



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

April 4, 2019

Sabres face the Senators on 8-game slide

Associated Press

April 4, 2019

Ottawa Senators (29-45-6, eighth in the Atlantic Division) vs. Buffalo Sabres (31-39-10, seventh in the Atlantic Division)

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

BOTTOM LINE: Buffalo heads into the matchup against Ottawa as losers of eight straight games.

The Sabres are 9-12-5 against the rest of their division. Buffalo scores 2.6 goals per game, the fewest in the Eastern Conference. Jeff Skinner leads the team with 38 total goals.

The Senators are 10-15-2 against the rest of their division. Ottawa ranks seventh in the NHL shooting 10.0 percent and averaging 3.0 goals on 29.7 shots per game. In their last meeting on March 26, Ottawa won 4-0.

TOP PERFORMERS: Carter Hutton leads the Sabres with a minuszero in 49 games played this season. Skinner has two goals and one assist over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

LAST 10 GAMES: Senators: 6-4-0, averaging 3.3 goals, six assists, three penalties and 7.9 penalty minutes while giving up 2.7 goals per game with a .921 save percentage.

Sabres: 1-8-1, averaging 1.9 goals, 3.3 assists, 2.4 penalties and 5.1 penalty minutes while giving up 3.9 goals per game with a .887 save percentage.

Sabres Injuries: Marco Scandella: day to day (foot), Zach Bogosian: day to day (undisclosed), Rasmus Ristolainen: day to day (illness).

Senators Injuries: Zack Smith: day to day (undisclosed).

Q&A: Carter Hutton reflects on decision to sign with Sabres, future outlook

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

April 3, 2019

In the final days of an unpredictable season, Carter Hutton has not lost sight of why he chose to sign with the Buffalo Sabres.

The 33-year-old goalie was free to join any NHL team last summer after an outstanding season in St. Louis and reportedly had offers from a few playoff contenders, including Boston. Yet, Hutton chose a three-year contract from the Sabres, who had just won only 25 games and had not qualified for the postseason since 2011.

Buffalo presented a unique opportunity for him to play more and potentially help turn around a struggling franchise. Hutton had a .936 save percentage during the Sabres' 10-game winning streak in November, only to enter Thursday with a mark of .908 – his lowest since an 18-game stint with Nashville in 2014-15.

Still, Hutton should reach his goal of appearing in 50 games this season and established himself as a leader in the dressing room. Though the Sabres entered Wednesday's games 28th in the NHL and amid an eight-game winless skid, Hutton expressed optimism for the franchise's future.

The Buffalo News caught up with Hutton to discuss his decision to sign with the Sabres, playing for a young team and his outlook for the future

BN: With the way the season has gone, do you still believe signing with the Sabres was the right fit for you at this point in your career?

CH: At times it's been hard. I could have gone somewhere and been more protected, but I wanted to play more and I wanted to compete. I wanted to be part of turning this thing around. Obviously, we took a good step forward, but I'm not done here. We have a lot of work to do, and I'm excited for the future for sure. Obviously we're going to finish strong here and hopefully we can finish with a couple of wins.

BN: When you signed with Buffalo, did you expect a young team such as this could potentially give up so many scoring chances?

CH: I knew what I was coming from was going to be different, for sure. I guess it's been unpredictable. I've had to alter my game a little bit because of that, but it is what it is. That's part of the growing pains of a younger team. For the most part, I went from being the average age on my last team to one of the really older guys, right? It's definitely been a change of pace in that sense.

BN: How did you alter your game?

CH: I thought, when I played in St. Louis, I was a little more conservative because it was a lot more predictable. We didn't really give up a whole heck of a lot. You had to make your three to four quality saves a game and the rest was predictable. A lot of outside shots. We had a veteran defensive corps and veteran forwards who really knew how to stay structured in the D zone, where here I have to keep more momentum in my game because we do give up a lot more secondary chances and seam passes. I've had to be quicker on my feet. It's a happy medium. You still need that conservativeness because that's my strength, but I do have the athletic ability to make secondary saves. I guess it's been a feeling-out process. You can kind of sense the way the game is going for us.

BN: Was there a certain point in the season when you realized you needed to change your game, or did you quickly come to that conclusion from the start?

CH: Not necessarily. Even early, I think the game has been pretty consistent for us from the start. It got overshadowed a bit because we won a lot of games there and everything was great. At the same time, we were still giving up similar stuff. Personally, I thought at one point I wasn't playing as well as I had, but it's a long year

as well. I don't think, by any means, I played bad, but sometimes you get a bad bounce and you're trying to do too much.

BN: Did you have a learning curve coming in here as a leader in the dressing room?

CH: It's tough. I've always been a vocal leader on teams I've played for and you try to be a good locker room guy, but obviously, this year. I've played a lot more games. Sometimes when you're playing it's more difficult to be the voice in the room in a sense because I need to focus on my job. I have to take care of business and stop pucks. That's the number one issue. I think it's been a fun transition. We have a lot of good, young kids. We have great personnel. At times, it's definitely been frustrating and guys have shown that, but at the same time, we have a good group of guys and we are still young. If you look at it – I know from the outside looking in, it's tough – but at the same time, we've won a lot of games. We're in a better place than last year. If we could tweak a few things here or there. What's done is done. We have to finish strong. For us, moving forward, we have a lot of talent and depth on this team.

BN: Even through the difficult moments, you and other veterans have referenced the positive chemistry with this team. What has allowed you to maintain that the past few months?

CH: Our older guys do a good job of communicating and keeping the younger guys in line. Misery loves company. I think the biggest thing is when there was anything where guys were negative or anything like that, our older guys and young guys have learned that we need to snuff that out right away. We've tried to stay upbeat and control what we can. It's obviously been a roller coaster of a year, but at the end of the day, we're professional athletes. We get paid to do this and we get paid really well. The criticism and the tough times that come with it are part of becoming a veteran pro. The majority of it is making sure you come to work every day, making sure you are getting better and finding a way to help this team win. We know we have a city that loves us. I know it's been tough at times, but they want to win just like we do.

Q: Do you feel good about your game heading into the offseason?

CH: It's a tricky year to look at my numbers. I feel like this is a real year for me to find out it's a team sport. You go as the team goes. I think, for me, I've prided myself on giving us a chance to win every night. We talk about the chances – I'm sure we could dive into analytics and you could really get into it – but I know what I bring to the table. I think management does and the guys in our room. I'm just trying to get better. I'm coming on 50 games here, which is what I wanted to do. It's been good. There are obviously games where there are things I want to change and others where I think I was a big difference-maker. I want to continue to bring that, and take this summer to get better and stronger and learn from this year playing this many games. Help this team get into the playoffs next year.

Kim Pegula talks sports betting, fan strategy for Bills, Sabres

By Tim O'Shei

The Buffalo News

April 4, 2019

DANA POINT, Calif. – The topic of sports and betting was long a taboo for team owners and top executives.

Not anymore.

Today, with the NFL and other leagues moving into Las Vegas, and with more states legalizing sports gambling, it's a necessary discussion — and Kim Pegula is participating in it.

The co-owner and president of the Buffalo Bills and Sabres was here in Southern California Wednesday as a speaker at a major sports industry convention.

Pegula, who participated in a session on customer engagement, was asked what fan-focused factors she is keeping in mind as the Bills explore the possibility of building a new stadium, or perhaps renovating the existing one.

"Sports betting is certainly a conversation that we're having," she said, "and how does that change the (in-game) experience?"

Sports betting in New York will soon be legal at four upstate casinos. For the moment, that means fans would have to physically drive to those casinos to place bets. But many lawmakers are pushing for sports betting to be allowed on mobile phones. If enacted, that would allow fans to place wagers from inside stadiums and arenas.

Therein lies Pegula's interest. As Bills executives shape ideas for a new or renovated stadium, she said, they are considering the type of technology that would need to be in place to support online betting.

They are also thinking about creating common areas where fans can watch not only their games, but other games, too. Pegula expects that legalized sports betting will create more cross-team interest, much as fantasy sports has done.

"If you are a Vikings fan, you don't necessarily watch a Bills game," she said. "Why would you, right? But with fantasy, and then now with sports betting, now we're going to get eyeballs on our game, and our fans, and that's going to actually really expand our market."

Pegula shared those thoughts with a crowd of approximately 500 to 600 sports executives, marketers and agents who gathered for the CAA World Congress of Sports, an event hosted by the publication Sports Business Journal. Pegula was part of a session called "Connecting with Fans on a League and Team Level." Her co-panelist, NFL Chief Operating Officer Maryann Turcke, reinforced Pegula's interest in sports betting.

"It's an important thing to talk about," Turcke said. "We do believe that it is likely to be the next (form of) engagement, and how that manifests itself, no one quite understands yet."

Turcke pointed out that in New Jersey, where mobile betting is legal, there are "a lot" of in-venue bets placed at an average of about \$10.

"It's a fun way to engage," she said, also pointing out that as the league and teams explore sports betting, "the integrity of the game becomes paramount to everything."

In a brief interview with The News after the session, Pegula expanded on her view of sports betting.

"I don't think that we've been shy about saying that we are for sports gambling in New York State, and especially in-venue," Pegula said.

The News previously reported that Pegula Sports and Entertainment had a lobbying firm working the state Capitol in March, and sources said they were advocating for online sports wagering in venues.

This week at the conference in California, shortly before grabbing a plane back east for the Sabres' final home game Thursday night, Pegula took care to emphasize that sports betting is in its infancy, and "where it ends up being at the end of the day, we don't know."

But if lawmakers eventually expand it to legalize online betting, she wants to be sure the teams have the ability to offer it.

"I am for having the opportunity," she said. "I'm not saying I'm necessarily morally for betting, but we need to have that opportunity to provide (the) amenity for our fans. And we should be the ones to be able to have that opportunity, because it's our game."

The sports betting conversation was only a few minutes of the half-hour session, which was emceed by NFL Network host Lindsay Rhodes. Much of the time was spent focusing on fan engagement strategies planned to celebrate the NFL's 100th season in 2019.

Pegula noted that the Bills' 60th anniversary coincides with the league's centennial mark. She shared a few of the team's plans:

Neighboring Rochester has an interesting place in NFL history. The Rochester Jeffersons football team, which existed from 1898 to 1925, was one of the NFL's original clubs. To celebrate that, some of the Bills' picks in the NFL draft later this month will be announced from Rochester. Former Bills linebacker Darryl Talley will be in Rochester to announce the team's fourth- and fifth-round picks, and Mayor Lovely Warren will announce the sixth-round selection.

The Bills will partner with Kaleida Health's hospitals, which includes Oishei Children's Hospital, to give an NFL 100th anniversary baby blanket, with a Bills logo, to every newborn.

Inspired by the frequent requests the Bills receive to allow wedding photos at the stadium, the team is working on a promotion that will allow one couple to actually get married at the stadium during halftime. Plans are still being developed, Pegula told The News in a brief interview after the session, but will likely include a way for fans to help select the winning couple.

"Hopefully we can get some of the alumni to be in the wedding," Pegula said, adding that as the team's staff has worked on the promotion, someone threw in this idea: "Hey, I wonder if Jim Kelly can officiate the wedding?"

Sabres' Skinner is still open to staying in Buffalo

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

April 3, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Many fans are worried that Jeff Skinner is going to not even give Buffalo a chance and leave in unrestricted free agency this summer.

Skinner has told me numerous times how much he enjoys this city and enjoys playing here, but in the past month or two, things have turned really ugly around here. The losses have been piling up and Skinner has slumped.

The winger does have a career-high 38 goals, but he's only scored two in his last 23 games, and eight in his last 32. Skinner didn't want to talk too much about contracts because his focus is on the final two games, but he did say he's still very open to remaining in Buffalo, "Yes, for sure. I'm a Sabre, I'm part of this team and those type of things will sort themselves out, but I'm not closed out to anything."

Skinner has stayed consistent throughout the season and not said much about free agency. He said, "For me, I'm part of the team. I think in the midst of a season you're trying your best as a player to try to help the team win and that's my focus the whole season and in particular the last couple of months when things haven't been going our way and that will continue to be my focus the last two games and then after that, you can reflect and think about the season as much as you want and break it down."

Skinner said he's not an overly superstitious man, but he did change his routine up a little. He said when it goes that long, it can get to you a little bit, "When you get into a slump like that maybe it snowballs a little bit and you start thinking about it."

Skinner has never scored 40 goals in a season. He said that's not an individual thing, "For me it shows how well the line is or how you're playing as a team. To create and score goals in this league you need all five guys on the ice."

It's possible Thursday could be Skinner's last home game in Buffalo, but it could also be the final home game for many players including Jason Pominville, who has played 731 games as a Sabre. Rasmus Ristolainen has played 422 games in Buffalo, while Zengus Girgensons has 418. They too could be wrapping up their careers as a Buffalo Sabre.

Phil Housley held an optional practice on Wednesday. Ottawa wraps up Buffalo's home schedule on Thursday.

Will Borgen was on emergency recall and went back to Rochester late Wednesday afternoon.

'Broke Please Help God Bless': The story of the Sabres fixture that many fans don't even notice

John Vogl

The Athletic

April 4, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. – The Sabres game is underway and foot traffic outside KeyBank Center has slowed to a trickle, so Allen Barraclough packs his worldly possessions.

The bucket, a mix of aluminum and corrosion, is lined with a sheet of worn plastic. He folds the excess over the night's donations, protecting his money from winter breezes and cold intentions. He turns over the two milk crates that had combined to serve as an altar, places the bucket inside, and straps his small backpack over both shoulders.

Tucking away his cardboard calling card – a sign that reads "BROKE PLEASE HELP GOD BLESS" – the 51-year-old Tonawanda native grabs a crate in each hand and shuffles away from the Sabres' arena.

After entering the nearby Tim Hortons in HarborCenter, Barraclough reaches into his backpack. He pulls out a small transistor radio and its silver antenna, plugs in cheap earbuds and begins sorting his money.

A block away, forward Tage Thompson extends the Sabres' early lead over Florida.

"Whooo! 2-0 Buffalo!" Barraclough, sitting alone, says excitedly. "Come on, Buffalo, we need it. Yes! We need it."

He finishes sorting before the first period ends, pulls a hood over his Bills hat, wraps a scarf around his neck and heads back into the January night. He eventually arrives at his destination behind a nearby restaurant, where he slides open the door to the fenced-in dumpster, walks through and closes the gate behind him.

Barraclough sees the skepticism on the faces of many Sabres fans on game days. He stands about 500 feet from the arena, on the sidewalk of Jim Kelley Way. It's one of three main thoroughfares to the arena entrance, so thousands of people pass by on their way to KeyBank Center.

Only two dozen or so pay him any mind. Some glance into the bucket but not at him. A couple holding hands split when reaching him and reunited without breaking stride.

Barraclough (pronounced Bear-a-claw) has been stationed in this spot for two or three seasons. He shares the area with a ticket broker who goes by the code name Ned.

"I've heard a few people say, 'You're still broke?'" Ned said. "I remember one fan gave him a jersey. He put it on and people were saying, 'You don't look broke. You've got a jersey.' So he took it off."

Barraclough's outfit hasn't changed this season. Black sneakers. White socks. Black and gray flannel sleep pants. A black hooded sweatshirt covered by a gray and blue Bills jacket, topped by a black winter jacket. A black beanie with a Bills logo covers his head, black gloves cover his hands and a white cross secured by a paper clip dangles from his neck.

Though he skipped a few bitter February games, Barraclough is otherwise out front two hours before puck drop, whether it's sunny and 50 or single digits and snowy. He heads back to the spot late in the game to seek donations from fans leaving the arena.

He was one of them as a child. His uncle worked in Memorial Auditorium, and he'd get Sabres tickets for Barraclough, his sister and their dad. That was a long time ago.

Though most ignore his stoic gaze, he quickly smiles when someone says hi. He tells of a woman who regularly attends games.

"I told her my name," he said. "She knows my name, Allen. Every time she comes by, she gives me some money and she gives me a hug. I give her a hug back. I go up to her and give her a hug, and then before she goes to

the game we talk about the Sabres, and then before she goes I give her another hug and I give her husband a shake.

"I bet you anybody else tries it, she wouldn't let nobody else do it except me. She wouldn't trust anybody. She would not give anybody money except me – 100 percent, I'm telling you. She's a very nice lady. Her husband's very nice, too. I know if somebody else tried it, she says no, and her husband would be right there telling him, 'Leave my wife alone.' I know 100 percent no one else would want to try it. They wouldn't dare. She would go to the police. I know that."

It's nice to have that trust.

"Because I don't do things bad," he said.

There are an estimated 700,000 homeless people in the United States and Canada, including 5,500 in Western New York. Homelessness is often an afterthought in Buffalo, a commuter city where people drive to their destination and get right back in their cars. It's not a walking city like New York, Toronto, San Francisco or Vancouver, where people living on the street is an everyday sight.

Barracough is in his conspicuous spot on the morning of Feb. 9. The Sabres are hosting Detroit at 1 p.m. in a Saturday matinee. It's 20 degrees and overcast as fans hustle toward the arena doors.

Some slow down. A teenage girl with her parents drops a bill in Barracough's bucket. A middle-aged man with his son follows suit. A woman on her phone stops in front of Barracough and reaches into her purse. There are donations from fans wearing the jerseys of Pat LaFontaine, Michael Peca and Jack Eichel. More than once, families walk past Barracough and stop, with the adults giving the kids cash so they can go back and contribute.

A half-hour before the game and 90 minutes into his shift, Barracough blows into his gloves and rocks from side to side to warm up.

As the puck drops in the arena, he packs up and heads over to Tim Hortons. This time, a thin woman with straight hair and a man with an unkempt beard – both in their late teens or early 20s – are waiting for him at a back table.

"These socks don't keep my hands warm at all," says Barracough, who sits down with the couple and takes off his black gloves to reveal white athletic socks.

As he warms up, the woman counts his cash.

"You got \$117 in two hours?!" she exclaims. "That's got to be a record."

Barracough puts in earphones and tunes in the transistor. He holds the small black radio high in the air with two hands, then one.

"It's 0-0 in the first period," he says.

The woman asks when the game will end. He explains it has three periods and will end around 3 p.m. He's going to go back outside at 2:30.

He again holds the transistor high with his left hand, listening to the Sabres in his earphones as his companions play "Ring of Fire" on a speaker and a remake of David Bowie's "Space Oddity" plays through the store's audio system.

The woman nonchalantly slips a bill from the bucket into her boot.

The pregame against Dallas on March 12 goes as expected. When a traffic officer up the block gives the OK to walk, the pack of fans heads in Barracough's direction. The people in front will occasionally stop and deposit money while the rest walk past.

As the game starts and Barraclough makes his usual trek to Tim's, a brisk night wind bites his cheeks. The bitterness has just begun.

The young couple has welcomed two more companions to the back corner of the store. One, wearing shiny gold sunglasses, has more style, confidence and cleanliness than the rest.

Before Barraclough reaches the expanded table of five, he talks to a shop employee who is off the clock.

"Jack Eichel got suspended for two games," he says. "Hopefully, we can beat Pittsburgh on Thursday. There's another game Sunday, too."

After placing the bucket on the table for the woman to count, Barraclough purchases a drink, sits down and kicks off one sneaker. His scarf is still on, the white cross dangling over his jacket.

"Come on!" he says as the group investigates his daily earnings. "Leave it alone, assholes. Put the money back."

A short time later, Barraclough remains visible from other tables in the restaurant, but his four companions have slid out of sight in an alcove. While he doesn't explicitly state what the rest of the group is up to, he makes it abundantly clear that it's not an activity he participates in.

"I don't do that," he says, shaking his head. "I don't do that stuff! No."

The noise picks up.

"Shhhh," Barraclough says. "We're going to get kicked out of here."

When the woman leaves the table amidst growing agitation, Barraclough says, "How much money can you make?!" She goes outside for a smoke, and he flips her both middle fingers through the window. He then pulls out his transistor and puts his head on the table behind the backpack, blocking his view of them and their view of him.

Unlike matinees, when the group stays in the store for the whole game, they depart early in the third period at the 9 p.m. closing time. They walk to a nearby stairwell, with Barraclough listening to the game on the first level and his companions sitting together on the second.

When he goes back outside with his sign and bucket, they stay inside and wait for him and his collections.

There are several Buffalo agencies that help the homeless, including Restoration Society Inc. and its Harbor House Resource Center. It is for homeless people who have a mental health diagnosis and a history of treatment. It's open from 9 p.m. to 7 a.m. 365 days a year, but during the winter it's open 24 hours to let people get out of the cold.

Laws and ethics prohibit the staff from discussing participants and visitors, but Barraclough says he's been spending overnights at Harbor House. In addition to sheltering the homeless, Restoration Society helps with housing solutions, employment, empowerment and peer counseling.

"He's here a lot as of late," an employee confirmed. "He's always very positive. He's very resilient."

He's also very trusting, which isn't always the best option on the streets. In February 2015, according to the City of Tonawanda Courier, Barraclough and two other homeless people took overnight refuge in a laundromat. The man and woman were arrested at 2:30 a.m. on drug charges. Barraclough was given an appearance ticket for trespassing.

He's been on the streets for at least a decade. A family member declined to talk about him, saying only that they are estranged in a very ugly, unfortunate and sad situation. His father died in 2009. The Harbor House employee said Barraclough has been relying on a younger couple, presumably the man and woman from Tim Hortons.

The bucket Barraclough uses to collect donations from Sabres fans. (Photo by John Vogl/The Athletic)

He didn't sit with them during the Sabres' final two home games of March. Rather than head to the doughnut shop to listen to hockey on his transistor, Barraclough purchased a hot dog and can of pop from a street cart and entered the Sabres' seven-story practice facility. He took an elevator to the top floor, where the main rink was hosting recreation and youth-league games, with friends and parents watching from the stands.

Barraclough walked to a TV, turned up the volume and watched the Sabres host Detroit last Thursday, repeating the routine for the Columbus game on Sunday. He sorted and secured his money: singles on the bottom, then fives, 10s and, for the Columbus game, a 20 on top. He talked like a typical fan – albeit one in a very atypical situation.

"You need to get a newer coach and that will help them out a little bit," he said. "The Pegulas got the money for it. He owns the Bills. He owns the Sabres. He's got money, you know? He'll look for a better coach from a better team who was coaching before. He was a good coach for the other team, and then he'll be good for the Sabres."

He relishes the goals.

"He shot that one real good!" he said after Kyle Okposo scored. "Right around that goaltender."

He shakes his head at the officials.

"Why wasn't that a penalty?" he said. "The referee was right in front of that! Why didn't he call it? That was a tripping penalty. They get away with a lot of crap."

When announcer Rob Ray appears on the screen, Barraclough reflects on the former enforcer's fights.

"Anybody got at him, he always knocked that guy right down," he said.

He dreams of Stanley Cup glory.

"It'll be nice to bring it home," he said. "They will. They'll get it. It'll be their turn. A lot of people have been saying that: It's their turn. They will get it. It will take awhile, but they will get it."

He talks of a domed stadium for the Bills, the city's need to clear snow from the sidewalk, Michael Jordan's days with the Chicago Bulls and commercials that come on the television. Looking out the window, he explains how he'd improve the ongoing transition of an outdoor ice rink to a water-filled attraction, a conversation he prefaces with "if I was a little bit more smart."

Though holes in his story remain, he answers some questions about his life. What does he like better, when people give money or when they say hi and give hugs?

"When they give money."

What does he usually do with it?

"I have two other friends, and we use it for food and that. We usually get pizza or something."

Where does he go when there's no Sabres game?

"I go out on Delaware (Avenue) and get some money."

He made the sign and found the bucket. His heavier jacket keeps him warm. Generosity keeps him fed.

With 10 minutes left in the Detroit game, he stood to put on his two jackets. A woman arrived out of nowhere. She said she'd been catering a party in the building and gifted him a large foil tray filled with food.

He carried it outside to his usual sidewalk spot and offered a quick farewell.

"Good night," he said. "See you Sunday."

It was time to get down to business. There were two milk crates to stack, a bucket to place on top and a cardboard sign to hold.

Sabres' Kyle Okposo responds to challenge from coach Phil Housley

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 3, 2019

BUFFALO – Late in the winter, in the midst of perhaps his worst season ever, Sabres winger Kyle Okposo and coach Phil Housley had what the veteran called a “good conversation” about his play.

Okposo, of course, didn’t want to share details of his chat with Housley, someone he has known since he was a teenager.

But during their talk, Okposo said Housley, who wasn’t made available to the media Wednesday, “challenged me.”

“I just feel like I kind of got back into the right head space where I knew that I could play and knew what to do to be successful and just going and doing it,” Okposo said Wednesday.

Okposo said his Feb. 26 outing, his second appearance after a concussion sidelined him four contests, was one of his best games this year.

“Kind of since that game I’ve been in a pretty good head space,” Okposo said of the Sabres’ 5-2 road loss to the Philadelphia Flyers. “I feel like I’ve been playing pretty well.”

His numbers don’t reflect a huge change. Entering Thursday’s home finale against the Ottawa Senators at KeyBank Center, Okposo has compiled three goals and five points in 18 games since that contest in Philadelphia.

Still, Okposo, 30, has been displaying the talents of a power forward, playing a heavier style. He has scored twice in the last four games, including Tuesday’s 3-2 loss to the Nashville Predators.

Overall, Okposo has compiled 13 goals, 27 points and a minus-10 rating in 76 games this season. The American has never scored fewer than 15 goals and 39 points in full NHL campaign.

His rating has improved after registering a ghastly minus-34 a year ago.

“It’s been OK,” Okposo said when asked to assess his game. “I mean, I still think I have more.”

This season, Okposo’s 12th in the NHL, has been perhaps his oddest, he said. He enjoyed a solid start, compiling five goals and 15 points in the first 25 games. The Sabres, meanwhile, rattled off 10 straight wins in November.

Okposo’s long slump late in the fall – he endured a 21-game goal drought – coincided with the beginning of the Sabres’ free fall down the standings.

Right now, they have a season-long eight-game losing streak (0-7-1) and just one win in the last 15 contests (1-13-2).

“High highs and low lows,” Okposo said of the season. “Definitely where we were at the end of November to where we are now, obviously very different. No one probably could’ve predicted it. Definitely strange, but you have to find meaning in everything, in every season.

“You got to try to get better, try to move forward and those conversations we’ll have next week. But, yeah, definitely a strange year. ”

His frustration has been evident for months. After games, he often looks beaten down by all the losing. Following a recent loss, he cursed during an interview.

Okposo is notoriously hard on himself – he acknowledged Wednesday probably too hard – and blunt when talking about his play.

"I've been that way my whole career," Okposo said. "That's something that probably I'll never outgrow. I mean, I have a little bit of an awareness around it now that I'm older and aware that I'm hard on myself. Still, it doesn't always make it easy. There's times that I can actively think about back off and giving myself a break.

"As long as I'm in this business, as long as I'm playing hockey, I'm going to continue to be that way, because that's how I know to be successful."

—

The Sabres sent defenseman Will Borgen, 22, back to the Rochester Americans on Wednesday. Borgen compiled zero points and a minus-4 rating in his first four NHL games.

—

With his assist Tuesday, Rasmus Ristolainen became third defenseman in Sabres history to hit the 40-point mark in four straight seasons, joining Housley and Jerry Korab.

—

Sabres captain Jack Eichel skated a career-high 26 minutes, 14 seconds Tuesday.

Okposo, Sabres welcome youth hockey player subjected to racial slurs

By William Douglas

NHL.com

April 3, 2019

Kyle Okposo wanted a moment alone with Roshawn Brown-Hall.

After the pictures were taken and the meet and greet was over Tuesday, the Buffalo Sabres forward and the 17-year-old Buffalo-area youth hockey player walked down a hall inside KeyBank Center and talked about what it's like being targeted on the ice because of the color of their skin.

"A pretty heavy conversation for somebody that you just met," Okposo said Wednesday. "Seventeen years old, starting in life, but I just tried to give him a little bit of insight, and if he needs anything down the road, he knows how to contact me."

Brown-Hall and his family were guests of the Sabres at their game against the Nashville Predators on Tuesday. The Sabres gave them tickets to center Jack Eichel's suite after team officials saw news accounts of Brown-Hall enduring racial taunts and slurs during a game between his Amherst Youth Hockey under-18 team and a team from Cheektowaga, New York, on Jan. 20.

Cheektowaga players were shown on video making monkey sounds and gestures toward Brown-Hall, and one player could be heard using a racial slur.

The incident generated national attention and produced an outpouring of support for Brown-Hall, with players like Philadelphia Flyers forward Justin Bailey, who is from Western New York, reaching out to him.

Brown-Hall was excited about attending the game Tuesday, even though the Predators won 3-2. He said meeting Okposo and having a candid conversation with him about hockey and race was the highlight of the night.

"He basically told me don't let those kids put me down, they're not worth my time," Brown-Hall said. "A man in the NHL really told me some nice advice, and it's going to stick with me."

Okposo said he told Brown-Hall, "Whether it's fair or unfair, because of the color of your skin, you're going to have to work harder to get what you want in life and you're going to have to let some things roll off your back that you probably shouldn't.

"You're going to have to be the bigger man."

He shared with Brown-Hall a similar encounter that he endured when he was 16 and playing for Shattuck-St. Mary's School in Minnesota.

"We were in Marquette, Michigan," Okposo said. "A player after the second period said something racist to me and I freaked out. I was lucky that I had somebody there to mentor me in that situation, and it happened to be Tom Ward, who's an assistant coach here (with the Sabres) ... He told me something and it helped me calm down. It was exactly what I needed to hear, and I'll never forget that. I hope that I can do something like that for Roshawn."

NHL.com correspondent Heather Engel contributed to this report

McCabe, Montour formed steady pair against Nashville's top trio

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

April 3, 2019

Jake McCabe protected the puck from Nashville Predators forward Austin Watson along the end boards in his own zone, biding time until his defense partner arrived for support. He passed it to Brandon Montour, who drew the forecheck in the opposite direction before reversing the puck back to McCabe.

By the time McCabe delivered his breakout pass to Jack Eichel, Montour was already speeding across the defensive blue line as an extra means of neutral-zone support.

It was the sort of shift that set the tone for the defensive duo of McCabe and Montour, who seemed to provide a perfect blend of speed and physicality against the Predators on Tuesday night.

McCabe and Montour were matched up heavily with Nashville's top line of Filip Forsberg, Ryan Johansen and Victor Arvidsson, yet the Sabres outscored the Predators 1-0 with that duo on the ice at even strength. Scoring chances were 8-6 in Buffalo's favor with the pair on the ice at even strength despite them not starting any of their shifts in the offensive zone, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

"I thought we handled them pretty well," McCabe said. "I thought we limited their opportunities. Monty's a hell of a player. He's really fun to play with, really easy to play with. He does a great job talking to me out there, supporting me all over the ice, and he just really attacks the game. He throws his body around and just all facets of his game are really fun to play with."

Playing a physical, shutdown role in his own zone is McCabe's forte, while Montour specializes in his ability to join the rush and contribute offensively. On the surface, those yin-and-yang qualities make the two defensemen ideal partners, with McCabe's ability in his own zone allowing Montour to be aggressive up the ice.

But both defensemen are multi-faceted. As dynamic a skater as Montour is, he prides himself on his ability to play a physical game in his own zone. McCabe is a strong skater who has shown he can contribute offensively, including a 20-game stretch to begin this season in which he tallied nine points (2+7).

"We play hard against them," Montour said regarding the Johansen matchup. "Any chance we got, we closed pretty quick and didn't give them too much. We're smart enough that when we had the puck, we're helping each other, supporting each other."

"I think we talked a couple times last night, we played a little in our D-zone, a little on offense but I think for the most part it was more in the neutral zone area, moving the puck in that sense. For me, I try to play that hard game as well, so definitely when we have two together like that it can translate."

McCabe began skating with Montour upon his return from a 13-game absence against Columbus on Sunday, skating 20:46. Montour matched his season high with seven shots that night to go along with three hits and three blocked shots.

McCabe complemented Montour's verbal skills as an asset that helped him ease back into the lineup.

"It's been really easy, I've played with pretty much everyone on the team now this year and each guy kind of has his tendencies," McCabe said. "You try to figure that out pretty quickly, but I think we've gelled nicely these first couple games, especially being out for about four weeks. He really helped me out getting back into that first game, talking to me and making my life easier out there."

"I think that's a strength of mine since I've been in the league or since I've started playing," Montour added. "Communication is huge, especially coming to a new team and getting familiar with my teammates, coaches, whoever it may be. I think communication is key, just to kind of get to know each other's tendencies."

Montour has seen a revolving door of defense partners since being acquired from Anaheim in late February, a list that include Rasmus Dahlin, Matt Hunwick, Lawrence Pilut and Marco Scandella.

It's only two games - with just two more remaining this season - but McCabe said he could see the early makings of a steady pair if they remain together going forward.

"There's a lot of guys on this team I can play with," he said. "It was a great pickup for us. He's a hell of a player and he's really going to help us in the future. I'm really happy to have him. As of right now, it's been going great together.

"Just continue to work hard these next couple games and shut down whatever opponent we're going against and try to produce a little offense as well."

Wednesday's practice

The Sabres took a light optional skate at KeyBank Center in advance of their final home game, which will be played against the Ottawa Senators on Thursday night.

It will be Fan Appreciation Night at KeyBank Center, with all fans in attendance receiving a Jack Eichel bobblehead and more giveaways and special offers to follow throughout the night. [Click here](#) for more information.

Alumni Spotlight: Richard Smehlik

By Brian Duff

Sabres.com

April 3, 2019

After playing two seasons professionally in then Czechoslovakia, Richard Smehlik was drafted 97th overall by the Buffalo Sabres in 1990. The world was changing dramatically at that time and following two more seasons in his homeland - and his first Olympic Games in 1992 - Smehlik ventured to North America to begin a more than decade-long career in the NHL.

Who inspired you to play the game?

When I was growing up, at first I wanted to do some sports, so I was not like really looking for any inspiration. I started playing soccer in the beginning and then I got chosen for a soccer school, but my parents wouldn't let me play soccer at the time so then I chose hockey.

Smehlik was born in Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, the same hometown as longtime NHL defensemen Filip Kuba, Marek Malik, and Roman Polak and goaltender Petr Mrazek.

How old were you when you felt like you were getting really good at hockey?

Probably later, once I started playing on Czech national teams, like 16, 17, 18, 19 years old. I kind of started realizing, you know, that I'd become pretty good at what I do, but there was still a long way to go.

Smehlik won gold for Czechoslovakia in the 1988 Under-18 European Junior Championship.

Were you excited to come to Buffalo/North America or were you nervous, unsure?

Well, I was nervous at first because at the time, I didn't speak any English - like nothing. And my dream as a player in Czech was never the NHL because of communism so we never thought we could come play in the NHL. Like the highest level I could go was the Czech national team and then play for Olympics and World Championships and stuff like that.

Then when the [Berlin] Wall came down in '89, you know that's when everything started moving. Players started getting drafted and when I was drafted by Buffalo, I didn't know what Buffalo was. I didn't know a lot of NHL players at the time. I only knew [Wayne] Gretzky, [Mario] Lemieux and [Paul] Coffey. I just wasn't familiar with the NHL scene.

Four Czech-born players drafted ahead of Smehlik in 1990, including Petr Nedved and Jaromir Jagr, who were taken second and fifth overall, respectively.

How well did you know Dominik Hasek before he joined you with the Sabres in 1992-93?

Well, Dom I briefly met on one of the Czech national teams. He was already a star in the Czech Republic and I was just a young guy, getting my feet wet in the Czech national team at the time and we were getting ready for a World Championship, I think, in Switzerland. We just met briefly on the team.

And then a second time, he and I were going to army and he was just leaving the army. So we spoke a little bit there, but that was like the first time I met him personally. But I knew who he was because he was a star in Czech.

What was your favorite memory from your time with the Sabres?

Oh, there's plenty of memories! My favorite probably would be playing in the longest game against New Jersey when Dave Hannan scored the goal. But actually, I had a lot of memories you know, making the playoffs [and winning a round] after so many years when we beat Boston with the Mayday goal, that was a great memory too. A lot of good memories in Buffalo.

From 1992 to 2002 Smehlik - despite missing the entire 1995-96 season due to a knee injury - played in 589 regular season games for the Sabres, second only to Rob Ray's 692 during that time. He also led the team with 83 playoff games played over that decade.

Twenty-one years later, what does your Olympic gold medal with the Czech Republic mean to you?

Well, I'm never a person that likes to look back too much, you know; I like to try and live in the present. But looking back, I think it was a great achievement from us because nobody expected our group to do anything great at the time. It was all about US-Canada.

But we believed we had a very good team, and believed that we could beat anybody with Dom in the net, but we also had other good players who could score and we were a well-balanced team. I think we just came from nowhere and people did not expect us to do that well.

Smehlik also won bronze medals at the 1990 World Junior Championship, the 1992 Olympics, and 1992 World Championships.

Are you involved with Czech hockey today?

I follow hockey, but I'm not involved in hockey that much. I left my hockey career behind me and I like to do other stuff. I currently train and teach at Buffalo Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Academy, so that's my passion right now. It has helped me become a stronger and better person.

Describe the experience of winning the Stanley Cup with the Devils in 2003.

It was great for me again because I knew after the season I would be retiring. I always said I would retire in my 30s. At the time, I signed with the Thrashers they were interested in signing a longer deal, but I knew I was retiring after the season. So I just wanted one year and then at the deadline, I was traded to the New Jersey Devils.

So I was coming to a team that was really established, and I was just a [insurance] type of guy for them. It was tough as a newcomer trying to fight for more of a spot, but it was a great opportunity! But I wish we had won it when I was with the Sabres [in 1999]. That time was an awesome run and I have a lot of good memories, good group of guys, a lot of fun going that deep in the playoffs.

Smehlik appeared in five postseason games for the Devils, including four in the Eastern Conference Final against Ottawa.

Why did you choose to stay in Buffalo after your career ended?

I played a long time here, I had a lot of friendships, my kids grew up here and Buffalo is a great city. A good community and a lot of friendly people that reminds me of my city back home. I don't like hot weather. I like four-season weather and so it was an easy choice for me.

What led to you owning and operating the Amherst Boarding Kennel?

I've always loved animals. Even back home when I grew up, I helped my friend train police dogs and I knew animals were always my passion. So when I opened my business, I think it was in 2001, with another partner, I was still playing hockey and we opened up the boarding kennel. I always knew there needed to be life after hockey and this is my passion, my passion for animals and it keeps me busy. Every day is a different day and it's a lot of fun.