buffalo was 3-3-3 in the next nine games and averaged three goals per outing. The Sabres rebounded from a terrible loss to Philadelphia by ending the stretch with a 3-0-1 run. They earned three out of four points on back-to-back days in Washington and Boston.

If they'd have kept that up all season, they would have remained in the playoff race – which was the preseason goal.

The beginning of the end was a 5-2 loss to Florida on Dec. 18. It had everything that defines the 2018-19 Buffalo Sabres:

\* The only goals came with Jack Eichel, Jeff Skinner and Sam Reinhart on the ice. The team lacked secondary scoring, a trait that general manager Jason Botterill chose not to address during the season.

\* Keith Yandle threw down Skinner, and the only reaction came from booing fans. Coach Phil Housley, hardly the most physical player during his career, eventually conceded his team was "soft."

\* The Sabres, leading 2-1, allowed three goals in a span of 3:44. The wheels repeatedly fell off this season as one goal turned into three over and over and over.

\* The goalies didn't get much help, but they didn't make the big save, either. The Panthers' winning goal came on a penalty shot that trickled through Carter Hutton.

\* The play that stuck the dagger in the Sabres featured a wraparound attempt and rebound goal. The players' defensive-zone awareness remains subpar regardless of who is on the bench. But flaws in Housley's game plan that were evident in Game 35 – like anytime an opponent circles the zone, the Sabres chase, lose track and are forced out of position – remain in Game 76.

So using that game on Dec. 18 as a dividing line, the Sabres have clearly been ... awful. More than awful, they're once again the worst team in the NHL. Here are key categories before and since the loss to the Panthers, with ranking when available.

Record

Before: 20-9-5, fifth in NHL.

Since: 11-27-4, last in NHL.

The Sabres are not only worse than everyone, they're significantly worse than everyone (aside from Ottawa, which just spanked Buffalo 4-0). The Sabres would need 11 more wins since mid-December just to move out of the bottom third.

## Goals

Before: 102 in 34 games, 15th.

Since: 100 in 42 games, 29th.

After ranking 31st last season, it looked like the Sabres were on the upswing. The opening 34 games featured celebrations and memories of high-scoring days.

And since then ...

Skinner, who has one goal in the last 19 games, has predictably fallen off his 58-goal pace. Despite the slump, he's still the Sabres' leading goal-scorer since mid-December.

Expected to carry the Sabres, the big three of Eichel, Skinner and Reinhart averaged 1.35 goals, 3.29 points and a plus-1.24 per game heading into Florida. Since then, they're averaging .88 goals, 1.98 points and a minus-1.55 per game. The burden was simply too heavy.

Ristolainen, who went from producing points to watching goal after goal enter his net, aptly summed up his play as "shit" this month. Other players who have seen their point production fall include Pominville, who was taken off Eichel's line, and Okposo.

Mittelstadt continues to shuffle through his rookie season. Sheary has picked up some, though it's still just a 14-goal, 38-point pace since the Florida game. Buffalo hoped for more from the second-line winger.

Then there are the guys who have never produced such as Thompson and Sobotka.

## Goals allowed

Before: 97 in 34 games, tied for 11th.

Since: 151 in 42 games, 31st.

Make no mistake, the Sabres have earned their spot at the bottom of the barrel. They've allowed four goals or more in 23 of the last 42 games. They gave up three goals in another nine.

In other words, a team scoring just 2.4 goals per game has allowed more than that 76 percent of the time. No wonder they can't win.

"It's critical mistakes that we make every night," Eichel said.

Carter Hutton's numbers have sunk from 13-8-2 with a .919 save percentage entering the Florida game to 4-15-3 with an .899 since. Linus Ullmark has fallen from 7-1-3, .915 to 7-12-1, .900.

There's no denying Hutton and Ullmark need more help. Once the Sabres made it obvious they wouldn't cover the goalies' backside – literally or figuratively – the netminders began leaning away from shooters and opening holes.

But, again, the goalies didn't do themselves any favors. Hutton ranks 46th on high-danger scoring chances with a .808 save percentage. Ullmark is 40th at .814. Dallas' Ben Bishop leads the category at .880.

## Five-on-five goals

Before: 69-65

Since: 72-103

The surprising thing isn't that Buffalo is getting clobbered at five-on-five. It's that it's happening despite playing relatively even.

The Sabres' Corsi since the Florida game is 50.85 percent, which ranks 13th in the NHL. But they've given up 56 high-danger goals and scored 40. When they make a mistake in their own zone, the puck goes in.

One-goal games

Before: 11-2-5

Since: 6-6-4

Overtime record

Before: 8-5

Since: 4-4

While the lack of results in one-goal games and overtime is concerning, what's worse is the drop-off in one-goal games and OT.

Early in the year, the Sabres at least gave themselves a chance to win by staying within a goal 53 percent of the time. Since mid-December, they've done it just 38 percent of the time.

So they struggle just to have a one-goal game and then they lose more than they win. In a league where "every point matters," the Sabres have coughed up plenty.

Record when scoring first

Before: 14-1-4

Since: 9-8-2

Even a good start usually gets doomed by the end of the second period. The Sabres have been outscored 59-36 during the middle period since the Florida game. They've been outscored 54-33 during third periods.

Penalty killing

Before: 83 percent, 6th

Since: 78.2 percent, tied for 23rd

No one has felt the brunt of Buffalo's penalties more than Ullmark.

The goalie entered the Florida game ranked fifth in the NHL with a .918 short-handed save percentage, stopping 45 of 49 shots. He's faced one fewer shot since then (48), but he's stopped only 36. His .800 save percentage since mid-December ranks 54th out of 60 goalies.

After watching Ristolainen get torched early on, the coaching staff has cut the defenseman's penalty-kill time by 46 seconds per game. Here were the numbers leading into the Florida game ...

... and since.

Road record

Before: 9-6-3

Since: 2-17-2

While fans in Buffalo have tired of the Sabres, fans in other cities can't wait to see them.

In the opening 18 road games, the Sabres' goal differential was minus-1. In the 21 games since then, it's minus-38. Yes, that's the worst in the league.

Here are the players' road stats prior to the Dec. 18 home game against Florida ...

... and since.

Opponents have used their matchup advantage to neutralize Skinner. Sheary has been quiet. Mittelstadt, Pominville, Okposo and Thompson are almost invisible.

Housley hasn't found a way to create good matchups. He hasn't inspired a team that has quit on him.

As fans know, it's been all downhill since mid-December.

"Something," owner Terry Pegula said, "has to change."

## Summer dreams: 13 free agent fits for the Sabres that range from feasible to fantasy

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

March 27, 2019

Now that the Sabres' season is coming to a mostly quiet end, along with the usual disappointment that surrounds another season without the playoffs, it's time for what's becoming an annual spring tradition in Buffalo as we look ahead at ways the team can add to its roster in the offseason.

Much of what Jason Botterill has been able to do to build up the Sabres roster has been accomplished through trades. You'd have to think that route will be taken again, but for now, let's get a sense of any additions he could make through the free agent market.

July 1 hasn't been a bonanza day for Botterill since he took over. Perhaps it's been a big help for the Rochester Americans, but it's been more reserved for the Sabres. As we see below, they've opted to go for goalie help and forward depth and have had debatable results given how things worked out.

2017

Chad Johnson, Benoit Pouliot, Seth Griffith, Jacob Josefson, Matt Tennyson, Kyle Crisculo, Kevin Porter, Adam Wilcox

2018

Carter Hutton, Scott Wilson, Scott Wedgewood

(College and international free agents were excluded from this list; apologies to Lawrence Pilut and Andrew Oglevie)

As we look ahead to free agent options in 2019, what are we to take from what's a pretty limited background of signings? Ryan Stimson offered up a look at some cap-friendly help that could be mined for success, so I'll stay away from discussing Joonas Donskoi and Jordan Weal. I'll take a wider look at who to watch out there with some regard for the Pegulas' purse strings and the salary cap.

Let's start by addressing the biggest needs the Sabres have. There may be a few.

They need more scoring depth and better top-six forward help. They desperately need scoring wingers and they've got to figure out how to get the defense on the same page when it comes to mobility, puck-handling, and being more physical in their own zone.

According to CapFriendly.com, the Sabres are projected to have \$22,337,977 of salary cap space for 2019-2020. If/when they sign Jeff Skinner to a contract, you can expect that number to drop anywhere between \$7 million and \$9 million, which means they won't have a ton of flexibility to meet their needs through free agency.

Botterill has said all along that he'll make deals for younger players if he can, which would mean offer sheets, but we don't live in a time where those happen on the regular in the NHL. Regardless, let's look at who could be out there at the beginning of July that meets the Sabres needs.

Don't get any big ideas, they're not gonna happen

Erik Karlsson, D, San Jose Sharks, 28

Yeah, it's a pipe dream, but the superstar defenseman hasn't signed an extension with the Sharks as of yet. He's been banged up this season, but he's continued to be one of the best defensemen in the league. He's the ideal kind of player to add to a defensive unit that wants to play the kind of hockey that values the type of defenseman Karlsson is.

But.

It's possible he doesn't even make it to July 1. The Sharks gave up a ton to acquire him and he's done wonders to add to their attack. Also, it's going to cost a fortune to bring him in. Sure, if Skinner isn't brought back there's money to be had and the Sabres have even more money coming off the books next summer. They'll have to pay Rasmus Dahlin a monster deal in the near future and are looking at a sizable raise to Sam Reinhart, too. Karlsson will be 29 by the time next season starts and the Sabres have more than enough Swedish flavor and influence to make it fun.

Artemi Panarin, LW, Columbus Blue Jackets, 26

In a perfect world, this is the player the Sabres go after the hardest to solve what ails them. But is Buffalo located in South Florida, the New York metro area or the California coast, where it's believed Panarin wishes to play the most? No, it is not. Ah, dang.

Joe Pavelski, C/RW, San Jose Sharks, 34

It felt disingenuous to not include the Sharks captain, although it seems highly unlikely he would leave San Jose after this season. But we're being thorough, so let's take a look. Pavelski is still a great player and he'll turn 35 in mid-July. He's a consistent 60 to 70 point player and has been since 2010-2011. He has 37 goals this season and has broken the 30-goal barrier four times, with 41 in 2013-2014. He's great. He's also probably not likely to bolt out of San Jose before getting another shot at winning a Stanley Cup. Even at his age he'd be a dynamite player to have on a short-term deal.

No alarms and no surprises, please

Matt Duchene, C, Columbus Blue Jackets, 27

If there was one very obvious weakness the Sabres had this season, it was at center behind Jack Eichel. Casey Mittelstadt was thrown in over his head in his first year. Evan Rodrigues did an admirable job by being steady, but the points weren't always there. Patrik Berglund bailed and Vladimir Sobotka and Johan Larsson aren't scorers. Duchene plays with speed, he produces points (55-70 per season), and he plays center. He also is coming off a contract that paid him an AAV of \$6 million and is probably due for a raise. Buffalo needs to score more and play with more speed and he addresses both of those needs well. If Skinner winds up not staying with Buffalo, an all-in push for Duchene could push Buffalo to the front of the pack chasing after him this summer.

If there are reasons to be concerned, he doesn't drive possession and he gets mostly offensive zone starts, according to NaturalStatTrick.com. Defense is an issue for the Sabres, but they really need offense.

Jordan Eberle, RW, New York Islanders, 28

The former Oilers draft pick is having a down season (32 points in 72 games), which is a reason to be worried, but the bulk of his career he's been a 40 to 60 point player. He's quick, he's shifty, and he's a righty shot. The bank won't be broken to bring him in, ideally, as his current deal pays him \$6 million per year and it'd be hard to see him get a raise off of that. But he is 28 (turns 29 in May) and as we've seen, those years close to or after age 30 sees production decline, which makes his offensive drop-off this season worrisome.

Jake Gardiner, D, Toronto Maple Leafs, 28

Since Karlsson is a pipe dream and there is a need for more defensemen who can push the puck up the ice, there's Gardiner, who always seems to be the first guy Leafs fans are ready to jettison. Nowadays that's got more to do with Toronto needing to re-sign Mitch Marner and Kasper Kapanen, but he's been a steady offensive player for them for a while, as James Mirtle wrote about recently.

Gardiner checks all the boxes for what the Sabres are looking for from a defenseman. Like Karlsson, he'll be 29 when next season begins. He'll get paid, but he won't get Karlsson-level paid. He's dealt with a back injury late this season and he's played a ton since the Leafs acquired his rights from Anaheim in 2010.

Kevin Hayes , C, Winnipeg Jets, 26

So if Matt Duchene isn't the guy to solve things, perhaps Hayes is. He's a Boston-area guy, which helps make Jack Eichel happy, but he also went to Boston College which goes against the whole BU thing the Sabres have going on. He'll turn 27 in May and he's been a steady 40 to 50 point producer with the Rangers and Jets.

At 6-foot-5, 216-pounds, Hayes would give the Sabres a physically large center, something they lost when Patrik Berglund departed the team. He wouldn't be a faceoff savior (career 45.1 percent) but the scoring makes him an ideal middle-six forward. As long as Casey Mittelstadt develops the way he's expected, Hayes makes a lot of sense.

Ryan Dzingel, F, Columbus Blue Jackets, 27

The Blue Jackets went for it, hey? Anyhow, Dzingel really made a name for himself this season with Ottawa and now with Columbus. He's scored 20-or-more goals the past two seasons and has a career-high in points this season. He, uh, doesn't drive possession and has gotten heavier offensive zone starts in Columbus.

He could totally be a late-bloomer that's taken advantage of getting an opportunity (something the Sabres admire in players) and he's got the college hockey background too (Ohio State). He's not a top-six answer, but if you want to make a team deeper with more scoring ability at not too high of a price, he's going to be on a lot of teams' shopping lists.

Gustav Nyquist , RW, San Jose Sharks, 29

The positives on Nyquist are that he's been a steady 40 to 50 point guy throughout his career in Detroit and now with San Jose. The shifty Swede scored 21 goals last season and had 28 in his first full NHL season in 2013-2014. The downside is that thanks to a three-year stay at the University of Maine and two full AHL seasons after that, he'll be 30 by the time next season begins. In eight NHL seasons, six full ones, he has more than 300 points and 128 goals.

Anders Lee, LW, New York Islanders, 28

You have to think after the Islanders watched homegrown stars Kyle Okposo and John Tavares walk away in free agency there's no way Lee will do the same. The Isles captain scored 40 goals last season and 34 the year before. This season he's been down, but the Islanders are better in Barry Trotz's system and Lee still has 27 goals and 47 points. He's another former college player (Notre Dame) but there's no way the Islanders have to deal with another captain leaving in the summer... do they?

Mats Zuccarello, RW, Dallas Stars, 31

The incredibly skilled Norwegian will turn 32 before the start of next season, but he's been a steady point producer since he joined the NHL in 2010. He's put up 354 points in just over 500 games played. He's more of a set-up guy than a goal scorer but has been a 50 to 60 point guy the past five seasons before injuries popped up on him this year. He's smaller, but he's speedy and did I mention the skill? A shorter-term deal seems more likely given his age, which could make him a better target for Buffalo.

Wayne Simmonds, RW, Nashville Predators, 30

Ask around the NHL and you'll find that just about everyone loves Wayne Simmonds because he does just about everything. He scores goals, he hits opponents, and he'll fight if he has to. He's played hard since the start of his career in 2008-2009, but the problem with all that is it comes at a physical cost and those harder miles can wear anyone out. His points are down this season (29 in 74 games with the Flyers and Predators) and he's got just two points in 12 games since being traded to Nashville. He's probably the exact kind of depth player the Sabres need, but a big money, long-term contract would come with a lot of worries.

Brock Nelson, C, New York Islanders, 27

A lot of what I said about Lee applies to Nelson as well. He's a touch younger, he's homegrown, and he also got his start in the college ranks (North Dakota). He's a big guy, listed at 6-foot-3 and 212 pounds. Like Hayes, he isn't overwhelmingly good at draws (career 46 percent win percentage). He's in the midst of a career-year with a high of 50 points after a down season with 35 last year. Generally he's a 40 to 45 point player but he's found a little more this season. He's an intriguing player but would have to think he'd be further down the center wish list.

## **Prospect Victor Olofsson joins reeling Sabres**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 27, 2019

BUFFALO – High-scoring Sabres prospect Victor Olofsson has finally earned a look from the big club.

The reeling Sabres, who have lost 17 out of the last 20 games, recalled Olofsson from the Rochester Americans on Wednesday. The Swedish winger will likely make his NHL debut Thursday against the Detroit Red Wings at KeyBank Center.

Olofsson, 23, has enjoyed a terrific first season with the Amerks, scoring 27 goals and 60 points, both team highs, in 64 games.

That offense could certainly help the Sabres, who have scored just one goal in the last two games and been shut out four times in nine outings.

Olofsson, a seventh-round pick in 2014, 181st overall, led the Swedish Hockey League with 27 goals last season. He roared into the AHL this year, scoring five goals and 15 points in the first nine games and solidifying his place as one of the Sabres' top prospects.

His presence should make Thursday's game a little more interesting. The Sabres, losers of four straight contests, are playing out the string. Six games are left this season.

Four months ago today, the Sabres rattled off their 10th consecutive win and stood atop the NHL. Their resurgence was the talk of the league.

After years of futility, they had finally arrived, right? Sure, they probably wouldn't finish first overall, but they would make the playoffs, a major accomplishment by their standards.

You know what transpired over the next 51 games. Since Nov. 28, the Sabres have compiled a wretched 14-30-7 mark, the league's worst record.

Their tumble down the standings has been nothing short of stunning.

Thursday's ugly 4-0 loss to the hapless, 31st-place Ottawa Senators cemented March as one of the worst months in franchise history.

"We stunk up the building tonight," Sabres coach Phil Housley told reporters in Ottawa. "We have a game plan in place, we didn't execute it. ... That's not winning hockey."

Incredibly, that was the Sabres' 13th consecutive road loss, the most since the Chicago Blackhawks dropped 16 straight in 2003-04.

Just a few weeks ago, unless the Sabres totally imploded, Housley's job seemed safe. But what do they do now?

Speaking to reporters Tuesday at the NFL owners' meetings, Sabres owner Terry Pegula said he can justify bringing Housley back for a third season.

"He's a young coach," Pegula said. "He was a great player and I think he can grow as a coach."

Despite Housley's lack of success, Pegula, who has had five coaches in just over six years, might finally be realizing the Sabres must commit to something and stick to it.

Less than two years ago, Housley, a Hall of Fame defenseman, was the league's hottest assistant as the Nashville Predators roared to the Stanley Cup final.

"I think (general manager Jason Botterill) has said it pretty well when he he supports Phil," Pegula said. "Phil communicates with the players well. Are we happy with how the season is going? Absolutely not. You can ask anybody on the team.

"So something has to change. We don't know what. But we're all going to put our heads together and talk about it."

The Sabres haven't made the playoffs since 2011. If the Carolina Hurricanes make it this season for the first time since 2009, the Sabres will own the NHL's longest drought, a dubious distinction.

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The Sabres had Wednesday off.

## 'A pretty surreal moment': Borgen, a former Moorhead hockey player, discusses NHL debut

By Chris Murphy

Inforum

March 27, 2019

MOORHEAD — Former Moorhead High School hockey player Will Borgen was eating breakfast at the rink in Rochester, N.Y., on Tuesday when he was called up to the office of Rochester Americans coach Chris Taylor. Borgen is in his first full professional hockey season with the Americans, an affiliate of the Buffalo Sabres.

Borgen began his Tuesday expecting to go to practice, go home and get ready for a game Wednesday. Turns out he had to get ready for a game that night, as Taylor informed him the Sabres had recalled the defenseman and he may have to play that night.

He was going to the NHL.

"I was really excited, obviously nervous too," Borgen said. "I didn't know if I was playing for sure, but I had a feeling I was. They told me to be ready. I was nervous the entire time, but obviously still super excited. The NHL was a longtime goal."

Borgen drove home to pack, calling his mom, dad and siblings on the way. A car was called to drive Borgen to Ottawa, Ont. He had five hours to sit and think about what was happening.

Borgen's phone had other plans, as it was flooded with text messages on the drive.

"It's a pretty cool thing because you get so many texts from family and friends that are excited for you and congratulating you," Borgen said. "It's really nice to have all the support. You think back to the people who help you get here like your coaches, family and parents. It's just a cool thing to have all the people involved."

Borgen found out when he got to Ottawa that he was going to play. He's not sure if it was the players or the equipment manager, but his helmet was hidden from him during warmups. The team also let him go out on the ice alone for a few laps during the warmup, which a lot of teams do for a player's first game.

"It's cool. You're just out there in your first NHL game alone," Borgen said. "It's a pretty surreal moment. It's also kind of weird because you're out there alone and it's funny."

Borgen had 21 shifts, 14 minutes, 54 seconds of ice time and three hits in a 4-0 loss for Buffalo. He was not on the ice for any of the four goals. It only took Borgen a few seconds to get his first hit.

"I just tried to get into the game early and the best is to go out there and get a hit," Borgen said. "I saw an opportunity to give a guy a little bump and tried to do it right away to get into the game. Once that first shift happened, the nerves went away."

Borgen became the seventh former Moorhead hockey player to play in the NHL. The 2015 Moorhead graduate joined former Spuds Jason Blake, Ryan Kraft, Matt Cullen, Mark Cullen, Brian Lee and Chris VandeVelde to play in the NHL. He was the 54th Minnesota native to play in the NHL this season as well.

The Moorhead boys hockey coaching staff went to Buffalo Wild Wings in Moorhead to watch the game. Moorhead head coach Jon Ammerman was supposed to buy a car Tuesday, but cancelled once he heard Borgen was going to play in his NHL debut. The staff ran into some former players at Buffalo Wild Wings, who were also there to see their former teammate play in the NHL.

"It was fun to watch. I think that'll be the first of many NHL games he'll get to play," Ammerman said. "You want to see the kids succeed in whatever their dreams are. Will's dream was to play in the NHL. But (former Moorhead hockey player) Alex Mehnert was talking to me last night about him wanting to be a pilot and the steps he was taking for that. No matter what, it's just cool seeing kids you coached get their dreams."

Borgen isn't sure if the Sabres are going to keep him up for the rest of the season, but he said he'll be back in Rochester for the American Hockey League playoffs either way. The meeting with Taylor was the one thing he said he would never forget.

"As soon as my coach called me up and told me, I got really excited," Borgen said. "It was a pretty crazy moment. I wasn't expecting it at all. It was out of the blue. To get told you'll be up in the NHL, it's a pretty awesome moment."