



Buffalo Sabres

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Johan Larsson looking to continue offensive surge for Sabres

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

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The hottest Buffalo Sabres player, non-Jack Eichel division, is easy to pick out.

Would you believe that it's Johan Larsson?

A longtime punching bag of Buffalo fans, Larsson hasn't scored more than six goals in any of the last four seasons with the team and has never had 20 points for a full year in his entire career. Two years ago, he was a minus-30 player with a Corsi rating of just over 42%.

But look at his recent numbers. They're eye-popping.

Over the last seven games, Larsson is on the best offensive stretch of his Buffalo career. In that span, he's got seven assists and nine points to go with a plus-9 rating. For the season, he's at 4-8-12 with a plus-8 rating and 51.2% Corsi while clearly becoming one of the team's most dependable forwards.

Larsson has a three-game point streak for the first time since November 2016 and can put together the first three-game goal streak of his NHL career if he tallies Thursday night when the Sabres host the Nashville Predators in KeyBank Center.

Coach Ralph Krueger loves the line of Larsson centering Kyle Okposo and Zemgus Girgensons. They can drive opponents crazy by cycling the puck in the offensive zone, especially against top players bent on scoring. They're defensively responsible. And now they're scoring themselves.

Whereas Phil Housley almost never gave players like that a legitimate chance to play some offense, it's what Krueger wants to see and he's getting a response.

"He believes in that. If you have a good shift, he tends to roll you and put you out there again," Larsson said after practice Wednesday in KeyBank Center. "He gets you belief and confidence. It's good to have and makes everyone better. I feel good. I've had a couple lucky bounces go my way and I'm going to keep going with it."

"Confidence is something you can't really control. It's brewed from past successes and it can be fleeting," Okposo said. "It comes and goes and 'Larry' has got it right now. I think you just want to maximize your play when do you have it, as high as it is for him, and he's doing a great job of that."

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Larsson's last six seasons

Year	GP	G	A	Pts	+/-
2014-15	39	6	10	16	0
2015-16	74	10	7	17	-4
2016-17	36	6	5	11	-7
2017-18	80	4	13	17	-30
2018-19	73	6	8	14	-8
2019-20	29	4	8	12	+8

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Larsson got a great bounce on Wednesday, taking Zach Bogosian's shot off the back boards and beating St. Louis' Jake Allen with 8.6 seconds left in the second period to give the Sabres a 2-1 lead in their 5-2 victory over the Blues.

The play may have ended with a stroke of luck but Larsson set it all up by confidently carrying the puck through the neutral zone and making an inside move past St. Louis defenseman Justin Faulk in the Blues' zone. The puck

moved to Jimmy Vesey coming on for a line change and Larsson lurked near the net as it went back to Bogosian at the right point. Larsson then beat Blues defender Vince Dunn to the puck to bang it home.

"I carried it up and I felt like I had a lot of speed," Larsson explained. "I thought the D-man was going to shade on me if I went to the outside so I cut to the inside and he overcommitted and I got it by him. The next D came and I wanted to go to the net but he got too close so I just held on to it.

"I was at the end of my shift and I was trying to go on net. It bounced behind, Jimmy picked up, we got a shot and I got a lucky bounce. I was right there."

After Larsson put the puck in, he exploded with a flying leap into the end glass and then sprinted towards his bench.

"It's kind of a bad 'celly' there. I was so happy," he said. "It's really solid and I guess I don't know how to do it. Just trying to celebrate with the fans there."

"He's having a blast. You can see it in his face," Okposo said. "Obviously he's so pumped up to score that goal."

Krueger seems set with Jack Eichel between Victor Olofsson and Sam Reinhart as his top line. The Larsson trio is clearly anchored as well.

"They're an example for how we want to play as a team in general," Krueger said. "And the way early in the season already they've embraced the principles and the concepts and believed in them as a group, that synergy is creating some offense now which is a good sign for the other guys to see.

"We've just got to keep along that path. On and off the ice, just a really exemplary group. We're really happy to see them get offensive production out of that now, too."

Even if it's not scoring, the line can frustrate opponents with his offensive-zone possession time. Neither Connor McDavid nor Leon Draisaitl had a point against the Sabres Sunday in Edmonton. Ryan O'Reilly didn't have a shot on goal Tuesday for the Blues and the former Sabre was minus-3 in the game.

"You have to be aware when they're out there, be on the right side of the puck," Larsson said. "The best medicine is play in their zone. Get in there, forecheck and keep it down there. They're not always the best defensive players. Maybe O'Reilly is but a lot of guys like that can get frustrated. As much as you can grind down there, maybe get a couple chances, maybe score a goal, it always helps."

Larsson added that he's hoping to collect more goals – and perfect his celebrations.

"Hey, I didn't want him to be face-planting into the glass like he did but I'm not gonna help him on that Lambeau Leap either. That's enemy territory for me," said a smiling Okposo, a Minnesota native clearly not fond of the Green Bay Packers. "But he's pumped up. He's playing great and we're all happy for him and what he's doing."

Sabres prospect Taylor Leier's shoulder injury was life-changing

By Bill Hoppe

The Buffalo News

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ROCHESTER – At first, Taylor Leier couldn't comprehend what had happened to his right shoulder.

In the immediate aftermath of his freak training accident, Leier said he was in "complete shock."

Later on, Leier, 25, said he would wake up during the night and wonder if he was dreaming about the injury.

"Like, there's no way my shoulder's actually hurt," he would say to himself.

Leier, who underwent surgery to repair a torn labrum, would ask himself why such an odd thing could happen to someone who dedicated himself to the game.

In eight seasons of major junior and pro hockey, the Americans' winger had been a model of durability, never suffering a major injury.

But on May 18, Leier was stickhandling on roller blades at a tennis court near his home in Saskatoon, Sask., a routine he said he had done thousands of times.

When a rock got caught in his right blade, he put his hand down to break his fall. His shoulder popped out.

"Just the way it happened, it affected me, it affected my family, it affected my girlfriend," an emotional Leier recently told The News. "It was traumatizing, just because you don't expect something like that to happen. It would be different if it happened during a game."

When Cindy Leier picked up the phone that day, she could barely understand her son's frantic voice.

"It's my shoulder, Mom, it's my shoulder!" he told her.

Despite the excruciating pain, Leier skated to his parents' house two blocks away. His brother, Keaton, happened to be visiting from Atlanta and drove him to the emergency room.

When Cindy Leier and her husband, Tim, arrived at the hospital, their son was still in shock.

"He felt very frustrated and disappointed," she said. "Like, he just thought, 'Oh, my gosh, what have I done to myself here?'"

She said she wondered if he would ever play hockey again.

"I could see it in their eyes," Leier said. "They were so upset for me."

Almost seven months later, Leier is ready to play again. He plans to make his season debut Wednesday against the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins at Blue Cross Arena.

Leier has made 261 American Hockey League appearances over the last five years. Wednesday's game will be among the most significant.

"He's been through hell, to be honest," Amerks general manager Randy Sexton said.

Sadness in his eyes

After four and a half seasons in the Philadelphia organization, the Flyers traded Leier to the Buffalo Sabres for winger Justin Bailey on Jan. 17, a swap of former second-round picks playing in the AHL.

Leier, who has played 55 NHL games, quickly acclimated to his new surroundings, scoring 12 goals and 23 points in 35 games with the Amerks.

"I loved the culture here and I was happy with how I played," Leier said. "The thought in my mind was to re-sign here. But at the same time, I was an unrestricted free agent for the first time."

Leier figured he would have suitors on the open market. Then he hurt his shoulder.

"I was pretty scared," he said.

Leier said he was nervous that teams would say, "Come talk to us when you're healthy."

Following the injury, Tim Hodgson, Leier's agent, called Sexton and explained what had happened. Sexton said the organization was still interested in Leier.

"He's a good prospect," Sexton said.

But to mitigate the risk, Leier, who spent all of the 2017-18 season in the NHL, was offered a one-year AHL contract.

On June 28, in addition to announcing Leier's new deal, the Amerks said he had undergone "successful offseason surgery" and was expected to make a full recovery.

"They've been very supportive ever since that phone call," Leier said. "They understand that I'm still young and stuff happens."

Sexton said: "I really hope that we're able to get him back on a two-way (contract) once he gets back and gets established."

By late June, Leier was progressing in his recovery and knew he would be OK. Still, reaching that point took an emotional toll on him.

Leier said "vicious things" went through his head regarding his career.

"Hockey is his life, his passion," said Nicolette Peloquin, Leier's girlfriend. "It's so much more than just a job for him."

When his best friend, Nelson Nogier, a Manitoba Moose defenseman, visited him in the emergency room, Leier said he "could see the sadness in his eyes."

Nogier experienced the same injury twice.

"When he saw me, we just looked at each other, and my arm was hanging off the table," Leier said.

'Zero pity party'

Leier remembers all the significant dates.

He underwent major shoulder surgery June 3. He finally ditched his sling July 17. He skated for the first time Oct. 10. After receiving permission from Sexton, he reported to the Amerks on Oct. 21, earlier than expected.

Leier loves training so much he said it's almost a second profession. For about five months, it was his life.

"I was like, 'As soon as you're allowed to do things, zero pity party, let's go,'" he said of his rehab.

He added: "I just said, '(Screw) it, I'm going to get better.'"

Leier, who lost 16 pounds, would work out for five hours, seven days a week.

"Literally, I had to rebuild my whole body back again," he said.

But Leier couldn't do much early during his recovery. Even going for a walk could be challenging.

He needed help from his family and Peloquin, who would visit from Rhode Island.

"It was 24-hour care for a couple weeks, that's for sure," Cindy Leier said.

Thinking about the critical support his parents and Peloquin provided made Leier break down crying.

"They were pretty reassuring I was mentally tough enough to get through it," he said.

Leier said the long recovery "teaches you a little bit more about yourself."

"In a way, it might be a blessing in disguise," he said of the injury. "There's not many things that can challenge you as much as this does."

KeyBank Center goes all Aud as Sabres prep for '80s Night

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

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There was quite a surprise in KeyBank Center when the Buffalo Sabres hit the ice for practice at the noon hour Wednesday.

The seating bowl looked almost exactly like Memorial Auditorium.

Golds by the ice. Then Reds. Then Blues (in the 200 level and suites). And the "balcony" – the 300 level – was of course all orange.

The seats were actually covered by T-shirts of the corresponding color for Thursday's '80s Night game against the Nashville Predators. In addition to paying tribute to the team's second decade, the game will also be a celebration of the Aud, the Sabres' home from their birth in 1970 through 1996.

The team will be introducing '80s alumni in a pregame ceremony, using '80s themed music and graphics and including several other special touches for the game.

After practice, coach Ralph Krueger gathered his players on the ice for their daily post-practice chat and reporters watching could hear the word "Aud" used. Assistant coach Steve Smith, who played in the building with Edmonton, was chiming in.

"I was checking if there was anybody else that had the same level of lack of information I had," said a smiling Krueger, who never saw a game in the franchise's former home. " 'Smitty' filled in the boys that he played here.

"Now I've done my research and I'm up to speed. Didn't get any heads up on that. Now I've seen it, saw the colors, it must have been a passionate building for the Sabres to play in. I'm sure it will bring back a lot of memories and should add a spark to the game against Nashville for sure."

Captain Jack Eichel said assistant equipment manager and Williamsville native George Babcock was filling the players in about the Aud and the seating arrangement.

"That would have been something to look at back at in the day," added winger Kyle Okposo. "Now I'm intrigued and I'm going to go look up some pictures later for sure. 'Smitty' said it was a small rink with the crowd right on top of you so that's pretty cool."

The list of '80s alumni attending is topped by Hockey Hall of Famer Dave Andreychuk and former captain Mike Foligno. Also scheduled to attend are: Adam Creighton, Mike Hartman, Val James, Uwe Krupp, Phil Myre, Wilf Paiement, Brent Peterson, Daren Puppa, Dave Snuggerud, John Tucker and John Van Boxmeer.

Peterson, acquired with Foligno as part of the 1981 trade with Detroit for Jim Schoenfeld and Danny Gare, has been with the Predators since their birth in 1998 as an assistant coach, broadcaster and ambassador.

Dahlin's return possible

Defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, who has missed the last eight games with a concussion, took regular turns at defense alongside Colin Miller and was at his quarterback slot on the No. 1 power play at practice Wednesday. The Sabres will wait until Thursday morning before deciding if Dahlin can return.

"There's definitely a step in the right direction," Krueger said. "We're just going to assess him and wanted to see him in his customary role and see how he looks. So it was an opportunity to take a look at him, and we'll make that call."

The workout was Dahlin's first real contact since the injury so the Sabres are obviously going to be cautious with him.

"He looked quite strong there, so it's trending in that direction," Krueger said of a return. "Let's not assume anything, because it was the first time he was in battles and contact. But he's moving in the right direction, for sure."

Another all-white night

Because it's a decade night, the Sabres will be wearing their white 50th anniversary jerseys and white gloves. Buffalo is 3-1 wearing the jerseys so far and the three victories have all included a lot of offense (wins over New Jersey by scores of 7-2 and 7-1, and a 6-4 victory over Toronto). The lone loss was the 1-0 shutout defeat Nov. 2 to the New York Islanders.

"I love them. I think it's great. Guys enjoy wearing them," Eichel said. "It's something different, keeps things fresh and you know it's a more special night with more added to it for the fans. We've had pretty good success for the most part wearing them, too. That's a trend we want to keep going."

The Sabres will wear the 50th sweaters eight more times this season, next for the Dec. 27 visit by Boston.

Buffalo a second home for Preds

The Predators hit town on an eight-game winning streak in Buffalo. They have not lost here since the Sabres posted an 8-4 win on Feb. 27, 2008. But strangely enough, Buffalo has had excellent success in Nashville with a 6-3 record in its last nine games in Bridgestone Arena.

The Predators earned the 800th regular season win in franchise history with Tuesday's 3-1 victory over San Jose. At 14-10-5, they are tied with Minnesota for fifth in the Central Division and are one point behind Vancouver in the Western Conference wild-card race.

Defenseman and captain Roman Josi leads the Preds with 26 points. Center Nick Bonino, whose two Stanley Cup victories for Pittsburgh included the 2017 final over the Preds, is the leading goal scorer with 12.

How Rasmus Dahlin's absence has affected the Sabres' power play

By Travis Yost

The Buffalo News

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Rasmus Dahlin was sidelined Nov. 25 with a concussion after incurring a blindside elbow to the head by Tampa Bay defenseman Erik Cernak. In his absence, the Sabres' coaching staff has had to blend nearly 19 minutes of ice time into the rest of the lineup.

The power play has been particularly affected. Before the injury, Dahlin was seeing nearly 70% of available man-advantage time. Dahlin's injury hasn't changed Buffalo's mentality regarding setup – they still favor the nontraditional four forward, one defenseman strategy that's taken hold in NHL circles over the last five years. But it obviously has changed deployment and personnel.

Without Dahlin, the team has moved minutes to veterans Rasmus Ristolainen and Brandon Montour. It's an interesting tweak made by Ralph Krueger as he tries to solve a couple of issues at the same time.

First, Dahlin has taken a step backward from his rookie campaign – he's still been a meaningful contributor in most game states, but nothing to the degree that we saw last season. The Sabres separately have had trouble generating meaningful offense on the man advantage. Entering Tuesday's games, their power play is 19th in the league at 5.9 goals per 60 minutes. Not dissimilar to Dahlin's year-over-year regression, the Sabres have seen a draw down in performance here, too: The Sabres scored 7.0 goals per 60 minutes up a man last season.

If we take a look at power play ice time allocation for the Sabres' defenders since the regular season started, you can see when Krueger made the personnel change – the 25th game of the regular season, a home game against the Calgary Flames on Nov. 27, the game after Dahlin's injury.

Though at first pass you would wonder why a player with Dahlin's toolbox would ever be pulled from the power play, Krueger does have an interesting number of options.

If we use a regression-based measure such as Goals Above Replacement (via Evolving Hockey), you can compare each defender's contributions and relative impact to his teammates on the power play over the last couple of seasons. Dahlin has been good, but so have Ristolainen and Colin Miller.

From our Goals Above Replacement measure, we assess Dahlin as the most impactful of the four skaters on the power play, but it's worth noting that his contributions have only been marginally better than Ristolainen's.

Why is that? Because for an extended period, Dahlin has played with Jack Eichel and Jeff Skinner (to name just a couple of the forwards at his disposal), two attackers with incredible scoring touch and prowess. Meanwhile, Ristolainen – at least since Dahlin was drafted – has been forced to pick up secondary duty, which means splitting more of his shifts between the first and second power play units. Broadly speaking, nearly 85% of Dahlin's power play time has come with the trio of Eichel, Skinner and Sam Reinhart. Ristolainen has seen 65% of his power play time with that same group of players.

It's these sort of contextual factors that a coaching staff needs to work through when trying to reset the lineup, especially after an impact injury such as Dahlin's. Most teams are ill-prepared to lose a top-four defender of significance for an extended period of time, but Buffalo's defensive depth – perhaps lacking in quality, but better than what we have observed in recent years – has allowed them to stem the tide for the time being.

And the team is already starting to see some rot on the power play with Dahlin on the mend. The combination of Ristolainen, Miller and Montour behind the Sabres forwards on the power play has been generally ineffective:

Those are ugly numbers. While it's impossible to say how much should be apportioned to the loss of Dahlin, we know that in relative terms, Buffalo is hurting in his absence. I think more than anything it helps put into perspective what Dahlin's "sophomore slump" actually means.

In the case of the power play or his play across all game states, Dahlin might not be exactly meeting Year Two expectations, but he certainly remains one of the best – if not the best – option for minutes on the Sabres' blue line.

Sabres' McCabe looking to get some consistency back into his game

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

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Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Whether you think Jake McCabe is playing well or not, there's one thing I can tell you: McCabe is a fiercely competitive man and he takes poor play and losing very hard.

The Sabres have eight NHL defensemen on the roster, so at different times, McCabe, Marco Scandella and Colin Miller have sat out. McCabe has sat out twice and he said, "It's tough. We're all competitive, especially in the back end, but I will say that everyone has handled it very well. I mean, as well as you can when you're not in the lineup. We've maintained good attitudes and we're still cheering for each other out there, so it's been tough, but it's one of those things that we all knew the situation was going to come to this. So we've all handled it really professionally."

There are definitely things McCabe wants to improve upon in his game. He said, "By no means is it perfect. When you get scratched, it's not a good thing, so you're just trying to work on just being more consistent. I'm definitely not satisfied, that's for sure."

Watching from above, it seems like, at times, McCabe is trying to do too much. He didn't disagree with that, "There's a lot of pressure in this job and we have high expectations in here. I have very high expectations for myself too, so when you're not in the lineup, you're pressing a little bit more or you're thinking about it, but it's all competition. Hopefully it'll bring the best out of us."

The Sabres have gotten points in eight out of 10 games, going 5-2-3. That has them alone in second place in the Atlantic Division and only two points behind in the Wild Card race. McCabe said improvements have been made, "I think guys have been working at how we want to play as a team as far as being really strong defensively and try to support each other all over the ice.

"The forwards have been doing a good job of providing back pressure allowing us to have good gaps in the back end, which makes our lives a lot easier plus we've been doing a better job of solving pressure and getting the puck out of our end pretty quickly and killing plays. That's all leading to some success, but we still have some areas we want to clean up as far as the [defensive] zone goes, but the last little bit it's been promising for sure."

Rasmus Dahlin was cleared for contact in Wednesday's practice and worked with the No. 1 power play. That usually means that the player is coming back the next game, but Ralph Krueger said they want to see how Dahlin reacted to being bounced around a little in practice. Krueger admitted that Dahlin did look promising.

Wednesday's lines:

Vesey - Johansson - Asplund

Girgensons - Larsson - Okposo

Olofsson - Eichel - Reinhart

Skinner - Rodrigues - Sheary (Mittelstadt)

Dahlin - Miller

Montour - Ristolainen

Scandella - Bogosian

McCabe - Jokiharju

As the Sabres celebrate the teams of the '80s, Mike Ramsey looks back on his legacy with pride

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

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What does a player do when he's done with hockey? Imagine trying to figure out what to do next after playing 18 NHL seasons and 1,070 games followed by 12 more years behind several NHL benches. That should be a challenge for someone who, up until that point, had been a lifer in the sport. Unless you're Mike Ramsey.

After entering the NHL as a 19-year-old rookie with the Sabres, Ramsey walked away from hockey in 2010 at age 49 after 30 years as a professional player and assistant coach. Rather than endure more winters on the road away from his family, the father of three opted for time at home in Minnesota watching his kids grow up and play hockey themselves over adding to his own hockey legacy that was already plenty eventful.

And what a career it was.

Ramsey will not be in attendance as the Sabres celebrate Aud Night ('80s Night) during Thursday's game versus Nashville – the second of five decade-themed nights the team will host in celebration of its 50th Anniversary this season – yet his contributions to the Sabres as a defensive minded defenseman during that time of high-flying, high-scoring offense deserve their own accolades.

Ramsey's role often meant not getting the notoriety needed to stand out, but his career was a matter of both adapting to what was needed by coaches and doing what he had to do to be successful.

In an age where Paul Coffey, Raymond Bourque, and Chris Chelios were the gold standard on defense, Ramsey was the working man's defenseman, specializing in shutting down superstar scorers. In a city like Buffalo, that made Ramsey the ideal player to admire.

"He was one of the all-time greats here," longtime Sabres broadcaster and NHL veteran defenseman Jim Lorentz said. "He was a great competitor. He'd do anything to win a game. Fall in front of any shot at any time. And I just remember the way he competed night after night. To me, the highest compliment that you can pay to someone is the compete level. His was through the roof."

Ramsey's hockey life begins and ends at home in Minnesota, where he spent his formative years at Minneapolis Roosevelt High School before moving on to the University of Minnesota playing for Herb Brooks.

After winning a national championship in his one season at Minnesota in 1978-79, Ramsey was drafted 11th by the Sabres in the 1979 draft. One of eight Gophers players (and the youngest member) that Brooks brought onto the 1980 U.S. Olympic Team the following year, Ramsey was a spunky up-and-comer who gave a team full of college kids a spark going into the Olympics.

"We were all kind of, apart from a couple older guys, pretty young, pretty immature and we all had a lot of fun playing. Rammer was probably the best example of that," United States captain Mike Eruzione said. "He was talented offensively, he was aggressive, and he jumped into the play a lot — maybe to Herb's chagrin a little too much. He was like a young colt, he just wanted to go and I think Herb tried to corral that a little of that."

Being under the guidance of Brooks at such a young age would seem to be a boon to anyone, but Ramsey certainly received all sides of the legendary coach's tough love.

"He was a great motivator," Ramsey said. "Herb could push the right buttons at the right time and get players to play. He was a good judge of character and of who should play with who and who should be on the ice. He wasn't an easy man to play for, I can tell you that."

During the Olympics, Ramsey showed the ability to both be a puck mover and a rigid defender. His physical play against the Soviet Union was one of many sparks in what became one of the biggest upsets in sports history on the way to winning a gold medal.

"The guys enjoyed him because he didn't have the experience that they had — to do things off the wall here and there — on and off the ice. But it endeared him to everybody," United States assistant coach and former Penguins GM Craig Patrick said. "And he was a great player, like he had a lot on the ice as a player offensively and he learned the defensive game that year pretty much. Herb did a great job teaching the systems to everybody."

That foundation — and the ability to handle a notoriously tough coach — would prove valuable when Ramsey joined the Sabres in March 1980, making his NHL debut less than three weeks after the Miracle on Ice.

"I was all over the ice, I was everywhere and after I don't know how many games right in my first full year Scotty said, 'Do you want to score? Do you want to block shots? Do you want to hit? Do you want to sell tickets?' He goes, 'You want to drive the Zamboni too,'" Ramsey said. "And then he said, 'I want you to just play defense. I'm going to tie you to the net and just play defense.' And I said, 'Yeah, I can do that.' It was almost refreshing. It was like, just go play defense. It changed my game and, after about two years, they labeled me a defensive defenseman and I had no problem with that. No problem with that label."

While Ramsey benefited from Sabres coach Scotty Bowman's straight talk, the one guy who didn't like that message was Ramsey's father.

"He wanted to see his kid go coast to coast. I said, 'It doesn't work like that, dad,'" Ramsey said. "The players are too good in the NHL, it doesn't work that way. I said I'm fine with what I'm doing. I had no problem with it. I thought it was easier to be a good defensive defenseman than it is to be a good offensive defenseman. That's how I felt. You've got to put up numbers every night if you're going to be a good offensive defenseman. Every night — and I just turned into a plumber and I plumbed. I just guard the nets and I had no problem with that."

Getting that kind of dose of reality could've been difficult for a young player to hear, especially if they came in with the mindset that they're meant to play a certain way. In Ramsey's case, it was more that he was being shown a new direction for his career.

"I think that's a strength of Mike's that he took advice from one of the greatest coaches in the game and realized that probably his success was not going to be offensive risk, but it was going to be his defensive prowess and that really became a strength," Sabres teammate Lindy Ruff said. "To try to do both, if you're not good enough for one, a lot of times it puts a lot of risk in the game and creates a lot of opportunities for the other team. I think he took that part and really, really started to flourish."

If Ramsey was a plumber in Buffalo, he may as well have been one of the Mario Bros. He made it to four All-Star Games in 1982, 1983, 1985, and 1986. He laid out Wayne Gretzky during the 1986 game in Hartford. He was plus 203 in plus/minus in his career, tied with Steve Larmer for 66th all-time. Not bad considering he scored 79 career goals and had 345 points. Out of his 18 seasons, he was a minus player once with a minus-4 in 1993-1994 with Pittsburgh.

"I got a big charge out of shutting down and playing against other teams' top player or killing a penalty or stopping a 2-on-1," Ramsey said. "I like blocking shots. That was my rush so I took pride in it and I enjoyed it."

The kind of mentality needed to be a non-goalie that enjoys getting in front of shots could make a goalie seem normal. Reveling in denying opportunities for attackers and shutting down scorers was, perhaps, an underappreciated quality in the '80s. Goalies were for the most part helpless in trying to stop shots in the firewagon style of the time. Being wired the way Ramsey was made him unique.

"I don't think there's a shiny side to that style of play," Ruff said. "It seems that everybody is looking for the big play, the big goal, the great part of the game on the offensive side. Where the unrecognized part a lot of times is that defending part. You got to put your work in and he did put his work in."

But that's the competitive nature that made Ramsey successful. Whether you were his teammate or not, he wanted to win.

"First day of camp, I think was my second or third year there and I was going around him and he got his stick in the right spot and I went down and went in the boards with my feet first and tore a little bit of the meniscus,"

former Sabres and Maple Leafs forward Rick Vaive said. "It was an accident, it was just the way it happened, but I missed four weeks. It wasn't a big deal and it was a total accident, but what I mean is it was so hard to get around him one on one because he knew what to do. And that probably wouldn't have been called a penalty way back in those days either."

It was Ramsey's competitive nature off the ice that solidified his friendship with his then-housemate Ruff.

"The reason him and I got along so good was we competed on everything – it didn't matter," Ruff said. "We had a pool table in our house, we competed. We had a ping pong table, we competed. Everything was a competition to see if one guy could beat the other guy. And I knew right away that this is a guy that if you're going to beat him you're going to have to work hard to beat him."

"I had him in pool but he had me in ping pong," Ruff added with a laugh.

That friendship led Ruff to bring Ramsey – who had been running a sporting goods store since his retirement as a player – onto his staff when he was hired as a first-time head coach with the Sabres in 1997.

"I just said I need you," Ruff said. "This is my first go and I want a guy with real good character and a guy everybody will be able to trust, first and foremost me. "I thought it was a perfect fit."

From 1997-98 to 99-00, Ramsey coached the defense for Ruff in Buffalo. The former teammates reunited and helped get the Sabres to the infamous 1999 Stanley Cup final. If the memories of being swept as a player with the Red Wings in the 1995 Cup final are still tough to swallow, thinking about the '99 conclusion feels like a bout of food poisoning.

"That still makes me bitter how the league dropped the ball on that," Ramsey said, referencing Brett Hull's foot-in-the-crease Game Six-winning goal. "They can spin it any way they want. And they their head in the sand and closed their eyes is what they did."

After three seasons with Ruff, Ramsey joined Jacques Lemaire's staff with the expansion Minnesota Wild. There were some playoff successes and a Western Conference final appearance in 2003, but no Stanley Cups. Winning was good, but the losses found ways to eat at him more while wearing a suit instead of a uniform.

"I remember my dad would say, 'Why do you get so worked up? You're an assistant coach,'" Ramsey said. "I'd say, 'Because I care, dad,' and he would say, 'Well, let Jacques worry about that.' And I'd say, 'Well, I worry about it too.' So if it doesn't bother you, you've got either a special personality or you've checked out."

Being at home in Minnesota was fulfilling, but the demands of professional coaching had grown a lot from when he first started as a player. That meant that even though he was in his hometown, he wasn't at home with his family – including daughters Hannah and Rachel and son Jack – as much as he wanted. On game days, Ramsey would often find himself at the rink from 7 a.m. until midnight. In 2010, he had enough.

"My last year coaching, I didn't take my kids to school and I didn't see them come home from school," he said. "I have three kids in school so I'm going, you know what, I was fortunate enough that I had other things going on that I could walk away from the game. I said it's just time to walk away. It was the right decision for me. Some people would regret it — I don't regret it at all."

After 30 years in the pro side of the sport, there was still hockey to watch. Rachel played four years at Minnesota on the women's team. Jack did the same with Minnesota's men's team, where he played with Sabres center Casey Mittelstadt. Jack is currently in the ECHL with the Indy Fuel, which gives Ramsey an opportunity to at least take in a game or two now and then. Chatting on the phone once a week or so with Ruff helps him get his fill of the pro game, but that's about it. The quiet life away from the game suits him just fine.

The Sabres' 50th anniversary season has allowed for debates about the greatest players throughout the team's history. Depending on the era you grew up in, you likely have your own favorite defensemen. If you were around in the 1970s and '80s, you might be partial to Bill Hajt. If you were with them through the '80s, it was probably Ramsey or Phil Housley, depending on how you felt about defense or points. While Rasmus Dahlin might one day supplant them all, for now the debate rolls on.

Hajt and Ramsey weren't scorers. They were defensive defensemen by the book. A lot of what you could say about Ramsey could be applied to Hajt, but the admiration between the two of them is there. As teammates for eight seasons, Hajt was a role model for Ramsey, especially given Bowman's desire to make Ramsey a shutdown defender.

"I was Bobby Orr compared to Bill Hajt," Ramsey said laughing. "I watched how he handled himself in the 'D' zone and his positioning — being calm and everything. I killed penalties with him and other stuff. He had a really good stick."

Hajt is humble when it comes to his own play, citing Ramsey and center Don Luce as strong defensive players who helped his game succeed.

"I wasn't a great skater. I wasn't a tough guy. I wasn't physical. So I had to play to my strengths and use my reach and use my smarts," Hajt said. "I got to play with some really good other defensive players that helped me with my game."

As far as who he felt was the better defenseman, Hajt made his choice clear.

"Mike was just an all around better player," Hajt said. "He's a great skater. He could play physical when you needed to. He did all the things I did. He was maybe just a little bit better. He's a little better offensively for sure. But he was a great player."

Ramsey was flattered that Hajt chose him as the best in team history.

"For him to say that, that's pretty cool. He was an awesome defensive defenseman."

Being lauded by teammates and contemporaries has been a part of what Ramsey's career was about. He's never been a player or a person that sought to be the center of attention. If that were the case, he might not have listened to Scotty Bowman. Of course, had he done that maybe his career doesn't turn out the way it did.

He was a Sabres captain in 1991-1992 and spent nearly 14 seasons with the team before he was traded to Pittsburgh in March 1993. He was inducted into the Sabres Hall of Fame and the U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame in 2001. He was inducted to the Greater Buffalo Sports Hall of Fame in 1998.

There have been debates over whether or not his number should be retired by the Sabres, although Ramsey doesn't ever think about such possibilities.

"It only crosses my mind when people bring it up. I think it'd be really cool, but would I have to come to the ceremony and speak?" he quips.

Playing in front of thousands and defending the best players in the world is one thing, but that was the job — a job he did very well for a long time. Those days are over and he's happy at home. But for those that watched him through his career, they know what he meant to the game.

"He just did all the things you're supposed to do and he did him better than anyone," Lorentz said. "I think anybody who's played with him, anybody who really knew the game in and out, could recognize what he was and he was one of the best."

Sabres' Johan Larsson scoring, having fun: 'He has an offensive upside'

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
December 12, 2019

BUFFALO – This is new, you know. Not only is Sabres center Johan Larsson piling up points, he's also having fun and smiling.

"He wasn't 'Angry Larry' last night," Sabres winger Kyle Okposo said of linemate's nickname. "He's having a blast. I think you can see it in his face."

Right now, having compiled two goals and nine points in the last seven games, Larsson is enjoying a career-best stretch entering tonight's home game against the Nashville Predators.

But Larsson, who has endured a lot of losing over his seven-year career, also seems happy.

Former Sabres coach Dan Bylsma once said the scouting report on Larsson was "he's grumpy, miserable, hard guy to play against."

Larsson has been a major contributor to the Sabres' recent success, anchoring perhaps their sturdiest line between Okposo and Zemgus Girgensons and contributing some surprising offense.

In Tuesday's 5-2 win over the St. Louis Blues, an amped Larsson celebrated wildly after putting the Sabres up 2-1 with 8.6 seconds left in the second period, jumping into the glass.

"Kind of a bad celly, I don't know," Larsson said following Wednesday's practice inside KeyBank Center. "I was just so happy."

The Swede started the play by slickly carrying the puck into the St. Louis zone. He also added an assist and hit the post in the waning seconds trying for a long empty-net goal.

"We felt all along he has an offensive upside that needs to be promoted and he needs to be confident bringing into the game, and you can see how much fun he's having with that," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "But he's a player that accepts his role in the team, works extremely hard at it and doesn't really look left or right."

Larsson's three-game point streak is his longest since November 2016. Before his current run, he had compiled nine points in his previous 48 games.

"A couple bounces going my way," Larsson said of offensive exploits. "I've got some confidence now it's kind of bouncing my way."

That confidence, of course, is critical.

"You see what confidence does to anybody," Okposo said. "I mean, you look at the best players in the league, you look at Sidney Crosby, he goes through spells where he doesn't have confidence. We're all human, we all go through those ups and downs. Confidence is something you can't really control. ... (Larsson's) got it right now."

Earlier in his career, Larsson had a knack for scoring big goals. In 2015-16 and 2016-17, seven of his 16 goals were game-winners. He hasn't, however, scored a game-winner since then.

Larsson, one of three Sabres remaining from the 2013-14 tank team, has struggled at times over recent seasons.

After dislocating his elbow and wrist midway through 2016-17, he never seemed to get on track.

Still, Larsson, a tenacious presence who can kill penalties, has kept earning regular duty.

Before the season, Krueger, Larsson's fifth coach with the Sabres, spoke glowingly of him.

"It's nice that he believes in me and trusts in me and gives me some confidence," Larsson said.

Larsson, 27, responded from the get-go, helping the Sabres roar out the gate. In the opening weeks, Larsson, Girgensons and Okposo formed arguably the team's most reliable combination.

Since Krueger reunited it last week, the trio has combined for six goals and nine points in three games while often shadowing the opposition's best. On Tuesday, top Blues center Ryan O'Reilly faced the line about half of his shifts, according to Krueger.

"We try to play the same style every night, go out and do all the right things," Larsson said. "Of course, you want to play down there (in the offensive zone). I think we're pretty heavy on the pucks and good down low and we have a little touch."

Besides Larsson, Girgensons, another checker who has played for five coaches in seven years, has often looked like a different player under Krueger.

"They've embraced the responsibility they have," Krueger said. "They give us an extra tool and another line that can play against any line of the other teams."

Okposo said Krueger's system "allows players like Larry and Z to really flourish."

"It causes them to just not think defensively, because they already do such good work defensively that they don't have to think about being back, because our system kind of takes care of that," he said. "You've kind of seen the confidence grow in the last couple weeks with Larry."

Sabres' Rasmus Dahlin practices, could be close to returning from concussion

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 11, 2019

BUFFALO – Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, out the last eight games with a concussion, practiced today on a regular pairing and also manned a point on the top power play.

So, could Dahlin, 19, return Thursday against the Nashville Predators?

"There's a definitely a step in the right direction," Krueger said inside KeyBank Center. "We're just going to assess him and wanted to see him in his customary role and see how he looks. So it was an opportunity to take a look at him, and we'll make that call tomorrow morning."

Dahlin participated in Tuesday's morning skate, his first time on the ice with the Sabres since suffering a concussion Nov. 25.

Today was the Swede's first contact session. He practiced beside Colin Miller, his partner earlier this season.

Based on line combinations today, center Casey Mittelstadt could be a healthy scratch Thursday for the second time in three games. Winger Conor Sheary would move back in after sitting out Tuesday's 5-2 win over the St. Louis Blues.

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When KeyBank Center opens Thursday, the stands will have a special look that should make Sabres fans nostalgic.

As part of their 50th anniversary, the Sabres are celebrating "Aud Night" and the 1980s.

Four different shirts – gold, red, blue and orange – were arranged on the seats before Wednesday's practice to resemble the old rink's color scheme.

Krueger said Sabres assistant coach Steve Smith, who played in Memorial Auditorium, explained the meaning of the colors to the players today.

"I didn't know the Aud seats were like that, but it's pretty cool," Sabres winger Kyle Okposo said. "It would've been something to kind of look at back in the day. Now I'm kind of intrigued. I'm going to go look up some pictures later."

Krueger said he never visited the Aud.

"Now I realize it's got a very historical meaning," he said. "I think it's amazing and a huge compliment to whoever put that (look) together for people to experience the original colors of the Auditorium."

GLO Line Shining Bright for Sabres

By Ted Goldberg

Spectrum News

December 11, 2019

The Sabres last three games have been a showcase for the "GLO" line (Zemgus Girgensons, Johan Larsson, and Kyle Okposo). All three players have scored multiple goals and provided great defense.

"They're an example of how we want to play as a team in general," says head coach Ralph Krueger. "The way, early in the season, they've embraced the principles and the concepts. They believed in them as a group, that synergy is creating offense now. Which is a good sign for the other guys to see."

Larsson and Girgensons have played together for seven years now, and are only now becoming consistent threats on offense. Okposo credits his coach and his new scheme.

"His system allows players like Larry and Z to flourish," he says. "It causes them to not think defensively; they already do such good work defensively, they don't have to think about being back. Our system takes care of that. You've seen the confidence grow in the last couple of weeks. It's fun to see."

The GLO line went dark for a bit when a concussion sidelined Okposo for nearly a month. Since his return, the Sabres have nabbed 5 out of 6 points, thanks in part to the line's chemistry.

"We're all kinda the same player," says Larsson. "We play a heavy game, strong on the puck. It was nice to get together again, get a good goal on the first shift helps get your chemistry again."

They get their next chance to light the lamp Thursday, when the Sabres host Nashville.

Facts and Figures: Eichel third to score 20 goals this season for Sabres

NHL.com

December 11, 2019

Jack Eichel became the third player to reach the 20-goal mark this season when he scored twice for the Buffalo Sabres in their 5-2 win against the St. Louis Blues at KeyBank Center.

Buffalo's captain broke a 2-2 tie at 5:26 of the third period with his 19th goal, then completed the win by scoring into an empty net to get 20 goals for the fifth time in as many NHL seasons. He joins David Pastrnak of the Boston Bruins (25) and Alex Ovechkin of the Washington Capitals (21) as the only 20-goal scorers so far this season.

Eichel also extended his point streak to 14 games, the longest by a Sabres player since Tim Connolly's 16-game run in 2009-10. The Sabres record is 18 games by Gilbert Perreault in 1971-72. Eichel is one behind Nathan MacKinnon of the Colorado Avalanche for the longest point streak in the NHL this season (15 games from Nov. 2-30).

With 44 points (20 goals, 24 assists) in 32 games, Eichel is on pace to become the third player in Sabres history to score 50 goals and have 100 points in the same season. Pat LaFontaine (53 goals, 148 points) and Alexander Mogilny (76 goals, 127 points) each did it in 1992-93.

Canadiens end two streaks in win against Penguins

The Montreal Canadiens ended two streaks when they defeated the Pittsburgh Penguins 4-1 at PPG Paints Arena for their third win in four games.

Tomas Tatar and Shea Weber each scored his 10th goal of the season for Montreal, which ended Pittsburgh's 10-game point streak at home (8-0-2). Tatar's goal at 12:24 of the second period ended Penguins goalie Tristan Jarry's shutout streak at 177:15, though Jarry passed Tomas Vokoun's previous team record of 173:06 from March 22 through April 2, 2013. Three goalies had runs of at least that length in 2018-19: Ben Bishop of the Dallas Stars (233:04), Marc-Andre Fleury of the Vegas Golden Knights (200:41) and Andrei Vasilevskiy of the Tampa Bay Lightning (184:04).

Weber reached double figures in goals for the 11th time in his NHL career, the most among active defensemen. Zdeno Chara of the Bruins (10) and Brent Burns of the San Jose Sharks (nine) are the only other defensemen to play this season with at least nine. Weber scored his 10th goal in his 31st game this season.

Flames extend streaks, score five for second straight day

The Calgary Flames scored five goals for the second time in as many days when they defeated the Arizona Coyotes 5-2 at Gila River Arena, extending their winning streak to six games and their point streak to eight (7-0-1). Each is the longest active streak of its kind in the NHL.

The five-goal performance came one day after the Flames scored five in a 5-4 overtime victory at Colorado. It's the third time in the past two seasons that they scored at least five goals on consecutive days, matching their combined total for the previous 24 seasons (1993-94 through 2017-18).

Jets continue to soar

The Winnipeg Jets won their fourth straight home game and 13th in their past 18 by defeating the Detroit Red Wings 5-1 at Bell MTS Place.

The Jets (19-10-2) moved within two points of St. Louis (18-8-6) for first place in the Central Division and Western Conference. Winnipeg is 13-3-2 since Nov. 1 and tied with the Capitals (13-3-2) and Stars (13-3-2) for the most wins in the NHL during that span.

Defense has keyed Winnipeg's surge. The Jets have allowed two or fewer goals in six of their past seven games, including one shutout. Their 38 goals against since Nov. 1 are the second-fewest allowed in the NHL behind the Stars (36).

Larsson, linemates seeing confidence translate on offense

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

December 11, 2019

At a glance, Johan Larsson's goal against the St. Louis Blues on Tuesday could be chalked up to a bit of good fortune. Zach Bogosian sent a shot wide of the net that caromed off the end boards and landed on Larsson's stick, and the forward banked his shot in off the pad of goalie Jake Allen.

Rewind 12 seconds, though, and you'll find the part of the play that still stuck in Kyle Okposo's mind one day later.

Larsson entered the offensive zone with possession of the puck and a tight gap between him and defenseman Justin Faulk. Rather than chip it into the corner and go on the forecheck, he deked and carried the puck down low.

"He probably doesn't make that play maybe earlier in the season or the last couple years," Okposo said after practice Wednesday. "But he's got a lot of confidence right now, and it's definitely a contagious thing."

Larsson has long been a trusted defensive presence during his seven-year tenure with the Sabres. He had one of the most specialized roles in the NHL last season, with just 16.12 percent of his 5-on-5 faceoffs having come in the offensive zone. Only linemate Zemgus Girgensons had a lower percentage, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

Both Larsson and Girgensons have seen those percentages rise to the mid-40s this season. Moreover, their line with Okposo has been trusted in crucial situations under coach Ralph Krueger, and they have the confidence to show for it.

Take the game against the Blues, for example. While Jack Eichel got the bulk of the matchups with Ryan O'Reilly, Larsson's line excelled in the minutes it got against the Blues' top line. In 5:48 of shared 5-on-5 ice time between Larsson and O'Reilly, shot attempts were 7-2 in favor of Buffalo.

When the Blues called timeout with a minute remaining, Krueger sent Girgensons and Larsson over the boards along with Eichel to protect the Sabres' one-goal lead. Larsson made a crucial play to poke the puck free off the draw and later got a shot on the empty net.

Girgensons watched patiently as the puck slid toward the goal line, then - with pressure coming from the Blues - tapped it in off the post.

"I'm just trying to be a good teammate there," Girgensons said, laughing. "I didn't want to steal it, but it got really close there to be honest."

The confidence drawn from playing a key role has rekindled an offensive spark among the trio. Larsson is currently on his first three-game point streak since 2016 and has nine points in his last seven games. Okposo scored in two straight games after returning from a concussion on Saturday.

"It's embracing that, but at the same time, knowing that they're an example for how we want to play as a team in general and the way early in the season already they've embraced the principles and the concepts and believed in them as a group," Krueger said.

"That synergy is creating some offense now, which is a good sign for the other guys to see. We just got to keep along that path. On and off the ice, just a really exemplary group. We're really happy to see them get offensive production out of that now, too."

Wednesday's practice

Rasmus Dahlin skated with the team for a second straight day, including work with the top power-play unit. Krueger said his status for Thursday's game against Nashville will be decided in the morning.

"This is the first contact he's had today, so we have to give it a little bit of time and give and make that assessment as this day progresses," Krueger said. "He looked quite strong there, so it's tending in that direction. Let's not assume anything, because it was the first time he was in battles and contact. But he's moving in the right direction, for sure."

Here's how the Sabres lineup at practice:

28 Zemgus Girgensons - 22 Johan Larsson - 21 Kyle Okposo
68 Victor Olofsson - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
53 Jeff Skinner - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 43 Conor Sheary / 37 Casey Mittelstadt
13 Jimmy Vesey - 90 Marcus Johansson - 74 Rasmus Asplund

6 Marco Scandella - 4 Zach Bogosian
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 33 Colin Miller
62 Brandon Montour - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
19 Jake McCabe - 10 Henri Jokiharju

35 Linus Ullmark
40 Carter Hutton

Tomorrow is Aud Night

The seats inside KeyBank Center were already transformed in time for Wednesday's practice:

Find the full list of attending alumni and more information [here](#).