



Buffalo Sabres

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Coaching carousel: Sabres Krueger fine with being unknown

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

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Buffalo Sabres coach Ralph Krueger watches during the third period of the team's NHL preseason hockey game against the Toronto Maple Leafs, Saturday, Sept. 21, 2019, in Buffalo, N.Y. (AP Photo/Jeffrey T. Barnes)
Ralph Krueger doesn't care if you have never heard of him.

Having just turned 60, the Buffalo Sabres' new coach leans on the benefit of his vast experience — in hockey, soccer, and life as a father, husband, author and motivational speaker — to have stopped worrying a long time ago about how others view him and whether he might have something to prove returning to the NHL following a six-year absence.

"I don't care about that at all. Not one second, not even a millisecond do I care about my popularity here," Krueger emphatically told The Associated Press earlier this month.

"I have zero fear in this job because I have nothing to prove to anybody other than I want this team to be successful and give back to the city," he added. "But it's not that I'm out to prove to people that I was an out-of-the-box hire."

This offseason's NHL coaching carousel featured seven changes. While it had the Florida Panthers landing the most highly-prized candidate in three-time Stanley Cup champion Joel Quenneville, the Sabres took the most intriguing approach in hiring Krueger to turn things around. The other changes have Dallas Eakins in Anaheim, Dave Tippett in Edmonton, Todd McLellan in Los Angeles, D.J. Smith in Ottawa and Alain Vigneault in Philadelphia.

In Buffalo, the Sabres essentially split the middle in choosing between hiring a so-called retread versus a first-timer by luring Krueger back to hockey after he spent the past five years running soccer's Southampton FC of the English Premier League.

From Winnipeg, Manitoba, Krueger is not exactly a fresh new face though he is highly respected for the quarter-century spent in hockey on both sides of the Atlantic. He has coached Switzerland's national team, led Team Europe to a second-place finish at the 2016 World Cup of Hockey, and was as a consultant for Canada's gold-medal team at the 2014 Winter Games.

He's also not exactly a recycled entity either, despite having spent 2012-13 coaching the Edmonton Oilers before being fired — via Skype of all things — following a 19-22-7 finish.

If Quenneville benefits from having instant recognition when walking into a locker room, Krueger focused on making a good impression on a Sabres lineup featuring a majority of players who weren't in the NHL when he was in Edmonton.

He began by reaching out to players by phone or personally, such as visiting with captain Jack Eichel and forward Sam Reinhart in Slovakia, where they competed at the world championships in May. And Krueger then gripped his players' attention during a pre-camp-opening speech which forward Kyle Okposo said was so impassioned several of his teammates were ready to run through a wall afterward.

"He's got that presence about him," Okposo said "I've been around a lot of coaches, a lot of people, and I would say he's an alpha."

Krueger regarded Okposo's impression of him as a compliment and believed it referred to the open line of communication he's established with players.

Though Krueger prides himself for being always upbeat, that doesn't mean he'll avoid being critical.

"I'm not a smiley, friendly guy," he said. "Positive isn't always friendly. Positive is constructive. Positive is working toward solutions. So if a player gets sent down, there's an opportunity for him, too. And we'll be clear on why and what has to be worked on."

Krueger spent his time away from hockey developing on-ice strategies, some of which he experimented with while coaching Team Europe. He emphasizes simplicity in allowing players to play to their strengths, and speed in always being focused on attacking the opposing zone.

Though he has no regrets leaving hockey, the hiatus gave him time to realize how much he missed the game and dealing directly with players.

"My kids, when they saw me at the World Cup of Hockey said, 'Dad, that was the happiest period you've had in the last five years,'" he said. "They didn't mean I wasn't happy, but it was more in my job, the energy, and that stuck with me."

The joy to be back behind a bench is reflected in messages he sends to his family in Switzerland.

"The nicest thing I'm telling them is I really feel at home," Krueger said.

NEW FACES

Dallas Eakins, Anaheim.

NHL coaching record: 36-63-14 (Edmonton, 2013-15)

Replaces: Ducks GM Bob Murray, who finished season as interim coach after Randy Carlyle was fired.

What they're saying: "You can already see it and feel it around the room that guys are ready to go, and guys are ready to turn that page," forward Adam Henrique said of Eakins, who spent past three years coaching the Ducks' AHL affiliate in San Diego. "It's a lot of fun coming to the rink. He's here to work."

Ralph Krueger, Buffalo.

NHL coaching record: 19-22-7 (Edmonton, 2012-13)

Replaces: Phil Housley, who was fired after two seasons.

What they're saying: "I think the thing that sticks out is the personality. He's somebody you want to be around, you want to be a better person around," captain Jack Eichel said. "He's very calculated, very smart. He knows what he wants."

Todd McLellan, Los Angeles.

NHL coaching record: 434-282-90 (San Jose, 2008-15, Edmonton, 2015-19)

Replaces: Willie Desjardins, who wasn't retained after replacing John Stevens early in the season.

What they're saying: "He's just honest person. He said he don't care what you did before. He said you just have to show up and show everybody what you can," said forward Ilya Kovalchuk.

Joel Quenneville, Florida.

NHL coaching record: 890-532-137-77 (St. Louis, 1997-2004, Colorado, 2005-2008, Chicago, 2008-2018)

Replaces: Bob Boughner, who was fired after two seasons.

What they're saying: "It's fantastic for him to coach again. It's the right situation with his relationship with Dale," Devils GM Ray Shero said, referring to Panthers GM Dale Tallon, who worked with Quenneville in Chicago. "It's not cheap to get a guy like that. But you know what, it's an important market and they want to win."

D.J. Smith, Ottawa.

NHL coaching record: None.

Replaces: Interim coach Marc Crawford, who finished season after Guy Boucher was fired.

What they're saying: "D.J. did a really good job for us," said Maple Leafs coach Mike Babcock, quoted in The Toronto Sun, referring to his former assistant. "We talked about this when he first interviewed with me five years ago that he would have an opportunity like this. He sent me a really nice text the other day about feeling really prepared and confident."

Dave Tippett, Edmonton.

NHL coaching record: 553-413-120-28 (Dallas, 2002-09, Arizona, 2009-17)

Replaces: McLellan, who was fired after four seasons.

What they're saying: "He's a big structure guys with his systems and I think that's going to be big for us because I think in the past, when things start going bad for us, we kind of abandon our structure and then things get worse and worse," forward Ryan Nugent-Hopkins said. "When things start to go wrong, I think Tipp's going to be able to keep us within that structure."

Alain Vigneault, Philadelphia.

NHL coaching record: 648-435-98-35 (Montreal, 1997-2000, Vancouver, 2006-2013, New York Rangers, 2013-2018)

Replaces: interim coach Scott Gordon, who took over in December after Dave Hakstol was fired.

What they're saying: "It was obviously a huge reason why I decided to go there," said trade acquisition forward Kevin Hayes, who played for Vigneault in New York. "He was a big contributor to my game changing in the NHL, from being kind of just offensive to a 200-foot player that I believe that I am today."

Curtis Lazar trying to get career 'back on track' with Sabres

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

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Curtis Lazar knows he's running out of time, yet the 24-year-old forward wasn't showing any signs of angst Tuesday morning inside the Buffalo Sabres' dressing room.

"Another day," he said, grinning. "I've gone through this enough now. I understand it's a business."

The business can be cruel, though, and Lazar is amid an important step in his career. The former first-round draft pick spent most of last season in the American Hockey League and signed a one-way contract with the Sabres in July with the intent of getting his career "back on track."

Despite performing well in both preseason games over the weekend against Toronto, Lazar might face long odds to be among the 23 players on the Sabres' roster for the season opener in Pittsburgh on Oct. 3. Barring injury, new coach Ralph Krueger and General Manager Jason Botterill must trim the roster by seven over the next week.

Lazar played right wing on the Sabres' fifth forward line during practice Tuesday, an indication he could be on the outside looking in. However, he was brimming with confidence ahead of what could be his final audition for a new organization.

"I definitely made a case for myself," Lazar said. "I feel very confident in the way I've played. I know I can help the Sabres take that next step. I just don't have the final say when it comes down to it."

Through three preseason games, Lazar has shown a willingness to play a physical game and flashed skill in a checking-line role. The latter could separate him from other potential fourth-line players such as Zemgus Girgensons, Vladimir Sobotka, Johan Larsson and Remi Elie.

Following a somewhat slow start to camp – including a minus-3 rating in the preseason-opening win over Pittsburgh – Lazar had a strong showing Friday in Toronto, recording two shots on goal, five shot attempts and five hits. He also irritated a few Maple Leafs players throughout the game.

That earned Lazar some power-play time in the second night of a back-to-back Saturday, and he finished with two shots on goal in 12:26 of the 5-3 win.

"He's one of many that's putting good pressure on the roster evolution, and I think he more than anything is somebody who's had a good last couple of days," Krueger said of Lazar. "We have a healthy competition up front in more ways than one. One is we are healthy and we'd like to keep it that way, touch wood. But the other is that depending on the roles, there are a lot of options. ..."

"We're pleased with this group that's out there right now and we've kept such a big roster because of how well everybody has performed in training camp. We'd be comfortable with any mix of these 12 forwards starting for us."

This might be the Sabres' last opportunity to see if Lazar can help them this season. His one-way contract will require him to clear waivers if he is assigned to Rochester, and his play this preseason could buoy his chances of landing an NHL job elsewhere.

Lazar chose the Sabres over multiple offers during his first foray into unrestricted free agency. In addition to encouraging conversations with Krueger, Lazar was intrigued by the Sabres' young core, which includes his former teammate at the IIHF World Junior Championship, Sam Reinhart.

Lazar also viewed this as his chance to realize the potential that he felt wasn't attainable earlier in his career. Lazar, who was drafted 17th overall in 2013 and scored 99 goals during his junior career with the Edmonton Oil Kings, was rushed to the NHL by Ottawa at 19 years old and struggled to adjust to a checking-line role.

Lazar gained traction late in his rookie season, recording six points in the final 12 games, but the Senators' neutral-zone trap system sapped the creativity from his offensive game. The result was 12 goals among 36 points while averaging 12:33 of ice time in 176 regular-season games over three seasons before he was traded to Calgary.

"I kind of wanted to stay afloat and I couldn't translate that into a larger role," Lazar said. "I have no problem playing on a checking line. For me it's always been about team success, but I know I can leave my stamp on the game a little bit more than I had the opportunity to do. ... I want to be part of this team very bad, and I think I'm showing it by the way I play."

Lazar never quite received that opportunity in Calgary, either. He averaged only 9:51 of ice time in 65 regular-season games during 2017-18 and failed to make the Flames' roster out of training camp last fall.

Lazar was sent to the Flames' American Hockey League affiliate in Stockton, where he mentored younger players by teaching them how to file a tax return and cooking them dinner. He also took advantage of a prominent role, scoring 20 goals among 41 points in 57 games.

Now, Lazar wants to prove he can produce in the NHL when surrounded by a talented core such as the Sabres' and while playing in a system that encourages players to use their creativity with the puck.

"It's kind of a blessing in disguise," Lazar said of his time in Stockton. "It gave me a chance to grow my game and I think you're seeing the product of that right now. I do feel like I'm playing some of my best hockey as an NHLer right now."

"I'm not thinking, I'm just playing. Everything is falling in place for me. It feels good because it's the first time in a very long time that I've felt this way."

Wilson cleared, Ristolainen returns

Forward Scott Wilson and defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen returned to practice Tuesday after sitting out Monday because of a lower-body injury and illness, respectively. Wilson, 27, had not skated with the Sabres since a preseason loss in Columbus one week earlier but has been cleared to return to game action, Krueger said.

Ristolainen, meanwhile, played 21:38 in the Sabres' 5-3 win over Toronto on Saturday night.

Winger Conor Sheary (lower body) and center Johan Larsson (upper body) did not practice Tuesday.

Dea clears waivers

Jean-Sebastien Dea will join Rochester after clearing waivers Tuesday. Dea, a 25-year-old forward, signed a two-year, one-way contract with the Sabres this summer and can play either center or wing. He'll likely be a candidate to be among the first recalled to Buffalo in the event of an injury.

Dea has scored five goals among seven points in 29 NHL games between Pittsburgh and New Jersey.

Sabres' Nelson staying in the mix on defense

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

September 24, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - With all the injuries on the Sabres' defense, Casey Nelson got some time on Tuesday at left defense with Will Borgen.

The 27-year-old is in his fourth professional season and has split time between Buffalo and Rochester every year. The defense will have a different look this season with the additions of Colin Miller and Henri Jokiharju. Nelson thinks they are much improved, "You talk about depth and that's the main word you could say especially since we've brought in so many guys to improve."

I would consider Brandon Montour a pretty new addition since he was acquired on Feb. 24. John Gilmour came from the Rangers as a depth free agent signee during the summer.

Nelson said now that everybody is competing for jobs, they know what to do, "There for sure is going to be more support, there's no grey areas anymore. Everyone's on the same page and obviously in these games we're getting better and better and you can see a lot of good things already."

In practice on Tuesday, Nelson was on the left side playing with Will Borgen. There have been a few times as a Sabre that Nelson has played left defense. He said it doesn't bother him at all to make the change, "Whatever I've got to do, you know what I mean? Anything they tell me to do, I'll do. There's no complaining there.

"I'm getting more and more comfortable at it. I practice it here and there and I'm good."

Now that Nelson has played some left D, he knows what to expect, "I take it as less of a big deal. I focus on things I can control and I've just got to embrace it. I mean, you've got to have confidence playing the opposite side and it's easier that way."

Nelson knows that on defense it's going to boil down to a numbers game. He said, "You can't worry about the game or you're two ahead or you're halfway through the season or next year or anything like that. You've just got to take it day-by-day and even during the game, shift-by-shift, so it's all about the little things and adding them up to more of a big piece."

Now that he's 27, Nelson feels he can be more of a leader. He said there are things he can help the young kids with, "I'm a more all-around guy. I don't exactly bring a ton of offense. I'm more and more defensive and I think I've got some key components that I can help some of the younger guys or anybody. Everyone is giving each other pointers. I mean, we're all really tight and we're all open to get to the same overall picture."

Rasmus Ristolainen and Scott Wilson returned to practice on Tuesday. The lines were:

Olofsson - Eichel - Reinhart
Skinner - Johansson - Okposo
Girgensons - Sobotka - Thompson
Vesey - Mittelstadt - Rodrigues
Elie - Asplund - Lazar
Wilson - Cozens

Dahlin - Ristolainen
McCabe - Miller
Nelson - Borgen
Scandella - Jokiharju
Gilmour

The Sabres are celebrating their 50th season. Equipment manager Rip Simonick has been there for each one

By John Vogl

The Athletic

September 25, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. – Dominik Hasek, the most acrobatic goalie of all time, was also an all-world manicurist.

Before cutting down shooters, Hasek trimmed his nails. He'd sit at his stall before every game and whittle away at his fingers, working the clippers with an intense stare.

It was Rip Simonick's job to make sure The Dominator had the right tools.

"He had to have his special fingernail clippers, so we had Velcro and we used to stick them on the wall where he sat," the Sabres' equipment manager said. "Dominik, he had to have his things. His coffee, he had to have eight packets of sugar. He couldn't have sugar from a container because he didn't know how much sugar to put in the coffee. So he had to have eight packets."

Simonick can tell stories like that all day. Hell, he can tell them all year. Thankfully, he does.

Whether it's goals and fights or good food and bad flights, the 70-year-old always has a tale to share. Follow him around any arena in the NHL and it won't be 20 steps before someone stops with him a hug, handshake and memory. It's like he is everyone's favorite relative.

"He's the grandfather of the Sabres," fellow Buffalo equipment manager Dave Williams said. "He's seen it all."

That's no exaggeration. As the Sabres celebrate their 50th anniversary season, Simonick is the only person left in the organization who precedes its founding. He became a stick boy for the American Hockey League's Buffalo Bisons in 1964 and got to know Seymour H. Knox III at a local rink. When the NHL awarded Knox and his brother, Northrup, an NHL expansion team for the 1970-71 season, the family moved Simonick up to the big leagues.

He's been dishing out sticks and stories ever since.

"People are amazed when they ask how many years you've been with the team and I tell them 50," Simonick said. "They say, 'No way.' I say, 'There's a way. I've done it.'"

As the years and friendships have multiplied, so have Simonick's duties. In addition to equipment manager, he's become a team historian, psychologist, motivator, prankster and shoulder to cry on.

"He was part of the team – a great part of the team," said Hall of Fame center Gilbert Perreault, the Sabres' original draft pick and superstar. "It's not only hockey. You've got to have fun in the dressing room, and Rip was a great part of that.

"He's a great friend and we had a great time in the early years. Every time I come to Buffalo, I try to see him in the room. He hasn't changed at all."

Things certainly have changed around Simonick. On the hockey side, there are equipment innovations no one could have foreseen. On the ice, the Sabres have transformed from perennial playoff participant to postseason afterthought. The biggest losses, however, have come away from the rink as Simonick said goodbye to family, friends and former players.

Still, day after day, Simonick pulls on his shirt with a Sabres logo and heads to the rink.

"He's basically sacrificed his life for this team and this sport," Williams said.

It's the early 1970s and the Sabres are heading west. The three-game trip starts in Los Angeles, moves to Oakland for a matchup with the Golden Seals and finishes in Vancouver. As happens in winter, weather is causing problems at the airport.

"It was all commercial flights then," Simonick said. "We very, very seldom chartered."

A ticket agent says the plane carrying the Sabres isn't going anywhere, but there is one flight getting out to California. Simonick agrees to put the equipment on that plane, hoping to get ahead of any other travel problems.

When the Sabres land in L.A. the following day for the game, Simonick learns the harsh news.

"Well, the flight to California went to Oakland!" he says, the astonishment coming through his voice to this day.

The Sabres and Kings had to sit around and wait for Buffalo's gear to head south, which was maddening then but just another cherished memory now. It was that downtime in airports and locker rooms that allowed those early team members to bond. Simonick was 21 when the Sabres were born, making him the same age as many of the players.

"You come in as a player and he takes care of you," said Don Luce, who joined the Sabres in 1971 and spent 31 years in the organization as a player and member of the hockey department. "He makes sure your equipment is great and does a great job at that, but realistically he talks to the players, makes them feel at home. When you're a young kid coming in or even a veteran, he makes you feel at home and makes you feel a part of it right away.

"His personality is such an ideal personality for his job."

Simonick also had the ideal competitive streak.

"He always wanted to win and was pissed off when you lost, much like we were," said Danny Gare, whose No. 18 hangs in Buffalo's rafters after starring at right wing from 1974 to 1981.

Simonick recalls pulling Gare aside after the winger's second career game. The Sabres got trounced in Philadelphia 6-1, but they didn't pull any punches against the Broad Street Bullies. They didn't score as many goals as the Flyers, but they threw just as many haymakers in an arena where most teams cowered.

"I said to Danny Gare after the game, 'We're going somewhere this year, buddy. We're going somewhere,'" Simonick said.

Indeed, in the Sabres' fifth season of existence, they advanced to the Stanley Cup final. Though they lost to the Flyers, Simonick still considers the 1974-75 team the best in Buffalo's 50 years.

"Obviously, I want to win," he said. "I still have hopes. We've got good management now. We've got a lot of good players. It's just that they have to jell. They have to get together. You've got to look over your shoulder and say, 'Am I ready to go to war with this guy? Is he ready to go to war with me?' They've got to be together. That's pretty much what I see."

Simonick is the one man who can connect those early years with Perreault to the first few seasons with Buffalo's current captain.

"I've told Jack Eichel many times: Gilbert never lost when he played amateur hockey," Simonick said. "Then we drafted him and he came here and one year we lost (or tied) 23 games in a row on the road. He would just sit on the bench and be heartbroken, tears running down his eyes.

"But he lived with it. He knew the team was going to get better, and he was the reason they got better. They built around him. We started adding guys, drafting guys who were good. ... Our second cast ended up being as good as our first and second line. It's just the inner competition that makes your team better, and that's what the Sabres were."

The Sabres feel that's what they're building now and hope history repeats.

"He's good to have around here," Eichel said. "I love Rip. He's just been here for so long, seen so much, been with so many different people. He tells a lot of good stories. To pick his brain on stuff, it's pretty good. He's a good resource."

It's the 1980s and '90s – pick a year, any year – and the Sabres are hosting their team party. The smell of beer, cigarettes and perfume wafts through the air as single players mingle with female guests.

Just as the gathering hits full swing, Simonick's production begins.

"The consistent prank for the locker room was players would always ask me to get a police officer in uniform that I knew," he said. "It was always a rookie. The GMs were in on it, too, and the coaches – Lindy (Ruff) was obviously the best – and we would have the police call the player over. The police would say, 'I don't know how to say this, but you're under arrest.'"

"The guy would be chalk white, then everybody in the room would just laugh."

While that was an annual tradition, Simonick also helped mix things up on a daily basis.

"He knew how to have fun and how far he could reach to poke the bear," said J.P. Dumont, who played for Buffalo in the early 2000s. "He was really good at that. He was always into a good prank, and if somebody wanted to prank the guys he was always involved. He really enjoyed that."

"Rip is a legend and not just in Buffalo. Everybody knows Rip in the NHL."

That's because Simonick takes a genuine interest in people. Chris Taylor, who played for the Sabres in the early 2000s and is coaching the minor-league team in Rochester, remembers his arrival in Buffalo well.

"As soon I got here, he knew where I was from, my hometown (of Stratford, Ontario) and that the old Sabres trainer Angie Nigro was from my hometown," Taylor said. "He shared that with me. I knew Angie Nigro very well. He was a baseball coach of mine when I grew up, so just for him to look up where I was from ... that understanding showed Rip cares about each individual who comes up and he takes notice of who you are and where you're coming from."

The relationships extend beyond the ice. When fellow Buffalo native Tim Nowak worked his final game as a linesman last season, Simonick was one of the first to shake his hand in the officials' locker room. As the equipment manager conducted an interview in the atrium of the Sabres' arena last week, he paused to ask a ticket salesman walking by how his trip to the dentist went.

"People say, 'How do you know all these people?'" Simonick said. "I say, 'I socialize.'"

While he knows people in every city, he's never strayed far from the neighborhood. He was born in the Old First Ward, a gritty part of Buffalo located just blocks from the Sabres' original and current arenas. He's helped his neighbors often through the years.

"I've known Rip since I was 8 years old," said Buffalo native and retired Sabres forward Tim Kennedy. "It's probably safe to say now, but a lot of my early hockey equipment was from Rip. I remember having a lot of Chris Drury sticks when I was younger in high school. He was always there to help out the community."

"He took great care of me as soon as I came onboard with the Sabres. Whatever I ever needed, he made sure I had it – and not just equipment-wise. He made sure I was welcomed to the room and welcomed to the organization. He introduced me to a lot of people that I probably wouldn't have met if I wasn't a friend of Rip Simonick."

"He embodies that First Ward mentality where if you're related somehow – third, fourth, fifth cousin – you're like family to him. He really takes care of you."

It's why autographed Sabres gear will make its way into the hands of people like Islanders coach Barry Trotz, who has a son with Down syndrome and participates in fundraisers.

"I've tried to be as generous as I could be for people that are willing to take care of the underprivileged," Simonick said. "A signed stick here, a puck there, a jersey here. If I can help them out, I'm always willing to do it."

It's 3 a.m. in some NHL city and the Sabres just flew in to complete back-to-back games. Simonick is surrounded by fellow equipment manager Williams, assistant equipment manager George Babcock, 22 overstuffed hockey bags, more than 100 sticks and several large trunks. They've been working for 20 hours straight with no end in sight. There was a concert in the arena and there's no access to the visiting locker room yet.

"The job that those guys do is very selfless," Kennedy said. "They don't get a lot of recognition, but it's the hardest job in pro sports. When players and coaches go home for the night, those guys are at the rink washing laundry, getting stuff set up, unpacking gear, packing gear. It's a very hard job, but he's been one of the best at it for a long time."

While few people see the around-the-clock work behind the scenes, it does occasionally get noticed. The NHL has tapped Simonick to work three All-Star Games and honored Williams and Babcock last season. Simonick went into the Sabres' Hall of Fame in 2000 and the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame in 2014.

Last year, he received his greatest hockey accolade with friends and fellow Sabres legends Pat LaFontaine, Rob Ray and Rick Jeanneret by his side. Simonick was inducted into the Society of Professional Hockey Equipment Managers Hall of Fame, which earned him a spot on the Wall of Honor in the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto.

Rip Simonick and Pat LaFontaine pose with the equipment manager's plaque that hangs in the Hockey Hall of Fame. (Photo courtesy of Pat LaFontaine)

"He's earned it," Williams said. "George is about to work 2,000 games. I'm close to 2,000 games. In many organizations, that's a hell of an achievement. Then we sit in the shadow of Rip and we can't say anything. We don't even see it as an accomplishment when you see what he's given."

Simonick is heading toward 3,700 games. In 2016, he became the first hockey equipment manager to pass the 3,500-game milestone. The changes since his debut are immeasurable.

"Now the players' association says you have to have a hot meal after the game," Simonick said. "Those guys used to have six beers and three pieces of pizza. That was their postgame meal – and a couple ciggies on the way to the plane. Actually, you could smoke on the plane then."

"It's a different world. You can't make it impressionable to the players today how hard those guys had to work to get where they are. They were like guys who had nice jobs in the banks or for the government or the steel plant. Those guys could intermingle. These guys now making millions are over and above the general public. One player's salary is probably the whole team's salary back then. That was our whole payroll, \$7 million, \$8 million, \$10 million."

"We used to take the equipment in an Econoline van, a small van. Now we've got 12 trunks and they've got to have everything in there from toothbrushes to Pepto-Bismol to massage oil, two skate machines, five medical trunks. Now we have a big, huge step van that they use to move people's houses and furniture."

The cost of a stick has risen from single digits to \$300. Skates are customized with blades that pop out for quick changes rather than in-game sharpening. And there was a lot of in-game sharpening back when LaFontaine was in town.

No one in Sabres history was more finicky about his skates than LaFontaine, who relied on his skating to set franchise records with 95 assists and 148 points in 1992-93.

"I always say you're either a skate guy or you're a stick guy," LaFontaine said. "The skates, people don't understand, you're on less than a quarter inch of a blade and you're balancing and you've got two edges and you've got a certain hollow – the deeper the hollow, the more your skates dig in – and then you've got radius for

turning, so it's really customizable. It was always kind of fine-tuning what was really optimal for me as a skater and player.

"Where some guys would say, 'Hey, just sharpen 'em up,' I would say, 'Hey, this stick looks good, tape it up,' but I would say, 'I've got a little strip on my right back edge when I'm going into a turn and I can feel it.' Ninety-eight percent of the time, Ripper knew right away, 'Yup, it's right here.' We were always in sync.

"He was an amazing trainer and equipment guy, and he had to have a Ph.D. in skate blades and how he sharpened them. He'd have guys try certain things, 'Hey listen, I notice that you're doing this and you might try a certain sharpening.' Then sometimes he would just do it knowing that it would be beneficial for a player and the player would go out, do well and might not even know that Rip noticed something in his skating style and adapted to it to help the player feel more comfortable and balanced on the ice."

Simonick also devised innovative ways to keep the Sabres on the ice. During the opening game of the 1993 playoffs in Boston, LaFontaine heard a pop in his knee while trying to take down Cam Neely. Meanwhile, Buffalo defenseman Doug Bodger suffered a shoulder injury. If it were the regular season, both would have taken a breather – but this was the playoffs.

"We were going to play," said LaFontaine, who began laughing as he launched into the story. "Rip's a big horse guy and there was this stuff called DMSO that they used on horses. It was numbing the soft tissue nerves of the skin and the joint area. You literally put a spoonful on your hand and rub it on the outside of the area, and the next thing you know you could taste some kind of bizarre, stringent taste under your tongue within about 10 seconds. So they used this for horses, and sure enough we put this on, rubbed on the outside.

"When you started to sweat," LaFontaine laughed, "it was like a barnyard. I mean literally like a horse stable. Guys were making the horse sound. They made Bodgie and I sit at the far end of the bench because it was so potent smelling.

"But we could play and we ended up sweeping them. Here's Rip Simonick coming up with the tricks to help his team any way he could, even if it meant going to the horse track to get some special DMSO. Rip was all about winning. Rip was all about doing whatever it took to help his team be successful, players be successful.

"He was more than just an exceptional trainer. His qualities as a person, his character and the way he treated everybody in that organization was amazing."

It's Feb. 7, 1986, one day after Sabres forward Dave Andreychuk set a franchise record with five goals against the Bruins. Simonick's wife, Maize, and her parents, Jack and Betty, attended the game in Boston Garden. They love hockey just as much as Rip and relish these times with him on the road.

The next stop is Hartford for a game against the Whalers. Since it's only 100 miles away, the Sabres travel by bus rather than plane. The equipment fits in the cargo hold.

"The bus is about three-quarters of the way to Hartford and all of a sudden the bus loses its power," Simonick said. "It starts slowing down, slowing down. The bus breaks down."

They call for another bus and wait for it to arrive. The weather is in the teens and the players want to get going. Once the backup bus arrives, they quickly board and take off, leaving Simonick and the equipment behind to wait for the Whalers' cargo van.

"I see this car coming down," Simonick said. "There's my wife, mother-in-law and father-in-law waving to me as they go by. They didn't even stop to pick me up. Five hours later, I go to Hartford."

He laughs loudly at the memory. But tears well in his eyes every time he talks about 2011.

"2011 was the worst year of my life and my career," he said. "I lost my brother-in-law, my wife, my father-in-law, my mother-in-law – four family members in one year."

His brother-in-law was also his best friend, neighborhood pal and longtime NHL Central Scouting director E.J. McGuire. Maize was his one and only, his rock away from the rink who always knew her way around one.

"Unfortunately, we haven't made the playoffs since she passed away," Simonick said. "She was the smartest of everybody in hockey. She knew who could play and who couldn't play. She used to send me voicemails during games, 'Tell Lindy Ruff not to use this guy. Don't use this guy!' She was scouting from home."

Home hasn't been the same without her, so Simonick has found ways to keep busy. He and his older brothers Paul and Eugene have always loved horse racing – Rip used to walk across the Peace Bridge from Buffalo to Fort Erie, Ontario, to watch the thoroughbreds – and Simonick spends the offseason with ponies that race for his Old First Ward Stable. The jockeys' silks are in the Sabres' blue and gold, drawing the attention of fans.

"I won a race at Saratoga and there's four people in the winner's circle, I don't know who they are," Simonick said. "They were just Sabres fans who had Sabres clothes on and they were all cheering, 'Go, Sabres, go!'"

Rip and Paul put New Mexico's Zia Park Racetrack on their bucket list, the site of their next great adventure. But before they could make it, Paul died in January 2017.

It was sign that maybe Simonick should do something other than visit the same hockey arena for the 100th time. So last season, for the first time in his five-decade career, he stopped going to road games. He journeyed with the Sabres to Las Vegas last October but went southeast to Zia Park while the team went west to San Jose.

"My brother, we were supposed to go," Simonick said. "I went there and got some of the stones and gravel from the paddock and racetrack and took it to his gravesite."

The losses continued this month when Eugene died, leaving just Rip and his older sister Dorothy remaining from a six-sibling family. They're planning to vacation together in Nashville when the Sabres visit in January.

Until then, Simonick will hang out in Buffalo's arena. He's happy. The promise of a new season has him smiling and telling stories, eager to celebrate 50 years in the NHL along with the Sabres.

"I'm so lucky to be in the same city my whole life," Simonick said. "I'm happy with what I'm doing. I'm happy just to be with the Sabres. I hope to be around for a few more years. I've got to be around when we win the Cup."

Colin Miller hopes to bring lessons learned with Golden Knights to Sabres

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

September 24, 2019

BUFFALO – Two years ago, Sabres defenseman Colin Miller joined the Vegas Golden Knights, an expansion team filled with castoffs hungry for an opportunity.

Within a matter of weeks, a group that had little or no expectations began one of the greatest and most unique seasons in NHL history.

Players who had never spent any time together quickly meshed. The Golden Knights morphed into a powerhouse and would become the unlikeliest Stanley Cup finalist ever.

A common bond united them.

"We kind of all had a chip on our shoulder," Miller said Tuesday inside KeyBank Center. "We were all frustrated from ... being let go by our former teams."

In Miller's case, after compiling six goals and 13 points in 61 games in 2016-17, the Boston Bruins left him unprotected for the expansion draft.

The former fifth-round pick seized his opportunity with Vegas, scoring 10 goals and 41 points in 82 outings in 2017-18.

Miller, 26, knows frustration can be a powerful tool if it's utilized properly. For the Golden Knights, it helped buoy them to within two wins of a championship.

These days, Miller, who was acquired for two draft picks on June 28, sees some Sabres irked by all the losing they've endured.

"In a sense here, there's some frustration around this locker room," Miller said after the Sabres prepared for Wednesday's preseason game against the Columbus Blue Jackets. "This team hasn't done what they wanted to do the last couple years, and we should go into this season with that kind of feeling in our stomach."

He added: "I can bring some of that experience over from Vegas that we had the last couple years and try to help this team move forward."

Shortly after the trade, Miller acknowledged he felt "mixed emotions" leaving Vegas. But on Tuesday, he said he "moved forward pretty quickly."

"I was excited once I got here and came down here in late July and kind of met the faces," he said. "Ever since then it's been pretty great."

Miller's new opportunity excites him. While he made significant contributions to the Golden Knights, he wasn't one of their top defensemen.

He averaged 19 minutes, 39 seconds of ice time an outings last season, 18 more seconds than 2017-18.

The Sabres plan to lean on Miller heavily. In Saturday's 5-3 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs, he skated in every situation, playing 22 minutes, seven seconds.

Miller's presence beside Jake McCabe has created a mobile second defense pairing.

"I'm going to hopefully get some opportunity here, be able to compete against some top or higher lines, which I didn't really get that opportunity in Vegas," Miller said.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said Miller has showcased confidence throughout training camp.

"He has picked up and embraces what we are doing here," Krueger said.

There's a good reason for that. The Sabres, Krueger said, are implementing many of Vegas' "principles or concepts."

"We just have our own package of how we're going to do it," he said. "So for him, I feel that he's comfortable in the way we want to play."

Krueger has watched Miller aggressively pressure the puck all over the ice.

"His ability to read that is very high," he said.

So is Miller's ability to shoot the puck. He unleashed some lethal one-timers from the point Saturday.

"We saw the weapon that he is the other night," Krueger said. "Those are four or five of the better shots I've seen in a lot time. Every one's a threat, every one is dangerous and the forwards will be excited to be around the net when he's shooting."

McCabe said: "I kill penalties, so I've seen it plenty of times whizzing by me."

Miller's heavy shot probably ranks among the NHL's most underrated.

"Shooting pucks is something that I always do every summer, and like a lot of guys, for whatever reason, I kind of got that rhythm down," he said. "It's something that I work on still to this day."

Buffalo Sabres roster decisions loom as regular season approaches

By Stu Boyar

WGRZ

September 24, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. — By the time the regular season starts for the Buffalo Sabres on October 3, the team can only have 23 active players on its roster. With just two preseason games left to play that means it's getting close to decision time for head coach Ralph Krueger.

"We're pleased with this group that's out there right now and we've kept such a big roster because of how well everybody has performed in training camp," Krueger said. "We'd be comfortable with any mix of these 12 forwards starting for us."

That's good for everyone still in training camp with the team as they prepare to face Columbus at the Key Bank Center Wednesday night.

Krueger says not to put too much emphasis for any player on the final two preseason games.

"However the decisions will fall they won't be based only on these two games," he said. "We have a bank of history here whether its last season observing what went on there through this summer and training camp and its not going to be one moment that will push a player one way or the other."

Forwards Johan Larsson and Conor Sheary did not practice on Tuesday. Forward Scott Wilson returned the ice along with defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen who was out sick Monday.

Jack Eichel is fan of Josh Allen but Boston-area native not sharing Bills-Pats pick

By Leo Roth

Rochester Democrat & Chronicle

September 24, 2019

BUFFALO – Buffalo Bills quarterback Josh Allen has a big fan in the city's other "franchise" player who knows all about hot starts and is wishing him a better outcome.

Sabres star center Jack Eichel, who led his team on a 10-game winning streak last November and a brief occupation of first place in the entire NHL before things unraveled, has watched Allen lead the Bills to a 3-0 record, saying after practice on Tuesday, "I'm super happy for him."

Allen's fourth-quarter rally against the Cincinnati Bengals, his second in three weeks, allowed Buffalo to remain unbeaten and set up a showdown for first place in the AFC East Division with the defending Super Bowl champion New England Patriots, who are also 3-0.

Yeah, Eichel's hometown team.

Eichel grew up in New Chelmsford, Massachusetts, about 45 minutes from Boston. While he said he roots for Allen "every week," Sunday's game at New Era Field is tugging at the loyalty heartstrings. So, who is he pulling for?

"I'll keep that stuff close to myself," a diplomatic Eichel said.

The Sabres' captain is more than willing to share his thoughts about what Allen is experiencing as a high first-round draft pick who is the face of a team with a proud tradition of success, but one that has fallen on difficult times.

The Sabres, celebrating their 50th anniversary season, have missed the NHL playoffs eight consecutive seasons. The Bills, celebrating their 60th year, have missed the NFL playoffs 18 of the last 19 years.

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Eichel, 22, and Allen, 23, were born five months apart in 1996. They share the same owners, Kim and Terry Pegula. And they share the expectations of western New York sports fans starving for a Stanley Cup or Super Bowl championship.

"He's got a lot of pressure on him with where the Bills have been," Eichel, who is entering his fifth professional season, said of Allen, who is into his second. "I thought he did a good job stepping in last year. It was a bit of a learning experience for him, but I thought he got better as the year went on. I love watching him play. You can tell he wants to win so bad, and he's a really good guy."

Eichel, an established NHL scorer, is working on his second contract that will keep him in a Buffalo uniform seven more seasons. Allen has a lot of work to do yet before "established" can be placed by his name and he is paid like an elite passer in his sport. But he's trending that way.

The eras are few when the Bills and Sabres had superstars plying their craft at the same time. O.J. Simpson and Gil Perreault in the early 1970s? Jim Kelly and Pierre Turgeon in the late 1980s? So many others who found the mantle too heavy.

"The people here are desperate for a winner, so you just want to do your best for them," said Eichel, who leads the Sabres against Pittsburgh in their regular-season opener Thursday, Oct. 3.

Meanwhile, Allen has the Patriots to deal with Sunday in Orchard Park. Only the biggest game of his young career.

"He's somebody you can see his competitiveness come out, whether he's passing or running," Eichel said. "He doesn't go down easy, he'll take contact on. He just wants to live up to the standard he's put on himself and I think he knows how good he can be. I'm rooting for him every day, he's a great dude and a great player and I think he's going to do wonders."

NHL Rumors: Top Trade Buzz Surrounding Rasmus Ristolainen, Justin Faulk, More

By Mike Chiari

Bleacher Report

September 24, 2019

With the NHL preseason in full swing and the start of the 2019-20 regular season just over one week away, teams are still looking to fine-tune their rosters and add the missing piece that could take them from pretender status to playoff contender.

While there seemingly aren't many huge names on the block, there are some quality defensemen to be had, and adding even one solid blueliner to the mix can make a difference at times.

Here is a closer look at the top players who are rumored to be available leading up to the commencement of the 2019-20 season and where they could potentially land.

Rasmus Ristolainen

The Buffalo Sabres have an obvious logjam along the blueline with the regular season approaching, and there is little doubt that Rasmus Ristolainen is the guy they would most like to move.

According to Pierre LeBrun of The Athletic, the Sabres are listening to offers for Ristolainen, and the Anaheim Ducks are one team that has checked in on him. LeBrun also noted that Buffalo's asking price for the Finn is high.

Despite still being one month shy of his 25th birthday, Ristolainen already has six years of NHL experience. He has also posted at least 40 points in each of the past four campaigns, including a 2018-19 season in which he registered five goals and 38 assists. Of those 43 points, 17 of them came on the power play, which is perhaps his greatest asset.

The biggest issue for Ristolainen is his defensive play. His plus-minus of minus-41 last season was a career worst, and it was the worst mark in the NHL as well.

Ristolainen has never had a plus-minus of better than minus-nine in a season, and his career plus-minus of minus-143 speaks to how big of a liability he can be on the defensive end at times.

If a team does acquire Ristolainen, it will be doing so based on his offensive ability and strength on the power play. The Ducks are in desperate need of someone like Ristolainen since none of their defensemen posted more than 28 points last season.

The Ducks and Sabres also have a history of making trades, as Anaheim dealt defenseman Brandon Montour to Buffalo last season.

Ristolainen still has three years remaining on his contract at \$5.4 million per year, and clearing that off the books would give Buffalo more flexibility while also making it more likely that a young defenseman like Henri Jokiharju can crack the lineup.

Buffalo still needs some scoring help up front, so if it can pry a forward like Rickard Rakell or Jakob Silfverberg from Anaheim as part of a Ristolainen trade, it would be a major coup for the Sabres.

Justin Faulk

Like Ristolainen, Justin Faulk is a quality offensive producer from the blueline whose time may be running short with his current team.

The 27-year-old is set to enter his ninth NHL season, and he has spent his entire career with the Carolina Hurricanes. Carolina is stacked on defense with the likes of Dougie Hamilton, Jake Gardiner, Jacob Slavin and Trevor van Riemsdyk, which is why Faulk is now expendable.

According to Elliotte Friedman of Sportsnet, the Ducks and Hurricanes had been in talks regarding a Faulk trade, and while his agent didn't call the talks dead, there is no sign that something is going to get done between the two sides.

Friedman added that it is believed Faulk wants a contract extension worth \$6.75 million per year from Anaheim in the event of a trade.

Faulk has only hit the 40-point mark once in his career (15 goals and 34 assists in 2014-15), but he is one of the best goal-scoring defensemen in the NHL. Faulk has scored double-digit goals in four of the past five seasons, including 11 last season.

While his 24 assists and 35 points were somewhat underwhelming, he posted a career-best plus-minus of plus-nine after being a minus player in each of the previous five seasons. He also contributed on the defensive end with a career-high 121 blocked shots and 156 hits.

Faulk would be a great fit in Anaheim since the Ducks are in desperate need of a power-play quarterback. He isn't shy about shooting the puck as evidenced by his 200-plus shots in each of the past three seasons, and that plays well into forward Ryan Getzlaf's skill set since he can set screens and clean up the mess in front of the crease.

Faulk is set to enter the final year of his contract, so if Carolina can't move him before the start of the season, he will be a prime candidate to get dealt prior to the trade deadline.

Julius Honka

Despite being the No. 14 overall pick in the 2014 draft, Dallas Stars defenseman Julius Honka has struggled to establish himself as a full-time NHL player.

The Finn has appeared in just 87 games in three seasons, including 29 in 2018-19. Since there is no guarantee Honka will make the Stars roster out of camp, he could seemingly be had via trade.

According to Sportsnet (h/t Marc Dumont of The Athletic), the Montreal Canadiens are among the teams that have shown interest in Honka.

The 23-year-old posted four assists and a minus-two rating last season. For his career, he has two goals and 11 assists for 13 points and a minus-seven rating to his credit.

Dallas' defense corps includes the likes of Miro Heiskanen, Esa Lindell, John Klingberg, Andrej Sekera, Roman Polak and Jamie Oleksiak, so Honka likely wouldn't be anything other than an extra defenseman if the Stars were to keep him.

The 5'11", 180-pounder remains unsigned as a restricted free agent, which means something has to give with Dallas either signing him or trading him.

Any team that potentially acquires Honka will be banking on the notion that there is some untapped ability that might only come to the forefront with a change of scenery.

Honka undoubtedly needs to go elsewhere since the playing opportunities are few and far between in Dallas, and trading him could be worth the risk for a team like Montreal provided the asking price isn't too high.

Q&A: Vesey on getting to know Buffalo, his preseason debut and more

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

September 24, 2019

Jimmy Vesey wanted to make a strong first impression.

Tied in the third period of his first home game as a member of the Buffalo Sabres on Saturday, Vesey was alone at the offensive blue line when his linemate, Sam Reinhart, collected the puck and delivered a tape-to-tape stretch pass from deep in the defensive zone.

With only the goaltender in front of him, Vesey wanted to make sure he capitalized. He skated in alone on a breakaway and buried the puck in off the cross bar, then raised his arm and pumped his fist as the horn sounded. The Sabres' faithful banged on the glass behind him.

It was the sort of finish that inspired the Sabres to acquire Vesey in a trade with the New York Rangers on July 1. Through three NHL seasons, the Harvard product has displayed a penchant for getting to opponents' nets and capitalizing on chances at even strength.

"Vesey's obviously just a pure goal scorer," Reinhart said. "As he showed the other night at home, when he gets an opportunity, he's putting the puck in the net. I think that's really valuable for us and something we really need."

Vesey sat down with Sabres.com after practice on Tuesday to discuss that goal, his first impressions of Buffalo, and more.

You score a breakaway goal in your first preseason game in Buffalo. What was your first impression of the atmosphere in this building?

I thought it was great. Obviously, Buffalo's known to have passionate fans. I definitely wanted to do something my first game here as a Sabre. I was lucky enough to get a great stretch pass from Sam and wanted to make sure I buried it.

It was definitely a good feeling. I know it's preseason, but I gave a little fist bump. I was excited.

What impression did Buffalo make during your trips here as a visitor?

Like I said, passionate fans, a good atmosphere. I think I always remembered the goal song, so that was cool to hear on the other side of it.

Something you'd like to hear more of?

Yeah, exactly.

I've heard you describe your game as having a blue-collar element. Where does that come from?

I think I've always had an ability to score goals. Even in college, every goal's not going to be pretty. If you look at the NHL, a lot of goals are scored right in front of the net. So, I guess from a young age, my dad was my coach and that was always something he harped upon. It just kind of stuck with me ever since.

I'm a bigger body, so I don't mind getting in front of the net and taking a cross-check to score a goal.

You were traded on July 1. How does that affect your summer logistically?

It wasn't too bad. I still prepared the same way, did the same workouts and same routine training-wise. I guess the biggest thing was just, like you said, logistics - finding an apartment, finding the time to come down here, talking to everyone, meeting new faces.

It was a lot the first couple days, just phone calls and talking to everyone. But I'm extremely happy how it's worked out so far.

How much time was spent in Boston versus Buffalo?

I go back to Boston for the whole thing. I've got a big family - a big extended family. Family is something that's important to me, so I like going home for the summer. It's a good area as a hockey player. There's a lot of guys in the area - good training, good skates. So yeah, it's a good spot.

How often do you train with Jack Eichel?

We work out at the same gym, Mike Boyle's gym. He's one of the more well-known trainers, I think. He was one of the first guys to do it. So, we worked out there the last two years and skate together a handful of times a week. I've known him, I guess, for probably eight years now. Knowing him makes it easier as well, just having someone to talk to, ask questions. He's the captain, so it's been good.

When did you meet for the first time?

I was probably in prep school and he was really young, because I'm three years older than him. We have the same agent as well, so there's a lot of familiarity there. We're both from the North Shore of Massachusetts, so we grew up pretty much in the same region of the state.

There are stories about his workouts being pretty intense. Are those accurate?

Yeah. I think - as you can see on the ice with the way he skates - he's a freak athlete. His explosive workouts are pretty impressive. I know in our gym, we test 10-yard sprint and vertical jump. He's always at the top of the list.

How many times did you speak with Ralph Krueger during the summer?

I spoke with him a couple times when I got traded and then just over text as camp got closer. He was great. We were kind of coming in, I guess, both from different places so I think that makes things easier. He's trying to get to know everyone, not just get to know me. He was great with me throughout the summer and I think he's done a great job with us so far.

It seems like there's a genuine excitement about him in the locker room. Can you put your finger on what it is that excites people?

I think just his demeanor. He's got a real positive demeanor. You can tell he's an intelligent guy. He's accomplished a lot, not only working in the NHL but I know he has a book and he's worked in soccer as well. You can tell he's an intelligent guy and the way he carries himself and demands attention when he's speaking, I think he's a good leader for us. I think everyone's excited.

Jack said he inspired him to try yoga (on Sportsnet's 31 Thoughts Podcast).

I didn't try any yoga, but even when he spoke at the opening of camp, I know there was a lot of buzz amongst players. He wants to win, and he wants to do it the right way. I think everyone's excited and it's easy to get on board with messages like that.

How much of Buffalo have you been able to experience away from this building?

I've been trying to explore. I went to Niagara Falls. I hadn't been there since I was a little kid at a hockey tournament in Toronto. I think the biggest thing for me is learning the city through restaurants. I don't cook, so I've been trying a lot of places. There's a lot of good food here.

What are your top three so far?

I like Siena, Tempo. I like Italian food so those two are good.

Being on the visiting team we really only went to the Chophouse, so I'm trying to steer clear of there. But I think it's pretty good there. I've been to Mother's, I thought that was a cool spot. I had dinner there with my dad, he came down with me when I moved in. Yeah, I've been just fielding recommendations from the other guys that have been here.

Who's the best Ping-Pong player on the Sabres?

I've only seen one play, and that was Skinner. He's pretty good. We were actually at Dominic Moore's charity event this summer in Toronto. There were a handful of good NHL players, but Skins is definitely up there. Right now, he's my vote.

What's one thing you want the people of Buffalo to know about Jimmy Vesey off the ice?

I'm really an easy-going, quiet guy. I think the way I would describe myself is just a normal kid. There's nothing crazy to me. I play hockey and that's what I've always known to do. But yeah, I'm a quiet guy and I think hopefully they'll see this year that I also take pride in my competitive nature.

Ristolainen, Wilson return to practice

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

September 24, 2019

Scott Wilson and Rasmus Ristolainen returned to practice with the Sabres on Tuesday as they prepared for their penultimate preseason game, at home against the Columbus Blue Jackets on Wednesday night.

Wilson had been absent since sustaining a lower-body injury in Toronto on Friday. Ristolainen missed practice on Monday due to an illness.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said that Wilson is available to play against the Blue Jackets, though a final roster will be announced later Tuesday. Wilson was one of 17 forwards at practice, all of whom are vying to crack the opening-night roster.

"We're pleased with this group that's out there right now and we kept such a big roster because of how well everybody's performed in training camp," Krueger said. "So, we'd be comfortable with any mix of these 12 forwards starting for us.

"It will all come down to the kind of synergies we're looking for in the lines and the balance we need between some grit and skill, some power play, some penalty kill. All of that's going to play out in the end, not necessarily the effort of any individual."

Tickets for Wednesday vs. Columbus

Krueger once again emphasized that the opening-night roster will be tailored to what he feels gives the Sabres their best chance against the Penguins in Pittsburgh, with evaluation to continue on a daily basis from that point on.

Moreover, the coach said that no determinations will be made solely on these final two preseason games. Rather, the coaching staff will lean on a depth of information including last season and players' work throughout training camp.

"Quite honestly, I think that competition never stops," Krueger said. "Anybody who's in this group right now who isn't on our roster the first night is going to work hard in Rochester to make sure they come back, right? So, that competition never ends. That's one of the things we worked on this summer.

"Jason did an excellent job of increasing the depth of our team, not losing any key parts but adding others who have pushed into the lineup. That makes for an internal competition that's only good for the group. I'm excited to keep that competition alive as long as I'm here."

Sabres on MSG

The game against Columbus on Wednesday will be broadcast on MSG with Rick Jeanneret and Rob Ray on the call. Brian Duff and Marty Biron will host the pregame show beginning at 6:30 p.m. with full postgame coverage to follow.

Lines at practice

Wilson worked in at forward alongside rookie Dylan Cozens, while Ristolainen resumed his place on the defense pair alongside Rasmus Dahlin.

Here's how the Sabres lined up in full:

68 Victor Olofsson - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
53 Jeff Skinner - 90 Marcus Johansson - 21 Kyle Okposo
13 Jimmy Vesey - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 71 Evan Rodrigues
28 Zemgus Girgensons - 17 Vladimir Sobotka - 72 Tage Thompson
81 Remi Elie - 74 Rasmus Asplund - 27 Curtis Lazar
42 Dylan Cozens - 20 Scott Wilson

26 Rasmus Dahlin - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
19 Jake McCabe - 33 Colin Miller
8 Casey Nelson - 3 William Borgen
6 Marco Scandella - 10 Henri Jokiharju
58 John Gilmour

40 Carter Hutton
35 Linus Ullmark