



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*December 17, 2019*

## **Eichel and Buffalo take on Toronto**

Associated Press

December 16, 2019

Buffalo Sabres (16-11-7, second in the Atlantic Division) vs. Toronto Maple Leafs (16-14-4, fourth in the Atlantic Division)

Toronto; Tuesday, 7 p.m. EST

**BOTTOM LINE:** Jack Eichel leads Buffalo into a matchup against Toronto. He currently ranks sixth in the league with 48 points, scoring 23 goals and recording 25 assists.

The Maple Leafs are 5-5-1 against division opponents. Toronto has surrendered 24 power-play goals, killing 76.7% of opponent opportunities.

The Sabres are 6-4-1 against opponents in the Atlantic Division. Buffalo has scored 20 power-play goals, converting on 18.7% of chances.

Toronto took down Buffalo 2-1 in the last meeting between these teams on Nov. 30.

**TOP PERFORMERS:** Auston Matthews has recorded 34 total points while scoring 19 goals and collecting 15 assists for the Maple Leafs. Mitchell Marner has totaled five assists over the last 10 games for Toronto.

Eichel leads the Sabres with a plus-14 in 34 games played this season. Victor Olofsson has scored six goals over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

**LAST 10 GAMES:** Sabres: 5-1-4, averaging 3.8 goals, 6.3 assists, 2.8 penalties and 5.6 penalty minutes while giving up three goals per game with a .909 save percentage.

Maple Leafs: 6-4-0, averaging 3.4 goals, 5.6 assists, 2.3 penalties and 5.1 penalty minutes while giving up 2.4 goals per game with a .923 save percentage.

**INJURIES:** Maple Leafs: Tyson Barrie: day to day (ankle).

Sabres: None listed.

## **Sabres Game Day: Big streaks at stake in Toronto**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 17, 2019

Matchup: Buffalo Sabres (16-11-7) vs. Toronto Maple Leafs (16-14-4)

Where: Scotiabank Aren

When: 7 p.m.

TV: NBC Sports Network (\*take note\*)

Radio: WGR 550.

Stringing points together: The Sabres enter tonight's game 3-0-2 in their last five. A win or overtime loss tonight would give them their second six-game run of the season, after they opened the Ralph Krueger era by going 5-0-1. The Sabres are 4-1-2 in December and 6-2-4 in their last 12 games.

In the standings: The Sabres are second in the Atlantic Division with 39 points, two points ahead of Florida and three ahead of both Toronto and Montreal. The Leafs and Buffalo are both playing their 35th game tonight. The Sabres got three of four points in the teams' home-and-home set that closed November, snapping a five-game skid against Toronto.

The Eichel Chronicles: Sabres captain Jack Eichel was named the NHL's Third Star of the Week Monday after scoring five goals in three games. Here's where he stands on the league's leaderboard heading into Tuesday's game:

Goals: 23, second to Boston's David Pastrnak (28)

Assists: 25, tied for ninth with former teammate Ryan O'Reilly of St. Louis

Points: 48, tied for fifth with Pastrnak

Current point streak: Career-long 16 games, the longest in the league this season. His 15 goals, 29 points and plus-19 rating during the streak all lead the NHL since it began Nov. 16. His 14 assists were two shy of the league lead during that stretch.

December points: 13, tops in the league.

Record books: With a point tonight, Eichel can tie a pair of 17-game streaks from Hockey Hall of Famer Dave Andreychuk (1991-92 and 1992-93 seasons) for second in franchise history. The record of 18 was set by Gilbert Perreault early in the 1971-72 campaign.

The Captain vs. the archrival: Eichel has raked the Leafs in his career, going 12-8-20 in 15 games. The 12 goals are his most against any opponent and 1.33 points per game is second only to his 1.64 against Ottawa.

#Goalofsson: Rookie Victor Olofsson has certainly reaped the benefits of being on Eichel's left wing, leading all first-year players in goals (14) and points (30). Olofsson has points in 16 of his last 19 games (8-12-20) and has had two-point outings four times in the last seven games.

In the nets: The Sabres have an interesting choice here. Linus Ullmark (10-6-3, 2.84/.915) could make his fifth straight start and 12th in the last 15 games. Ullmark is tied for the NHL victory lead in December with 4. He's 4-1-1, 2.49/.924 thus far in the month.

Meanwhile, Carter Hutton (6-5-4, 3.05/.901) is in the midst of an 0-5-4 disaster -- but had one of his best games in recent weeks here on Nov. 30, stopping 41 of 43 shots even though he flubbed John Tavares' overtime goal in and out of his glove.

The Leafs are expected to go with starter Frederik Andersen (16-8-3, 2.49/.921). They have an NHL-low one point from backup goalies this season (0-6-1).

One look at the lineup: With Casey Mittelstadt gone to Rochester, the Sabres' forwards were arranged this way in practice Monday:

Olofsson-Eichel-Reinhart

Skinner-Rodrigues-Asplund  
Girgensons-Larsson-Okposo  
Vesey-Johansson-Sheary

## **Sabres fans lauded in Forbes' rankings of NHL's top fan bases**

The Buffalo News

December 17, 2019

Despite the Sabres' playoff drought, the team's fans largely remain devout, engaged and vocal.

Those are among the qualities that led Forbes to place Sabres fans at No. 5 in the rankings of the National Hockey League's fan bases.

According to Forbes, the rankings are based on quantitative fan consumption metrics: local television ratings, stadium attendance based on capacity reached, secondary ticket demand, merchandise sales and social media reach (Facebook and Twitter followers based on the team's metro area population). U.S. teams also had a "hometown crowd reach component" that is the percentage of the metro area population that attended, watched or listened to a game in the last year.

Among the key contributors to the Sabres' ranking is that the team lead the league in local television ratings for the third time in four seasons, according to Forbes. That includes a 75 percent increase last season.

The Pittsburgh Penguins were ranked first, followed by the Boston Bruins, Chicago Blackhawks, Vegas Golden Knights, the Sabres, Toronto Maple Leafs, St. Louis Blues, Winnipeg Jets, Nashville Predators and Detroit Red Wings.

## **Sabres finally made right choice with Casey Mittelstadt**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 16, 2019

This was a decision that probably took longer than it should have, but the Buffalo Sabres got it right with Casey Mittelstadt.

They gave the 21-year-old as much rope as they could, especially given his stature as a top-10 pick and the first No. 1 choice made by General Manager Jason Botterill. But 114 games into his NHL career – and with just one goal and two points in the last 22 games – Mittelstadt no longer belonged in the league.

For now, he should be in the American Hockey League. And once he has an offensive breakout there mixed in with the requisite defensive responsibility, Mittelstadt can think about returning to the Sabres.

Even as good as the pressbox popcorn and sweets might be in KeyBank Center, the Sabres don't want Mittelstadt up there at this stage of his career. That was the tipping point. Once limited ice time became maybe no ice time, it was time to re-evaluate.

"That's the single most important thing here at that age, is to get the reps and to get the minutes," coach Ralph Krueger said after practice Monday. "As soon as he became a candidate for being scratched, we needed to think about what was the best for him as an individual combined with that we need as a team long term. For sure, a player in that development phase needs to play."

The Mittelstadt issue has been pressed by the fact the Sabres have gotten healthier, particularly with the returns of Marcus Johansson and Kyle Okposo, and by the way, Rasmus Asplund has grabbed an NHL job in his first call-up from Rochester.

Asplund was an injury stopgap when he first got the call here last month. After 16 games in the NHL, he doesn't appear like he's going to see the AHL much going forward.

The Sabres are deeper this year and probably learning from mistakes as well. They went 65 games into last season before pulling the chute on Tage Thompson, who probably should have been celebrating Christmas in Rochester just like Mittelstadt will be. That didn't help the player or the team. This will.

Everyone has to slow down in this situation. Mittelstadt probably could have used another year in college but a coaching change at Minnesota combined with his top showing at the 2018 World Junior Championship made him think he was NHL-ready before his time. The Sabres pushed him too much as well, hoping he could be Ryan O'Reilly's replacement as the No. 2 center. It was bad thinking all around.

Mittelstadt gets reunited with Rochester coach Chris Taylor, who runs the team's summer development camps and was on the NHL bench for two months this season while assistant coach Don Granato battled a serious illness.

Taylor saw Mittelstadt's strong play during the team's California trip and many of his struggles as well. Botterill fully believes in Taylor and Krueger does too after Taylor's time here.

"After sitting out a few games, we wanted to make sure leading into the (holiday) break that he was playing games and continuing his development," Botterill said. "What we've tried to create in our organization is development at every level. Whether it's Buffalo, Rochester or Cincinnati, they're getting better. Sometimes there needs to be different interactions with parts of the organization and that's what we're doing with Casey right now."

Botterill said there's never a set timeline for a player to return under these circumstances. For now, he wants Mittelstadt to be "all in" with the Amerks. But the Sabres obviously need depth scoring. If Mittelstadt spends a couple of weeks lighting it up in the AHL, he could easily get a quick call back.

And if he's there for a long time, even helping the Amerks on a deep run in the Calder Cup playoffs, that would be fine, too.

"It's always an emotional conversation when you're talking to somebody over this," Botterill said. "But what I liked was his initial respect for the American Hockey League level and his excitement of going and playing."

"Casey is going to be fine," said captain Jack Eichel. "It's a good chance for him to build his confidence, build up his game again. I don't think anyone is worried about him."

Mittelstadt has roomed with Rasmus Dahlin for more than a year and Dahlin said he understood why the move was made even though it now changes his living conditions.

"I think it's going to be good to go down there, play a lot of minutes and get some confidence back," Dahlin said. "But for me, yeah, obviously it's sad and not fun at all. I'm going to miss him, but it's the NHL and we're both on the same page with it. It's going to be weird, but it's a business and a lot of guys go in and out."

Botterill was frank when talking about Mittelstadt on Monday. There's no embarrassment here. This is simply development not always going in a straight line. When Mittelstadt was summoned to the arena to meet with the coach and GM on Sunday's off day, he knew what was coming. But Botterill loved the tone that was set.

"What I really enjoyed about the conversation was just how it was immediately get over the frustration and disappointment," Botterill said. "And now it was, 'What do I have to do to get back on track, get back to the National Hockey League to help achieve things?' "

Sounds good for now. Mittelstadt has to translate that attitude to the ice.

## **Casey Mittelstadt embracing opportunity for bigger role in Rochester**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

December 16, 2019

ROCHESTER – Casey Mittelstadt began to receive a steady stream of empathetic text messages shortly after the news of his assignment to the Rochester Americans was announced Sunday evening.

Mittelstadt appreciated the thoughtful gestures, but he didn't agree with the sentiment. The 21-year-old center was admittedly somewhat surprised when he was informed he was being sent to the American Hockey League after playing 114 games for the Buffalo Sabres.

Mittelstadt didn't feel sorry for himself, though. Watching three of the Sabres' previous four games from the press box left him wanting to make an impact, and he felt getting more ice time was the only way to rediscover the scoring touch that made him the eighth overall draft pick in 2017.

Mittelstadt will have that opportunity in Rochester, where the Amerks are in first place and coach Chris Taylor has a track record of injecting confidence into young players who have lost their way in the NHL.

"I have high expectations for myself and I haven't exactly met those yet, but I've persevered my whole life," Mittelstadt said Monday following his first practice in Blue Cross Arena. "I've been through things somewhat similar to this and always came out on the better side. I'm not worried about myself. Just keep my confidence and work on my game and I should be fine."

As much as Mittelstadt didn't expect the call Sunday, he had a sense this could be coming. He was a healthy scratch in back-to-back games for the first time since joining the Sabres in March 2018 and didn't play well in 10:26 of ice time last Tuesday against the St. Louis Blues in KeyBank Center.

When he was scratched for the first time this season Dec. 7 in Vancouver, Mittelstadt reminded himself that he was in the NHL for a reason. He spoke of how watching from the press box could help his game, particularly without the puck, and emphasized the importance of not trying to do too much.

However, consistency eluded Mittelstadt. He had zero points with a minus-7 rating and only 12 shots on goal, five of which came Nov. 25 against Tampa Bay, during a 15-game span from Oct. 24 through Nov. 27.

"I might have been pressuring a little bit here and there, and I think that hurts you all over the ice," he said.

His scoring drought ended Nov. 29 with a deflection goal during a 6-4 win over the Toronto Maple Leafs. More defensive lapses, including a minus-2 rating during a 6-5 overtime loss to the Vancouver Canucks on Dec. 7, proved to be Mittelstadt's undoing.

He had four goals among nine points with a minus-5 rating in 31 games, and his 12:45 average ice time ranked ahead of only Kyle Okposo among Sabres to appear in at least 20 games this season. Two of Mittelstadt's goals occurred Oct. 17 at Los Angeles and two of his assists came in the season-opening win at Pittsburgh on Oct. 3.

Both were part of a 10-game span in which Mittelstadt had three goals among seven points and a plus-6 rating.

When Mittelstadt drifted into healthy-scratch territory, coach Ralph Krueger and General Manager Jason Botterill began to contemplate what was best for his development.

"We've seen his hockey sense and his skill level," Botterill told reporters in Buffalo. "We've seen glimpses of it. We just need to see it on a more consistent basis. He's a very motivated young player who has a lot of aspirations. As an organization we know he's going to be a big part of the future and hopefully part of our second half here, too. ..."

"We need to get away from a discussion of should he be in the lineup or how many minutes. We want him to be an impact player. We think developing a few elements of his game in Rochester right now is going to be beneficial for him and our organization."

Mittelstadt centered a line with Taylor Leier and Amerks leading scorer Andrew Oglevie during practice Monday. Additionally, Mittelstadt will play on the power play and penalty kill beginning Wednesday night in Binghamton, while also receiving more defensive-zone faceoffs.

One mistake won't result in diminished ice time, Taylor said. The plan is to put Mittelstadt in as many challenging situations as possible and see how he responds, much like the Amerks did with Tage Thompson last March.

Thompson, a 22-year-old winger, flourished in Rochester after struggling for a chunk of his 65 games with the Sabres last season. That injected confidence into Thompson, who was among the final cuts in training camp this fall and was the Amerks' leading scorer before suffering an upper-body injury with the Sabres in Chicago on Nov. 17.

Mittelstadt will also be playing in the same systems used by Krueger in Buffalo and has familiarity with Taylor, who served as an interim assistant coach for the Sabres' first 22 games this season.

"I think sometimes that happens," Taylor said when asked about Mittelstadt's play wavering. "He did start out pretty good and lost his confidence. Some ice time was taken away and it keeps going. He couldn't find his way back, I guess. I talked to Casey many times throughout that process, and he's been very positive and keeps working hard. I think he just needs to play some big minutes and play important roles with us. That will be really good for him."

There is also a willing mentor in Rochester. Forward Curtis Lazar, a 24-year-old former first-round draft pick, played 143 games with the Ottawa Senators before he was assigned to Binghamton at the start of the 2016-17 season.

Lazar returned to the NHL and has since bounced back and forth between the two leagues. He played six games with the Sabres this season and has 14 points in 17 games with the Amerks. Mittelstadt's assignment "brought back some memories" for Lazar.

"I think the biggest thing is you're so used to playing in the NHL and you feel like you're losing your step," Lazar said. "Everyone is aware of it, nobody more than yourself. You're trying everything to maintain that level when ultimately the best thing is to get back to enjoying yourself. A demotion doesn't always feel like the best thing, but in the long run I think it's really going to help him out."

"Once he gets that confidence going he's a very skilled player and he can impact the game on any level when he's going. ... I look at this as an opportunity to mentor him because I've gone down this path before. I'm all on board on helping him get back to Buffalo."

Mittelstadt can't pinpoint why his offense and defense slipped with the Sabres. He theorized the former could be the product of not touching the puck enough. Krueger experimented with putting Mittelstadt at wing but less responsibility on defense did not result in success on offense.

Mittelstadt had similar struggles last season, when he scored 12 goals among 25 points with a minus-19 rating in 77 games. An offseason of building muscle mass was supposed to better prepare him for the grind of another professional season.

Now, it's likely up to Mittelstadt whether that will occur in Rochester or Buffalo.

"When I was out of the lineup for a couple games up there, you're watching and all you want to do is play. I just want to come down and play, have some fun," Mittelstadt said. "I'm playing hockey, so it's not too bad. If you come into it with a bad attitude it's not going to work out. Come down here, get used to playing with the puck again, find my confidence."

## **Rasmus Dahlin, Mitch Marner will return for latest chapter in Sabres-Leafs rivalry**

By Mike Harrington  
The Buffalo News  
December 16, 2019

Chapter III of this year's Buffalo Sabres-Toronto Maple Leafs rivalry will have some added star power Tuesday night in Scotiabank Arena.

When the teams split a home-and-home series Nov. 29-30, Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin was out of the lineup with a concussion and Leafs scoring star Mitch Marner was sidelined by an ankle injury. They're both back.

"It's going to be good," Dahlin said Monday. "I think it's going to be fun. Tough game, great place, Marner is going to be back in their lineup. They have a great offense and I'm really excited to be back for it."

Marner has six goals and 25 points in 23 games this season. He has two goals and five assists in the five games since his return.

"Their offensive upside is as high as it gets in the league," said Sabres' coach Ralph Krueger. "If we can control that, stay patient, we have an opportunity against them. With Marner back, they're a better team and a different team. Their top two lines have some of the best depth in the National Hockey League offensively. They are continually a scoring threat. The game is never over, no matter the score. They like to play offense."

The Leafs are 7-4-0 under new coach Sheldon Keefe, who took over last month after Mike Babcock was fired. They went 3-1 on a four-game road trip that concluded with Saturday's 4-1 win in Edmonton and included victories in St. Louis and Vancouver sandwiched around a loss in Calgary.

Buffalo posted a 6-4 win here Nov. 29 and Toronto responded the next night with a 2-1 overtime victory on a John Tavares goal.

### **Botterill on Bogosian**

General Manager Jason Botterill didn't have much to say on defenseman Zach Bogosian, who reportedly requested a trade last week after being a healthy scratch for the first time in his NHL career.

"Look, I've been consistent with this. My conversations with players are going to stay between the players and myself," Botterill said. "All that I'll say is that we're ecstatic that Zach is back within our lineup here now. He worked extremely hard coming off the hip surgery. He's added another dynamic to our back end. When he's out there on our (penalty killing unit), his physical presence is another point of helping out our group."

Bogosian continues to practice regularly with the team. He has sat out the last two games.

### **No timeline on Thompson**

Botterill had no update on winger Tage Thompson, who was called up from Rochester on Nov. 17 and promptly injured a shoulder in the final three minutes of the game that night in Chicago. The Sabres initially listed a timetable of three to five weeks but have issued no update as the clock ticked past four weeks Sunday.

"Once we have something more set in stone and we know that's going to be a solid timeline, we'll certainly get back to you on that," he said.

## **#OneBuffalo feels: Sabres' Jack Eichel, Ralph Krueger thrilled by Bills' playoff clincher**

By Mike Harrington  
The Buffalo News  
December 16, 2019

Red-hot Buffalo Sabres center Jack Eichel was named the NHL's Third Star of the Week for the period ending Sunday, but he wasn't talking about himself much after practice Monday.

The #OneBuffalo feel was all around the Sabres' dressing room in KeyBank Center as Eichel was wearing a bright blue Buffalo Bills cap as he met with reporters. And while the Sabres have points in 10 of their last 12 games and Eichel has pushed into the Hart Trophy conversation, the captain was more interested in talking about the other team in town, now that it's heading to the NFL playoffs for the second time in three years.

"I'm really fired up for them, it's awesome to see," Eichel said. "I'm just really happy for their group, and I know how hard they work. It's so great for the city to have that. The Pegula family, they do everything for us, they do everything for the Bills. It's awesome to see them get rewarded for how great owners they are.

"We're still trying to find our identity. We've got a long way to go, a long season. For them obviously, they've been working for months now and they're starting to see some of their hard work pay off and starting to accomplish some of their goals they set out to achieve."

Eichel said he's impressed with how the Bills have landed on same page under coach Sean McDermott.

"It's big for us to try to build an identity as a team. You can see their identity," Eichel said. "I think when you look at their group, look at each guy on the roster, it really stands out how much the team means to that. They've obviously identified their strengths and they really play to them.

"Their defense is tremendous. They take care of the football. They do all the little things well and it adds up to wins. Ten wins in the NFL isn't easy. They've just had a tremendous season and I can't say enough good things about them, couldn't be happier for the city to have them in the playoffs."

Coach Ralph Krueger said he's been regularly texting with McDermott and reached out Monday to both McDermott and owners Terry and Kim Pegula.

"I watched that game and I usually go to bed way earlier than when that game ended," Krueger said. "We're always giving each other some kind of push. Both of us are out here trying to make the Buffalo sports community proud and they've really done that with what they've achieved and we're trying to continue to do that."

Krueger said he loved seeing the Bills used the word "connected" in some of their postgame interviews Sunday in Pittsburgh. It's a buzzword he's used with the Sabres and the phrase "Play Connected" has been on the dressing room wall since training camp.

"There's a lot of parallels right now between the Bills and Sabres," Krueger said. "Sean and I are passionate here to get the sports community back on the track it deserves to be on for the passion that's in the area. It's a lot of fun. Both of us are having a lot of fun in our work. ... I watched every second, every minute, every snap yesterday."

Eichel had five goals and an assist in three games last week and has pushed to second in the NHL in goals with 23 and a tie for fifth in points (48). The First Star was Vegas' Max Pacioretty and the second star was Ottawa's Anthony Duclair. All three players had five goals on the week.

## **The Sabres are enjoying the Bills' playoff run**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

December 16, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - The Sabres seemed pretty happy for the Bills as they clinched a playoff spot in Pittsburgh on Sunday. Here are some of the comments from the Sabres after Monday's practice:

Jason Botterill:

"I'd like to start off by congratulating Brandon Beane and the Buffalo Bills on a great season. It's always difficult to go into Pittsburgh and win, and I certainly wish him all the best in the playoffs."

Ralph Krueger:

"I want to say congratulations. I've already communicated with Sean, Kim and Terry and I watched that game and cut in on my sleep."

"I'm so pleased with my communication with Sean through the year. We've been exchanging messages more than anything, and we're always giving each other some kind of a push. Both of us are out here trying to make the Buffalo sports community proud, and they've really done that in what they've achieved and we're trying to continue to do that."

"There's a lot of parallels between the Bills and the Sabres, and Sean and I are passionate here to get the sports community back on the track it deserves to be on."

Jack Eichel:

"I was really fired up for them, it's awesome to see. I'm just really happy for their group. I know how hard that they work and it's so great for the city to have that and the Pegula family. They do everything for us and the Bills, and it's awesome to see them get rewarded for how great of owners they are. Plus, I'm excited to watch them in the playoffs and to follow them."

"I'm starting to get closer with some of the guys over there on that team, and seeing and talking to Josh [Allen] a little bit here and there and it's awesome to see him doing so well. He's such a competitive guy and he puts it on the line every week."

Kyle Okposo:

"I was really, really pumped for them to get into the playoffs. There's a huge buzz around the city right now, as evidence by the scene when they got home last night. I'm just really happy for those guys. I know that with coach McDermott and the culture he's created over there is exceptional, and it's been fun to see Josh Allen grow with the team, and we've become diehard Bills fans in our house. It's pretty awesome for them."

## **Sabres' Botterill is confident that Mittelstadt will get the confidence he needs in Rochester**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

December 16, 2019

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - Casey Mittelstadt hadn't been playing lately and, to be honest, that's not a good way to develop a 21-year-old player.

With that in mind, the Sabres sent Mittelstadt down to Rochester. The forward was with his new team for practice on Monday.

Sabres general manager Jason Botterill said it was a decision that needed to be made, "With the holiday break coming up here and with the new coaching staff coming in here, we wanted to continue to work with Casey and his development and the one thing we've loved interacting with Casey is he's been all in.

"His attitude during practice and after practice with the coaching staff has been really good, and after sitting out a few games, I wanted to make sure that leading into the break that he was playing games and continuing his development."

Amerks coach Chris Taylor has been instrumental in the development of Victor Olofsson, Linus Ullmark, Tage Thompson, Rasmus Asplund and others. Botterill said it will only help Mittelstadt putting him in Taylor's hands, "To have Chris come up here and work beside Ralph, understand exactly what Ralph's looking for in players, and also too Chris has now seen some of Casey's best games and he's also seen when Casey struggled. Having that knowledge is just going to help him out in getting Casey back up to the National Hockey League."

Mittelstadt has many things to learn as he starts his journey in Rochester. Botterill said, "We see his hockey sense. We see his skill level and we've seen glimpses of it. We just need to on a more consistent basis.

"He's a very motivated young player and as an organization. We know he's going to be a big part of our future, and hopefully a part of our second half here too.

Botterill and Ralph Krueger called Mittelstadt in on Sunday morning to talk about this. Botterill said, "It's always an emotional conversation, but what I liked was his initial respect for the American Hockey League level and going and playing." Botterill added, "What I really enjoyed about the conversation is he immediately got over the frustration and disappointment and it was, 'What do I have to do to get back on track to the National Hockey League to help achieve things.'"

For the second straight week, and third time this season, Jack Eichel is the NHL's third star of the week. Eichel has complete faith in Mittelstadt that he's going to handle his situation in the right way, "Casey's going to be fine. It's a good chance for him to go down there and build some confidence. It's never easy being out of the lineup and not playing and with somebody like him, he comes in with a lot of expectations and it's a good chance for him to start building his game again and I don't think anybody's worried about him."

Krueger thinks that Mittelstadt needs to play and for right now, that wasn't happening in Buffalo. He said, "The most important thing is development and us always communicating with the players in a real clear way about what our expectations are, what they need to work on and Casey has the opportunity now in Rochester with a little more time and space to work on these things and to get more reps and more minutes and to continue to work on his habits."

The team practiced for about 40 minutes on Monday before leaving for Toronto to play the Leafs on Tuesday.

## **How Jack Eichel compares to other recent Hart Trophy winners at this point of the NHL season**

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

December 16, 2019

If there's a current Sabres player who can testify what it's like to play alongside a teammate who's having an elite-level season, it's Marcus Johansson.

The first seven seasons of Johansson's career were spent with the Washington Capitals and Alexander Ovechkin. In that time, Ovechkin won the Hart Trophy in 2012-2013 and was a finalist for it in 2014-2015. Playing with a guy who's won the award three times means getting an up close viewing of greatness.

Now that Johansson gets a daily look at Jack Eichel, who is off to the kind of start that has him in the early discussion for the league MVP, he can offer a good idea of what makes the 23-year-old center so special.

"To me they're very different players," Johansson said. "What they can both do is they can win games and that's a special talent or skill set, whichever you want to call it. That's impressive. But they're very different with how they play. I think Jack might be one of the guys in the league that has the puck most on his stick. That he can be playing with the puck that much, he can just dominate a game completely."

Through 34 games, Eichel's put up 48 points with 23 goals. He's trending towards a 100-plus point season and more than 50 goals if the pace continues. That he might be able to do that anyway puts him in a special discussion just in Sabres history. But how Eichel stacks up compared to past Hart Trophy winners at this point of the season is worth examining to get a sense of where he could be headed.

We'll use the lockout-shortened 2012-2013 season as a line of demarcation since that's how we can separate eras. Here's how Eichel stacks up against the MVP winner since 2012-2013 through 34 games. Mind you, in 2014-2015, Montreal goaltender Carey Price won the Hart.

Based on points alone, Eichel's goal numbers being ahead of everyone on this list and that he's not doing it all on the power play is an excellent thing. There is a word of warning here though. Eichel has taken 123 shots on goal to this point and is scoring at a blistering 18.7 percent. That means he's likely to cool off, because his shooting percentage runs between nine and 10 percent historically. Anomaly seasons do occur now and then, but like we learned last season when everything Jeff Skinner shot seemed to go in, things can go quiet for a while.

As far as points go, Eichel starting off the same way Kane did in 15-16 and Kucherov did last season shows that there are a few ways this can go. Kucherov blasted off around this time last season with the rest of the Lightning on their way to the Presidents' Trophy. In Kane's case, he had a great season for a team that was part of a wicked slog into the playoffs with other Central Division teams that had stellar seasons.

Being great on a team that makes the postseason despite being up against other very difficult teams is a great way to make an MVP case that much stronger. The Atlantic Division this season is shaping up to be that sort of race, with Boston far ahead and the likes of Montreal, Buffalo, Toronto, Florida, and Tampa Bay all there to duke it out.

Based on what Johansson said, Eichel may be able to help separate from others in this year's field because he's lifting up his teammates and carrying his team, as opposed to others in the field working off of other elite players. McDavid has Leon Draisaitl in Edmonton; David Pastrnak has Brad Marchand in Boston; Jonathan Huberdeau and Aleksander Barkov are inseparable in Florida.

Eichel may have to keep pace with Colorado's Nathan MacKinnon, whose 20 goals and 50 points through 32 games is astounding. You can argue that MacKinnon has Mikko Rantanen to work off of there, although Rantanen has dealt with injuries early on and is getting into form now.

Clearly what we're seeing out of Eichel right now is the kind of play reminiscent of the days of Pat LaFontaine and Alexander Mogilny working off of each other to put up well over 100 points each in 1992-1993. If Eichel scores 53

goals and 148 points the way LaFontaine did, you can start building the statue now. As far as having the discussion about Jack Eichel: MVP Candidate, it's not at all unreasonable to do.

## **Sabres believe Casey Mittelstadt has right attitude to thrive with Amerks**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 16, 2019

TORONTO – On Sunday, a day off for the Buffalo Sabres, general manager Jason Botterill and coach Ralph Krueger summoned center Casey Mittelstadt to KeyBank Center to inform him he was being demoted to the Rochester Americans.

After Mittelstadt, 21, got over the initial shock and disappointment of getting sent to the minors – “It’s always an emotional conversation,” Botterill said Monday – he asked what he must do to return to the NHL.

“He is a mature guy, he is a realist,” Sabres winger Kyle Okposo said of Mittelstadt. “I think he’s able to look at the situation objectively and probably think that it might be best for his development to go down there. So I think that that definitely helps, his ability to step back and look at things in a bigger picture.”

Botterill said: “What I liked was his initial respect for the American Hockey League level and the excitement of going and playing.”

Having jumped from the University of Minnesota to the Sabres in March 2018 following his freshman season, Mittelstadt started a new adventure Monday. The former eighth overall pick has never played in the AHL.

“Once I was out for a couple games in a row I thought it could happen,” Mittelstadt told reporters Monday in Rochester. “I was obviously still surprised by the move.”

Mittelstadt said a lot of people have texted him and said they’re sorry he got sent down.

“I’m not upset about it,” he said of coming to Rochester. “I’m ready to be here.”

While Mittelstadt possesses loads of skill, he has endured a rough campaign, struggling to produce offense while looking raw defensively.

Mittelstadt has mustered just one goal and two points in his last 21 contests and endured a 16-game goal drought before scoring Nov. 29. Overall, he has compiled only four goals, nine points and a minus-5 rating in 31 games this season.

After sitting out three of the last four games as a healthy scratch, the Sabres decided Mittelstadt, who has made 114 NHL appearances, must play games.

“That’s the single most important thing here at that age is to get the reps and to get the minutes,” Krueger said. “As soon as he became a candidate for getting scratched, we needed to think about what was the best for him as an individual combined with that, which we need as a team long-term.”

Botterill said Mittelstadt has been “all-in.”

“His attitude in practice, after practice, with our coaching staff has certainly been good,” he said. “But after sitting out a few games, I wanted to make sure leading into the break that he was playing games and continuing his development from that standpoint.”

He added: “The fact that he can get his mind wrapped around what do I have to do to improve my individual game shows a lot of maturity on his part.”

Botterill wouldn’t put a timetable on how long Mittelstadt could stay in the AHL. He will almost certainly stay at least through the weekend.

As the Sabres prepare for tonight’s game against the Maple Leafs, Mittelstadt will be riding a bus to Binghamton. The Amerks play a road game against the Devils on Wednesday before hosting Binghamton on Friday and the Utica Comets on Saturday.

Mittelstadt centered Taylor Leier and Andrew Oglevie during Monday's practice.

The Amerks offer Mittelstadt a unique opportunity. Considering he has significant NHL experience, he could be a dominant AHL player. His stint could certainly help him generate confidence.

"Casey has the opportunity now in Rochester with a little more time and space to work on these things (he must improve) and to get more reps, more minutes to continue to work on his habits," Krueger said. "He's a very young player, there's a lot we ask for for somebody who's eventually going to be an important piece of our team as a centerman in the National Hockey League. We just all found for his development this is the right place to be."

Joining the Amerks reunites Mittelstadt with coach Chris Taylor, who subbed as an assistant in Buffalo earlier this season while Don Granato recovered from pneumonia.

Taylor, who often worked one-on-one with the youngster, saw some of Mittelstadt's best outings, including an early three-game stretch in which he scored three goals and five points.

"Just having (Taylor's) knowledge is certainly going to help him out in getting Casey back up to the National Hockey League," Botterill said.

Clearly, the Sabres did not want to make the same mistake two consecutive years. Last season, they kept winger Tage Thompson in Buffalo for 60 games as he struggled, occasionally scratching him. Mostly, however, the prospect skated short minutes.

When the Sabres finally sent him to Rochester in late March, Thompson started piling up points. After starting this season with the Amerks, Thompson played so well he earned a promotion last month.

## **Sabres thrilled for Bills' success: 'They've just had a tremendous season'**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
December 16, 2019

BUFFALO – Ralph Krueger normally goes to bed long before "Sunday Night Football" ends. Still, the Sabres coach stayed up late to watch the Bills' thrilling 17-10 victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers, which clinched just their second playoff berth in 20 seasons.

"I cut into my sleep," Krueger joked today inside KeyBank Center.

Of course, Krueger, who said he has become as big a Bills fan as anybody, was happy he could enjoy such a significant game. He said he had already send his congratulations to Bills coach Sean McDermott and owners Terry and Kim Pegula.

Krueger isn't along in his fandom.

Sabres captain Jack Eichel, who grew up a New England Patriots fan, proudly sported a Bills hat in the dressing room following today's practice. So did defenseman Jake McCabe. Winger Kyle Okposo, who grew up in St. Paul and recently started living year-round in Clarence, said he was "really, really pumped" the Bills made the postseason.

"We've become die-hard Bills fans in our house," he said.

Naturally, the Sabres understand what the Bills' success means to the community.

"It's so great for the city to have that," Eichel said. "The Pegula family, they do everything for us, they do everything for the Bills. It's awesome to see them get rewarded for how great owners they are. Just really good for our city."

Krueger said he and McDermott often exchange texts and are "always giving each other some kind of a push."

"Both of us are out here trying to make the Buffalo sports community proud," he said. "They've really, really done that in what they've achieved."

The Sabres, who currently stand second in the Atlantic Division, see parallels between what the Bills have accomplished and what they want to do.

"I heard them in some interviews yesterday using the word 'connected,' which is all what we're about," said Krueger, who installed a sign above the dressing room door before the season that says "play connected."

Eichel said he can see the Bills' identity.

"When you look at their group and you look at each guy through the roster, it really stands out how much the team means to them," he said. "They've obviously identified their strengths and they really play to them. I mean, their defense is tremendous, they take care of the football, they run, they do all the little things well. It adds up to wins.

"Ten wins in the NFL isn't easy. They've just had a tremendous season. You can't say enough good things about them."

Eichel said "football has a lot of similarities to hockey."

"You do all the little things well, all the little details add up over a course of a game," he said. "You see how they have success doing all the little details, all the fundamentals. I think when we do that sort of thing, we have a lot of success as well."

Before Sabres general manager Jason Botterill spoke to the media Monday, he congratulated GM Brandon Beane and the Bills on their season.

–

Eichel, who's enjoying a 16-game point streak entering Tuesday's game against the Maple Leafs, has been named the NHL's third star for the week ending Dec. 15.

The center compiled five goals and six points in three games as the Sabres went 2-0-1 and moved into second place in the Atlantic Division.

Vegas Golden Knights winger Max Pacioretty (five goals and eight points in four games) earned first star honors. Ottawa Senators winger Anthony Duclair (five goals and six points in three games) was named the second star.

Eichel was also named third star last week.

–

Botterill on Sabres defenseman Zach Bogosian, who reportedly requested a trade last week after being a healthy scratch: "I've been consistent with this: My conversations with the players is going to stay between the players and myself.

"All that I'll say is we're ecstatic that Zach is back within our lineup now. He worked extremely hard coming off the (hip) surgery. He's added another dynamic to our back end there. You look at when he's out there on our PK and just his physical presence, it's another point of helping out our group here."

Bogosian, 29, has been scratched the last two games.

## **Sabres fans rank 5th best in NHL**

WIVB

December 17, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) — A new poll by Forbes says the Sabres have one of the best fan bases in the NHL.

Buffalo fans ranked fifth overall based on factors like local television ratings, ticket sales and merchandise sales.

The team is returning to the ice on Tuesday night after their Saturday loss to the Islanders.

The puck drops at 7 p.m.

## **Sabres get laugh from Tre White Goalie Academy on Sunday Night Football**

By Heather Engel

NHL.com

December 16, 2019

BUFFALO -- Carter Hutton was putting his two young kids to bed Sunday night and came back to discover several text messages awaiting him.

He learned that in the few minutes he had stepped away, Buffalo Bills cornerback Tre'Davious White introduced himself as being from the Tre White Goalie Academy during the introductions on NBC's Sunday Night Football broadcast.

"Me and Linus [Ullmark] had a good laugh this morning talking about it," Hutton said.

Last season, the two Sabres goalies, forward Kyle Okposo and defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen took part in a commercial promoting the fictional organization, produced by the Buffalo Bills in an effort to get White elected to the Pro Bowl. The Sabres and Bills are owned by Terry and Kim Pegula.

"I lied on my application just so I could get into the Advanced Celebration Program," Ristolainen says in the video.

Former Sabres goalie and current analyst Martin Biron serves as the spokesperson while noting he's "also a student."

In a video tweeted by the Bills in November 2018, which preceded the ad campaign, White attended a Sabres game and was asked who his favorite player is. "Forty. Goalie. Sutton. We just got him, right? Hutton, yeah."

"I always thought we were going to be a blockbuster hit but it took some time," Hutton said of the gag finding new life a year later. "It was great. Just the whole initial video. I think people still call me Sutton, so it's kind of funny."

The pair have yet to meet but the appreciation is mutual.

"It's great. It's honestly one of the beautiful things about playing in Buffalo," Hutton said. "We've got sports fans through and through, whether it's the Bills or Sabres. Tre White's a character and he's a heck of a player. I try to stay a little more quiet; I'm more a character behind the scenes, I don't try to do it in the light but those guys are something else and they're playing well, so it's awesome."

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger told reporters on Monday that he sacrificed some sleep to watch the end of the late game, but it was a necessary move for one of the newest members of the Bills Mafia, who has developed a special friendship with Bills coach Sean McDermott.

"Sean and I are passionate here, both of us, to get the sports community back on the track it deserves to be on in the area," Krueger said. "It's a lot of fun. Both of us are having a lot of fun in our work and I've become the biggest Bills fans out there -- Well, as big as anybody else. I'm sure there's bigger Bills fans out there, but I watched every second of every minute of every snap yesterday."

## **Red-hot Sabres star Jack Eichel providing hope for playoff-starved team**

By Ryan Dixon

Sportsnet

December 16, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres have been doing some great things as part of their 50th season celebrations, including dressing up KeyBank Center to look like their former rockin' home, 'The Aud.'

Of course, the throwback move they'd really like to bust out is making the playoffs. The Sabres of yesteryear used to do that regularly, but Western New York hasn't seen post-season hockey since 2011.

That could change this year, almost entirely because Jack Eichel is making more of an impact on games than any player wearing blue and yellow has since — with apologies to 2010-11 Ryan Miller — the turn of the century, when Dominik Hasek's fish-on-land puck-stopping approach nearly caught Buffalo a Cup.

Though the Sabres lost their only game of the weekend — a 3-2 overtime decision on the road against the tough New York Islanders — Eichel picked up a point for the 16th straight contest, giving him the longest such streak in the NHL this year. The 23-year-old — who's tied for fifth in league scoring with 48 points — actually potted a couple of points, the second of which was a power-play goal that tied the game with 1:46 remaining in regulation time.

By snagging a single point versus an Islanders club that has won six straight home tilts, the Sabres remained in second place in an Atlantic Division that almost feels like it's in some kind of holding pattern until the real Tampa Bay Lightning and Toronto Maple Leafs show up.

(We're still sure that's happening, right?)

At this time a year ago, the Sabres held third place in the division with a 19-9-5 record built mostly on the back of a 10-game winning streak that was peppered with extra-time victories. The club came completely unglued in the second half of the season and missed the playoffs by a margin so wide they basically had to axe coach Phil Housley.

This year's Ralph Krueger-led squad also got off to a great start, but was really starting to slide in November, when Eichel decided he'd seen enough. Game 1 of this points streak was a 4-2 win over Ottawa on Nov. 16 in which Eichel bagged all four goals to stop a six-game losing skid for Buffalo. Though they haven't been setting the world on fire during Eichel's month-long run, the Sabres are 7-5-4 and they've picked up at least a point in nine of their past 10.

And while Eichel doesn't have near the support network other top-flight stars get — McDavid has Draisaitl, Marchand has Pastrnak and Bergeron, MacKinnon plays on an offensively loaded Avs squad — some of the Sabres are doing what they can. Rookie Victor Olofsson, riding shotgun with Eichel, has seven goals in his past 16 outings, Linus Ullmark has been steady in goal and Rasmus Dahlin — who missed more than two weeks with a concussion — has a pair of assists in two games since his return on Dec. 12.

This is undeniably the Eichel show, though. And in a season where the Sabres are honouring their past, nobody is providing more hope for a happy immediate future.

## **PHT Face-Off: Eichel can't be stopped; Jarry can play**

By Joey Alfieri

NBC Sports

December 16, 2019

The calendar year is coming to a close in the NHL and there are certain trends that are continuing to develop. The PHT Face-Off breaks down those trends every Monday. We'll discuss Jack Eichel's run, Auston Matthews' season, Anthony Duclair's goal-scoring prowess and much more.

- Who's gonna stop Jack Eichel?

Eichel has been on fire for over a month now. He's found a way to be a difference-maker for the Sabres on a nightly basis and he's currently riding a 16-game point streak. The race for the top three spots in the Atlantic Division is wide open. The Sabres are right in the mix. As of right now, they're sitting in second place.

Whether or not they can keep this up remains to be seen, but it sure looks like their captain is going to do everything he can to drag them into the postseason.

Eichel is currently second in the league in goals, with 20. He's also tied for fifth in league scoring with 48 points in 34 games. The 23-year-old needs to continue producing at a similar clip if they're going to make it back to playoffs.

He needs to extend his point streak by two more games to tie the franchise record, which is held by Gilbert Perreault.

You have to think that if the Sabres make the playoffs, Eichel will at least be a finalist for the Hart Trophy.

- Has Auston Matthews been good enough?

Heading into this week's action, Auston Matthews is rolling at a point-per-game pace. He's picked up 34 points in 34 games, but the Toronto Star's Bruce Arthur feels like the Leafs star has more to give.

Matthews has been held off the scoresheet in four of his last six games and he has just four points in his last nine games. Arthur points out that the Leafs star's XGF/60 is down from 1.06 last year to 0.76 this year. So he's not exactly shooting from areas that are as dangerous, but all of his other individual numbers are up.

His CF% has never been higher (55.77 percent) and neither has his FF% (54.46 percent). When he's on the ice, the Leafs control 57.67 percent of the high-danger chances, which seems absolutely ridiculous and, oh yeah, he's been a point-per-game player.

There's no doubt that Matthews has the potential to be more than a point-per-game player, but he's also on pace to score over 40 goals this season.

Yes, he's going through the rough patch in terms of offensive production, but he'll get in back on the rails soon enough.

- Anthony Duclair is a top-10 goal scorer:

Raise your hand if you expected Duclair to be one of the 10 best goal scorers at this point of the raise. If your hand is up, you're probably related to him or you're lying.

Through the first third of the season, the Senators forward has found the back of the net 18 times. He's just two goals away from tying his career-high of 20, which he set back in 2015-16. If you add it all up, he's on pace to score 45 goals.

Sure, the Sens are a rebuilding team that never really had serious playoff aspirations coming into this season, but you can't deny that those are impressive numbers that Duclair has put up. Even if he doesn't score another goal between now and the end of the season, the fact that he's scored 18 times is good value for Ottawa.

The 24-year-old has now played for five different teams. He's making the most of what could've been his final opportunity in the NHL.

It'll be interesting to see what the Sens will do with him as the season progresses. Do they sign him to an extension? Do they capitalize on his production and trade him away for some young assets?

- Tristan Jarry dominating between the pipes:

The Penguins have dealt with so many injuries this year and their starting goalie Matt Murray hasn't been really good. But they've found a way to stay in the playoff picture (they're currently in the first Wild Card spot).

How have they done it? Well, Evgeni Malkin, Jake Guentzel and Bryan Rust have taken their game to another level in Crosby's absence. The other guy that has stepped up in a big way is Jarry. He's won eight of his last 10 outings and he's also posted three shutouts in his last five outings.

Even though Jarry was drafted in the second round of the 2013 NHL Draft, the 24-year-old had plenty of question marks surrounding his ability.

Murray will likely take over between the pipes again at some point. But for now it appears as though the Pens have an interesting situation between the pipes.

They might be able to trade a goalie away to get help at another position.

- Geoff Ward has been a perfect fit in Calgary:

Since Ward took over for Bill Peters, his team has gone 7-1-0. That's quite the turnaround considering the Flames didn't get off to a great start under Peters.

This incredible run now has the Flames back in the Western Conference playoff picture, as they're in the second Wild Card spot. Calgary was clearly better than their early-season record would indicate. Now, they've found a guy that's pushing all the right buttons.

Ward made the bold decision to split up Sean Monahan, Johnny Gaudreau and Elias Lindholm, which has resulted in more balanced offense for this group.

What's coming up this week?

- Thursday's 10-game schedule will mark the 102nd anniversary of the NHL's first game. On Dec. 17, 1917, the Montreal Canadiens beat the Ottawa Senators, 7-4, while the Montreal Wanderers beat the Toronto Arenas, 10-9.
- Joe Pavelski is scheduled to play his 1,000th NHL on Friday night, when the Dallas Stars take on the Panthers in Florida.

## **Money Men: An early-season look at the seven best bending RFA goalies**

By Steven Ellis

The Hockey News

December 16, 2019

The Pittsburgh Penguins likely didn't envision themselves having a crease conundrum this season, but as we inch closer to the holiday break, second stringer Tristan Jarry is pushing Matt Murray for the starting role and, in turn, throwing a wrench into the two-time Stanley Cup-winning goaltender's next contract negotiations.

Murray's feeble hold on the No. 1 gig comes as the result of his own inconsistent play and Jarry's standout performances when he's gotten the nod. Waking up Sunday morning, Murray has a goals-saved above average at 5-on-5 of minus-8.90, which ranks 50th out of the 53 goaltenders who have appeared in at least 10 games, and a .899 save percentage which ranks better than all but four of those 53 keepers. Statistically, he's been one of the worst goaltenders in the NHL this season, and Jarry's .951 SP and 9.77 GSAA hasn't done Murray's performance any favors, especially not with the Penguins' supposed backup finding himself in the same company as early Vezina Trophy favorites Connor Hellebuyck and Darcy Kuemper. Add to it that Jarry, who boasts a 9-5-0 record, was recently named one of the NHL's three stars of the week after establishing a franchise shutout record of 177:15 and it's safe to say he's set to have himself the best year of his career.

Jarry's play poses some problems for Murray, too, particularly as far as his next contract is concerned. Signed to a three-year deal with a \$3.75-million cap hit – a pact that signified Pittsburgh's desire to see if Murray could handle a heavy workload on a consistent basis – he's had an up-and-down few seasons. So, Jarry coming in and stealing the thunder in an RFA season for both complicates the situation moving forward. Will Jarry's play for a battered Penguins squad take a bite out of Murray's next deal? Jarry doesn't have a resume that competes with Murray's, but is this recent play something to look deeper into if you're the Penguins? Is Murray just having a dry spell and falling at an inopportune time, or is there something more to be concerned about?

Nonetheless, the Penguins' goaltending situation will be interesting as the seasons rolls on, and they're not the only team that will need to make a decision about their RFA netminders. Here's a look at five other pending RFA goalies to keep an eye on this season:

### **Linus Ullmark, Buffalo Sabres – \$925,000**

Carter Hutton started the year red hot, but Ullmark has been the man in Buffalo in recent weeks. Ullmark has a 10-6-3 record, but his .929 SP at 5-on-5 ranks 14th among goalies with 10 appearances and his 4.77 GSAA ranks 11th among the same cohort. At 26, he's playing some of the best hockey of his career on a pact worth \$925,000. That's tremendous value for a playoff contender. His next contract will see him earn a nice pay raise as he's likely to fill the starting role until Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen is ready for NHL duty. A long-term deal for Ullmark could even be in the cards if it means having a solid 1-2 duo when Luukkonen makes the jump. For now, Ullmark is keeping things steady in the Sabres' crease.

### **Alexandar Georgiev, New York Rangers – \$792,500**

The heir to 'King' Henrik Lundqvist's throne appears to be Igor Shesterkin, but Georgiev is doing everything in his power to enter the conversation. The 23-year-old from Bulgaria entered this weekend with five wins in his past six games (including shutouts against New Jersey and Vegas) and a 9-5-1 record. At 5-on-5, Georgiev's 2.17 GSAA is only narrowly behind Lundqvist's 2.82 mark. Could Georgiev be starting material? That's to be seen, but he won't cost too much on his next deal and he can create a good, young tandem with Shesterkin in the future.

### **Joonas Korpisalo, Columbus Blue Jackets – \$1.15 million**

This season was all about transitioning for Columbus after the departure of two-time Vezina Trophy winner Sergei Bobrovsky. Korpisalo's stats aren't anything special: he has a 12-10-3 record, but his .927 SP at 5-on-5 ranks 16th among goalies with at least 10 games played this season. He also boasts a 5.47 GSAA, which is a mark bested by only 11 netminders. He projects as a solid backup goaltender, and if the Blue Jackets can sign him for less than \$3 million, he's a good value option while the team seeks out a long-term starter.

### **Mackenzie Blackwood, New Jersey Devils – \$697,500**

This season has been rough for the Devils and goaltending hasn't done much to bail the team out. Blackwood has done his best in the No. 1 job, however, especially now with the pressure on after Cory Schneider was demoted to the AHL. Blackwood's .921 SP and 1.11 GSAA puts him 28th in each category among the 53 goaltenders with

at least 10 appearances. He's still a rookie, too, and he has proven he can have stretches of brilliance. How much will that help him on his next deal? Maybe not all that much. It'll be interesting to see if the Devils reward him for his potential. The club hasn't given much with which to work, so we'll see.

Malcolm Subban, Vegas Golden Knights – \$850,000

Sitting behind one of the winningest active goaltenders, Marc-Andre Fleury, has resulted in Subban seeing little playing time early on, and his 5-5-0 record isn't exactly dazzling. Despite that, Subban's .916 SP and minus-0.88 GSAA at fives put him on par with Fleury, who boasts a similar .916 SP but a slightly worse minus-1.36 GSAA. If the Golden Knights don't explore other options, it seems likely Subban will be brought back for less than \$1 million and continue doing what he does best: spell Fleury when the veteran is in need of a rest.

## **Mittelstadt embracing opportunity for playing time in Rochester**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

December 16, 2019

Sabres general manager Jason Botterill and coach Ralph Krueger brought Casey Mittelstadt into KeyBank Center on Sunday to inform him he was being assigned to Rochester and talk him through the steps ahead.

Immediately, Botterill said, Mittelstadt turned his attention toward making the necessary improvements to return to the NHL.

"It's always an emotional conversation when you're talking to somebody about this, but what I liked was his initial respect for the American Hockey League level and the excitement of going and playing," Botterill said Monday.

Botterill said the decision to assign Mittelstadt to Rochester was made to ensure the 21-year-old center would get the necessary playing time to continue his development. Mittelstadt had been scratched for three of the team's past four games after appearing in each of the first 30 games of the season.

He will now have the chance to be an impact player on a nightly basis for a team in the thick of its own playoff race. The Amerks are 13-1-1 in their past 15 games and have ascended to first place in the North Division.

"We see his hockey sense. We see his skill level and we've seen glimpses of it. We just have to see it on a more consistent basis," Botterill said. "He's a very motivated young player who has a lot of aspirations.

"... We need to get away from the discussion of whether he should be in the lineup or how many minutes. We want him to be an impact player, and that's where we think developing a few elements of his game in Rochester right now is going to be beneficial for him and our organization."

Krueger echoed Botterill's assessment.

"Casey has the opportunity now in Rochester with a little more time and space to work on these things and to get more reps, more minutes to continue to work on his habits," he said.

"He's a very young player, there's a lot we ask for somebody who's eventually going to be an important piece of our team as a centerman in the National Hockey League. We just all found for his development this is the right place to be."

Mittelstadt will have the benefit of working with a familiar face in Amerks coach Chris Taylor, who spent the first month and a half of the season filling in as an assistant in Buffalo while Don Granato recovered from an illness.

The Sabres have been happy with how players have developed under Taylor's tutelage, including a pair of notable examples in forwards Victor Olofsson and Rasmus Asplund. After coming to North America and spending last season in Rochester, both have become mainstays in the Sabres lineup. Olofsson leads the rookie scoring race.

"Chris has now seen some of Casey's best games," Botterill said. "You look at the West Coast trip earlier on in the year, and he's also seen when Casey's struggled. I think just having that knowledge is certainly going to help him out in getting Casey back up to the National Hockey League."

Mittelstadt, meanwhile, arrived for his first day in Rochester with a positive attitude.

"I think a lot of people are texting me and stuff saying sorry and things like that," he told reporters following practice with the Amerks. "I'm not upset about it. I'm ready to be here and I'm happy to be able to just come down and play."

Sabres congratulate the Bills

Count Jack Eichel among those who were thrilled to see the Buffalo Bills clinch a playoff berth with their 17-10 victory over the Pittsburgh Steelers on Sunday night.

Eichel, wearing a Bills cap at his stall in the Sabres dressing room, said he was happy for the city, for Bills and Sabres owners Terry and Kim Pegula, and for some of the Bills players he's gotten to know over time, a group that includes quarterback Josh Allen.

He then began to draw parallels between what the Bills have accomplished and what the Sabres are trying to build under Krueger.

"We have a lot we still have to accomplish," he said. "I think it's big for us to try and build an identity as a team. You can see their identity. I think when you look at their group and you look at each guy through the roster, it really stands out how much the team means to them. They've obviously identified their strengths and they really play to them. I mean, their defense is tremendous, they take care of the football, they run, they do all of the little things well. It adds up to wins. I mean, 10 wins in the NFL isn't easy and they've just had a tremendous season. You can't say enough good things about them. I couldn't be happier for the city to have them in the playoffs.

"We're trying to build our identity as much as possible. I think we've identified what our strengths and weaknesses are and for us to be successful in this league, what we need to do on a night in and night out basis. It's really important. But, football, there's a lot of similarities to hockey. You do the little things well and all the little details add up over the course of a game. You see how they have success doing all the little details, all the fundamentals, and I think when we do that sort of thing we have a lot of success as well."

Off to Toronto

The Sabres open a two-game road trip in Toronto on Tuesday night. It will be the third meeting of the season for the two rivals, who split a home-and-home set in November.

The game will be televised on NBCSN, or you can listen to Dan Dunleavy and Rob Ray on WGR 550. Puck drop is scheduled for 7 p.m.

## **Eichel named NHL's 3rd Star of Week for 2nd week in a row**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

December 16, 2019

Jack Eichel has been named the NHL's Third Star of the Week for the second straight week, the league announced Monday.

Eichel put together three multi-point outings against St. Louis, Nashville, and the New York Islanders, with five goals and an assist during the week ending Dec. 15. The Sabres went 2-0-1 to gain five of a possible six points.

The Sabres captain is currently on a 16-game point streak, the longest by any player in the NHL this season and tied as the fourth longest in franchise history. Only Gilbert Perreault (18 games in 1971) and Dave Andreychuk (17 games, twice) have put together longest streaks as Sabres.

Eichel's 23 goals this season rank second in the NHL to Boston's David Pastrnak. He leads in the league with 17 even-strength goals and is tied for fifth with 58 points. He's on pace for 55 goals and 115 points, which would be the most productive season by a Sabres player since Pat LaFontaine and Alexander Mogilny's memorable 1992-93 campaign.

Asked about his recent performance after practice on Monday, Eichel gave credit to linemates Victor Olofsson and Sam Reinhart.

"I think Victor and Sam have been tremendous," he said. "I think obviously we know how good of a player Reino is and he's proven that over the last few years, but I think Vic's taken his game to another level over the last however many games.

"You can see him in the O-zone protecting pucks, putting people on his back, you can tell he's really confident right now. I mean, you see him shoot the puck, it's something else. That shot the other night to start the second period, there's not a lot of guys in the world who can shoot the puck like that. It's great to see. I think we're starting to build more chemistry. I think we're just trying to work hard."

Vegas Golden Knights forward Max Pacioretty was named the First Star of the Week and Ottawa Senators forward Anthony Duclair earned Second Star honors.