



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*October 22, 2019*

## **Sabres prospects Rasmus Asplund, Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen return to practice**

By Bill Hoppe

The Buffalo News

October 22, 2019

ROCHESTER – Sabres prospect Rasmus Asplund practiced with the Rochester Americans on Monday after an upper-body injury sidelined him one game.

“He was feeling good, so we’re looking forward to having him back,” interim Amerks coach Gord Dineen said.

Asplund, 21, was killing a penalty and crouched down when the puck hit him about 2:15 into Friday’s 4-3 shootout loss to the Cleveland Monsters. The Swedish center quickly skated off the ice and did not return.

Dineen said the X-rays came back negative. Still, the Amerks held him out of Saturday’s 7-1 loss to the Utica Comets.

Asplund centered Remi Elie and Tage Thompson during Monday’s session.

In other injury news, top Sabres goalie prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, 20, practiced with the Amerks on Monday for the first time since undergoing hip surgery in late April.

The Sabres assigned Luukkonen to the American Hockey League on Sunday. The Finn had been rehabbing in Buffalo.

“He was really excited to be here,” Dineen said. “He’s been working really hard in his rehab and rehab skates with (goalie development coach) Seamus Kotyk and the rehab staff there in Buffalo. To be able to be out with the team and to face a few games situations was really good for him.”

Dineen would not reveal a time frame for Luukkonen’s return.

“I would venture the performance staff has a timeline for him and the medical staff does, but being patient is definitely the priority right now,” Dineen said.

Sabres general manager Jason Botterill said in September he could start playing games in early November.

Luukkonen played one AHL game last season following a standout junior campaign with the Sudbury Wolves in which he was named the Ontario Hockey League’s MVP and top goalie.

## **As Sabres improve 5-on-5 scoring, Victor Olofsson hopes to add his contribution**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

October 21, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres lived off their power play through the season's first four games. Now it's gone cold in terms of goals, but they are suddenly figuring out how to generate offense in 5-on-5 play. That kind of balance is a big reason the team has gone 7-1-1 through nine games.

Rookie Victor Olofsson, of course, was one of the keys to the early man-advantage success. He's hoping to join the scoring parade at even strength, too. He can do that if he follows coach Ralph Krueger's advice: throw opponents a few changeups.

Olofsson agrees.

"I think that's a real important thing but I don't think it's something that's new to me at all," Olofsson said after practice Monday in KeyBank Center. "I've been off to a hot start every season my last 3-4 years no matter where I've been playing. It's been kind of the same here and now I need to find different ways to get to the net to score."

The Sabres went 0-for-4 on the power play during Saturday's win at San Jose, but had nine shots on goal during those chances. They're only 3 for their last 22 with the man advantage after opening the season 8 for 15. During their 2-1 California trip that ended Saturday, seven of Buffalo's nine goals came at 5 on 5.

"It's good to see the 5-on-5 game going right through the lineup," Krueger said. "What we all know we need is depth scoring and offense coming out of every group. That's probably the most exciting thing – there's scoring chances coming on a regular basis right through the games now. Every line has its own personality. It's coming to that end in different ways and we're enjoying the chances we're creating."

All six of Olofsson's goals this year, and all eight in his 15-game NHL career, have come on the power play. He's been setting up shop in the right circle and firing one-timers at will, but that's no longer going to come as easy when opponents note he's tied with Edmonton's James Neal for the league lead in power-play goals.

As Krueger often has said in the last 10 days or so, opponents have Olofsson's name circled in their scouting reports. That can make life tough on a rookie, who suddenly will see the best penalty killers and best defense pairs on the ice against him.

"Victor is going to go through that evolution now of being somebody that nobody knew his name to seeing him as a threat, especially on the power play," Krueger said. "At 5-on-5, he will grow to be a big threat, too. You're going to get better defensive play against you once you're on the map here. It goes quickly.

"He's a smart kid, continues to play extremely well without the puck, very mature in that regard. He will find new ways and he needs to be unpredictable and bring deception into his game because he's got the skillset to score. I know he will as he grows. We need to be patient with him."

Olofsson was flipped off the top power play in the third period Saturday in favor of Marcus Johansson, but Krueger downplayed the move Monday.

"We're going to be flipping all year long. Don't get married to any group here or any line or any D-pair," Krueger said. "That was an in-game call. Marcus was feeling really good in that game. It was nothing against Victor. It was actually freeing Victor up with another group because it seemed there was an overfocus on him. We trust both groups."

Instead of playing with Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart, Jeff Skinner and Rasmus Dahlin, Olofsson joined the second unit with Casey Mittelstadt, Conor Sheary, Colin Miller and Rasmus Ristolainen.

"We had two D-men on that unit and it forces you to be more flexible," Olofsson said. "You can't be as static on the one side that I've been used to. I have to go down to the front, go out to the half-wall, move around more."

Those are the kind of strategies that can help get Olofsson going at 5-on-5 as well. He has a 42.9 percent Corsi rating at 5-on-5, the lowest on the team, and that's certainly a product of the difficult matchups he faces playing with Eichel and Reinhart on Buffalo's top line.

"There's always going to be adversity. He's playing against the top defensive pair every night and that's not easy," Johansson said. "What's fun with him is he's always working on stuff and looking for things to get better on. It's a long year. This is just the start. If he keeps working, it's going to come 5 on 5, too, because he's so dangerous."

Because he became a key figure in Buffalo's fast start, it was easy to forget what a neophyte Olofsson really is on the NHL scene. Something as simple as travel to many NHL arenas is going to be new to him.

"It was a great experience for me just to see California for the first time. I had never been there," Olofsson said. "It's some good, heavy teams we played. We would have wanted a better result in Anaheim, but we still had some chances to win that game, too. It was a good trip for us and a great experience.

"It was a place I always wanted to go. It was a little different, for sure. You go outside in the morning, and you can go in just a T-shirt and shorts and then you have to go play a game. It was a fun trip."

## **Carter Hutton likely to reclaim the crease vs. Sharks after earning NHL's Third Star of the Week**

By Mike Harrington  
The Buffalo News  
October 21, 2019

The NHL must be one tough league. Ask Sabres goalie Carter Hutton about it.

Hutton posted back-to-back shutouts last week, stopping all 72 shots he faced in wins against Dallas and Los Angeles. His rewards? The NHL only named him its Third Star of the Week – and he didn't even get to start in the next game after either shutout.

It's a good bet Hutton will get back in the crease for Tuesday's game against the San Jose Sharks in KeyBank Center after Linus Ullmark stopped 29 of 32 shots in Buffalo's 4-3 win over the Sharks on Saturday in SAP Center.

But with a compressed schedule because of the club's upcoming trip to Sweden, the Sabres have relied on input from their sports science department to filter to assistant coach for goalies Mike Bales and head coach Ralph Krueger. After Hutton started the season's first two games, he and Ullmark have alternated for the last eight games.

"I don't know what's going behind closed doors truthfully," Hutton said after practice Monday. "I'm glad I don't sit in those meetings because they have lots to think about. I think they have a plan and they're just sticking to it and it's working. No matter who's in net, I think we're giving us a chance to win right now and that's all that matters."

For the season, Hutton is 5-0 with a 1.39 goals-against average and .953 save percentage. He entered Monday's play leading the NHL in shutouts, GAA and save percentage, and was tied for second in wins. Ullmark is 2-1-1, 3.18/.913 and has posted a pair of 40-save games.

Hutton made 25 saves in last Monday's 4-0 win over Dallas and followed that with a 47-save blanking of Los Angeles in the Sabres' 3-0 win Thursday in Staples Center.

Hutton's 47 saves, including 19 in the third period, set a franchise record for the most by a goaltender in a regular-season shutout. Hutton joined Bob Sauve (1979) as the only Buffalo goalie with two shutouts over his first five appearances of a season.

"It's great. I guess it's a little accolade, personal stuff," Hutton said. "But at the end of the day, and I think I'm beating a drum here, I'm just glad we're winning."

"You just try to stay with it, whether you get 20 shots or 47 or whatever it is. You get some breaks too. Every time you get a shutout, there's some breaks, a couple posts or loose puck battles. (The win in LA) was a game where we got an early lead and we had to keep battling because they kept coming."

Why wasn't Hutton the league's First Star? That honor went to red-hot Boston winger David Pastrnak, who had seven goals and nine points in three games. The No. 2 star was Washington defenseman John Carlson, who had an eight-point week and took over the NHL lead in both assists (15) and points (18) through 10 games.

"It's OK though. The league don't run on Carter Hutton so it's all right," a smiling Hutton said. "It's good, great recognition ... I had it one time early in my career my first year in Nashville so it's always something that's kind of cool. You just want to win. As long as we're winning games, everyone is happy and it makes for a fun time."

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Krueger said he thoroughly enjoyed the bonding nature of the weeklong California road trip early in his tenure as Sabres coach.

"You could feel a real natural, organic kind of movement of the group together to the meals, the traveling, all of that," he said. "There was nothing forced or unnatural and that's what you want to feel on your first road trip."

Krueger said that togetherness translated to the ice as the team won two games to bounce back from an opening loss in Anaheim.

"The answer was probably the San Jose game, how we gave three leads in a game on the road in a really, really tough building to win and never gave up on the way we wanted to go through the 60 minutes," Krueger said. "The final game of a road trip where the bags are packed and they're in the bus and they're all ready to go home and you still stay with it all the way through is a compliment to the group."

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Krueger said he's looking forward to Tuesday's rematch with the Sharks, an exceptionally rare home-and-home series against a Western Conference opponent. That hasn't happened for Buffalo since it played Toronto in 1996 when the Leafs were in the West. And it's the only the third set in franchise history against a Pacific Time Zone team, joining one against Vancouver later in '96 and another against California in 1971.

"I think it's outstanding. They're going to bring their best game," Krueger said of the Sharks. "They're way better than they are in the standings right now (3-5-0). There's not even a question that team is going to drift back up and has amazing personnel. It's a good back-to-back kind of test."

"There are other circumstances where you could see opposition more than twice in a few weeks and we'd like to get there (the playoffs). It's a good test for us to see if we can stay with it, not let our guard down and understand there's going to be a really good hockey team in here."

Hutton said meeting the Sharks twice in a row will give the Sabres a little bit of a feel for their Nov. 8-9 series against Tampa Bay in Sweden.

"It's kind of odd, especially for a team not in your division," Hutton said. "But it's good to see that team, create a little bit more of a rivalry. Find some more battles and kick it off where we left it Saturday night in San Jose. ... They've got a lot of firepower and they can play. They've got depth up front and on the back end and they can score in bunches."

The Sabres played Arizona twice in a three-game stretch at the height of the 2015 tank wars, including the infamous game here where Buffalo fans cheered on the Coyotes to an overtime victory.

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Defenseman Brandon Montour, sidelined since the first week of training camp with a hand injury, still isn't ready to return to practice and Krueger said he won't be rejoining his teammates this week. Krueger said Montour is progressing and continues to skate and work out on his own.

## **Sabres goalie Carter Hutton named NHL's Third Star of the Week after two shutouts**

By Mike Harrington  
The Buffalo News  
October 21, 2019

Buffalo Sabres goaltender Carter Hutton was named the NHL's Third Star of the Week on Monday after fashioning back-to-back shutouts in his last two starts.

Hutton stopped all 72 shots he faced in posting his first two shutouts as a Sabre. Hutton made 25 saves in last Monday's 4-0 win over Dallas and followed that with a 47-save blanking of Los Angeles in Thursday's 3-0 win over the Kings in Staples Center.

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For the season, Hutton is 5-0 with a 1.39 goals-against average and .953 save percentage. He entered Monday's play leading the NHL in shutouts, GAA and save percentage, and was tied for second in wins.

The Sabres (7-1-1) host San Jose Tuesday night in the back end of a rare home-and-home against a Western Conference team. With Linus Ullmark in goal, Buffalo closed its California trip with a 4-3 win over the Sharks Saturday night in SAP Center.

## **Shot advantage could be harbinger of Sabres' long-term success**

By Travis Yost  
The Buffalo News  
October 22, 2019

Do you believe now?

Sports fans tend to be exceptionally polarizing people and that doesn't lend itself well to early season analysis. The bad teams are quite bad, the good teams are quite good, and everyone in between is going to be fighting all season for a fringe playoff spot. Or so we tend to react.

But the win and loss column is always fickle this time of the year, especially in a sport where it takes nearly an entire regular season for skill to supersede luck. Remember the 2018-19 Buffalo Sabres? They had 10 points in the first nine games, and actually led the entire NHL through Thanksgiving. They followed that up by being the worst team in the NHL between Thanksgiving and the end of the regular season.

That team, although respectable early on in the standings, was quite vulnerable to a performance regression. Why? The Sabres had one incredibly productive line, but obvious depth issues further down the lineup. Through almost two months of the season, Buffalo rested their laurels on their top line staying hot, and the goaltending duo of Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark continuing to stop shots at an exceptional rate. Absent that, the Sabres were still a team routinely out-shot and out-chanced, and had to offset a volume disadvantage by continuously converting on a high percentage of their opportunities (and, correspondingly, denying their opponent on a high percentage of their opportunities).

We know how that story ended. The goaltending had a dizzying collapse, and while the Jack Eichel and Jeff Skinner combination continued to make magic, the rest of the Sabres' lineup didn't have much to offer. It's hard to imagine anyone could have saw such a collapse in the crease, but the rest of Buffalo's performance – or lack thereof – seemed fairly predictable.

That brings us to the 2019-20 season. Fans are tremendously excited about another hot start – 15 points in the first nine games of the season. Those points have already created daylight between other playoff hopefuls, but I think there is this innate fear that the season is going to take a turn for the worse.

I don't expect Buffalo to sustain a 136-point pace, but the team's underlying numbers are much more encouraging. In fact, the only Sabres teams that have looked similarly in recent history pretty much cover the three-year span between 2009 and 2011. In those three seasons, the Sabres made the playoffs twice and averaged 97 points per 82 games.

And what made them appear similar? They are the only teams in recent history that were winning the shot and territorial advantage.

I don't think I need to remind Sabres fans that the team's last playoff appearance was in that 2010-11 season, and even the "disappointing" year in 2011-12 meant missing the postseason by just three points. Every other season has ranged from outright disappointment to "coming as close to intentionally losing as possible," like whatever the heck the 2014-15 year was.

You might ask why I think that shot volume is a better lead indicator of future performance than the team's win-loss record, especially over the same nine-game interval. And the answer is relatively simple – shot numbers are much more saturated in volume than goals for or against or wins and losses, and shot advantages tend to be very closely tied to the success of teams long term in the standings.

To that end, even nine games of shot numbers can be a strong predictor of a team's future goal differential and associated standings record. In fact, it might be the best predictor we have.

So what's the cause of the change in performance? What is driving Buffalo into the offensive zone, both for longer shifts at a time and more frequently in nature? I shared my thoughts last week, but the overhaul on the blue line – the obvious weak link in recent Sabres seasons – has been tremendously obvious. (We shouldn't discount the impact Ralph Krueger might be having on this team, too.)

The point of all this? Be cautiously optimistic about the direction of this team. It might still be October, but we are starting to see contenders separate from pretenders. Some of them just don't know it yet.

## **The Sabres got to know each other better in California**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

October 21, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - The Sabres went 2-1 on their west coast road trip, but it was the first time this group got to go out and spend six days together.

Ralph Krueger is big on the bond that teams have and newcomer Marcus Johansson enjoyed the quality time with his teammates, "It's a big part of it, spending time together and doing other stuff than hockey and going for dinners and all that, I think that helps a lot and it's a big part of building."

Krueger will always keep an eye on that stuff. He said, "Off-ice, you could feel a natural organic kind of movement of the group together, whether it was to the meals or through the traveling. There was nothing forced, and I think that's what you want to feel on their first road trip and the answer was probably the San Jose game. How we gave up three leads in a really, really tough building, to get a win, and never gave up on the way we wanted to go through the 60 minutes."

Johansson knew they played well to start in Anaheim and Los Angeles, and then finished up well in San Jose. The center said, "We had parts in every game that we played really well, and then we stopped playing our game and let the other teams back into it. It shows that when we do play our game, we have success."

Carter Hutton had two shutouts last week and he's proud of how the team handled things, "We hit some adversity, but we stuck with it and gave ourselves a chance. Going out there is never an easy trip because it's tough teams to play against."

Hutton knows there are going to be times when they have to play through tough times. He said, "It was good to see that sometimes when it is rough, we found a way to win here and it's never easy going to those rinks playing back-to-back." Hutton added, "It's not always going to be pretty, we play 82 games and sometimes from the outside it's frustrating and they're like, 'Where was the team that played the night before', but in this league there are other teams that are good too and we're not fooling anybody anymore, it's not like we're rolling into town and teams don't know what we bring to the table, so we're going to face teams and their best game."

Krueger said that Brandon Montour is progressing well, but is not expected to be back practicing this week yet.

The Sabres finish up their home-and-home series with the Sharks on Tuesday.

## **Hutton named NHL's 'Third Star' of the week**

By Brayton Wilson

WGR 550

October 21, 2019

For his back-to-back shutout efforts against the Dallas Stars and Los Angeles Kings, Buffalo Sabres goalie Carter Hutton has been named as the NHL's "Third Star" of the week ending on October 20.

Hutton started last week with a stellar performance against the Stars at KeyBank Center, where he made 25 in a 4-0 win on Monday. The 33-year-old followed that performance with an even better one in Los Angeles, California on Thursday against the Kings, where he set a franchise record with 47 saves in a 3-0 win at Staples Center.

His current shutout streak stands at 128:36 and dates back to October 9th's 5-4 overtime win over the Montreal Canadiens.

The Sabres netminder went on to stop all 72 shots that he faced, improved his season record to 5-0-0, and added to his league-leading goals-against average of 1.39 and league-leading save percentage of .953.

"It's great to get an accolade, some personal stuff, but at the end of the day I'm just glad we're winning, that's what it's all about," Hutton said following practice on Monday. "I think I had it one time early in my career in Nashville, so it's always something that's kind of cool, but as long as we're winning games, everyone's happy and it makes for a fun team. I think the city's enjoying it with the big Bills win as well."

It is the second time that Hutton has been named as one of the NHL's "Three Stars" of the week. The last time was back in the 2013-14 season while as a member of the Nashville Predators where he was also named the week's "Third Star".

The last Sabres player to be named as one of the "Three Stars" of the week was Jack Eichel last season for the week that ended December 16.

The Sabres return to game action on Tuesday night as they close out their home-and-home series with the San Jose Sharks at KeyBank Center. Faceoff is set for 7 p.m. with the Paul William-Beltz Pre-Game Show starting at 6 p.m. with Schopp and the Bulldog at (716) Food and Sport.

## **Seals of approval: Buying Oakland's team gave the Sabres their ticket to the NHL**

By John Vogl

The Athletic

October 22, 2019

SAN JOSE, Calif. – When the Sabres took the ice for their pregame skate Saturday, Len Shapiro traveled back in time. Up in the Sharks' press box, he pulled out faded newspaper clippings from the 1960s and told vibrant stories of the 1930s and 1970s.

As the 72-year-old rifled through papers and spun tales, it became clear how different Buffalo's hockey history could be. This would be the Sabres' 51st anniversary, not their 50th. The Original Sabre would be Ted Hampson, not Gilbert Perreault. Instead of Buffalo's NHL story starting with the 1970 expansion team, it would have begun with the 1969 relocation of the Oakland Seals.

The headlines jumped off Shapiro's keepsakes from the San Francisco Chronicle and Oakland Tribune.

"Seals on the Way to Buffalo?"

"Seals Sold, May Move"

"Another Shift Threat"

Passed over in the 1967 NHL expansion, Seymour and Northrup Knox remained determined to bring a team to Buffalo. Oakland owner Barry Van Gerbig was just as resolute in getting rid of his team.

So the sides brokered a sale – two, in fact. The NHL history books show the Knox brothers as vice chairmen of the Seals, with Seymour serving as Oakland's alternate governor on the league's board of governors. And stories show a relocation from California to Buffalo was in the works.

But it's Perreault's name hanging in Buffalo's rafters, not Hampson. And this is the Sabres' 50th anniversary, not their 51st. So what happened?

As with most things involving the Seals and their short-lived NHL run, there are twists, turns, finger-pointing and money issues. The Buffalo Sabres benefited.

Trouble from the start

In 1967, the NHL doubled in size by awarding expansion franchises to the Los Angeles Kings, Minnesota North Stars, Oakland Seals, Philadelphia Flyers, Pittsburgh Penguins and St. Louis Blues. Despite solid ownership, a history of hockey and funding for expansion of the Aud, Buffalo got passed over.

The Seals seemed to be a solid choice. The Bay Area's hockey roots go back to the 1930s, when the Oakland Clippers played in the Pacific Coast Hockey League. In the 1960s, the San Francisco Seals won back-to-back championships in the Western Hockey League, drawing upward of 12,000 fans to the Cow Palace.

The NHL opted to put its new team in the sparkling Oakland Coliseum rather than San Francisco's aging arena.

"Oakland Coliseum was a nice rink," said Montreal Canadiens legend Peter Mahovlich, who serves as special adviser to Florida Panthers ownership. "Everything was brand new. The market was all new to us as hockey people.

"They wanted to expand right through from the east to the west. They had the team in Los Angeles, so it made sense to have another team out there in Oakland."

But the NHL didn't know what Bay Area locals knew.

"A famous line is the bridge from Oakland to San Francisco is 10 minutes. From San Francisco to Oakland, it's 1,000 miles," said Shapiro, who covered the Seals before becoming part of their media relations team. "People wouldn't go to Oakland."

During the Seals' sparsely attended inaugural season of 1967-68, Van Gerbig attempted to sell the team to prospective owners in Vancouver, another city passed over for expansion.

"That killed more attendance," Shapiro said.

The league blocked the move to Vancouver, so the Knox brothers took their run the following season. In January 1969, the Knoxes purchased the Seals from Van Gerbig for \$3.5 million and "would take immediate steps to have the franchise transferred to Buffalo," according to the Oakland Tribune.

So rather than fondly remembering the inaugural 1970 Sabres squad of Perreault, Roger Crozier, Floyd Smith, Eddie Shack and Gerry Meehan, Buffalo fans would have watched this Seals team compete in Memorial Auditorium in 1969.

"We're in the hands of the NHL," Van Gerbig told the Chronicle following the sale. "They've accused me of screwing up things in Oakland and San Francisco ... been after me for eight weeks to do something. ... I told them, 'You tell me what you want us to do and we'll do it.' Right now it's in the league's hands and I have no idea what's going to happen.

"I will do whatever the NHL tells me to do ... move to Buffalo, stay here or go to Siberia. I'm sick of the whole damned thing."

Once again, the NHL blocked a move.

"It is a matter of policy that we desire to continue to operate in the Bay Area," league president Clarence Campbell said.

The NHL had two reasons to stay in Oakland. The first was a TV contract with CBS that stated two teams must be in California. The second reason was even more lucrative. By denying relocation to Buffalo and Vancouver, the league could charge huge franchise fees during the next expansion.

And expansion was inevitable. The league knew it and so did the Knox brothers. So in March 1969 – two months after trying to buy complete ownership of the Seals – the Knoxes bought a 20 percent share.

"It is no secret that our main effort is to eventually bring major league hockey to Buffalo, but it won't be the Oakland Seals," Seymour Knox said in the Seals' official news release. "The Seals are staying in Oakland. We are happy to remain active in hockey and we hope that one day, in future expansion of the National Hockey League, we will be able to launch a franchise in Buffalo."

By getting on the Seals' board of governors, Knox secured one more "yes" vote for Buffalo when the next NHL expansion arrived.

"That's basically what our in was," said Sabres equipment manager Rip Simonick, the sole employee remaining from Buffalo's inaugural season. "The Knoxes got to know Bill Wirtz and all the guys who were running the league. That's where we got the inside track on running the franchise."

The Sabres were officially born May 22, 1970. Rather than spending \$3.5 million, the total that was set to go into Van Gerbig's pocket, the Knoxes gave a \$6 million expansion fee to the NHL. So did the Canucks. But regardless of the price, Buffalo and Vancouver were ecstatic to have their long-sought franchises.

The Seals, meanwhile, continued to sink. The group that bought the other 80 percent when Knox secured his share in 1969 was a fraud and relinquished control. The NHL chose Charlie Finley as a new owner rather than Bills founder Ralph Wilson, who bid for the team along with Kansas Chiefs owner Lamar Hunt, Houston Oilers owner Bud Adams, Oakland Raiders owner Wayne Valley and roller derby promoter Jerry Seltzer.

"Wilson would have been part-owner of the team if that deal had gone through," Shapiro said, "but the NHL decided they wanted a single owner, didn't want a roller derby guy and they didn't want the bigwigs from the football league who had more money than many of the NHL owners at that time."

Oakland's team name changed to the California Golden Seals in 1970 and the California Seals in 1974. The Seals finally moved in 1976, heading to Cleveland, but the club struggled again and folded into the North Stars in 1978.

The Bay Area went without the NHL until the San Jose Sharks arrived in 1991. Unlike the Seals, they've been a hit in a populated area with an arena that fans use.

"I'll be honest, I'm jealous," Shapiro said. "We worked our ass off to get 4,000 people in the building. They opened the doors here and they sold out."

As the Sabres celebrate their 50th anniversary, the Seals' booster club recently celebrated its 55th. The franchises will always be connected. But while Buffalo thrives, the 72-year-old Shapiro is one of the last people left to tell the tale of hockey in Oakland.

"We just had our 55th anniversary. I don't think we're going to make 60," said Shapiro, who has seen the booster club decimated by aging, health issues and death. "Unfortunately, we're down to about 35 people and it was 800. My goal is to keep going and keep the Seals alive."

"We have a history of hockey. A lot of people don't know this stuff."

## **Sabres' Casey Mittelstadt, linemates starting to score after slow start**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

October 22, 2019

BUFFALO – The Sabres' torrid start has created lineup stability not felt in these parts in a long time.

Through nine games, the 7-1-1 Sabres have dressed just 21 players, only making one change – Evan Rodrigues for winger Conor Sheary – when an injury forced them.

The lineup has essentially remained intact all season entering tonight's home game against the San Jose Sharks, right down to the same lines and defense pairs.

Health, of course, has helped the Sabres. But coach Ralph Krueger has understandably been reluctant to mess with what has worked so well.

As a rookie last season, Casey Mittelstadt, 20, never would've centered the same struggling line for two weeks. But the Sabres' success allowed Mittelstadt and wingers Jimmy Vesey and Sheary or Rodrigues time to develop chemistry.

"I've played for some teams where lines switch within the hour," Vesey said following Monday's practice inside KeyBank Center. "It's good."

The line performed splendidly during the Sabres' three-game California road trip last week, igniting the offense following a rough 5-2 loss to the Anaheim Ducks.

"If we can get a goal or two in a game, I think it's a big difference for our team," said Vesey, who said the line can be an "X-factor."

In Thursday's 3-0 win over the Los Angeles Kings, Mittelstadt scored his first two goals this season and assisted on Sheary's goal. Vesey also recorded his first point on Mittelstadt's first goal.

"It took me a little bit, so it was a bit of relief," Mittelstadt said of his first goal.

Then in Saturday's 4-3 win in San Jose, Vesey created Mittelstadt's second-period goal, briefly restoring Buffalo's lead.

"We got all four lines that have been very stable in terms of combinations," Vesey said. "We stayed patient and we're finally getting rewarded."

The Sabres have remained patient with Mittelstadt. While the former eighth overall pick possesses oodles of talent, he has often looked raw through his first 92 NHL games, especially defensively.

So it's notable Krueger said the genesis of Mittelstadt's recent scoring surge is the comfort he has developed defensively in the Sabres' new system.

"He needed some time to understand that part of the game and he spent a lot of time on it," Krueger said. "He's worked really hard at it. He's been coached off the ice, he's taken a lot of video sessions on, and I think that now he's understanding that that doesn't take away from his time on the puck and what he needs to do offensively.

"He's able to manage that switch in his head really well. Using his size, using his body, he's positioning himself defensively better, which also creates some forechecking pressure."

Mittelstadt said the defensive side has "slowed down quite a bit" for him.

"The system we play too is a little bit more aggressive," he said. "It's easier for me to read. I know ... it works for me well."

It's no coincidence Sheary's return from his upper-body injury Thursday boosted the line. After his goal opening night, the trio went six games without producing a goal.

But the line started improving with Rodrigues two games before Sheary returned, posting club-best Corsi For totals – the percentage of shot attempts by the team while the line is on the ice five-on-five – in back-to-back games, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

After generating a Corsi For of 50% on Oct. 11 against the Florida Panthers, the line compiled a gaudy 80% last Monday versus the Dallas Stars.

"Probably starting with the Florida game we had the puck more," Vesey said. "It seems like every game we're having time in the other team's end. I think all three of us are capable enough to make plays at that end and finish, and we've done that the last couple games now.

"It's definitely a good feeling. Kind of a tough start, but I'm happy that the coaches kind of let us figure it out and get ourselves going. I think we can be an important line for the team."

## **NHL third star honor caps Sabres goalie Carter Hutton's interesting week**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

October 21, 2019

**BUFFALO** – How's this for an interesting week? Sabres goalie Carter Hutton posted two shutouts, yet he didn't even start consecutive games.

Instead of awarding Hutton another nod, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger started Linus Ullmark both games following the veteran's dazzling performances.

But Hutton, who who earned the NHL's third star for the week ending October 20, isn't worried about his playing time. He knows the coaching staff must make some hard decisions.

"I don't know what's going on behind closed doors, truthfully," Hutton, 33, said this afternoon following practice inside KeyBank Center. "I'm glad I don't sit in those meetings. They got a lot to think about.

"Honestly, I think they have a plan and they're sticking to it."

Whatever plan the Sabres have is working.

Hutton is 5-0-0 with a 1.39 goals-against average and a .953 save percentage in five games this season. He went 2-0-0 last week, stopping all 72 shots he faced.

The Sabres, meanwhile, are 7-1-1.

Last Monday, he made 25 saves in a 4-0 home win over the Dallas Stars, his first shutout with the Sabres and the 12th of his career.

After Ullmark started Wednesday's loss to the Anaheim Ducks, the start of a three-game road trip, Hutton stopped 47 shots in 3-0 win over the Los Angeles Kings.

Hutton's busy night established a new franchise record for saves in a shutout.

"It's the same game, truthfully," Hutton said of his busy night. "You just try to stay with it, whether you're getting 20 shots or 47, whatever it is. You get some breaks, too, right?"

Then Krueger started Ullmark for Saturday's 4-3 win versus the San Jose Sharks.

Hutton, who will likely start Tuesday's home game against the Sharks, said his honor is "a little accolade."

"But at the end of the day – I think I'm beating a drum here – I'm just glad we're winning," he said.

Boston Bruins winger David Patranak (seven goals and nine points in three games) earned the first star of the week. Washington Capitals defenseman John Carlson (seven assists and eight points in four games) received the second star.

## **Sabres 'Starter' Hutton named NHL's Third Star of the Week**

By Paul Ross

WKBW

October 21, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — Buffalo Sabres goalie Carter Hutton was named the NHL's Third Star of the Week for the week of October 14th to October 20th.

Hutton recorded shutouts in games against the Dallas Stars and the Los Angeles Kings.

The latter was a 47-save performance, breaking a franchise record for most saves in a regular season game.

Hutton is 5-0-0 on the season with a 1.40 goals against average, and a .953 save percentage.

## **Sabres continuing to focus on finding 5-on-5 scoring success**

By Jenna Harner

WIVB

October 21, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres back on home ice with four of six possible points in hand after their West Coast road trip. The team telling us Monday they learned a whole lot, especially after their first loss in regulation. But they also learned they could generate 5-on-5 scoring, not just on the power play, and they were able to do so across multiple lines.

"It's good to see the 5-on-5 game going right through the lineup," said head coach Ralph Krueger. "I think that's what we all know we need is depth scoring, offense coming out of every group and that's probably the most exciting thing. There's scoring chances coming on a regular basis right through the games."

"The way I look at our team is we've been a tough out for opponents just because our top line and our power play have been so potent," added forward Jimmy Vesey. "Now with all lines contributing, that kind of adds a little bit of an X-factor. If those guys are having an off night and we're able to pick up the slack, then I think we're a tough match-up for a lot of teams."

"There's always details we're working on," said forward Marcus Johansson. "When we put it together, I feel like 5-on-5 is one of our strengths. It's been good so far and it's been improving. If it keeps doing that, I think it's going to be a lot of fun."

Game two of the home and home with the Sharks is set for 7pm Tuesday night at KeyBank Center.

## **Sabres' Hutton named NHL's Third Star of the Week**

By Stu Boyar

WGRZ

October 21, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Buffalo Sabres goaltender Carter Hutton has been named the NHL's Third Star of the Week.

Hutton shut out the Dallas Stars on Monday, October 14 at the KeyBank Center in Buffalo, and then in his next start blanked the Los Angeles Kings 3-0.

Hutton made 25 saves against the Stars. He was much busier against the Kings turning aside all 47 shots on goal.

Hutton is 5-0 with a 1.39 goals-against average and .953 save percentage.

Boston winger David Pastrnak was named the league's first star. He had seven goals and nine points in three games. Washington defenseman John Carlson was the second star. He had an eight point week.

The Sabres are home Tuesday night against the San Jose Sharks. It's a 7 p.m. face off.

## **First-place Sabres return home from California road trip**

By Ted Goldberg

Spectrum News

October 21, 2019

The Sabres early-season warpath continued through California, with the team (7-1-1) winning two of three and maintaining their first-place standing in the NHL.

"We gave up three leads in a game on the road [in the third game against San Jose], in a tough building to play in, and we never gave up on the way we wanted to go through the 60 minutes," says head coach Ralph Krueger. "Deservedly got the win in the end because of that. I think when your final game on the road, your bags are packed on the bus, all ready to go home, and you still stayed within it all the way to the end, it's a compliment to the group."

"Never an easy trip out there," says forward Jimmy Vesey. "[Anaheim, Los Angeles and San Jose] are big teams, heavy teams. It was tough to drop the first one after we played such a good first period. Rebounded, stuck with it, and we were able to get two wins. It's early in the season, but all the points matter."

After two seasons of near-constant line changes, the Sabres kept their lines the same during Monday's practice. Aside from Evan Rodrigues subbing in for Conor Sheary following an upper-body injury, Sabres lines haven't changed since opening night. Players credit the team's balance to explain the lack of changes so far.

"It doesn't have to be a special line every night. We don't need any one line to always be the best line," says forward Marcus Johansson. "It feels like we have guys that can step up. That's big over the course of a long season. It's big to have that."

"With all lines contributing, that adds a little bit of an 'x factor,'" says Vesey. "If those guys are having an off-night, and we can pick up the slack, I think we're a tough matchup for a lot of teams."

The Sabres will try for their eighth win in ten games Tuesday, when they host the Sharks to finish a home-and-home.

## **NHL Power Rankings: Fast starts most likely to continue**

By Adam Gretz

NBC Sports

October 21, 2019

In this week's edition of the NHL Power Rankings we are taking a look at 10 fast starts around the league and which ones are most likely to continue, and which ones are most likely not to continue.

How are we defining a fast start? It's pretty simple, actually — teams that as of Monday have a .640 points percentage or better so far this season. A .640 points percentage over an 82-game season would be a 105-point pace, so it is obviously pretty high level of play.

There are 10 teams that qualify, and not all of them will continue that level of play throughout the season. Just for comparisons sake, there were nine teams off to the same start through same date a year ago and three of them ended up missing the playoffs. In 2017-18, four of the nine teams off to a similar start also ended up missing. So it stands to reason that a handful of these teams are going to significantly cool off.

This isn't necessarily a ranking of which of these teams has played the best so far, but a ranking of which ones are most likely to continue playing well.

Who is for real and who is not? To the rankings!

### **Fast starts that will continue**

1. Colorado Avalanche. Entering play on Monday they are 7-0-1 on the season and have the best record in the league, earning 15 out of a possible 16 points in the standings. The scary thing about them? They may not be playing their best hockey just yet.
2. Carolina Hurricanes. Speaking of not playing their best hockey yet, the Hurricanes have won six out of their first nine games and have just three goals from the trio of Sebastian Aho, Nino Niederreiter, and Andrei Svechnikov. It is a testament to the depth they have assembled that three of their top players can be off to such a slow start and the team can still win the way it has.
3. Washington Capitals. They are the highest scoring team in the league, have been one of the top possession teams, and still haven't received great goaltending from Braden Holtby. The latter part should scare the rest of the Metropolitan Division because even if Holtby doesn't return to his former Vezina Trophy form he can still be better than he has been.
4. Vegas Golden Knights. The top of their lineup is full of impact players (especially Mark Stone, who has been incredible to start the year) but one of the big wild cards on this team is the emergence of rookie Cody Glass. He already has six points in his first nine games.

### **Fast starts, but with some questions**

5. Boston Bruins. The biggest question here is the same one they have had for the past two years — will they get enough secondary scoring after their top line? Right now if one of David Pastrnak, Brad Marchand, or Patrice Bergeron does not score a goal, no one is scoring. They managed to find enough secondary scoring to reach Game 7 of the Stanley Cup Final a year ago, so it may not be a huge concern in the long-run, but this is still a very top-heavy team so far this season.
6. Pittsburgh Penguins. Interesting team so far in the sense they have probably overachieved given the injury situation that has taken half of their forward lineup away. They are playing the way coach Mike Sullivan wants them to play, and they have played extremely well, but we still haven't seen the Penguins as they were meant to look this season. Still not entirely sold on the defense, and I question how much of this early success is entirely sustainable.

### **Fast starts, but with some real concerns**

7. Anaheim Ducks. The Ducks won five of their first seven games last year — thanks mostly to John Gibson — before completely falling apart. The one thing that should give a little more optimism this time around is Dallas Eakins seems to have them playing a more sustainable style of hockey — one that does not rely entirely on

goaltending — and they have actually carried the play in some of their wins. The concern is I am just not sure there is enough offense here and their two goalies have a combined save percentage of .940. What happens when that drops a bit?

8. Arizona Coyotes. They barely missed the playoffs a year ago and have probably been better than you realize at the start of the season. The concerns here are the same as in Anaheim, where they are still very dependent on incredible goaltending and there is not a ton of offense to work with.

**9. Buffalo Sabres.** For the second year in a row the Sabres are one of the big stories in the NHL with a fast start, entering play on Monday with a 7-1-1 record. There is reason to believe they can avoid the total meltdown they experienced a year ago thanks to an improved roster (offseason additions of Colin Miller, Henri Jokiharju, Marcus Johansson, while Rasmus Dahlin has a full season in the NHL under his belt) and what seems to be a better coach. But there are also still some real concerns. Carter Hutton won't keep stopping 95 percent of the shots he faces. Victor Olofsson won't keep scoring on 30 percent of his shots. They still play in an extremely tough division. There is reason to expect some regression here as the season goes on.

10. Edmonton Oilers. It's been amazing start, but James Neal is not going to keep scoring on 30 percent of his shots and once that stops this team has the same problem it has had for years in that there is not enough depth after Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl. They have feasted on a light schedule so far (and those points still count) but this is a team that needs to prove it over a full season before anyone fully buys into it.

## **Believe in the red-hot Colorado Avalanche**

By Travis Yost

TSN

October 21, 2019

Two weeks into the regular season, I think it's fair to assume no one expected the Colorado Avalanche, Buffalo Sabres and Edmonton Oilers to be leading the rest of the National Hockey League field.

We tend to see early-season runs each year from a team or two – last year, the Sabres led the entire NHL through American Thanksgiving, then followed that up by being the worst team in the league through game 82 of the season. So yes, some of these runs can be fleeting.

What's particularly interesting is how many of the teams that we expected to be on the fringe of the playoff cut line (or, worse) are currently sitting atop the standings. We don't want to make sharp judgments based on eight or so games of data, but these teams have already bagged a serious number of points to put daylight between themselves and the competition in the standings. Even if you are bearish on these clubs, the reality is their playoff probabilities have increased in a matter of weeks.

That brings us to the million-dollar question: Which of the surprise teams are real, and which are not? We have to adjust our prior expectations at this point in the season, but how much should we adjust them based on two weeks of win-loss records? This is where more predictive and larger-sample underlying numbers can really be beneficial.

Below, quick thoughts on the three teams:

Colorado Avalanche (7-0-1) Believability: High

Of the four teams hanging around the top of the standings, the least surprising has to be Colorado. The Avalanche made the playoff cut last season by the thinnest of margins, finishing just a handful of points ahead of the Arizona Coyotes. But an impressive playoff run, easily dispatching the Calgary Flames in Round 1 and taking the San Jose Sharks to a Game 7, resonated around the league. Their roster makeup – an impressive combination of developing young talent and a couple of unquestionable superstars – qualitatively makes you believe their hot start is just a continuance of the promise we saw a season ago.

Colorado's season-to-date measures:

EV Corsi%: 50.1 per cent (17th)

EV Expected Goal%: 50.9 per cent (13th)

EV Goal%: 63.4 per cent (Third)

Power Play Expected Goals Per-60 Minutes: 4.6 (27th)

Penalty Kill Expected Goals Against Per-60 Minutes: 5.0 (Fifth)

It is hard to find a real flaw with this team. They outshoot and out-chance their opponents on a regular basis, have one of the league's better penalty-killing units, and the goaltending tandem of Philipp Grubauer and Pavel Francouz has posted a 92.8 save percentage (seventh in the NHL). Grubauer will shoulder a larger role for the first time in his playing career, but he's been consistently above average when it comes to denying shooters since entering the league back in 2012-13.

The Nathan MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen duo has been predictably electric, each with 11 points in just eight games. But the Avalanche are also getting contributions further down the lineup – Andre Burakovsky, Joonas Donskoi, and Nazem Kadri have seamlessly integrated themselves this season, and 20-year-old Cale Makar already appears ahead of schedule on the blueline.

I'm buying all of the stock I can in Colorado.

## **Buffalo Sabres (7-1-1) Believability: Moderate**

This isn't the Sabres of a year ago – a team that rode lofty shooting percentages early in the season, only to watch their huge shot volume disadvantage (along with an inexplicable cratering in performance from the goaltending duo of Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark) ultimately win out. Last year's Sabres team was fatally flawed: they had one ultra-productive line trying to smooth over depth issues in the forward ranks and a ghastly defence that was seemingly incapable of moving the puck.

Buffalo's blueline overhaul may end up being one of the biggest stories of the 2019-20 season. Adding Colin Miller and Henri Jokiharju – two guys with some holes in their off-puck game but incredible puck movers and north-south transitional players – has alleviated a huge defensive burden from their forward class. Jokiharju, in particular, has completely reshaped Buffalo's ability to take the game to their opponents when their best players are on the ice. Paired predominantly with Marco Scandella, the Sabres are getting a whopping 55 per cent of shots with their third unit on the ice.

Buffalo's season-to-date measures are as follows:

EV Corsi%: 51.5 per cent (12th)

EV Expected Goal%: 53.0 per cent (Seventh)

EV Goal%: 67.2 per cent (First)

Power Play Expected Goals Per-60 Minutes: 6.4 (15th)

Penalty Kill Expected Goals Against Per-60 Minutes: (7.7 (27th)

Those aren't the type of numbers we expect to see from teams that are lottery bound. There is surely some puck luck blessing this team on the defensive side, as the Sabres are stopping more than 95 per cent of shots at 5-on-5 and nearly 93 per cent across all situations. Turn your opponent into a team that can only convert on five to seven per cent of their opportunities and you'll have a chance to win on most nights. The only problem is that these stop rates are well outside of our expectations for both the team and the goalies, and we did see this same exact thing happen last season.

But the best way to combat an inevitable save percentage regression is to spend more time in the offensive zone, which serves to both apply pressure on the opposition defensively and ease the pressure on the defensive side of the game. This Sabres team has shown they are capable of doing just that, and that's materially different from what we have seen from other Buffalo teams for most of this decade.

The Sabres still don't seem like a great pick to finish inside of the top three in the division, but they can pass the bar of wild-card calibre. That's quite impressive in a division with the likes of the Tampa Bay Lightning, Toronto Maple Leafs, and Boston Bruins.

Edmonton Oilers (7-1-1) Believability: Low

I will say this much about the Oilers: I don't think the Pacific Division is really impressive outside of the Vegas Golden Knights, so there's a real opportunity for even a depth-challenged team to try and steal one of the two other playoff spots. While I think the lineup is fatally flawed, the Oilers' first line is on a perpetual heater and the goaltending combination of Mikko Koskinen and Mike Smith has held up so far.

If both don't sustain, Edmonton is going to have a hard time staying afloat. Consider their performance numbers through the first nine games with both of those as major positives:

EV Corsi%: 48.6 per cent (21st)

EV Expected Goal%: 47.5 per cent (23rd)

EV Goal%: 55.5 per cent (Ninth)

Power Play Expected Goals Per-60 Minutes: 8.1 (Third)

Penalty Kill Expected Goals Against Per-60 Minutes: 8.7(31st)

I think the Oilers will continue to have one of the best lines in all of hockey – magic is being made anytime one or both of Connor McDavid or Leon Draisaitl is on the ice (they have 37 per cent of the team's goals so far this season). But the Oilers are still only getting about 40 per cent of the goals when those players are shelved at 5-on-5, and at some point, the usage for their big guns may come back to haunt them.

Unlike a team like Buffalo, though, the Oilers are still being broadly outshot and out-chanced, and polarizing power-play performances seem to be something of a wash. The depth issues that everyone feared would lower this team's ceiling haven't left – they've just been masked over by incredible individual efforts, which are quite fleeting historically.

Still, the points are in the bag, and the division doesn't offer up a tremendous amount of competition. That can't be understated enough. The Oilers may be a flawed team – more flawed than the standings would suggest – but the hot start has given them an early leg up on the rest of the field, and they might be able to hang around in the playoff race for quite some time as a result.

## **Five position battles that have emerged in the early season**

By Jared Clinton  
The Hockey News  
October 21, 2019

At the beginning of the 2018-19 campaign, David Rittich was the second-in-command in the Calgary Flames' crease behind incumbent Mike Smith. But the signs of an impending takeover were clear early on.

Through four games, despite one shutout, Smith struggled. Through eight games and about three weeks of the campaign, his trouble hadn't cleared up. And it was about that time the calls started to come. While he had only made four appearances, Rittich had played well when called upon. He had not a single outing with a single-game save percentage below .923. Smith, on the other hand, had only one outing – albeit a 43-save shutout – that was better. And come the end of October, with Smith boasting a winning record but an ugly .871 SP through 10 games and Rittich possessing a .939 SP in six appearances of his own, the change was made.

Over the next handful of games, Rittich got the nod. He proceeded to rattle off victories in five consecutive appearances, helped the Flames earn points in six of seven and it became clear that he was starting to pull away in the crease competition. By the time the season ended, Rittich had appeared in more games, started 42 to Smith's 40 and though he lost the starting gig come the post-season, Rittich had made clear that he was the clear-cut go-to guy. The Flames let Smith walk in the off-season, and the crease was Rittich's to lose entering the current campaign.

But the friendly crease competition between Rittich and Smith wasn't the only notable position battle we watched take shape in the early part of last season. Max Domi proved himself to be the second-line center with the Montreal Canadiens. Elias Pettersson rose from promising rookie to top-six fixture with the Vancouver Canucks. And even late-blooming defenseman Erik Gustafsson stood out early and managed to unseat all but Duncan Keith in terms of minutes on the Chicago Blackhawks blueline.

As we inch further into the current campaign, though, what ice-time and position battles are we starting to see emerge around the league? Here's a look at five worth watching:

### **Darcy Kuemper vs. Antti Raanta – Arizona Coyotes**

Some might not even call this a battle anymore given Kuemper's early performance, which has been excellent, but Raanta isn't letting his crease counterpart pull away. Though the former has pieced together a 3-2-0 record in five starts, including a .949 SP and 1.62 goals-against average, Raanta has kept pace with a .926 SP and 2.43 GAA of his own. And given Raanta has this season and next left on his deal at \$4.25-million per season, the second year of which comes when the first year of Kuemper's two-year, \$9-million extension kicks in, chances are the Coyotes will be willing to ride the hot hand all season.

One interesting note about the Arizona goaltending battle is that Raanta is actually ahead of Kuemper in a couple of interesting underlying numbers. At 5-on-5, Raanta has a .978 SP, better than Kuemper's .947, and Raanta also has a goals-saved above average of 1.73 per 60 minutes, which puts him ahead of Kuemper's .79 mark. It's still early days, but this might be the best crease competition we see all season.

### **Victor Olofsson vs. Jeff Skinner – Buffalo Sabres**

Based on ice time and reputation, one might assume Skinner is skating with the big guns. If you've paid any attention to the Sabres this season, though, you would know that the projected long-time pairing of Skinner and Jack Eichel has been split to start the season. In Skinner's presumed place by the Buffalo captain's side? Rookie winger Olofsson. That has been coach Ralph Krueger's favored formation for the top line to the extent that Skinner has actually only skated 10 minutes at 5-on-5 alongside Eichel. Olofsson, meanwhile, has been glued to Eichel's side for 114 minutes.

If ever the Sabres need a change or an attacking boost, though, we might see one of the top-line winger roles handed to Skinner. For all the good Olofsson has done on the top unit – he has a pair of assists – most of the damage he's done has been with the man advantage. Skinner, meanwhile, has all five of his goals at even strength. That might be reason for a promotion to top-line duty at some point, particularly if or when Buffalo needs to load up.

#### Anthony Cirelli vs. Tyler Johnson – Tampa Bay Lightning

If one were to place a number next to each Lightning line based solely upon the players with which the two Bolts pivots have played this season, chances are Johnson's unit with Ondrej Palat and Yanni Gourde would be called the second line and the Cirelli group with Alex Killorn and Mathieu Joseph would be called the third. The funny thing about that, though, is that Cirelli has taken a bite out of the ice time of those around him, not the least of which has been Johnson. In fact, Cirelli has seen more ice time than Johnson in seven of eight games this season, including all but one game since Brayden Point's return.

At some point, the salary cap is going to force the Bolts to make changes. And as Cirelli begins to cannibalize the ice time of Johnson and some of the other middle-six forwards, it's becoming pretty clear that the likes of Johnson, Palat and Gourde could be among those on the chopping block.

#### Patrik Laine vs. Kyle Connor – Winnipeg Jets

Even if it was taken slightly out of context, Laine's off-season comment about playing with the best players had some truth to it. What scorer doesn't want to be on the top line and which winger wouldn't want to skate alongside Mark Scheifele and Blake Wheeler? For the past couple of campaigns, that has been Kyle Connor's spot, though, meaning that despite some sojourns on the top line, Laine has been relegated to life on the second line in recent campaigns. But that hasn't been the case for the bulk of this season. Not one bit. The Jets sniper has skated all but 40 of his 5-on-5 minutes with No. 55 as his pivot through the first 10 games of the season.

Does that hold now that Bryan Little has returned from injury? For the time being, it appears that way, particularly as Laine was on the top unit in Sunday's outing against the Oilers and Connor hasn't spent much time at all with Scheifele and Wheeler. It will be interesting to see what happens when coach Paul Maurice feels the need to put his lines in the blender, though. Laine wants the coveted top-line spot and you can rest assured that Connor would love it, too. It might be worth mentioning Nikolaj Ehlers as the potential third wheel of the group, as well. He performed well in his audition up top.

#### Braden Holtby vs. Ilya Samsonov – Washington Capitals

Holtby is being given the benefit of the doubt right now. Not once has he sat in back-to-back games and he's been given the nod in consecutive games despite some performances that have left something to be desired. Base statistics alone suggest that it might be time to start giving Samsonov the reins more often than he's gotten them in the early part of the season, though. In his four games, the up-and-coming keeper has a 3-1-0 record, .933 SP and 1.84 GAA, numbers that are better than Holtby's .878 SP and 3.70 GAA. And even underlying numbers lean in favor of Samsonov. Small sample and all that, but he has a .951 SP at 5-on-5, which is head-and-shoulders above Holtby's .879 SP thus far.

Not only is this an intriguing battle to watch because it has some of that teacher-versus-student, veteran-versus-rookie feel, it also comes as Holtby is set to head towards free agency. He's already lost the trust of the Capitals coaching staff once, starting Washington's Stanley Cup run on the bench in favor of Philipp Grubauer before a trade sent him to the Colorado Avalanche later that summer. Losing that faith again could mean we've seen the end of Holtby with the Capitals.

## **Roth: Red-hot Buffalo Sabres no longer a 1-line show under Krueger**

By Leo Roth

Democrat & Chronicle

October 22, 2019

BUFFALO – It happened “organically” Buffalo Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said.

Round pegs into round holes, squares into squares, nothing forced into place.

Setting lines on a hockey team is part science and part art and let’s just say that nine games into the Sabres’ 50th anniversary season, Krueger is looking like Einstein and Rembrandt.

Buffalo heads into Tuesday’s game against the San Jose Sharks at KeyBank Center no longer a one-line team, that line being any one that Jack Eichel is on.

The Sabres now come at opponents with four lines that are producing goals, the result, a 7-1-1 record, good for 15 points and a share of first place overall heading into Monday’s slate of games.

“I think the system we’re playing is producing more chances,” center Casey Mittelstadt said. “Obviously you have to keep it going and it could be a different line on any night that’s producing. It’s been good so far and we’re going to try and keep riding it.”

At practice, the news of the day was that there wasn’t any.

The lines and defensive pairings that have been working so well remained as they were, from Game 1 through an early western road trip that saw Buffalo lose its first game of the season, 5-2 at Anaheim, only to rebound with victories at Los Angeles (3-0) and San Jose (4-3).

Krueger isn’t a guy who needs to tinker with his lineup just to let his bosses know he’s working.

There has been in-game shuffling, of course, when a spark may have been needed, like Victor Olofsson and Marcus Johansson trading places on power play units. When Conor Sheary recovered from an injury, he took the place of Evan Rodrigues on Mittelstadt’s line with Jimmy Vesey.

Otherwise, status quo is working. You don’t paint the bedroom if you like the color.

“I think we all know we needed depth scoring, and offense coming out of every group, and that’s probably the most exciting thing is that there’s scoring chances coming on a regular basis,” Krueger said. “Every line has its own personality and it comes to that end in different ways. But we’re enjoying the chances we’re creating right now as a group.”

Early on, Buffalo’s fourth-ranked power play (31.4 percent) carried things, but even-strength scoring has picked up considerably. The Sabres are now averaging 3.7 goals for and 2.3 against, which compared to a year ago is one more for and one fewer against.

In hockey, that’s serious progress. Do that for 73 more games and Lord Stanley’s playoff invitation is guaranteed to arrive in the mail in Buffalo after eight lost seasons.

Here’s how the Sabres’ lines break down (left to right) by goals and shots: Olofsson, Eichel, Sam Reinhart — 13 goals, 65 shots; Jeff Skinner, Johansson, Vladimir Sobotka — nine goals, 68 shots; Vesey, Mittelstadt, Sheary — six goals, 30 shots; Zemgus Girgensons, Johan Larsson, Kyle Okposo — three goals, 35 shots.

The Sabres have scored 11 power play goals, led by Olofsson’s six. But they have 22 even strength goals with 11 players with at least one, led by Skinner with five.

The impact of former Rochester Americans star Olofsson on the Sabres’ lineup has been profound, allowing for a more even spread of talent. Last season, 41 percent of Buffalo’s goals came from three players: Skinner, Eichel and Reinhart.

Skinner played exclusively with Eichel and finished with 40 goals and a new \$10-million contract. But he's doing just fine on a different line with veteran newcomer Johansson at center. Because when you're good, you're good.

Meanwhile, Mittelstadt, a former first-round pick whose future was uncertain in training camp, has added a much-needed dimension at the opposite end of the spectrum, with his line gaining a ton of confidence out west. He and Sheary have three goals apiece with Vesey, the former New York Ranger obtained in a trade, waiting to exhale when his first goal in a Buffalo uniform goes in.

"I think the first couple games we didn't get much offense going but we were good defensively and eventually it was good to see a few pucks go in the net," Mittelstadt said. "That's good for everyone's confidence."

Okposo, 31, who is looking to regain the touch he had as a 27-goal man for the Islanders after a serious concussion battle, said the attacking, up-tempo style brought to Buffalo by Krueger has meant more ice time — and more chances — for everyone.

"I think our shift length is a lot better this year, guys are simply getting into the games," said Okposo, who has a goal and three assists. "The system we're playing makes us play fast and that allows every line to get chances because each line is playing the same way."

And with Eichel's line setting the pace, "it's a healthy competition," Okposo said.

How did Krueger set his lineup coming out of training camp?

It wasn't pure gut feelings, though there is always some of that for a coach. Mostly it was trying to determine the best mix of offensive and defensive skillsets. Forwards who want to see the ice better be as good without the puck as with the puck, meaning their man can't slip free from their watch like a toddler in a shopping mall.

Buffalo's collective plus-minus, a negative-259 last season, is presently a combined plus-40.

"Every line has a mix of personalities, and you need to have that ability to defend in the NHL, you can't go with three all-out offensive players anymore if you want to survive," Krueger said. "I think finding balance within those lines is important."

Also of note: Krueger likes to use 6-7 centers a night. Girgensons and Sobotka are playing the wing but they have centerman backgrounds, so playing all 200 feet isn't a foreign concept, and they can take faceoffs.

"You have different players playing different roles to strengthen our game away from the puck, which was our first necessity here," Krueger said. "So the lines were put together every bit for the defense as for the offense."

Hard backchecking, active sticks, tight gaps. None of it is sexy. But winning is.

## **Sharpen Up: All the Sabres news you need to know on October 22, 2019**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

October 22, 2019

The Sabres are back home tonight against San Jose. It's a 7 p.m. faceoff with the GMC Game Night pregame show starting at 6:30 on MSG.

Buffalo is coming off a successful West Coast road trip and hope to sweep the season series with the Sharks tonight. Tickets are on sale now.

Here's what you need to know.

### **Tonight's matchup**

From the Game Notes...

- With a 4-0-0 start to their home schedule, the Sabres are looking to open the season with at least five consecutive wins at home for the first time since 1984-85, when they won their first five.
- A 5-0-0 record through five home games would tie the Sabres' second-best start at home, matching the 1972-73 and 1984-85 seasons. The team's record for most consecutive home wins to begin a season is six, set in the 1975-76 season.
- This is the second of two meetings between the Sabres and Sharks this season.
- Last meeting: Buffalo defeated San Jose 4-3 in San Jose on Oct. 19
- The Sabres are 5-4-1 in their last 10 games vs. the Sharks; 7-2-1 at home.
- Tonight's game is the second in a home-and-home series between the Sabres and Sharks that began with a 4-3 Sabres win on Saturday night in San Jose. It is the first home-and-home series ever to be played between the teams.
- This series is the Sabres' first home-and-home set against a Western Conference opponent since November 1996 (Toronto). It's just their third ever contested against a team located in the Pacific time zone, joining their series against California in February 1971 and Vancouver in March 1996.
- The Sabres have played in 163 previous home-and-home series in franchise history, going 92-48-23 (.635) in the home games and 56-78-29 (.433) in the road games in previous series.

### **Hutton named NHL's Third Star of the Week**

Buffalo Sabres goaltender Carter Hutton was named the NHL's Third Star of the Week for the week ending Oct. 20, the league announced Monday.

Hutton has had a terrific start to the 2019-20 season, punctuated by back-to-back shutout appearances last week against the Stars and the Kings.

He earned his first shutout as a member of the Sabres on Monday against Dallas and followed that up by setting a Sabres franchise record with 47 saves in a shutout on Thursday at Los Angeles, joining Bob Sauve as the second Sabres goaltender to post two shutouts in his first five games of a season. Sauve accomplished the feat in 1979-80.

He enters tonight's game against San Jose having played his last 128:36 without allowing a goal and needs to play just 2:16 without allowing a goal in his next appearance to surpass his longest career shutout streak of 130:51 set from Feb. 16 to March 3, 2017 when he was with St. Louis.

### **Monday's practice**

We took a look at the Sabres' balanced scoring among their forward lines.

From the Ice Level Practice Report...

Kyle Okposo has noticed a healthy competition developing among the Sabres' forward lines. It starts at the top with the trio of Victor Olofsson, Jack Eichel, and Sam Reinhart, and trickles to the others, with each group wanting to match the offense of the others.

"We just want everybody to do well," Okposo said. "It's fun. When everybody's having success, the team's having success. I want the other guys to score just as much as myself."

He paused. "But I want to score too. There's that, and it's a lot of fun."

Through nine games, the Sabres' offensive attack has been as balanced as any in the NHL. Eighteen different skaters have registered a point and 11 have scored at least one goal.

The Sabres have four players who have scored four or more goals (Olofsson, Eichel, Jeff Skinner, and Marcus Johansson), tied with Colorado and Pittsburgh for the most such skaters in the league.

That number climbs to seven if you include players with three goals (Reinhart, Casey Mittelstadt, and Conor Sheary), matched only by Colorado and Washington.

"It's good to see the 5-on-5 game going right through the lineup," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said Monday. "I think that's what we all know we need, is depth scoring and offense coming out of every group."

"That's probably the most exciting thing, is that there's scoring chances coming on a regular basis right through the games now. Every line has its own personality and is coming to that end in different ways, but we're enjoying the chances that we're creating right now as a group."

## 'Good, healthy competition': Breaking down the Sabres' balanced offense

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

October 21, 2019

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The Sabres added Johansson and Jimmy Vesey during the offseason with the goal of establishing four lines that could contribute offensively. Olofsson and his scoring touch are full-time additions as well, with the rookie having spent most of last season in Rochester.

With those names, Krueger sought to craft four lines with balance in their offensive and defensive abilities. Those trios have remained unchanged since opening night, save for in-game adjustments and Evan Rodrigues filling in for an injured Sheary for four games.

"Every line has a mix of personalities and you need to have that ability to defend in the National Hockey League," Krueger said. "You cannot go with three all-out offensive players anymore if you want to survive.

"... So, the lines were every bit as much put together for the defense as for the offense. The whole lineup in general is then about the balance that you need for the players who take on the power play and the penalty killing roles. It happened organically, naturally, and I thought at the end the decisions were pretty easy and the players made those decisions for us."

Let's look at the identity each line has crafted for itself thus far.

### **Olofsson - Eichel - Reinhart**

The offensive skill stands out on paper and on the ice, but Krueger has complimented the Eichel line for its willingness and ability to play without the puck as well. They play against opponents' top lines and defense pairs on a nightly basis, which is particularly an adjustment for the rookie Olofsson.

"Victor is going to go through that evolution now of being somebody who nobody even knew his name to seeing him as a threat especially on the power play, but 5-on-5 he will grow to be a big threat too," Krueger said.

"You're going to get better defensive play against you once you're on the map here. It goes quickly. He's a smart kid, he continues to play extremely well without the puck, very mature in that part. He will find new ways and he

needs to be unpredictable; he needs to bring deception into his game because he's got the skill set to score. I know he will as he just grows, and we need to be patient with him."

### **Skinner - Johansson - Sobotka**

Johansson has fit right in despite playing center for the first time since early in his career. He credits his comfort to playing with Vladimir Sobotka, who has played center and wing throughout his career.

"I think both offensively and defensively, he works so hard on both sides of the puck," Johansson said. "For me, being kind of new at center, it feels very good to have him out there to kind of help me out and sometimes split that work. He's just such a solid two-way player. And he sees the ice really well. He makes some really good plays. I think that he doesn't always get credit for it."

The Sabres have outscored opponents 7-1 in 95:49 with the trio of Skinner, Johansson, and Sobotka on the ice at 5-on-5. All five of Skinner's goals have come at even strength, one behind NHL leader Roope Hintz of the Dallas Stars.

"I feel like we just trust our game," Johansson said. "We have such a solid 5-on-5 game when we're playing the right way that we know we're going to get chances. The way our goalies have been playing too always gives you a boost as well. It brings confidence, and that's a big part of it."

### **Vesey - Mittelstadt - Sheary**

Krueger stressed patience when it came to Mittelstadt as he adjusted to the defensive responsibilities of playing in a new system. It started to pay off offensively in California, with the second year forward scoring three goals in two games and assisting on another.

"I think the comfort level of what he needs to do to play within our principles defensively," Krueger said when asked what's improved in Mittelstadt's game. "He needed some time to understand that part of the game and he spent a lot of time on it. He's worked really hard at it and he's been coached off the ice, he's taken a lot of video sessions on, and I think that now he's understanding that that doesn't take away from his time on the puck and what he needs to do offensively.

"He's able to manage that switch in his head really well. Using his size, using his body, he's positioning himself defensively better which also creates some forechecking pressure. His line in general had a couple of games now where they were creating some O-zone time and that builds confidence, of course, when you have more time on the puck. But lots of good things happening around that line in general."

Vesey, meanwhile, has proven to be a versatile asset for the Sabres. He's been used in a more defensive role than in the past, appearing regularly on the penalty kill and filling in alongside Eichel and Reinhart when the Sabres are trying to close out games in the third period.

"I like where my game's at, I think," Vesey said. "I've been sound defensively and get on the PK at the end of the game when we have a lead, so it's interesting for me to play that side of it but at the end of the day we all want to be on the ice. Being used in all situations, for me, is just more ice time."

### **Girgensons - Larsson - Okposo**

Finally, the Roaring Twenties. Or the GLO line. Or the LOG line.

Call them what you will. The trio has a penchant for putting pucks behind opponents and going to work on the forecheck, which led to Girgensons' winning goal in San Jose on Saturday.

The result has been a 62.68 shot-attempt share at 5-on-5, the best among the Sabres' four regular trios. Krueger has referred to the line as an example for others to follow in terms of playing within the team's principles.

They go over the boards making to look their own impact on the score sheet, too.

"Obviously, you've got Eichs' line up front that has a ton of skill and they're going to finish a lot," Okposo said. "The other lines, they're trying to compete, they're trying to finish as much as them. Good, healthy competition."

## **Hutton named NHL's 3rd Star of the Week**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

October 21, 2019

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Hutton has had a terrific start to the 2019-20 season, punctuated by back-to-back shutout appearances last week against the Stars and the Kings.

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Hutton ranks first in the NHL with a .953 save percentage, first with a 1.39 goals-against average, and is the only goaltender in the NHL with multiple shutouts. With a record of 5-0-0, he's tied for second in the NHL in wins.

He enters tomorrow's game against San Jose having played his last 128:36 without allowing a goal and needs to play just 2:16 without allowing a goal in his next appearance to surpass his longest career shutout streak of 130:51 set from Feb. 16 to March 3, 2017 when he was with St. Louis.

Boston Bruins forward David Pastrnak and Washington Capitals defenseman John Carlson were named the First and Second Stars of the Week, respectively.