



Buffalo Sabres

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Pittsburgh hosts Buffalo for season opener

The Associated Press

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BOTTOM LINE: The Pittsburgh Penguins face off against the Buffalo Sabres at home for the season opener.

Pittsburgh finished 26-15-11 in Eastern Conference action and 23-14-4 at home in the 2018-19 season. The Penguins scored 56 power play goals on 228 power play opportunities last season.

Buffalo finished 19-25-8 in Eastern Conference play and 12-24-5 on the road in the 2018-19 season. The Sabres recorded 378 assists on 221 total goals last season.

The matchup Thursday is the first meeting this season between the two teams.

Penguins Injuries: Alex Galchenyuk: day to day (lower body).

Sabres Injuries: None listed.

Analyzing the Sabres' first roster under new coach Ralph Krueger

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

October 3, 2019

Jason Botterill didn't perform the roster surgery that some expected. The Buffalo Sabres' General Manager retained his restricted free agents and did not trade Rasmus Ristolainen.

There weren't any contract buyouts, either. Instead, Botterill supplemented his core players with four important additions: Marcus Johansson, Jimmy Vesey, Colin Miller and Henri Jokiharju. The Sabres also improved their depth in the organization by adding John Gilmour and Curtis Lazar.

Rather than parting ways with players who struggled under former coach Phil Housley, Botterill is hoping new coach Ralph Krueger gets more production out of the Sabres.

"I thought we've built each game," Miller said at the conclusion of the preseason. "It's still preseason, so obviously other teams aren't going as hard as they will be in the regular season. Everyone is getting their feet wet. It will be fun once we finally start."

Here is a closer look at the roster the Sabres will take to Pittsburgh for the season opener Thursday night in PPG Paints Arena.

Forwards (13): Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart, Victor Olofsson, Jeff Skinner, Marcus Johansson, Vladimir Sobotka, Jimmy Vesey, Casey Mittelstadt, Conor Sheary, Evan Rodrigues, Zemgus Girgensons, Johan Larsson, Kyle Okposo.

Jason Pominville was the only notable loss this offseason, and the Sabres added Johansson and Vesey, two players who could make a significant impact.

Johansson had an impressive performance in the Stanley Cup playoffs last spring for the Boston Bruins, who lost in Game 7 of the Stanley Cup final. He has two 20-goal seasons and already has brought leadership to the Sabres' dressing room. Johansson, though, will play center for the Sabres, a position that he hasn't manned full-time in several years.

Vesey could be in position for a breakout season. The 26-year-old winger had 16 even-strength goals in each of the past two seasons for the New York Rangers, but he'll benefit from receiving consistent time with talented linemates in Buffalo. Vesey will be a candidate for the first line if Krueger's initial groups don't produce at the start of the season.

Olofsson, who scored a career-high 30 goals for Rochester in 2018-19, is expected to start the season on the top line.

The Sabres also return their top-three scorers from last season: Eichel, Skinner and Reinhart. Eichel, 22, should take another significant step after recording career highs in goals (28), assists (54) and points (82). Skinner, meanwhile, received an eight-year, \$72 million contract after scoring a career-high 40 goals. One of the important questions entering the season is how will Skinner perform if he's not placed on a line with Eichel.

Reinhart was outstanding during the latter portion of training camp. He was disruptive in the defensive zone and made outstanding plays with the puck. He appears to be in line for another big season, especially if he remains on a line with Eichel.

Sobotka, Girgensons and Larsson are likely to be in the lineup Thursday in Pittsburgh. Each has made a strong impression on Krueger, but will need to produce more offensively this season. Killing penalties won't be enough. If the three aren't going to contribute goals, they'll need to forecheck consistently and be difficult to play against in the defensive zone. Lazar is among the forwards whom the Sabres would consider recalling if the team doesn't receive enough production from the bottom-six.

Mittelstadt needs to take a big jump this season. The 20-year-old gained muscle mass and is equipped with lessons learned from his first full year in the NHL, but struggled to adjust to the new systems in training camp. The Sabres need to find a way to free up Mittelstadt to use his skill on offense.

Rodrigues will provide versatility and a consistent effort. He's capable of producing more than the nine goals he scored last season. Sheary was also disappointed in his 14-goal season but should benefit from feeling more comfortable in Buffalo. Okposo, meanwhile, is trying to rebound from a season in which he scored 14 goals among 29 points in 78 games.

Defensemen (7): Rasmus Dahlin, Colin Miller, Rasmus Ristolainen, Jake McCabe, Marco Scandella, Henri Jokiharju, John Gilmour.

Botterill addressed the Sabres' deficiencies on the back end by acquiring three talented puck-moving defensemen over the past eight months: Miller, Jokiharju and Brandon Montour.

Additionally, Miller, 26, has 30 games of playoff experience, 20 of which occurred during Vegas' run to the Stanley Cup final in 2018. He is expected to begin the season on a pairing with Dahlin, providing stability and guidance to help the 19-year-old adjust to a new system under Krueger.

Dahlin focused on improving his shot this offseason and recalled taking roughly 100 per day once he began his on-ice work this summer. The Calder Trophy finalist had nine goals among 44 points -- the second-most points by an 18-year-old defenseman in NHL history -- while playing all 82 games last season. It's realistic to think he'll produce more offensively given the improved shot and additional support around him.

Ristolainen isn't leaving Buffalo, at least not for now. The 24-year-old expressed frustration with all of the losing during his time with the Sabres and may have requested a trade. Yet, he remains on the roster and played well during the preseason, showing the blend of skill and toughness that make him effective.

The Sabres are hoping McCabe and Scandella play better under Krueger. The former wasn't ineffective last season. McCabe's problem has been health, as he's been limited to 112 regular-season games over the past two years. He is an important part of the Sabres' penalty kill and his presence is particularly important with Zach Bogosian out. McCabe can block shots, kill penalties and sticks up for teammates.

Scandella underwent ankle surgery this offseason and had a strong preseason. He'll benefit from Krueger's change in defensive-zone structure.

Jokiharju, 20, was acquired this offseason from Chicago in exchange for Alexander Nylander. The Blackhawks had concerns about Jokiharju's defensive play, however, and the Sabres are intrigued by the offensive ability. Jokiharju will need to be competent in his own zone if he's to remain on the team once Montour returns from injury.

Gilmour was the story of training camp. The 26-year-old was signed to a one-way contract July 1 after scoring 20 goals among 54 points last season for Hartford of the American Hockey League. Gilmour has elite speed for a defenseman and isn't afraid to join the rush, but he made the Sabres because of his impressive play without the puck. He'll need to continue to show that in games and practices if he is going to hold on to his roster spot.

Goalies (2): Carter Hutton, Linus Ullmark.

Mike Bales was arguably one of the Sabres' top offseason acquisitions. The goaltender coach has two Stanley Cup rings from his time in Pittsburgh and guided the Carolina Hurricanes' tandem to the playoffs last spring. He will try to coax more consistency out of Hutton and Ullmark, both of whom were solid at times last season.

However, each endured a difficult stretch and struggled to handle the number of high-danger scoring chances. Both will benefit from the Sabres' changes in defensive structure, which should lead to fewer opponents left alone in front of the net.

The depth chart is uncertain entering the season, though. When asked about goaltending, Krueger and Botterill have stated they will need both Ullmark and Hutton throughout the season, particularly in October when the Sabres have 12 games in 23 days.

Hutton played a career-high 50 games last season and is entering the second year of a three-year contract. He was outstanding during the 10-game winning streak last November. Ullmark, meanwhile, avoided salary arbitration by signing a one-year contract and could surpass the career-high 37 games he played last season.

Injured reserve (4): Brandon Montour, Zach Bogosian, Matt Hunwick, Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen.

Montour is expected to miss three to four weeks after suffering a hand injury during a preseason loss in Columbus on Sept. 17. Bogosian had multiple setbacks this summer while recovering from hip surgery and is out indefinitely.

Hunwick is expected to miss the season because of a neck condition, and Luukkonen likely will play in Rochester once he is cleared to return to game action. The 20-year-old goalie underwent hip surgery in April.

Though Lawrence Pilut is not on injured reserve in the NHL, the 23-year-old defenseman is recovering from shoulder surgery and will miss the start of the season. He could be an option for the Sabres in the event of an injury.

Jimmy Vesey once spurned the Sabres. Now he hopes to produce for them

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

October 3, 2019

Mike Harrington

To look at what looms as the biggest season of Jimmy Vesey's career, you have to first circle back three years to what was the biggest decision of his hockey life.

The Buffalo Sabres' newest left winger was a 23-year-old with a Harvard University degree who hadn't played a game in the NHL by the summer of 2016. And he suddenly and unexpectedly found himself as one of the key names and major power brokers in the sport.

Vesey was a third-round draft pick of the Nashville Predators in 2012 from the South Shore (Mass.) Kings in Foxboro. He was a 48-goal scorer as an 18-year-old and blossomed into the Hobey Baker Award winner at Harvard.

Each year, he would dutifully attend Predators summer development camps and get feedback during the season from the Nashville staff. By 2016, the Predators were offering Vesey an NHL contract with a top-9 role in the playoffs and no thought of time in the AHL.

"We really have this need for a left wing with his size and ability and scoring potential." Nashville GM David Poile told reporters at the time. "All I can tell you is we are very hopeful to sign him and I tell you firmly that he's not going to be going to Milwaukee, he'll be coming here."

Few players out of college get that kind of guarantee, but Vesey had other ideas. Once you're in college four years, you can wait until Aug. 15 after your senior year and become an unrestricted free agent. It's not a well-known verse in the CBA but some players have used it. Vesey told the disappointed Predators that was the route he was going to take.

With Nashville out of the picture, the Sabres took a stab in the dark when GM Tim Murray sent a third-round pick to the Preds to get Vesey's rights. Murray thus had a month of a head start to convince Vesey to sign before he was a free agent – and already had Vesey's close friend, Jack Eichel, on his roster.

The Sabres got one meeting with Vesey in Boston in July, 2016, but it went nowhere. Vesey's message to Buffalo was a simple thanks but no thanks.

The hockey world, and especially social media, turned on Vesey in that period while waiting for his decision as NHL GMs and coaches piled East to watch Vesey in the Foxboro Summer Pro League. Veteran players working out that summer grumbled about a kid with no games of experience deciding where he would get to play. The media labeled him as selfish.

"Obviously he's a smart guy and I don't think he let all that noise and a lot of that garbage that went on get the best of him," Eichel said Sunday in KeyBank Center. "He took some heat for going into free agency but at the end of the day it's his career and his life. Why would you limit yourself to one team when you can potentially be in different markets?"

All that makes sense really. Blake Wheeler did it in 2008, heading to Boston after being drafted by Arizona. Kevin Hayes signed with the New York Rangers in 2014 after being drafted by Chicago.

There have been others, but Vesey is the one who got vilified for it. Maybe it's because he spurned a good team, which went to the Stanley Cup final in 2017. Maybe it's because he took his time in the summer, leaving fans and media hanging and waiting for a decision. Being a Hobey winner was a big factor as Vesey Watch became a thing.

I vividly remember calling Vesey a "punk" on Twitter during that period. He got much worse than that, sure. But the fact doesn't change that I was out of line.

I apologized to him last week in person in the Sabres' dressing room and am doing so publicly with this column. Vesey laughed uncomfortably at first when I fessed up, but said he understood, too.

"The biggest thing I can say now is that anyone who knows me knows all those things people said are just not how I am," Vesey said. "I'm a quiet guy and it got crazy there. The thing was I wasn't the first guy to go UFA. I won't be the last guy. I was just taking my option there. I had been with them for four years and felt I wanted to pursue other things. It became a big deal on the outside."

Sure did. Especially when Vesey went for the bright lights of the big city and signed with the New York Rangers.

"For somebody who went to Harvard and had a lot of connections and friends there, being in New York City gives you a chance to do a lot off the ice," Eichel said. " 'Ves' looked at the opportunity hockey-wise like anybody would: You get a chance to play in Madison Square Garden every night and represent the Rangers. Pretty cool, right?"

What do the Sabres get?

The Rangers moved Vesey on July 1 for a third-round pick and the Sabres are getting durability with some scoring ability. They also should be getting a hugely motivated player, with unrestricted free agency again looming for Vesey next July.

At 5-on-5, Vesey has scored 43 of his 50 career goals while playing 240 out of 246 games in New York the last three years. His goal totals were 16, 17 and 17. His point totals were 27, 28 and 35.

"Lines shuffle and power plays can get mixed around so you have to find a way to score 5-on-5 and they were pretty clear that was a big reason they brought me in," Vesey said of the Sabres. "One of the things I've taken pride on is being able to go to the front of the net. I like to get in the tough areas. Everything is not going to be tic-tac-toe. I can go hard to the net but I like to skate and shoot pucks, too."

"Jimmy has been outstanding in his acceptance and hunger to find his way in the team," said coach Ralph Krueger, who has Vesey slotted on his third line for Thursday's opener in Pittsburgh. "He's a good teammate. ... Left side or right side, on the power play or off, he brings a good spirit to the room, he brings a hunger to the room to try to help the team. He's been very teachable and coachable. He's really come in here and feels like he's at home."

Vesey played the last two years in relative anonymity. His first season was much more scrutinized.

The first game he played in Nashville was a circus. On Dec. 17, 2016, with Bridgestone Arena fans lining the glass during warmups and Predators fans taunting him with signs, Vesey scored in a shootout to help the Rangers to a 2-1 win.

One Preds fan's sign said simply, "Jimmy Vesey is a lying weasel." The boos were nonstop during the game every time he touched the puck.

It had been much the same when he came to Buffalo for the first time two weeks earlier. Just about every time he touched the puck, the crowd booed.

"Nashville was actually fun in some ways. Guys on our team were chirping me about some of the signs," Vesey said. "I don't think too many of them knew what was going on when we came here. Even during the game, we were on the ice and (Sabres winger) Marcus Foligno asked me what all the booing was about."

Impressive résumé

Eichel said he first met Vesey around 2012 when he was a 15-year-old in the Foxboro Summer League in Massachusetts coming off time with the Boston Jr. Bruins and Vesey was a 19-year-old heading to Harvard that fall.

They were foes during Eichel's one year at Boston University but friends and summer workout buddies since. Eichel is as impressed by Vesey off the ice as on it, and who wouldn't be?

Vesey was a government major at Harvard, focusing on political science by taking classes on American and international government and international conflict. And get this: He's fluent in Mandarin.

"I used to try to take classes about Asia," Vesey said. "For a little bit, I was contemplating doing secondary work in East Asian studies, but I guess the stars never aligned on that."

As you might expect, Vesey reveled in the experience of being a Harvard student and combining that with an NHL career.

"I took my time, graduated college, had a great end to my senior year and I think I deserved that after staying there for four years," he said. "That summer my decision was made and I had a great time in New York. It was an incredible experience, not only being able to play for the Rangers but I had a lot of friends from college that had moved there for work. Being able to see them and having the hockey side of it made it a great three years."

Eichel and Vesey were reunited by the trade three months ago, leading Vesey into his most important NHL season yet. He's yet to score 20 goals in an NHL season and that's a big objective. It would help the Sabres immensely now – and certainly up his market value for next summer.

"Obviously it's not the first time I've been in this situation," Vesey said. "Three years in New York I played pretty much up and down the lineup and that was good training. Another example of mental toughness like when I went through (in 2016). You're not going to have 82 good games, you're not going to be on the first line or the top power play all 82 games."

Vesey said he figured the Rangers' rebuild under coach David Quinn might be moving away from him, especially after the team drafted Finnish winger Kaapo Kakko with the No. 2 overall pick. When he heard he was going to be Buffalo, Vesey had no qualms about playing in a place he once snubbed.

"I guess it is ironic," Vesey said. "But looking back, maybe if I had come three years ago I wouldn't be here now. You don't know. I think it just depends on your perspective. In this era of salary cap, a lot of guys get moved around. I'm very excited to be here. I was excited as soon as I heard about the trade."

The Sabres are banking on some of the mental toughness Vesey showed three years ago translating to veteran leadership – and performance – on the ice this season.

"He's a normal guy who has done a lot of really cool things in his life," Eichel said. "He's got life experience, very well-rounded. I mean, a degree from Harvard. That says a lot. Everything he's been through with all of his time in Harvard, his free agency, his time in New York, it's made him who he is."

"Look at someone his age and all those things put together, it's pretty impressive. I don't think he'd change it for anything. You learn a lot from something like that. He's excited for his new opportunity, and I know we're excited to have him."

'Enough with the dress rehearsals': Sabres ready to start season under Ralph Krueger

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

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The process of changing how the Buffalo Sabres play began in earnest when Ralph Krueger was hired as coach May 15.

Krueger traveled to Slovakia to meet with Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart at the IIHF World Championship, called a number of Sabres to introduce himself, attended the NHL draft in Vancouver, pieced together a coaching staff and put together a framework for how he wanted his team to play in his first National Hockey League season since 2012-13.

There also was a midsummer dinner in Buffalo, where he spoke with Kyle Okposo, Zach Bogosian and Carter Hutton about the past. Those experiences helped Krueger develop a definitive plan for an opportunity he's been waiting for since he was last behind the bench for Team Europe at the World Cup of Hockey in 2016.

Now, Krueger and his players are ready to see how the conversations, planning and practicing translate on the ice when the Sabres open the season Thursday night against the Pittsburgh Penguins at PPG Paints Arena.

"Just an excitement that we're finally launching games that really matter," Krueger said following practice Wednesday in KeyBank Center. "I think the process has given us a lot of confidence for that. You would be nervous if you thought the team wasn't prepared or uncertain of how they need to play. We feel like the process has gone as smoothly as possible. I have to tell you, honestly, I'm going quite confidently onto that bench and just excited to get it going, but not nervous in a negative way at all."

Krueger recalls that his interest in a possible NHL return piqued when he coached Team Europe, but he could not walk away from his project overseas. The 60-year-old worked as chairman of Southampton, an English Premier League soccer club, from 2014-19. As de facto owner, Krueger was responsible for day-to-day operations, including marketing and on-the-field personnel.

The role taught Krueger how to build and sustain an organization in a pressure-packed atmosphere, yet his mind never strayed from hockey. He routinely checked scores and intended to someday return to coaching if the right situation came along. That opportunity arrived when Krueger met with Sabres General Manager Jason Botterill and owners Kim and Terry Pegula.

In addition to coming off a historic second-half collapse last season, the Sabres' eight-year playoff drought is the longest in the NHL. Rather than dwelling on past failures, Krueger planned to use principles that helped him succeed in the past, with a few minor changes. This isn't his first time behind the bench for an NHL team. Krueger was an assistant coach under Tom Renney in Edmonton from 2010-12 and was elevated to head coach for the lockout-shortened 2012-13 season.

But Krueger's one season as a head coach did not include the challenges of an 82-game schedule, including chaotic travel, or a proper training camp. Technology, analytics and sports science weren't as advanced, either. However, Krueger has leaned on his coaching staff – including Steve Smith, who worked as an assistant under former coach Phil Housley – to prepare for the season.

"He wants everybody to feel good about themselves on a daily basis," Smith said of Krueger. "Everyone who walks through that locker room feels like they're part of something, they're part of a bigger process. He treats everyone with respect, players with respect. What he does really, really well is he delegates and believes. He sets expectations of what he wants from us. He sets expectations of what he wants from the players, from the trainers, from the PR people, from everybody and tries to hold them all accountable and feel part of a big process. ... You walk away each day feeling like you accomplished something."

The Sabres have not accomplished anything yet. Their intensive training camp included long practice sessions and off-ice workouts. Krueger didn't slow the pace by drawing on a whiteboard between drills. Every detail was

planned prior to the team stepping onto the ice, and he wouldn't dive into the X's and O's until the midpractice break inside the dressing room.

Practice drills aren't very long, either. Krueger gives his players only a few repetitions and demands perfection. His practices are structured to encourage competition. Players have explained that Krueger has them feeling less robotic on the ice, allowing them to be more creative with the puck and more confident in trusting teammates in the defensive zone.

"I feel like, to use Ralph's term, everybody is able to express themselves out there," defenseman Jake McCabe said. "We've got a lot of really talented guys on this team. When the puck is on their stick in the offensive zone, they're able to express themselves, show their creativity and show their skill set. Away from the puck, it's put your head down and be a smart hockey player. ... Everyone is skating together as a unit of five. With the new systems we're implementing, guys are champing at the bit. Enough with the dress rehearsals. We're ready for the real thing."

There is unbridled enthusiasm and optimism entering the season opener. Jack Eichel explained he and his teammates feel "a little more relaxed" and that "guys feel better about themselves." Krueger was lauded for his ability to inject confidence into the Oilers during his time as coach, and he is recognized as an impeccable motivator.

Krueger wrote a book about leadership and has spoken at the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on New Models of Leadership. The Sabres, though, have yet to experience any sort of adversity, aside from needing overtime or a shootout in three of their four preseason wins.

"It starts with him, so the majority of it is Ralph," Eichel said of the changes he's noticed. "The environment he's created and the mood he's created every day, I think guys feed off of it. He's been great to work with, and I think everyone would probably agree with that."

Krueger wants his forwards to use their speed to succeed in the offensive zone and has drilled the importance of playing strong away from the puck. He wants all five players pressuring an opponent and trusting each other with individual assignments in a zone-based system. The Sabres played much better defensively during the preseason, but they did not face a lineup filled with NHL players and the intensity of games will increase significantly beginning Thursday.

Krueger will face challenges during the season. He'll need to navigate a chaotic schedule, and he acknowledged there are times he'll need to be firm with his team. However, his players' response in training camp has him encouraged that a blueprint is in place to succeed in Buffalo.

"I've spoken to you often about coming into a team at the right time, where their mindset is open for what we are now trying to bring in, the principles," Krueger said. "There's a lot of sacrifice here that's being asked for by the players. Possibly a touch of your offense might be left off because of the way we're going to deal with risk, and where and when risk is allowed in our game. I'm excited about the buy-in for sure."

Leadership group

Krueger announced following practice Wednesday that Eichel will remain the Sabres' captain, while McCabe and forward Marcus Johansson will begin the seasons as alternate captains. Defenseman Zach Bogosian and winger Kyle Okposo served as alternate captains under Housley in 2018-19.

Captains return

The Sabres are bringing back 14 former captains for the home-opener festivities Saturday, and they will be available to greet fans at 5:30 p.m. outside KeyBank Center. The following players are participating in the event: Floyd Smith, Gerry Meehan, Don Luce, Danny Gare, Gilbert Perreault, Mike Foligno, Michael Peca, Donald Audette, Stu Barnes, Jochen Hecht, Toni Lydman, Brian Campbell, Craig Rivet and Brian Gionta.

Montour's timeline

The Sabres confirmed what Krueger told reporters following practice Tuesday: defenseman Brandon Montour will miss three to four weeks because of a hand injury. The team also announced Bogosian and goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, both of whom underwent hip surgery in April, are out indefinitely.

Olofsson, Jokiharju absent

Unsurprisingly, Curtis Lazar, Jean-Sebastien Dea and Lawrence Pilut didn't practice with the Sabres after being recalled from Rochester on Tuesday. Additionally, neither Victor Olofsson nor Henri Jokiharju were on the ice with the Amerks.

Olofsson and Jokiharju are expected to be recalled in time for the season opener Thursday, and the move was made because the Sabres plan to place one or more players on long-term injured reserve. By adding additional salary on one-way contracts prior to the roster deadline Tuesday, Botterill maximized his cap space entering the season.

14 former Sabres captains to take part in ceremony before home opener

The Buffalo News

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The Sabres have announced that 14 former captains will participate in pregame festivities before Saturday's home opener against the New Jersey Devils at KeyBank Center.

The captains and Sabres alumni will walk the blue and gold carpet beginning at 5:30 p.m. at Alumni Plaza.

The captains scheduled to attend:

Floyd Smith (Captain: 1970-71)
Gerry Meehan (Captain: 1971-72 - Oct. 1974)
Don Luce (Captain: Jan. 1976)
Danny Gare (Captain: 1977-78 - 1980-81)
Gilbert Perreault (Captain: 1981-82 - Nov. 1986)
Mike Foligno (Captain: Feb. 1989 - Dec. 1990)
Michael Peca (Captain: 1997-98 - 1999-2000)
Donald Audette (Captain: April 1998)
Stu Barnes (Captain: 2001-02 - March 2003)
Jochen Hecht (Captain: Oct. 2007, Feb. 2008)
Toni Lydman (Captain: Nov. 2007)
Brian Campbell (Captain: Dec. 2007)
Craig Rivet (Captain: 2008-09 - 2010-11)
Brian Gionta (Captain: 2014-15 - 2016-17)

Weather permitting, the Party in the Plaza begins at 5 p.m. with kid-friendly activities and a performance by Strictly Hip.

At the door, fans will receive a "Scratch and Score" card that can be redeemed at KeyBank branches while supplies last. A commemorative home opener T-shirt will be on each seat.

Fans are urged to be in their seats by 6:45 p.m. for a pregame ceremony, including the captains.

Sam Reinhart at center is a layup for Krueger

By Joe Dibiase

WGR 550

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Probably the biggest weakness on the Sabres roster going into the 2019-20 season is second line center. Behind Jack Eichel, the same cast and crew of Casey Mittelstadt, Johan Larsson, Vladimir Sobotka, and Evan Rodrigues could all see time down the middle. That group combined for 81 points in 293 games. Jack Eichel had 82 points in 77 games. The Sabres got no offensive support from any center that wasn't their captain.

Going into this season opener, there is one change at center. Free agent addition Marcus Johansson has been preparing to play second line center, despite playing mostly wing in his career. Logically, it makes sense for the Sabres to do this. 'Is the player the best man for the role', should outweigh 'is the role best for this player'. If Johansson is better than the alternative, that should be more valuable than whether he's better on the wing. However, if the Sabres are okay with this way of thinking, why isn't Sam Reinhart getting a crack at center?

Sam Reinhart played center for his entire life leading up to the NHL, or at least going back to 2009 when he was a 13-year old playing bantam, as that's as far back as his EliteProspects.com page goes. Reinhart is a natural center. Since going pro, Reinhart has only had a chance to play down the middle twice, and they hardly count.

The first time was when Reinhart was an 18-year old rookie on a tanking Sabres team for 9-games. Are we really going to count his playing ten minutes a night with the likes of Zenon Konopka as a real chance to play center?

The second time Reinhart played down the middle was in 2017-18 when Phil Housley first got here as head coach. Housley didn't give Reinhart a real chance at success. In the week or so that Reinhart played center under Housley, his most common linemates were Zemgus Girgensons, Nick Baptiste, and Seth Griffith. Two AHL players and a career fourth liner. Housley pulled the plug very quickly and never tried Reinhart at center again.

Once upon a time, I was skeptical that Reinhart could ever be anything more than a winger that fed off a great centerman like Jack Eichel. Last season, Reinhart took a big step. He created plays himself more often, scored goals from outside the net-front more frequently, and had for the first time was as productive away from Eichel as he was with him. That's the step Reinhart needed to get back to center.

Sam Reinhart doesn't make this play consistently three years ago. Now he has both the confidence and the ability to do it.

Evidence of Reinhart's development as a complete offensive player comes in his shot chart.

The above chart is from last season. Reinhart had 34% of his shot attempts from the front of the net, the lowest of his career. For comparison, 39% of Reinhart's shots came from the net-front in 2018, and that number was 42% in 2017.

If I could make one suggestion to Ralph Krueger it would be to take Sam Reinhart, give him some good wingers, and watch him be your second line center for the next decade. One good thing about this Sabre roster is they have some pretty decent depth at wing. There are at least six wingers that would be instant upgrades over what Reinhart played with the last time he was taking faceoffs consistently.

Just as an example:

Johansson - Eichel - Olofsson

Skinner - Reinhart - Sheary

That's just one of several combinations that could be possible with Eichel and Reinhart as your centers, but no matter what Krueger would put together, it'd automatically be a more balanced lineup than last season. Notice by the way, that I put Olofsson on his off-side. I feel Olofsson would be better suited on his off-side to utilize his shot, similar to what Alex Ovechkin does.

Putting Sam Reinhart back at his natural position almost seems too easy. Ralph Krueger is going to try Marcus Johansson in the role I'm advocating for Reinhart to start the season. If that doesn't work, Reinhart needs to get a shot. Imagine trying to pass Rodrigues, Larsson, or Sobotka as a second line center for a second year in a row.

Just for sake of argument, let's say those opposed to this idea are right and Reinhart's production would take a hit down the middle. He was a 65-point player last season. If he dropped 15-points, down to 50, by switching positions, that'd still be a MASSIVE upgrade for the Sabres. Their wingers are more capable of filling the void of a 65-point player, than their centers are capable of filling the void of a 50-point player. It's not even close.

One thing that excites me about Kreuger, is he seems determined to focus on proper player utilization, which has been ignored by previous coaches. If he gets around to putting Sam Reinhart in as the second line center, that's going to make me very confident that the Sabres hired the right man for the job.

At the end of day, I hope Krueger asks himself one question. Who on the team would do the best at second line center? It's time to put what's best for the team over what's best for the player. Put Sam Reinhart back where he belongs. At center.

Sabres' Eichel wants to enjoy the season

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

October 2, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Jack Eichel can be a very intense player on the ice. He starts season number five in Pittsburgh on Thursday and he said he had to relax to be at his best, "Just staying in the moment, not trying to put too much pressure on myself and make sure I'm enjoying playing hockey every day because usually when I do that, I'm at my best."

Eichel wants to be a good leader and wants to be known as one of the best players in the game. He said he can't be hard on himself, "At times I put too much pressure on myself and I forget about enjoying it, I mean it's hockey, This is the only thing I've ever done in my whole life so I'm prepared for the season, excited for it, but make sure I don't get down, I mean there's going to be ups and downs in the season, so I want to stay even keeled."

Training camp was hard for the team and there were a lot of long days. The captain said everything was just right, "I thought it was great, I don't think it was too hard, I thought it was just the right amount and we're all pretty prepared for the season."

With this being Eichel's fifth season in the NHL, he tries not to do things differently, "I try to keep a similar mindset going into the year, I try and have the same one no matter what."

If this team is going to improve and play Ralph Krueger's system, they must be on the same page. Eichel said there's been a good connection with the coaches, "I think the connection is there between the coaching staff and the players. I think we've definitely accepted what he's been saying and vice-versa. It's a pretty open line of communication and I think we know what we have to do."

Krueger has told his players from Day 1 that he wants to hear what they think. Eichel thinks that goes a long way in the room, "I think that's huge, the relationship has got to be one between the locker-room and the coaching staff, so he's done a really good job of doing that and I think everyone's responded well to it."

Krueger has gotten a good sense of what his players can and can't do. When it comes to Eichel he said, "To be among the league's best you need to be on both sides of the puck and he is working so hard to be that. Defensively we've been very excited about his lead there and his understanding of the principals that we want to put into place.

"I believe he's just becoming a more complete player in front of our eyes and he's still far from the finished product."

Krueger said he has selected Jake McCabe and Marcus Johansson to be the alternate captains behind Eichel. That means Kyle Okposo and Zach Bogosian have lost that position. Krueger said they handled it well, "I communicated with everybody quite honestly and openly and nobody was upset and the only thing that I said was to continue doing what you're doing and continue to lead the way they are."

Wednesday's lines:

Rodrigues Eichel Reinhart
Skinner Johansson Sobotka
Vesey Mittelstadt Sheary
Girgensons Larsson Okposo

McCabe Ristolainen
Dahlin Miller
Scandella Gilmour

Krueger: We're sure not going to lack in effort

WGR 550

October 2, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres will begin regular season play this Thursday night in Pittsburgh, opening the franchise's 50th season against the Penguins. After a disappointing second half in 2018-19, there might be a bit more pressure on the Sabres to get off to a good start than in years past.

General Manager Jason Botterill made a number of moves over the summer to alter the team's roster and makeup. One of, if not the biggest of these moves, was the hiring of Ralph Krueger to be Buffalo's next head coach.

Similar to the players on the ice, there may be a bit more pressure on Krueger than there typically would be for a coach in his first season with a new organization. That extra pressure could stem from the fact that Krueger is replacing former Sabre bench boss Phil Housley, whose coaching decisions were sometimes publicly scrutinized.

Thursday's contest against Pittsburgh will be the first National Hockey League game Krueger is coaching in since April 27, 2013, his last game as head coach of the Edmonton Oilers. He's coached international hockey since then, working with Hockey Canada during the 2014 Winter Olympics, and coaching Team Europe in the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

It will certainly be interesting to see how Krueger's return to coaching plays out, and it could be a big storyline with this Sabres team through the first few months, or even the whole season.

Krueger will be joining Howard Simon and Jeremy White on WGR every Wednesday morning at 8:00 a.m. this season. Here is some of what he had to say during his first appearance:

Krueger on meeting the players, working with them, and learning their strengths and weakness:

"As a coach, you never understand or know a player until you coach them, because you don't know what the other coaches have been asking or telling them to do. So, you're watching the tape, and you don't know what the directive is. And now, the directives are clear. The asks, with or without the puck, are very well defined. The players know exactly what we want, and now I can evaluate them, really on a fair basis."

Krueger on who could be the the No. 2 center and how the lineup might look:

"From the outside, people will want to rank our players. But for me, everyone is important. The 13-minute guy that spends five of those minutes killing penalties is every bit as important as the 22-minute guy who plays eight of those minutes on the power play. It's just about getting everybody to buy into their roles, accept their roles, and execute them as best they can. That's really our job as coaches."

Krueger on improving the teams play in the defensive end:

"The game without the puck, I speak about it so much, is really where you see the character of the team, where you see the personality of a group, and that has been a major focus in training camp. Because with the puck, and offensively, we have a lot of exciting skill and talent. It'll be a never-ending teaching process that we have, because there's always improvement on the defensive side. There's also always offensive things we can work on."

Krueger on Buffalo fans:

"I really have a feeling that these fans in Buffalo are really honest. If they feel that that team is giving it's very best on a daily basis, and they're fighting with all their hearts and souls, they will support us, no matter the results. I really think, after spending a few months here now in Buffalo, that we have a very honest environment. We have a very real world here of good people. That's what we need to strive for, that our fans leave this building every night, and watch us play on the road, and are convinced we've given our best. That'll be our motto to begin with, and I'm convinced wins will follow."

Do Sabres players use themselves in the EA Sports 'NHL' video games? Depends who's playing

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

October 3, 2019

There are some pretty sweet perks of making it to the NHL, but one of the coolest has to be having your likeness and attributes in a video game for fans across the world to play. That seems like a pretty awesome thing to have happen, especially if you grew up with video games in your life anyway. Even for players that weren't gamers growing up, being in the game as themselves was ... well, it was different things to different guys.

"It was cool, I started my career in the American League," Sabres defenseman Jake McCabe said. "It's not like I'm a young stud like Jack (Eichel) or Ras (Rasmus Dahlin) coming in the league where it's like, 'Oh I'm 18, I got to know what my rating is.' So I'm not quite like that, no. Buddies will text you and play with the Sabres (in the EA Sports NHL hockey series) and it's like 'Oh you're on the game!' It's like, oh yeah, that's cool."

Wait, what else did your buddies say when they texted you?

"Friends sent me pictures and it probably wasn't a very good rating, so they're like, 'You suck!' or whatever," McCabe said. "It's cool though."

Fortnite became a bit of a controversial point in the past couple years when it was rumored that players were spending lots of their off-ice time playing the battle royale shooting/building phenomenon. But going from playing Fortnite to being replicated in a game can be a little bit mind-blowing.

"It's just weird," forward Casey Mittelstadt said. "It's, I don't know what the word is, I don't think I'm amazed by it or it just hits me, but I just think it's weird. Obviously we'd play in tournaments out of town or whatever we'd play knee hockey and play 'NHL.' It's semi-weird but I think that's the main word is it's weird."

For younger players, the realism of the games has made it so the onscreen players are almost virtual twins of themselves when they see it. The games have come a long way from the pixelated 16-bit graphics of the NHLPA '93 and NHL '94 days.

"I haven't played really in a while, but if I were to play right now against my buddies and we were picking teams, I don't want to go right to the Sabres because I play for the Sabres. But I don't want to play for anyone else," Mittelstadt said. "It'd be weird, I'd have to play with the US National Team or something."

EA Sports, whose "NHL 20" was released in September, likes to say in its ads, "If it's in the game, it's in the game." Yet the part about getting chirped by your friends when you make it to the NHL still hasn't become part of the game. Even the guys who aren't big time gamers have fun seeing themselves in the almost-flesh-like appearance on their TVs.

"My rookie year I think EA Sports sent a bunch of games for something I did during the rookie showcase," Eichel said. "I'm not really much of a video gamer. I don't mind playing a little Madden here or there, but that's about it. I think when you're growing up or you got buddies around I'll throw it on for them, but I'm not really into it."

Eichel may not be a self-professed gamer, but when he and Sam Reinhart were roommates for a couple years, the young phenoms spent a little time to away from the real ice on the virtual rink.

"When me and Reino lived together we used to play a little bit," Eichel said. "We'd go online and play 2-on-2 — play as the Sabres — we'd just leave each other out there the whole game and try to score with ourselves."

"It's just a pretty funny concept, thinking you have no idea who the person on the side is playing against you and they have no idea that you're the actual guy in the game playing. We used to get a kick out of that. We used to do that a lot when we lived together."

How well did that work out?

"Oh yeah, we had a little success on there but we had a lot of games getting spanked so it was funny either way," Reinhart said.

Sure, the successes are nice, but really, playing against experienced gamers couldn't have gone well.

"Yeah, we used to get smoked," Eichel said. "We'd win here or there but there's some good video gamers. It's tough to play 2-on-2. It makes the game a little bit harder."

The chemistry on the ice for Eichel and Reinhart is very apparent, but what about when it involves controllers and opponents who train as much in the video game as they do in the real one. When asked who was better when they played, Reinhart smirked and said they were about even, but also couldn't hold back a truth we've known about their play for a couple years now.

"I think we fed off each other well when we played on the same team," Reinhart said with a laugh. "I find that it's more fun with that than playing one-on-one. A lot more can happen and it's a lot tougher to read so that's more enjoyable."

LeBrun: NHL coaches offer their picks for surprising team for 2019-20

By Pierre LeBrun

The Athletic

October 2, 2019

If you want any further proof of my long-held description of the NHL's middle standings as a crushed beer can, look no further than the results from my poll of NHL head coaches this week.

I asked the 31 coaches (with 28 responding) to pick their surprise or dark horse team for the season. Of course, I stipulated, they could not pick their own team.

In the end, nine different teams were picked, underlining again how smart hockey people can see things differently. Or perhaps more to the point, it highlights just how many dark horse contenders there are due to the similarities between about a dozen teams expected to finish in the middle of the standings. A year ago, just 10 points separated seventh overall from 17th overall.

This year's dark horse teams?

Florida, New Jersey and Dallas were the top three choices from the coaches' poll, but there were also picks of Arizona, Vancouver, Buffalo, Edmonton, Ottawa, Detroit, Columbus and Minnesota.

And I will say, while still protecting the anonymity of the coaches, the selections weren't as divisional or geographically biased as I would have thought. The coaches were all over the place, with some picking a team within their own division, while others went to the other conference for their selection.

Here are their answers, all via text message:

The Q-Bob factor

"Florida," one head coach said. "They are deep at the forward position. Barkov is a legit superstar. And now they have added goaltending."

"I think Florida had good pieces in place," another coach said. "Acquisition of Bob in net will help. They added a new coaching staff which will bring change. Probably not a Cup favorite, but could surprise people."

"Vegas and Toronto are the best teams ... but I'll say Florida will be the sleeper," one coach said. "Top 2 C and now have depth plus a goalie."

"Florida – a lot of talent there already and added the most important piece: goalie," another coach said.

"Florida – goaltender upgrade and experienced, winning coach," yet another coach said.

Another coach also voted Florida, citing the Q factor.

But one coach said it was cheating to pick Florida which is why he didn't.

"Florida can't be a choice because I will be surprised if they're not in the mix!" he said.

My take: Florida was the pick for six coaches and a few more said it was too obvious to pick them. Our numbers guru Dom Luszczyszyn had the Panthers 14th overall in the NHL, with a 55 percent chance of making the playoffs in his team previews.

The high level of respect for Joel Quenneville is evident in the coaching community and therefore it shouldn't shock anyone that his team was picked to surprise by his peers. No question, I think Florida will be in the playoff race, but whether or not they make it will depend on how well they can improve defensively. Yes, they added an all-world netminder in Sergei Bobrovsky. He alone can steal seven to eight wins this season. That could be the difference in Florida making the playoffs. But as much as an aged Roberto Luongo and his backup James Reimer struggled last season — and they certainly did — it should also be noted how porous defensively the Panthers

were at times in front of those goalies. And while they didn't give up a lot of shots overall, they did give up too many high-danger chances.

It's why as I reported last week that Panthers GM Dale Tallon has made finding a left-handed, shutdown type D a wish list item for between now and the trade deadline.

Here come the Devils

"New Jersey is my pick," said one coach in picking his sleeper team. "Lots of young talent that will be a year better. Well coached. Goaltending a question mark, but if they get a reasonable level from that area, they will be very good."

"If NJ gets goaltending I think they will knock on the door. Like their coach, too," another coach said.

"New Jersey for me," yet another coach said. "Real fast – Hall healthy again. And added good players in trade and free agency. Top 2 young players are good."

"NJ Devils," another coach said. "They're a hard team to play against, in your face kind of hockey but also move more skill than people give them credit for."

My take: What's not to like when you've got 2017-18 Hart Trophy winner Taylor Hall returning to health, you draft Jack Hughes first overall, plus add P.K. Subban, Wayne Simmonds and Nikita Gusev. But as the coaches said, the Devils success will depend on veteran Cory Schneider returning to form coupled with quality netminding from young Mackenzie Blackwood. If they get quality goaltending New Jersey could take a considerable jump in the standings this season. Our man Dom has the Devils vaulting to 15th overall in the league, up from 29th overall last year, with a 53 percent chance of making the playoffs based on his model.

Dallas rocks (and not just the Cowboys)

"Dallas is really good," one coach said in picking the Stars. "Strong D and goaltending and very fast."

"Dallas – one more year of experience and added firepower," another coach said.

"I don't know if it a surprise but I think Dallas," one coach said. "Solid goaltending, mobile blue line with great skill. Deep forward group with size, skill and physicality. Really good special teams."

My take: Well, the Stars were one overtime goal away from completely changing the Stanley Cup playoffs last season, so I'm not sure if they can be considered a surprise team this year. They were a surprise to me last year, no doubt, but this season I expect them to contend. I just love their blue line. GM Jim Nill has built a team with staying power here. Dom predicted 11th overall, 96 points and a 72 percent chance to make the playoffs. I'm buying in.

Les Coyotes

"Arizona," one coach responded as his surprise/darkhorse team. "Underrated in all areas. D can skate and pressure pucks. Goalies were great additions. (Rick Tocchet's) systems fit his team and he is a good coach. 100 plus-points."

"Arizona," another coach said. "Just think they've made steps and are due."

"Arizona just because someone new is going to make it ... they always do," one coach said.

"Arizona," another coach said. "Improved PP and they stay healthy."

My take: The first coach said 100-plus points! Dom only had Arizona at 24th overall, with 85 expected points and a 26 percent chance to make the playoffs.

Well, the Coyotes nearly made the playoffs a year ago with a lineup depleted by injuries all year long. There is that. What can a healthy team which added a few pieces including Phill Kessel accomplish? After years of gong show-esque distractions off the ice due to ownership instability, the hope on the ice mirrors the newfound

stability it would appear the Coyotes finally have off of it with new ownership, as our own Craig Morgan wrote this week.

Like the Devils, though, I think goaltending is huge here. Can Antti Raanta stay healthy? Can Darcy Kuemper duplicate his career-best season of last season? Rick Tocchet deserved Jack Adams consideration last season. He's an excellent coach who gets the most from his roster.

The Canucks, Sabres, Oilers and the rest ...

"Vancouver," answered one coach for his darkhorse team. "Improved their defense. J.T. Miller will be a good fit. Pettersson and Hughes are dynamic. Will be an elite PP."

Another coach also voted Vancouver without giving any reason, even though I asked each coach to do so. He's like me when I only read the first three words of a text from my wife and then she gets mad because I only answered the original question. I'm terrible at that (note to self, get better at that.)

This next coach gave four surprise teams, two per conference!

"East: CBJ, no drama this year; also Detroit, forward talent. West: Vancouver, forward talent; and Chicago: forward talent and goaltending."

"Buffalo. Players have underachieved," one coach said. "Culture has been a big question mark. Ralph is infectious. Understands leadership and uniting people. He will be the difference maker."

Added another coach who picked Buffalo as his surprise team: "I'm thinking Ralph connects with these guys and they have a great run."

A third head coach also picked Buffalo.

"Edmonton," one coach said. "Two superstars, added skill depth with James Neal, good adds to forward depth (Jurco, Sheahan) ... Need top D to stay healthy. Their players have to be sick of losing and ready to buy in!"

And then he added: "I assumed Florida doesn't count as a dark horse otherwise that's my pick."

"Edmonton, Tippett will have them play tighter and they will be in every game," another coach said.

"Edmonton," another coach added. "Tippett will get them to play together and it's a weak division. I worry about whether the goalies are good enough."

"Minnesota," one coach said. "They are really good defensively with an elite D-corps and have upgraded their team offence."

"NYR b/c of the signings," one coach texted.

A couple of coaches also picked the Senators.

"Ottawa," one coach said. "They are way better than people think and they are now organized."

"Ottawa. Tough division but love D.J. Smith and some of the guys they brought in," another coach said.

My take: I'm not completely surprised the Senators got a couple of votes. Since they were the worst team in the league last season, all they have to do this year is improve on that, which would quantify as a surprise to most. I'm a big fan of the D.J. Smith hire as coach. Young, young team, though, and on many nights their decisions with the puck will reflect that. But they won't be boring to watch by any measure. That the Oilers got two votes surprised me. I think GM Ken Holland has his long-term vision glasses on. Which he should. While it's very true that Tippett's track record is teams often overachieving, there are roster holes on this squad too glaring to overcome this season. The Canucks are going to be a treat regardless of wins and losses. I'm going to be staying up late many a night watching Elias Pettersson and Quinn Hughes electrify that fan base. The Ralph Krueger

factor in Buffalo, which I wrote about earlier this week, got a few votes from his peers. Sneaky early season pick for the Jack Adams if he gets the Sabres to flirt with a playoff spot.

I will say I'm somewhat surprised no coach picked Anaheim. I sense the Ducks on the rebound this season. They've got a Vezina-capable netminder in John Gibson, depth up front and the first-year bump from a coaching change. Dallas Eakins 2.0 will work out this time around.

Communication skills help Ralph Krueger win over Sabres early

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

October 2, 2019

PITTSBURGH – Kyle Okposo figures they spent 10 minutes talking about hockey. For most of the evening, the three Buffalo Sabres veterans dining with their new coach, Ralph Krueger, discussed their backgrounds and families.

The sport that consumes so much of their lives didn't come up much.

"We barely talked about hockey," Okposo said of the get-together.

When the Sabres hired Krueger on May 15, he hadn't coached in the NHL in six years. He knew very little about his new players, and they knew next to nothing about him.

So as the affable Krueger started getting to know the Sabres last spring, he invited Okposo, Zach Bogosian and Carter Hutton out to eat.

Okposo had heard some positive things about Krueger from a few players familiar with him. But the dinner helped Okposo learn more.

"You realize that he's such an interesting guy, (has) an interesting background and a lot of unique experiences that you don't hear a lot about in the hockey world," Okposo said. "So it helped out a lot."

Thursday's season opener against Penguins, the start of the Sabres' 50th anniversary campaign, will be Krueger's first game behind an NHL bench since April 27, 2013.

This is only his fourth year coaching in North America. He spent just one lockout-shortened, 48-game season as the Edmonton Oilers' coach. He was also an Edmonton assistant for two years.

Krueger, 60, made his name coaching overseas, mainly with Switzerland, whose Olympics upset of Canada at the 2006 Torino Games ranks among the biggest ever.

After the Oilers fired Krueger, he spent five years in England as chairman of Southampton F.C., an English Premier League soccer team.

The Winnipeg native probably owns the most unique resume of any NHL coach.

So Okposo and the others listened to Krueger intently that night in Buffalo.

"We were more like in awe, kind of, of what he was saying about the Premier League and how it was ran," Okposo said. "It was just really, really cool to get his experiences out there."

Krueger can certainly command a room. His leadership and communication skills made him an attractive coaching option despite the time he spent away from hockey and his limited NHL experience.

But just days into training camp, Okposo said Krueger had already established a strong presence as a leader.

"You know that he's in charge and you do what he says," Okposo said.

Krueger's energetic personality, Sabres defenseman Colin Miller said, makes him easy to follow.

"He's so positive ... upbeat and eager to get this thing going," Miller said. "His excitement is contagious."

Sabres captain Jack Eichel said: "The environment he's created and the mood he's created every day, I think guys feed off of it."

Krueger's ability to communicate on different levels has earned his players' respect. He takes an interest in their lives outside of hockey.

"A lot of times people come into this business and it's just hockey, hockey, hockey, hockey," Okposo said. "Some people forget that you're people, too, and you have families, you have lives. He's definitely not one of those guys. He's just a well-rounded person."

That makes Krueger more approachable than many coaches.

"He's the type of leader and a person that you have respect for but you're not afraid to talk to," Sabres goalie Linus Ullmark said. "You have head coaches that are very respectful and (take) a lot of pride in their coaching and all that, and when you try to talk to them it feels like you don't really reach out to (them), you're not really talking to that person."

"With Ralph, I really feel like when he's a coach he's a coach. But if you want to talk to him about whatever – if it's social, if it's family, if it's hockey – he can always change his personality to match your question, which is really nice."

The clear lines of communication helped Krueger establish his program for the Sabres. He said he came to town with a framework but not a "clear plan." He sought feedback from his players.

Krueger said Okposo, for example, spoke honestly "about the journey the team had been on psychologically" and what needed to change.

"Every single drip, drip, drip piece of information I was able to get from people through the summer helped to set up the camp and set up the process as we've now executed," Krueger said.

The Sabres, Krueger said, have embraced the style he wants to play.

The new system, according to Okposo, is "pretty simple." Instead of being overwhelmed with information and feeling robotic, the players can rely on their instincts.

"There's not a lot of thinking," Okposo said. "It's more just go. If you're unsure, you have guys around. It's nice that you can get back to kind of using your instincts."

Krueger's instincts tell him the Sabres are prepared. When he walks out on the bench Thursday at PPG Paints Arena, he said he won't feel any nerves, just excitement.

"We feel the process has gone as smoothly as possible," Krueger said. "So I have to tell you, honestly, I'm going quite confidently onto that bench."

Marcus Johansson, Jake McCabe named Sabres' alternate captains

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
October 2, 2019

BUFFALO – New Sabres coach Ralph Krueger announced today he has named center Marcus Johansson and defenseman Jake McCabe alternate captains for the 2019-20 season.

"We feel that that's a strong group for the ice," Krueger said following today's practice inside KeyBank Center.

Johansson and McCabe replace defenseman Zach Bogosian and winger Kyle Okposo.

Center Jack Eichel is still the Sabres' captain, a duty he started last season.

"I feel the maturity and the ability to lead from the position," Krueger said of Eichel, "and our room's filled with people that will be leading and helping us lead."

How did Okposo, a proud veteran, handle the news he had lost his letter?

"I communicated with everybody quite honestly and openly, and nobody was upset," Krueger said. "They were open to honest discussion. The only thing I can say is continue to do what you're doing, continue to lead the way they are. Those are really good people leading the way in there, and they will continue to do that."

Johansson, 28, signed a two-year \$9 million contract with the Sabres on July 6. The Swede has played 588 games since coming to the NHL in 2010-11. Krueger has already installed him as the Sabres' second-line center.

Meanwhile, the gritty and versatile McCabe, 25, has played 274 games since joining the Sabres late in 2013-14.

The Sabres open their 50th anniversary season Thursday on the road against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

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Fourteen former Sabres captains will participate in a pregame ceremony before Saturday's home opener against the New Jersey Devils, the team announced today.

Donald Audette, Stu Barnes, Brian Campbell, Mike Foligno, Danny Gare, Brian Gionta, Jochen Hecht, Don Luce, Toni Lydman, Gerry Meehan, Michael Peca, Gilbert Perreault, Craig Rivet and Floyd Smith are scheduled to attend.

Four of them – Audette, Campbell, Hecht and Lydman – only served brief tenures as captain.

–

Krueger on his coaching style: "I believe every game has its own story line and own way in trying to get to a victory. You need to feel what the opposition is doing and you need to be flexible, whether it's possibly adjusting your rotations or adjusting even the lines, because of what's going on within the game. So I'm a coach that likes to live the game."

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According to an injury report the Sabres released Wednesday, defenseman Brandon Montour (hand) will be sidelined another three to four weeks. Meanwhile, Bogosian (hip) and goalie prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen (hip) are out indefinitely.

McCabe and Johansson selected as Sabres' alternate captains

By Adam Unger

WKBW

October 2, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — Head coach Ralph Krueger announced his alternate captains for the 2019-2020 season. Both are new to having the designation, and one is new to the Sabres' roster.

25-year old defenseman Jake McCabe has been a mainstay on the Sabres' roster for four seasons, but the last two have been hampered with injuries.

The newly signed 28-year old forward Marcus Johansson serves as a veteran presence in what's still a fairly young locker room. But just because they received A's doesn't mean they're the only leaders.

"Our room is filled with leaders and people that will be helping us lead," Krueger said. "I have to say that whether it's Kyle Okposo, Zach Bogosian, Carter Hutton, or a younger player like Sam Reinhart, everybody has been showing signs of leadership."

The return of Jack Eichel as captain and addition of two new alternate captains leaves Kyle Okposo's jersey blank; he had been an alternate captain for the Sabres since the 2017-18 season.

"Nobody was upset, they were open honest discussions. The only thing I can say is continue doing what you're doing and continue leading the way you are."

The Sabres open their season in Pittsburgh against the Penguins on Thursday at 7:00 p.m.

4 Storylines to watch: Sabres 2019-2020 season

By Nick Filipowski

WIVB

October 2, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – A new coach and some new faces mixed in with some familiar ones.

What's in store for the Sabres this season? Here are four storylines to watch.

Compete

It's real simple for the Blue & Gold heading into their 50th anniversary season: Just be better and show signs of progress.

With all the offseason additions the on-ice product should improve. But, are the Sabres ready to be playoff contenders?

90 points seems to be the bench mark for a postseason bound team — a place the Blue & Gold haven't skated since their last playoff appearance during the 2010-2011 season.

Since the "rebuild" began, the Sabres have only reached 80 points twice – in 2011-2012 (89) and in 2015-2016 (81).

Provided the guys on the ice play as a unit, follow the game plan and believe in the message coming from Krueger and his assistants, the scoreboard will take care of itself and the wins will come.

But, above all else, here's one thing that should never happen: They Sabres shouldn't be boo'd off the ice this year.

Keep the emotions in check

Throughout last season the Sabres admitted they didn't handle success or adversity all too well.

The good times were good — but they were few and far between.

Too many times the Sabres would let one mistake become two and then three...and it would snowball into absolute disaster. That's a major reason why the Sabres went nearly four months without winning back-to-back games.

If the Sabres are able to manage the highs and lows of the season – build on their success and not dwell on the setbacks – things should trend in the right direction.

How long does Rasmus Ristolainen stick around?

This story isn't going to go away anytime soon, and the calls – both literally to general manager Jason Botterill and by fans — are going to continue and get louder as the season moves along.

Since returning for training camp, Ristolainen has said and done all the right things.

However, his comments dating all the way back to locker cleanout and to MTVSports in his native Finland continue to echo in the hockey world.

Every organization likes to have a depth. Make no mistake: the Blue & Gold have an excess of right hand defenseman.

Once the guys start to get healthy it'll be interesting to see how that impacts Ristolainen's future and the position group as a whole.

The curious case of Casey Mittelstadt

Following the preseason finale, head coach Ralph Krueger had some very interesting comments about the second year centerman.

Mittelstadt had his struggles in training camp but continued to show signs of growth throughout the preseason, especially in the finale when he scored the shootout winner against Pittsburgh.

"Casey has been moving in the right direction here," Krueger said following the 3-2 shootout win on Sept. 28. "I think he's understanding what he needs to do defensively to play center at this level. Offensively his confidence seems to be growing and we'll see where it takes us now in our decisions"

Krueger was asked a follow up question on Mittelstadt and whether he believed with all the chances the young center had, if he'd have more success once he settles in to the regular season.

"We're going to take a look at everybody in camp the next couple of days," Krueger said following the preseason finale. "Jason and I will dive deep and then we'll see what we come up with Tuesday evening of a starting roster. But, Casey has made a strong case for himself and is an exciting part of the future of the franchise. We know that. He's learned a lot in just these two weeks that show us the future is very bright for him."

Neither of those quotes are ringing endorsements for Mittelstadt who struggled mightily in his first pro season recording a lowly 25 points (12 goals, 13 assists).

With Marcus Johansson getting an extended tryout at center the last week of the preseason and now slated to start the year as the 2C, that bumps Mittelstadt to the team's third line center – which is fine for now.

However, if Mittelstadt continues struggle, it wouldn't be a total surprise to see the 20-year-old log meaningful minutes in the Amerks and continue his development.

Montour to miss 3-4 weeks with hand injury

By Nick Filipowski

WIVB

October 2, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – With the puck set to drop on their 50th anniversary season on Thursday, the Sabres announced defenseman Brandon Montour will miss first three-to-four weeks of the year with a hand injury.

Montour suffered the injury in the third period of Buffalo's preseason loss to Columbus on Sept. 17.

Provided there are no setbacks in his recovery, Montour would be in line to return to the ice in late October or early November.

The Blue & Gold open the season on the road against Pittsburgh on Thursday and return for the home opener at KeyBank Center on Saturday against New Jersey.

Sabres season preview: 1-on-1 with Colin Miller

By Heather Prusak

WGRZ

October 2, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Colin Miller scored the first Stanley Cup Final goal in Vegas Golden Knights history in game one in 2018. Now he brings that playoff experience to the Sabres looking to end an eight season postseason drought.

After the Bruins left Miller unprotected for the expansion draft, he was a part of Vegas' inaugural season that ended with a series loss to the Capitals in the Stanley Cup Final.

After spending two seasons with the Golden Knights, Sabres GM Jason Botterill traded a second and fifth round draft pick for Miller hoping he'll help bolster their blue line that's struggled.

"If you look over an 82-game season it's very tough to keep things in check and not let those long streaks snowball so just the consistency is something I want to bring. We've got a good puck moving group back there so if we can take care of our own end then we can have some fun off ice," Sabres defenseman Colin Miller said.

Miller averaged just over 19 minutes of ice time last season and scored three goals and 29 points. In his first year with Vegas he scored 10 goals and 41 points.

Both seasons in Vegas he had 64 blocked shots. His hit total was 165 in the 2017-2018 season and 122 last year.

"I think everybody has things that they want to prove this season and we definitely have something we want to prove as a team as well," Miller said.

The Sabres open the season on Thursday, October 3rd in Pittsburgh then come back to Buffalo for their home opener on Saturday, October 5th against the Devils.

Sabres open the season in Pittsburgh

By Stu Boyar

WGRZ

October 3, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The Sabres begin the Ralph Krueger era tonight in Pittsburgh against Sidney Crosby and the Penguins.

The Sabres own the longest playoff drought in the NHL. They haven't been in the post season since 2011.

It was a busy off season for General Manager Jason Botterill. After hiring Krueger to replace Phil Housley who was fired after two seasons behind the bench he added some key performers to the team.

Jimmy Vesey and Marcus Johansson should add secondary scoring. Johansson will start the season as a second line center. He hasn't played that position for awhile so that will be something to watch.

Botterill brought in defensemen Collin Miller from Las Vegas and Henri Jokiharju a young player the Sabres believe has a tremendous upside.

Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark return as the team's goaltenders.

The Sabres home opener is Saturday night against New Jersey.

Top Six: Vorse's Bold Sabres Predictions

By Greg Vorse
Spectrum News
October 2, 2019

Let me preface this by saying the first four all have to do with scoring and goal increases, which shouldn't be hard to find for the Sabres. They finished 24th in goals last year. Just get to 12th and you've scored 35 more than last season.

Jack Eichel reaches 100 points

Eichel was a point per game player last year and has increased his scoring in each of his four seasons. Boldly, I proclaim he will have 35G and 65A. Just improving in year two as the captain will get him close, but consider that he only had 8 power play goals, good enough for 42nd last year, he certainly has easy areas to improve. Couple that year two with Skinner and hopefully having Victor Olofsson sniping apples for him and it's 100 or bust for Captain Jack.

Victor Olofsson scores 20 goals

The move we all begged for a year ago has finally happened with Olofsson getting some run on Jack Eichel's line, and that alone should get you to 20G. So, is this a "bold prediction" then? Well, 20G last year would have been good enough for 4th on the Sabres. A rookie doing that is pretty impressive. Last year, the young forward had 2 goals (2 assists) in 6 Sabres game. I think he can fire home at least 18 more.

Reinhart earns a fat deal

One thing I've noticed a lot during the preseason is the Sabres' desire to get pucks on net under Ralph Krueger. It's something he preaches a bit at practice, too. If pucks are going to the crease expect Samson to be standing there for rebounds and greasy tallies. Last year the 2nd overall pick in 2014 had 22+43 for 65 points. That number could jump to 75 or 80 and Buffalo wishes its bridge deal was long term.

Dahlin is Dynamite

That's not bold, I know! What is bold is that not only do I think Rasmus will play in the All-Star game, but he'll get another trip to Vegas for the award ceremony. His 9+35 for 44 points could balloon to 17+53 for 70 points which would have been 4th a season ago. The one "major" critique I found last year was that he seemed to wear down and was a bit small at times. Standing next to him it's obvious he's packed on some muscle. He told a couple other reporters and me in an off-camera conversation that he got in better shape lifting and playing a Swedish version of racquet ball. "I played that a lot" he said a few times.

Putting a bow on Risto

I'll take the "L" when my info is wrong and I was told by people in the know that Rasmus Ristolainen would be traded at the draft and then before the season started, well, here we are. The returns haven't met the asking price yet, but whether it's an injury or Botterill taking less, he'll be gone by Christmas.

In the hunt

I still don't think this is a playoff team at the time of this post, but I could see seven more wins and a point total of 90 as a bold finish. That would have them in the 9/10 area for many seasons and clearly pointing in the right direction under Ralph Krueger.

Johansson Settling In to 2nd-Line Center Role

By Ted Goldberg

Spectrum News

October 2, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. - Bringing in Marcus Johansson gave the Sabres an option to play center on the second line, one of the biggest holes on the team last year. Even though he hasn't played center full-time in eight years, he's fit in well to Ralph Krueger's new system.

"What I like about Ralph is he wants us to play with speed, he wants us to be aggressive," Johansson says. "Not sit back and wait for anything, go out and take it. I like that mentality to go out and play aggressively. That goes for offense and defense. That fits this group really well."

"He's been really good," says Jeff Skinner, the left wing on Johansson's line. "Obviously, he's been around a long time, he knows how to play the game. He's got some good vision, and he's a smart player. That's a pretty good mix for a centerman."

Johansson appreciates the large role he'll have on the Sabres this season, and he tells me his teammates have helped him acclimate to Buffalo.

"Great group of guys. It's a great staff. Everyone's treating everyone well," he says. "That's really important to me. It's been really good so far."

"He lives out where I live, pretty close. Obviously, he's asked me for a couple of things," says goalie Linus Ullmark. "It's an easy thing to talk about. You try to make an easier transition."

Johansson's teams have reached the playoffs five out of the last six years — the Sabres will try to keep that streak going starting with the season opener Thursday.

Ritzel: Sabres begin Golden Season, but franchise still lacks the silver trophy it covets

By Justin Ritzel
Auburn Citizen
October 3, 2019

Fifty years is a long time.

In October 1970, Pink Floyd released "Atom Heart Mother," and that album was the band's first to reach the top of the music charts. That same month, singer Janis Joplin died from a drug overdose, and PBS took over as the United States' primary educational television provider.

While Pink Floyd's psychedelic tunes were playing on records all over the world, something else funky happened: the Buffalo Sabres played their first game as a National Hockey League franchise.

Oct. 10, 1970, the Sabres defeated the Pittsburgh Penguins 2-1 at Pittsburgh's Civic Arena. Five days later, Buffalo played its first home game at the Buffalo Memorial Auditorium — more commonly known as "The Aud" — and fell to the eventual Stanley Cup champion Montreal Canadiens 3-0.

The Sabres finished with 24 wins, 39 losses and 15 ties in their inaugural season. Not great, but for an expansion franchise, not bad either. No. 1 pick Gilbert Perreault scored almost 40 goals and won the Calder Trophy for rookie of the year. He'd play 16 more seasons before his induction into the Hockey Hall of Fame.

Buffalo was different then. Decades of disappointing seasons hadn't yet weighed on what's become a hockey-mad city. Instead, there was optimism and curiosity.

Five years after their inception, the Sabres were in the Stanley Cup Final, but Buffalo suffered the first of two championship defeats, falling to the Philadelphia Flyers in six games.

In 1999, Buffalo returned to the Stanley Cup Final, again losing in six games, this time to the Dallas Stars. "No goal" is still a phrase regularly uttered across hockey rinks and bars in western New York.

On Thursday, the Sabres begin their 50th season. Much like its first, Buffalo will open regular season play on the road at Pittsburgh. The excitement and interest that boosted the franchise in its early years has long since been replaced by pessimism and impatience.

Buffalo hasn't qualified for the Stanley Cup Playoffs in eight years and hasn't won a playoff series in 12. When the puck drops against the Penguins, behind the bench will be Ralph Krueger, the Sabres' sixth different coach since 2012.

Will Buffalo's 50th season be any better than its 49th? Despite having the 2018 No. 1 overall pick (Rasmus Dahlin) and two former No. 2 overall picks (Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart) on their roster, the Sabres are no closer to contention than five years ago when the franchise blatantly tanked its season for the highest possible draft pick.

In Year No. 49, the Sabres teased their fans with a 10-game winning streak that briefly pushed them to the top of the NHL standings. But after starting the season 17-6-2, Buffalo went 16-33-8 over its final 57 games to finish as the fifth-worst team in the league.

This year, the Sabres will celebrate their Golden Season, which naturally includes fresh alternate jerseys, white with golden trim. Each month of the season will signify a different decade of the franchise's existence — November includes 70s night, December has 80s night, and so on.

Along the way, the Sabres will highlight iconic players and moments from their history, like Perreault and the French Connection, Dominik Hasek and Michael Peca, those horrid red and black uniforms from the late 1990s to mid-2000s, and more.

Buffalo won't be recognizing any championship teams. If you want to see Sabres players hoisting Lord Stanley, you'll have to purchase the "Bruce Almighty" Blu-ray.

Fifty years is a long time. Many NHL franchises, like the California Golden Seals, have come and gone and are a mere footnote in hockey history. Others, like the Quebec Nordiques or Hartford Whalers, struggled for a few years and were forced to relocate. There's even cities like Winnipeg that have lost its franchise only to gain one back.

The Sabres haven't been broke enough to relocate and they haven't been bad enough to fold. For the most part, Buffalo's hockey team is just there, a team for opposing franchises to play 82 times a year before someone else captures the sport's most coveted trophy.

Maybe the next 50 years will be better than the first 50. Or maybe in 2070 the Sabres will celebrate their centenary as the first NHL franchise to last 100 years and have absolutely nothing to show for it.

Sabres D Montour (hand) out 3-4 weeks

TSN

October 2, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres updated the status of Wednesday, announcing the defenceman will miss three-to-four weeks due a hand injury.

The team also announced that both defenceman and goaltender Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen are both indefinitely due to hip injuries

Montour was ruled out for the remainder of the preseason on Sept. 19 due to the injury. He was acquired by the Sabres from the Anaheim Ducks last season and posted eight goals and 35 points in 82 games with the two teams.

The 25-year-old has 19 goals and 73 points in 189 games since being selected second overall in the 2014 NHL Draft. He is scheduled to become a restricted free agent next summer and carries a cap hit of \$3.39 million for this season.

Bogosian, 29, had three goals and 19 points in 65 games with the Sabres last season. He is also entering the final year of his current contract and carries a \$5.14 million cap hit for this season.

Luukkonen, 20, is entering his first season of professional hockey after appearing in 53 games last season with the OHL's Sudbury Wolves. He appeared in one game with the AHL's Rochester Americans last season, allowing two goals on 34 shots.

7 Coaches Take Charge Of New Teams For The 2019-20 NHL Season

By Carol Schram

Forbes

October 2, 2019

If you're looking for job security, don't pursue a career as an NHL head coach.

As the 2019-20 regular season kicks off on Wednesday, nearly a quarter of the league's 31 teams will have new bosses behind their benches. Clubs are hoping to follow in the footsteps of the 2018-19 St. Louis Blues, who turned themselves around and won a Stanley Cup after Craig Berube took over from Mike Yeo last November.

Like Berube, who had previously coached the Philadelphia Flyers, most of this year's new recruits also have past experience. Just one of the seven new faces is a true rookie, taking on a head-coaching gig for the first time.

Here's your guide to who landed where and what expectations they're facing this season.

Anaheim Ducks – Dallas Eakins

Selected in the 10th round of the 1985 draft, Dallas Eakins beat his long odds of reaching the NHL as a player, ultimately suiting up on defense for 120 games on nine different teams over the span of a decade.

When his playing days were over, Eakins built a strong reputation as a bright coaching mind during four years with the AHL Toronto Marlies. That led to a one-and-a-half season stint with the Edmonton Oilers starting in 2013.

Eakins makes no bones about the fact that his aggressive, guns-blazing attempt to overhaul the Oilers' culture was a disaster. After he was fired, he spent the last four years rebuilding his reputation as the coach of the AHL's San Diego Gulls. This summer, he was given his chance to step up to the Gulls' parent club, the Anaheim Ducks.

Last season, the Ducks missed the playoffs for the first time in seven years. General manager Bob Murray took over behind the bench in February after Randy Carlyle was dismissed.

On the ice, the Ducks are in the middle of a roster overhaul that is driven by youth, many of whom have played under Eakins in San Diego. That familiarity could help spark a quick franchise turnaround in Orange County this season.

Buffalo Sabres – Ralph Krueger

Ralph Krueger's only previous NHL coaching experience also came in Edmonton. Hired from the Swiss national team, Krueger spent two years as an assistant before guiding the Oilers to a 19-22-7 record in the lockout-shortened 2012-13 season.

Krueger was dismissed from Edmonton when Eakins became available, then augmented his reputation as one of the most interesting men in hockey by spending five years as chairman of Southampton FC of the English Premier League — as well as guiding Team Europe to a silver medal at the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

Two years ago, the Sabres tried to reverse their fortunes by bringing back franchise legend Phil Housley. Krueger represents a 180-degree change of course — the ultimate outsider, with plenty of fresh ideas.

Krueger should have no trouble motivating his players if the impression he made on the first day of training camp holds up. "I talked to five or six guys after," veteran forward Kyle Okposo told John Wawrow of the Associated Press. "Ralph talked for 15 or 20 minutes, and every single one of them said they wanted to run through a wall after he was done talking."

The Sabres showed they could be successful last fall, when they rode a 10-game winning streak to the top of the NHL standings. But a second-half collapse cost Housley his job and extended the franchise's playoff drought to eight seasons, currently the longest in the league.

This year, the Sabres are celebrating their 50th anniversary, but still looking for their first-ever Stanley Cup. Krueger's job is to eliminate his group's longstanding emotional fragility and instill enough confidence to return the team to on-ice respectability.

Edmonton Oilers – Dave Tippett

The latest coach to land on Edmonton's perpetual hot seat, Dave Tippett's 721-game NHL career as a left winger started with the Hartford Whalers in the mid-80s, a team that also included new Florida Panthers bench boss Joel Quenneville.

Tippett has previously had two long NHL head-coaching stints — six years with the Dallas Stars, followed by eight years with the Phoenix/Arizona Coyotes. He won the Jack Adams Award as the NHL's coach of the year with the Coyotes in 2010.

After five years out of the playoffs, the Coyotes and Tippett agreed to part ways after the 2016-17 season. Last year, he worked as a senior advisor for NHL Seattle before agreeing to join new GM Ken Holland in the latest attempt to turn around the Oilers.

Respected industry veterans with roots in Western Canada, Holland and Tippett are expected to start with a long leash in Edmonton. A lack of roster depth will create challenges, but expect to see Tippett ramp up his team's defensive structure after the Oilers tied for 25th in goals against last season.

Florida Panthers – Joel Quenneville

The big fish is now swimming in the Atlantic ocean. Joel Quenneville is second all-time to Scotty Bowman in both games coached (1,636) and career wins (890). He won the Jack Adams Award as coach of the St. Louis Blues in 2000, then won three Stanley Cups in six years with the Chicago Blackhawks between 2010 and 2015. He was fired last November.

The instant Quenneville became a free agent, his name was tossed around for other vacancies. In April, he re-joined his original Blackhawks boss, Dale Tallon, with the Florida Panthers — a team that has reached the playoffs just twice since 2000 and hasn't won a playoff series since going to the Stanley Cup Final in 1996.

After just missing out on a postseason berth two years ago, the Panthers were widely expected to take a step forward last season. Instead, they backslid by 10 points, which led to the dismissal of incumbent coach Bob Boughner.

"We will seek to identify a transformative, experienced head coach with Stanley Cup pedigree to lead our team going forward," said Tallon when Boughner was let go. Just one day later, Quenneville's hiring was announced.

In July, the Panthers signed a seven-year, \$70-million contract with unrestricted free agent goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky. The mission this season is clear — playoffs or bust.

Los Angeles Kings – Todd McLellan

Optimism abounded in Northern Alberta when Todd McLellan parted ways with the San Jose Sharks after the 2014-15 season, then landed with the Edmonton Oilers just as first-overall pick Connor McDavid rolled into town.

Two years into McLellan's tenure in Edmonton, everything appeared to be on track. McDavid had blossomed into a scoring champ and Hart Trophy winner and the Oilers came within a breath of reaching the 2017 Western Conference Final.

But the team couldn't maintain its momentum. A playoff miss in 2018 and a slow start last season led to McLellan's firing last November, after 20 games.

Now, the 51-year-old is back in California, tasked with revitalizing the Los Angeles Kings. Two-time Stanley Cup champions, the Kings have won just one playoff game in the five years since their last title in 2014. They

plummeted to NHL basement last year, leading to John Stevens' dismissal in early November, and ended the year in last place in the Western Conference.

McLellan points out that anything can happen in a National Hockey League where the St. Louis Blues went from last place to the Stanley Cup last season, but cautions against overly high early expectations for the Kings.

"Growth," he told Joe Reedy of the Associated Press about what he's looking for this year. "Everyone has to improve in every facet of the game. Old dogs have to learn new tricks, and the new dogs have to be prepared and open to absorb and be professional."

Ottawa Senators – D.J. Smith

This season's only rookie head coach is a 42-year-old who spent most of his playing career as a defenseman in the minor leagues. D.J. Smith managed just 45 NHL games, with the Toronto Maple Leafs and Colorado Avalanche.

When he hung up his skates, Smith signed on as an assistant coach with the OHL's Windsor Spitfires in 2005. After six seasons, he moved to the head job with the Oshawa Generals, where he guided his team to the 2015 Memorial Cup.

From there, it was back to the Leafs. Smith spent the last four seasons as an assistant to Mike Babcock, where his primary focus was on Toronto's defense.

Smith's transition to head coaching this season might be eased by some familiar faces around him. Former Leafs blueliners Nikita Zaitsev and Ron Hainsey and forward Connor Brown have all joined him in Ottawa.

Senators general manager Pierre Dorion has gutted the Senators' roster over the last year by trading away star players like Erik Karlsson and Mark Stone, so expectations this season will be decidedly modest. But Brady Tkachuk, Colin White and Thomas Chabot lead the list of the team's young players on the rise.

After finishing with less than 70 points in each of the last two seasons, there's nowhere for Smith to go but up.

Philadelphia Flyers – Alain Vigneault

Another Jack Adams winner, Alain Vigneault was named coach of the year with the Vancouver Canucks in 2007 and has guided both the Canucks (2011) and the New York Rangers (2014) to the Stanley Cup Final. He was relieved of his duties on Broadway at the end of the 2017-18 season, as the Rangers embarked on their franchise rebuild. Last May, he took Team Canada to a surprise silver medal at the IIHF World Championship, one month after signing on with the Flyers.

The tournament gave Vigneault a chance to work with some of his new charges, including forward Sean Couturier and young goaltender Carter Hart, who looks like he's the solution to the netminding issues that have plagued the organization for decades.

Vigneault has a reputation for quick success when he takes over a new team. With the Flyers now seven years removed from their last playoff series win, general manager Chuck Fletcher is hoping that his new coach can achieve similar results this year in the City of Brotherly Love.

Top 10 Calder Trophy candidates for 2019-20

By Matt Larkin

The Hockey News

October 2, 2019

It's best to wait until the last possible second to make realistic Calder Trophy predictions, as it's never a given which prospects make their respective teams aside from the elite blue-chippers picked at the very top of a draft year.

With opening night of the 2019-20 NHL season here, we now know the finalized versions of every roster. A few hyped older rookies were surprising cuts from their squads, from Filip Zadina to Eeli Tolvanen, while some true peach fuzzers blew away expectations to crack their NHL parent clubs, from Ville Heinola to Rasmus Sandin.

So who has the strongest chance at the Calder? In this era of hyper-accurate scouting, the players projected to become the best get picked the highest in the draft and most commonly become the league's next wave of stars. Since the dawn of the salary-cap era in 2005-06, 12 of the 14 Calder winners have been first-round picks, and five were first-overall picks. The award doesn't always go to a big-time prospect jumping directly to the NHL from the draft, however. The past two winners, Elias Pettersson and Mathew Barzal, were first-round picks but were older rookies with one or more extra years of seasoning. Same goes for Jonathan Huberdeau in 2012-13 and Tyler Myers in 2009-10. So we can't overlook the "mature" rookies in this year's class of Calder candidates.

Who are the best picks to win the award this season? Here are my top 10.

1. CALE MAKAR, COLORADO AVALANCHE

His puck-moving skill and all-around offensive ceiling have been compared to Erik Karlsson's. Makar, one of the smartest, most talented blueline prospects to come around in quite some time, got a taste of NHL duty via trial by fire in the 2019 playoffs. He didn't look out of place at all, picking up six points in 10 games. He'll work as the primary quarterback on a Colorado power play that includes the all-world forward line of Gabriel Landeskog, Nathan MacKinnon and Mikko Rantanen, meaning Makar is set up to post a big-time point total by rookie D-man standards.

No rookie defenseman has even cleared 50 points since Vladimir Malakhov in 1992-93, but Makar has the setup to do it. He has the best chance in years with a big role on a contending team with some elite offensive players surrounding him.

2. JACK HUGHES, NEW JERSEY DEVILS

If we're ranking the rookie class on long-term upside, Hughes has as strong a claim as anyone's to the No. 1 spot, and it wouldn't be remotely surprising to see him light it up from Day 1. He has a speedy, nifty skill set that tailors him beautifully to today's NHL. He possesses the upside to win multiple scoring titles in his career. Think Patrick Kane, but a center. Still, Hughes is 5-foot-10, 170 pounds and 18 years old, so it's possible he'll take his lumps from time to time playing against grown men.

His team is also mid-rebuild and a long shot to make the playoffs, but that won't dash his Calder hopes too much. Only two of the past five winners reached the post-season. Being a great rookie on a bad team comes with the territory. Chances are, the team has you because it was bad and picked you with a high draft slot.

3. KAAPO KAKKO, NEW YORK RANGERS

Of the rookie forwards, Kakko is probably the most NHL ready. His body is mature at 6-foot-3 and 199 pounds. He possesses tremendous puck control and general hockey awareness. He fits the "mature beyond his years" cliché.

"He can play with the puck, he can beat you 1-on-1, he can take hits, he can give hits, and he's like a man already," said Kalle Kaskinen, Kakko's Finnish League coach with TPS, when we spoke just before the draft last year.

What keeps Kakko behind Makar and Hughes is situation. Pavel Buchnevich has beaten out Kakko for the first-line right wing job in Manhattan alongside Artemi Panarin and Mika Zibanejad, and there's a massive gap in linemate quality between Line 1 and 2. Kakko is slated to open 2019-20 with Chris Kreider and Ryan Strome. Kakko can still do damage on any line and will get some power-play looks, but he's unlikely to post monster point totals in the Barzal/Petterson range in Year 1. Kakko could easily overtake Buchnevich on the depth chart at some point, of course, and Kakko has the talent to win the Calder regardless of line assignment, as he doesn't have to rely on others to generate offense. But his ceiling for Year 1 just isn't quite as high as Jack Hughes'.

4. QUINN HUGHES, VANCOUVER CANUCKS

Jack's older brother brings a similar scintillating skill set – to the blueline. Hughes possesses many similarities to Makar. Both are relatively undersized for their position and both already can move the puck like top-end offensive NHL defensemen. Hughes should be fascinating to watch in his first full season as part of the Canucks' rebuild, especially after he flashed so much potential in a five-game trial with Vancouver at the end of last season. The biggest threat to Hughes' Calder bid is that Makar does so many of the same things well and plays on a better team at the moment, meaning Makar will likely post a better version of Hughes' stat line. That said, Quinn, like Jack, belongs in the elite tier of Calder threats. It's a pretty set quartet with a sizable gap afterward.

5. CODY GLASS, VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS

Glass, a brainy center most commonly compared to Mark Scheifele, drew rave reviews in the pre-season for his work on the power play and along the boards. It's thus not a huge surprise to see Glass slated to open the season on Vegas' top power-play unit. The big shocker, however, is seeing Glass usurp Paul Stastny to skate with Max Pacioretty and Mark Stone on the projected opening-night lines. Glass always projected to become one of Vegas' top two centers in the long term. But if he has that job on Day 1 and keeps it, he could post surprisingly great numbers and enter the Calder discussion.

6. NICK SUZUKI, MONTREAL CANADIENS

Going into the pre-season, Suzuki fell under the category of "Not a lock to make the team but very interesting if he does." Here we are in October, and Suzuki has beaten out fellow (injured) prospect Ryan Poehling to make the Habs. Suzuki always had the higher offensive ceiling than Poehling, despite Poehling getting a hat trick in his NHL debut last year, and Suzuki's intelligence at both ends of the rink means he can play center or wing and on any line. At the moment, he's slated to work on Max Domi's right wing. Suzuki is ready to become a high-impact NHL player. All he needed was an opportunity, and now he has it.

7. VICTOR OLOFSSON, BUFFALO SABRES

Olofsson checks none of the typical rookie boxes. He's a seventh-round pick, he's 24 and, as recently as last winter, our panel of NHL scouts rated him merely as Buffalo's seventh-best prospect in our Future Watch publication. But Olofsson has slowly seeped into our consciousness. He led the Swedish League in goals two seasons ago. Last season, he ripped 30 goals in 66 AHL games and found the net twice in six NHL games. Blessed with a deadly shot, he won new Sabres coach Ralph Krueger over quickly in training camp. Olofsson wound up on Buffalo's first line, flanking Jack Eichel, by the end of the pre-season.

We must be careful not to base Calder picks too much on line deployments, but all Olofsson does is snipe, and he has a dream situation to start his rookie campaign. It wouldn't be a surprise if he paced all freshmen in goals this season. (Ignore his demotion to the AHL. That's just some salary-cap juggling. He'll be back up for the opener.)

8. ALEXANDRE TEXIER, COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS

What a fun story Texier is. The Jackets picked him in the second round of the 2017 draft right out of France. He hadn't played at a level any higher, and Columbus took a chance on him anyway. He was playing in the Finnish League a year later and, last season, Texier jumped from the Liiga to the AHL, where he ripped off five goals in five games, and then the NHL, where he scored three times in 10 games, eight of which were playoff games.

It was evident coach John Tortorella trusted Texier, a kid who cut his teeth playing against grown men when he was a teenager, and that carried over to training camp and the pre-season. Texier has earned a coveted spot

replacing UFA departure Artemi Panarin on the top line with Pierre-Luc Dubois and Cam Atkinson. Texier is no 'Bread Man' but brings an intriguing blend of playmaking and feistiness. Texier is experienced enough to stick at the NHL level going forward, and the current assignment sets him up for a hot start.

9. SAM STEEL, ANAHEIM DUCKS

The Ducks have done a nice job slow-playing Steel after picking him 30th overall in 2016. They returned him to major junior, where he posted video-game stats for a couple more seasons, then developed him in the AHL for the majority of last season, where he managed 20 goals and 41 points in 53 games and six goals and 13 points in 16 playoff games. Mixed in as well were 22 NHL games, in which he held his own with six goals and 11 points, albeit the possession numbers suggested he was a bit overmatched. Steel's AHL coach, Dallas Eakins, is now his NHL coach, and Steel got some plum assignments in the pre-season, working most frequently as the Ducks' No. 2 center between Rickard Rakell and Jakob Silfverberg.

The Ducks are committed to youth. They need Steel. He's set up to succeed, having been given time to develop at his own pace and opening the year with quality linemates. It's just a matter of getting healthy, as a lower-body injury cost Steel much of the pre-season and will force him to the IR to open the year. The hope is that, when he returns, it's to second-line NHL job and not an AHL demotion.

10. BARRETT HAYTON, ARIZONA COYOTES

The Coyotes got some heat for picking Hayton fifth overall in 2018, leaving Filip Zadina on the board. But the Red Wings just demoted Zadina, and Hayton made the Coyotes. He grew into quite a leader last season, captaining OHL Sault Ste. Marie, and projects to be a leader someday in Arizona. Hayton is still eligible to return to major junior after nine games, but he has potential to slot anywhere in the Coyotes lineup, which lacks high-end forward depth beyond Clayton Keller and Phil Kessel. Following a running theme on this list: Hayton has a good two-way hockey mind, which should endear him to coach Rick Tocchet and decrease the odds of a demotion.

Other 2019-20 Calder Trophy candidates to consider: Erik Brannstrom, Alexander Nylander, Mackenzie Blackwood, Adam Fox, Rasmus Sandin, Dante Fabbro, Max Comtois, Drake Batherson, Noah Dobson, Ville Heinola, Thatcher Demko, Kristian Vesalainen, Tobias Bjornfot, Ryan Poehling, Nic Hague, Martin Necas, Kirby Dach, Dillon Dube, Elvis Merzlikins, Jesper Boqvist, Ilya Samsonov

Roster surprises: Who is the unfamiliar face on each NHL team's opening night roster?

By Jared Clinton
The Hockey News
October 2, 2019

It's here. It's finally here. After a months-long wait and some agonizing final days between the pre-season's start and the moment games really matter, the NHL season is upon us. The ice is in, the lines are painted and with the puck set to drop on the 2019-20 season, the rosters for each of the league's 31 teams are in place.

Of course, when the puck drops Wednesday night, you'll be acquainted with the top talent. You'll recognize the Connor McDavids and Sidney Crosbys and Alex Ovechkins of the league. You'll also be met with the lineup regulars, the secondary scorers and the blue-collar workers who make up the middle of every roster. But if you're not an NHL obsessive, there may be a few names on opening night that give you a moment of pause. And this, dear fan, is a rundown of those players, a look at the surprises and unfamiliar faces who have landed on NHL rosters ahead of opening night.

Where possible, we tried to avoid using any 2019 draft choices on this list and tried to keep it to those players who were either fringe players, entered training camp fighting for a contract or simply afterthoughts who were believed to need more time to develop in the minors. In some instances, it was either difficult or impossible. In others, the surprise is simply the player who made the cut in the face of a difficult decision.

So, without further ado, here are the opening nights surprises for each team:

Isac Lundestrom, Anaheim Ducks

The young locks for the roster included Sam Steel, Troy Terry and Max Comtois. Lundestrom, meanwhile, was expected to be right on the cusp of making the cut, but some had him starting the season in the AHL. Not so. He impressed during training camp, and after a 15-game look in Anaheim to start last season, he'll again be skating with the Ducks to start the current campaign. This time, the hope is he can turn it into a full-time spot. Last season, though, he was down in the AHL by mid-season and over in the Swedish League not too long after.

Barrett Hayton, Arizona Coyotes

Maybe this gets this entire list off to something of a bad start, but "surprise" might not be the best descriptor for Hayton. In his five pre-season games, he put up one goal and three points and earned himself a spot on the roster. But here's the thing: it's all or nothing. Either he sticks around in Arizona or it's back to major junior for the 19-year-old, who was the Coyotes' fifth-overall pick in 2018. It's a tough spot to be in, as Hayton is a cut above the rest in the OHL and sending him back might not do all that much to continue the growth of his game.

Urho Vaakanainen, Boston Bruins

It's not that he's on the roster that's a surprise, but who he beat out. It seemed that Connor Clifton was a safe bet to make the roster after his performance in the post-season, but Vaakanainen, 20, has a boatload of potential and acquitted himself well when he skated in Boston last season. This could be another taste of the NHL for him before he jumps in head first next season.

John Gilmour, Buffalo Sabres

Gilmour was a standout with Providence during his college days and he's fared well in the AHL, but he's had difficulty breaking into the NHL. During his three years in the Rangers' organization, Gilmour skated in 33 games with the Blueshirts, but he was lapped on the depth chart. Thankfully for Gilmour, injuries on the backend to Zach Bogosian, Brandon Montour and Matt Hunwick opened up a spot on the Sabres and he has him chance to prove himself during the campaign in Buffalo, where he inked a one-year, league-minimum deal this summer.

Tobias Rieder, Calgary Flames

He came into camp on a professional tryout, so that alone made Rieder something of a long shot for the Flames' roster. However, after his abysmal season down the road with the Edmonton Oilers in 2018-19, Rieder won a spot – and a one-year, league-minimum deal – in Calgary. He's by no means set to become a point-per-game contributor for the Flames, but if the 26-year-old can find his old form and net something in the 12-goal, 25-point range, he'll be a useful acquisition and welcome addition to the lineup.

Martin Necas, Carolina Hurricanes

The talent is obvious – Necas put up 16 goals and 52 points as an AHL rookie last season and added another five goals and 13 points for the Calder Cup-winning Charlotte Checkers – but the question was about space, as in where Necas would fit. That's for Rod Brind'Amour to decide now, though, because the 20-year-old has shown enough to stick with the big club into the season. He possesses a ton of upside and Necas could be yet another home-grown offensive weapon for the Hurricanes in short order.

Alexander Nylander, Chicago Blackhawks

He's getting his chance. Acquired from the Sabres in something of a head-scratcher this off-season that saw the Blackhawks ship defenseman Henri Jokiharju the other way, Nylander, 21, had difficulty sticking in the NHL with Buffalo across his three pro seasons. The raw talent is undeniable, but Nylander hasn't been able to put it all together to make good on his upside. If Chicago can tap into that and Nylander flourishes, it's going to be a great get for Blackhawks GM Stan Bowman. Nylander is going to have to make sure to prove his doubters wrong.

Conor Timmins, Colorado Avalanche

The surprise here isn't that Timmins, 21, has the ability to stick around in the NHL. The surprise is that he's ready for the NHL roster right out of the gate after being sidelined for more than a year with a concussion. He didn't skate in a single game with the Avalanche's farm club last season, but he beat out Calle Rosen for the final spot on the blueline in the pre-season and will almost assuredly start in a third-pairing role when the puck drops on the season.

Sonny Milano, Columbus Blue Jackets

This is it. He's being given his make-or-break chance from the jump, and Milano, 23, has no choice but to grab the opportunity and make the most of it if he's going to stick around in Columbus beyond this season. His stock has dropped year over year since he was drafted, but he remains an offensively gifted winger with potential to be a consistent contributor in the right role. Will he find it? If he doesn't, the Blue Jackets might start looking to rehome the 2014 16th-overall pick.

Justin Dowling, Dallas Stars

There aren't many surprises in Dallas, as the lineup regulars one would expect are all present and there wasn't much room for movement elsewhere. That said, Dowling's inclusion is interesting. The 29-year-old spent last season as the Texas Stars' captain and has had a few cups of coffee but no extended stays with the big club. Chances are this will be another season on the fringes, but he'll at least begin in the NHL.

Taro Hirose, Detroit Red Wings

Maybe it shouldn't come as a shock given his effectiveness after he put pen to paper late last season. In 10 games, he notched a goal and seven points. Yet, on most rosters, Hirose likely would have had to start the season in the minors and battle his way up. The Red Wings are thin, though, and injuries haven't helped, so that has opened a spot for Hirose to pick up where he left off in the NHL last season. If he can impress, he'll be a full-timer.

Tomas Jurco, Edmonton Oilers

His intriguing offensive skillset made Jurco, 26, a once-promising prospect in Detroit, but he failed to really catch on with the Red Wings and has had to fight his way back into the NHL. Last season, Jurco was on an AHL-only deal and ended the campaign with the Charlotte Checkers, lighting up the Calder Cup playoffs to the tune of seven goals and 18 points in 18 post-season outings. That was enough to net him a one-year deal with the Oilers on July 1 and he's stuck around on the roster through camp. Where he ends up slotting in is anyone's guess, but the thin wings in Edmonton could mean a middle-six job is his for the taking.

Dryden Hunt, Florida Panthers

Honestly, there are no stunners in Florida. The Panthers' opening night roster is made up of almost the exact same group most would have expected when camp opened. Not even Troy Brouwer, who was on a PTO, managed to stick around. So, Hunt – or Jayce Hawryluk, if you prefer – gets the nod here if only because played the fewest big league games and potentially snatches a spot from a youngster such as Owen Tippett.

Tobias Bjornfot, Los Angeles Kings

So, we're avoiding 2019 first-round picks where possible, but it's difficult not to include Bjornfot when talking about the Kings. The 22nd overall pick in June, he's getting a look straight out of camp and doing so at a time

when there's not much need on the Kings' part to fast-track any youngsters. This could be nothing more than a several-game audition for Bjornfot, but if he performs, it wouldn't be the least bit shocking to see him stick around and learn under Drew Doughty.

Carson Soucy, Minnesota Wild

He's had his NHL debut already, but the three-game look in 2017-18 was the only time Soucy has seen big-league action. The rest of his professional career, which stems back to the late stages of the 2016-17 campaign, has been spent with the Iowa Wild. There was an open spot on the Minnesota blueline given the injury to Greg Pateryn, and that opened the door for a battle for the final spot. Soucy is sticking around for now, and the 25-year-old could skate consistent third-pairing minutes until the roster is back at full health.

Cale Fleury, Montreal Canadiens

Looking at the Canadiens' blueline ahead of the pre-season, few would have considered Fleury, 20, to be part of the conversation, but he absolutely earned his spot with his pre-season performance. A Montreal third-rounder, 87th overall, in 2017, Fleury put up solid numbers in his rookie season in the AHL and is likely to skate on the third-pairing to start the season. If he can play a steady, reliable game and earn the trust of coach Claude Julien, there's little reason why Fleury can't become a mainstay on the back end in Montreal this season.

Daniel Carr, Nashville Predators

Once a fringe player with the Canadiens, Carr spent much of the past two seasons – and almost the entirety of the 2018-19 campaign – in the AHL. Last season, he was remarkable in the minor league, registering 30 goals and 71 points in 52 games with the Chicago Wolves, and that was enough to earn him a look with the Predators. He took advantage of his opportunity and stuck around through camp, too, beating out notable youngster Eeli Tolvanen and roster regular Mikka Salomaki for the final forward spot. Carr will play a depth role and nothing more. That he's earned that much is impressive, though.

Kevin Rooney, New Jersey Devils

He's had to battle his way to the big league, and Rooney, 26, is about to start the 2019-20 campaign in the Devils' lineup. Despite playing 41 games in the NHL last season, his inclusion on the opening day roster is something of a stunner. He wasn't especially prolific last year at either the AHL or NHL level, but the reality is that he won't be asked to be. He's a fourth-line guy who's going to play minimal minutes, tasked primarily with being a bit of a disturber each time he hits the ice.

Noah Dobson, New York Islanders

It comes down to the benefits of keeping him in the NHL versus any potential gains that can be made through another season in major junior. Ultimately, though, the choice was made to keep the 19-year-old with the big club. Does that mean he's here to stay? Not necessarily. But if it's a matter of icing the best possible roster with the greatest potential for upside, Dobson could very well stick around. He's a big, big part of the future in New York, and if the Islanders and Barry Trotz think Dobson is ready, then he's ready.

Greg McKegg, New York Rangers

This spot was reserved for Michael Haley, but technically he's not on the opening-night roster. So, let's instead give the nod to Greg McKegg, with whom some will be familiar but whose spot on the roster likely came at the expense of the Rangers keeping the likes of Vitali Kravtsov or Filip Chytil in New York. That said, McKegg, 27, has value as a bottom-six, grind-line type and there's value in getting Kravtsov and Chytil more reps in the AHL than they would get in the NHL.

Scott Sabourin, Ottawa Senators

Undrafted out of the OHL, Sabourin has scratched and clawed for a spot in the NHL. He spent the first four seasons of his professional career in the Los Angeles Kings' organization, moved along to the Anaheim Ducks' farm club and spent one campaign with the Flames' AHL affiliate before being given a shot on a PTO by the Senators. He skated in four games in the pre-season for Ottawa and picked up 14 penalty minutes, but his game was enough to land him a one-year, league-minimum pact. At 27, and with no prior NHL experience, he'll get a chance to make his NHL debut.

Carsen Twarynski, Philadelphia Flyers

The pre-season is about making the most out of any opportunity that arises and Twarynski did exactly that in Philadelphia. Was he an undeniable standout? Maybe not. But the 21-year-old – along with fellow 21-year-old

Connor Bunnaman – reached out and grabbed a spot on the roster with a pair of expected roster regulars, Nolan Patrick and Tyler Pitlick, on the sidelines. Twarynski gets the nod as the biggest surprise as he's a winger, which makes him a less versatile option up front.

John Marino, Pittsburgh Penguins

A steady producer during his three years at Harvard, Marino, 22, was expected to start the season in the minors as he got adjusted to the professional game. Instead, he has impressed in training camp and throughout the pre-season, enough that he's pencilled in as an extra defender for the time being but could very well end up in the lineup if Penguins coach Mike Sullivan wants to add some more mobility to the lineup. Whether or not Marino spends the entire season in the NHL is up for debate, but his upside, especially this early, has to excite the Penguins.

Mario Ferraro, San Jose Sharks

The 21-year-old defenseman wasn't a lock to make the roster, but as is the case in several other cities, injuries have opened the door, specifically the one suffered by Radim Simek, and Ferraro has taken advantage. Selected 49th overall by the Sharks in 2017, the former UMass-Amherst captain, who put pen to paper to depart college in April, is jumping right into the NHL lineup. And who knows. If he impresses, there's a chance Ferraro spends the campaign in the NHL. The depth on D isn't San Jose's strong suit, so there's a window there.

Mackenzie MacEachern, St. Louis Blues

Tough to pick out anyone from a roster that stayed largely the same year over year. So, given Justin Faulk, who was acquired from the Carolina Hurricanes, doesn't count, we'll go with MacEachern, who spent his first two full pro seasons in the minors, split time last season between the AHL and NHL and looks like he's got a shot at becoming a full-time big-leaguer this season. The 25-year-old is a crash-and-bang bottom-sixer and not much more, but there's room for that on the Blues' fourth line.

Carter Verhaeghe, Tampa Bay Lightning

You have to admire the climb. In 2015-16 and 2016-17, Verhaeghe, 24, was splitting time between the AHL and ECHL, and it wasn't until the 2017-18 campaign that he became a full-time with the Bolts' AHL affiliate. His career has taken off since then, too, and last season's 34-goal, 82-point performance with the Syracuse Crunch put him on the big club's radar and his pre-season output – two goals and five points in six games – has earned him a spot on the NHL roster to start the season. If he becomes a lineup regular, chalk it up as another spectacular find by the Lightning's scouting staff.

Timothy Liljegren, Toronto Maple Leafs

The offensive upside Liljegren, 20, possesses gives him tremendous upside, but he hasn't been able to put it together in the AHL. His one-goal, 17-point rookie season in the minors was his best campaign, but injuries have limited his time and slowed his development. He showed well enough in camp and the pre-season, though, to get an extended look from the Maple Leafs' staff. Don't count on him sticking around all season, but he should get some minutes early in the campaign.

Adam Gaudette, Vancouver Canucks

The demotions were the most shocking part of Vancouver's final cuts, particularly those of Alex Biega and Sven Baertschi. Moves had to be made to make room for those who earned a spot in the eyes of the staff, though, namely defenseman Oscar Fantenberg and Gaudette, a Canucks fifth-rounder in 2015 who looks ready to compete for a bottom-six job. The 22-year-old was an exceptional scorer in his final two seasons at Northeastern, but bounced between the AHL and NHL last season. It's not so shocking that he made the final cut, but in a roster management sense, with Gaudette waiver exempt, it was surprising to see him kept over others who could have been lost for nothing.

Jimmy Schuldt, Vegas Golden Knights

The former St. Cloud State captain came right out of college and into the Golden Knights' lineup last season, so it might not be altogether surprising that he made the cut this time around. However, he's all the way down the depth chart and likely won't be an every-game player to start the season. The 24-year-old's offensive output in the NCAA was eye-popping, though, and if he gets a chance to shine, he might do just that. Keep an eye on him.

Martin Fehervary, Washington Capitals

A second-round pick of the Capitals in 2018, 46th overall, Fehervary spent the entirety of last season in the Swedish League and the expectation was that he would get acclimated to the North American game in the AHL this coming season. But that won't be the case, at least not to start the campaign. Thanks in part to Michal Kempny starting the season on the sidelines, Fehervary is getting a look on the blueline and he's a possibility to start the campaign on the third pairing. If he's already ready for full-time NHL work, that will be a boon to the Capitals' blueline.

Ville Heinola, Winnipeg Jets

The 18-year-old impressed throughout training camp and was in the conversation for a spot on the blueline, but an injury to Nathan Beaulieu all but ensures Heinola will be on the roster on opening night. He could even be in the lineup, particularly if the Jets want to see what they have in the youngster when game action gets underway. There were a lot of factors that played into Heinola's spot on the blueline – the departure of Jacob Trouba, Dustin Byfuglien's personal leave, injuries that opened up playing time – but his presence on the Jets' roster remains among the biggest surprises coming out of the pre-season.

Johansson, McCabe named Sabres alternate captains to start 2019-20 season

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

October 2, 2019

Marcus Johansson spent September adjusting to a new city, a new coach, and new linemates. He even had to adapt to playing center, a position he had not played regularly since early in his career.

As he packed his bag for his first regular-season road trip with the Sabres, Johansson - who was named an alternate captain along with Jake McCabe on Wednesday - said he feels like the month of preparation has paid off.

"Yeah, absolutely," Johansson said. "It feels like we're - just looking at practice - it feels like guys are ready. I mean, there's high intensity, guys look hungry. This is when the fun starts. Yeah, we're ready. This is what we worked for all summer. It's finally here."

That sentiment was echoed by Ralph Krueger, who will coach his first regular-season game with the Sabres when they visit the Pittsburgh Penguins on Thursday night.

Krueger rejected the idea that he'll be nervous for his return to an NHL bench. Rather, he's confident in the way his players have bought into the principles that he hopes will define Sabres hockey under his leadership.

"Just an excitement that we're finally launching games that really matter," Krueger said. "I think that the process has given us a lot of confidence for that. You'd be nervous if you thought the team wasn't prepared or uncertain about how they need to play."

"We feel that the process has gone as smoothly as possible, so I have to tell you, honestly, I'm going quite confidently onto that bench and just excited to get it going. But not nervous in a negative way at all."

Krueger felt confident that players would respond to his message based on off-season interactions. His experience in training camp confirmed that belief. He has praised the team throughout the preseason for their willingness to conform to the style the coaching staff has tried to instill, particularly in the defensive zone.

Players saw proof that those principles can work in their preseason finale in Pittsburgh last Saturday, when they showcased the balance of aggressiveness and responsibility Krueger has been preaching for the first period of what ended as a 3-2 overtime victory.

"I think it's definitely a positive," forward Conor Sheary said. "I think it doesn't matter who we put in our lineup, that's just the proving the system can work. I mean, it was preseason so it's a little bit different, but I think the keys are there."

"I think the habits are changing around here and I think that's a good thing."

Johansson said the belief in the system can be felt throughout the lineup. He's ready to put it to the test.

"I think with Ralph as a coach, his enthusiasm, it makes it real easy for everyone to buy in," he said. "So far, we've done that. Now, we've got to go out and do it for 60 minutes tomorrow and we build on it from there."

Krueger details his leadership group

Krueger explained that while Johansson and McCabe will wear letters, the task of leadership will fall on the entire dressing room.

"We have with Jack Eichel a very strong captain going into his second season," he said. "I feel the maturity and the ability to lead from that position. Our room is filled with people that will be leading and will be helping us lead. We've decided to begin with As on Jake McCabe and Marcus Johansson."

"We feel that that's a strong group for the ice. But I have to say that whether it's [Kyle] Okposo, [Zach] Bogosian, the veterans, [Carter] Hutton, or a younger player like Sam Reinhart - everybody has been showing signs and moments of leadership here in training camp."

We checked in with Eichel for today's edition of Sabres In :50...

Behind the bench

Krueger has rolled four lines for most of the preseason. With more strategy potentially coming into play in Pittsburgh, he detailed his philosophy on in-game management.

"I believe that every game has its own storyline and its own way of trying to get to a victory," he said. "You need to feel what the opposition is doing, and you need to be flexible, whether it's possibly adjusting your rotations or adjusting even the lines because of what's going on within the game."

"So, I'm a coach who likes to live the game. You've probably seen it even in the preseason that we'll do whatever we think we need to do to give us a chance. That's not going to be set in stone every night. On the road, mixing things up here and there is more what we'll do."

What to expect before the Sabres' home opener on Saturday

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

October 2, 2019

The first home game of the Golden Season is shaping up to be one you won't want to miss.

For Saturday's Home Opener presented by KeyBank, the Buffalo Sabres will welcome back 14 former captains to participate in pregame festivities.

There will be a Party in the Plaza outside of KeyBank Center starting at 5 p.m. where fans can enjoy sponsor activations, kid-friendly activities and a musical performance by The Strictly Hip (all outdoor activities are weather permitting).

Then at 5:30, Northtown Automotive will drop alumni off at the Blue and Gold Carpet. Fans will have the opportunity to greet the former captains and take photos as they make their way through Alumni Plaza.

Former captains attending include:

Floyd Smith (Captain: 1970-71)

Gerry Meehan (Captain: 1971-72 - Oct. 1974)

Don Luce (Captain: Jan. 1976)

Danny Gare (Captain: 1977-78 - 1980-81)

Gilbert Perreault (Captain: 1981-82 - Nov. 1986)

Mike Foligno (Captain: Feb. 1989 - Dec. 1990)

Michael Peca (Captain: 1997-98 - 1999-2000)

Donald Audette (Captain: April 1998)

Stu Barnes (Captain: 2001-02 - March 2003)

Jochen Hecht (Captain: Oct. 2007, Feb. 2008)

Toni Lydman (Captain: Nov. 2007)

Brian Campbell (Captain: Dec. 2007)

Craig Rivet (Captain: 2008-09 - 2010-11)

Brian Gionta (Captain: 2014-15 - 2016-17)

The captains will participate in a special pregame ceremony, so fans are encouraged to be in their seats by 6:45.

At the door, fans will receive a "Scratch and Score" card that they can redeem for prizes at local KeyBank branches while supplies last.

When fans arrive at their seat, they'll find a Sabres commemorative home opener T-shirt courtesy of KeyBank waiting for them.

Tickets for the game are on sale now, and the team is also offering fans a chance to win a pair of tickets. [Click here for details.](#)