



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

October 14, 2019

Buffalo plays Dallas, seeks 4th straight home win

By Associated Press

October 14, 2019

Dallas Stars (1-4-1, fifth in the Central Division) vs. Buffalo Sabres (4-0-1, first in the Atlantic Division)

Buffalo, New York; Monday, 3 p.m. EDT

BOTTOM LINE: Buffalo hosts Dallas aiming to extend its three-game home winning streak.

Buffalo went 33-39-10 overall a season ago while going 21-15-5 at home. The Sabres scored 221 total goals last season while collecting 378 assists.

Dallas finished 43-32-7 overall and 19-18-4 on the road a season ago. The Stars were called for 286 penalties last season averaging 3.5 penalties and 7.7 penalty minutes per game.

The matchup Monday is the first meeting of the season between the two teams.

Sabres Injuries: Conor Sheary: out (upper body).

Stars Injuries: None listed.

Mittelstadt seals Sabres 3-2 shootout win over Panthers

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

October 11, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — On a night the Buffalo Sabres' top scorers were held in check, Kyle Okposo and his line of grinders came to the rescue.

Okposo set up both goals in regulation before Jack Eichel and Casey Mittelstadt scored in the shootout to help Buffalo match its best start to a season in 10 years with a 3-2 win over the Florida Panthers on Friday night.

"I've never seen a bench cheer so much for another line having success," coach Ralph Krueger said of how his so-called energy line scored goals 2:33 apart spanning the second intermission to stake Buffalo to a 2-0 lead. "To see all that hard work, the grinding they've been doing the first five games paying off was so big tonight."

It might have been even more satisfying had the Sabres not squandered a two-goal, third-period lead for a second consecutive game. Buffalo blew a 4-2 lead in an eventual 5-4 overtime win over Montreal on Wednesday.

"We just sat back a little bit," said Okposo, who had the primary assists on goals scored by Johan Larsson and defenseman Marco Scandella. "We just have to find a way to continue to play our game and continue to stay aggressive."

Zemgus Girgensons also had two assists on a night Buffalo's potent power play finished 0 for 4. Linus Ullmark finished with 41 saves, with two more in the shootout.

Buffalo improved to 4-0-1 and opened with three straight home wins for the first time since 2008-09.

Mike Hoffman forced overtime by scoring with 11 seconds left. Left open in the right circle, he waited patiently before snapping a shot over Ullmark's left shoulder. Evgenii Dadonov had a goal and assist, and Jonathan Huberdeau had two assists for Florida (1-2-1).

Much of the credit goes to goalie Sergei Bobrovsky, who made 30 saves, including several in the final 1:45 of overtime.

First he lunged up to get a piece of Eichel's shot on a breakaway. Then, Bobrovsky kicked out his left pad to stop Mittelstadt, who was set up at the right post.

"It's a huge point for us," Bobrovsky said. "Obviously, we could clean up some things, but I thought the boys stepped up and showed character."

Bobrovsky was coming off a 6-3 loss to Carolina on Tuesday, when he was yanked after allowing four goals on 14 shots through the first period.

Eichel scored on Buffalo's first shootout attempt by banking in a shot off the right post. After Florida's Vincent Trocheck and Aleksander Barkov failed on their attempts, Mittelstadt sealed the victory by backhanding a shot inside the crossbar.

Ullmark was impressed by how the Sabres didn't let up after surrendering the lead.

"We never hesitated. We stayed calm on the bench. No one got upset or anything like that," he said.

And he blamed himself for allowing Hoffman's goal, which came with Bobrovsky pulled for an extra attacker.

"I should've had that. He's known to go top glove," said Ullmark, who stopped 40 shots in a 4-3 overtime loss at Columbus on Monday night. "It's my job to stop the puck."

Larsson opened the scoring with 31 seconds left in the second period just as Hoffman finished serving a cross-checking penalty.

Okposo drove up the right wing and drew two defenders while entering the Panthers' zone. Okposo then slipped a pass to an open Larsson, who roofed a shot in and then went soaring over Bobrovsky, who was a split-second late in getting across with 31 seconds left in the second period.

Buffalo's power-play unit entered the game having converted eight of 15 opportunities.

Scandella put Buffalo up 2-0 by jumping into the play and converting Okposo's pass into the left circle by scoring 2:02 into the third period.

The Sabres had several point streaks come to an end, including defenseman Rasmus Dahlin's four-gamer, in which he had a goal and six assists, and rookie forward Victor Olofsson, who combined for four goals and an assist in his first four games.

NOTES: Buffalo entered the day with 18 goals scored in first four games, the most over that same span since scoring 19 in 2007-08. ... Panthers remain the NHL's only team to not have scored a goal in the first period this season. ... Panthers C Denis Malgin returned to the lineup after sitting out two games and replaced Henrik Borgstrom.

UP NEXT

Panthers: At New York Islanders on Saturday.

Sabres: Close three-game homestand against Dallas Stars on Monday.

Taco night at the Ullmarks: How Sabres' Swedes support each other off ice

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

October 14, 2019

Linus Ullmark remembers feeling isolated. He and his wife, Moa, left their home country, Sweden, for the United States in 2015, so he could pursue his dream of playing in the National Hockey League.

Ullmark, now a 26-year-old goalie for the Buffalo Sabres, did not have a fellow Swede on the Rochester Americans' roster that season. When he and the Amerks were playing games on the road, Moa was alone at their home on the outskirts of the city, nearly 3,800 miles away from family and friends.

"That whole year was a messed up kind of year," Linus Ullmark said. "It was good, those experiences, but I would rather that year just disappear."

Upon arriving in North America, Swedes must adapt to smaller ice rinks and the subtle differences in hockey culture, particularly a more physical style of game. The transition off the ice is far more difficult. That's one of the reasons why Linus and Moa started taco night at the Ullmarks.

"All the Swedes here are great guys," Rasmus Dahlin, a 19-year-old native of Lidköping, said. "It's something that's comfortable. They're always there to talk to. It's really good to have them here because if there's something I really need, I can talk to them. We're doing this together. When you just want to say something or whatever you can go to the Swedes. It's good to be able to do that. You can say what you want to say."

On the eve of the past two training camps, the Ullmarks invited the team's Swedes – seven this season – over for a night of conversation and tacos, a popular food in their home country. In addition to meeting new teammate Marcus Johansson, Ullmark hoped a break from hockey would provide young players Victor Olofsson and Rasmus Asplund the type of support he didn't have during that difficult season in Rochester. Ullmark has continued to invite Olofsson and other Swedes over for dinner since the season began.

Ullmark's first year in North America was difficult for a number of reasons. Since he and his wife were unfamiliar with Rochester, they chose to live 15 to 20 minutes from Blue Cross Arena, far away from his teammates. Additionally, an injury to Robin Lehner forced Ullmark into the Sabres' net for 20 games that season. He welcomed the opportunity but the unexpected NHL debut made it difficult for the couple to become comfortable.

With Lehner, a native of Gothenburg, on long-term injured reserve, Ullmark spent more time with another fellow Swede, Johan Larsson, who arrived in Buffalo the previous season. It wasn't until two years later that Ullmark felt completely comfortable in his surroundings, though Rochester's roster included only two other Swedes: Alexander Nylander, who was born in Calgary, and Daniel Muzito-Bagenda.

The Swedish Sabres said there are few noticeable cultural differences, but there is a certain level of comfort speaking to a countryman in their native language, Ullmark explained. Though he speaks English fluently and has a strong grasp of the language, Ullmark finds it easier to converse with his Swedish teammates who often share similar interests.

"It's an awful lot easier," Ullmark, a native of Lugnvik, a municipality near the country's east coast with only 349 inhabitants according to the latest census, said. "It's easier to start a conversation because you always have something in common and that's Sweden. Everything that you might have liked or whatever, what you like to do, you can talk about. The Swedish culture and American culture is different when it comes to those sort of things."

"All of us speak pretty good English, but it's another thing with small talk," Rochester goalie Jonas Johansson, 24, said following a recent practice at Blue Cross Arena. "It's hard. You almost have to think before you speak when you're with North American guys. It's easy to feel like you're sort of on the outside. You can understand what they say, but you don't say anything because you have to think first. When you're with your countrymen, you can enjoy the small talk a little better, that's what I feel at least."

The presence of Swedes on the Sabres' roster is one of the reasons the team was chosen to participate in the 2019 NHL Global Series, a weeklong event in Stockholm that will be capped by Buffalo facing the Tampa Bay Lightning for back-to-back games on Nov. 8-9.

Entering Friday, the Sabres, Vancouver Canucks and Anaheim Ducks led the NHL with five Swedes. In addition to Dahlin, who has quickly become one of the NHL's top young talents, the Sabres have Ullmark, Larsson (Lau), Olofsson (Ornskoldsvik) and Marcus Johansson (Landskrona). Additionally, the team had Jonas Johansson (Gavle), Asplund (Filipstad) and Lawrence Pilut (Tingsryd) on its training camp roster, all of whom were invited to the Ullmarks for tacos.

The Sabres had 11 Swedes participate in their development camp in June and have drafted seven over the past three years. They also have a coach who has experience working with players from countries around the globe. Ralph Krueger coached Switzerland's National Team for three Winter Olympics and 12 IIHF World Championships, as well as Team Europe at the 2016 World Cup of Hockey. He also played professionally in Germany for 10 seasons.

"There's no question after 18 world championships or Olympics, you get used to other nationalities," Krueger explained. "First of all, you're working against them and playing against them and all their different systems that they have. ... But more than anything, the psychology of the different countries. Every country in Europe has their own personality.

"You can really see it often in the way they play and the way the players function within the team structure. That helps me here with all the nationalities we have. Understanding, first of all, the individual and the way to bring them into the team."

Reaching North America is often a Swede's first major milestone in his hockey journey and, in some ways, Swedes are better prepared to handle life as a professional than players who played in North American junior leagues or the NCAA.

All of the aforementioned Swedish Sabres played professionally in their home country prior to being drafted or signed by Buffalo. Many left home as teenagers, an experience that forced them to learn how to cook, clean, do their own laundry, and they learned English. Most don't have billet families to complete those tasks for them.

Those responsibilities prepared Dahlin for his move to Buffalo in July 2018. Though his mother, Asa, joined him in Western New York for the first two months, he had few questions about how to take care of himself. His roommate, Casey Mittelstadt, also helped with the transition.

Life away from home wasn't easy the first time around, though. Dahlin, who was drafted first overall in 2018, recalled being home sick upon leaving Lidköping at 15 years old to begin his junior hockey career with Frolunda. Though Dahlin lived with a few teammates, he remembers lying awake at night missing his home. He joked that he called home "five times a day" to ask his parents how to prepare meals or perform other household chores.

"It's way different in Sweden," Dahlin explained. "Here, most people don't move away from their parents until they go to college. I lived on my own when I was 15. There were a couple of us that lived together and cooked and did all that stuff. ... It was so much more difficult when I first move away. I remember my first night in my own bed, in my own apartment. I was sad. ... Now I don't call home that often."

Like Ullmark, Asplund was unsure where to live upon moving to Rochester last fall. There were also a myriad of responsibilities he had to take care of, such as opening a bank account and purchasing a cellphone plan.

Asplund, though, shared the experience with Olofsson. The two lived in the same apartment building and often cooked meals together, mostly pasta. Each credits the other for making the transition seamless on and off the ice. Comfort away from the rink allowed both to excel during their first year in North America, Asplund said.

"It's pretty tough," Asplund, 21, said. "Everything is in a different language. You have to set up a new place to live at, bank accounts, phones. It takes some time. You have to get adjusted to that. It takes energy from you. You have to be patient and know it's going to be tough at the start. Once you get adjusted, it's pretty good. It was huge to have Oly here. He became like a brother to me last year."

During taco night, Jonas Johansson and Olofsson asked veterans questions about life in the NHL, on and off the ice. The night of bonding gave them an opportunity to gain some perspective about what's next and calmed their nerves entering training camp under a new head coach.

Marcus Johansson has been an important resource for Olofsson, in particular. Their locker stalls are close to each other inside KeyBank Center and they skated together on a line for the first half of training camp. Johansson, 29, has played 593 regular-season and 94 playoff games over eight years in the NHL. However, he too was overwhelmed upon coming to the United States and joining the Washington Capitals in 2010.

Johansson quickly found himself a mentor in fellow Swede Nicklas Backstrom. Although Backstrom was only three years older, he helped Johansson assimilate in a new dressing room and routinely checked on Johansson following practices or games. There were invites away from the rink, much like Ullmark has done for his teammates.

Johansson, who was named one of the Sabres' two alternate captains this season, hopes to make a similar impact on his teammates.

"If I could do that for half the younger guys now that he did for me, I'll be proud of that," Johansson said of Backstrom. "It's a different country. Everything is new. It's a different language. You go to a grocery store and the stuff is not the same. There's a lot that happens when you come over at first. It's important to have someone there to help you out and support you. Be there with any type of questions and anything you're wondering."

Sabres recall forward Curtis Lazar from Rochester

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

October 13, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres recalled forward Curtis Lazar from Rochester on Sunday ahead of a three-game road trip to the West Coast.

Barring another injury, the roster move will give the Sabres 13 forwards when they face the Anaheim Ducks, Los Angeles Kings and San Jose Sharks on the road. Winger Conor Sheary remains "week to week" with an upper-body injury.

Lazar, who signed with the Sabres as an unrestricted free agent in July, had one assist in three games with the Amerks. The former first-round draft pick scored 20 goals among 41 points in 57 games last season for the Calgary Flames' American Hockey Affiliate, Stockton.

Lazar has scored 15 goals among 51 points in 246 career regular-season games between the Flames and Ottawa Senators. He was drafted 17th overall by the latter in 2013.

Sabres Mailbag: Why isn't Rasmus Dahlin playing more?

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

October 13, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres had every excuse to start slow this season. A new coach forced the players to learn new systems and there isn't enough time in training camp to practice the power play or penalty kill.

However, the Sabres (4-0-1) were sitting atop the Atlantic Division entering play Sunday, and they wrap up this homestand Monday afternoon against the Dallas Stars. With Conor Sheary still out, Buffalo recalled forward Curtis Lazar from Rochester ahead of the team's three-game road trip to Anaheim, Los Angeles and San Jose.

The roster move is the latest example of the Sabres' improved depth at forward. With that in mind, let's start my latest mailbag with a reader's question about Buffalo's success on offense through five games:

Mike: Is the current group of forwards capable of producing more or do the Sabres need to add another piece?

Lance Lysowski: This group is capable of producing enough offense to win games. The Sabres entered play Sunday tied for sixth in the NHL with 20 goals through five games and their power play remained first, despite the ugly showing against Florida. They're getting production out of Johan Larsson's line, and the offense will come for Casey Mittelstadt's group, particularly Jimmy Vesey.

It's also important to remember that offense in the NHL often starts with your defensemen and General Manager Jason Botterill has done an outstanding job building a formidable group on the back end. I'm sure fans would prefer a more skilled player such as Tage Thompson to play with Jeff Skinner and Marcus Johansson, but Vladimir Sobotka's forechecking can allow them to use their creativity in the offensive zone.

The Sabres beat the Florida Panthers, who many analysts picked to make the playoffs, without receiving a regulation goal from either of the top-two forward lines. Buffalo will need to stay healthy to continue to produce at this rate. However, in my opinion, Krueger has the personnel to remain competitive this season, and Botterill has shown he won't hesitate to add to the group. The Sabres have the depth to make a significant trade at the deadline in February, or perhaps a few months in Rochester will help prepare Thompson to make a significant impact in Buffalo at some point this season.

Carter: Do you expect Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark to share the Sabres' net if they continue to do well?

LL: Krueger likely will use a tandem in net, much like his goalie coach, Mike Bales, did last season in Carolina. Krueger, Bales and the rest of the coaching staff meet prior to each game to decide which goalie will start. Bales offers his recommendation and the group comes to a consensus. The Sabres will continue to pick the starter based on the matchup and which of the two goalies is better equipped to face a certain type of team or situation.

Both goalies have performed much better so far this season. Ullmark seems to have rediscovered the confidence he lost last March and appears to have cleaned up some technical issues. Hutton, meanwhile, has proven to be a capable goalie in the National Hockey League. But the Sabres' defensive-zone coverage is the primary reason behind the early success.

Consider this: Among goalies to start at least two games entering play Sunday, Hutton and Ullmark rank in the top eight of furthest average shot distance faced, according to NaturalStatTrick.com. Hutton also ranks first in rebound attempts against among goalies with at least three games played, and the Sabres have allowed the third-fewest high-danger scoring chances against.

The Sabres' defensemen have done an excellent job retrieving pucks after an initial shot attempt and defensive-zone pressure has forced opponents to shoot from the perimeter. We've seen that Buffalo has the goaltending to succeed as long as neither Hutton nor Ullmark are asked to stop a barrage of shots from dangerous areas. We won't have to talk about which goalie is the "starter," unless this team manages to make the playoffs. They'll likely share the net throughout the season.

Liam: Why is Rasmus Dahlin getting the fifth-most ice time among Sabres defensemen?

LL: There seems to be a considerable amount of angst among fans after Dahlin sat for the final 9 1/2 minutes of regulation Friday night against Florida. After all, he has one goal among seven points through five games and could have provided a spark offensively in a game in which the Sabres needed an insurance goal.

However, Dahlin's puck management and defensive-zone coverage have been a liability at times. Remember, he's only 19 years old. He's not remotely close to reaching his potential. Krueger's job is to win games, and he's building a culture of accountability. In case you missed it, Dahlin struggled during his final shift of regulation Friday. He'll learn from the experience and be a better player because of it.

We shouldn't be surprised. A number of people I spoke to from Edmonton, including former players, told me Krueger did not hesitate to sit young players such as Taylor Hall and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins following a bad shift or period in the 2012-13 season. This isn't Krueger picking on Dahlin, either. Marco Scandella didn't play for the final six minutes of regulation last Monday in Columbus.

The Sabres are trying to put Dahlin in the best position to succeed. At the moment, it's clear Dahlin is placing too much pressure on himself. The best way to handle a young player's development is to be smart about usage. He's not ready to play more than 20 minutes a game. That time will come. For now, Krueger will continue to put Dahlin in situations to help build confidence. Part of that is protecting him during close games. You'll continue to see Rasmus Ristolainen average more than 24 minutes a game until Dahlin is ready for a more prominent role.

Ed: What will the Sabres do on defense once Brandon Montour, Lawrence Pilut and Zach Bogosian return from injury?

LL: Your guess is as good as mine. Seriously. My answer a few days ago would have been simple: Henri Jokiharju gets sent to Rochester once Montour is ready to return from the hand injury, and the Sabres will figure out the rest once Bogosian returns. Well, Jokiharju has been told by Sabres management to find a place to live in Buffalo. The 20-year-old defenseman will be sticking around for a while and he deserves that opportunity.

Though Jokiharju has yet to record a point, he has been excellent in the defensive zone, particularly on the breakout, and quickly earned Krueger's trust. The Sabres are unlikely to trade Ristolainen at this time because they'll be asking for a king's ransom in return. They could try to send Montour to Rochester for a brief conditioning assignment to buy some time but that's a temporary solution. I doubt Buffalo wants to risk losing John Gilmour on waivers, either.

Pilut will be sent to Rochester once he's ready. He'll need to play quite a few games down there to prepare himself for a return to the NHL. That's not a knock against Pilut. It's just difficult to miss all of training camp and the start of the season. He also needs to work on his play in the defensive zone. Bogosian, meanwhile, doesn't have a timeline to return after he experienced multiple setbacks this summer.

A trade seems inevitable. The question is with which defenseman do the Sabres part? They're in an advantageous position. Last season, Buffalo was forced to use Matt Tennyson for four games and had to rush Pilut up from Rochester.

When it comes to Rasmus Dahlin, Ralph Krueger taking a measured approach

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

October 12, 2019

Rasmus Dahlin is 19.

Let's repeat that sentence so it's clear to everyone: Rasmus Dahlin is 19.

He's played 87 NHL games. Not 387. Not 587. Not 787. Just 87. Sometimes, that's easy to forget. Sure, he was a Calder Trophy finalist in June, and there's hope he will be a Norris Trophy candidate and a superstar probably sooner rather than later.

Stats are glossy: He entered Saturday's play second in the NHL among defensemen in both assists (6) and points (7). The seven points came in the first four games of the season — the most ever recorded by a teenage defenseman through his team's opening quartet of games.

But he's 19. Which means he will struggle at times, no matter how many points he's piling up.

When that happened Friday, Ralph Krueger sat Dahlin for the last 9 1/2 minutes of regulation in the Sabres' 3-2 shootout win over Florida. Buffalo's new coach has his demands. Nothing wrong with Dahlin's offensive skills. We all know that. But like any young defenseman, he can be better with his puck management.

"We've gone 11 days in a row without a day off to start the season," Krueger said after his team improved to 4-0-1 for the first time since 2009. "There's been a lot of effort invested in getting the results that we've had. You could see a few guys tapering off, and we just thought we were protecting them in that little stretch down there.

"We knew Florida was going to push hard so we went with a little more experience. But Rasmus has played outstanding with his learning and growing every day, and there's going to be moments like that where we going to reduce the lineup to go with the guys we think have the best chance of closing. He will definitely be in that mix eventually."

Initially, the decision seemed curious. Dahlin didn't contribute to a goal against the Sabres. He played 17:56 and had six shot attempts. Sometimes Krueger seems to go on feel, and he clearly felt Dahlin was a little worn down.

Dahlin's last shift of the third period seemed to indicate that. In one 65-second span, he missed the puck behind the net, then missed a check behind the net and had a turnover below the goal line. All on the same 65-second shift. Krueger and defensive assistant Steve Smith decided that was enough for regulation (Dahlin took one shift in overtime).

Dahlin's season to date includes a highlight-reel goal on opening night against Pittsburgh and five assists on the lethal Buffalo power play. He has a plus-2 rating and a Corsi of just more than 55 percent. But there have been some uneven moments at 5-on-5, too. He has been unusually sloppy with the puck, especially in the neutral zone.

"I know there will be times that don't go as well. I understand that," Dahlin said. "When it doesn't feel right, just put the puck in down low, get our guys to work it."

"I want to give his parents a hug every day because he's such a nice kid and he really, truly, for a young guy, he's wise beyond his years," Smith said during training camp. "He wants to get better. He likes to listen. He doesn't have a problem with criticism. He wants to know if he's done right or wrong. He truly tries to please every day. Add that component to all the ability he has, that's why we all feel he has an opportunity to become a star in the league."

It will be interesting to see what kind of response the Sabres get from Dahlin. They were off Saturday and the next game is an interesting one: Monday's matinee visit from the Dallas Stars. Their lineup includes fellow sophomore defenseman Miro Heiskanen, whom many observers feel was a snub among the Calder finalists last season.

(An aside here: Who was Heiskanen going to supplant in that vote? Vancouver's Elias Petterson was the winner and St. Louis goalie Jordan Binnington lifted the Blues from oblivion into the playoffs. Dahlin had a 44-point season that was one of the greatest ever for an 18-year-old defenseman. Those were three slam-dunk finalists.)

Dahlin said he's come to understand that not every shift can end in big scoring chances or goals. He's learning the same lesson that Jack Eichel did: Some shifts are 50-50 plays and you need to move to the next one.

"I really found that out last year and started to learn from it," Dahlin said. "It's not fun when nothing happens, but you've just got to play your best, play easy at times. It's important to know that."

Krueger loves how coachable Dahlin is and how he has excellent listening skills. As a No. 1 overall pick, Dahlin has lived through a lot of hype. Now it's about developing his skills.

"Any player who is drafted first overall comes from a world where he had the puck all the time. You'll see that with any pick in the first two or three in the National Hockey League," Krueger said. "We coaches have to come in and be hard on them on the game without the puck and what the responsibility is.

"As a defenseman to play 25 minutes, if the coaches do not trust you, you won't get those minutes. Doing that without taking away their genius is the challenge for us coaches."

Krueger has some experience in this area. Edmonton took Taylor Hall and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins, respectively, at No. 1 overall in 2010 and 2011. Krueger said Hall was the first Oiler he met when he joined the club as an associate coach in the summer of '10.

"Taylor did not know there was a game without the puck really because he had the puck all the time in junior," Krueger said. "He was the very first player I worked with closely. ... I remember the conversations with him. To see him become the player he is today, he's like one of your kids in the history of your coaching. For sure, there's a lot of parallels there."

"It's different to know what to do without the puck," Dahlin said. "Playing the first year all 82 games, you get used to it. It's very important to learn what to do when you don't have it. You don't want to get scored on and you have to be in the right spots at the right time."

Dahlin was the first No. 1 overall pick on defense since Florida took Aaron Ekblad in 2014 one spot before the Sabres' selection of Sam Reinhart.

"Good player, no doubt. He's really skilled, really good on all sides of the puck," Ekblad said of Dahlin before Friday's game against the Panthers. "He's got a lot of confidence with the puck as well, which is huge. From being in that situation, I know you can lose that confidence at times pretty quick. To really have a good head on your shoulders is huge, and I'm sure he does."

Smith said he was impressed how Dahlin analyzed last season, from both a team and individual standpoint.

"He talked about how difficult it was to go through the second half of the season and not winning many games, which tells you the competitiveness in the young man," Smith said. "He did run out of steam at about midseason last year and we did have to back off from him. We had to leave him alone and keep him out of the gym.

"We talked a little bit about if he's eating right and sleeping right. Whether that 82-game schedule versus the 30- or 40-game schedule overseas was starting to get to him. He was smart enough to know when to push it hard and when to back off."

Krueger and Smith gave Dahlin a push late Friday night. All part of his development.

Shootout win over Panthers has Sabres off to best start since 2009-10

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

October 11, 2019

Linus Ullmark bailed out the Buffalo Sabres this time. Each of his teammates who spoke to the media inside their KeyBank Center dressing room late Friday night acknowledged that fact when recalling how they escaped with a 3-2 shootout win over the Florida Panthers.

Ullmark stopped 41 of 43 shots during regulation and overtime, as well as each of the Panthers' two shootout attempts. That allowed Casey Mittelstadt to clinch the Sabres' 4-0-1 start to the season — matching their best mark since 2009-10 — with a backhanded shot over sprawling Florida goalie Sergei Bobrovsky in the third shootout round.

Winger Kyle Okposo, who assisted on both Sabres goals during regulation, called this a "big two points" and an important lesson for him and his teammates. They squandered a two-goal lead in the third period for a second consecutive game, relying again on their goaltender to fend off a barrage late in regulation.

Though Panthers winger Mike Hoffman scored the tying goal with 11 seconds remaining in regulation, Ullmark ensured the Sabres finished the night atop the Atlantic Division.

"I thought we were able to learn from that and settle down, manage the puck better, stayed stronger inside," coach Ralph Krueger said of the Sabres' dip in play during the third period. "But overall, really pleased with the calmness on the bench as we headed into overtime, the belief that we could still win. The lack of disappointment in that late goal is really what sticks with me at this moment."

The Sabres had every reason to falter when Hoffman's wrist shot from the right-wing circle went over Ullmark's glove and into the net. Their patience was tested throughout the game by Bobrovsky, a two-time Vezina Trophy winner and Florida's top offseason acquisition.

Bobrovsky stopped all 13 shots he faced in the first period, including a breakaway by Mittelstadt and a pair of one-timers off rebounds, and held the Sabres' prolific power play scoreless in four opportunities. Additionally, the Panthers (1-2-1) controlled possession for the first half of overtime.

Ullmark, who has stopped 82 of 87 shots in his first two starts, tilted momentum with his glove save on Denis Malgin in overtime. Moments later, Jack Eichel and Henri Jokiharju rushed down the ice for a 2-on-1. Bobrovsky then made a flurry of saves on Mittelstadt, Sam Reinhart and Rasmus Ristolainen to force a shootout.

The Sabres were outshot by the Panthers, 43-32, including 19-4 during the third period. Four minutes after Buffalo gained a two-goal lead, Evgenii Dadonov snuck behind the Sabres' defense and scored off an outlet pass by Jonathan Huberdeau. Hoffman then added the tying goal with Florida's net empty and Johan Larsson trying to defend without a stick.

"I think we have to stay aggressive," Okposo said. "I thought we just sat back a little bit. We didn't have as many shifts in the offensive zone and obviously that's going to happen. You tend to sit back when you have a lead. We just have to find a way to continue to play our game and continue to stay aggressive when we do."

"We've had a couple of ups and downs through these five games, and I think that's definitely one thing we can learn, just manage the game when we're up 2-0," Zemgus Girgensons added. "Just kind of finishing the job and getting the win in regulation."

The Sabres simply stopped following their game plan in the third period. Breakout passes weren't as crisp; they were chasing the puck in the defensive zone and spent little time in the Panthers' end. However, the first 43 minutes of this game provide a solid blueprint for Buffalo.

Following an ugly start to the game, the Sabres peppered Bobrovsky with shots and controlled the puck in the offensive zone. Their energy line — Okposo, Larsson and Girgensons — again led the way. Girgensons drove to the net to create a scoring opportunity midway through the first period.

Moments later, Jeff Skinner was stopped from in front of the net. Two of the Sabres' four power-play shots were rebound one-timers by Okposo and Victor Olofsson, both of which were turned away by Bobrovsky.

"He played a heck of a game," Okposo said of Bobrovsky. "His legs were kind of all over the place. He played a great game, and we did stick with it. We generated some momentum in the first, carried it over in the second and were able to pop a couple. Credit to him for playing a good game."

The energy line broke through with 31 seconds left in the second period when Okposo drew two defenders to the right-wing circle and dished a pass to Larsson, who fired a wrist shot into the net for a 1-0 lead. Marco Scandella then pushed the lead to two at 2:02 into the third period on a pass from Okposo.

The Sabres rank second in the National Hockey League in goals (20) and 12th in shots per game (33.2) through Friday. Each of their forward lines contributed against Florida, though Larsson's was on the ice for both goals in regulation. Additionally, their defensemen have fared better in the defensive zone so far this season, particularly in cleaning up second-chance opportunities.

Krueger and his staff will dissect another ugly third period to find any parallels, and they will have one practice prior to hosting the Dallas Stars for a Monday matinee. All involved acknowledged there are mistakes to clean up, however, the Sabres expressed confidence in their ability to beat anyone when they are at their best.

"First of all, we know that when we stick to our game plan, we win," Ullmark said. "We play a very good hockey game. Are we going to win every game? Probably not, but we have a very good opportunity to do it as long as we stick to the process and stick with our game plan."

The Wraparound: Sabres 3, Panthers 2 (SO)

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

October 11, 2019

Jack Eichel and Casey Mittelstadt scored in the shootout to send the Buffalo Sabres to a 3-2 win over the Florida Panthers on Friday night in KeyBank Center.

Johan Larsson, Kyle Okposo and Zemgus Girgensons were on the ice for each of the Sabres' two goals in regulation, and Linus Ullmark made 41 saves. Larsson scored with 30.7 seconds left in the second period, and defenseman Marco Scandella pushed the lead to two goals on an assist from Okposo at 2:02 into the third period. The Sabres blew a two-goal, third-period lead for a second consecutive game.

The Sabres (4-0-1) matched their best start to the season since 2009-10 and won each of their first three home games for the first time since 2008-09.

Larsson, Okposo and Girgensons, all of whom have quickly earned the trust of coach Ralph Krueger, provided the spark on a night in which Florida goalie Sergei Bobrovsky almost stole the game for Florida (1-2-1). Panthers winger Evgenii Dadonov scored with 13:45 left in regulation, and Mike Hoffman sent the game to overtime with a wrist shot over Ullmark's glove with 11 seconds remaining.

What about Bob?: Bobrovsky bailed out his teammates in the first period. The team's top free-agent acquisition stopped all 13 shots he faced, most notably Casey Mittelstadt's breakaway at 15:14. Bobrovsky also made an outstanding save on Girgensons' drive to the net and a pair of rebound saves on Victor Olofsson and Okposo. There was also an impressive stop on Jeff Skinner's chance from in front of the net.

Ullmark was also outstanding with 11 saves in the first period. Ullmark made a glove save on Mike Hoffman's shot from the slot and seemed to shift momentum with consecutive saves eight minutes into regulation.

Henri heroics: Sabres defenseman Henri Jokiharju was a favorite of Florida coach Joel Quenneville during their short time together last season in Chicago. Jokiharju, 20, was among the Blackhawks' most trusted defensemen before Quenneville was fired and was traded to the Sabres for Alexander Nylander this past summer.

Jokiharju tortured his old coach by threading a stretch pass to spring Mittelstadt for the breakaway.

Breakthrough: Following an ugly power play in which over-passing resulted in turnovers, the Sabres finally broke through with 30.7 seconds remaining in the second period. Jokiharju's breakout pass up the right-wing boards found Okposo, who drew multiple defenders. That freed up Larsson, who one-timed a shot into the net for a 1-0 lead.

As of the second intermission Friday, the Sabres had out-chanced their opponents, 28-8, this season with Larsson, Okposo and Girgensons on the ice.

Close call: The Panthers nearly scored late in the first period when a puck deflected off Scandella's stick and into the Sabres' crease. However, Scandella was able to clear the puck off the goal line.

Grind line again: Scandella pushed the Sabres' lead to 2-0 when he received a 2-on-1 pass from Okposo and fired a wrist shot into the back of the net. The play was made possible by Girgensons, who carried the puck into the offensive zone and drew a defender away from the net to create enough room for Okposo and Scandella.

Ugly history: The Sabres were 2-7-1 in their previous 10 games against the Panthers, failing to win back-to-back meetings since 2011.

Hot start: Buffalo's 18 goals through the first four games were the most during that span since the Sabres scored 19 in 2007-08.

Lineup: Sabres defenseman John Gilmour was a healthy scratch for a fifth consecutive game, and winger Conor Sheary remains "week-to-week" with an upper-body injury. In prospect news, defenseman Mattias Samuelsson, the Sabres' second-round draft pick in 2018, missed Western Michigan's season opener with a lower-body injury.

Florida defenseman Mark Pysyk, who played parts of four seasons for the Sabres, was a healthy scratch.

Next: The Sabres are off Saturday and are scheduled to practice Sunday. They host the Dallas Stars for a Monday matinee at 3 p.m.

Sabres game day: Jack Eichel showing he's 'one of the very elite players'

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

October 11, 2019

Matchup: Buffalo Sabres (3-0-1) vs. Florida Panthers (1-2-0)

Where: KeyBank Center

When: 7 p.m.

TV: MSG

Radio: WGR 550

The Eichel show: Sabres captain Jack Eichel scored one of his more impressive goals Wednesday night against Montreal. The 22-year-old stickhandled around a defender in the neutral zone to create a 1-on-3 and fired a shot between two Canadiens to beat Keith Kinkaid in the second period.

Eichel has three goals among seven points in only four games. He's also sparked the power play to an 8-for-15 start, which ranks second in the National Hockey League. Eichel has been critical of his own play the past two games. Following the 5-4 overtime win against Montreal, he was quick to point out his turnover near the end of regulation and told the media he did not play well against Columbus.

Though Eichel, like many players, might be experiencing some early-season rust, he has been the Sabres' leader on and off the ice.

"What he did tonight was not surprising for me since I've been watching it now since the 13th of September," coach Ralph Krueger said following the game. "Jack is just one of the very elite players in the league. His game isn't even near complete. I'm just really excited to be coaching a player with that skill set, and I'm going to work hard every day to help him get better."

Sabres' lineup: The Sabres aren't expected to make any changes to their lineup with Conor Sheary still "week-to-week" with an upper-body injury. Evan Rodrigues will skate on a line with Casey Mittelstadt and Jimmy Vesey. Defenseman John Gilmour will be a healthy scratch for a fifth consecutive game. Krueger told reporters Linus Ullmark will start against the Panthers.

Here was the lineup Wednesday against Montreal:

Olofsson-Eichel-Reinhart
Skinner-Johansson-Sobotka
Vesey-Mittelstadt-Rodrigues
Girgensons-Larsson-Okposo

Dahlin-Miller
McCabe-Ristolainen
Scandella-Jokiharju

Hutton in goal

Past struggles: The Sabres aren't interested in talking about the past. That includes their struggles against the Atlantic Division, and they have a history of playing poorly against the Panthers. Buffalo is 2-7-1 in its last 10 games against Florida. The Sabres went 1-2-1 against the Panthers last season, and the latter is viewed as a potential playoff team after hiring Joel Quenneville as coach.

Additionally, the Panthers added goalie Sergei Bobrovsky, defenseman Anton Stralman and forward Noel Acciari, among others.

"We have a lot of respect for the direction they're going with the new coaching staff," Krueger said of the Panthers. "You can already feel Joel's hand print on the group and just like our situation here, there's a lot of newness and a lot of teaching and coaching going on, I'm sure. We have a lot of respect for the skill that's in their group. There's a lot of drive, a lot of speed. Their defense are extremely involved in the attack and

offensively they come hard, so they'll test our structure and we look forward a lot of excellent games against Florida. ... They're still not where they want to be, but on a good day these are going to be tough games."

Panthers' lineup: Here's how the Panthers lined up during practice Thursday:

Huberdeau - Barkov - Hoffman
Vatrano - Trocheck - Connolly
Hawryluk - Malgin - Dadonov
Hunt - Acciari - Sceviour

Weegar - Ekblad
Matheson - Stralman
Yandle - Brown

Dahlin mentorship: There's no question Rasmus Dahlin is pressing. The 19-year-old defenseman has turned the puck over more than the Sabres would like and appears to be too eager to join the offensive rush.

Yet, Dahlin has one goal among seven points in four games. Krueger acknowledged Dahlin is still in the early stages of his development in the National Hockey League. Dahlin won't play around 25 minutes per game until he improves his play without the puck. However, the Sabres have one asset this season that they did not during Dahlin's rookie year: Colin Miller.

Miller, 26, played in the Stanley Cup final with Vegas in 2018 and is the sort of reliable defensive presence that can provide Dahlin with more freedom to join the rush. Miller has also become somewhat of a mentor to Dahlin.

"Colin is a very positive voice for Rasmus, who can sometimes be a little hard on himself and has to be realistic about the experience level and age that he's at and that there's going to be bumps on the road," Krueger said. "Colin has been good to smooth those bumps out for him and at the same time be an example because they're both important offensive players for us on the power play and yet we need them to make that switch defensively to be able to play against top lines of the other team. They've done that well together."

Sabres' Dahlin knows why he didn't play late in the third on Saturday

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

October 13, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Rasmus Dahlin didn't play in the final 8:23 of the third period against Florida after a horrible shift behind his own net. Dahlin has struggled mightily defensively, especially in the last two games. He did get one shift in overtime and said, "It was a 1-0 lead and we have better players in our D-zone, so that's how it is."

Ralph Kruger has heard a lot about it since the game ended on Friday. He said it's not that big of a deal, "I think there's too much focus on that right now, we had a game closing strategy and that could be different the next game, but there's no time for feelings here when we're reducing, but we're pleased with the attitude and coachability with Rasmus and we're pleased with how he's taking on adversity."

Steve Smith didn't say much to Dahlin about why he sat other than "It was just McCabe and Ristolainen were really on fire in the D-zone and he felt in those players he could trust them a lot."

Dahlin is having no trouble in the offensive zone, but playing without the puck has been a huge problem for him. He said he's working to get better, "It's being heavy in the battles. In the corners for my body it's not as easy as it is for Risto, so I just have to use my brain a little bit more than I used to."

On Friday you heard from Colin Miller about how he's enjoyed being a mentor for Dahlin. The young defenseman said he takes in everything Miller tells him, "He's meant a lot, he's been in the Stanley Cup Finals, he's been in the league awhile, so I have a lot to learn from him."

Miller mentioned how he's helping Dahlin not be so hard on himself. Dahlin said, "I've grown from last year and I've understood how important it is not to think too much about the game you played, but yes, sometimes when I get pissed he tells me, 'Yes, just shake it off and try to be better next time.'"

With a goal and six assists for seven points, Dahlin is 13th in league scoring. He said he likes the improvement in his offensive game, "Yes, I feel like I'm more comfortable with the puck, but also I like to shoot the puck too, so I'm shooting a little bit more so they don't know if I'm going to shoot or pass, so it's better overall."

Dahlin has been doing a terrific job as the point man or quarterback of the power play. Five of his seven points have come with the extra man. He said, "When I get the puck I see their forwards and their D actually cheating on him (Eichel) a little bit so it makes Vic open."

Lately teams have been trying to take both flanks away, but that leaves Jeff Skinner in the high slot and Sam Reinhart in front of the net. Dahlin said he's been using Skinner more, "Last game they took away both players, so I just flipped it into the middle to Skins and he got a great scoring chance, so all four guys that I play with, they can score, they can shoot, they can pass, so it's really fun playing with them."

The Sabres have recalled Curtis Lazar from Rochester. They're leaving for Anaheim right after Monday afternoon's game and they have to have an extra forward for the west coast trip. Lazar has one assist in three games with the Amerks. He did not play on Sunday.

The Sabres made no changes to the lines or the D-pairs in Sunday's practice.

Join Brian Koziol for the pregame for the Stars game starting at 2:00 when he'll be joined by Ralph Krueger, Rasmus Dahlin and Johan Larsson.

The Sabres beat Florida on the heels of their hardest working line

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

October 11, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - We've been talking all season about how good the Johan Larsson line has been with Zemgus Girgensons and Kyle Okposo, and they finally got rewarded on Friday night. That line has spent most of the season in the offensive zone, and has been getting bodies and pucks to the net, but only had gotten one goal to show for it.

That changed in the second period on Friday when Okposo sprung Larsson in alone for his first of the year, and the veteran did it again when Marco Scandella joined the rush.

Okposo and Girgensons combined for four assists in the game and the line had five points combined.

This was a game where Linus Ullmark and Sergei Bobrovsky should've been the first two stars of the game. They stood on their heads, but the Sabres don't do the three stars that way. Very often it's the best three Sabres.

Ullmark made 41 saves and stopped two more in the shootout. Bobrovsky made 30 saves, and Ralph Krueger revealed that the Panthers goaltender faced the better chances.

Mike Hoffman tied the game with 10.5 seconds left, scoring his fifth goal of the season, but Ullmark stopped him on wide open chances six other times. Hoffman had nine shots on the game.

Another positive sign I took out of this game is Casey Mittelstadt's line had some good offensive chances for the first time all season. Mittelstadt, along with Jimmy Vesey and Evan Rodrigues, really dug in and got some pucks to the net.

Vesey charged in from the right circle and was stopped. Henri Jokiharju did what he does very well at the end of the first, put Mittelstadt in alone with a perfect stretch pass. Mittelstadt also had a great opportunity in overtime.

He iced the game in the shootout with a beautiful backhand right under the crossbar. In his career, Mittelstadt is 3-for-6 in shootouts.

Jack Eichel also scored in the shootout, while Sam Reinhart was stopped.

Rasmus Dahlin got one shift in overtime after getting benched for the final 8:23 of regulation. The 19-year-old has struggled mightily defensively in the past two games, and he will learn from it. Krueger did say Dahlin's time will come.

Vesey only got four shifts in the third period, but did take over for Victor Olofsson in the third, as he has in most games.

Mittelstadt played twice in the third period and sat the final 14:03. Olofsson had four shifts in the third and sat the final 12:42. Olofsson had a couple of decent 5-on-5 shifts in this game, but, for the most part, has been invisible 5-on-5.

Rodrigues had just one shift in the third period and sat the final 14:03.

Honestly, I can't disagree with any of this. Many of these players will be a huge part of the future, but right now they can't be trusted in one-goal games. The only one I would disagree with is Colin Miller played, but his time was reduced. In my mind, he's been Buffalo's best defenseman and needs to be out there in these situations.

Krueger claims that the Sabres out-chanced the Panthers in this game, but Ullmark was making big save after big save. Ullmark did say on the post-game show that he feels he should've stopped Hoffman's game-tying goal. Ullmark said he knows he likes to go high and he should've been ready for it.

At 4-0-1, the Sabres are three points ahead of Detroit and Boston in the Atlantic Division, and trail Carolina by one point for the NHL lead.

Buffalo hosts Dallas on Monday afternoon before leaving for three games out west. Monday starts five games in a row against the Western Conference.

Sabres outlast Panthers 3-2 in first shootout of the season

By Kyle Powell

WGR 550

October 11, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres' point streak reached five games to start the 2019-20 season on Friday as they staved off a late attack from the Florida Panthers to win in a shootout, 3-2 at KeyBank Center.

Johan Larsson and Marco Scandella supplied the regulation goal scoring for the Sabres, while Kyle Okposo picked up a pair of assists, and Linus Ullmark made 40 saves on 42 shots faced throughout the night.

There were no goals to be found in the first 20 minutes of play as both Ullmark and Panthers goalie Sergei Bobrovsky put in respective clinics in their creases; making some highlight saves on a few high-danger chances. One of the best scoring chances of the opening period came from Casey Mittelstadt, who was sprung for a breakaway by defenseman Henri Jokiharju. Bobrovsky stopped Mittelstadt on his chance all alone, as the Sabres center went to the forehand trying to beat the two-time Vezina Trophy winner on the blocker side.

The second period was filled with more stellar goaltending from Ullmark and Bobrovsky. The Sabres generated better scoring chances, but Bobrovsky remained unwaivered for the Panthers.

Then, with 30.7 seconds left in the period, Larsson struck gold and gave Buffalo a much-deserved lead. Larsson accepted a pass from Kyle Okposo down the slot, and finally beat Bobrovsky on a 2-on-1 chance as the Sabres snatched the first goal of the night.

Buffalo's lead swelled to 2-0 just over two minutes into the third period, and it was Okposo again helping a teammate cash in thanks to a crisp pass. This time, it was Scandella who received the pass and the Sabres defenseman potted his first goal of the season.

That multi-goal lead would only last about four minutes for Buffalo, though, as Florida finally broke through against Ullmark with 6:15 gone in the frame. The netminder found himself slightly out of position in his crease, and Panthers forward Evgenii Dadonov deposited a goal past Ullmark's right leg to gave the visitors a pulse late in regulation.

With Bobrovsky pulled for the final minute-plus of regulation, Florida went to work in Buffalo's end of the ice and tied the game at 2-2 with 11-seconds left in the contest. Panthers winger Mike Hoffman buried a wrist shot above Ullmark's left shoulder and under the bar, and forced the game into overtime.

The Sabres dominated most of the play in the overtime period, out-shooting the Panthers 4-2 in the extra frame. However, Buffalo was unable to net the game-winner, even when both Bobrovsky and a Panthers defenseman were without a stick in the dying seconds of overtime.

In the shootout, Eichel led things off with a goal, and his tally was followed up with a stop on the other end by Ullmark on Florida forward Vincent Trocheck.

No goals were scored in the second round, which opened the door for Mittelstadt to end the game in the top of the third round. This time, the second-year center was able to beat Bobrovsky on the backhand under the bar to secure the 3-2 win.

GAME SUMMARY

Goal Summary:

First Period:

BUF: NONE

FLA: NONE

Second Period:

BUF: 19:29 - Johan Larsson (1) (Kyle Okposo, Zemgus Girgensons)

FLA: NONE

Third Period:

BUF: 2:02 - Marco Scandella (1) (Kyle Okposo, Zengus Girgensons)

FLA: 6:15 - Evgenii Dadonov (2) (Jonathan Huberdeau, Denis Malgin); 19:49 - Mike Hoffman (5) (Evgenii Dadonov, Jonathan Huberdeau)

Overtime:

BUF: NONE

FLA: NONE

Penalty Summary:

First Period:

BUF: NONE

FLA: 10:00 - Keith Yandle (Tripping - 2 min.)

Second Period:

BUF: 6:27 - Rasmus Dahlin (Slashing - 2 min.)

FLA: 6:12 - Mackenzie Weegar (Holding - 2 min.); 17:27 - Mike Hoffman (Cross-checking - 2 min.)

Third Period:

BUF: 7:26 - Rasmus Ristolainen (Slashing - 2 min.)

FLA: 3:38 - Frank Vatrano (Tripping - 2 min.)

Overtime:

BUF: NONE

FLA: NONE

Shots on Goal:

BUF: 33 (13, 11, 5, 4)

FLA: 42 (11, 11, 18, 2)

Goalies:

BUF: Linus Ullmark - 40 saves

FLA: Sergei Bobrovsky - 31 saves

Power Plays:

BUF: 0 for 4 (0%)

FLA: 0 for 2 (0%)

Three Stars:

1.) Linus Ullmark - BUF

2.) Kyle Okposo - BUF

3.) Johan Larsson - BUF

What's Next:

The Sabres have the weekend off before wrapping up their three-game homestand on Monday against the Dallas Stars for a Columbus Day matinee contest at KeyBank Center. Faceoff is set for 3 p.m. with the Paul William Beltz Pre-Game show kicking off at 2 p.m. on the flagship of the Buffalo Sabres - WGR Sports Radio 550.

Botterill: 'We didn't need a revamp, but we wanted to add'

By Schopp & Bulldog

WGR 550

October 11, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres are off to a hot start to the 2019-20 season, holding a 3-0-1 record heading into Friday night's matchup with the Florida Panthers at KeyBank Center.

It is the best start to a season for a Sabres team since the 2009-10 season, when Buffalo got out to a 4-0-1 record in the first five games.

In the Sabres' first four games, they are led by the league's best power play, which is currently at a 53.3% conversion rate. Leading the way on the power play is rookie winger Victor Olofsson, who has scored all four of his goals this season while on the man advantage.

Rasmus Dahlin is also having a major impact on the power play, picking up five power play points in the first four games. Dahlin leads the Sabres overall in scoring with a goal and six assists to start the year.

Sabres captain Jack Eichel is also right at the top of Buffalo's scoring list with three goals and four assists in the opening four games. He's coming off a big four-point night on Wednesday night where he scored twice and added two helpers in a 5-4 overtime win over the Montreal Canadiens.

The architect of this year's team is general manager Jason Botterill, and he joined the Bulldog and Paul Hamilton at (716) Food and Sport before Friday night's game against the Panthers.

Here's some of what he had to say:

Botterill on head coach Ralph Krueger:

"Jim Rutherford suggested I talk to Ralph. Just felt that he could be a good mix with myself. He has a very creative resume, but at the end of the day he's a kid from Manitoba that loves hockey. There's a simplicity to Ralph, our players are able to talk to him."

Botterill on being right up against the salary cap:

"We understood when we signed [Marcus] Johansson that we'd be close to the cap. We certainly want to have the ability to add to our team. So many of the top teams are right up against it. It'll come into it a lot from a trade perspective."

Botterill on Rasmus Dahlin's second season:

"He knows what he has to work on. Lower-body strength, he looks bigger and stronger. He has such a great brain. He knows the moves of the other players. He'll make mistakes, but his ability to learn from them is why he's so special."

Botterill on Casey Mittelstadt going into Year 2:

"Players are always going to develop at different time frames. Casey had to work on his body and he did that over the summer. We see the hockey sense. Ralph puts him in power play situations. The fact that we have two units that produce is nice."

The Sabres look for more points at home against Florida

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

October 11, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - The Sabres have not had good luck against Florida. In the last 10 games, Buffalo is 2-7-1, but Marcus Johansson couldn't care less. He said he's not at all interested in the past, he's only interested in today.

The Sabres are 3-0-1, which is their best start since 2009-10.

Both Jack Eichel and Rasmus Dahlin have seven points in the first four games. That has them tied for ninth in league scoring.

Buffalo's power play is second in the NHL at 53.3%, but the penalty killing is 21st at 69.2%. Buffalo has killed 9-of-13 penalties. Zemgus Girgensons says there are ways to improve that, "I definitely feel it's not where it needs to be. I think we've been good in zone, but have struggled with the clear and it's something where the guys have to relax a bit and when you get the puck on the stick, you have to make sure it goes all the way down."

Ralph Krueger knows they've struggled a little on the kill, but he thinks there's been some luck involved too, "I think we've had some goals that aren't typical PK, we've had the double, triple deflection, but if you look at the structure there and the way that we're executing, those numbers will follow, I'm confident and if we stick to the way we need to play, we'll be fine."

The Sabres have a power play with five lethal guys on it. Krueger thinks power plays are now different, "Power plays with the speed and the way they're executing. It's just getting more and more lethal and for the penalty kills it's getting harder to have those numbers up to where you'd like to have them."

Florida's power has worked at 30.8%.

As much as the Girgensons-Larsson-Okposo line has spent most of their shifts in the offensive zone, the Vesey-Mittelstadt-Rodrigues line has spent most of their shifts in the defensive zone. It actually got worse on Wednesday with Conor Sheary out injured and Evan Rodrigues in. Krueger said, "It's offensive zone time, yes there's a need to be stable defensively and I believe that's been strong, they've had very few chances against, but now it's building some O-zone time and some cycling and getting that skillset going. We'd like to see them play down below the hash marks a lot more."

Henri Jokiharju has been trusted by the coaching staff in many defensive situations. He plays on the penalty kill and averages over 17 minutes per-game. The kid is only 20-years-old and has played 42 career NHL games. Krueger said he doesn't pay attention to age, "It's funny, only when you start those conversations with me do I even think about their age. The way I've always been as a coach whether you're 35 or 19, I treat you exactly the same and expect the same habits from you, so for younger players that can sometimes put pressure on them, but I've never, ever seen him as a 20-year-old, I've just seen him as a player that needs to play the same way and he's done a really good job of doing that."

Linus Ullmark will get his second start of the season in goal. In his first game, he stood on his head making 40 saves in a 4-3 overtime loss at Columbus.

With a 1-2-0 record, the Panthers have already annoyed their new coach Joel Quenneville. He bag skated them for over an hour this week, which really isn't done much in the NHL these days.

In three games, their prized free agent goalie Sergei Bobrovsky has allowed 11 goals, giving him a 4.78 goals-against and .859 save percentage.

On the other side of the equation, Mike Hoffman has had a red-hot start, scoring four goals and six points in three games.

Former Sabres defenseman Mark Pysyk has fallen out of favor in Florida. He's only played one game and will likely be a healthy scratch again Friday.

Join the Bulldog for the pre-game show at 6:00 live from (716) Food and Sport when he'll be joined by Krueger, Girgensons and Colin Miller.

The Satchel: Josh Allen's future with the Bills, Rasmus Dahlin's Norris Trophy chances and more

By Tim Graham

The Athletic

October 11, 2019

The Bills are 4-1 and have a mouth-watering schedule ahead.

The Sabres look like a brand new team, with seven out of eight possible points to start the season.

What else do you want?

The only possible way a Buffalo sports fan can feel any more gratification is by starting off their weekend with The Satchel.

Is Josh Allen still the Bills starting QB five years from now? — Brian M.

What an interesting question, one I don't consider expressly about Allen, but about the odds any blue-chip prospect has to establish himself as a franchise quarterback into his second contract.

Allen is popular among Bills fans already, but much of that has to do with dreamy potential they see in him as a leading man. The Bills' front office and coaches view him similarly. Frustrations have been tempered by the hope he can reduce critical errors.

But patience with repeated giveaways will wear thin. Buffalo's defense and opposing kickers can't be counted on every week to bail out reckless play. Furthermore, Allen's proclivity to fight for extra yards on the ground heightens the risk for injury, a significant factor to any chance at longevity.

As Brett Favre said about Allen: "It can become toxic that every time you run the ball you want to steamroll someone because the fans love it, and two years later you're beat up and out of football. Now the fans are loving the next guy. It can be a slippery slope."

Of the 35 quarterbacks selected in the first round between 2002 (the last year of expansion and realignment) and 2013 (the latest we would know if he'd stuck for five years), only 12 started that long for the team that drafted him. I'm including Eli Manning and Philip Rivers here despite the Giants-Chargers draft-day switcheroo.

So, what's my answer about Allen still quarterbacking Buffalo in five years? I predict he will evolve enough to augment commendable leadership characteristics and, if he can stay healthy, reward folks for believing in him.

Tim, regarding the Bills, this is the first time in a long time that we have had a GM and coach seemingly in lockstep. How much of the current Bills success do you attribute to coach and GM synergy versus specifically the individual talent of Brandon Beane and Sean McDermott? — Mike W.

As much as Russ Brandon used to insist that Bills management was in lockstep, this group finally looks the part. Leadership was fractured from the moment Ralph Wilson fired Tom Donahoe in 2006. We still don't know who truly ran football operations over the next three years. Even when Buddy Nix ascended to general manager in December 2009 and hired Chan Gailey, other forces remained at play. Wilson became an absentee owner because of his health and installed Brandon as his proxy. Then came Doug Whaley, and Nix soon was kicked aside, and Wilson died, and things got weirder until McDermott came aboard and Whaley was fired.

McDermott and Beane have fostered a healthy culture, more commonly referred to as The Process. An important aspect was fazing out staffers and players from the previous regime to start anew. By all accounts, McDermott and Beane trust each other even though they sometimes disagree. Such a working dynamic sounds quotidian, but coaches and GMs frequently are suspicious about getting stabbed in the back.

What I'm most impressed by is the scouting staff Beane has assembled. The Bills have a regrettable history of football operations executives nobody else wanted, guys who didn't get interviewed for promotions with other

teams and couldn't stay in the NFL once the Bills dismissed them. Beane's crew is loaded with top-level NFL pedigree.

Do you think that Rasmus Dahlin has a legitimate shot at the Norris Trophy this season? — Ryan C.

For this to happen, Dahlin would make history by matching Bobby Orr as the youngest Norris Trophy winner at 19 years old. But let's take a look at what kind of stat line Dahlin would need based on recent honorees. I know the Norris Trophy is for the top defenseman, but the award always goes to the best offensive defenseman.

Let's take it from 2008-09, one season after Niklas Lidstrom earned three in a row. This way, we're not weighing down the numbers to the point where we're looking at a quasi-Lidstrom comparison. Over that span, the average Norris winner (applying an 82-game pace to the lockout-shortened 2012-13 season) recorded 17.3 goals and 47.6 assists with a plus-20.2 rating.

Norris voters have shown they're open-minded to new names. Each of the past four was a first-time winner: Mark Giordano, Victor Hedman, Brent Burns and Drew Doughty. Since Lidstrom took his seventh and final Norris in 2010-11, no one has won it two years in a row and only Erik Karlsson has won it twice. Karlsson was 21 the first time, making him the youngest Norris winner since Orr in 1969-70.

Hi, Tim! Cheers from a fellow Baldwin Wallace grad. In light of the new Sabres 50th uniform, do you think the NHL would/should ever lighten up on its jersey policies? Why not wear whites at home for half the year like the AHL, or wear special sweaters like the purple Hockey Fights Cancer jersey for the entire game and not just warmups? For a league that seems obsessed with and insecure about drumming up interest and revenue, this would seemingly be an easy way to do so. — Christopher H.

Always great to hear from a fellow Yellow Jacket, Christopher. I've always been an advocate of wearing white at home regardless. That way, colors don't get so repetitious. To see the Flyers in orange, the Canadiens in red, the Maple Leafs in blue would be so much more visually gratifying than navy versus white every night.

As for adding multiple alternates, thirds, throwbacks and promos to be worn in games, the NHL doesn't want to create headaches for opposing equipment managers, who might have to pack twice as much gear for road trips.

Tim, with the Pegulas firmly entrenched in the Buffalo market do you see any chance that we are able to bring an MLS team to the area? — Matthew C.

Odds sure seem long that Buffalo could be a Major League Soccer locale. MLS wants to grow to 30 clubs. Austin, Miami, Nashville and St. Louis are scheduled to join by 2022, bringing the league to 28 teams. Sacramento is expected later.

That leaves one vacancy. Buffalo's problem is that too many other markets, whether through a specific, well-heeled prospective owner or a civic campaign, have been aggressive in courting MLS expansion and are way out in front of any Buffalo interest. Las Vegas has two ownership groups vying for a team. Carolina Panthers owner David Tepper wants the MLS in Charlotte. Phoenix, Indianapolis and Louisville have been active.

There has been speculation that MLS someday will expand to 32 clubs, but league president Mark Abbott has stated that possibility is a long way off.

Buffalo, at No. 52, also would be the league's smallest media market by a wide margin. No. 40 Austin will be the smallest when it arrives.

I expect the national pundits to predict wrong — a lot — but this is shaping up to be the biggest Vegas total-wins miss that I can remember. The Bills have an elite defense and a slightly below-average offense, which makes sense considering last year they had a great defense (that they added pieces to) and a terrible offense (that they totally overhauled and added another year of experience at QB). What's the biggest surprise to you about this team? Is this team really coming out of nowhere? — Timothy P.

Over 6.5 wins sure looks like a smart wager, doesn't it? Buffalo's defense was fantastic last year and improved over the offseason with experience and some roster tweaks. All the offense has to do is play competently. The

schedule is favorable. Given all that, I think the Bills are playing as expected for anybody who had been paying attention.

The biggest surprise has been Frank Gore as the offensive rock. Most fans in the summer would have ranked him the third-most important running back behind LeSean McCoy and Devin Singletary, but without Gore the Bills are in trouble. At 36 years old, he leads Buffalo and ranks 12th in the NFL with 333 rushing yards. He is on pace for another 1,000-yard season.

Is Ryan Bates an upgrade from Cody Ford at right tackle? Barely noticed Ryan Bates on Sunday, but I sure noticed Ford and his slow feet. — Michael S.

Why haven't we seen Cody Ford rotate in at left guard? He's clearly not working out at right tackle, and Quinton Spain is a liability. — Gordon S.

Buffalo's second-round draft choice has not been the plug-and-play addition many hoped. The transition from Oklahoma to the NFL has been rocky. A head injury forced Ford out of Sunday's game. That sent undrafted rookie Bates into the lineup at right tackle. Bates acquitted himself in a four-minute offense that pounded out the victory. Spencer Long also performed well at right guard after Jon Feliciano had to shift to center for the injured Mitch Morse.

Spain has been inconsistent at left guard, too. While the Bills could experiment with Ford in Spain's spot, you have to wonder how replacing one unsteady lineman with another who hasn't played the position would help in any meaningful way.

But at the very least Sunday, we saw Buffalo has respectable O-line depth that's versatile enough to give the coaches options to consider.

Tim, getting seven of a possible eight points to start the season is about as good as we could've asked for. The power play is hot right now, but the third line has hardly produced anything, and Jeff Skinner and Marcus Johansson are playing a man down every shift with Vladimir Sobotka playing alongside them. With Conor Sheary out week-to-week now, any chance we get someone from Rochester to shake things up with the third line and give the second line a winger who isn't Sobotka? There is no way Sobotka brings more potential upside out there than Tage Thompson. — Jordan

I can't pretend to know Ralph Krueger's innermost thoughts, but my years of covering hockey taught me coaches are quite superstitious about their lineups. As long as the Sabres play well, you should assume Vladimir Sobotka will remain on the ice.

To play devil's advocate, perhaps a little patience should be given to Sobotka. We've seen the jolt Krueger's fast-and-aggressive style has given the Sabres. Maybe skating on a line with Skinner and Johansson and elevated play throughout the roster will pull Sobotka along. I'm not optimistic that will happen, but with the offense playing so well, it might not hurt to give him a fresh chance.

Do you think the Sabres are holding on to Rasmus Ristolainen until Brandon Montour comes back? — Joseph G.

As said above, let's see if Ristolainen buys into Krueger's message and finally becomes the type of player the Sabres should keep. Winning is fun. Standing ovations at KeyBank Center are fun. Overwhelming opponents is fun. Ristolainen might come around.

Ristolainen, even if he still wants out of town, would be wise to perform at the highest level to improve his trade value. The Sabres weren't able to move him over the offseason, but they still have too many right-handed defensemen once Montour returns from a hand injury in about three weeks.

Rasmus Dahlin could enjoy greatest offensive season by Sabres defenseman

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
October 14, 2019

BUFFALO – Having already produced seven points through five games, Rasmus Dahlin could be in the early stages of the greatest offensive season ever enjoyed by a Sabres defenseman.

Dahlin, of course, will likely cool off. At his current pace entering this afternoon's home game against the Dallas Stars, he would score 115 points over an 82-game campaign.

Only five NHL defensemen have ever recorded a 100-point season. The last one, Brian Leetch, hit the milestone in 1991-92.

Still, Dahlin could certainly threaten Phil Housley's franchise record of 81 points by a defenseman set in 1989-90, especially with the Sabres' power play clicking this season.

The early production – one goal and six assists, including five points on the man advantage – underscores the dynamic talent Dahlin has become just 87 games into his NHL career.

Fresh off a nine-goal, 44-point rookie season, the Swede has quickly shown signs of offensive growth.

"I feel like I'm more comfortable with the puck, but also I like to shoot the puck, too," Dahlin said Sunday inside KeyBank Center. "I shoot it a little bit more. The forwards, they don't know if I'm going to shoot or pass. Everything, it's better overall."

It can be easy to forget, but Dahlin just turned 19 in April. He's still a raw kid playing a demanding position.

He's far from a finished product. His defensive play can be suspect.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger benched Dahlin for the final 8:23 of regulation in Friday's 3-2 shootout win over the Florida Panthers.

Krueger, who played Dahlin again in overtime, has downplayed sitting out Dahlin late in a tight game.

"There's too much focus on that right now," Krueger said. "We had a game-closing strategy. That could be different the next game and different in two games. There's no time for feelings here when we're reducing."

Dahlin understands why the Sabres utilized other defensemen late.

The former first overall pick said Jake McCabe and Rasmus Ristolainen "were really on fire in the D-zone," so assistant coach Steve Smith, who runs the defense, "could trust them a lot in that situation."

"Nothing really crazy," said Dahlin, who has been partnered with newcomer Colin Miller this season.

Dahlin's ability to listen and evolve has been perhaps the most underappreciated aspect of his development.

"He is so coachable, and he wants to be the best possible player in this league that he can be," Krueger said. "He's listening. The important thing is that we find the balance so that his offensive creativity is always evident in our five-on-five and our power play."

Youngsters of Dahlin's caliber often adjust slowly to the defensive side of the NHL. Before they entered the league, they had the puck all the time, so playing without it wasn't a huge worry.

"We coaches ... have to be hard on them on the game without the puck," Krueger said.

Krueger said the challenge is doing that without taking away the "genius" of the player. He experienced that with the Edmonton Oilers when he coached future Hart Trophy winner Taylor Hall.

"To have a player like that and finding those boundaries and those limits that you want him to go to so his genius doesn't get tapped by our defensive needs, that's what we're working on with Rasmus," Krueger said.

The 6-foot-3, 193-pound Dahlin said being "heavy in the battles in the corners" has been the most difficult challenge of playing without the puck.

"For my body, as easy as it is for Risto, I just have to use my brain a little bit more than he has to because he's stronger," he said. "I have to try other stuff."

Krueger mentioned a defenseman of Dahlin's caliber someday playing 25 minutes a game, an elite level he hasn't ascended to yet. He has averaged 18 minutes, 28 seconds an outing this season.

Whatever happens, Dahlin, who has been hard on himself in the past, is learning to move on quickly.

"I'm 19 now, so I'm more mature," Dahlin joked. "No, I mean, I grew from last year, too, and really understood how important it is not thinking too much about the game that you played. It's 82 games. It sounds cliché but it's true.

"Of course, sometimes when I get (ticked, Miller's) like, 'Yeah, just shake it off. Go out there and do the same thing and try it next time.'"

Sabres recall Curtis Lazar from Amerks

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

October 13, 2019

BUFFALO – The Sabres recalled forward Curtis Lazar from the Rochester Americans this afternoon.

Lazar, 24, will likely accompany the Sabres on their three-game western road trip that begins Wednesday to serve as their extra forward.

The Amerks scratched Lazar from today's road game against the Hartford Wolf Pack.

The Sabres have had only 12 healthy forwards since winger Conor Sheary suffered an upper-body injury last week. Sheary skated on his own today.

Lazar signed a one-year, one-way contract worth \$700,000 on July 1. The former first-round pick recorded one assist in his first three games with the Amerks.

The 6-foot, 211-pound Lazar has compiled 15 goals and 51 points in 246 career NHL games.

The Sabres host the Dallas Stars on Monday afternoon.

Sabres tell Henri Jokiharju, Victor Olofsson they're staying in NHL

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

October 13, 2019

BUFFALO – Just five games into the season, Sabres defenseman Henri Jokiharju and winger Victor Olofsson have earned spots in the NHL.

The Sabres have told both youngsters to leave the hotel they've been staying in and find something more permanent.

"They're both out hunting for places to live," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said today inside KeyBank Center. "But, again, the competition in the league doesn't stop. The pressure on you doesn't stop to perform."

The Sabres' decision to keep Jokiharju and Olofsson, of course, is no surprise.

Jokiharju, 20, has been one of their steadiest defenders, forming a strong tandem beside Marco Scandella.

"Get out of the hotel and get your own place," Jokiharju said. "It's awesome."

Olofsson, meanwhile, has already scored four power-play goals and five points. The Swedish rookie, 24, has skated on the top line all season.

The Sabres, who practiced today inside Harborcenter following a day off, host the Dallas Stars on Monday afternoon.

Johan Larsson line, goalie Linus Ullmark lead Sabres past Panthers

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

October 12, 2019

BUFFALO – Sooner or later, the unheralded Sabres line of Johan Larsson and Zemgus Girgensons and Kyle Okposo was due to erupt for some goals.

For more than four games, the trio consistently generated offense, buzzing around the opponent's zone.

A combination regarded as the fourth just a week ago has quickly morphed into the Sabres' most reliable line.

But other than one Okposo goal, the players hadn't done any scoring.

So when they created both Sabres goals in Friday's 3-2 shootout win over the Florida Panthers – Larsson scored and Okposo and Girgensons assisted on defenseman Marco Scandella's goal – the bench went crazy.

"I've never seen a bench cheer so much for another line having success," coach Ralph Krueger said after the Sabres improved to 4-0-1. "The entire bench just erupted on both of the goals. To see all that hard work, the grinding they've been doing the first five games is paying off (is) big."

Of course, the Sabres needed more than two goals before the crowd of 15,638 inside KeyBank Center.

After Larsson scored late in the second period and Scandella made it 2-0 2:02 into the third, they sat back, allowing the Panthers to attack and roar back.

Mike Hoffman tied the game with 10.4 seconds left in regulation. Evgenii Dadonov's goal 6:15 into the third period ignited the Panthers, who pumped outshot the Sabres 19-4 in the third period.

Goalie Linus Ullmark, who made 41 saves, kept the Sabres in it, allowing captain Jack Eichel and center Casey Mittelstadt to secure the shootout win.

The Sabres also blew a two-goal lead late in Wednesday's 5-4 overtime win against the Montreal Canadiens.

"We have to stay aggressive," said Okposo, who had two assists in a game for the first time since Nov. 19. "I thought we just sat back a little bit. We didn't have as many shifts in the offensive zone. ... You tend to sit back when you have a lead."

Ullmark's splendid play, however, covered up the Sabres' late collapse. Fresh off a 40-save outing in Monday's 4-3 overtime loss road loss to the Columbus Blue Jackets, he looked sharp again.

The Swede outdueled Sergei Bobrovsky, who stopped 30 shots for the Panthers.

"World class goaltending on both ends, lots of slot chances, lots of scoring chances," Krueger said. "What we were able to eliminate really was the second chances."

Ullmark said: "We never hesitated. We stayed calm on the bench. No one got upset or anything like that. We just thought about what happened, let it go ... and try to get those two points."

Girgensons, like Okposo, also had two points.

What has made the line, which also played together late last season, mesh so well?

"We're working," Okposo said. "All three of us just kind of go hunt pucks. Get on the forecheck and go hard. The other guys support. I think when you have three guys really committed to pressure something just happens. It works."

Too much work earned Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, 19, a seat on the bench for the final nine and half minutes of regulation.

Krueger played second-year star in overtime. Still, why sit one of your top talents?

"We've gone 11 days in a row without a day off to start the season," Krueger said. "There's been a lot of effort invested in getting the results that we've had and we could see a few guys tapering off. We were protecting him actually in that little stretch. ...

"We knew Florida was going to push hard, and we went a little more with experience there. But Rasmus has played outstanding and is learning and growing every day. There's going to be moments like that where we're going to reduce the lineup to go with the guys we think have the best chance of closing."

The Sabres have won three straight home games to start a season for the first time since 2008-09.

Sabres notes: Henri Jokiharju earning keep on blue line

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
October 12, 2019

BUFFALO – Ralph Krueger doesn't pay much attention to his players' ages. Whether you're a teenager and or a veteran, the Sabres coach said he treats everyone the same way.

In turn, Krueger expects a rookie to have the same habits as, say, a 35-year-old.

"So for younger players, that could sometimes put pressure on them," Krueger said prior to Friday's 3-2 shootout win over the Florida Panthers inside KeyBank Center. "For older players, it also means they need to play like a young player."

For Sabres defenseman Henri Jokiharju, 20, Krueger's philosophy helped create an opportunity he has seized.

"I feel he's doing that for every player," Jokiharju said. "I think it's a good way of doing it for a coach. I think it's fair for everyone."

So far, Jokiharju has been a pleasant surprise for the Sabres, contributing strong minutes on the third pair beside Marco Scandella and killing penalties.

Jokiharju said he didn't kill penalties last season in the NHL, AHL or while winning gold medals with Finland at the World Junior Championship or the World Championship.

When the Sabres acquired the 6-foot, 195-pound Jokiharju from the Chicago Blackhawks on July 9, it was unclear what role he might fill. Could the Finn stick and earn a spot in the NHL or would he return to the minors?

Then Krueger said a confident Jokiharju arrived at training camp intent on grabbing a job.

"That was important," he said of the youngster's confidence. "He came here with a vision on playing in the lineup and not just being a depth player. He's confirmed (by) adding depth to our defense the way he's playing."

Jokiharju's Corsi For – the percentage of shot attempts by his team while he's on the ice – was a healthy 57.58 entering Friday, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

Defense injuries also helped Jokiharju's fight. Right now, Zach Bogosian (hip), Matt Hunwick (neck, out for season) and Brandon Montour (hand) are injured.

Montour's injury early in the preseason pushed Jokiharju up the depth chart.

"I haven't ever seen him as a 20-year-old," said Krueger, who noted the media usually reminds him of his players' ages. "I just see him as a player that needs to be playing a certain way within our framework, and that he's done a really good job of doing that."

That job, according to Krueger, involves "playing at both sides of the puck."

"His puck-moving ability has been confirmed, but also the way he attacks and plays on his toes and looks for his gaps early," he said. "We enjoy that part of his game."

Jokiharju, the 29th overall pick in 2017, enjoyed playing big minutes early last season with the Blackhawks before they fired coach Joel Quenneville.

In Quenneville's final game, Jokiharju skated a career-high 25 minutes, 29 seconds.

After Jeremy Colliton took over, Jokiharju's ice time dropped. Chicago assigned him to the AHL in February.

Jokiharju entered Friday averaging just over 17 minutes through four outings this season.

Quenneville, who now coaches the Panthers, raved about Jokiharju's skills and smarts Friday morning.

"He had a tremendous start to the year," he said of last season.

Meanwhile, winger Alexander Nylander, the prospect the Sabres traded to the Blackhawks for Jokiharju, will likely be a healthy scratch for Saturday's game against the Winnipeg Jets.

Nylander, 21, started the season on the top line beside center Jonathan Toews and Patrick Kane.

—

The Panthers scratched former Sabres defenseman Mark Pysyk (healthy).

Sabres goalie Linus Ullmark to start against Panthers

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

October 11, 2019

BUFFALO – Fresh off a terrific 40-save outing in his first appearance this season, Sabres goalie Linus Ullmark will start tonight's home game the Florida Panthers.

Ullmark, 26, looked strong throughout Monday's 4-3 overtime road loss to the Columbus Blue Jackets, helping the Sabres steal a point.

The Swede has compiled a 2-2-1 record with a 3.18 goals-against average and a .914 save percentage in five career outings against the Panthers.

Sabres goalie Carter Hutton made 23 stops in Wednesday's 5-4 overtime win against the Montreal Canadiens.

The Panthers have started slowly under new coach Joel Quenneville, a three-time Stanley Cup winner with the Chicago Blackhawks.

In Tuesday's 6-3 home loss to the Carolina Panthers, Quenneville yanked goalie Sergei Bobrovsky after the former Vezina Trophy winner allowed four first-period goals.

Bobrovsky signed a seven-year, \$70 million contract during the offseason.

Overall, the Panthers are 1-2-0

"We have a lot of respect for the direction they're going with the new coaching staff," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said this morning inside KeyBank Center. "You can already feel Joel's handprint on the group. Just like our situation here, there's a lot of newness and a lot of teaching going on, for sure.

"We have a lot of respect for the skill that's in their group. There's a lot of drive, a lot of speed. Their defense are extremely involved in the attack offensively. They come hard, so they'll test our structure."

5 Observations: Ullmark shines in Sabres 3-2 shootout win over Panthers

By Matt Bove

WKBW

October 11, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. [WKBW] — With their 3-2 shootout win on Friday, the Buffalo Sabres are off to their best five-game start since the 2009-2010 season. Johan Larsson and Marco Scandella scored for the Sabres while Jack Eichel and Casey Mittelstadt sealed the win in the shootout. Buffalo is now 4-0-1 to start the season, despite squandering away two-goal leads in back-to-back games.

5 Observations from Friday's win:

Lights Out Linus

Linus Ullmark for his second consecutive start was exceptional. Only this time, his efforts were enough to help lift his team to victory. Ullmark turned away 41 of the 43 shots he faced and stopped both Panthers' attempts in the shootout.

"We know that when we stick to our gameplan we win," Ullmark said after the game. "Are we going to win every game? Probably not, but we have a very good opportunity to do it, as long as we stick with the process and stick with our game plan.

Both goaltenders were lights out in this game and I'm sure the Sabres are very happy with how both Ullmark and Carter Hutton have started the season.

Riding pine

Victor Olofsson has earned the trust of the coaching staff on the power play. He has yet to earn their trust during the crucial moments of the game. For the second consecutive game, Olofsson was glued to the bench in the third period as he watched his teammates rotate taking turns alongside Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart. While this has some fans frustrated, it shouldn't come as a huge surprise. For a young player, it often takes a long time to adjust to the speed of the NHL game while defending. It will eventually come, it just hasn't happened yet.

Credit where credit is due

Can we please discuss how impressive the line featuring Johan Larsson, Zemgus Girgensons and Kyle Okposo has been? Don't worry, if their success comes as a surprise, you're not alone. Going into the season, I was pretty adamant that it was time to move on from Larsson and Girgensons. I'm here to admit I was wrong. As a trio, this line has been the Sabres most consistent in almost every game. When the Sabres need to regain control, this is the line that comes onto the ice. When it's time to protect a lead, these three hop over the boards. And on Friday when the Sabres needed a goal, these guys delivered. Never, ever, ever break them up.

Not Joking Around

Henri Jokiharju, who is nicknamed the Joker, has been an excellent addition to the Sabres early in the season. Playing alongside Marco Scandella, who struggled last season, the duo has been arguably the Sabres' most effective defensive pairing. In the defensive zone, the pair have looked calm and has done a great job limiting high danger chances.

Then there are the moments when make you wonder why a team traded the 20-year-old defender. One of those came in the first period as Jokiharju fed Casey Mittelstadt with a perfect stretch pass that led to a breakaway. As I said on twitter dot com after the play, there is no way Jokiharju can be sat down when the Sabres blue line starts getting healthier. Now in fairness, Jokiharju did get caught on the Evgenii Dadonov goal. I won't put all the blame on him but he could've done a better job keeping Dadonov in front of him. Nevertheless, the young defenseman has been super impressive in his first five games in Buffalo.

When the well goes dry

There will be nights when the power play just doesn't click. Friday was one of those nights. As I wrote on Wednesday, the Sabres are relying too much on their power play prowess. That's not a bad thing, it's just a reminder that on some nights you can't expect to score multiple goals with the man advantage. Friday doesn't make me think any less of the unit, it just makes me think they aren't robots.

Girgensons, Larsson & Okposo rewarded in win over Panthers

By Nick Filipowski

WIVB

October 12, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – Last season when Zemgus Girgensons, Johan Larsson and Kyle Okposo would come over the boards and onto the ice, expectations weren't always very high for what was typically the fourth line.

This year, those three have been one of the more dominant, consistent lines new head coach Ralph Krueger has deployed on a nightly basis. They entered last night's game against the Panthers having combined for only one goal and two points. And, while the production might not have been there, they were finally able to break through Friday night.

"I've never seen a bench cheer so much for another line having success. I mean, the entire bench erupted on both of the goals," head coach Ralph Krueger said after the game. "To see all that hard work, the grinding they've been doing here through the first five games paying off."

"It's nice," added Johan Larsson. "It's a good feeling we're creating chances but at the end you have to score. It was nice to see them go in today."

Kyle Okposo, who finished with two assists in the victory over Florida, explained the system head Krueger has installed allows the trio to just "go play."

"I just think we're working. All three of us just kind of go hunt pucks and you know, get on the forecheck and go hard and the other guy supports. I think when you have three guys really committed, something just happens and just works. We seem to have some chemistry and keep going."

"It's always nice to be out there," added Girgensons. "A couple great plays by (Okposo) back door with good finishes by (Scandella) and Larry."

"Certainly the ones that were cheered in the locker room after the game," said Krueger. "And, just pleased they got some offensive return for all that effort."

We'll see if they continued to be rewarded for their tenacious play on the ice on Monday, when the Sabres host the Dallas Stars.

4 Observations: Sabres hold off Panthers in 3-2 shootout win

By Nick Filipowski

WIVB

October 11, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – Casey Mittelstadt scored the game winner in Friday night's 5-4 shootout win over the Florida Panthers.

With the win, Buffalo matches best five game stretch to start since a season since 2009, when the Blue & Gold also opened the year by going 4-0-1.

Here are four observations from the win.

Finding A Way

The Good: For a second straight game the Sabres blew a two goal lead in the third period...and for a second straight game found a way to pickup two critical points early on in the season.

The Bad: The sentiments inside the locker room was the team wasn't aggressive enough over the final 20 minutes and "sat back" allowing Florida to claw it's way back into the game.

Krueger has mentioned multiple times since the season has started this team is in the deep learning phase of creating an identity.

But, that mentality is a bad habit was a trademark of the Sabres struggles a year ago, and one they have to kick.

Ullmark outduels Bobrovsky

If there is a netminder teams are going to struggle to score against in the NHL, it's the Panthers Sergei Bobrovsky.

The two-time Vezina winner has a .919 save percentage in his career — which ranks 11th all-time in league history.

Linus Ullmark matched one the all-time greats, who made several incredible stops of his own, to pick up his first victory of the season.

In the first period, Ullmark turned away two high-danger chances from the slot and flashed the leather as he snagged an absolute rocket off the stick of wide open Mike Hoffman to keep the game scoreless.

While Ullmark was brick wall in the crease, stopping 36 of the 38 shots he made, with his lone mistake coming in the third period on Evgeni Dadonov's tally.

Even as Florida made a push in the third period with a power play and by hemming the Blue & Gold in their own, Ullmark continued to provide a steady presence in the net.

Granted the Panthers tied the game with an extra attacker, Ullmark stood tall in over time and the shootout, stoning Vincent Trocheck and Aleksander Barkov to help secure the win.

While Ullmark was sensational, the save of the night actually belonged to Marco Scandella, who managed to keep this puck of the net:

22-28-21

Remember when you would cringe every time that line would step onto the ice a year ago?

What a difference a year, and a new head coach, can make.

Johan Larsson, Zemgus Girgensons and Kyle Okposo combined for one goal and two points through the first four games of the season. While the production hasn't been there, that group has been a bright spot generating scoring chances on a near nightly basis.

That trend continued for the first 39 minutes against the Panthers, with Zemgus Girgensons and Kyle Okposo being turned away on Grade-A chances — before the trio finally broke through in the final minute of the second period.

As Okposo entered the zone, he feathered a pass under the stick of Anton Stralman to a streaking Larsson — who flipped the puck over a sprawling Bobrovsky for his first goal of the season.

To open the third period, the trio came through again as Girgensons dropped a pass off to Okposo, who fed the puck to Marco Scandella for the easy tally.

Secondary scoring has been an issues for the Blue & Gold in recent years, but if those three can continue to play well and put pucks in the net, it can only help in the Sabres return to respectability.

Pass Happy

One of the early season trademarks of the Sabres' success has been their crisp, quick passing. Friday night, the Blue and Gold were a bit too pass happy and passed up (no pun intended) too many scoring opportunities.

In the second period, the Sabres' top line of stars played hot potato and missed a chance to pot one on rush but came up empty.

Even on the power play the Blue & Gold's shot mentality wasn't necessarily there tonight.

Bottom line: When you get pucks to the net, good things can happen — don't get too cute.

Sabres return to practice: Olofsson, Jokiharju to stay

By J.T. Messinger

WGRZ

October 13, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. — All eyes at HarborCenter were on the Buffalo Sabres Saturday morning following their first off day of the new season. The team took to the ice to prepare for their Monday matinee against Dallas, after which they'll head out to the west coast for the remainder of the week.

Head Coach Ralph Krueger said the team has given the green light to rookies Victor Olofsson and Henri Jokiharju to find a more permanent living situation. The message: they're going to be around for a while.

"They're both out hunting right now for places to live," Krueger said. "But again the competition in the league doesn't stop and the pressure on you doesn't stop to perform."

"Of course, happy. Really happy," Jokiharju replied when asked about the message. The blue-liner played 43 games on the back end for Chicago last season.

Jokiharju added, "Last year I had some struggles with man-on-man coverage, but I think this year I'm of course a little bit bigger and I think the defensive zone structure is really good. I really like it."

Jokiharju's defensive partner likes the system too.

"We're not sitting back, so those reads are a lot easier when you're just making them and you're just playing with your hockey IQ, your intuitions," Olofsson said. "I just feel like the game's easier when you're not sitting back watching what the other team is going to do. You're playing your game, so I feel like we're connected and that's the main thing."

Heading into the second full week of the year with 9 out of 10 possible points in their pocket, the team continues to work to establish their new identity and shed the skin of what they've been the past few seasons, something Johan Larsson is working to cement.

"For me, it's just like we've got to like learn how to win here and always bring it every day and be more consistent," Larsson said.

The center has taken the second-most draws on the team through the initial five games behind Jack Eichel.

Larsson added, "I just want to try to help the team be like that."

Stars at Sabres preview

By Heather Engel

NHL.com

October 13, 2019

STARS (1-4-1) at SABRES (4-0-1)
3 p.m. ET; MSG-B, FS-SW, NHL.TV

The Game

The Buffalo Sabres can open the season with points in six straight games for the first time since 2008-09 when they host the Dallas Stars at KeyBank Center on Monday.

Buffalo, which is 4-0-1 following a shootout win against the Florida Panthers on Friday, went 6-0-2 to start the 2008-09 season.

The Stars are playing the first of a four-game road trip against Eastern Conference opponents. Their lone win this season came at Washington on Tuesday.

Dallas, which shut out the Sabres in both games last season, has won five in a row against Buffalo and is 8-1-0 in the past nine games against them.

Players to watch

Stars forward Roope Hintz, who scored two goals at Buffalo last season, leads Dallas with five points (four goals, one assist) and is the only player to have scored more than one goal.

Sabres center Jack Eichel leads the team with seven points (three goals, four assists).

They said it

"This is a big road trip for us. You don't want to say it's a playoff game but everyone in here, including myself, needs to have a playoff mentality going on this road trip." -- Stars forward Tyler Seguin

"Maintaining possession and breaking out under pressure is the test of a strong defenseman in the National Hockey League. It's a tough test; teams come hard and fast, especially when they're behind, as we've had a few times lately. Henri's been good at solving pressure, which is something quite impressive at his age." -- Sabres coach Ralph Krueger on 20-year-old defenseman Henri Jokiharju

Stars projected lineup

Jamie Benn -- Tyler Seguin -- Alexander Radulov
Mattias Janmark -- Roope Hintz -- Joe Pavelski
Jason Dickinson -- Radek Faksa -- Joel L'Esperance
Andrew Cogliano -- Rhett Gardner -- Nick Caamano

Esa Lindell -- John Klingberg
Miro Heiskanen -- Andrej Sekera
Jamie Oleksiak -- Joel Hanley

Ben Bishop
Anton Khudobin

Scratched: Justin Dowling, Taylor Fedun

Injured: Corey Perry (foot), Blake Comeau (lower body), Roman Polak (upper body), Martin Hanzal (back), Stephen Johns (post-traumatic headaches)

Sabres projected lineup

Victor Olofsson -- Jack Eichel -- Sam Reinhart
Jeff Skinner -- Marcus Johansson -- Vladimir Sobotka
Jimmy Vesey -- Casey Mittelstadt -- Evan Rodrigues
Zemgus Girgensons -- Johan Larsson -- Kyle Okposo

Rasmus Dahlin -- Colin Miller
Jake McCabe -- Rasmus Ristolainen
Marco Scandella -- Henri Jokiharju

Carter Hutton
Linus Ullmark

Scratched: John Gilmour, Curtis Lazar

Injured: Conor Sheary (upper body), Brandon Montour (hand), Zach Bogosian (hip)

Status report

Lazar was called up from Rochester of the American Hockey League on Sunday but is not expected to play against Dallas. ... The Stars did not practice before flying to Buffalo on Sunday.

Stat pack

The Sabres have 15 players who each have at least one point through the first five games. ... Skinner needs one assist to reach 200 in the NHL. ... Bishop, who is expected to get the start, has won 12 straight games against the Sabres, which is tied for the longest active winning streak by an NHL goalie against a single opponent (Nashville Predators' Pekka Rinne, against the Edmonton Oilers). ... The Stars are 1-for-20 on the power play.

Ullmark makes 41 saves for Sabres in shootout win against Panthers

By Heather Engel

NHL.com

October 11, 2019

BUFFALO -- Linus Ullmark made 41 saves and Jack Eichel scored the deciding goal in the shootout for the Buffalo Sabres in a 3-2 win against the Florida Panthers at KeyBank Center on Friday.

Mike Hoffman scored for the Panthers with 11 seconds remaining in the third period to tie the game 2-2. But Eichel scored in the first round of the shootout for Buffalo, and Casey Mittelstadt ended the game when he beat Sergei Bobrovsky to start the third round.

"We never hesitated," Ullmark said. "We stayed calm on the bench. No one got upset, or anything like that. We just thought about what happened, let it go, go in there and try to get those two points."

Johan Larsson and Marco Scandella scored, and Kyle Okposo and Zemgus Girgensons each had two assists for the Sabres (4-0-1), who have points in five straight games to start a season for the first time since 2009-10, when they also started 4-0-1.

Evgenii Dadonov scored, and Bobrovsky made 30 saves for Florida (1-2-1).

"I thought we had a good third period, we had a good first as well," Panthers coach Joel Quenneville said. "Second, they had the puck more than us, but I thought it was a good battling-back effort. An interesting end to that overtime, but Bob made some huge saves for us, we had some good looks ourselves."

Larsson gave Buffalo a 1-0 lead when he received a pass through the slot from Okposo and shot it blocker side with 31 seconds remaining in the second period.

Okposo set up Scandella at the inner edge of the left face-off circle to make it 2-0 at 2:02 of the third period.

"I've never seen a bench cheer so much for another line having success," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said of Okposo, Larsson and Girgensons. "The entire bench just erupted on both of the goals. To see all that hard work, the grinding they've been doing the first five games is paying off so big tonight. They were certainly the ones that were cheered now in the locker room after the game. We're just pleased they got some offensive return for all that effort."

The Panthers pressed in the third, outshooting the Sabres 19-4. It paid off at 6:15 when Dadonov scored from the edge of the crease to cut it to 2-1.

"We started to play a little more desperate, we started to play a way that we intended to all game, getting pucks on net, starting to hold on to pucks, making plays," Hoffman said. "We've just got to do that for a full 60 minutes, just not the last five, six minutes when we need a goal."

They said it

"It's a huge point for us. Obviously, we could clean up some things, but I thought the boys stepped up and showed character and got back to the point." -- Panthers goalie Sergei Bobrovsky

"It's a big two points. I thought there were definitely swings in momentum. We've got to try to find a way to finish that game in regulation. (Goalie) Linus [Ullmark] really did a heck of a job, especially in the third period there. He stood on his head and gave us a chance to get those two points." -- Sabres forward Kyle Okposo

Need to know

Jonathan Huberdeau played in his 471st NHL game, tying him with Jay Bouwmeester for 10th place in Panthers history. ... Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin's season-opening point streak (one goal, six assists) ended at four games. ... The Sabres have won three straight at home to start a season for the first time since 2008-09.

What's next

Panthers: At the New York Islanders on Saturday (Nassau Coliseum; 7 p.m. ET; MSG+, FS-F, NHL.TV)

Sabres: Host the Dallas Stars on Monday (3 p.m. ET; MSG-B, FS-SW, NHL.TV)

Carolina Hurricanes continue to surge

By Dan Dobish

Yahoo! Sports

October 12, 2019

It was a short and sweet National Hockey League slate on Friday night, but we had a few nice fantasy producers. We also had a little franchise history being made, as a surprise team from last season's playoffs is out to prove that they were no fluke. It was a night of good hockey, too, as two of the three games were decided by one goal. Let's get started!

Carolina Hurricanes 5, New York Islanders 2

The Hurricanes have fired out to a 5-0-0 start, which is the first time in Carolina/Hartford franchise history that they have posted five straight wins to open a season. The previous best was 4-0-1 starts both in 1995-96 and 2018-19.

A big reason for the success of the Hurricanes has been the old guard, as well as shrewd offseason acquisitions. The addition of Erik Haula in a trade with the Vegas Golden Knights is making general manager Don Waddell look like a genius. Haula has scored in four of his five outings, including two scores on the power play, and Friday's marker was the game-winning tally.

Andrei Svechnikov had an empty-net goal and an assist, giving him four consecutive multi-point performances. He is one of five players tied for the NHL lead with seven helpers. Svechnikov managed just 17 assists across 82 games in 2018-19.

Dougie Hamilton posted a goal and an assist, and he was making history, too. He has his three goals and four assists, typing Mark Howe (1980-81) and Risto Siltanen (1984-85) for the most points through five games by a Carolina/Hartford rearguard.

Meanwhile, Teuvo Teravainen scored a goal and now has two goals and six points in a five-game point streak to open the season. He also played in his 205th straight game, tying last season's captain Justin Williams with the fifth-longest streak in franchise history.

Jordan Staal had a helper, giving him a goal and three assists during a four-game point streak. Jacob Slavin had an assist, too, as he has two goals and four points in a four-game point streak. Nino Niederreiter also had two assists for his 47th multi-point game in the NHL, and eighth with Carolina.

For the losing side, Brock Nelson registered a goal and an assist, both on the power play, but he took an ugly minus-3 to nullify that positive fantasy production somewhat. Johnny Boychuk was the other goal scorer for the Isles, his first point of any kind across three games.

Jordan Eberle also opened with a pair of assists, his first time on the stat sheet in four games so far.

Thomas Greiss was solid early on, but eventually he let in four goals on 39 shots. He is still a very sharp 1-1-0 with a 2.40 goals-against average and .928 save percentage across two starts and one relief appearance so far this season. Look for Semyon Varlamov to be back in the crease for Saturday's home tilt against the Florida Panthers in the second end of a back-to-back situation.

Editor's Note: Drafting is only half the battle. Dominate all season long with our Season Pass! Use our NEW Lineup Adviser, get our Weekly and Rest-of-Season rankings and projections, track all of your players and more on your way to a championship! [Click here for more!](#)

Buffalo Sabres 3, Florida Panthers 2 (SO)

Mike Hoffman scored a goal for the visiting Panthers while taking nine shots on net. He has posted five goals and seven points during his current four-game point streak. Evgenii Dadonov also lit the lamp, giving him a goal and an assist. That's two straight games with a marker.

Sergei Bobrovsky was a little better than last time out against the Hurricanes, but he suffered another loss. He stopped 30 of the 32 shots he faced in regulation and overtime before losing in the shootout.

Jack Eichel and Casey Mittelstadt registered goals on the shootout to send the home folks away happy.

In regulation, Johan Larsson and Marco Scandella posted goals. They're not exactly the who's who of fantasy. Zemgus Girgensons and Kyle Okposo assisted on both goals, getting themselves on track after a slow start. Girgensons hasn't scored in five games, but he does have three assists over the past four. Okposo had a goal, his lone point, back on Oct. 5 against New Jersey. This was his first multi-point game since Nov. 19, 2018 in Pittsburgh.

Linus Ullmark picked up the win, stopping 41 of the 43 shots he faced. That's 81 saves in his two starts, as the Buffalo backstop is facing a lot of vulcanized rubber early on.

Anaheim Ducks 2, Columbus Blue Jackets 1

The game with the least amount of fantasy production was in C-Bus. Jakob Silfverberg netted a shorthanded goal to beat Joonas Korpisalo early in the second period. While Jean-Luc Dubois answered in short order, it was Cam Fowler putting a bow on the scoring in the second to grab his second game-winning goal of the season.

Ryan Miller allowed just one goal on 27 shots in his first action of the season. It was a tough loss for Korpisalo, who deserved a better fate, but had virtually no offensive support. He turned aside 21 of the 23 shots he faced, but it wasn't good enough.

Sullivan: Bills, Sabres finally giving fans reason to buy in

By Jerry Sullivan

Niagara Gazette

October 13, 2019

OK, it's early. If there's one thing our Buffalo sports teams have taught us over the years, it's the danger of overreacting to a hot start.

But it's easy to get carried away when our two major franchises are doing well at the same time. For the better part of a decade, the Sabres and Bills were mired in parallel dysfunction, their defining feature a gift for making moves for the wrong reasons.

Now they're both 4-1 for the first time since 2011, shortly after Terry Pegula bought the Sabres. Sure, neither made the playoffs that year, but you'll have to indulge me. Remember, if not for a miracle pass by Andy Dalton two years ago, both Buffalo teams would have the longest playoff droughts in their respective sports.

This is the most optimistic I've been about the franchises as a tandem since, well, maybe since the turn of the new millennium. The standard is admittedly low, but both teams appear to be making strides and demonstrating a rare, refreshing sense of competence on the management and coaching sides.

Again, history has taught us to be wary. They've teased their fans too many times before. But you also can't ignore what you see with your own eyes. The Bills are a legitimate playoff contender, with an elite defense and improving offense in Josh Allen's second season as the starter.

Before the season, I predicted 10 wins. At this point, when you consider the beleaguered state of the AFC and the relatively soft schedule, it would be a letdown if they didn't get to 10 victories and make the playoffs. There are really only two AFC teams — the Chiefs and Patriots — who are clearly better. They're two games clear of the Chargers, Browns, Titans and Jaguars.

The Bills are still a work in progress. Keep in mind, they were trailing with under five minutes to play against the Jets and Bengals, two teams that as of Sunday had yet to win a game. But they're in far better shape than anyone could have imagined back in August.

The point is, the window is wide open. It has to be a consideration at One Bills Drive. I know Brandon Beane and Sean McDermott believe in the process, in building slowly through the draft and winning by developing their own guys. It's going well. If Josh Allen is for real, they'll be a contender for the next decade or so.

But sometimes, you need to seize the moment. When the window is wide open and circumstances are falling your way, you have to go running through it. I'm not saying Beane should do anything stupid and mortgage the future, but if he can make a move or two to bolster his roster for a playoff run, he should consider making a deal by the trade deadline, which is 4 p.m. Oct. 29.

The most pressing need is at wide receiver. Allen isn't making big plays down the field — or even attempting many. He hasn't completed a pass that traveled 30 yards in the air.

John Brown and Cole Beasley have been as good as advertised. But the other wideout has been a zero. Zay Jones was traded. Robert Foster, who was expected to build on a promising start last year, doesn't have a catch. Duke Williams had a great debut against the Titans, but he doesn't stretch defenses. They need to do better to take advantage of Allen's big arm.

Beane should at least kick the tires on a wideout. The Vikings' Stefon Diggs stepped away from the team last week, raising speculation that he wanted to be traded. The Bengals' A.J. Green could be available. He'll be a free agent after the season and the 0-5 Bengals have to consider moving a receiver past his prime.

The Bills value their assets. But a second-round pick for Diggs or Green or a similar talent wouldn't be unwise. They've built a foundation of young talent through the draft. They have a budding star at all three levels of the defense in Tre White, Tremaine Edmunds and Ed Oliver. They have the presumed franchise quarterback in Allen and a dynamic running back in Singletary.

Package a second-rounder and maybe the fifth they got for Jones and see if they can fortify the roster for a real playoff run. With their best defense in 20 years, there's no telling how far they could go with a reliable offense in a watered-down AFC.

The Sabres, meanwhile, are a flawed but talented and promising group. Like the Bills, they've adopted a more attacking mentality, a willingness to dictate to the opposition. There's a sense that the coaching staff knows they have better talent and intend to use it. Their high-end players are playing at a high level and the additions are making significant contributions.

They still give up too many good scoring chances. They've been bad in their own end for long stretches of the young season and blew two-goal leads in the third period of their last two games. It was a jarring reminder of last year, when they squandered leads on a regular basis and fell apart after Thanksgiving.

Still, this year feels different. The Sabres are showing a more confident, resilient mentality under new coach Ralph Krueger. At the very least, they figure to be entertaining — maddeningly so at times. Home attendance is down, a sign that some fans are tired of empty promises and aren't buying in anymore.

Buffalo fans don't ask for a lot. They simply need the team to play as if it cares, which wasn't the case down the stretch last season. Fans in this town need to stop accepting a lower standard. At least Jason Botterill and the Pegulas realized their mistake with Phil Housley.

They look better under Krueger. They could hardly be worse. I picked them for 88 points, more than a lot of experts did. If they keep this up, they should sneak into the 90s and contend for a wild-card spot. It won't be easy. They're in the best division in hockey and there's little chance of them finishing in the top three.

Krueger has a reputation as a communicator, and it seems he's gotten through to some guys. The power play has been phenomenal, a sign he knows a thing or two about hockey tactics. He's rewarding solid effort. He's getting surprisingly strong early-season production from the likes of Kyle Okposo, Zengus Girgensons and Johan Larsson.

They're still a shaky defensive team. But if they keep pushing the action and playing more freely in transition, they'll make it hard for opposing defenses and they'll continue to draw penalties. That'll help, as they have eight power-play goals in five games, the most in the league. They had 46 all last season, so they won't be able to rely on the man advantage every night. Things will level out, and they'll eventually find their level.

But one week into a new season, there's reason to believe their level might be a little higher than expected. Like the Bills, they're giving their fans genuine hope. It's about time.

Jokiharju impressing with confidence, poise in defensive zone

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

October 13, 2019

Henri Jokiharju said upon being acquired by the Sabres in July that it was his goal to play the full season in the NHL. It's early, and coach Ralph Krueger has emphasized that internal competition will remain throughout the season, but Jokiharju's five-game start certainly has him on the right track.

Krueger said after practice on Sunday that Jokiharju and rookie forward Victor Olofsson were given the go-ahead to look for places to live in the area, a positive sign for the 20-year-old defenseman.

"They're both out hunting for places to live," Krueger said. "But, again, the competition in the league doesn't stop. The pressure on you [to perform] doesn't stop."

Jokiharju has been paired with a veteran in Marco Scandella for all five games this season. Together, their 56.56 shot-attempt percentage ranks 23rd among NHL defense pairs with at least 20 minutes played at 5-on-5, according to NaturalStatTrick.com. Both players said they have good chemistry off the ice, which has translated onto it.

Krueger at multiple points has used the word "confident" regarding Jokiharju, both about his attitude coming into camp and his decisive passing coming out of his own zone. Scandella opted for the same adjective when asked what he's learned about his young teammate.

"He's a really good young player, good puck-moving defenseman," Scandella said. "He's playing with confidence out there, so I feel like it's really working between us."

From an experience standpoint, Jokiharju has good reason to be self-assured. He came to North America and played two seasons of Canadian junior hockey with the Portland Winterhawks of the WHL beginning in 2016, an experience he credits with helping prepare him for the rigors of an NHL schedule.

Jokiharju played 38 games with the Chicago Blackhawks last year at the front end of his first pro season, tallying 12 assists in the process. He went on to spend the rest of the season in AHL Rockford, mixing in gold medals with Finland at World Juniors and the World Championship.

That taste of the NHL, combined with his success on the international stage, put Jokiharju in position to take the next step this summer. He feels like more of a complete player now than he did a year ago, pointing to his recurring usage on the penalty kill as an example.

He also admits he's benefitted from playing in Krueger's system, which promotes aggressiveness and instinctual play.

"I feel like we're not sitting back," Scandella explained. "So, those reads are a lot easier when you're just making them and you're just playing with your hockey IQ, your intuitions. I just feel like the game's a lot easier when you're not sitting back watching what the other team's going to do."

Krueger said he's been impressed with the way his defensemen have bought into aggressively closing their gaps in the neutral zone, preventing clean entries across their blue line. He cited Jokiharju as one of the team's "driving forces" in that area.

The other strength Jokiharju has showcased is his ability to break the puck out of his own zone. He made multiple plays that led to offense at the other end against Florida on Friday, whether it was a seeing-eye stretch pass that set Casey Mittelstadt loose on a breakaway ...

... or the quick, decisive pass along the boards that led to Johan Larsson's second-period goal.

"He's making great plays, he's making simple plays, but he's not afraid to hold onto the puck and look for that good pass," Scandella said. "I feel like he's been really sharp out there."

"Maintaining possession and breaking out under pressure is the test of a strong defenseman in the National Hockey League and it's a tough test," Krueger added. "Teams come hard and fast, especially when they're behind as we've had a few times lately.

"Henri's been good at solving pressure which is something quite impressive at his age."

The competition for minutes on defense will remain, with Brandon Montour and Zach Bogosian both working their way back from injury. Though Bogosian's timetable for a return is indefinite, Montour was estimated to be three weeks away as of last Tuesday.

Jokiharju knows nothing will be given. For now, he's just happy he'll no longer be living out of a hotel.

"It feels great," he said.

Sunday's practice

The Sabres were back on the ice following a day off on Saturday, their first since the start of the regular season. Krueger said he expects the rest to pay off during their afternoon game against Dallas on Monday.

"I think it's going to show up in the game tomorrow," Krueger said. "Today, you're trying to get the intensity, focus that we need to play our hockey and they gave it to us in practice. But that freshness, we expect to show up in the game and the energy that we'll have against Dallas."

The team's lineup remained unchanged from the win on Friday:

68 Victor Olofsson - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
28 Zemgus Girgensons - 22 Johan Larsson - 21 Kyle Okposo
53 Jeff Skinner - 90 Marcus Johansson - 17 Vladimir Sobotka
13 Jimmy Vesey - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 71 Evan Rodrigues

19 Jake McCabe - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 33 Colin Miller
6 Marco Scandella - 10 Henri Jokiharju
58 John Gilmour

40 Carter Hutton
35 Linus Ullmark

UPDATE (5:10 p.m.) - The Sabres have recalled forward Curtis Lazar from the Rochester Americans (AHL).

He recorded his first point as an Amerk in last night's 3-2 loss at Providence. Last season, he posted AHL career highs in goals (20), assists (21) and points (41) in 57 games with the Stockton Heat, earning a spot at the 2019 AHL All-Star Classic.

'That's Sabres Hockey': Hard-working trio gets rewarded in SO win

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

October 11, 2019

Linus Ullmark watched from the opposite end of the ice as the trio of Zemgus Girgensons, Johan Larsson, and Kyle Okposo went to work for long stretches in the offensive zone throughout the Sabres' meeting with the Florida Panthers at KeyBank Center on Friday.

What was the goalie thinking during those moments of rest?

"That's Sabres hockey right there," Ullmark said. "I love it."

The line of Girgensons, Larsson, and Okposo helped create a pair of goals in Buffalo's 3-2 shootout victory over Florida, which improved the team to 4-0-1 to start the season.

Next home game: Monday afternoon vs. Dallas

It wasn't always smooth. As was the case in their overtime win against Montreal on Wednesday, the Sabres took a two-goal lead in the third period only to see a division rival come back to force overtime. Mike Hoffman scored the tying goal with the Panthers' net empty and 10.4 seconds left on the clock.

Still, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger saw positives in the way his team handled the game down the stretch and heading into overtime.

"There was a period after the 2-0 where they made a really hard push, but I actually liked our last six, seven minutes," Krueger said. "I thought we were able to learn from that and settle down, manage the puck better, stayed stronger inside.

"But overall, [I'm] really pleased with the calmness on the bench as we headed into overtime, the belief that we could still win, the lack of disappointment in that late goal is really what sticks with me at this moment."

Ullmark turned away shots from Vincent Trocheck and Aleksander Barkov in the shootout to put the finishing touches on a 41-save performance. Jack Eichel and Casey Mittelstadt beat Florida goalie Sergei Bobrovsky on their two attempts to seal the win.

The Roaring Twenties

Krueger spoke about the line of Girgensons, Larsson, and Okposo at length after practice on Thursday, referring to the trio as an example for the team's other lines to follow in terms of how he wants the Sabres to play. He expressed confidence that offense would follow if they kept playing the same way.

The Sabres entered the game out-chancing teams 23-7 with the trio on the ice at 5-on-5, according to NaturalStatTrick.com. That trend continued from their first shift of Friday night, as the three went right to work with their simple, forechecking game and quickly put pressure on Bobrovsky.

Their reward finally came with 30.7 seconds left to play in the second period, when Okposo barreled into the offensive zone, split the defense pair of Mike Matheson and Anton Stralman and passed across to Larsson, who roofed the puck for his first goal of the season.

They carried that momentum into the third, setting up Marco Scandella for a goal that doubled the Sabres' lead at 2:02 of the period. Girgensons tossed the puck in behind the defense, won a race to the half wall and quickly found Okposo, who set up Scandella with a wide-open net.

"I've never seen a bench cheer so much for another line having success," Krueger said. "The entire bench just erupted on both of the goals. To see all that hard work, the grinding they've been doing the first five games is paying off so big tonight.

"They were certainly the ones that were cheered now in the locker room after the game. We're just pleased they got some offensive return for all that effort."

Okposo broke down what's made the line successful through five games.

"All three of us just kind of go hunt pucks, get on the forecheck and go hard and give other guys support. I think when you have three guys really committed to pressure, something just happens. It works.

"I played with those guys a little bit last year and we seem to have some chemistry so we're going to continue to keep it going."

Ullmark stays calm

Ullmark has now stopped 40-plus shots in each of his two appearances this season, the first of which came in an overtime loss to Columbus on Monday. He was asked how he remained poised through the heavy workload and managed to come through in the shootout.

"I breathe, and I enjoy the moment," he said.

The Sabres enjoyed having Ullmark, who managed to outduel a two-time Vezina Trophy winner in Bobrovsky on a night when he made life difficult for the team's offense. Though the Panthers held the edge in shots, 43-32, the Sabres had the scoring chance tally in their favor.

"I thought both goalies were outstanding," Krueger said. "World-class goaltending on both ends, lots of slot chances, lots of scoring chances. What we were able to eliminate really was the second chances. There weren't a lot of rebounds that he had to deal with."

"We're pleased with that, but Linus and [fellow goalie Carter Hutton] both in these five games have done what we've asked for. We're excited by the duo we have back there right now."

Trust the process

The Sabres have matched their best start since 2009-10 with nine points in their first five games under Krueger. The stretch has seen plenty of positives, along with stretches the team intends to learn from moving forward.

Ullmark summed up what he's learned about his team so far.

"First of all, we know that when we stick to our game plan, we win," he said. "We play a very good hockey game. Are we going to win every game? Probably not, but we have a very good opportunity to do it as long as we stick to the process and stick with our game plan."

Up next

The Sabres conclude their homestand against Dallas on Monday afternoon. Coverage on MSG begins at 2:30 p.m., or you can listen live on WGR 550. The puck drops at 3.

At the Horn: Panthers 2 - Sabres 3 (SO)

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

October 11, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres played in their third overtime game in a row on Friday, and this time 65 minutes just wasn't enough.

The Sabres entered their first shootout of the year and came away with a 3-2 victory over the Florida Panthers at KeyBank Center.

Jack Eichel and Casey Mittelstadt scored in the shootout and Linus Ullmark stopped both shots he saw to secure two points.

Since the beginning of training camp, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger has talked highly of the depth and balance among the team's four lines. Throughout regulation, he leaned heavily on the line of center Johan Larsson and wingers Zemgus Girgensons and Kyle Okposo, and the line stepped up to produce both of Buffalo's goals.

Larsson and defenseman Marco Scandella were the direct beneficiaries of the line's play as they each potted their first goals of the season.

Linus Ullmark was busy early for Buffalo and held strong to keep Buffalo in it, making 41 saves on the night. Girgensons and Larsson were also relied upon late in the defensive zone with the Panthers pressing, but with man advantage - and the misfortune of a broken stick for Larsson - allowed the Panthers to tie the game with 10.4 seconds remaining in regulation.

Ullmark improved to 3-2 in his career in the shootout and has made 15 saves on 18 shots. According to @SabresPR, he owns the sixth-best career shootout save percentage (15-for-18, .833) of any NHL goaltender with at least 15 shots faced in shootouts.

How it happened

The two clubs traded chances early and both goaltenders were equal to the task. Both Ullmark and Panthers netminder Sergei Bobrovsky were perfect through 20 minutes - and almost 40.

Larsson put Buffalo on the board with 30.7 seconds remaining in the second period, executing on a nice breakout play and then pulling off his best Bobby Orr impression, leaping over Bobrovsky's pads and into the endboards.

Scandella then tallied 2:02 into the third period, joining the rush and capitalizing on a crisp feed from Okposo.

The Panthers climbed back into the game at the 6:15 mark of the third when Evgenii Dadonov scored to make it 2-1.

Mike Hoffman then forced overtime in the 6-on-5 situation as Florida mounted a heavy assault in the final minutes of the game.

The teams trade chances in overtime, and Eichel in particular had two great opportunities to end it. Bobrovsky also stoned Mittelstadt on the doorstep with under a minute left in the extra period. Buffalo outshot Florida 5-2 in overtime.

Eichel and Mittelstadt got the last laugh as they both went on to beat Bobrovsky in the shootout.

What it means

As we noted in the Eaton Morning Skate Report, the Girgensons-Larsson-Okposo line generated a ton of chances through the first four games of the season. That continued on Friday night with the trio wreaking havoc in the Panthers zone and sustaining pressure in the offensive end.

And because of that effort, the team is off to a 4-0-1 start, their best five-game stretch to open a season since 2009-10.

Coming up

Sunday is a practice day so stay tuned for coverage here on Sabres.com while you're out picking pumpkins or raking leaves.

Then the team will play a matinee on Monday to wrap up the homestand. It'll be a 3 p.m. start from KeyBank Center against the Dallas Stars. The GMC Game Night pregame show on MSG will begin at 2:30 p.m.

Larsson's line looks to continue strong play vs. Panthers

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

October 11, 2019

Ralph Krueger noted during training camp that Zengus Girgensons was playing with a high level of confidence. He lauded the forward for his trustworthy defensive play and his tone-setting tenacity on the forecheck.

Girgensons has teamed with linemates Johan Larsson and Kyle Okposo to keep up that strong impression through the first four games of the season. Krueger spoke highly of the trio on Thursday, citing the line as an example for others on the Sabres to follow.

The next step is to carry their tenacious play in the offensive zone onto the score sheet. Krueger said he believes they deserve more than the one goal they have to their name, a tip from Okposo against New Jersey on Saturday. Girgensons expressed confidence that the points are coming.

"As long as you keep getting those chances, at some point one's going to go in," Girgensons said. "Even if it's a dirty goal or something. We've just got to keep doing what we've been doing, creating that little chaos around the net and the chances will come."

Their next chance will come tonight, when the Sabres host the Florida Panthers for the second game of a three-game homestand at KeyBank Center. Pregame coverage on MSG begin at 6:30 p.m.

The chances have been plentiful so far. The Sabres have out-chanced opponents, 23-7, with Girgensons, Larsson, and Okposo sharing the ice at 5-on-5. All three rank in the top 15 in shot-attempt percentage at 5-on-5, with Okposo leading the league among skaters with at least 10 minutes of ice time.

Their success has been the result of hard work and simplicity. They throw the puck behind opponents and throw their bodies around to get it back, supporting one another as they battle along the boards. They've embraced the old cliché of getting pucks and bodies to the opposing net.

"We are all a little bit more free to do what we want in the offensive zone and we all just read off each other," Girgensons said.

Even if they don't have the offensive numbers to show for it, Krueger suggested their work has indirectly led to offense from other lines. After Larsson and company wear a defense pair down, for example, Krueger might look to match one of his skill lines against that pair the next time around.

If the Sabres are being pinned in their zone for consecutive shifts, the line takes pride in being able to swing momentum back in their favor.

"When we get out on the ice, we try to play simple," Girgensons said. "There's been times when teams have kind of pinned us in our end and we step out and we try to get the momentum back. Yeah, definitely, it can help the team to swing the [momentum in our favor]."

Scouting the Panthers

The Panthers are 1-2-0 coming off a 6-3 loss to the Carolina Hurricanes at home on Tuesday. New coach Joel Quenneville expressed disappointment with his team's start to that game, which saw the Panthers fall into a 4-0 hole they never climbed out of.

"We have a lot of respect for the direction they're going with the new coaching staff," Krueger said. "You can already feel Joel's handprint on the group. Just like our situation here, there's a lot of newness and a lot of teaching and coaching going on. We have a lot of respect for the skill that's in their group."

"There's a lot of drive, a lot of speed. Their defense are extremely involved in the attack and offensively they come hard, so they'll test our structure. We look forward to a lot of excellent games against Florida. When I look at the games they've played so far this year, they're still not where they want to be but on a good day these are going to be tough games."

Sergei Bobrovsky, a major acquisition by the Panthers this offseason, will get the start in net. The two-time Vezina Trophy winner is 1-2-0 with a .859 save percentage in three appearances this season.

Projected lineup

Linus Ullmark will make his second start of the season in net. He made 40 saves in an overtime loss to Columbus on Monday.

Here's how the rest of the lineup is expected to look based Thursday's practice:

68 Victor Olofsson - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
53 Jeff Skinner - 90 Marcus Johansson - 17 Vladimir Sobotka
13 Jimmy Vesey - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 71 Evan Rodrigues
28 Zemgus Girgensons - 22 Johan Larsson - 21 Kyle Okposo

19 Jake McCabe - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 33 Colin Miller
6 Marco Scandella - 10 Henri Jokiharju

35 Linus Ullmark
40 Carter Hutton