



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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As preseason opens, Sabres will get lots of game action to test skills

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

September 15, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres are six practices over three days into the Ralph Krueger era and now they quickly transition to a different portion of their preseason with one main question: How does all this work translate to real game action?

The answers will come fast and furious this week with four games in the next six nights. The Sabres open Monday at Pegula Ice Arena on the campus of Penn State with a game against the Pittsburgh Penguins, followed by a trip to Columbus to meet the Blue Jackets on Tuesday.

After an off day Wednesday and two more practices on Thursday comes back-to-back games against the Toronto Maple Leafs. The teams meet Friday night in Scotiabank Arena and stage Buffalo's exhibition home opener Saturday night in KeyBank Center.

"We want to see the games settle the competition that we have but we have time," Krueger said after Sunday's two practices in the arena. "We're going to use these four games well to assess the group. We only have really one full practice day (this week) but I think we've done enough practicing and guys are ready to play."

"Everybody is real excited," said C.J. Smith, who is battling for a spot on the wing. "He's simplified the game a lot to have guys trust their instincts and their hockey knowledge. It's giving guys confidence and letting them play with the puck instead of being forced to feel like you have to make a play in a certain system or have to be in a certain spot. Most guys in that locker room really enjoy playing to their instincts."

Making any sort of judgments based on drills is a risky proposition, but winger Victor Olofsson is one player who has looked particularly sharp in practices, with one example the way he froze goalie Linus Ullmark with a nifty leg fake before scoring in a shootout drill Sunday.

Olofsson collected 30 goals last year in Rochester and scored his first two NHL goals in a six-game run with the Sabres at the end of the season. He's a good bet to make the club and has been skating with veteran Marcus Johansson and center Rasmus Asplund.

"That's my goal, to make this team out of camp," said Olofsson. "It's the expectations I have on myself. That's my goal and what I've been working for all summer. I'm just really excited to be here and super excited for these couple games.

"I felt like I was ready my last year, too, when I got here from Sweden. I felt like I had a chance to make the team right away and it didn't happen, but I think I grew over the first couple months last year and really developed my entire game."

It appears that Smith, a 28-goal scorer for the Amerks last year, has been given a huge show-us opportunity in camp by being put on a line with Casey Mittelstadt at center and Sam Reinhart on the right wing.

"To me, it shows they saw what I did last year and are willing to give me a big chance so I'm excited about that," Smith said. "I think after last year, I did earn an opportunity to play with guys like that, so I'm excited to go forward.

"With the puck, we believe we have a lot of skill," Krueger said. "There's a strength in possession for us and how we manage that. We've given them some tools. Above all, we want to begin with a defensive structure that limits our D-zone time and offensively, we'd like to be really strong at managing the puck and retaining possession."

Sabres-Pens lineup news

The Sabres announced their lineup for Monday's game on Sunday night and first-round draft pick Dylan Cozens is among the forwards listed. He's joined by Jack Eichel, Jimmy Vesey, Johan Larsson, Curtis Lazar, Zemgus Girgensons, Conor Sheary, Andrew Oglevie, Jeff Skinner, Evan Rodrigues, Tage Thompson and Remi Elie.

The defense includes newcomers Colin Miller, Henri Jokiharju and John Gilmour along with Marco Scandella, Casey Nelson and Brandon Hickey. Carter Hutton and Jonas Johansson will split the game in goal, leaving Linus Ullmark and newly signed Andrew Hammond to play in Tuesday's game.

The Sabres will play a Pittsburgh lineup featuring almost exclusively AHL players. Among the missing Monday will be Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, Kris Letang, Jake Guentzel, Patric Hornqvist, Brian Dumoulin and goalie Matt Murray. Casey DeSmith and Tristan Jarry will man the nets.

Monday's game will mark the Sabres' third visit to play in the Penn State arena that was funded as part of a \$102 million donation from Sabres owners Terry and Kim Pegula. The Sabres played the Penguins there in 2017 and opened their exhibition slate there in 2016 against Minnesota.

On the air

The games Monday and Tuesday will be streamed on Sabres.com within the team's broadcast viewing area. The games against Toronto will be shown on MSG, using the Leafs' Sportsnet broadcast. All games during the preseason will be broadcast on WGR Radio.

Sabres' Mittelstadt in better shape for season No. 2

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

September 15, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Casey Mittelstadt did not have the rookie season he was hoping for.

In 77 games, he scored 12 goals and 13 assists for 25 points and was even a healthy scratch for one game. The kid had never played that many games, and he realized that he needed to be in better shape to handle the rigors of an NHL season.

Mittelstadt went back to Minnesota and said he didn't get over last season right away, "It definitely took some time. It was tough to watch the playoffs and not be a part of it, but at the same time once the year's over, there's nothing you can change and you've got to control what you can control and make sure you start getting better and ready for next year."

You can tell Mittelstadt is in better shape just by looking at him and watching him on the ice. In the first three days of training camp, he's looked quicker on the ice. Mittelstadt really put the work in this offseason, "I've come in with a fresh mindset and it was a big summer for me. I focused on some conditioning stuff and getting stronger and leaning out a little bit, so I've come in here in shape to show I'm ready to go."

I wondered if Mittelstadt had to change his eating habits. He said, "I think for me it wasn't so much eating poorly. I think I would just eat too much. I think like having two plates I eat one of whatever my mom made for dinner. It sounds kind of dumb, but that's what it came down to."

"Once you get used to it. you start to feel better and have a little more energy and it almost becomes enjoyable. It might take a week or two, but after that you feel pretty good and for me it was pretty easy."

So what habits need to change for Mittelstadt to become the player the Sabres believe him to be? The 20-year-old said, "The toughest lesson I learned is what you do early in a week on your days off comes back when you have three games in four nights or back-to-backs and I started to figure it out more towards the end of the year."

There were a couple of things Mittelstadt incorporated like taking a nap, getting to bed earlier and eating the right meals, The centerman said, "I've never played that many games. In college, I got a back-to-back and then had five days to get back and be ready, and last year you got a day to be ready so it's a bit different and you learn things throughout the year."

Watching from above, it appeared, to me, that Mittelstadt lost some confidence as the season went on. He's the type of guy that has faith in his ability, but he admitted it happened, "I'd be lying if I said I didn't, but at the same time, I'm pretty confident and I always have been, but there were times where I did lose confidence, but it doesn't take me long to get it back and I always feel like I can make plays and do things."

There's pressure on the new guys coming in, but, in my mind, if the Sabres are to be better this season, young players like Mittelstadt, Tage Thompson and to a lesser extent Rasmus Dahlin must be better. Mittelstadt agrees, "It's quite a bit, there's a lot on our shoulders and the new guys are also going to have some pressure to step up and it's a good mix of both, but we've got to step up from within and try to help the guys get some wins."

The Sabres open the preseason on Monday when they tangle with Pittsburgh at Penn State. Join us for pre-game coverage starting at 6:45.

Monday's Lineup:

Sheary - Eichel - Vesey

Skinner - Rodrigues - Lazar

Girgensons - Larsson - Oglevie

Elie - Cozens - Thompson

Dahlin - Jokiharju

Scandella - Miller

Gilmour - Nelson

Hickey

J. Johansson

Hutton

It's interesting that Rasmus Ristolainen has been part of this group the first three days of training camp, but he's not going on the trip.

As preseason games come in a rush, a look at several levels of expectations for the Sabres

By John Vogl

The Athletic

September 16, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. – Jack Eichel wants more goals. Jeff Skinner just wants one.

Dylan Cozens, Victor Olofsson and Curtis Lazar hope they take jobs. Vladimir Sobotka is aiming to keep his.

The opening three days of Sabres training camp featured 48 players split into two groups, and everyone was trying to catch the eye of new coach Ralph Krueger. Here's what you need to know as Buffalo transitions from practices to four preseason games in six days.

Setting goals for goals

Eichel made a huge offensive leap last season, increasing his goals (25 to 28), assists (39 to 54) and points (64 to 82). His reputation as a playmaker has grown. He wants "sniper" on his résumé.

"I've wanted to score more goals, find the back of the net more," the Sabres' captain said in KeyBank Center. "I improved from Year 3 to 4, but I think there's another step to take in terms of becoming an elite goal scorer."

Eichel finished fifth in the NHL in shots last season, putting 303 on net to trail just Nathan MacKinnon (365), Patrick Kane (341), Alex Ovechkin (338) and Tyler Seguin (334). Yet former coach Phil Housley repeatedly urged Eichel to shoot even more.

That's the mindset Eichel is bringing into the season.

"At times, I pass up good opportunities," Eichel said. "The goalies are good, right? It's tough to score goals in this league. But I worked at it this summer."

"A lot of it, like I said, is a mindset, wanting to shoot the puck more. I shoot the puck a lot, but it's just opportunities when you're around the net to get the puck on net. It should help our team."

If Eichel can add two goals to his total from last season, he'll become just the second Buffalo player to reach 30 since 2012. The first, of course, was Skinner last year. He's coming off a 40-goal season that earned him an eight-year, \$72 million contract.

He doesn't feel pressure to follow up with 40 goals again.

"I just go into the season trying to get one, then you go from there," Skinner said. "Obviously, producing offensively is part of my job, but I don't think last season adds more pressure. That's what you expect of yourself. You expect to keep getting better. You expect to keep helping the team win, and that's what I'm going to keep trying to do."

Who was that guy?

Just like during the Sabres' prospect tournament, Olofsson is turning heads. The second-year winger is scoring in drill after drill. New goaltender Andrew Hammond shook his noggin after a few pucks went flying past and needed to know who was beating him.

"I definitely took a look to see what the name bar was," Hammond said. "He had one in the three-on-three game that was definitely a top-level shot."

Olofsson picked up the moniker "Goalofsson" while scoring 30 times for Rochester last season. He's been penciled into a top-nine role for the Sabres and is moving toward permanent-marker status.

Lean and mean

Defenseman Rasmus Dahlin and center Casey Mittelstadt, last year's top rookies, went into the offseason looking to transform their bodies. Though the stats barely moved – Dahlin is three pounds heavier, Mittelstadt is three pounds lighter – the players certainly look different.

"For me, it wasn't so much eating poorly," said Mittelstadt, who is down to 199 pounds. "I think I would just eat too much. Instead of having two plates, I'd have one of whatever my mom made for dinner. It sounds kind of dumb, but I think that's almost what it came down to."

The 6-foot-3 Dahlin is up to 193 pounds. As the Sabres leaned on him more last season – he skated 20:26 per game during the first half and averaged 21:52 in the second – Dahlin felt it.

"To be honest, the last 20 games, I think my body wasn't feeling that strong," he said. "This year, I'm more prepared for what's going on, like how I'm going to handle myself throughout the season, do all the small stuff every day. So I think this year I can be not as tired as I was at the end of last season."

The strength will also help when opponents physically challenge the 19-year-old.

"You know, it's pretty fun when the games are like that," Dahlin said. "I kind of like it when it's intense."

Forgetting the past
Sobotka refuses to look back.

"It's a new, fresh year and I don't want to talk about what happened last year," he said.

It's understandable. The center/left winger went 42 games without a goal, failing to find the net from Nov. 10 to Feb. 19. The drought coincided with the Sabres' plummet in the standings, so plenty of fingers pointed toward Sobotka. He carried the disappointment into the summer.

"Yeah, it took some time, but it's a new year, new season," he said.

The 32-year-old is in for a roster battle, opening camp on the fifth line despite a \$3.5 million cap hit. He finished with just five goals and eight assists last season. He hurt his cause with uninspired play, but his deployment didn't help. He started in the offensive zone just 35.1 percent of the time, the 28th-lowest total in the league.

"If you want to play more, you need to deserve that ice time," Sobotka said. "I think everyone is good with that. We're trying to push each other to be better and whoever gets it, gets it, you know?"

Trying to fit in
Cozens, the Sabres' first-round draft pick, is feeling his youth. The 18-year-old noted that some guys in camp have been playing hockey for "as long as I've been alive."

"It's a little crazy and a little surreal," he said. "It's definitely a big change, grown men that are super strong that have been doing this for a long time."

Still, Cozens doesn't feel intimidated. He wants to get at least one exhibition game – and then another.

"Obviously, I want to play in the NHL this year," he said. "But I have to earn it and I know that. You've got to take someone's spot, and I know it's not going to be easy."

Krueger's slogan inspires
The theme of camp is "Play Connected." The words are emblazoned on the dressing room wall, printed atop a triangle of interlocking swords with the Sabres' logo underneath.

What does "Play Connected" mean to the players?

"You're going to be able to make plays without looking," center Evan Rodrigues said. "You're going to know where guys are at all times. There's going to be no question on what we're doing. It's going to be plain and simple. We're going to play fast and play aggressive."

For teams with a history of success, all of that stuff is inherently present. As anyone who's watched the Sabres in recent years knows, the unofficial slogan was "Play Disjointed." So Krueger is using practices, video sessions and backroom teaching to get everyone together.

"I'd like for you to be able to tell me in three, four weeks what you're seeing and you underline the fact that we're playing like this and this is Sabres hockey," the coach said. "More than anything, that's on the ice. It begins off the ice. We have to work on that unity, and it's not going to happen overnight."

Don't worry, be happy

Lazar and Hammond knew it was coming. Their past is inescapable. So once word got out this summer that they were signing with the Sabres, Lazar sent a text.

"I said, 'Well, here come the hamburger jokes again,'" Lazar recalled. "What can you do?"

In Lazar's case, you laugh and smile. It seems that's what he always does.

In the spring of 2015, when Hammond went on a 14-0-1 run for the Senators, fans in Ottawa saluted "The Hamburglar" by tossing burgers on the ice. Lazar infamously grabbed one for a quick meal.

"It was fully wrapped on the bench," Lazar said. "It still was disgusting, but I'm all about having fun. I think you guys will get to know that. I always have a smile on my face and I'm just a kid playing a game I love."

And he's loving his chance in Buffalo.

"Hopefully," Lazar said, "I can make some more noise with my on-ice play instead of just eating a hamburger."

The right winger was one of the top prospects in the 2013 NHL Draft. He went 17th overall to the Senators after a 38-goal season with the Edmonton Oil Kings and celebrated by scoring another 41 in juniors.

The Senators gave him a job the next season, but the goals disappeared. He has just 15 in 246 NHL games.

Calgary sent him to the AHL last year, and he finally rediscovered his scoring touch, potting 20 goals in 57 outings.

"It was huge and – honestly – it was probably much needed for myself," Lazar said. "I got rushed in the NHL as a 19-year-old. Yeah, I was able to stay afloat on the fourth line and stuff, but I kind of lost that offensive edge."

The Sabres are giving him the opportunity to show it's back for good, lining him up with Skinner and Rodrigues. Buffalo signed Lazar for the league minimum of \$700,000 after the Flames declined to make him a qualifying offer.

"That's a big reason I'm here is the opportunity, especially up front for a guy like myself," Lazar said. "I've played in this league before. I know I belong in the NHL, and I'm here to line up with the Sabres on opening night."

While that's a serious sentiment, it belies the joy that Lazar exudes. If Buffalo handed out a Happiest Player award for the opening weekend, Lazar would be the unanimous winner.

"I can tell you it's not fake," Hammond said. "It's pretty authentic that he is always smiling and always very happy to be playing hockey, and even outside of hockey it seems like he's always in a great mood."

Lazar has been in a great mood since signing, according to Sabres right wing Sam Reinhart. The former Hockey Canada teammates worked out together for a few days during the offseason.

"To see him through the summer and see his motivation, he knows where he stands," Reinhart said. "He knows he's going to have to make it and that's kind of the mindset that he's brought on. I love to see that."

"We kind of learned from each other growing up, so I know what he's capable of. I know we're all thrilled to have him."

AHL star C.J. Smith intent on sticking with Sabres this season

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
September 15, 2019

BUFFALO – Only about 10 Sabres forwards have roster spots locked up, meaning in a training camp filled with competition, the best battles might be taking place up front.

Among the players fighting for the four or so remaining slots are journeymen (Jean-Sebastien Dea, for example), NHL veterans (Vladimir Sobotka) and prized prospects (Victor Olofsson).

Then there's C.J. Smith, an older (he turns 25 on Dec. 1) and often overlooked prospect who has quietly ranked among the AHL's top scorers for two seasons.

The 5-foot-10, 184-pound Smith has compiled 45 goals and 102 points in 119 games since joining the Rochester Americans in 2017-18, the team's highest totals over that stretch.

After earning a spot in the AHL All-Star Game as a rookie, Smith kept developing last season, scoring 28 goals and 58 points in 62 contests.

Smith was so dynamic the Sabres recalled him in late December because they needed a spark.

"The more experience I get, the more I learn from it," Smith said Friday. "I'm really good at learning the game and learning to play at high levels. ... I've always had to think the game, just being a smaller guy."

Olofsson said: "He always wanted to take the puck to the net. He's shooting from every angle. I think we did kind of see him score from every angle, too."

Now Smith's AHL apprenticeship could be over. With so many open spots and a new coaching staff running camp, he has a splendid opportunity to crack the NHL lineup.

"I like where it's at," Smith said of his opportunity. "It's also really deep, too. I think there's a lot of guys here that can play in this league and play at the level. So it is really competitive."

That competition will kick up a notch Monday, when the Sabres open the preseason against the Pittsburgh Penguins at Pegula Ice Arena on the Penn State campus.

Following four days of practice inside KeyBank Center, the Sabres are probably itching for some game action.

The Sabres announced late Sunday center Dylan Cozens, the seventh overall pick in June, will be making his preseason debut tonight. Captain Jack Eichel, defenseman Rasmus Dahlin and wingers Jeff Skinner and Jimmy Vesey are also scheduled to dress.

The Sabres play four of their six preseason games this week, including a road contest Tuesday against the Columbus Blue Jackets. Smith will likely play then.

Expect the Sabres to give Smith, who played 11 NHL games last season, a long look this preseason.

On Sunday, Smith practiced at left wing on a scoring line beside center Casey Mittelstadt and Sam Reinhart, an intriguing trio.

Besides talent, Smith has something else going for him. He must clear waivers if the Sabres want to send him to Rochester this season, according to capfriendly.com. Given his age and track record of scoring, he would likely be claimed.

So far, Smith has impressed Sabres coach Ralph Krueger.

"He's left his mark here in the first three days," said Krueger, who doesn't want to assess his players yet.

Smith said Krueger is "really caring, really knowledgeable."

"He's willing to listen, he wants to learn a lot," said Smith, a free agent the Sabres signed from UMass Lowell. "He's a very honest guy, which at this level is very important."

He added: "I really like his philosophies, just his personality and his charisma. I think he just brings a good energy to the locker room. I think he's just one of the guys (who) walks into a room and you kind of respect him. He brings a really good message."

One of Krueger's messages is to play fast. When Smith heard that, he altered his offseason workouts, taking out a day of heavy lifting and add more running.

"He wanted to bring a really-fast paced game, and they said, 'Get in shape,'" Smith said. "So I did a lot of sprinting, a lot of running and I think I just kind of had a jump in my step the last two days. I feel really good."

—

Olofsson, who wore No. 41 during his six-game stint with the Sabres last last season, has switched to No. 68.

The Swede said he likes the look of 68, the year his father was born.

"I always played in No. 11 before I got over here," he said. "Obviously, that's not going to happen here."

No. 11, of course, belonged to the legendary Gilbert Perreault and was the first number the Sabres retired.

No Sabre has ever worn 68.

Notes: Krueger said he plans to play four goalies over the first two preseason games. ... Krueger said assistant coaches Don Granato and Steve Smith will be on the bench with him during games, while Mike Bales and Myles Fee will be in the press box. ... The Penguins will field a lineup mostly comprised of AHL players. None of their stars are scheduled to dress.

Sabres season preview: New coach Krueger looks to end playoff drought

By Heather Engel

NHL.com

September 15, 2019

The 2019-20 NHL season begins Oct. 2. With training camps open, NHL.com is taking a look at the five keys, the inside scoop on roster questions, and the projected lines for each of the 31 teams. Today, the Buffalo Sabres.

Coach: Ralph Krueger (first season)

Last season: 33-39-10; sixth place Atlantic Division

5 KEYS

1. Krueger's impact

Krueger, hired May 15, is Buffalo's sixth coach in the past seven seasons. He will try to help the Sabres reach the Stanley Cup Playoffs for the first time in nine seasons.

General manager Jason Botterill said Krueger's skills as a communicator and experience in high-pressure situations sets him apart as a coach. Those strengths will be important to a team that was fragile last season, finishing 27th in the NHL following a strong start.

Krueger has a wealth of international coaching experience but 48 games in the NHL, with the Edmonton Oilers in the 2012-13 season.

2. Secondary scoring

The additions of forwards Jimmy Vesey and Marcus Johansson should help an offense that got 90 of its 221 goals last season from three players: Jeff Skinner (40), Jack Eichel (28) and Sam Reinhart (22). Vesey scored 17 goals last season with the New York Rangers and has scored 43 of his 50 NHL goals at even strength. Johansson scored 13 goals in 58 games with the New Jersey Devils and the Boston Bruins last season and is three seasons removed from an NHL career-high 24 goals and 58 points with the Washington Capitals.

The Sabres will be counting on younger forwards taking the next step. Victor Olofsson, 24, had an impressive first season in North America (two goals, two assists in six games with the Sabres; 30 goals, 33 assists in 66 games with Rochester of the American Hockey League). Casey Mittelstadt, 20, had 25 points (12 goals, 13 assists) as a rookie last season. And Tage Thompson, 21, needs to be more the player who had nine points (six goals, three assists) in eight games with Rochester than the one with seven goals and five assists in 65 games with the Sabres.

3. Improved defense

The Sabres revamped the right side of their defense, adding defensemen Colin Miller and Henri Jokiharju in trades with the Vegas Golden Knights and Chicago Blackhawks. Brandon Montour will play his first full season in Buffalo after being acquired from the Anaheim Ducks on Feb. 24.

Despite trade rumors, Rasmus Ristolainen is part of that group on the right side. The additions will allow the Sabres to ease the defenseman's minutes; he's averaged 24:14 per game over his six NHL seasons.

4. Bounce-back seasons from goalies

Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark each fared well in the first half of last season and, like the rest of the Sabres, struggled in the second half. Hutton's save percentage dropped from .911 through his first 32 games to .902 the rest of the way. Perhaps he became more fatigued as he faced an average of 30.8 shots per game in an NHL career-high 50 games, a notable jump from the 24.8 he saw on average in his first 138 NHL games in the previous six seasons.

It was worse for Ullmark, who went from a .916 save percentage in his first 20 games to .890 in the other 17 games. Better consistency from Ullmark will allow the Sabres to not overwork Hutton.

5. Winning on the road

The Sabres won 12 road games last season, third-fewest in the NHL and the fewest for Buffalo since winning nine in 2014-15. Eight of their first 14 games this season are on the road, and on Nov. 8 and 9 they'll play two games against the Tampa Bay Lightning in Stockholm, Sweden as part of the 2019 NHL Global Series.

ROSTER RUNDOWN

Making the cut

There will be battles for the wings, with a surplus of left wings and an opening for a top-six right wing. Botterill said he likes the versatility of the forwards, noting the ability of Olofsson, Vesey, Thompson and Conor Sheary, among others, to play both sides.

On defense, Jokiharju is looking to make the roster out of training camp as he did a season ago with the Chicago Blackhawks, when he had 12 assists in 38 games. John Gilmour, signed July 1, led Hartford of the AHL with 54 points (20 goals, 34 assists) last season and will vie for a spot on a left side that features incumbents Rasmus Dahlin, Jake McCabe and Marco Scandella.

Most intriguing addition

Miller has mobility and puck-moving skills, and brings leadership and 30 games of postseason experience, including 20 games during a run to the 2017 Stanley Cup Final with the Golden Knights.

Biggest potential surprise

Forward C.J. Smith was second to Olofsson in goals (28) and points (58) in Rochester last season and scored his first two NHL goals while playing 11 games with the Sabres. He skated with Mittelstadt and Reinhart on the first day of training camp and could earn a spot on the roster with a strong showing in the preseason.

Ready to break through

Olofsson didn't look out of place during six NHL games late last season. The 24-year-old's talent and experience - he played over 200 games in the Swedish Hockey League -- were especially noticeable at the Prospects Challenge earlier this month, when he scored in all three games.

Fantasy sleeper

Olofsson (average draft position: N/A) has a chance to earn a top-six role after a productive NHL trial last season (four points in six games) and has sneaky upside if he plays with Eichel at even strength and/or on the first power play. -- Pete Jensen

PROJECTED LINEUP

Jeff Skinner -- Jack Eichel -- Conor Sheary

Marcus Johansson -- Casey Mittelstadt -- Sam Reinhart

Jimmy Vesey -- Evan Rodrigues -- Victor Olofsson

Vladimir Sobotka -- Johan Larsson -- Kyle Okposo

Rasmus Dahlin -- Brandon Montour

Jake McCabe -- Rasmus Ristolainen

Marco Scandella -- Colin Miller

Carter Hutton

Linus Ullmark

Larkin, Skinner among fantasy sleepers to watch in 2019-20

By Steven Psihogios

Yahoo! Sports

September 15, 2019

When you head into your fantasy hockey draft, it's probably wise to have a couple of sleepers in your back pocket.

I know a lot of people like to set up their fantasy drafts closer to the beginning of the regular season, but I typically find that the best time to find value is right around the start of the pre-season.

The average draft positions (ADP) you see in mid-September aren't based off a large sample size, mainly because people typically wait to draft. That means the numbers available earlier are more heavily influenced by oddities that may occur in drafts. For example, let's say your buddy, who is a massive New Jersey Devils fan, drafts Taylor Hall in round one. That will have a bigger impact on his ADP now than it will when many other drafts have taken place.

That's why now is the best time to set up a Yahoo Fantasy Hockey league and draft those late-round gems before their stock rises.

With that in mind, here is my all-sleeper fantasy hockey team based off of Yahoo Fantasy Hockey ADPs.

Center - Dylan Larkin (Yahoo ADP: 128.7)

Honestly, the fact that you can start a league today and draft Dylan Larkin this late is absolutely ridiculous.

The list of centers that scored 30 goals and had 40 assists last season is not very big, as you can imagine. Just 17 middlemen were able to reach both plateaus last season with Larkin being one of them.

So why is it that the 23-year-old is currently going as the 37th center in drafts? Plain and simple, it doesn't make sense.

On a young Detroit Red Wings team that should be improved this upcoming season, feel great about where you can get Larkin.

Left Wing - Jeff Skinner (Yahoo ADP: 105.1)

People, don't discredit the player just because the team he plays on hasn't been good. Come on.

While people are shying away from Jeff Skinner because he plays on the Buffalo Sabres (Full disclosure: I hope hockey returns to Western New York for more than half a season), you should be jumping all over him given how late you can nab him in your draft.

At just 27 years old, Skinner is still firmly in the prime of his career. Finding players with his type of goal-scoring talent is near impossible outside the top 100 picks of your draft.

In his first season with Buffalo, he was just one of four left-wingers who tallied 40 goals or more, joining Alexander Ovechkin, Alex DeBrincat and Jake Guentzel as the only others at the position.

Being paired once again on the team's top line with Jack Eichel means Skinner should produce similar numbers in 2019-20.

Right Wing - Cam Atkinson (Yahoo ADP: 115.3)

Just because Artemi Panarin, Matt Duchene and Sergei Bobrovsky ditched the Columbus Blue Jackets this off-season doesn't mean you have to, too.

I'm sure a lot of people think that losing Panarin will greatly affect Atkinson's goal total, but the 30-year-old should be just fine without him.

Before the 'Bread Man' even laced 'em up for the Jackets, Atkinson potted 35 goals during the 2016-17 campaign, proving that he's not dependant on him for production. Having Panarin did help, however, as Atkinson hit a career-high with 41 markers last season.

Columbus's top line will hurt a bit given the absence of Panarin, but Gustav Nyquist is a decent replacement-level player who should get the first crack at filling the void. Pierre-Luc Dubois, who is slated to be the team's No.1 centre should also take a step forward as he enters his third year.

He may not have an elite playmaker on his line, but Atkinson has proven that he has enough talent to make things happen without one.

Defenceman - Jacob Trouba (Yahoo ADP: 115.4)

This guy right here may just end up being the steal of the draft.

Moving from the Winnipeg Jets to the New York Rangers was possibly the best thing that could've happened to Jacob Trouba's fantasy prospects.

The two-way blueliner should get every opportunity imaginable in the Big Apple, as the team really doesn't have the greatest defence core.

Despite splitting time with Dustin Byfuglien on the No.1 man-advantage unit in Winnipeg, Trouba finished 16th in power-play points amongst defencemen with 18. The former first-round pick also recorded his first-ever 50-point campaign, thanks to a whopping 42 assists.

Likely manning the blueline on the first power-play grouping with Artemi Panarin and Mika Zibanejad should help lift his point total from last year's numbers.

The math behind this is simple: Trouba is going to get lots of minutes in all situations, that should equal a premier performer on the backend.

Defenceman - Cale Makar (Yahoo ADP: 112.8)

Now that Tyson Barrie has exited the picture in Colorado, the lucrative position of being the Avalanche's power-play point man is Cale Makar's for the taking.

While there's no question that Barrie is one of the best offensive blueliners in the league, it certainly helped that he had players like Nathan MacKinnon, Mikko Rantanen and Gabriel Landeskog on the man-advantage with him. The now Maple Leafs rearguard is coming off of back-to-back 50-point seasons in this environment.

If all goes well for the 20-year-old Makar, we could be looking at someone who returns top-15 defenseman numbers. He is currently being selected as the 27th blueliner in Yahoo Drafts.

The youngster flashed his potential in the 2019 Stanley Cup playoffs. In 10 games, he registered six points. His development is probably a big reason why general manager Joe Sakic made Barrie expendable this off-season.

Sure, as an unknown commodity, Makar poses some risk. But I think given the opportunity he's walking into, he's worth buying while surrendering relatively inexpensive draft capital.

Goalie - MacKenzie Blackwood (Yahoo ADP: 175.5)

Essentially, all MacKenzie Blackwood has to do in order to become the New Jersey Devils' No. 1 netminder is outplay Cory Schneider.

That shouldn't be too difficult considering he already did it last season.

Blackwood finished with a .918 save percentage across 23 games, oppose to Schneider who recorded a mark of .903 in 26 contests. And sure, Schneider dealt with an abdominal strain in 2018-19 but he hasn't posted a SV% higher than .910 since 2015-16.

Going into the new season with additions such as P.K. Subban, Jack Hughes, Wayne Simmonds and Nikita Gusev, as well as a fully healthy Taylor Hall, the Devils are ready to compete. If Schneider does get the first crack at the job, I'd imagine he'll be under close watch.

New Jersey needs some stability between the pipes, and I predict Blackwood will give them a better chance to win on a nightly basis than Schneider, which should translate to quality fantasy production.

Veterans embracing internal competition at camp

By Jourdon LaBarber

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In a lot of ways, you can see why Jake McCabe would see a bit of himself in William Borgen.

Their on-ice identities are a match - both are brash, physical defensemen who can hold down their own end but also possess the skating and puck-moving abilities to get involved offensively. There's also the fact that Borgen currently finds himself in the same position McCabe was in four years ago, a promising young talent who's had a taste of the NHL and is now looking to take the next step.

Yet Borgen took a long pause when asked about the comparison, noticeably uncomfortable with the idea of placing his name alongside a veteran of 274 NHL games.

"Sure, I guess," Borgen finally offered. "I mean, he's a really good player. That would be a nice comparison for me if that was it."

McCabe, meanwhile, went out of his way to note their similarities.

"I think me and Borgs feed well off each other," he said. "We play similar styles, rugged and physical and we both can skate pretty well. I like our intensity, especially in the D-zone. We talk a lot. I just really love the way he plays, and I feed off his energy."

The defense pair of McCabe and Borgen serves as a microcosm for the larger picture of competition that exists through three days of training camp and the dynamics it entails.

Borgen is trying to force his way up a crowded depth chart, yet his reverence for McCabe is evident. McCabe is trying to protect his role and his minutes, yet he's extended himself as a communicative presence for his younger counterpart.

"I mean, that's their job to push us and it's my job to keep my job," McCabe said. "That's the way it goes. I was in their position not too long ago, that I'm trying to force my way into a lineup and grab a spot here. Once you get the spot, you can't be complacent. You've got to continue to get better and strive to get better each and every day."

Meeting on the eve of their first practice sessions, Sabres general manager Jason Botterill and coach Ralph Krueger laid it out clearly to players that competition would be the driving force behind their decisions, from roster spots to ice time distribution.

Krueger wants his players to take that competitive edge and use it constructively.

"I think everything is a competition," he said. "The minutes on defense, the minutes for forwards, the minutes in goal. This is only the first day. Let that competition live and let it be a part of who we are. There's going to be always players that are grumpy and fighting for more minutes. But let's just find a basis to make that positive and see opportunities from there to grow."

Throughout the roster, young roster hopefuls have been placed alongside veterans in preparation for their first preseason games on Monday and Tuesday. C.J. Smith and Casey Mittelstadt are skating alongside Sam Reinhart. Victor Olofsson and Rasmus Asplund have practiced on a line with Marcus Johansson.

"We have a vastly diverse group and a lot of different skillsets," Reinhart said. "It's good to see guys kind of sticking to their own game and seeing where they fit. A guy like [Smith], a guy like [Olofsson], kind of see how they adapt and stick to their game because they're a heck of a talent, those guys."

"Those are just two that come to mind because they're in my group. To kind of see them progress, they don't have to change anything. It's just a matter of fitting them in, really. There's a lot of competition and it's only going to help everybody."

The mindset extends to the net, where Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark are entering their second season as goaltending tandem. Asked if there was a "starter" going into camp, Krueger said the next three weeks would influence their rotation.

Last season, the split wrought 48 starts for Hutton and 34 for Ullmark. The two goalies formed a supportive relationship along the way, recognizing that the success of the Sabres depended on both of their individual performances.

"He's a heck of a goalie," Hutton said of Ullmark. "We have each other's back, and that's the main thing. The main thing, I think, that we both try and demonstrate is that we support each other and we're playing for the Sabres, not for [ourselves]."

"There's obviously contract stuff, and everybody wants to play and be the guy, but you can do it from a good place."

Veterans throughout the roster have tried to embrace that same attitude. Olofsson, Smith, and Borgen all played NHL games last year, as did Tage Thompson and Henrik Jokiharju. The older players are aware that there's a talented crop of prospects fighting to push its way up.

McCabe laughed recounting his experience going up against the young guys on the first day of camp, when they were fresh off the Prospects Challenge.

"I got burned wide a couple times by the younger guys, I can tell they've been playing at a high level for about a week prior," he said. "It's great to see. It really just brings everyone's level up that much higher when you're being pushed internally. Competition brings the best out of everyone."

Let the games begin

The Sabres open their preseason schedule with a pair of road games, against Pittsburgh at Penn State on Monday and in Columbus on Tuesday. Krueger had not yet finalized his rosters when he met with the media Sunday, though he did say they'll be sending two different teams for the games.

Don Granato and Steve Smith will join Krueger on the bench. Granato will work with the forwards and scout opposition play while Smith will run the defense. Mike Bales will join video coaches Myles Fee and Kyle Smith offering support from the press box.

As for what to expect stylistically, Krueger said players have been provided with a simplified game plan. "We're going to give them just a couple simple principles we want to see," he said. "Defensively, you want to feel that group working together. You definitely want to feel everybody involved and understanding and hopefully we can get them quickly into the spaces we want them to be."

"With the puck, we believe we have a lot of skill. There's a strength in possession for us and how we manage that, we've been giving them some tools. I'd say overall, we want to begin with a defensive structure that limits are D-zone time and offensively, we'd like to be really strong at managing the puck and maintaining possession."

Here's how the two practice groups lined up Sunday:

Blue Group

13 Jimmy Vesey - 9 Jack Eichel - 43 Conor Sheary
53 Jeff Skinner - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 27 Curtis Lazar
81 Remi Elie - 42 Dylan Cozens - 72 Tage Thompson
28 Zemgus Girgensons - 22 Johan Larsson - 52 Andrew Oglevie
47 Sean Malone - 46 Eric Cornel

26 Rasmus Dahlin - 10 Henri Jokiharju
58 John Gilmour - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen

6 Marco Scandella - 33 Colin Miller / 78 Jacob Bryson

40 Carter Hutton
34 Jonas Johansson
50 Michael Houser

Gold Group

49 C.J. Smith - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 23 Sam Reinhart
73 Matej Pekar - 17 Vladimir Sobotka - 21 Kyle Okposo
90 Marcus Johansson - 74 Rasmus Asplund - 68 Victor Olofsson
20 Scott Wilson - 25 Arttu Ruotsalainen - 15 Jean-Sebastien Dea
12 Kevin Porter - 82 Kyle Olson

8 Casey Nelson - 62 Brandon Montour
19 Jake McCabe - 3 William Borgen
44 Brandon Hickey - 45 Casey Fitzgerald
61 Devante Stephens - 38 Zach Redmond

35 Linus Ullmark
36 Andrew Hammond