



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

October 24, 2019

New York plays Buffalo, looks to stop home slide

Associated Press

October 24, 2019

Buffalo Sabres (8-1-1, first in the Atlantic Division) vs. New York Rangers (2-4-1, eighth in the Metropolitan Division)

New York; Thursday, 7 p.m. EDT

BOTTOM LINE: New York plays Buffalo looking to end its three-game home skid.

New York finished 21-22-9 in Eastern Conference games and 18-14-9 at home during the 2018-19 season. The Rangers scored 221 total goals last season while collecting 372 assists.

Buffalo went 33-39-10 overall and 19-25-8 in Eastern Conference action in the 2018-19 season. The Sabres averaged 2.7 goals and 4.6 assists per game last season.

The matchup Thursday is the first meeting of the season for the two teams.

Rangers Injuries: None listed.

Sabres Injuries: None listed.

Bills CB Tre'Davious White keeps coming up with big saves

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

October 23, 2019

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. (AP) — Cornerback Tre'Davious White occasionally enjoys parading around the Buffalo Bills facility in goaltending gear while claiming to have been the best hockey player in his native Louisiana history.

It's all fiction, including The Tre'Davious White Goalie Academy, where he supposedly taught Buffalo Sabres starter Carter Hutton all he knows. White, in fact, was unfamiliar with hockey until last year, when he became a big fan of Hutton while attending his first NHL game.

The outing was filmed by the team's promotional department, and prompted the Pegula-owned Bills and Sabres to produce a "mock-umentary" in which White proudly says: "I've never allowed a goal."

All joking aside, White was immediately captivated by Hutton because he can appreciate how a goalie's role is no different than his.

"Ultimately, I don't want to be embarrassed out there. So, when you're the last line of defense, and somebody catches the ball on you, that's all everybody's going to talk about, right?" White said. "Just like a touchdown or when somebody scores a goal, you want to try to defend the goal, and the team is depending on you to try to save the day."

Preferring pigskins over pucks, the third-year player has generated an impressive save percentage for making key stops particularly in the clutch.

On Wednesday, with Buffalo (5-1) preparing to host Philadelphia (3-4) this weekend, White earned his first AFC defensive player of the week honors.

It came after he forced two momentum-changing second-half turnovers, allowing Buffalo to rally from a five-point fourth-quarter deficit in a 31-21 victory over winless Miami last weekend.

"I feel it's just the first step," said White, who has on several occasions voiced his objective of becoming the NFL's top cornerback. "I always felt like those accolades would come if the team wins. And so far we're winning and people are paying attention. I mean, as long as we win, that's all that matters."

Both turnovers led directly to Buffalo touchdowns, starting with White's diving interception of Ryan Fitzpatrick's pass at the Buffalo 2 to end a 16-play third-quarter-opening drive. Two series later, White punched the ball out of receiver Preston Williams' hands, with the fumble recovered by teammate Jerry Hughes.

"Big-time players make big-time plays in big-time moments, and he's a big-time player since he got here," safety Micah Hyde said. "That's just Tre. What's he call himself? Fourth-quarter Tre? That's when he starts playing really well."

Of White's 13 career takeaways (including nine interceptions), 12 have come in the second half.

In Week 3, he clinched a 21-17 win over Cincinnati by intercepting Andy Dalton's pass that tipped off Hyde's hands at the Buffalo 10 with 12 seconds remaining.

It was no different during his rookie season in 2017.

White sealed a 16-10 win at Kansas City by intercepting Alex Smith's pass at the Buffalo 27 with 1:10 remaining. He also forced and recovered Adam Humphries' fumble with 2:28 left to set up Stephen Hauschka's 30-yard game-deciding field goal in a 30-27 win over Tampa Bay.

"It's funny you bring that Tampa game up," defensive coordinator Leslie Frazier said Monday.

"What he did yesterday was very similar. But we've seen it in his three short years here: He finds a way to come up with big plays in some tough moments," Frazier added. "There's no situation too big for him, no circumstance that scares him."

According to the NFL's Next Gen Stats, quarterbacks have completed 44.8 percent of their attempts thrown in White's direction, and he leads the league with a 26.6 defender passer rating based on a minimum 20 targets this season.

From Shreveport, Buffalo's 2017 first-round draft pick honed his skills at LSU, where White practiced against a group of receivers that included Odell Beckham Jr. and Jarvis Landry.

White drew on those experiences when picking off Fitzpatrick's pass intended for Isaiah Ford, who broke off his route and cut to the right sideline.

"Just from practicing and being beat on that route so many times," White said. "It comes from trial and error, just being in that position so many times, and trusting my feet and trusting my eyes."

No different than a goalie.

Hutton was impressed by White's performance against Miami, and gets a big laugh out of the hockey-related videos the Bills have produced.

"He's a character for sure," Hutton said. "I think it's great to have personalities. I think it's great for fans to see the human side of us, too. We like to have fun. We're not just robots."

Hutton, off to a 6-0 start this season, winked in saying White hasn't taught him everything about goaltending.

"No, no. He taught me a lot but not everything," he said.

White's not giving up his day job just yet, though he's prepared to pull on his gear in a pinch.

"If the Sabres need an emergency goalie, I'm up for it if coach (Sean) McDermott will let me," White said.

Casey Mittelstadt's drive to net shows Sabres' commitment to defense

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

October 23, 2019

In the aftermath of a thrilling overtime win Tuesday night, Casey Mittelstadt received from a friend a text message that included a clip from an NHL Network broadcast.

Kevin Weekes, a former goaltender and current analyst for the network, spent more than two minutes breaking down Mittelstadt's final shift of the Buffalo Sabres' 4-3 win over the San Jose Sharks inside KeyBank Center. Mittelstadt, a 20-year-old center, skated full bore down the ice to break up a centering pass from Erik Karlsson near the Sabres' net, baited the Sharks into a bad line change and assisted on Jack Eichel's game-winning goal.

The vision with which Mittelstadt surveyed the ice following his forced turnover led Weekes to compare him to Hall of Fame defenseman Nicklas Lidstrom.

"Uh, no," Mittelstadt said when asked about the Lidstrom comparison. "I think that's my roommate's job. One of my buddies sent me that clip last night. They were just making fun of me the whole time. It's pretty good. It's pretty funny."

Mittelstadt's shift also was a prominent talking point during the Sabres' team film session prior to practice Wednesday. The sequence illustrated the defensive work coach Ralph Krueger wants to see from his players every game and continued an upward trend in Mittelstadt's play. However, he downplayed his part in the victory.

"I saw Karlsson get the puck and they had a two-on-one," Mittelstadt recalled. "I pretty much had no choice but to go, I guess. I don't know, I don't think it's that big a deal. I think anyone on our team would've done it. I guess it's just something you've got to do."

The game-winning shift began when the Sabres (8-1-1) turned the puck over behind the Sharks' net, leading to an odd-man rush in the other direction. Mittelstadt put his head down and skated up the ice to intercept Karlsson's pass. Upon gaining possession, Mittelstadt bought time for Buffalo to make a line change.

In the meantime, San Jose chose to make a change. It proved to be the difference in the game. Mittelstadt sent a breakout pass up the ice, and Eichel scored his second goal of the game on a scramble in front of the net. Mittelstadt, who was drafted eighth overall in 2017, has continued to show refined play without the puck.

"It definitely didn't get lost, because pretty much everything that's happening here on the positive offensively – five-on-five, four-on-four or three-on-three – is coming out of excellent defensive work and decisions that guys are making," Krueger said of Mittelstadt's final shift. "That gets lost in the general analysis of a game – what happens, the tracking, the way the D are gapping up, and all of that is causing the opposition stress in that we're attacking them when they're quite weak, and that's what happened there. ... That was just a microscopic example of what's going on in this team in general and the character we've shown and the commitment we've shown without the puck is what's making even these victories possible."

Mittelstadt has three goals among seven points with a plus-6 rating in 10 games this season. Five of those points have come in the past three games. His line – which also includes Jimmy Vesey and Conor Sheary – has helped rejuvenate the Sabres' play at 5 on 5 since they were reunited last Thursday in Los Angeles.

Mittelstadt's improvement is perhaps the most significant development surrounding this team. Last season, he struggled to adjust to the defensive responsibilities of playing center in the NHL. An offseason of training helped him gain strength to better prepare him to withstand the grind of an 82-game season and to outmuscle an opponent for a loose puck along the boards.

Though Mittelstadt downplayed his role in baiting San Jose into what Sharks captain Logan Couture called an "inexcusable change," the reaction from the bench was particularly gratifying for Krueger.

"I'm watching the entire bench cheering Casey's drive back to our net," Krueger said. "I've spoken to you a little bit about the life on our bench right now, and when you hear the players talk and use the word tracking in front

of you in a three-on-three overtime situation and everybody's so excited and then it turns into a goal, it's that lead up to the goal that really makes you proud of what the group is doing as a coach."

•••

With two goals and two assists Tuesday night against San Jose, Eichel became the sixth player in Sabres history to post multiple four-point outings through his first 10 games of a season. Pat LaFontaine (1992-93) and Gilbert Perreault (1972-73) each accomplished the feat three times.

Rasmus Dahlin, meanwhile, became the fifth teenage defenseman in NHL history to record at least 10 points in his first 10 games of a season, joining Phil Housley (13 points, 1984 and 10 in 1983), Zach Werenski (10, 2017) and Hannu Virta (10, 1983).

•••

The Sabres' game Thursday night against the New York Rangers in Madison Square Garden marks Vesey's return to his former home. Vesey, a 26-year-old winger, scored 50 goals among 90 points in 240 regular-season games during his three years with the Rangers. He also played 12 playoff games with the team in 2016-17.

The Sabres acquired Vesey in July for a third-round draft pick in the 2021 NHL draft. The Rangers (2-4-1) have a negative-6 goal differential despite adding Artemi Panarin, Kaapo Kakko and Jacob Trouba, among others, this past offseason.

Won Buffalo: Fans haven't had it this good this early in 30 years

The Buffalo News

October 23, 2019

It's a good time to be a Buffalo sports fan with the Bills and Sabres off to tremendous starts. But how good are their starts?

With the Sabres' win last night to move to 8-1-1 and the Bills sitting at 5-1, the teams have combined for 13 victories before Nov. 1 for only the third time, and the last time was 30 years ago.

The Bills have one more game in October, Sunday against the visiting Philadelphia Eagles. The Sabres have three more games: Thursday at the New York Rangers, Friday at the Detroit Red Wings and Monday against the Arizona Coyotes.

Swiss spot isn't only offseason connection for Sabres coach and Sharks' Joe Thornton

By Lance Lysowski
The Buffalo News
October 23, 2019

Davos is a resort town situated along the Landwasser River, high in Switzerland's Eastern Alps. According to the latest census, less than 11,000 people make it their permanent residence.

Tourists account for most of the congestion on the one major road leading into the town, and for two weeks each January, approximately 3,000 people visit for the World Economic Forum, a series of meetings to address global, regional and industry agendas.

The Alpine region can appear desolate in the summer months when the slopes are no longer blanketed with snow, yet its picturesque landscapes and seclusion are used as an offseason escape for two prominent figures in hockey: Buffalo Sabres coach Ralph Krueger and San Jose Sharks center Joe Thornton.

The two men have formed what Krueger called a "special relationship" since meeting 15 years ago in Switzerland and live close to each other in Davos every offseason. They were united as foes when the Sabres and Sharks played a home-and-home series Saturday and Tuesday.

"Oh, he's the best," Thornton said of Krueger while pulling off his jersey following the Sharks' morning skate Tuesday. "The best. Just a fantastic guy. A fantastic guy."

The relationship began when Thornton, a former first overall draft pick, chose to play for Davos HC during the National Hockey League's lockout in 2004-05. Krueger was coach of Switzerland's national team, and he helped the country become a source of elite talent for the NHL. The 60-year-old led Switzerland in 12 IIHF World Championships and three Winter Olympics.

Krueger is still revered in Switzerland and recognized as a pioneer in ice hockey's emergence. He guided the Swiss to a stunning upset of Canada at the Turin Games, a tour-de-force coaching performance that helped him earn a spot on the Edmonton Oilers' staff as an assistant under Tom Renney in 2010.

Thornton was on the wrong side of that upset. That hasn't soured him on Krueger, though. The two have become close in the year since, often seeing each other during their summers in Davos. Thornton, now 40 and in his 22nd season in the NHL, said publicly in the past he could imagine finishing his playing career in Switzerland.

For now, Thornton is attempting to bring a Stanley Cup to San Jose, his home since a trade from Boston in 2005.

"He's such a fantastic human being and I can understand why they would extend him to keep that person in your environment and in the room," Krueger said of Thornton. "His love for the game and his passion for the game and for being a great teammate is special. I have a lot of respect for him as an athlete for sure and as a human being."

That praise was reciprocated by Thornton. He beamed inside the KeyBank Center visitors' dressing room at the first mention of Krueger. Like Sabres players, Thornton is captivated by the manner in which Krueger delivers a message.

The townspeople of Davos are aware of Krueger. He's lived there since becoming the Swiss coach in 1997 and is a member of the World Economic Forum, though his work with the Sabres and, previously, Southampton F.C., has prevented him from attending the annual summit in recent years.

Thornton was captivated upon spending time with Krueger.

"You could feel it," Thornton said of Krueger. "You can. He has this presence that you want to be around a guy like that. Whatever it is, he has it. I'm glad to see the boys over there playing hard for him. He deserves to be on a good team."

There isn't a ton of hockey talk between the two men in the offseason. Thornton spends time with his wife and children, while Krueger is an avid outdoorsman. They have frequent encounters throughout the town, though. Thornton joked it's not the best place to be in the summer if you want to avoid someone.

They connected over their passion for the sport. You can count Thornton among the players, coaches and executives in the NHL who believe Krueger wasn't given a fair chance during his one season as coach of the Oilers in 2012-13.

"Not at all," Thornton said when asked if he's surprised to see Krueger behind an NHL bench again. "He had a quick stint there in Edmonton. I don't think they gave him a real good shot, but I'm glad to see him back. He's a great guy, super coach. You saw him in the World Cup there a couple years back. I'm so happy for him that he's back."

Tuesday was the final matchup of the season, and potentially, ever, for the two men, unless the Sabres have a chance encounter with the Sharks in the Stanley Cup final. It's unclear how much longer Thornton intends to play, while Krueger is in the early stages of his plan to bring playoff hockey back to Buffalo.

When their respective seasons are over, they'll likely reunite in Davos. Thornton already has a request for the Sabres' coach.

"He's such an easy guy to talk to," Thornton said. "Always a smile on his face. I always enjoy talking to him. Very friendly guy, a hospitable guy."

TV ratings show Sabres fans are losing sleep over the team's early success

By Alan Pergament

The Buffalo News

October 23, 2019

Buffalo Sabres fans are losing sleep over their team's strong early season performance. But in a good way.

The team's hot start had led to an average of a 7.6 rating on MSG over the first nine games. The rating for Buffalo's 4-3 overtime win over San Jose Tuesday night won't arrive for a few days.

The first five evening games averaged a 9.0 rating.

An afternoon game with Dallas on Columbus Day had a 6.4 rating, which isn't surprising since many afternoon games almost always have lower ratings and many fans probably were working while the game was being played.

But here's the most positive sign for interest in the team and evidence of fans losing sleep: The Sabres' loss to Anaheim in the first game of the three-game California road trip had a 5.9 rating even though it started at 10 p.m. and ended around 1 a.m.

The Sabres win over the Los Angeles Kings on the following night had a 5.2 rating even though it started at 10:30 p.m. and ended about 1:15 a.m. And the 4-3 win over San Jose in the last game of the trip had a 5.9 rating even though it started at 10:30 p.m. Saturday and ended around 1:15 a.m.

To put those ratings in perspective, it is rare for any prime-time entertainment program on broadcast television to average a 9 live rating in Western New York these days, meaning 9% of the Western New York households with TVs were tuned to that program. It is even rarer for any 10 p.m. prime-time entertainment program to get a rating above a 5.

Most prime-time entertainment programs at all hours don't even get a 5 rating and they usually are for only 30 minutes or an hour compared to three-hour games that have much more time to sell advertising.

The Sabres averaged an 8.1 rating last season, a 70% gain from the 4.8 average for the 2017-18 season.

But the ratings were as inconsistent as the team, which started the season 17-6-2 and collapsed in March with a 2-12-2 record.

The Sabres' 10-game winning streak last season started in game 16 and ended in game 26.

The Sabres are ahead of the pace of the first 20 games last season. The first 20 games, which included a five-game West Coast trip, averaged a 6.9 rating. The second 20 games that started five games into the winning streak averaged an 11.3 rating. The third 20 games averaged a 7.9 rating and the last 20 games when the wheels fell off the season averaged a 6.4 rating,

Ratings for Sabres games don't approach the ratings for Buffalo Bills regular-season games, which get in the range of the mid-30s to the low 40s.

Sabres' Sobotka is making a good impression on his team

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

October 23, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Vladimir Sobotka was the fans' whipping boy during last season. It wasn't a good year for him and during the summer, he decided he needed to change some things.

Some of the fans refuse to give him a chance and see how much he's improved. The man that has given him a chance is head coach Ralph Krueger, "Sobotka just doesn't get the credit he deserves here. He's allowing [Marcus] Johansson and [Jeff] Skinner some freedom here to take some risks here and there. He's a unbelievable physical presence on that line, and he's just been an unbelievable strength in character here, showing the young guys how we need to play. The way he stays above the puck, the way he plays a responsible game with it, but this is showing up in practice and carrying it into games. This is not luck what's happening here."

Johansson hasn't played center since his rookie year in Washington. He said he loves having Sobotka on his line because he helps him a lot, "He brings a lot both offensively and defensively. He works so hard on both sides of the puck, and for me being kind of new at center, it feels very good to have him out there to help me out and sometimes split that work."

Johansson also feels that Sobotka deserves more recognition for his game, "He's just such a solid two-way player, and he sees the ice very well and makes some really good plays, and I think he doesn't always get credit for it."

Krueger tells the players that there's a team within the team when you're talking lines, power play and penalty killing. Jimmy Vesey kills penalties up top with Sobotka, and the veteran has had some tips for Vesey, "I've talked to him about just the reads. There are times where you need to be patient and there are times where we need to be active, so I think he's done a really good job."

In Tuesday's game against San Jose, the Sabres produced many offensive chances in the first period because they were forcing the Sharks into turnovers in the offensive zone. Krueger said it's the group mentality that they have all over the ice, "It's the initial player always looking for that gap pressure at the puck, but then without any support behind him, and a disconnect with the rest of the group, you won't end up with possession. The possession always comes out of the second and third layers of support."

Sobotka leads the Sabres forwards in hits by a lot. He said he likes getting in hard to the corners, "We forecheck. We forecheck well. We're really fast on the ice and we steal a lot of pucks when we're on the forecheck, so I think that gives us some jump in a game."

Sobotka's 20 hits is third overall on the team and is 57th in the NHL. He said it's all in the way you look at the game, "I just feel better, and the most important thing is the support when you know you're not wasting energy on something that can't get the puck on, and that's frustrating. So I feel like this year is more playing together and it makes more sense to go into the corner and hit because there's another guy that are going to help you."

There's always support and it doesn't matter which side. We're always two or three together and we're playing together."

When I saw Sobotka last year, he was miserable on the ice and around the room. Things have totally changed this year. He smiles in practice, during games, around the locker room, and he's much happier, "I'm enjoying every minute of playing hockey and I've just tried to change a couple of things from last year and it seems to be working. I'm having fun."

Krueger speaks with his staff every day about sports science and about analytics. He uses a little bit of everything, because he knows it's not just about analytics, "I speak about those areas of no statistics that we have so many of in hockey. There's no analytics that will ever be able to summarize some of the work that's being done right now, and it's the guys buying into all those non-statistical efforts that make the difference in a hockey game and we just cannot let go of that."

Casey Mittelstadt has received a lot of credit for the defensive play he made that led to Jack Eichel's overtime goal. Krueger said when Mittelstadt made the play, the bench reacted the same way it would had they scored right then, "What I do spend time on is the way our bench erupted when Casey backchecked. It was crazy. I mean, I'm watching the entire bench cheering Casey's drive back to our net, and it's that lead up to the goal that makes you proud of what the group is doing as a coach."

The Sabres practiced in Buffalo on Wednesday before heading to New York to play the Rangers on Thursday.

Krueger: We created a system where we let players' genius execute

WGR 550

October 23, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres have been able to keep up their hot start to the 2019-20 season, now at 8-1-1 after Tuesday's 4-3 overtime win over the San Jose Sharks at KeyBank Center.

With Buffalo's 17 points in the standings through the first 10 games, it has the team atop the overall NHL standings. In the Atlantic Division, Buffalo currently sits three points ahead of the Boston Bruins, five points ahead of the Toronto Maple Leafs, and six points ahead of the Florida Panthers.

Leading the way for the Sabres is their captain Jack Eichel, who currently sits tied for fifth in league scoring with 14 points (6+8) in 10 games. Eichel had an outstanding night against the Sharks on Tuesday with a four point night (2+2), which included the overtime winner with 1:47 to go in the extra five minutes.

Carter Hutton has also been very strong for the Sabres to start the 2019-20 campaign. Through six games, the veteran netminder is a perfect 6-0-0 with a 1.65 goals-against average and a .943 save percentage.

One person who has had a big influence on the Sabres' hot start to the year is first-year head coach Ralph Krueger. He joined Howard Simon and Jeremy White on Wednesday for his weekly appearance on WGR to discuss the team's early season success and what has his players clicking through the first 10 games.

Here is some of what he had to say:

Krueger on the team's league-best goal differential:

"That's an area of the game where there aren't many statistics. It's a time when you sacrifice the most for your teammates and for the team. The buy-in to playing without the puck and the speed that we have without the puck is every bit as high as with the puck right now, and that's something we're really excited about. Because playing team defense and with the pace we've been under, playing 10 games already in this short time, it's been our foundation. It's been the reason we've been in every game and the guys are understanding the value of that effort."

Krueger on the improved goaltending and defensive play:

"It's always critical, how many chances are you giving up and how much chaos is there around your net versus shots hitting your net where the goalie has to make the initial save. We've definitely worked hard at eliminating those second chances. If you look at the [Los Angeles Kings> game, where we were really on our heels for the second period and [Hutton> had to play an excellent period for us."

"Save percentage is a combination of the goalie's performance and the team's support of him."

Krueger on the creativity of Eichel, and Eichel saying he should shoot more:

"One of the things I've spoken about since the beginning is we created a system where we let players' genius roll and let their genius execute. We don't want them thinking too much. Jack, with his world class skill set, you want to give him some parameters defensively and we need structure in both directions but there are spaces within that where he needs to make the decision that he feels is right. But he's finding that way and just yesterday, within that game, he realized that he needed to take some more shots himself, scores two goals and really drives the net hard for the winner."

Krueger on the improvement being shown by Casey Mittelstadt:

"He's improving daily, with Casey, there's so much learning at that age to do. Second year in the league and the responsibility that you have as a centerman, both directions, taking care of things in your own end. There's a lot coming at him and we're teaching on a daily basis, and what's exciting about Casey is he works as hard as anybody in this group and not just on the ice but off the ice. He's processing really well and what an exciting future he has."

Krueger on the minutes and usage of Rasmus Dahlin:

"He's leading our first power play, which is important that he has good energy for that. Similar to Casey, there's a lot to learn away from the puck and a lot to learn defensively in this league and the challenge of defending every single day needs energy. We're just being mindful of that and we have an experienced [defensive] corps where everybody is chipping in, depending on their role. "

"Right now, his 5-on-5 role is important to support us offensively but also to take care of the pressure we have in our own defensive structure and he's doing a good job. People speak way too much about the minutes, we do what we think is best within a game."

"The minutes are definitely something that will fall in his favor as he develops and grows as a defenseman in the National Hockey League."

Are these guys for real? How the Sabres' hot start compares with last season's 10-game winning streak

By John Vogl

The Athletic

October 23, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. – There's one colossal question out there: Are these guys for real?

That remains to be seen. But if there's one thing the Sabres have learned so far, it's that their game plan works.

"I don't think anybody can argue it," defenseman Colin Miller said. "When we do it, things are going well."

The 8-1-1 record is Exhibit A.

"Nothing ever replaces winning in sports," coach Ralph Krueger said. "I think that has been really good for our energy and for the buy-in that we have here."

The players have certainly bought in. But, understandably, there's hesitance among Buffalo's fan base and the outside hockey world. After all, it was just 11 months ago that the Sabres had a 10-game winning streak. It resulted in nothing more than a 27th-place finish.

The guys who lived through that plunge understand the reluctance as much as anyone.

"It's nice to get off to a good start, nice to get results," left wing Jeff Skinner said. "Obviously, we have a long way to go. We know that. We have a lot of work to do. We have things we want to work on."

"But we've gotten off to a good start and now we've got to build on it."

So, can they sustain this? Are the Sabres really, truly, finally a playoff-caliber team?

One way to get a glimpse is to compare the opening 10 games of this season to last year's 10-game run. The results and NHL rankings show Buffalo may indeed have what it takes to play meaningful games in March, April and possibly beyond.

Category	2018	2019
Goals	33 (10th)	37 (4th)
Goals against	24 (4th)	24 (9th)
Shots	315 (12th)	309 (10th)
Shooting percentage	10.5 (11th)	12.0 (4th)
Shots against	344 (27th)	326 (22nd)

The teams are remarkably close. The one sign of trouble is shots against. The Sabres appear to be behind in the puck-possession battle, which was a harbinger of trouble last season.

But wait ...

Category	2018	2019
Shot attempts	-59 (29th)	-23 (24th)
SAT Tied	-18 (25th)	5 (14th)
SAT Close	-39 (28th)	28 (7th)
SAT Ahead	-44 (29th)	-23 (25th)

The Sabres are outplaying the competition when it matters. They're out-attempting teams by 33 when the game is tied or within a goal.

It's a sign they are a legitimate team at five-on-five.

"When we play the right way, you see the results," Miller said. "If we play within our system, I think we're going to have a good chance every night. It's fun hockey right now."

The Sabres certainly could do a better job when they have the lead, but hunkering down rather than applying pressure has produced eight wins in 10 games.

"We find multiple things to work on after every game," Krueger said. "The learning and growing process will never end actually. It's just exciting for us to see the details that we can now focus on."

Category	2018	2019
Scoring first	7-0	7-1
One-goal games	9-0	4-0-1
Three-goal games	1-0	3-1
Overtime	7-0	3-1
Leading after two	3-0	7-0

Both Sabres teams thrived on jumping on the opposition. Quick starts remain important in the NHL, where 23 of the 31 teams have a winning record when they score first.

But this year's squad can build off its starts. They've got three wins by three goals or more, something last year's team did only once during its run.

"The way we've won some of our games is something we can build confidence in," Skinner said.

And on those rare occasions when it falls behind early, Buffalo has confidence it can come back. The Sabres are 2-0-1 when trailing after one period.

"It starts with the guys on the bench," left wing Zemgus Girgensons said. "Everyone stays positive. There's not a moment where we think we're going to lose a game. It's been like that throughout all these games this season so far. It's a great thing to see."

Last year's Sabres loved nail-biters. Nearly every game during the winning streak was close, including an astounding seven that went to overtime or a shootout.

This edition knows how to build a lead through 40 minutes and how to hold it without heading to the extra session every game.

Category	2018	2019
Power play	20.0 (13th)	30.8 (4th)
Penalty kill	88.9 (4th)	76.7 (20th)

The Sabres' power play has been a major story during the start. The unit has connected in eight of the 10 games, including three multigoal outings.

Victor Olofsson and his shot lead the way with six power-play goals, but four other players have scored (Jack Eichel, Conor Sheary, Casey Mittelstadt and Marcus Johansson) while five more have points (Rasmus Dahlin, Miller, Sam Reinhart, Skinner and Rasmus Ristolainen).

The depth is a good sign of sustainability. If opponents shade toward Olofsson on the right side, the Sabres can feed Eichel on the left, set up Skinner in the slot or hit Reinhart in front of the net.

"You need to be creative within each game and take each game with a different approach to neutralize some of that prescouting that's going on," Krueger said. "But what we have is an extremely skilled group when it comes to puck possession and the opportunity that lies within it. It's been a lot of fun. They've bought into the principles and we give them a lot of freedom to create within that."

Now let's look at individual stats, starting with goals from last year and this year.

Skinner remains at the top, but he doesn't have to carry the team this time. Of the seven scorers with multiple goals, three forward lines are represented – and the remaining line of Larsson, Okposo and Girgensons has a goal from every skater.

"Every single line can score," Dahlin said. "Every single line is dangerous out there."

"That's a fun way to play," Skinner added. "It's tough for other teams to defend when you have four lines rolling like that."

Last year's top line of Skinner, Eichel and Reinhart was overworked and, eventually, overwhelmed. Now Skinner is scoring alongside Johansson. Eichel is still feeding Reinhart. Mittelstadt and Sheary are connecting with Jimmy Vesey. The Larsson line is scoring.

Playoff teams need balance, and the Sabres seem to have it.

"We've had so many contributions from so many different guys and I think that's one of the keys to our success," Eichel said. "We've got a deep group right now. You're getting contributions from both goaltenders, all defensemen and all four lines. It speaks to the work that the guys have put in so far."

Let's look at the crease, starting with last season's winning streak

Once again, Hutton is guarding the net at an unsustainable rate. During the past 20 years, only three goaltenders have finished with a save percentage above .935: St. Louis' Brian Elliott (.940, 2011-12), Boston's Tim Thomas (.938, 2010-11) and Vancouver's Cory Schneider (.937, 2011-12). So Hutton's numbers will dip.

But he's thrived before in a structured system, recording a .931 save percentage with the Blues two seasons ago. It's asking a lot to do that again, but the defenders have confidence in Krueger's structure.

"We're working really hard with video and stuff after games because last year wasn't our best in the D-zone," Dahlin said. "Guys who were here last year really want to be solid in the D-zone. We have a really good structure going on. It's really easy to play it. It's simple."

It's harder to predict whether the Sabres are for real. Hesitance is understandable, but there are enough signs that it might actually be OK for fans to believe.

"We need to stay extremely humble with what's going on here and have respect always for the league and the opposition," Krueger said. "This start helps to confirm that we have a plan that can work. We know the opposition will have more and more respect for us as we go on here, and we will need to be better every day to continue having success."

After six years of losing, Zemgus Girgensons enjoying Sabres' revival

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

October 23, 2019

BUFFALO – Over winger Zemgus Girgensons' first six NHL seasons, the Sabres earned an average of only 67 points, missing the playoffs every year and finishing dead last three times.

Girgensons, 25, has endured a lot of losing over his 430-game career. His only taste of big league success before this month – a 10-game winning streak last November – was fleeting, as the Sabres quickly reverted to their hapless ways.

So the Sabres' scorching 8-1-1 start this season has been a special experience for Girgensons, one of three Sabres left from the 2013-14 tank team.

Having already earned 17 points, the Sabres rank first overall in the NHL entering tonight's contest against the New York Rangers, the start of a two-game road trip.

"It's been a blast," Girgensons said Monday inside KeyBank Center. "It's just been fun coming to the rink, playing hockey. I've seen it all. I've seen many coaches, many GMs."

Try five coaches and three general managers, ridiculous numbers that illustrate the Sabres' recent futility.

Under new coach Ralph Krueger, Girgensons said he's having "the most fun I've had in a long time."

"He's such a good speaker, good motivator," said Girgensons, who scored the winning goal in Saturday's 4-3 road victory against the San Jose Sharks. "He connects with the guys. He just makes you feel confident in yourself and confident in each other to have each others' backs on the ice and off the ice.

"So he's just been really positive bringing the guys together."

Five years ago, it seemed like Girgensons, the 14th overall pick in 2012, would be leading any Sabres revival. He scored 15 goals in 61 games in 2014-15, even earning a spot in the NHL All-Star Game thanks to his rabid fans at home in Latvia.

But following the tank years, Girgensons plummeted down the depth chart. In recent seasons, the former No. 1 center has mostly skated on the third or fourth line and killed penalties.

Still, the tenacious Girgensons has embraced his role, quietly going about his business and morphing into one of the Sabres' top checking forwards.

"Zemgus is all about what does the team want or need, and he will try his best to fill that role on a nightly basis, never missing a heartbeat because of ice time or responsibility," Krueger said. "He's just ready when you call upon him. He's very passionate and proud to be a Buffalo Sabre, which is excellent for us."

Girgensons has spent the entire season playing left wing beside center Johan Larsson and Kyle Okposo.

The line quickly became perhaps the Sabres' most consistent, showcasing a sturdy style and generating time in the offensive zone.

"He's never going to take a night off, you know what you're going to get from him every night," Okposo said. "That's something as a linemate that is extremely valuable. He's been awesome. ... He's definitely a fun guy to play with."

Larsson, who also joined the Sabres with defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen in 2013-14, said playing with Girgensons is "perfect."

"I love it," he said. "I know exactly what I get from him every night and exactly what I have in him."

Okposo understands Girgensons has made a difficult adjustment. High draft picks who have a history of scoring often struggle to seize a lesser role.

"It's not easy, for sure," Okposo said. "You come into the league with expectations, you're drafted as an offensive player and you're looked at as an offensive player your whole life.

"And then all of a sudden, you get to the NHL and to really embrace a role like that is a very unselfish thing to do and something that isn't easy. He's done a great job of it."

OT play earns Sabres' Casey Mittelstadt comparison to Nicklas Lidstrom

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

October 23, 2019

BUFFALO – Coach Ralph Krueger said the Sabres bench “erupted” long before captain Jack Eichel scored Tuesday’s wild overtime winner.

It started getting loud about 20 seconds earlier, when center Casey Mittelstadt put his head down and pursued San Jose Sharks defenseman Erik Karlsson as he raced out of the Buffalo zone on a two-on-one.

“It was crazy,” Krueger said following Wednesday’s practice inside KeyBank Center. “I mean, I’m watching the entire bench cheering Casey’s drive back to our net.”

Winning can breed a lot of things. For the 8-1-1 Sabres, who play a road game tonight against the New York Rangers, it has helped create a lively bench.

A few seconds later, a winded Mittelstadt intercepted Karlsson’s pass around his own net and skated into the neutral zone before circling back into his own end.

Mittelstadt appeared to be taking his time as Eichel and defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen jumped on the ice.

The Sharks, figuring they had a few seconds, also tried to change.

But Mittelstadt, 20, baited the Sharks, quickly passing the puck up to Ristolainen, who was streaking down the left wing on a two-on-one.

Before the Sharks could get their fresh players out, Eichel had buried Ristolainen’s rebound, securing the come-from-behind, 4-3 victory.

Then the Sabres bench exploded again.

“When you hear the players talk and use the word ‘tracking’ in front of you in a three-on-three overtime situation and everybody’s so excited and then it turns into a goal, it’s that lead up to the goal that really makes you proud of what the group is doing as a coach,” Krueger said.

Mittelstadt said he couldn’t remember what transpired before he fed Ristolainen.

“I think was just going to wait for our guys to get on the ice,” he said. “I didn’t think that they were going to change right away. Then when I saw all their guys jump off, then it was pretty easy play for me, I think. Risto and Eichs were pretty open and pretty far apart.”

Mittelstadt downplayed his backchecking, saying he had to pursue Karlsson during the three-on-three session.

“I don’t think it’s that big a deal,” he said. “I think anyone on our team would’ve done it. I guess it’s just something you got to do.”

Krueger, however, made Mittelstadt’s play the focus of Wednesday’s team meeting.

“Pretty much everything that’s happening here on the positive offensively ... is coming out of excellent defensive work and decisions that guys are making,” he said.

Earlier this week, Krueger cited Mittelstadt’s improved defensive play as the biggest factor in his recent offensive production.

Krueger said Mittelstadt’s effort Tuesday “was just a microscopic example of what’s going on in this team in general and the character we’ve shown.”

"The commitment we've shown without the puck is what's making even these victories possible," he said.

Following the game, NHL Network analyst Kevin Weekes, a former goalie, dissected the play and compared Mittelstadt's read to plays Hall of Fame defenseman Nicklas Lidstrom made throughout his legendary career.

"Uh, no," Mittelstadt said when asked if he ever thought he'd be compared to Lidstrom. "I think that's my roommate's job."

Mittelstadt is roommates with Rasmus Dahlin, a young Swedish defenseman.

After the game, Mittelstadt said one of his friends sent him the clip of Weekes analyzing the play.

"They were just making fun of me the whole time," he said. "It's pretty good. It's pretty funny."

Top Six: Week Three Sabres Observations

By Greg Vorse

Spectrum News

October 23, 2019

The Sabres had their first West Coast swing last week and returned to Buffalo to finish a home-and-home with San Jose — here are my top six observations.

1. West Coast Warriors

— The Sabres went out west and took four of a possible six points and I would sign up for a 67% point total for all road trips this season, so this was a win. That said, what was more impressive was that in the first game they were thumped 5-2 by the Ducks and it appeared a weakness was exposed in that they could be pushed around. Bouncing back to get the final four points showed this might not be the Sabres of yesteryear and I think thus far you have to thank Ralph Krueger's approach to coaching for the ability to bounce back.

2. Hutton's (a) Hero

— Carter Hutton was absolutely dominant out west pitching a shutout (his second in a row) and going 2-0-0 over the Sabres' last four games. In the process he earned the NHL's 3rd star for the week and had a shutout streak of 134:22. At the time of writing this he is 2nd in the league in wins (6), 1st in GAA (1.65) for netminders with 5 or more starts, 2nd in save percentage at .943, and 1st in shutouts (2).

3. Four Scoring Lines

— Depth has been something the Sabres have lacked for the better part of a decade, but through 10 games that seems to be a thing of the past. Blue and Gold currently has seven players with three or more goals, that includes four centers, meaning all four lines has at least one dude filling the net.

4. Home Ice Advantage

— Sabres are 5-0-0 at home, but you may think, "So, they're supposed to do that?" Well get this: the best they have been over the last seven years at home is 21-15-5. I'm not saying they are going 41-0-0 at KeyBank Center this year, but just being a .600 team there the rest of the way puts them at 27-14-0 and that is eight more points than any other time the last seven years.

5. Leave Your Scandella Hate at the Door

— After Vlad Sobotka, the man most hated player by Sabres fans has been Marco Scandella, but just watching his play this season tells you he's been a valuable part of the blueline and will make it even harder on Ralph Krueger when the team gets healthy. Looking at the numbers and he's been even more impressive. He's on pace for 24 points which would be a career high and far more than you would have expected from him. He is also a +7, that's a very flawed stat, but understand he was -13 a season ago.

6. Sabres are 8-1-1

— I don't think I need to explain this one...they are 8-1-1 and have the best record in hockey. Enjoy!

Biggest early-season surprise debated by NHL.com

NHL.com

October 24, 2019

The NHL season began three weeks ago. It is a small sample size, but large enough to start forming some opinions about what is happening across the League. For this edition of the roundtable, we asked nine staff writers what has been most surprising -- good or bad -- thus far in the 2019-20 NHL season.

Here are their thoughts:

Amalie Benjamin, staff writer

Two words: Edmonton Oilers. Sure, it's a small sample size but the 7-2-1 start of the Oilers is pretty stunning. And more than that, it's how they're doing it, led in part by a resurgence from James Neal. After stealing Neal from the rival Calgary Flames (for Milan Lucic), he already has nine goals in 10 games after scoring seven in 63 games last season. He ranks second in the League in goals, one behind David Pastrnak of the Boston Bruins, which isn't a statement that anyone expected to be true at any point in this season, and that's in addition to the incredible starts from Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl, who are the bread-and-butter for the Oilers. It's hard to tell if this will last - that might be too much to hope for - but right now Edmonton is my surprise of the (early) season.

Tim Campbell, staff writer

Agree completely with Amalie that small sample sizes are not always wise and sometimes dangerous, but for me, the New Jersey Devils are the biggest surprise. General manager Ray Shero was an offseason darling for being so proactive after the 2019 NHL Draft Lottery win. The first three weeks of the new season are certainly not what Shero had in mind. The goaltending of Cory Schneider and Mackenzie Blackwood has raised a lot of questions with a 3.63 goals-against average. Defenseman P.K. Subban, with three points (one goal, two assists) in eight games, has not had the impact imagined since he was acquired in a trade with the Nashville Predators. Free-agent acquisition Wayne Simmonds has had a dull start with one assist in eight games. League-wide chatter, often hard to stop, has focused on forward Taylor Hall's lack of a contract extension so far, and trade rumors have already begun. The No. 1 pick of the 2019 NHL Draft, center Jack Hughes, will likely turn out to be a good player but has underperformed after being overhyped. Shero's moves may yet yield dividends, but the results so far rank as a major disappointment and surprise.

Nick Cotsonika, columnist

I know the Buffalo Sabres were first in the NHL as late as Nov. 28 last season. I know coach Ralph Krueger melded players quickly when he led Team Europe to the final of the World Cup of Hockey 2016. Still, I'm surprised the Sabres are at the top of the League again at 8-1-1, one point ahead of the Washington Capitals, who have played one more game. They aren't going to keep up this pace, but can they make a run at the Stanley Cup Playoffs? Are they farther along than we thought? Rasmus Dahlin is having a sophomore surge instead of a slump. The 19-year-old has 10 points (one goal, nine assists) in 10 games, including seven on the power play, which is the most among League defensemen. He's a big reason Buffalo is clicking at 30.8 percent on the power play, fourth in the League, and that's a big part of their success.

William Douglas, staff writer

Nick makes good points about Buffalo and the job that Krueger has done in getting the team to perform well this early in the season, which makes the Devils' poor start more glaring. It wasn't supposed to be this way. Subban was supposed to add some box office charisma and offensive firepower, Simmonds was supposed to be the goal-scoring immovable object in front of the net and Hall was supposed to return to his 93-point (39 goals, 54 assists) Hart Trophy-winning form from 2017-18. Instead, each is struggling to score, and a power play that looked formidable on paper is 29th in the League at 6.9 percent with two goals in 29 opportunities. There's plenty of time for Subban, Simmonds, Hall, and Hughes to turn it around, but this definitely isn't the start that New Jersey envisioned.

Rob Reese, fantasy editor

Similar to what Bill noted about the Devils' poor start, the Dallas Stars were a unanimous playoff favorite among NHL.com writers during the preseason but have fallen short of expectations in October. No. 1 defenseman John Klingberg has struggled, and the top forwards Tyler Seguin, Alexander Radulov and Jamie Benn have also been quiet. Forward Roope Hintz leads the team with six goals, which is a nice surprise. A large part of their offensive

struggles can be linked to struggles on the power play, which at 9.4 percent ranks 28th in the League. The NHL.com Fantasy department still believes in the Stars, who have one of the most valuable goalies in Ben Bishop. Goal support will allow them to climb out of this early-season hole.

Tom Gulitti, staff writer

Like Rob, I'm surprised the Stars haven't been better, but they are showing signs of life with wins in their past two games to improve to 3-7-1. Many expected them to be Stanley Cup contenders heading into the season, and maybe they will be. Their slow start reminds of the St. Louis Blues, who similarly didn't initially live up to expectations last season but ended up winning the Cup after being in last place on Jan 3. Dallas' offense, which is last in the NHL at 2.09 goals per game, should improve with Joe Pavelski, who has two goals in his past four games after scoring none in his first seven, getting more comfortable and Corey Perry healthy after missing the first seven games with a broken foot. However, counting on being able to pull off a Blues-like turnaround in the second half would be unwise.

Tracey Myers, staff writer

There are some good choices that have already been mentioned, and I was one of the people who definitely thought the Stars would have a better start. But here's another team that is a surprise to me: the Anaheim Ducks. So far, the Ducks are reminding me of the Stars from last season. They're not scoring much (24 goals in 10 games), but have been stingy defensively for the most part, allowing 1.78 goals per game prior to a 6-2 loss at the Nashville Predators on Tuesday. Goalies John Gibson and Ryan Miller have led the charge, but the Ducks will probably need more production for long-term success. Nevertheless, they are off to an excellent start.

Dan Rosen, senior staff writer

Tracey stole my thunder by saying the Ducks. I think she heard me talking about them on this week's NHL @TheRink podcast and figured she would get to them first because she was ahead of me in the queue for this discussion. I'm going to pivot and take John Carlson's 20 points in October as the biggest surprise. It's not surprising that the Washington Capitals defenseman is putting up points -- he had 70 last season -- but I don't think you could find anybody who would say he'd be leading the League in scoring through three weeks. Carlson has been impressive in his decision making and passing. He's always looking to set up plays. Many are resulting in goals. He's well on his way to being the fourth defenseman since 2000 to average a point-per-game in a season, joining Brent Burns last season (83 points in 82 games), Erik Karlsson in 2015-16 (82 in 82) and Nicklas Lidstrom in 2005-06 (80 in 80).

Mike Zeisberger, staff writer

Buffalo is about a 90-minute drive from Toronto (friendly customs agents permitting) and I've made the trek there numerous times the past few seasons only to be disappointed by subpar hockey. But there's an entirely different vibe around the Sabres this year. Jack Eichel, enigmatic as he can be sometimes, has always been a special talent but often has looked frustrated with the supporting cast not stepping up. They are now. Let's face it; even the most optimistic of Buffalo fans could not have predicted the Sabres would be 8-1-1 through their first 10 games. Eichel had four points (two goals, two assists) to help the Sabres defeat the San Jose Sharks 4-3 in overtime Tuesday and has 14 points (six goals, eight assists) this season. He's tied for the team lead in goals with forwards Jeff Skinner and Victor Olofsson. As Nick astutely pointed out, there's no sophomore slump for Dahlin, who is second on the Sabres in scoring with 10 points. Also, goalie Carter Hutton went 134:22 without giving up a goal until the Sharks opened the scoring Tuesday. Obviously, this surprising team is buying what Krueger is selling. And so am I.

The Krueger Effect: How new Sabres coach has led turnaround

Greg Wyshynski

ESPN

October 23, 2019

Since entering the NHL in 2008, Kyle Okposo has played for six head coaches. Ralph Krueger is his third one in four seasons with the Buffalo Sabres.

What's different about him?

"Uh ... a lot?" Okposo said. "Where do I start?"

Krueger, a 60-year-old Canadian who played professional hockey in Germany, became a head coach in Austria and then with the Swiss national team that upset his home and native land in the 2006 Winter Olympics. After a brief stint in the NHL with the Edmonton Oilers, he changed genres, left for the U.K. and became chairman of Southampton Football Club in the Premier League. He said that opportunity was less about soccer than it was about leadership, a virtue Krueger extolled during his time with the Geneva-based World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council, which focused on new models of leadership. He had a side gig in 2016 as head coach of Team Europe, a desperate collection of nationally unaffiliated NHL players whom he led to the championship round of the World Cup of Hockey.

Oh, and his 2002 book "Teamlife: Über Niederlagen zum Erfolg" ("over defeats to success") has five stars on Amazon. That, too.

So there's a lot that makes Ralph Krueger different than your typical NHL bench boss. That couldn't be more refreshing for the Sabres.

"It's definitely a different environment," center Jack Eichel told ESPN. "He does a really good job with the guys in the room. Our opinions really matter to him. When you do that and you incorporate everyone into your decision-making, you get a really good response from everyone. So many things, in a short amount of time, to let us know that we're all in this together."

The Krueger Effect has been transformative. The Sabres are one of the league's biggest early season stunners, with an 8-1-1 record out of the gate, unexpected offensive balance and goaltending ranked in the top five in save percentage (.926).

The changes haven't just been tactical -- though anyone who has seen the Sabres play with the puck pressure, quickness and creativity Krueger demands has witnessed those systemic tweaks -- but are also attitudinal. This is Buffalo. These are the Sabres. The expectation of victory has been antithetical to the franchise, which has the longest active playoff drought (eight seasons) and has never won the Stanley Cup since entering the NHL in 1970.

Yet confidence is found here, in abundance.

"It starts with the guys on the bench. Everyone stays positive. There's not a moment where we feel like we're going to lose a game," forward Zemgus Girgensons said. "It's been like that all season. It's great to see."

Krueger knows that "all season" means, at this point, a minuscule fraction of it.

"The picture is so small that I'm not allowing surprise into my brain at the moment, he said. "We need to stay extremely humble with what's going on here and have respect, always, for the league and opposition.

"It's about constant improvement. Anything else would just be a distraction."

Jason Botterill had to get this right.

Since being hired as Sabres general manager in May 2017 and taking over what could be correctly called "a rebuild inside a rebuild," he had hired and fired his first coach in Phil Housley. His team had missed the playoffs in

consecutive seasons. Fortune had smiled upon him in the acquisition of winger Jeff Skinner from the Carolina Hurricanes, whose no-move clause helped him orchestrate a trade to Buffalo, where he scored 40 goals last season. Fortune had frowned in the trade that sent center Ryan O'Reilly to the St. Louis Blues, with whom he won the Conn Smythe and hoisted the Stanley Cup while Buffalo sifted through spare parts and draft picks.

When Botterill and his staff sketched out what they wanted in a candidate, NHL head-coaching experience was the first priority -- something Housley didn't have prior to the Buffalo job. Krueger's head-coaching stint with Edmonton lasted only 48 games in a lockout-truncated season, but he was an associate coach with the Oilers in the two years leading up to it. He was also a consultant for the Carolina Hurricanes while serving as head coach of the Swiss national team. The Sabres liked his quick adjustments behind the bench for international teams and heard rave reviews of his communication style from former players.

Botterill inquired about Krueger in 2017 before hiring Housley, but the latter's commitment to Southampton prevented a return to the NHL. This time, it was a different answer.

"With Ralph's résumé, I know he had other opportunities. That's what gets us excited that he wanted to come here," Botterill said. "He's a kid from Manitoba who loves the game of hockey and has a passion about being a teacher."

Okposo says Krueger is the best kind of teacher: one who makes his assignments and his expectations clear.

"He's got a concise, demanding but nonconfrontational way about him. It's something that the team has gravitated toward. He's been able to get everybody on the same page very quickly," Okposo said. "It's just honesty. If he doesn't like something, he's going to say it. And if we don't like something, we're going to say it and talk it out. You know where you stand with him. There's no extra talk. There's no needless meetings. There's no wasted time. Everything that we're doing, there's a purpose to it."

That includes, for example, not doing anything on the ice some mornings.

Krueger is an advocate of fewer morning skates. "I think it's all about energy and understanding the different ways we can gather energy," he said. "Making sure the quality of our execution stays high. What I've found is that if you're practicing with a team that's tired mentally or physically, your execution principles just fall away."

"That's probably one of the things that comes out of my experience with the Premier League. Watching the way they gather or use energy on game days. You don't see any pregame warm-ups or activities there at all. We played at 8 or 8:30 at night. It got me thinking, and in speaking with sports scientists, that pregame skates are often an expenditure of energy you don't really need."

Eichel supports it.

"It helps. With the opportunity not to be on the ice as much, you get more opportunities to recover, spend more time in the weight room," he said. "We've had a lot of man games lost in the last few years to tissue injuries. It's a long season. It wears on you."

So does losing, if you're the Buffalo Sabres.

Housley went 58-84-22 as head coach in Buffalo. There were peaks and valleys but not enough consistency to build confidence. Perhaps it's the clean slate Krueger arrived with or his positive disposition bleeding into the dressing room, but this season feels different.

"Winning helps. It gives you that confidence on the bench, especially in tight games," said Skinner, who committed to the Sabres on an eight-year contract extension last summer.

Is "culture change" too strong a label?

"It's kind of a general word, 'culture.' It's a feeling that you have. The kind of hockey that you play," Skinner said. "I don't really think that you can trademark how you're playing this early in the season. We had stretches that we liked and stretches when we wanted to improve our consistency."

What the Sabres have liked: a power-play that has scored 11 goals in its first 35 opportunities, with six of them coming from rookie winger Victor Olofsson. Krueger said the key is unpredictability.

"It's about finding ways to surprise the opposition," he said. "They're pre-scouting. So you have to be creative in each game and take each game with a creative approach to neutralize some of that. What we have is an extremely skilled group when it comes to puck possession and the opportunities that lie within it. They bought into the principles. We allow them a lot of freedom to create within that."

Olofsson, who led all rookies with six goals through nine games, has spent the majority of the season playing with Eichel. Krueger made the seemingly bold choice to break up the Eichel-Skinner combination that produced 53 goals last season and -- if we're being candid -- helped the latter earn a \$72 million contract extension.

"I didn't really have a reaction," Skinner told ESPN. "I've been doing this long enough to know that training camp happens, there are different line combinations that go with it, and then from there, you build off of what's working. The lineup that you start a season with is never going to be the lineup you end with. There's always mixing and matching. When I first got to camp, I had never played with [Marcus] Johansson before. So that was a nice surprise."

Johansson was a shrewd offseason signing for Botterill, adding a veteran with experience playing with high-end talent to his forward group. So far, everything that needs to happen has happened with this group, from the emergence of Olofsson to a resurgent Casey Mittelstadt (six points in nine games) to the fact that 12 Sabres have goals through nine games.

"That's the nice thing about having the depth we do. No matter where you play in the lineup, you're going to play with skill guys," Skinner said.

Colin Miller has been an important veteran addition to a young Sabres roster. Matt Cohen/Icon Sportswire
Two other offseason additions to the blue line -- Henri Jokiharju from the Chicago Blackhawks and Colin Miller from the Vegas Golden Knights -- have solidified the back end in front of goalies Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark, who are under the tutelage of highly regarded goalie coach Mike Bales, last seen transforming the Carolina Hurricanes' journeyman netminders.

For Miller, who has been paired with burgeoning star Rasmus Dahlin, coming to the Sabres after spending two years with a veteran group in Vegas was jarring.

"A little bit of a young room," he said. "There's some stuff that the group hasn't been through, like learning how to manage games to become that team that we want to be."

Miller credits Krueger with helping to mature them.

"You could feel his presence right away," he said. "Very good with breaking things down. As a player, that's what you want: what he wants from you, to have that open conversation."

Honesty is the policy in Buffalo. The players marvel at the open lines of communication between themselves and the coaches and how constructive those conversations have been.

"Guys really appreciate that -- when they're in on what's going on," Eichel said. "Everyone talks about how positive he is. Even when he's critical, he makes guys excited to get better. He brings a lot of good energy to the rink."

Krueger said those conversations started in the summer. "Some face to face and some on telephones," he said. "I felt always, since day one, a willingness to buy in to what we're doing here. To learn how to play the way we have to have a chance every night, so when we enter third periods, there's an opportunity for points. That's always been the case."

The Sabres have collected points like this before. Last season, they won 10 straight games from Nov. 8 through Nov. 27. Then they went winless in five games. In March, they lost 15 out of 16 games. It was 10 steps forward and a tumble backward down a mountain.

That's why Okposo believes you have to look beyond the team's record. He has this season. And he likes what he sees.

"I don't think we were playing very well when we did that," he said. "Watch the games we've played [this season] vs. those 10 games, and there's no comparison. The results are similar, but we're playing complete games now."

As Krueger said, the start of the season is a small picture. When does it get magnified? When does Krueger get a true handle on what the Sabres could accomplish?

"I know what the team is already. I know what our strengths are, and I know what we need to work on," he said. "I think this group is also very honest, so players interact with us coaches in a very honest way and are working together on those deficits and working on those strengths. So the picture is actually full. Within it we see all the challenges that we have to be the team we want to be. We're still a ways off. You never stop growing. You never stop learning in this league.

"The players are all-in. It's a lot of fun, but it's fun with hard work and sacrifice for each other. The spirit's amazing. Nobody cares who's scoring anymore. They're all cheering for each other. There's a general hunger to be a good team. That's what we're building on here."

NHL Notebook: Krueger's Sabres taking hot start in stride, TO troubles

Canadian Press

October 23, 2019

Joe Thornton's eyes lit up when the conversation pivoted to Ralph Krueger.

"Just a fantastic guy," said the veteran centre. "Just a phenomenal guy to be around."

The two go back 15 years to when Thornton was riding out the first NHL lockout playing in Davos, Switzerland, and Krueger was head coach of the country's national team.

"You can feel it ... he just has this presence," Thornton added. "You want to be around a guy like that."

"Whatever it is, he has it."

What Krueger has right now is the Buffalo Sabres atop the NHL standings at 8-1-1 following Tuesday's 4-3 overtime victory against Thornton's San Jose Sharks.

Hired as the franchise's 19th coach in May to replace Phil Housley, the 60-year-old has implemented an up-tempo, offensive brand his players have latched onto early.

Krueger is open to new ideas and wants feedback.

"He's definitely respected the guys in the room and our opinions," said Sabres captain Jack Eichel, who leads the team with 14 points. "It's just the overall connection. He's done so much to get us to buy into what he's saying ... it's his delivery, it's his message, it's the energy he brings. He's such a positive person."

"When you're around that, it makes you want to be better for him. He just does a really good job of bringing out the best in people."

Getting a message across when you're winning, of course, doesn't hurt either.

"This helps to confirm that we have a plan that can work," Krueger said before the San Jose game. "Nothing ever replaces winning."

But the majority of these Sabres have seen a run like this before. Buffalo led the NHL with a 17-6-2 record on Nov. 27, 2018, following a 10-game winning streak before losing 41 of its next 57 games to miss the playoffs for the eighth straight season.

That's why the players aren't getting ahead of themselves, but also aren't concerned about a potential collapse with Krueger at the helm.

"We've grown up a little bit," Eichel said. "I don't think we're guarded at all. You can learn a lot from last year, but I don't think we're worried about that."

With a long, eclectic resume, Krueger isn't afraid to work outside the box.

"We don't really operate on anything traditional here," said the native of Steinbach, Man. "We're trying to operate on what we think is best for the Buffalo Sabres today, and then tomorrow, and then the next day."

"I'm not really interested in norms and that kind of decision-making."

Sabres goalie Carter Hutton, who's 6-0-0 with two shutouts, a .943 save percentage and a 1.65 goals-against average, said this season simply feels different. Buffalo's 10-game winning run in 2018-19 was largely a mirage, with seven of those victories coming after regulation, including three in a shootout.

"We weren't playing the right way," Hutton said. "It's more about our structure than anything. Last year we just didn't have that ... that's what we're trying to find."

Sabres general manager Jason Botterill has liked what he's seen so far under Krueger, and the roster's willingness to jump on board.

"Ralph has brought in a clear message and has done a great job in communicating with our group," Botterill said. "But I also think our players have been very open to it."

Krueger's journey back to the NHL has been well-documented. He had a cup of coffee behind the Edmonton Oilers' bench in the lockout-shortened 2012-13 season, but has largely seen his professional success come outside North America.

He was a mainstay with the Swiss program, led Team Europe to a surprise second-place finish at the 2016 World Cup of Hockey and spent the last five years running soccer's Southampton of the English Premier League.

"When he talks, guys are going to listen no matter what he's talking about, whether it's hockey or life," said Sabres centre Sam Reinhart. "We've really been enjoying our time with him so far and doing what we can to learn.

"He's done a good job of getting everyone on the same page."

But Eichel cautioned it remains a work in progress.

"We're continuing to get closer as a group off the ice and continuing to learn more about ourselves as a team on the ice," he said. "It's a process. It's not one that's going to be done tomorrow or next month.

"We're just trying to continue to evolve the whole year and become the best team we can be."

TROUBLE IN TORONTO

The Maple Leafs sit a pedestrian 5-4-1 through 11 games following Tuesday's 4-2 defeat in Boston, a result that came on the heels of a blown third-period lead at home in Monday's 4-3 overtime loss to Columbus. Worrying trends stretching back to last season continue to dog Toronto, including defensive miscues and a lack of focus. Star centre Auston Matthews was blunt in his assessment Tuesday night: "It's just not good enough ... I need to be better. All of us need to be better."

CAPTAIN CANUCK

Bo Horvat grabbed Vancouver by the scruff of its neck Tuesday, leading a five-goal third-period barrage with his first NHL hat trick in the Canucks' 5-2 comeback victory in Detroit. Named the team's captain Oct. 9, Horvat had one assist through five games, but scored five times on Vancouver's just-completed 3-1-0 road trip.

RED-HOT CARLSON

Washington's John Carlson is the first player to reach 20 points this season. The Capitals defenceman scored twice in a 5-3 victory at Calgary on Tuesday to bring his total to five goals and 15 assists — three more than Edmonton captain Connor McDavid and Boston sniper David Pastrnak.

Mittelstadt's OT effort was a microcosm of Sabres' defensive success

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

October 23, 2019

Casey Mittelstadt said his friends sent him the clip to make fun of him. His roommate, Rasmus Dahlin, laughed when he heard the comparison.

"Oh, he's Nick Lidstrom?" Dahlin said. "Nice."

The video in question was a breakdown by NHL Network analyst and former goaltender Kevin Weekes, who lauded the two-way effort from Mittelstadt that led to Jack Eichel's overtime goal against San Jose on Thursday.

"That's a Nick Lidstrom-esque, defenseman-type read there," Weekes said during the segment, which you can watch below.

It's the sort of comparison that can draw chirps from friends when you're a 20-year-old who's just two seasons removed from playing high school hockey. It was also a point of emphasis from Ralph Krueger and his coaching staff when the Sabres met Wednesday morning.

The play begins with Mittelstadt working to retrieve a puck behind his own net with a pair of Sharks surrounding him, one of which is six-time All-Star Erik Karlsson. Mittelstadt puts his head down and hustles up the ice as Karlsson emerges for a 2-on-1 rush, defended by Henri Jokiharju.

Jokiharju drops to the ice, stalling Karlsson just long enough for Mittelstadt to complete his pursuit. The second-year center intercepts Karlsson's crossing pass, carries the puck into the neutral zone, circles back to give his linemates a chance to change, then hits Rasmus Ristolainen with a pass at the far blue line, setting the Sabres free on a game-winning, odd-man rush.

"I kind of was wincing for him seeing that it was Karlsson because a lot of times you're not going to catch him," Sabres forward Jimmy Vesey said. "But he put his head down and got back. I think Henri played the 2-on-1 very well, bought Casey that one extra second for him to get back. He gets the puck and we win the game."

Mittelstadt downplayed the sequence.

"I saw Karlsson get the puck and they had a two-on-one," Mittelstadt said. "I pretty much had no choice but to go, I guess. I don't know, I don't think it's that big a deal. I think anyone on our team would've done it. I guess it's just something you got to do."

To Krueger, the idea that any member of the team would do the same thing is what made the play a big deal. Krueger cited the sequence as a microcosm of the dedication to playing without the puck that's made the Sabres so successful through their 8-1-1 start.

"It was the main point in the meeting today," Krueger said. "The tracking that he did from our end back to the front of our net in stealing that puck, then delaying in the neutral zone so they got baited into making a line change and then turning it up ice really quickly on that opportunity.

"It definitely didn't get lost, because pretty much everything that's happening here on the positive offensively - five-on-five, four-on-four or three-on-three - is coming out of excellent defensive work and decisions that guys are making. That gets lost in the general analysis of a game - what happens, the tracking, the way the D are gapping up, and all of that is causing the opposition stress in that we're attacking them when they're quite weak, and that's what happened there."

The Sabres have talked about playing aggressively ever since Krueger took over as coach. It's their play away from the puck that allows them to do it.

Defensemen feel able to play with tight gaps because they know there will be support to retrieve the puck. They pinch down low in the offensive zone because they can trust forwards to cycle back and take their place up top.

"Across all four lines, we've tracked back well," Vesey said. "It's tough to play against that when you're the other team, when our D are staying up and the forwards are coming back. It's never fun.

"I think just coming back hard, you're in the right position a lot more often than not," added Conor Sheary. "I think we've just been creating turnovers and turning it into offense."

For an example, look at Mittelstadt's goal in San Jose on Saturday. Sheary hustles hard late in a shift to negate an icing, then Vesey tracks back to force a takeaway in the neutral zone before setting up a Jokiharju shot from the point.

Krueger felt his team's commitment to playing without the puck was evident in the reaction the bench had to Mittelstadt's overtime effort on Saturday.

"What I do spend time on is the way our bench erupted when Casey backchecked," he said. "It was crazy. I mean, I'm watching the entire bench cheering Casey's drive back to our net.

"I've spoken to [the media] a little bit about the life on our bench right now, and when you hear the players talk and use the word tracking in front of you in a three-on-three overtime situation and everybody's so excited and then it turns into a goal, it's that lead up to the goal that really makes you proud of what the group is doing as a coach."

As for Mittelstadt, he now has seven points in 10 games this season. Five have come in his last three outings, during which Krueger has seen an increased comfort in the centerman's defensive game.

Did he ever think he'd be compared to a Hall of Fame defenseman like Lidstrom? Mittelstadt shrugged and laughed.

"Uh, no," he said. "I think that's my roommate's job."