



Buffalo Sabres

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Ralph Krueger changed an entire country's approach to hockey. Next: Buffalo.

By Lance Lysowski
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The 60-year-old coach is applying the same motivational techniques, defensive foundation on ice and patient approach that made Swiss hockey competitive against the best in the world.

Ralph Krueger's eyes swelled with tears as he stood among the crowd of 12,500 inside Stockholm's Ericsson Globe on May 19, 2013. Only a few weeks removed from his first season as a head coach in the National Hockey League, Krueger watched the fruits of what he calls his "life work" — Switzerland winning its first silver medal at the IIHF World Championship with a 5-1 loss to Sweden.

Sixteen years earlier, Swiss hockey fans and media bristled when the gregarious, effervescent coach mentioned his goal of winning a medal on the sport's biggest stage. Watching the realization of that dream remains one of Krueger's fondest hockey memories, despite his not being behind the bench.

"I'm extremely proud of what's happened to the program," said Krueger, now coach of the Buffalo Sabres.

Krueger did not win a medal during his 13 years as Swiss coach; however, he did reshape the national team from a group of complacent club players into one of hockey's global powers and a hotbed for NHL talent. The project is similar to the one he has inherited in Buffalo, where the Sabres own the league's longest playoff drought.

Krueger's latest project is equipped with far more talent and, in his opinion, is closer to achieving its goal. The 60-year-old coach, though, is applying the same motivational techniques, defensive foundation on ice and patient approach that made Swiss hockey competitive against the best in the world.

"It's very similar, actually," said Krueger, who coached the Swiss from 1997 to 2010 before leaving for the Edmonton Oilers. "When you come into a program where there is a lot of baggage from the past that you're trying to shake off ... Switzerland was not a consistent A group team, which is hard to believe today, but it was a program that needed a big reboot. This one doesn't need a reboot. There is a way stronger foundation. We're way further along.

"But we're still a long ways away from being — I always say there are 10, 10, 10 in the NHL. There are 10 at the bottom, 10 in the middle and 10 at the top. You want to move into the 10 in the middle, first of all. We're realistic about that and I think we have a lot of hard work to do. It's a project for sure. ... It's going to be a question of time. This is going to go much faster than what I experienced in Switzerland, for sure."

'The belief started right away'

Patrick Fischer recalled with vivid detail the somber mood in the Swiss dressing room more than 21 years later. He and his teammates had just lost to Sweden, 4-2, in the second game of the 1998 IIHF World Championship, and there was an overwhelming sense that an early exit was inevitable.

Switzerland only qualified because it was hosting the tournament. The country was ranked 16th in the world and finished third in the B pool one year earlier. As dread began to set in among the Swiss, Krueger walked into the room at Hallenstadion in Zurich and reminded his players they only needed to beat France by four goals to move to the next round.

"Right there he changed our mindset," said Fischer, now 44 and coach of the Swiss National Team. "Instead of us being down, within 20 seconds we thought, 'OK, let's go.' The belief started right away."

The Swiss won their next game by exactly four goals and opened the second round with a 4-2 win against Russia before losing both games in the semifinals to finish fourth behind Sweden, Finland and the Czech Republic. The tournament was a watershed moment for the Swiss Ice Hockey Federation and the entire country, which had not experienced much success in a team sport during international competition.

This was what Peter Zahner, the Swiss National Team general manager until 2007, envisioned when he plucked Krueger from the Austrian Hockey League in 1997.

Krueger was 38 when he led VEU Feldkirch to an unprecedented victory against Dynamo Moscow to win the European Hockey League, a tournament that included 24 of the top professional clubs from across the continent. His success in Austria gave him instant credibility with the Swiss players.

The media and fans, on the other hand, weren't receptive to Krueger's promise of a turnaround.

"He was not very well-known, so the people in Switzerland, media and whoever, felt, 'Who is Ralph Krueger?' " Zahner said. "He gave our players a clear message that we wanted to be successful at the world championship in 1998. At that time, in Switzerland, the players played the national team games with an attitude not to lose. Ralph changed that attitude. He told them to play to win."

Krueger's plan, though, required a cultural change within the program, an emphasis on playing well defensively and a few difficult decisions.

Culture change

The motivational speeches fell on some deaf ears. Veterans on the Swiss national teams resisted Krueger's approach to off-ice fitness. He wanted players to approach their craft as if it were a year-round job and immediately implemented fitness testing, as well as a focus on sports science. Fischer, who was 22 when Krueger took over, said that the Swiss tend to "take time to make decisions." Krueger also stressed the importance of body language and ran his players through team-building exercises.

Some players weren't willing to make the sacrifice needed to be in top shape for the world championship, since salaries for the national team paled in comparison to what they made from their respective professional teams in Switzerland.

"At first, we were like, 'Ahh,' " Fischer recalled. "We really weren't that professional. When Ralph came he started to [really get on us]. We had to do tests because he knew we weren't in shape like we should be since we had an easy life in Switzerland and not much competition. ... We had to do it, though. Otherwise you weren't going to be on the team."

Not all players realized that, though. With the Swiss not qualified for the 1998 Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan, they organized a home-and-home exhibition series against a Canadian team that Zahner described as "goons."

Brawls broke out during the four games. The incidents struck fear in the Swiss players, Zahner said. Six weeks later, the Swiss played poorly during a four-game series against the same team in Canada. It was a disastrous tuneup to the 1998 IIHF World Championship, which Switzerland was set to host.

Two days before the Swiss were to gather for their pre-tournament selection camp, Krueger cut four prominent players.

"This world championship, that was his first with Switzerland, the name Ralph Krueger was well-known around the country," Zahner said. "Not only because of the success, but the way he took his job so serious. He could have made his life easier by taking the big names. ... That was never his attitude. His attitude was always I want to have the best team. I don't need the best players."

Switzerland was always going to be a long-term project for Krueger. He received calls from European clubs and the NHL during his time in Switzerland but did not intend to leave until his children, Justin and Geena, were out of school. With that in mind, he and Zahner hosted a symposium with every coach in the junior and senior national programs.

If Swiss hockey were to compete with the global powers long-term, every coach and player, no matter the age group or level, needed to know Krueger's system and deliver the same positive message. His thinking was that doing so would build a sustainable player development model, helping to ease the transition for junior players once they were called up to the national team.

Krueger initiated the same plan once he took over the Sabres, gathering the coaching staffs from Rochester and Cincinnati to develop one consistent style of play and verbiage.

"We need to have the same habits, we need to have the same goals, the same education," said Jakob Kolliker, an assistant coach under Krueger from 1997 to 2010. "They needed to know how we train. Ralph initiated that thinking in the federation, and that's important. Ralph initiated everything here in Switzerland for the hockey development. The professionalism, the details, how we have to work.

Krueger's plan wouldn't have been possible several years earlier. When Zahner took over as general manager in 1991, he had to explain to the federation's president, Rene Fasel, that an increased budget was needed so the junior and senior national teams could travel to play elite competition. Exhibition games against Romania weren't helping the Swiss prepare for the world championship.

Fasel complied, but Zahner had trouble finding a willing competitor. The latter recalled Czech officials laughing at an invitation for the two countries' Under-18 teams to face each other, and Zahner had to agree to a series in which the Swiss played against younger competition.

Krueger brought respectability. Success in 1998 led to invitations for the Swiss to face world powers such as Sweden and Finland in exhibitions ahead of the world championship. The next step was convincing his players they weren't there to simply play the role of spoiler.

"The problem in Switzerland was never the speed or technical qualities," Zahner said. "The problem was the mentality. Ralph was able to get them to believe they could do it."

'Pain and adversity'

Each member of the Swiss National Team received a text message from Krueger during the evening of May 2, 2000, less than 24 hours before they were scheduled to host Russia in Saint Petersburg's Ice Palace for their final pool play game of the IIHF World Championship:

"Believe in the impossible and the impossible becomes possible."

The Swiss, fielding a lineup of zero NHL players, lost to France, 4-2, in their previous game and faced long odds against the Russians, whose star-studded lineup featured Hall of Fame forward Pavel Bure. Switzerland used Krueger's defensive structure to score three unanswered goals in a 4-2 win, eliminating Russia in front of its own fans.

"It was like the movie 'Rocky' where Rocky fought in Russia against freaking Ivan Drago," Fischer recalled. "It sounds like the same story. We did it. I still don't know how we did it because we didn't have a chance. If you would have had people in Switzerland vote in 2000 for who they wanted to be president, I think they would have voted for Ralph Krueger."

Though the tournament ended with a sixth-place finish after a quarterfinal loss to Canada, Krueger's players began to believe they were capable of competing against the best in the world and set the stage for the 2002 Winter Olympics, which he referred to as "the toughest tournament of my life."

Despite its success under Krueger, Switzerland was one of 12 teams forced to play qualifying-round games ahead of the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. With his players possessing high-end skill and strong defensive habits, Krueger decided to change his system to try to coax more offense.

The result was an 11th-place finish during a tumultuous trip to the United States. Following a 5-2 loss to Ukraine that ended the Swiss' chance of reaching the quarterfinals, two of Krueger's veteran players, former team captain Reto von Arx and Marcel Jenni, reportedly missed curfew and did not return to the Olympic Village until 7 a.m. the next day.

Krueger dismissed both players in what Kolliker called "a big crash in the team." Krueger never admitted publicly that his strategic shift was a failure. Instead, he spoke to the media about the experience being part of the building process. In addition to another strategic shift after Salt Lake City, he chose to revamp his roster with younger players, beginning another phase in his plan that resulted in a defining moment for the program and country.

"We tried to go a little bit more offensive and we weren't ready for it," Krueger said. "We were very disappointed. ... There were some discipline problems off-ice, and I have to say it was just amazing how that unbelievable pain and adversity of 2002 launched us towards 2006 and 2010, where we were really competitive right until the end of both tournaments.

"We needed that adversity, we needed that pain, to actually grow ourselves. Salt Lake City was the toughest tournament of my life, ever. I learned the most out of that tournament. I would never, ever want to miss that in my life or on my resume."

Another upset

More than 13 years have passed since the Winter Olympics in Turin, Italy, yet Krueger still grows excitable when recalling the events of Feb. 16, 2006.

With Wayne Gretzky as general manager and Pat Quinn as head coach, Canada had a roster that featured Martin Brodeur, Rob Blake, Chris Pronger, Jarome Iginla, Vincent Lecavalier, Joe Sakic and Martin St. Louis, among others. Switzerland, meanwhile, was led by only one NHL skater, Mark Streit, a 28-year-old defenseman in his first season with the Montreal Canadiens; Fischer; goalie Martin Gerber; and forward Paul DiPietro, who was born in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont.

"If you were to look across the ice when we were in Torino, if there was a salary cap at those tournaments, most of the other teams wouldn't have been able to play," joked Peter John Lee, an assistant coach under Krueger from 2000 to 2010.

"That was one of those games where we had no chance," Fischer added. "That was one of those games if you played them 90 times we lose 88 times. Was it a tactical, absolute heroic game from us? No."

Krueger learned from his mistake the previous Winter Olympics. He knew an emphasis on defense was the Swiss' only chance at upsetting the Canadians, so much so that he sent his penalty-killing unit on the ice for a power play because he wanted to avoid a shorthanded goal.

Unlike the opposition, the Swiss roster was not built as an All-Star team. Krueger and his staff picked players to fill specific roles, much like an NHL general manager constructs a roster. He's implemented a similar structure in Buffalo, emphasizing the importance of checking-line players such as Johan Larsson, Zemgus Girgensons and Vladimir Sobotka.

Kolliker estimated that Canada possessed the puck "over 70% of the game" and that Switzerland spent "maybe 50 minutes in our own end." Yet DiPietro scored twice and Gerber had a 49-save shutout in a 2-0 win to finish higher than Canada in the group stage.

"That showed us we can do it," Fischer said. "When all the stars were aligned right, we could win. I always say Ralph put us on the map. He taught us how to play good defensive hockey."

"That was Switzerland's best win in 50 years," Kolliker added. "We made a step, mentally, to move forward. This game was unbelievable for the whole hockey program in Switzerland."

"That was unbelievable," Zahner recalled. "It was belief. The players believed we could beat those guys. That's what Ralph changed."

Switzerland finished sixth after a loss to Sweden. However, its wins over Canada and Czech Republic were arguably the biggest in its history and shifted the thinking of a country that thought it would never be able to compete against the best.

"We didn't win a medal at the tournament, but it gave the guys confidence and it was the beginning," Krueger said. "Mark Streit became a star in the NHL and everything seemed to kick off from there. The respect level for Switzerland on that day, because of the people in the stands, with Gretzky sitting there and the coaches at that time, they certainly went, 'What happened?' That win on the world stage at the Olympics was the turning point in the program for sure."

Growth

Michel Riesen had just completed his second season with the Hamilton Bulldogs of the American Hockey League when he returned to Switzerland for training camp ahead of the 2000 world championships.

The media mobbed Riesen to learn of his experience and he was viewed as a pioneer. The NHL seemed unattainable to many young players at the time. A silver medal two years earlier was the only significant success by the national team, and North American scouts seemed to have little interest in the country's players despite their speed and skill on the ice.

Riesen became the first Swiss forward in the NHL in 2000-01 but played only 12 games for the Edmonton Oilers. Streit's second attempt at playing professionally in North America led to a 12-year NHL career, and he became an idol to young players across the nation.

"I'm proud that it was a sustainable foundation that we built and a courageous style of play that they continued to build on," said Krueger, who left for an assistant coaching position with the Oilers in 2010. "Those kids that I was watching as 9- or 10-year-olds when I was the coach are now — I watched Nico Hischier in a highlight reel last night or Kevin Fiala the other night. I'm very proud of that."

There are 13 active Swiss players in the NHL, including Hischier, who was drafted first overall in 2017, and Nashville Predators defenseman Roman Josi. Fifteen Swiss players have been drafted in the past five years.

Following 1998, Switzerland never finished higher than fifth at the world championship under Krueger. However, since he left, they have won silver medals in 2013 and 2018. Now, Switzerland is one of eight nations invited to the Hlinka-Gretzky Cup, an annual Under-18 junior tournament featuring the top developmental national team programs.

"We don't have to hide anymore," Hischier, a center for the New Jersey Devils, said recently at KeyBank Center. "We have close games against the top countries. It didn't used to be like that. We can compete with the bigger countries, and Swiss hockey does a great job developing players."

"The dream expanded," said Fischer, who played 27 games in the NHL for the Phoenix Coyotes in 2006-07.

Krueger spent two seasons as an associate coach with the Oilers and one as their head coach in 2012-13 before he joined English Premier League's Southampton F.C. as chairman. He has emphasized the importance of patience since arriving in Buffalo, maintaining a positive message to his players and the media following losses.

Krueger must navigate his team through a chaotic 82-game schedule, and he does not have to rebuild the organization from the ground up like he did with the Swiss National Team. He changed an entire country's mentality, though, much like he may have to do in Buffalo, where an eight-year playoff drought hovers over a group of players who have grown frustrated by a lack of success.

"We're at the point where in Switzerland, people tell me on the streets that this year we're going to win the gold medal," Fischer said. "The mindset is right. They want to win. We're starting to think like the Swedes, Fins and Czechs. Ralph is one of the pillars of that movement."

Sabres' Jack Eichel is named NHL's third star for the week

The Buffalo News

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Sabres captain Jack Eichel was named the NHL's third star of the week after extending his personal point streak to a career-high 13 games.

Eichel had two goals and five assists for seven points in four games. He is seventh in the league with 42 points (18 goals, 24 assists) on the season and is one of 10 players on pace for 100 points.

During the week, Eichel had a goal and two assists against New Jersey, a goal against Calgary, two assists against Vancouver and then assisted on Colin Miller's game-winner in overtime Sunday against Edmonton.

Defenseman John Carlson of the Washington Capitals was named first star. He had six points, including two game-winning goals during the week, and is the NHL leader in goals, assists, points and game-winning goals among defensemen. Pittsburgh Penguins goalie Tristan Jarry was the league's second star with a 2-0 record and two shutouts during the week.

From 'Sabre Dance' to 'We're Gonna Win That Cup', music elevates Sabres fans' experience

By Jeff Miers

The Buffalo News

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As the Buffalo Sabres celebrate their 50th year as an NHL franchise in a city and surrounding environs rightly revered collectively as a serious "hockey town," let's ruminare on the marriage of music and sport.

This phenomenon might not be unique to Buffalo, but as Sabres in-game organist Curtis Cook points out, there are clear inherent connections between sports and the arts in our local culture.

"Buffalonians certainly love their sports and the arts," Cook said. "I'm lucky enough to be one of the people that help blend those two things together."

Music has been used to dramatic effect from our team's beginnings, when an excerpt from composer Aram Khachaturian's 1942 ballet "Gayane" became the Sabres' clarion call as they took the ice. That excerpt, known as "Sabre Dance," has been pumping up the heart rates of players and fans alike virtually without pause since 1970. That tradition will continue Tuesday night in KeyBank Center, as the Sabres return from a Western road trip to host the St. Louis Blues.

(The piece was placed on hiatus briefly in the early 2000s, and the Scorpions' "Rock You Like A Hurricane" filled the gap, but "Sabre Dance" returned in 2011, and has stayed since.)

"There has been so much influential music throughout the 50 years of this franchise's history," Cook said. "Everyone knows about 'Sabre Dance,' which I still play on the organ at least once a game, at the beginning of a period. I think it's a unique and diverse piece of music and it's been associated with the team for so long that fans of every age can identify it immediately."

Khachaturian's piece, which was a huge radio hit in 1948, has gone on to be covered, interpreted, reinterpreted, and reassembled myriad times over the years, in virtually any genre imaginable. Everyone from Woody Herman and Liberace to composer Danny Elfman, vocalist Nina Hagen, violinist Vanessa Maye, and the Brian Setzer Orchestra has taken a swing at the high-energy piece.

That's just the tip of the iceberg, according to Cook.

"The original 'Sabre Dance' with full orchestration is the version that everyone knows, but a lot of people don't realize that it has been covered by more contemporary groups over the years.

"For example, a Belgian group named the Jokers covered it, as did a group called Love Sculpture, featuring Welsh singer/songwriter/guitarist Dave Edmunds in it. Both of those groups covered the song without an orchestra and with more modern instrumentation – electric guitars, electric bass, drums – and I think those versions sound awesome, too."

Sabres announcer Dan Dunleavy, a self-taught guitarist with a deep and abiding love for music, recently had a dream about "Sabre Dance."

"I quite literally had a dream where I was playing a heavy, riff-y version of 'Sabre Dance' on guitar from the booth as the team takes the ice," he laughed. "I mean, how cool would that be? Maybe someday."

The in-game experience

Of course, "Sabre Dance," as invigorating as it remains, doesn't tell the whole story. Over the years, tunes by artists as diverse as Led Zeppelin ("The Immigrant Song"), DJ Kool (goal song "Let Me Clear My Throat"), Metallica ("Fuel"), Flo Rida ("Low (featuring T-Pain)") and the Who ("Baba O'Riley") have blasted from the rafters of the old Aud and KeyBank Center between play.

The hometown Goo Goo Dolls' "Better Days" became an anthem for the Sabres' 2007 playoff run.

There have also been locally produced novelty theme songs, many of which have jumped several generation gaps by this point.

"Through the decades, there's been such a connection between fans and songs like 'We're Gonna Win That Cup' (written by Tommy Calandra and performed by Donna McDaniel) from the Sabres' Stanley Cup run in '75, the radio jingle 'Rock 'em Sabres,' and the (Buffalo Chamber of Commerce-commissioned) 'Buffalo Talkin' Proud' jingle of the '80s," Cook said.

Maria Sebastian's remake of "We're Gonna Win That Cup" was played frequently during the Sabres' run to the Stanley Cup final in 1999.

"I still play a lot of these songs on the organ," Cook said. "Every time I do, I always have people tweeting me or coming up to me at the game saying that hearing any of those songs I mentioned brought back a certain memory. I love hearing people's stories on how they connect a memory with a certain piece of music."

"I love 'Sabre Dance' and hope it always has some place within their presentation, even if it's just accompanying old highlights or something like that," WGR 550 AM's Chris "Bulldog" Parker said. "But I think the team ought to let a different player pick the entrance song each night. Make it a part of the intro, maybe even have the player on the Jumbotron introducing the song and, if they're comfortable enough, saying something about why they chose the song."

Dunleavy went whole-hog on anthemic arena-rock when asked what song he'd be thrilled to hear as the team takes the ice.

"Queen's 'One Vision,'" Dunleavy said, citing the lyrics' encapsulation of the Sabres fan experience. "'One goal, one fight, one true religion' – that, for Buffalo, being their Sabres and hockey in general.

"That song represents the Sabres, for sure, but it also represents something that I truly feel is unique about Buffalo. Here, everyone is all-in on everything relating to Buffalo – whether that's the Bills, the Sabres, the development of Main Street, what might happen as Canalside grows, what's gonna become of the Skyway – it doesn't matter the topic, and it doesn't matter if we disagree.

"Having lived in Toronto and traveled to so many different cities, I can say for sure that it's not like that everywhere. From music culture to politics to sports, even if we disagree around here, we all care."

In a minor key

In the end, a winning season comes down to much more than the right song, the right sound, the right lyric and the right fan attitude. The team, of course, needs to do the work. The right music can, at the least, help set the mood and frame the experience for the fans.

"I'm certainly still a fan when I'm working," Cook said. "I think to be a successful sports organist, you really need to be a fan yourself. You're essentially a cheerleader for 19,000 people, so as a live musician, I can change the mood of the music instantly and in turn, help get the crowd going.

"For example, if play stops and I begin to play a song in a major key that's upbeat and then players start pushing and shoving, I can instantly modulate into a minor key and make the organ music sound like villainous chase music from an old silent film to fit the mood of what is going on down on the ice."

How is Cook feeling about the Sabres' chances this year?

"I am the eternal optimist," he said. "No matter what happens, I am always all-in on the Sabres. They were my team even before I started working for them and they always will be my team, no matter what. I always hope we can get to the playoffs, year after year. I always look forward to hockey season starting and getting back to the arena to work and cheer for the guys on the ice.

"I've lived here all my life, and I can say for certain that Buffalo has an incredibly, and unusually, loyal fan base."

Eichel named as NHL's 'Third Star' of the week

By Brayton Wilson

WGR 550

December 9, 2019

The National Hockey League announced on Monday that Buffalo Sabres captain Jack Eichel has been named as the NHL's "Third Star" of the week ending on Dec. 8.

Eichel had a productive week for the Sabres in four games played, scoring two goals and picking up five assists for seven points. He was also able to extend his career-long 13-game point streak on Sunday with an assist on Colin Miller's overtime goal against the Edmonton Oilers. The 23-year-old is only five games away from matching the Sabres' franchise record of 18 games set by Gilbert Perreault back in the 1971-72 season.

It is the fourth time in his career that Eichel has been honored as one of the NHL's "Three Stars" of the week. His last honor came last season for the week ending on Dec. 16, when he scored five goals and registered nine points in four games.

So far this season, Eichel is on pace for his best season yet in the NHL, scoring 18 goals and picking up 24 assists for 42 points in 31 games. He's currently seventh in the NHL in scoring, and is seven points behind Oilers forward Leon Draisaitl for the league lead in scoring.

Eichel is currently one of 10 players who are on pace to eclipse the 100-point mark this season, where's he's on pace for 48 goals and 63 assists for 111 points.

The performance from Eichel this season has helped Buffalo into a top-three spot in the Atlantic Division through the first 31 games of the 2019-20 season. The Sabres are currently 14-11-6 with 34 points, just one point back of the Florida Panthers for second in the division and 12 points back of the Boston Bruins for first place.

Buffalo was given the day off on Monday after returning from their three-game Western Canada road trip. The team will return to the ice for Tuesday's morning skate before its matchup with the St. Louis Blues at KeyBank Center.

Faceoff is set for 7:30 p.m. with the Paul William Beltz Pregame Show starting at 6:30 p.m. with Schopp and the Bulldog live at (716) Food and Sport. The game will be televised on NBCSN on Tuesday, so the only place to get live and local coverage is on the home of the Sabres - WGR Sports Radio 550.

Factchecking Ralph Krueger's claim that the Olofsson-Eichel-Reinhart line is 'already one of the best lines in the NHL'

By John Vogl

The Athletic

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The difference between Ralph Krueger's optimism and that of his predecessors? It's legitimate. There were times Phil Housley would talk about unicorns and rainbows when the Sabres really were surrounded by fleas and storm clouds.

So it was a bit jarring to hear Krueger's compliment about Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart and Victor Olofsson over the weekend.

"They're certainly already one of the best lines in the National Hockey League," Krueger said.

It seemed like a stretch, the kind of false advertising that Buffalo has grown to know.

But is it true? Do the Sabres have one of the top lines in the NHL?

Krueger's certainly not blowing smoke. Now the Sabres' No. 1 unit has to maintain its pace to stay with the elite.

There's no doubt Eichel belongs in the conversation. He's on a 13-game point streak, putting up 10 goals and 23 points. They aren't garbage stats, either. Eight of those points have come on go-ahead goals and five more were on tying goals. He's making it count.

Eichel is up to 18 goals and 42 points in 31 games, a goal barrage that's tied for fifth in the NHL and a point total that's seventh. The captain is on pace for 48 goals and 111 points, which certainly qualifies as elite.

Eichel's run has overshadowed a fairly remarkable stretch for Olofsson. Since heading home to Sweden for the Global Series last month, the rookie has points in 13 of 16 games. He's put up six goals and 16 points during the stretch, bringing his season totals to 12 goals and 26 points. His point total ranks 34th in the NHL.

With 11 goals and 23 points, Reinhart is 58th in the league scoring race. Having all three linemates in the top 60 makes them a bonafide first line. That is what the Sabres need with Eichel on the ice.

"Jack Eichel is completely comfortable with the responsibility that he has," Krueger said. "He embraces over and over what the team needs from him."

The captain is generating so much league-wide attention that one Calgary reporter apologized for asking about Eichel since she knew Krueger gets queried at every stop.

"You can ask me about Jack all you want," the coach said. "It's no problem. He's just been a real pleasure to work with. He's for sure one of the elite players in the league, growing to become a very complete two-way player."

"He's trying so hard to grow on the side of the puck that nobody really gives him credit for or there's statistics that can measure that growth. But we see it as coaches. His on- and off-ice leadership has been outstanding and he's truly deserved of all the credit he's getting right now for the season he's having."

"Everybody speaks about the offensive numbers, but again I'm going to say we are so excited with how hard he is working to be excellent without the puck and to support the game we need to have be competitive at this level."

And make no mistake, Eichel is getting help from his linemates.

"Victor and Sam, especially, are just really aware of the game that Jack's playing and how to best support him," Krueger said. "Victor probably more leaning toward the defensive side of support and Sam doing his job"

defensively but being more the one that's closest to Jack as a give-and-go on the way to the offense. That's what makes that line so special is that they work it out between them.

"Victor is the one that's generally above the group and Sam is always kind of in-between connecting them. ... Jack is getting the numbers he's getting because of the way we're working as a group when he's on the ice and we're supporting him in both directions."

The line certainly isn't embellishing its numbers with power-play stats. Since Eichel's 13-game point streak started Nov. 16 against Ottawa, the line has combined for 18 goals and 44 points. Only two goals and eight points have come on the power play, so Eichel, Olofsson and Reinhart are getting things done at even strength.

During this run, according to Natural Stat Trick, the line has a Corsi of 56.25, leads opposing lines in shots 90-68 and has allowed just five goals.

Eichel, Reinhart and Olofsson haven't been this dominant all season, though. With all three on the ice, their year-to-date totals feature a 51.78 Corsi and a 22-17 goal advantage. It's still good, but is it one of the best lines in the NHL?

The immediate comparison is Edmonton's Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and Zack Kassian. Draisaitl leads the NHL with 53 points in 32 games while McDavid is just one point behind in second place. Their line has outscored opponents 27-21 this season, though their Corsi is 47.22.

When healthy, Boston boasts the terrifying trio of Brad Marchand, David Pastrnak and Patrice Bergeron. They've combined for 51 goals and 111 points this season, giving them the edge over Buffalo's top line (41 goals, 91 points). But the Bruins' threesome has 18 goals and 39 points on the power play. They've outscored opponents at even strength 21-15, not far off the Sabres' 22-17 total. Boston's unit has the puck a lot more with a 56.65 Corsi.

The Eichel line has nine more goals and four fewer points than Florida's top unit of Aleksander Barkov, Jonathan Huberdeau and Evgenii Dadonov. Barkov's line is outscoring opponents 27-23 at even strength.

Injuries to Colorado's Gabriel Landeskog and Mikko Rantanen have limited their time alongside Nathan MacKinnon, but they were one of the league's most dominant trios last season, outscoring opponents 60-40 at even strength.

The fact the Sabres are being compared to those other lines says a lot. And the Eichel line has grown significantly since a slow start. From the season opener through Nov. 15, Eichel, Olofsson and Reinhart were outscored 12-10 and had a Corsi of 48.67. The results gave plenty of credence to those who wanted Jeff Skinner to replace Olofsson alongside Eichel.

But for almost a month now, the Sabres really do have one of the best lines in the NHL. Krueger's compliment checks out as Eichel, Olofsson and Reinhart are on an impressive roll.

"I'm just trying to work more on supporting our D, being better in the D-zone, trying to take care of the puck," Eichel said, "knowing that the offense will come if you do that."

Gluttons for punishment: Seven first-year coaches discuss buzz, challenge of new gigs

By Craig Morgan

The Athletic

December 10, 2019

When the 2019-20 season began, 14 of the NHL's 31 coaches had been at their current post less than two seasons. By Dec. 3, that number had grown to 17 with the firings of Mike Babcock (Toronto) and John Hynes (New Jersey), and the resignation of Bill Peters (Calgary), all in the past three weeks.

The Maple Leafs' Sheldon Keefe, the Devils' Alain Nasreddine and the Flames' Geoff Ward have barely had time to settle into their new gigs — the latter two as interim coaches — but last summer, seven coaches moved into new posts in one of the more tumultuous and notable coaching offseasons in NHL history.

What distinguished this summer was the relative experience and achievement levels of the majority of the new class. Florida first-year coach Joel Quenneville has the second-most wins in NHL history (905), Philadelphia's Alain Vigneault has the 12th most (665), Edmonton's Dave Tippett is 21st on the list with 571 wins, and Los Angeles' Todd McLellan is 33rd at 445.

Quenneville won three Stanley Cups but that didn't save him from the firing line in Chicago. Vigneault led two different teams to the Stanley Cup Final, but that didn't keep him in New York. McLellan helped end the Oilers' 10-year playoff drought, but he was still gone a season and a quarter later, and Tippett walked away from an unstable situation with the Coyotes when it was clear he did not see eye to eye with the majority owner at the time.

The three additional summer hires sit in stark contrast to those four. Anaheim's Dallas Eakins got just 113 games behind the bench before Edmonton fired him in 2014. Ralph Krueger got just 46 before Edmonton fired him in 2013, and Ottawa's D.J. Smith is in his first go-round as an NHL coach after 14 seasons in the OHL (as an assistant and head coach) and NHL (as an assistant).

When new coaches are hired, the public and media focus is generally on how they will reshape a team that is in need of changes, but for this story, we focused on the personal impact a new job can have on a coach. The insights touched on a variety of topics, such as the value of sabbaticals for Quenneville, Tippett, Vigneault and McLellan, the buzz of opportunity for all of them, and the lessons learned along the way.

Here are each coach's thoughts.

Joel Quenneville

Current team: Florida Panthers

Total seasons as NHL head coach: 23

Past teams: St. Louis, Colorado, Chicago

Overall (W-L-T-OTL) record (as of Dec. 10): 905-541-77-142

Notable achievements: Jack Adams Award (2000, St. Louis), three time Stanley Cup champion (Chicago, 2010, 2013, 2015).

Current record (standing): 15-9-2 (second, Atlantic Division)

Were you surprised when Chicago fired you last November after winning three Cups?

"You're probably more disappointed than anything, and then you reflect back and you say, 'Geez, the memories are so special' and the opportunity was like that as well. It was a long time with the one situation. We had an off-year there the prior year (2017-18) and then I thought we had a decent beginning to the next season (2018-19) but they made a change.

"Right away, I was not ready to, or thinking about coming back during that short amount of time. There was an opportunity to be away, an opportunity to spend some time with the family.

"I started watching games after a while — I didn't watch many Blackhawks games — but a lot of good things happened there. As the season progressed I was sitting there thinking about some options and started thinking

about next year, and over the course of the summer you got a little bit more excited. The Florida situation was enticing in a lot of ways and that was for the whole family as the situation presented itself. It was a great opportunity with a chance to win with a young team that I think is very close."

What enticed you about Florida?

"There's a lot of newness to it. Being in Chicago for as long as we were there, you've got a different environment here. You've got the Eastern Conference, you've got palm trees, but then you've got a comparable team in a lot of ways and a young team that is looking at trying to be a playoff team and looking like there's a lot of great ingredients to find a way to not just be a playoff team but have some success.

"It was an exciting situation to come to, a fresh opportunity and completely different in a lot of ways than the other situation. We've got a young team that has some high-end players that have the ability to be special ones; as good of players as there are in the game. (Sasha) Barkov is one of those guys. (Jonathan) Huberdeau really came along last year. (Vincent) Trocheck has got some ability. (Mike) Hoffman has got some high-end shooting ability. (Aaron) Ekblad has been playing good for us and when you look at how he began his career, I think that he's got a lot of great ingredients on both sides of the puck to be dangerous."

Did you have doubts you'd return or did you always know you would coach again?

"I think that's always there, it's in you, and once you're back at it, all of the sudden you're at training captain, you've got three groups going every day and it gets you going. You're very busy, but it's something we've done for a while now. We haven't changed the flavor or the recipe too much. We're pretty consistent in the approach. I still think you've got to be you when you do things but it's nice that we've got a new coaching staff together here and we appreciate that everybody brings a little bit different ingredient on a regular basis and I think that keeps everybody fresh to make us a better staff and a better team as well."

Where have you seen the greatest changes as a head coach from the guy who started in St. Louis 23 years ago?

"My skating has really gone poorly and I have definitely lightened up on officials (laughs). I think I've backed off screaming at officials. I'm sure there will still be moments, but I think I have been a bit calmer in that area. I don't even know if it's the spontaneity of yelling that is gone, but if you're looking at the results of yelling, I'm sure it didn't enhance anything.

"But no, the game has changed a little bit over the years so you want to make sure that you're as current as possible. I still think you do things that are you. It might feel like we've been doing the same drills forever but it's kind of the way we do things here. We do add some other situations for the coaches to keep it a little bit fresh but at the same time, we play a system that's fun for the guys. It's fun and it's simple. I find you get the fun and the rewards of success by playing the right way and winning hockey games and that's what we look for."

Alain Vigneault

Current team: Philadelphia Flyers

Total seasons as NHL head coach: 17

Past teams: Montreal, Vancouver, New York Rangers

Overall (W-L-T-OTL) record (as of Dec. 10): 665-443-35-103

Notable achievements: Jack Adams Award (2007, Vancouver). Led Canucks (2011) and Rangers (2014) to Stanley Cup Final.

Current record (standing): 17-8-5 (third, Metropolitan Division)

You took a sabbatical for the 2018-19 season. How was that?

"A little different for me in the sense that I didn't coach anywhere. For the first time in about 20 years, I wasn't involved in the game. I didn't follow it much. I didn't pay attention. I just stepped away. It had been 12 straight years as a head coach in the NHL. It's demanding, it's challenging and it's tiring so when I stepped away I spent more time with my family, my kids, my friends, played golf, started to play tennis again. I've got a place in Florida so I spent my winter there. You can obviously sleep easier at night. I was able to enjoy things that you don't have time to when you're coaching."

"I do think it got me re-energized. By getting away from the game, it permitted me to fall in love with it again so when I started to hear rumblings in March that there might be some openings I got a little excited and then I was offered the job to coach (Canada) at (the World Championship) last year. After that, (Flyers GM) Chuck (Fletcher) called me up. Within a couple days, I had agreed to come here to Philly."

What was your favorite thing you did during that year off?

"For the past 20-some years I have never been able to go back home (Gatineau, Quebec) for Christmas and New Year's. My parents (Maurice and Loraine) are 85 and 86. My mother is having a little bit of a tough time, but my dad is straight as an arrow, sharp, plays golf once a week with us in the summer. That was special to be with them, just to talk to them."

Have you ever considered how fortunate you are to have coached in such premium markets?

"Yes, and I wouldn't have come back just to coach. If I didn't have an opportunity to go somewhere where I had a chance to win, I wouldn't have come back. I've coached with Montreal, Vancouver and New York, three first-class organizations that do everything first class with their players, with travel. Anything they can get on top of to be proactive, they will spend the money. I was looking for the same type of place, and a place where the GM and I saw things the same way. I wanted to have one more chance at winning a Cup.

"That Montreal experience for a little Quebecer was unbelievable. It set the tone for me. I was six years in between jobs in Montreal and Vancouver but then I got to coach in another Canadian market. While I was coaching in Vancouver for those seven years, in the other five Canadian markets (Winnipeg came in at the end), they went through 20 coaches. For me to be able to do seven years in a Canadian market — it was a challenge but it was a lot of fun and we just missed a Stanley Cup."

After all of those experiences, do you still get nervous when you step into a new situation?

"That's definitely part of it, without a doubt, coming to training camp and meeting all the guys for the first time. I don't know if nervous is completely right. Maybe it's more excited and you get the butterflies that come with it. I was pumped and I brought in a staff that I'm real comfortable with and Chuck is comfortable with. The best part is I've been doing this a long time and I still love it. I've never felt I really went to work a day in my life."

Dave Tippett

Current team: Edmonton Oilers

Total seasons as NHL head coach: 15

Past teams: Dallas, Phoenix/Arizona.

Overall (W-L-T-OTL) record (as of Dec. 10): 571-423-28-124

Notable achievements: Jack Adams Award (2010, Phoenix). Led Coyotes/Jets franchise to first division title and first conference final (2012).

Current record (standing): 18-10-4 (first, Pacific Division)

When we first spoke after you took the job as a senior adviser for the Seattle expansion franchise, you seemed to really like the career path it afforded you. What changed to pull you back into coaching?

"The Seattle job was really, really interesting, and I was working with great people. That's going to be a phenomenal franchise but the opportunity to jump back in the game in a Canadian market was really exciting for me. I had never played or coached in a Canadian market. Being Canadian, and knowing how much the game means up here, that was exciting. And then it was with a team that's trying to take the next step with some real good core pieces. That has made it exciting to get back behind the bench again and work with players again."

How much did having Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl influence you?

"I'd had Connor before the World Cup so I knew a little bit about him but when you can have a player or a couple players like that, they give a coach extra tools to work with. That's a big piece of the puzzle if you're trying to build a championship team. He is an unbelievable talent and his skills speak for themselves, but he has a real passion to win. From the outside, everybody just sees that the talent is amazing but you don't know what's on the inside. Those are things you see every day when you're around him.

"In talking to (GM) Kenny Holland in the summer, we knew that there were some challenges here — there's some challenges with the salary cap still that a lot of teams have — but we added some pieces on our bottom and for our group to help our penalty killing and just help to stabilize the lineup a little bit. We knew we had some high-end talent that we had to try to help surround. When you've got a couple players that are X-factor players like McDavid and Draisaitl, if your group is stable, maybe those X-factors can push your team along and that's we've seen a little bit of so far."

You were still busy in Seattle, but how did you use the two years away from coaching?

"I think it can be renewing when you've been out for a little bit. The two years I was out, I was watching a lot of hockey, thinking about a lot of different things that I maybe didn't have time for before."

"I talked to a lot of people and it's not just sports people. It was businesspeople, therapists, psychologists. There's a woman that deals with a lot of NBA teams that deals with a lot of personalities and meshing personalities together and leadership. It was real interesting hearing her concepts of being able to read different athletes and read different ways that people understand what you're trying to get through. It's more personal stuff."

"My wife (Wendy) actually met her at a wives retreat and then I met her and she's got a couple of these tests. It's really interesting stuff, how you understand personalities of people. I did the test myself and it was amazing how close it was. I had my wife and daughters do it, too. You learn which things you look at very clearly and which things you should look at maybe a little deeper."

How are you different than you were when you first started coaching in Dallas?

"Experience is knowledge. You learn patience. You learn it's an ever-evolving equation to try to find solutions to build a team. Your first mindset is to get to know the people and then you get to know how they play and how you are going to mold the group, but as you get more and more experience throughout the league, those solutions seem to come more clearly and quickly. You have an idea what you're going to do and you have an idea what you want to put into place and you hope those ideas settle in quick enough for you to get your team up and running as quick as you can."

Todd McLellan

Current team: Los Angeles Kings

Total seasons as NHL head coach: 12

Past teams: San Jose, Edmonton

Overall (W-L-T-OTL) record (as of Dec. 10): 445-300-0-92

Notable achievements: Led Sharks to Western Conference Final in 2010, 2011.

Current record (standing): 11-18-2 (last Pacific Division)

Like others, you also had a sabbatical. Was it productive?

"Let's face it. Nobody likes to be told they need a sabbatical, but all of us at some point have been or will be put on leave. There's that initial phase after that happens where you are bitter at the whole hockey world and then you realize you can take advantage of the time to watch other teams. You can talk to other people when you don't belong to a team. They'll share more with you. Maybe that's just us being protective but people are more willing to exchange ideas."

"The other thing it does for you is getting the battery recharged, doing some things with your wife, your family, things that you never do during the winter was rewarding for me. I have a son who plays college hockey at Denver (Tyson) and another (Cale) attends school in Boulder so we spend a lot of time in that area watching them play hockey. I also went over and worked with a team in Europe and spent a week touring around Europe. I did some downhill skiing and I hadn't done that since I was a kid. I enjoyed a real Christmas instead of getting up on the morning after and traveling somewhere. We enjoyed a family Christmas for the first time in 25 years. But you do miss the game."

Can stepping into a new job deliver a sense of renewal, even when the profession is so unforgiving?

"For me, I have enjoyed coming to the rink every day I have been here so far. There's some losses you don't enjoy but then the next day you still wake up and want to come to the office because the people around you are pretty darn good, you like where you're living, it's an honest group of players and with management, there's a plan in place.

"It's definitely been invigorating. It's probably not unlike a teacher that gets a new class every year. You're not sure what you're getting but you spend a week or 10 days with them and you realize you've got a pretty good group to work with and then the school year goes pretty well. It doesn't mean everybody passes the test but you enjoy the classroom and that is what it's been like for me."

Did you make any significant changes in your approach in your time off?

"We are ever evolving. We have to be. We have to stay current. We can't play catch-up or fall behind. Tactically, we have changed some things from a year ago when I was let go in Edmonton. We're not using the same tactics or the same systems we used in Edmonton solely.

"It's a different style of play. A different type of forecheck. A different type of neutral zone structure. When you have done something as a coach for really a long time and you start to implement something different you learn a little bit more about the game. It's refreshing.

"That time off gives you a chance to watch more teams play and when you see some of the tactics teams use — as Mike Babcock used to say, 'You take what's good and make it your own and throw the rest out.' We're trying to do that, We're trying to steal from other teams. People might say, 'Well, you can do that in the summer' but when the season ends, you're burned. The last thing you want to do is open up your computer and watch another 85 to 90 games. You're tired so my time after Christmas gave me a lot of time to view games, talk to coaches, look at players that I wouldn't have otherwise had."

Given the way things ended in Edmonton last November, did you always know you'd come back?

"You know when you realize that you need the game? When you don't have the game. It was about February last year when I would work out and go home and I'm sure I was driving my wife bananas because I had nothing to do. You can only go for so many walks or to go to the ski hill so many times. You've got to be doing something. We're probably all Type-As anyway where we're wound up and ready to go. We've got to have our hands on something and this is what we do, so we keep coming back for another beating.

"The first time I put the whistle around my neck and blew it, it felt good. I was a little lost in the first exhibition game. You forget how quick things are happening and you're missing things but it comes back real quick. It's like taking the bike out in the spring. The first lap around the block, you're a little wobbly but then you're OK and away you go."

Ralph Krueger

Current team: Buffalo Sabres

Total seasons as NHL head coach: 2

Past teams: Edmonton

Overall (W-L-T-OTL) record (as of Dec. 10): 33-33-0-13

Notable achievements: Led VEU Feldkirch to five straight Austrian championships, coached Team Europe to finals at World Cup of Hockey (2016). Director of director of Southampton F.C. in the Premier League from 2014-19.

Current record (standing): 14-11-6 (third, Atlantic Division)

You have been away from the NHL and the North American game for six years. What is going through your head as you shift from something so dramatically different — the English Premier League — back to this?

"It's quite simple. I am not allowing emotions into my space. From the day I made the decision, I have been extremely focused on taking care of what I need to take care of on that day and I haven't drifted beyond that.

"The first few months were about developing a revised plan for where the NHL is today, where the speed of the game is and the lowering of the physicality and the increasing of the offense. With my assistant coaches, we

developed a plan throughout the summer. I mean, we brainstormed hours and hours and hours. Once the plan was clear, it was about how to implement it. We had lots of contact with the players in the summer, lots of communication before we even came together. Every day, we have so much to work on and improve on so we have stayed on topic. I've just been plowing through some hard labor together with the staff and the players and that's really it."

How did you familiarize yourself with the NHL game after being away so long?

"I'm a coach that focuses much more on my own team than others. There's always pre-scouting — and I don't watch every minute — but our video guys cut them together and they know what I'm looking for. In the end, it's been a focus mainly on us and it continues that way. We're making sure we're getting our principles and concepts in on a regular basis.

"As far as the need-to-know the details, I have that around me. I have that support from my coaching staff. There is so much copy and paste in the league that you try to look for the nuances and I try to look for the personality of a team. Every team has a personality and I have enough time to go team by team, even with the back-to-backs, but it is a learning process."

Is there an inherent advantage from having worked in Europe and being familiar with so many other hockey-playing cultures?

"We have 10 (European) players. Almost half your team comes from European cultures so understanding them helps a lot: the needs of a Finnish player vs. a Czech vs. an American. They come from completely different backgrounds so it's important to be cognizant and respectful of that. There are different buttons to push — not that everybody from a country is the same but I do feel that is an advantage I have.

"Having said that, this is such an international game now. Hockey is played very similar all over the world now. There's no real European and North American game anymore. I think they are all meshed together. You have the different (ice) surface but the great Swedish players have a lot of the same traits as the great Americans and Canadians. Twenty years ago, there was such a different personality coming from each country. Now, everybody has homogenized the game because they have taken the best parts of different cultures."

You didn't get much of a chance in Edmonton. Why come back after all those years in Europe before and after the abbreviated Oilers experience?

"More than anything, I was looking at all my different experiences in life and what was the next place where I could use the maximum amount of my toolbox. This was the only role that gave me that feeling. I could have gone into team presidency or there were two groups looking to purchase teams in the Premier League that asked me to lead the purchase. I had three really weird options.

"After the Olympics and the World Cup, there was so much hockey going on inside my brain that I wasn't able to put into play and I thought if I don't do it now I might not ever be able to do it. I can use my leadership skills at the same time. Everything in my life seemed applicable to what Buffalo needed. It felt like the right time to come here. I took the job because it checked more boxes than any other one and the personal challenge and the respect I had for the challenge made me want to climb another really steep mountain and this was the steepest of them all. The others were quite a bit flatter and softer.

"I think it's a renewing experience for my whole family. This is the world I was in for 25 years. We never cared where we were, whether it was in Austria or the Olympics. I just love the day-to-day life as a head coach so to be able to step back into that lifestyle, my whole family has really embraced it. My kids are adults now but this is a journey we are sharing together. It's definitely refreshing and renewing. The people of Buffalo and this organization from Day 1 have been extremely supportive about this abstract hire.

"I could have had a lot tougher month of August or September. Friends of mine who might have questioned me taking the job because of the perception of me coming from the Premier League in a chairman role to this, but the people of Buffalo were open right from the start and that has helped a lot."

D.J. Smith

Current team: Ottawa Senators

Total seasons as NHL head coach: 1

Past teams: None

Overall (W-L-T-OTL) record (as of Dec. 10): 13-17-1

Notable achievements: Led Oshawa Generals to OHL and Memorial Cup titles (2015)

Current record (standing): 13-17-1 (seventh, Atlantic Division)

How are you approaching this challenge as a first-year coach?

"You're always nervous the first time but you've got to be confident and believe in yourself. If you're prepared, I think you're going to be confident. If you study for the test, you shouldn't be nervous about it.

"The important thing for me is you have to know that you earned getting here. No one handed me this. I was all those years in the OHL, four years in the NHL. You're looking at so many years of coaching just to get a crack at it but you had better make sure you're ready because you may never get another crack at it. I feel I worked my way here. Now I have to show that I belong.

"It's a new staff, new players and for me, it was such an exciting challenge with a young team. We get a chance to grow together. We knew we were going to have some tough times, but we have to make sure we're better for it. At the end of the year, we have to make sure we're better structurally and the kids are better so I have a big job to do. After 82 games, how much better are we? That's on me."

How is this different from the other levels of coaching?

"Learning how to deal with NHL players is a challenge. It's a lot different than dealing with juniors or American League players. Guys have been around. Older guys can be set in their ways, guys have more money, long-term contracts, families. You have to find ways to maybe re-motivate them. I find that exciting to try and help somebody and teach them something new.

"The thing that's probably the biggest difference in the NHL is how much you deal with the media, especially a team like this where we're young and will go through some tough times. You have to answer questions about your power play and your penalty kill and this guy and that guy. You just have to keep looking at the big picture. Some days, I might not have a great game but it is what it is and you have to deal with it. The thing I probably took from Mike (Babcock) and Lou Lamoriello the most is they call it steady on the rudder where you're the same all the time. Lou was unbelievable about that. We'd lose a game and he'd come in and just have such a calming presence. It gave everyone that feel like everything was all right. I need to give that feeling to our staff and players."

Are you able to share ideas with other coaches?

"No (laughs). No one really wants to share anything. I think everyone thinks they're super smart and they've got some secret plan. Everyone does their own thing, but on the other side of that, I think the coaches look after each other. It is a brotherhood."

What does your personal support in this new venture look like?

"I'm really tied to Windsor (Ontario). I go back there in the summer and I have a lot of good friends and hockey people there and people outside hockey, my wife (Christy Bezaire) and sons (Colton and Brock). I realize what happens doesn't just affect me, it affects others. It's hard not to take it home with me, sometimes, but I can turn it off — not 100 percent of the time but I can. But there's a certain reality to this business. It's an eight-to-10 month job, depending on how far you go. You get to turn your brain off in the summer so while you're going, while you're coaching, you give it everything you've got."

Dallas Eakins

Current team: Anaheim Ducks

Total seasons as NHL head coach: 3

Past teams: Edmonton

Overall (W-L-T-OTL) record (as of Dec. 10): 48-77-0-18

Notable achievements: Led Toronto Marlies to Calder Cup (AHL) Finals (2012). Led San Diego Gulls (AHL) to Western Conference Finals (2019).

Current record (standing): 12-14-4 (seventh, Pacific Division)

Eakins was the only one of the seven coaches to decline an interview request. If you'd like his insights, however, The Athletic's Eric Stephens sat down with him earlier this season for a terrific interview that you can read by following the link.

Linus Ullmark emerges as Sabres' No. 1 goalie during Carter Hutton's slump

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 10, 2019

BUFFALO – If Carter Hutton were performing close to his usual standards, the Sabres goalie would likely start tonight's home game against the St. Louis Blues.

Hutton, 33, spent two seasons with the Blues, playing 61 games before signing a three-year, \$8.25 million contract with the Sabres.

The veteran, of course, probably wants to face the Blues, the defending Stanley Cup champions, badly.

But for the ninth time in the last 12 games, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger will likely use goalie Linus Ullmark.

Ullmark, at least for now, has wrestled away the starting job.

Following a scorching 6-0-0 start, Hutton suddenly started struggling, a rough period he called "one of the tougher stretches of my career." He hasn't won a game since Oct. 22.

"It's tough just trying to compete all the time," Hutton told reporters Saturday afternoon in Vancouver after making 26 saves in the Sabres' 6-5 overtime loss to the Canucks. "I don't know, it feels like I'm swimming out there a bit."

In his last nine outings, Hutton has compiled a wretched 0-5-4 mark with a 3.99 goals-against average and an .875 save percentage.

A goals-against average over 3.00 or a save percentage under .900 doesn't cut it in today's NHL.

Over that stretch, Ullmark, 26, has compiled much better numbers – 6-5-1, 2.77 and .915 – in 12 contests. The Swede is 4-1-1 in his last six starts.

"There's a reason why my starts have been spread out," Hutton said. "Linus has outplayed me, he's done his job and that's a good thing. All I can do is control my attitude and the way I come to work."

Hutton has allowed five or more goals six times during his slump. Still, having suffered six one-goal losses over that stretch, he probably should've earned at least a win or two.

"When that kind of momentum works against an individual player, you just have to work with him to stay in what are his fundamentals," Krueger said of the close defeats.

Naturally, Hutton's losing streak has taken a toll on him – "It wears on me, for sure," he acknowledged – and sapped some confidence.

"All things considered, it's been a tough go, but thank God I had a good start," he said.

Following Saturday's game, Hutton said he must "trust myself a little more." Early in the contest, for example, Canucks winger Josh Leivo beat him from the right circle, a shot he probably should've stopped.

"I start thinking about backdoor passes and plays moving and I get myself a little unsquare," he said.

Hutton, however, shouldn't be counted out.

He has morphed from an undrafted nobody into a seven-year NHL veteran. His .931 save percentage led the NHL two years ago. He played a career-high 50 games last season, when he rebounded late in the campaign following a slump.

"One thing I don't doubt," Hutton said, "is my work ethic to come back."

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Following Sunday's 6-5 overtime victory in Edmonton, winger Kyle Okposo acknowledged the Sabres wanted the game for Krueger, who coached the Oilers during the lockout-shortened 2012-13 season.

"We talked about it in between periods and this morning, and we wanted to get a win for him," Okposo told reporters. "We know how much it meant to him. Things didn't end well here for him. He wouldn't say it, but I know this game meant a lot to him."

Krueger, who was famously fired over Skype by former Oilers general manager Craig MacTavish, called the win a "special gesture."

"It's real nice, they know the story and they know the history," he said. "We've got an honest culture in there. We're just out for each other. It was a beautiful victory, really, tonight here, especially because of the character we showed to get it."

The Sabres, who had Monday off, had lost five straight games in overtime.

They've earned points in seven of the last nine games (4-3-2) and rank third in the Atlantic Division.

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The Sabres' surfeit of forwards and defensemen means they've been scratching some notable names.

On Sunday, forward Casey Mittelstadt sat out for the first time this season, while defenseman Jake McCabe, an alternate captain, was also benched for the second time.

Mittelstadt, 21, has scored just one goal in the last 21 games.

"The numbers game we have going on here, whether it's Casey or Jake, right now, we've got excellent people right through the roster," Krueger said. "We like our depth on both positions

"For Casey, it was a day to take a breath, take a watch from the outside and learn."

Notes: Sabres defenseman Colin Miller, a healthy scratch seven times recently, on scoring Sunday's overtime winner, his first goal this season: "It's been a while and it's been an interesting season, so, yeah, it felt good." ... Sabres defense prospect Ryan Johnson, the 31st overall pick in June, has been named to Team USA's preliminary roster for the World Junior Championship later this month. ... Former Sabres center Ryan O'Reilly, last season's Conn Smythe Trophy winner (playoff MVP), has compiled six goals and 27 points in 31 games this season.

Terrific week earns Sabres captain Jack Eichel NHL third star honors

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 9, 2019

A league-best seven points in four games helped Buffalo Sabres captain Jack Eichel earn the NHL's third star for the week ending Dec. 8.

Eichel, 23, compiled two goals and five assists to extend his career-best point streak to 13 games (10 goals, 23 points). Meanwhile, a 2-1-1 mark moved the Sabres into third place in the Atlantic Division.

Right now, Eichel is enjoying the best stretch of his five-year career.

The center had a three-point night in last Monday's 7-1 win over the New Jersey Devils. He scored one goal in Thursday's 4-3 loss to the Calgary Flames. He registered two assists in Saturday afternoon's 6-5 overtime loss to the Vancouver Canucks. He closed the Sabres' three-game road trip Sunday by assisting on defenseman Colin Miller's overtime goal in a 3-2 win.

Eichel has compiled 18 goals and 42 points in 31 games this season, putting him seventh in NHL scoring. He's one of 10 players on pace for 100 points this season.

Washington Capitals defenseman John Carlson (three goals, including two game-winners, and six points) was named the first star. Pittsburgh Penguins goalie Tristan Jarry (two shutouts in two wins) was named the second star.

Facts and Figures: Eichel on pace for 111 points with Sabres

NHL.com

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Jack Eichel is on pace for an NHL career-high 111 points (48 goals, 63 assists) after he assisted on Colin Miller's overtime goal for the Buffalo Sabres in a 3-2 victory against the Edmonton Oilers at Rogers Place on Sunday.

The assist gave the 23-year-old center 23 points during a 13-game streak (10 goals, 13 assists), the longest of his NHL career and the longest active in the League. The Sabres captain and No. 2 pick in the 2015 NHL Draft is 4-2-1 head-to-head against Oilers center Connor McDavid, the No. 1 pick in 2015.

Eichel is among a group of 10 players who could reach the 100-point mark this season. Also on the list are Oilers center Leon Draisaitl at 136 points (49 goals, 87 assists), New York Rangers forward Artemi Panarin with 102 points (40 goals, 62 assists), and Florida Panthers forwards Aleksander Barkov (28 goals, 74 assists) and Jonathan Huberdeau (31 goals, 71 assists), each with 102 points.

Eichel's point streak is tied with Pastrnak, Draisaitl, Brad Marchand and Nathan MacKinnon for the second-longest this season behind Patrick Kane's 15 games for the Chicago Blackhawks from Nov. 2-30. He has five points on tying goals and eight points on go-ahead goals during the run.

Barkov, Huberdeau achieve Panthers first

Barkov had a goal and an assist and Huberdeau had two assists for the Panthers in a 5-1 win against the San Jose Sharks at BB&T Center. Each passed 35 points in their 29th game this season. It's the first time in Panthers history that two players each had 35 before their team's 30th game. Pavel Bure had 35 points (21 goals, 14 assists) after 26 games of the 1999-00 season and is only Panthers skater to reach the mark in fewer games than Barkov (10 goals, 26 assists) and Huberdeau (11 goals, 25 assists), each of whom has 36 points. Huberdeau now has 395 points in the NHL, passing Stephen Weiss (394) for second in Panthers history. He's 24 points behind Olli Jokinen's 419.

Florida (15-9-5) is second in the Atlantic Division behind the Bruins (20-4-6) after earning its third win in four games (3-1-0).

Six defensemen spark Rangers to victory

Jacob Trouba had a goal and assist and Tony DeAngelo had an assist, two of six defensemen with at least one point for the Rangers in a 5-0 win against the Vegas Golden Knights at T-Mobile Arena. It was the second time this season that New York had at least one point from six defensemen (a 6-4 win against the Winnipeg Jets on Oct. 3). The only other time in Rangers history that's been accomplished was Nov. 17, 2007, when Michal Rozsival, Dan Girardi, Marc Staal, Fedor Tyutin, Paul Mara and Jason Strudwick each had at least one point.

Rangers defensemen have 86 points (26 goals, 80 assists) this season, most in the NHL. Trouba has seven points (two goals, five assists) in his past six games, DeAngelo leads New York defensemen with 21 points (seven goals, 14 assists) and Brady Skjei had an assist against the Golden Knights for his 100th NHL point.

Oilers forward Gaetan Haas has an admirer in Ralph Krueger

By Jim Mathieson
Edmonton Journal
December 9, 2019

Buffalo coach Ralph Krueger is a big booster of Gaetan Haas, who played 10 years in the Swiss League and now is in his first year with the Oilers.

"He was the best player in that league with a Swiss passport last year. By far and there wasn't even a close second. He's played with my son Justin in Bern and I have a lot of respect for him. He's an extremely good player with a huge upside," said Krueger, who knows it's a major learning curve for Haas in the NHL.

"You have to look at Gaetan as if he's three or four years younger than a North American. He played in a different station over there. The Swiss Hockey League is a completely different game with a much lower, physical component and with the size of the rink in Europe you never have the contact. But if Gaetan puts in the work, it'll come out."

Haas has lots of time for Krueger's son, who has played in Switzerland for eight years but just two with Haas in Bern.

"He's a defensive defenceman playing a North American style. Good in the corners and in front of the net. He's heavy, not the fastest player but he's tough to play against. Great guy, always a smile on his face," said Haas.

KRUEGER PICKS HOCKEY OVER SOCCER

Krueger had several offers from English Premier League clubs to be their chairman after leaving Southampton FC this past spring, but the lure to coach hockey was too strong.

He's known Sabres GM Jason Botterill for years, back to when Botterill worked for Penguins as Jim Rutherford's assistant GM. Back to when Rutherford offered him the head coaching job in 2014 that he turned down.

The Southampton team has fallen hard on the pitch since Krueger left, third from the basement in the 20-team Premiership. Watford is last, Norwich second last and Southampton is tied with Aston Villa.

The three worst teams are relegated every year.

"The British Premier League is a lot scarier than the NHL. When you're near the bottom of the league you don't get a draft pick, You lose \$100 million pounds in revenue (relegated to a lower league). Different kind of pressure," said Krueger, who would sit in the stands at soccer games as chairman, far away from the action on the field.

Krueger, who talked to the Rangers about their team presidency position this spring, was also offered the same job with another Eastern-based NHL club two years ago but declined.

SABRES' TOP GUN

Buffalo captain Jack Eichel has evolved into a real leader according to Krueger.

"Jack is completely comfortable with the responsibility he has. He's embraced over and over what the team needs from him. When he doesn't have the puck, it's what he's doing to lead the group and bring physicality or defensive positioning. He's giving up offensive production and that shows his maturity," said Krueger.

MYLES AND MYLES DOWN ROAD

Krueger brought in former Oilers video coach Myles Fee to do the same job with the Sabres, but with more responsibility.

"He's grown a lot since he was in Edmonton. He's more than a video coach. He's like an assistant coach now. He's my go-to guy on the pre-scouts and rankings of other teams," said Krueger.

Fee left Oilers in 2016 after seven years here and was working for Charlotte Checkers, Carolina's farm team.

"I just got my ring," Fee said of last year's AHL championship team.

PAT ON THE BACK FOR MAURICE

While Krueger was head coach of Team Europe at the World Cup in 2016 and had a large hand in working with Leon Draisaitl, Krueger said Winnipeg Jets coach Paul Maurice was the real teacher in this equation.

"Paul took Leon on as a pet project and Edmonton should send Paul some flowers or something. Paul did a really good job making Leon understand what it meant to play against the best players and teams in the world," he said.

THIS 'N' THAT

Three-time Stanley Cup winner with the Oilers Steve Smith is also on Krueger's Buffalo staff as he was when Krueger was Oilers head coach. He looks after the Sabres defence. "Our history is very strong," said Krueger ... The Oilers sent extra forward Colby Cave back to Bakersfield with Ryan Nugent-Hopkins and Zack Kassian cleared to play after being hurt. Sam Gagner and Patrick Russell didn't dress against Buffalo ... Krueger, who has been a speaker at the World Economic Forum in his adopted Swiss home Davos for years, won't do it this January, obviously.

Point streak helps propel Eichel to NHL 3rd Star of the Week honors

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

December 9, 2019

Jack Eichel has been named the NHL's Third Star of the Week for the week ending Dec. 8, 2019, the League announced on Monday.

Eichel is riding a 13-game point streak, the longest active streak in the NHL, that began on Nov. 16. In four games this week, Eichel recorded seven points (2+5), including a three-point night on Dec. 2 against New Jersey. The Sabres went 2-1-1 in those four games.

He currently has 23 points (10+13) in what is also the longest point streak of his career. It's the longest by a Sabre since Tim Connolly tallied points in 16 straight from Dec. 23, 2009 to Jan. 25, 2010.

Eichel's point streak is tied with Pastrnak, Draisaitl, Brad Marchand and Nathan MacKinnon for the second-longest this season behind Patrick Kane's 15 games for the Chicago Blackhawks from Nov. 2-30, according to NHL.com. He currently ranks seventh in the NHL with 42 points (18+24).

"It's been a good start in terms of finding the back of the net," Eichel told Sabres.com before the team's road trip last week. "I just want to keep it going. It's all about consistency and bringing it every night."

With 18 goals in 31 games so far this season, Eichel is on pace to shatter his previous best goal total (28), set in the 2018-19 season.

His output through 31 games currently has him on pace to finish the season with 48 goals and 111 points, which would be the highest goal and point totals by a Sabre since Pat LaFontaine (53+95) and Alexander Mogilny (76+51) in 1992-93.

"I've been kind of shooting low," Eichel said. "I feel like in the past, I've had a lot of opportunities and just passed them by just missing the net.

"... You try and go high and miss the net, you don't give yourself a chance to score or maybe someone else a chance to score. You don't know what's going to happen. Just trying to shoot different places, I think, and knowing that sometimes it doesn't matter how hard you get it off. It's just about surprising the goalie."

Eichel is also in his second season as team captain and his leadership skills have impressed first-year coach Ralph Krueger.

"I think more than anything he's now a leader who understands that sometimes it's quality over quantity, and he can still concentrate on his game," Krueger said last week.

"... He's just been a very natural captain, he's enjoying it, he's communicating in a really good, consistent way and he's very positive in his influence on the team whether we've had a good day or a bad, and that's what we need to continue."

Washington Capitals defenseman John Carlson was named the First Star of the Week while Pittsburgh Penguins goaltender Tristan Jarry earned Second Star honors.

The Sabres host the St. Louis Blues on Tuesday at KeyBank Center.