



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

December 27, 2019

Top scorers Eichel and Pastrnak meet in Buffalo-Boston matchup

By Associated Press

December 26, 2019

Boston Bruins (22-7-9, first in the Atlantic Division) vs. Buffalo Sabres (17-14-7, fifth in the Atlantic Division)

Buffalo, New York; Friday, 7 p.m. EST

BOTTOM LINE: Two of the league's top scorers, Jack Eichel and David Pastrnak, meet when Buffalo and Boston square off. Eichel currently ranks sixth in the NHL with 51 points and Pastrnak ranks fourth in the league with 54 points.

The Sabres are 6-6-1 against the rest of their division. Buffalo has given up 28 power-play goals, killing 74.8% of opponent chances.

The Bruins are 8-4-3 against Atlantic Division opponents. Boston is fifth in the league averaging 5.7 assists per game, led by Brad Marchand with 0.9.

Boston knocked off Buffalo 3-2 in the last meeting between these teams on Nov. 21. Marchand scored two goals for the Bruins in the victory.

TOP PERFORMERS: Eichel leads the Sabres with 27 assists and has recorded 51 points this season. Victor Olofsson has five goals and seven assists over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

Zdeno Chara leads the Bruins with a plus-18 in 37 games played this season. Pastrnak has totaled three goals and eight assists over the last 10 games for Boston.

LAST 10 GAMES: Bruins: 2-4-4, averaging 2.9 goals, 5.1 assists, 3.4 penalties and 7.7 penalty minutes while allowing 3.1 goals per game with a .891 save percentage.

Sabres: 4-4-2, averaging three goals, 5.3 assists, 2.6 penalties and 5.2 penalty minutes while giving up 3.4 goals per game with a .886 save percentage.

INJURIES: Sabres: Kyle Okposo: day to day (illness), Johan Larsson: day to day (undisclosed), Evan Rodrigues: day to day (lower body).

Bruins: Brett Ritchie: out (illness), Torey Krug: day to day (upper body).

Pageau scores twice, Senators beat Sabres 3-1

By Associated Press

December 23, 2019

OTTAWA, Ontario (AP) — The Ottawa Senators are heading into their break feeling good about their game.

Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored two goals, leading the Senators to a 3-1 victory over the Buffalo Sabres on Monday night.

Brady Tkachuk had a goal and two assists. Craig Anderson, making his first start since suffering a knee injury Dec. 7, stopped 43 shots.

"Getting back in there knowing I had several practices in a row where I was able to get back in the swing of things and get the rhythm back (helped)," Anderson said. "I think the best thing is to go out there and play and not think and that was (Monday)."

Anderson made two great saves to keep the lead, including one on Evan Rodrigues while sprawled on his back. Tkachuk added an empty-net goal to ensure the victory.

"He looked really confident," said Senators coach D.J. Smith. "He held us in the game and made the saves he needed to make."

Zemgus Girgensons scored for the Sabres (17-14-7). Linus Ullmark made 27 saves.

"We had good control early in the game, but we weren't creating the net pressure that we should have out of the puck pressure that we had," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "They were opportunistic on their chances. I thought (Ullmark) played a really good game, both goalies were outstanding. It was the one bounce that went their way at the end that cost us the win, but I'm proud of the guys for what they've been doing here."

With the game tied 1-all, Pageau scored his second of the game, taking a drop pass from Connor Brown and breaking in on Ullmark. The Sabres goalie made the initial save before Pageau pounced on the rebound of a shot by Tkachuk and scored on a backhand.

Both goalies made a number of big saves in the second period, with Ullmark stopping Tyler Ennis from close range to keep it a one-goal game.

The Sabres were finally able to beat Anderson at 15:12 as Rodrigues made a backhand pass to Girgensons, who tipped it over Anderson's shoulder.

Despite being outshot 14-10 in the first period, it was the Senators (16-18-4) who took a 1-0 lead. Tkachuk sent a great pass to Pageau, who beat Ullmark.

Jack Eichel's attempt at becoming the first player in Sabres history to have a point in 19 consecutive games came to an end. Eichel came into the game with 32 points (16 goals, 16 assists) over his last 18 games.

"He's a hard player to cover," Pageau said. "I think our linemate, our D-men, did a great job against him. He's obviously a talented player that cannot only create plays for himself, but for his linemates also so it's a hard line to cover, but I think (Tkachuk) drove our line."

NOTES: Scott Sabourin will have to wait until after Christmas to make his return as he was forced to miss the game with the flu. Sabourin has not played since Nov. 2, when he suffered a concussion after colliding with Boston's David Backes. ... Buffalo was without Kyle Okposo due to illness.

UP NEXT

Sabres: Host Boston Bruins on Friday.

Senators: Host New Jersey Devils on Sunday.

Eichel and Buffalo take on Ottawa

By Associated Press

December 22, 2019

Buffalo Sabres (17-13-7, fourth in the Atlantic Division) vs. Ottawa Senators (15-18-4, seventh in the Atlantic Division)

Ottawa, Ontario; Monday, 7 p.m. EST

BOTTOM LINE: Jack Eichel and Buffalo hit the ice against Ottawa. He currently ranks fifth in the in the league with 51 points, scoring 24 goals and recording 27 assists.

The Senators are 5-5-2 against the rest of their division. Ottawa leads the league with seven shorthanded goals, led by Jean-Gabriel Pageau with three.

The Sabres are 6-5-1 against division opponents. Buffalo has given up 28 power-play goals, killing 74.3% of opponent chances.

In their last meeting on Nov. 16, Buffalo won 4-2. Eichel totaled four goals for the Sabres.

TOP PERFORMERS: Pageau leads the Senators with a plus-19 in 37 games played this season. Anthony Duclair has scored 11 goals over the last 10 games for Ottawa.

Eichel leads the Sabres with a plus-16 in 36 games played this season. Victor Olofsson has collected eight assists over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

LAST 10 GAMES: Sabres: 5-3-2, averaging 3.6 goals, 6.3 assists, 2.9 penalties and 5.8 penalty minutes while allowing 3.3 goals per game with a .895 save percentage.

Senators: 4-3-3, averaging 3.4 goals, 5.6 assists, 4.4 penalties and 9.9 penalty minutes while giving up 3.7 goals per game with a .889 save percentage.

INJURIES: Senators: None listed.

Sabres: Johan Larsson: day to day (undisclosed), Evan Rodrigues: day to day (lower body).

Sabres and Bruins linked through the decade as matchups loom at the end of the 2010s

By Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
December 27, 2019

There's some odd symmetry about it as the 2010s come to a merciful end for the Buffalo Sabres. It's some weird circle of life that the final three games of the decade include a home-and-home set against the Boston Bruins that starts Friday night in KeyBank Center.

The Sabres are celebrating their decades as part of their 50th anniversary season and there's no such tribute planned for the '10s. With good reason. And the Bruins are a major reason why.

Think back to when the decade started. From 2000-2009, the Sabres missed the playoffs five times but also got to two Eastern Conference finals and made another trip that ended in the second round. Even two of their playoff misses came attached to seasons of 90 and 91 points, respectively.

The Bruins, meanwhile, were stuck in mediocrity that stemmed from the "May Day" goal in 1993 in Buffalo that ended a division championship season in a shocking first-round sweep at the hands of the Sabres. The Bruins won only two postseason series in the rest of the 90s and never got past round two in the 2000s, missing the playoffs four times and falling in the first round four other times.

From their berth in 1970 through Dec. 31, 2009, the Sabres had the fourth-highest points percentage in the NHL at .553. Only Montreal (.602), Boston (.596) and Philadelphia (.553) were ahead of them. They made the playoffs 27 times in 38 seasons.

It all started to change in 2010. The Sabres, remember, were still a gold standard franchise and won the Northeast Division title. The Bruins finished third. But Johnny Boychuk cut down Thomas Vanek in Game 2, old friend Miroslav Satan beat his former team in double overtime in Game 4 and the Sabres were upset victims in Game 6.

Still, the Sabres were hardly dead. The 2010-11 season was a struggle until Terry Pegula took ownership of the team in February, but a 16-4-4 finish from that point forward produced another berth in the playoffs, where the Sabres blew a 3-1 lead at home in Game 6 and lost in Game 7 at Philadelphia. The Bruins, meanwhile, won the Stanley Cup for the first time since 1972.

Optimism remained high in Buffalo in 2011-12 with two wins to open the season in Europe keeping the hope tank full. The Sabres were 10-5 and on a four-game winning streak when they went into Boston on Nov. 12.

Then Milan Lucic took out Ryan Miller with his infamous bullrush through the Buffalo goalie and the Sabres have never been the same since. The Sabres missed the playoffs that season and went on to become one of the NHL's laughingstocks for the entire decade.

Buffalo, of course, carries the league's longest playoff drought at eight years and counting, but the numbers are worse. With three games left, the Sabres are 311-371-103 for the 2010s and their .462 points percentage is 30th out of 31 NHL teams, ahead of only Edmonton's .452.

The Sabres have 725 points while the Oilers have 710. Next worst are New Jersey and Arizona -- both at 795 (we're not counting Vegas' 2 1/2 seasons here). The Sabres are tied with Florida for the fewest playoff games won in the decade with five. The Bruins have the most with 69, many collected during their three trips to the Cup final.

The Sabres, Panthers and Oilers all tied for the fewest number of postseason games played in the decade with 13. Five teams played more than 100, topped by Pittsburgh's 124 and Boston's 121. Ten teams played more than 80.

And as for Pegula ownership, it has not been the panacea fans expected it would be after that great finish to the 2010-11 season.

Since the memorable win over Atlanta when the French Connection greeted Terry Pegula on the ice prior to the Sabres' victory in his first game on Feb. 23, 2011, Buffalo is last in the NHL in wins (263), losses (330), points (617) and points percentage (.451) among teams that played the entire decade. In the same span, the Bruins are third in points percentage (.634) and fourth in wins (391).

SABRES BY THE DECADE

Years	W-L-T&OTL	Pts Pct (NHL rank)
1970s	357-261-132	.564 (4th of 22)
1980s	387-294-121	.558 (7th of 21)
1990s	348-315-118	.521 (11th of 28)
2000s	374-272-94	.569 (9th of 30)
2010s	311-371-103	.462 (30th of 31)

Source: NHL.com

It was a decade full of weirdness

When the decade started, Darcy Regier and Lindy Ruff were in charge, just as they had been since 1997. Things ended for both nine months apart in 2013 and that started a front office and coaching carousel that hasn't stopped.

In the team president's office, there's been Ted Black, Pat LaFontaine, Russ Brandon and now Kim Pegula. In the GM's suite, Regier has been followed by Tim Murray and Jason Botterill.

And the coach's office has been a black hole since Ruff with its occupants, in order, going from Ron Rolston to Ted Nolan to Dan Bylsma (after Mike Babcock's snub) to Phil Housley and now Ralph Krueger.

It was a decade full of weirdness. And we're not just talking The Tank or the infamous night in 2015 when a whole bunch of KeyBank Center fans suddenly rooted on the Arizona Coyotes through an overtime victory over their own team.

For low moments in franchise history, may that one never be matched.

Pegula initially thought throwing money at everything was the answer and it wasn't. A team-produced web episode on the 2011 trip to Finland caught Pegula's children talking about Dad being enraptured watching Vancouver defenseman Christian Ehrhoff play the Bruins during the 2011 final, so it wasn't hard to see how Regier gave Ehrhoff a 10-year, \$40 million contract.

Ville Leino's overtime goal in Game 6 here in 2011 -- the last playoff game held in KeyBank Center -- certainly stuck in the minds of ownership and Regier as well. Leino got a six-year, \$27 million contract in free agency and immediately announced on his conference call with reporters he wasn't all that comfortable playing center.

The Ehrhoff and Leino contracts were bought out by Tim Murray in 2014 in compliance fashion after the 2013 lockout so the Sabres didn't take any cap hits. The same unfortunately was not the case for the six-year, \$25.5 million deal Cody Hodgson signed in September 2013. Murray bought out that deal in 2015 and Botterill rues the move.

The Sabres will be paying \$791,667 on their cap to Hodgson's buyout for three more seasons. That's certainly enough for a quality NHL forward but it's money going somewhere else.

The Leino contract started an ugly pattern that continues today when it comes to centers. Mikhail Grigorenko and Zemgus Girgensons were taken as centers with first-round picks in 2012 and neither was able to last in the position, although Girgensons forged a workmanlike career at wing. Sam Reinhart was drafted No. 2 overall in 2014 and has proven to be a fine winger after he showed he couldn't play the middle.

Casey Mittelstadt is in Rochester after he was taken at No. 8 in 2017 and didn't thrive in the middle and Marcus Johansson was signed last summer to a two-year, \$9 million deal and hasn't been able to do much in the middle either, just as everyone who covered the Bruins, Devils and Capitals in recent years warned.

Now the Sabres wait on 2019 first-rounder Dylan Cozens to hopefully fill the hole in the middle behind Jack Eichel. It's been empty since Botterill dealt Ryan O'Reilly in 2018 and watched him become a Conn Smythe Trophy winner 11 months later for St. Louis.

Eichel, of course, has developed into a Hart Trophy candidate and is en route to his first 30-goal season after being acquired in the wake of the tank. Yes, it's odd, indeed, after all that's gone on in this decade that the hopes of the Sabres lie squarely on the shoulders of a Boston kid.

A quick look back at the 2010s

All-decade picks: Goal: Ryan Miller. Defense: Rasmus Ristolainen, Tyler Myers. Wings: Jason Pominville, Thomas Vanek. Center: Jack Eichel.

Odd ages to ponder: When the decade started, Linus Ullmark was 16, Ristolainen was 15, Reinhart and Victor Olofsson were 14, Eichel was 13 and Rasmus Dahlin was 9.

Stat leaders: Eichel leads the Sabres in the decade in goals (125), assists (185) and points (310). Pominville is second in goals (108) and points (250) while Ristolainen is second in assists (172) and is the leader in games played (462).

In the nets: Among goalies, Miller was the leader in games (243) and wins (117), ahead of Robin Lehner (129 and 42).

Played one game in the decade: Forwards Jean-Sebastien Dea, Joel Armia and Sean Malone, defenseman Nathan Paetsch and goalies Jason Kasdorf, Andrey Makarov and Adam Wilcox.

Worst draft pick: Alexander Nylander at No. 8 overall in 2016 when the draft was in Buffalo. Murray passed on first-rounders Mikhail Sergachev (9), Charlie McAvoy (14) and Jakob Chyrcun (16) when defense was a much greater need. Botterill righted the wrong somewhat last summer by dealing Nylander to Chicago for Henri Jokiharju.

Quote of the decade: "It may require some suffering." That's the message GM Darcy Regier sent fans about the team's rebuild during an often-contentious news conference with president Ted Black on April 29, 2013.

Question asked by fans as the 2020s loom: When will the suffering end?

Team Canada uses late heroics to beat Team USA in World Juniors opener

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 26, 2019

Dylan Cozens 1, Mattias Samuelsson 0.

In a battle of top Buffalo Sabres prospects on the opening day of the World Junior Championships, Cozens' team got the upper hand as Canada roared back from a 2-0 deficit to beat Team USA, 6-4, in their initial pool play game in Ostrava, Czech Republic.

Alexis Lafreniere, the Quebec League superstar expected to be the No. 1 pick in next June's NHL draft in Montreal, led Canada with a goal and three assists. He snapped a 4-4 tie on a spectacular goal with 3:11 left, intercepting a mid-air pass and dekeing USA goalie Spencer Knight to put Canada back in the lead just seven seconds after the Americans had tied the game on a goal by Ottawa prospect Shane Pinto with 3:18 to play.

Cozens, Buffalo's No. 1 pick in June, played 13:58 in the game for Canada with three shots on goal. Samuelsson, the Sabres' second-rounder in 2018, played 17:36 with one shot on goal on defense for Team USA in his first game as the Americans' captain. Neither player registered a point.

Team USA had a 2-0 lead after the first period, but Canada roared back to take a 3-2 lead in the second. The Americans' Pinto thought he had a tying goal at the buzzer of the second but it was ruled late on replay and Canada went up, 4-2, midway through the third on the second goal of the game from captain and Arizona prospect Barrett Hayton.

The U.S. then made its ill-fated rally, which was short-circuited by the Lafreniere tally and an empty-net goal by Ty Dellandrea with 1:10 left.

Team USA returns to action against Friday against Germany at 1 p.m. Eastern time (NHL Network). Canada plays Russia on Saturday and it's suddenly a huge game for the Russians, who suffered a 4-3 upset loss earlier Thursday to the host Czechs.

Sabres prospect Matej Pekar did not have a point in 13:01 for the Czechs. He had one shot on goal and was minus-1 in the game, which had no goals scored over the final 22 minutes.

Dylan Cozens among four Sabres prospects at world junior championships

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

December 25, 2019

The next step in Dylan Cozens' development will take place at one of hockey's marquee international tournaments.

Cozens, an 18-year-old center drafted seventh overall in June, is among four Buffalo Sabres prospects set to participate in the IIHF World Junior Championship, which begins Thursday in Czech Republic and culminates with the gold medal game Jan. 5.

Cozens will be among Canada's top forwards, while the Sabres also will be represented by forward Matej Pekar (Czech Republic), goalie Erik Portillo (Sweden) and defenseman Mattias Samuelsson (United States). Pekar and Czech Republic will open the tournament Thursday against Russia at 9 a.m. Eastern. Canada and the United States play at 1 p.m., with both games televised on NHL Network.

Sweden's first televised game is Dec. 31 against Slovakia at 9 a.m.

"It's great. First of all, it's rewarding to our amateur staff because those guys work very hard, they pound a lot of miles, a lot of lonesome nights and to see our players – it's great for Dylan Cozens," Sabres assistant general manager Randy Sexton said. "That's exciting, but hey, we've got Matej Pekar that's a fourth-round pick, and we've got Erik Portillo, who's a third-round pick.

"That's really exciting because what I believe that tells our guys is, hey, the model we've asked you to scout to and the model we work to from a scouting, drafting and development perspective is working. There's no greater positive reinforcement than players getting picked to play in world juniors."

Samuelsson, a second-round draft pick in 2018, was named captain of the United States team after winning a silver medal at the tournament last January. The 19-year-old is in his sophomore season at Western Michigan University and has one goal among four points in 12 games.

Cozens, meanwhile, is again one of the top players in the Western Hockey League. His 46 points (20 goals, 26 assists) through 30 games with the Lethbridge Hurricanes rank fourth in the league. Cozens had 34 goals among 84 points in 68 regular-season games in 2018-19 before he was drafted by the Sabres.

Portillo, picked in June, is one of three goalies on Sweden's roster and has proven to be a potential draft-day steal for the Sabres. He earned a spot in the tournament with a breakout performance at the World Junior Summer Showcase in Plymouth, Mich., and he has a 2.05 goals-against average and .912 save percentage in 15 games with Dubuque of the United States Hockey League.

The 19-year-old went undrafted in his first year of eligibility in 2018 and will attend the University of Michigan following his season in Dubuque.

Pekar will be counted on to bring offense and grit to the host country's lineup. A fourth-round pick in 2018, Pekar is 19 and playing in his second world junior championships. He appeared in five tournament games last winter before suffering a broken collarbone with the Barrie Colts of the Ontario Hockey League.

Pekar had an impressive showing at the Sabres' Prospects Challenge in September and has 16 goals among 29 points in 26 games with the Colts this season.

The United States and Canada are in Group B and will play their round-robin games at Ostravar Arena in Ostrava, along with Russia, Czech Republic and Germany. Finland, the 2019 tournament winner, will be in Group A with Switzerland, Sweden, Slovakia and Kazakhstan. The group will play its round-robin games at Werk Arena in Trinec.

"For our kids, we're delighted and our advice to them is all the same: Go embrace the experience, don't waste one second of your time there, to learn and take it all in, be a great teammate and whatever happens, happens," Sexton said. "Make sure you're focused on absorbing everything you can out of that tournament."

Collaboration between Sabres, Amerks produces 'good development story'

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

December 24, 2019

The collaborative process used to prepare prospects for an opportunity with the Buffalo Sabres began, in earnest, shortly after Ralph Krueger arrived in Buffalo.

Rochester Americans coach Chris Taylor traveled the Thruway one June morning to meet with Krueger over breakfast, and the two spoke in great detail about the style of play and systems they wished to use.

"That was the biggest relief was that we had the same ideas and principles in how we wanted to play," Taylor said in a phone interview Monday. "It was something really nice. It was instant, the connection between Ralph and I."

Out of that conversation, and a subsequent coaches' symposium ahead of the organization's Prospects Challenge in September, came what Krueger refers to as "Sabres hockey." The Sabres, Amerks and Cincinnati Cyclones are using the same philosophies, systems and verbiage with their players.

The model is similar to those implemented by organizations throughout the National Hockey League. However, Curtis Lazar's performance Saturday against the Los Angeles Kings illustrated how well the Sabres are executing their development plan.

"It's a good development story," Krueger said. "We had him up here, there were some things we thought he needed improvement on and to work on. We communicate that to Chris Taylor, he goes to Rochester, spends some time down there and works specifically on the game he needs to play here in the NHL. It was working down there, too, and he becomes a major player for them. He returns a better player and returns embracing the system and principles, the concepts that are up here."

Lazar, a 24-year-old former first-round draft pick of the Ottawa Senators, averaged just 8:51 of ice time during his first six games with the Sabres this season. He had a highlight-reel goal by blocking a shot and scoring on a breakaway during his first game in a Sabres uniform Nov. 14 against Carolina, only to struggle with the nuances of playing wing in the NHL.

Lazar, who has played center for most of his junior and professional careers, also was not moving his feet enough in the offensive and defensive zones. The Sabres shifted Lazar back to center when he was assigned to Rochester and gave him an on- and off-ice program to work on his agility and quickness.

Lazar had five points in seven games upon returning to the Amerks and was recalled by the Sabres on Friday when center Johan Larsson suffered an upper-body injury during a 6-1 loss to Philadelphia. During his first game back in Buffalo, Lazar helped close out a 3-2 win over the Kings by playing 15:53, his most ice time in an NHL game since he logged 17:57 for the Calgary Flames on March 29, 2018.

Lazar didn't have to spend time learning systems or principles in his return to the Sabres since Taylor is teaching and speaking to the Amerks in the same manner as Krueger.

"It's been like that since day one," Lazar said. "Not much of an adjustment for me. That's set me up for success. When (Amerks assistant coach Gord Dineen) was at the helm there, or with Taylor, everything we do in Rochester is the same as up here. You don't have to think as much. You can just go out there and play your game."

The collaborative process wasn't limited to Krueger and Taylor. Following their one-on-one conversations in Buffalo and at the NHL draft in Vancouver, they were joined by the coaching staffs of the Sabres, Amerks and Cyclones to exchange ideas.

Krueger used a similar process during his 13 years as coach of Switzerland's national team. He learned the importance of player development in the NHL from Hall-of-Fame center Steve Yzerman, who is now general manager of the Detroit Red Wings and held the same job with the Tampa Bay Lightning from 2010-18.

Krueger asked the Amerks' and Cyclones' coaching staffs how they wished to play, their ideas on how to defend and score. Those concepts produced one style of play that can be seen in Buffalo, Rochester and Cincinnati.

"That's the goal, I think, of every organization is to have a seamless set of dynamics between the two teams, so when players arrive in the NHL, you don't have to do too much teaching from a systemic perspective," Sabres assistant general manager Randy Sexton said. "You can just go right into the game tactics and the game plan, and the players are comfortable with the nomenclature, the drills and the approach. We've worked very hard at it. It's a work in progress, but happy with where it is right now."

Adjustments are made at every level throughout the season. For example, the Sabres must tweak their penalty-killing strategy based on an opponent's power-play tendencies, whereas the Amerks typically stick to their structure.

However, the core principles remain the same. Even Krueger's "Stay Connected" mantra is used by the Amerks and Cyclones. Sexton suggested that players throughout the organization quickly bought in to the systems since Krueger has implemented an "exciting" style of play, and Cincinnati coach Matt Thomas explained last month that his NHL counterpart has assisted development and eased the transition by passing on a way to keep the concepts simple.

"It's as simple as this: if you're going to pressure the puck, you need to look to see if you're connected," Thomas said. "You can't go pressure by yourself. That's a big word he uses a lot, is we've got to be connected. It's a simple term and it's not that anybody's never heard it before, but it's a focal point of every zone in our system. Are we connected? If we are, we can pressure. If we're not, we've got to wait for our opportunity to pressure. For me, that's a real clear-cut way for guys to be able to understand that we're in go-mode because we're connected."

The collaborative process is a tenet of the player development model Sexton and General Manager Jason Botterill brought to Buffalo in 2017. Execution depends on constant communication throughout the organization -- Taylor helped with the process in Rochester while working as an interim assistant coach with the Sabres for their first 22 games -- and has been assisted by veteran Amerks players, according to Sexton.

Team meetings and practices are run in the same fashion, Taylor said. In addition to Lazar, forward Rasmus Asplund made a successful transition to the Sabres upon being recalled Nov. 15. Asplund, 21, has emerged as one of Buffalo's top penalty-killing forwards while playing each of the team's last 20 games.

"We want guys to be comfortable in what they're doing," Taylor said. "If someone gets recalled to Buffalo, we want to make sure they know exactly what to expect. There's nothing to learn. It's get in there and get to playing. That takes a lot off the player's mind, so he doesn't have to go through different systems."

The Sabres are building their team through drafting and player development. After spending most of last season in Rochester, former seventh-round draft pick Victor Olofsson leads all NHL rookies with 34 points through 38 games and is on pace for the most goals by a Sabres rookie since Ray Sheppard scored 38 in 1987-88.

Linus Ullmark, who spent parts of three seasons with the Amerks, has emerged as the Sabres' No. 1 goalie and has a .918 save percentage in his last 12 starts. Rochester's roster includes a number of promising prospects, including Lawrence Pilut, Will Borgen, Jacob Bryson, C.J. Smith, Andrew Oglevie and Jonas Johansson.

Casey Mittelstadt, who was drafted eighth overall in 2018, was assigned to Rochester last week to build confidence and develop his game after playing 114 games with the Sabres. A similar plan helped Tage Thompson rediscover his scoring touch with the Amerks, though the 22-year-old winger has been out the past five weeks with an upper-body injury suffered in his first game back with Buffalo.

With Larsson likely to return Friday against Boston, the Sabres assigned Lazar to the Amerks late Monday night. However, Krueger is going to need reinforcements throughout the final 44 games of the regular season, and the Sabres' development model has eased the transition for those who receive the call.

"We believe in collaboration, we believe in unity and we believe in one," Sexton said. "We've practiced that and preached it from day one. It is rewarding and gratifying to see players coming from Rochester fitting in, some playing better than others, but as we remind all of our players all the time, becoming an every day NHL player is a process. You don't get recalled once and you're there forever.

"We tell our coaches all the time it's a little bit like a stock. Some days it goes up and some days it goes down a little bit, but we need to make sure the trend is always up and to the right. Not every player is going to have a great day every day, but if we're focused on collaborating internally and working with our players to help make them get better, then more often than not it works."

Latest loss 'a tough pill to swallow' for Sabres entering holiday break

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

December 23, 2019

OTTAWA — Ralph Krueger joked Monday morning that the best way for the Buffalo Sabres to handle the looming three-day break was to tune out any questions on the subject.

Krueger's tone quickly turned serious, though. The Sabres' coach then acknowledged he and his players were "feeling the opportunity" of a much-needed respite from the chaotic schedule, but he didn't think anyone was overlooking the Ottawa Senators.

His opinion wasn't different following Buffalo's 3-1 loss to the Senators in Canadian Tire Centre. The Sabres had a season-high 44 shots on goal, including 19 during the third period, and showed no signs of fatigue while playing their 11th game in 23 days this month.

Yet the Sabres entered the break with their fourth loss in five games and failed to take over second place in the Atlantic Division. During his postgame media availability, Krueger emphasized all that the Sabres did well — from Linus Ullmark's 27 saves to an impressive performance by a makeshift line featuring Evan Rodrigues — but there was a somber mood in the visitors' dressing room.

"This was a big game for us going into the break — division game," Rodrigues, who had a team-high six shots on goal, said. "It was big, and it's obviously one that we wanted and we had our chances to take. This one is a tough pill to swallow a little bit, but we have two or three big division games right after the break before New Years. We have to take this break and come back ready to go and ready to win some hockey games."

The Sabres (17-14-7) have earned points in 11 of 16 games and could be only two points out of a playoff spot when they host the Boston Bruins in KeyBank Center on Friday night. However, Krueger's team has been haunted by missed opportunities and is tired of settling for promising performances.

Ottawa gave the Sabres plenty of chances to leave with a win. Buffalo had three shots on goal during its two power-play opportunities and finished with 25 scoring chances, according to Krueger. The Senators (16-18-4), who improved to 11-5-1 at home and have points in eight of their last 11, decided to allow goalie Craig Anderson to face a high-volume of shots from the perimeter.

Buffalo couldn't capitalize when the opportunity was there, either. Rodrigues poked at a loose puck in the crease with 10 minutes remaining in regulation, only to watch Anderson make a sprawling blocker save.

Anderson also stopped Jimmy Vesey's second-period shot from the slot, and the Senators cleaned up the rebound when Zemgus Girgensons drove to the net late in the second period.

"It wasn't enough," Girgensons said. "I think their goalie made some big stops there when we had the chance to score. We kept them in their zone for a long time in the third and just couldn't pull through."

The Sabres managed to control possession in the offensive zone when they forechecked effectively and retrieved rebounds off shot attempts. Rodrigues won a battle for a loose puck along the right-wing boards and made a backhanded pass toward the net, where Girgensons redirected it into the net to tie the score, 1-1, with 4:48 remaining in the second period.

The goal was a significant momentum swing considering the Sabres had yet to lose in regulation when tied through two periods. Two mistakes made the difference, though. Senators center Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored twice on defensive breakdowns by the Sabres.

Pageau broke a scoreless tie at 19:06 into the first period with his one-timer off a centering pass from Brady Tkachuk, who beat Jake McCabe to the loose puck in the corner. Pageau then gave the Senators a 2-1 lead at 5:16 into the third by scoring off his own rebound following a split save by Ullmark, who has a .918 save percentage in his last 12 starts.

The Sabres had only two shots on goal during the first 10 minutes of the game and finished with 78 shot attempts, 25 more than the Senators. Tkachuk was awarded an empty-net goal with 1:25 remaining in regulation for Ottawa, which has defeated Edmonton, Boston and Nashville in December.

"Probably the first 10 minutes aren't what we wanted, but I think the second half of the first we turned it on," Rodrigues said. "We had ups and downs in this game that maybe we'd like to see more consistent pressure. We definitely had our chances. They scored more than we did."

This was a difficult game for the Sabres' top line, which combined for a minus-9 rating. Jack Eichel's personal point streak ended at 18 games and three of his six shot attempts missed the net. However, there were encouraging signs from Rodrigues, Jeff Skinner and Conor Sheary.

Though Skinner failed to score for a 10th consecutive game, he had five shots on goal — his most in a game since Dec. 7 in Vancouver — and was responsible for creating several scoring chances. Sheary had arguably his best performance in more than a month after being a healthy scratch in three of the previous six games.

"I just have to fight through it," Skinner said. "It's kind of the way it's going for me right now. We just have to work through it. Their goalie made some good saves. They did a good job pushing us to the outside and limiting our second opportunities. You have to fight through that and try to find ways to generate chances inside and finish some of your chances."

The Sabres will open their post-break schedule with a home-and-home against the Bruins, followed by games in KeyBank Center against the Tampa Bay Lightning, Edmonton Oilers and Florida Panthers. There are 11 games before the All-Star break, and Krueger left Canadian Tire Centre confident that the best is yet to come for the Sabres.

"For us, the important thing at this point in time is to be part of the race," Krueger said. "We're definitely there, because we believe we're only going to get better here. We believe we're going to improve and we're going to get stronger as this season builds. ... Out of painful days like today, we tend to grow, so I'm sure we will this time, too."

The Wraparound: Senators 3, Sabres 1

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

December 23, 2019

OTTAWA -- Jack Eichel's personal point streak finally ended Monday night in Canadian Tire Centre. So did all the momentum gained from the Sabres' come-from-behind win over the Los Angeles Kings two days earlier.

Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored twice, including the go-ahead goal with 14:44 remaining in the third period, to lift the Ottawa Senators over the Sabres, 3-1. Eichel was held without a point during a game in which he appeared for the first time since Nov. 14.

The Sabres' 23-year-old captain recorded a point in a career-best 18 straight games played, scoring 16 goals among 32 points with a plus-19 rating during that span. Buffalo (17-14-7) had earned points in 11 of its past 15 games and would have taken over third place in the Atlantic Division with a win. Instead, the Sabres will begin the three-day holiday break two points out of a playoff spot.

Zemgus Girgensons scored the tying goal for the Sabres, and Linus Ullmark made 27 saves in goal. Pageau broke a scoreless tie late in the first period, and Brady Tkachuk was credited with an empty-net goal. Ottawa (16-18-4) has earned points in eight of its last 11 games.

Chances: Ullmark stopped nine of 10 shots in the first period, including Thomas Chabot's deflected shot with 11 minutes remaining and Connor Brown's wrist shot from the right-wing circle less than four minutes later.

Ullmark's best work came with 5:30 remaining on a shot from in front by Tkachuk on a centering pass from behind the Sabres' net.

Offensive surge: The Sabres had 14 shots on goal in the first period, arguably none better than Victor Olofsson's off a 2-on-1 centering pass from Eichel. Jimmy Vesey also hit the post in the final minute against Ottawa goalie Craig Anderson, who was starting his first game since Dec. 7.

Opening salvo: The Senators took a 1-0 lead with 53.2 seconds remaining, when Jake McCabe lost a battle for a loose puck and Tkachuk's centering pass to Pageau's glove. Entering Monday, the Sabres were 4-8-5 when trailing after the first period.

Response: Jeff Skinner, who had not scored in nine straight games entering Monday, had three shots on goal during an outstanding second period. His centering pass to Vesey almost resulted in the tying goal, and his drive to the net almost gave Buffalo the lead.

Special-teams test: The Sabres had one shot on goal during their second power play, a wrist shot by Eichel from the left-wing circle. They also killed off two penalties, though Ullmark prevented a goal by making a split save on former Buffalo first-round draft pick Tyler Ennis.

Breakthrough: Girgensons tied the score, 1-1, by deflecting Evan Rodrigues' backhanded pass from the right-wing boards into the top corner of the net with 4:48 remaining in the second period. Girgensons has six goals in 38 games this season after finishing 2018-19 with five goals in 72 games, and Rodrigues had not recorded a point since Nov. 14.

Entering Monday, the Sabres were 3-0-5 when tied after two periods, while the Senators had a negative-12 goal differential in the third period.

Risky business: Pageau scored the go-ahead goal 5:16 into the third period after he cut to the slot and shot his own rebound in the net. The Senators' possession began when Brandon Montour pinched in the offensive zone, leaving Olofsson and Zach Bogosian to defend the Ottawa rush.

Close call: The Sabres almost tied the score with 10 minutes remaining in regulation on a scramble in front of the net. However, Anderson used his blocker to prevent Rodrigues from poking the puck across the goal line.

Lineup: Winger Kyle Okposo missed the game because of an illness, while defenseman Colin Miller was a healthy scratch for the fourth time in five games. Forward Vladimir Sobotka (knee), winger Tage Thompson (upper body) and center Johan Larsson (upper body) were out because of injury.

Prospect update: Defenseman Mattias Samuelsson, a second-round draft pick of the Sabres in 2018, was officially named to the United States' roster for the IIHF World Junior Championship, which begins Wednesday.

Next: The Sabres host the Boston Bruins in KeyBank Center on Friday at 7 p.m.

Sabres game day: Road test against 'improved' Senators precedes break

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

December 23, 2019

Matchup: Buffalo Sabres (17-13-7) vs. Ottawa Senators (15-18-4)

Where: Canadian Tire Centre

When: 7:30 p.m.

TV: MSG

Radio: WGR 550

Break looming: The Sabres, like the rest of the National Hockey League, will have a mandatory three-day holiday break beginning Tuesday. Time off will provide them with the opportunity to recover from their chaotic schedule, which included 11 games in 23 days during December.

Marcus Johansson described the break as a potential for a "fresh start" for his own game. However, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger acknowledged that such a break can be challenging because his players need to maintain their focus against the Senators, who have shown improvement over the past two weeks.

Krueger said his players are eager to build on their 3-2 win over the Los Angeles Kings in KeyBank Center on Saturday.

"It's really important," Krueger said. "We're all feeling that opportunity. Your families of pulling you in that direction, of course, so that's the human side of it, but Ottawa has that, too. The key for us beginning with this morning session we had is — as we've been doing all year — making that picture really small and taking care of our next task, whatever that is. The next shift, the next period and so on. Build a game here tonight. I feel a hunger in the group to build on the LA game. I thought it was one that gave us a lot of energy and (playing a) division rival like this, it's a lot of fun to have this one here tonight."

Lineup: The Sabres' lineup will remain a mystery until warmups. Krueger could choose to dress seven defensemen for a second consecutive game because the Sabres' blue line contributed its first multigoal game of the season against the Kings.

The Sabres did not hold a morning skate since they practiced Sunday in Buffalo. Here's how they lined up during that session:

Olofsson-Eichel-Reinhart
Skinner-Johansson-Vesey
Girgensons-Lazar-Okposo
Sheary-Asplund-Rodrigues

McCabe-Ristolainen
Dahlin-Bogosian
Scandella-Jokiharju
Montour-Miller

Starting goalie: Linus Ullmark will start in goal for the Sabres and is 7-2-2 in his last 11 games, posting a .915 save percentage during that span. The Senators plan to start goalie Craig Anderson, who has a .927 save percentage in 30 career games against Buffalo. Anderson (knee) has not played since he suffered a knee injury at Philadelphia on Dec. 7.

Ottawa will be without defenseman Ron Hainsey (lower body) and forward Scott Sabourin (flu).

Lazar's return: Sabres forward Curtis Lazar was a first-round draft pick of the Senators in 2013 and played 176 regular-season games for Ottawa, scoring 12 goals among 36 points before he was traded to Calgary.

Lazar played a season-high 15:53 against the Kings on Saturday — his most ice time in an NHL game since he logged 17:57 for Calgary on March 29, 2018 — and was among the forwards Krueger trusted to close out the win in the third period.

Lazar's game has improved since he was shifted back to center in Rochester. He's filling in for Johan Larsson on a line with Kyle Okposo and Zemgus Girgensons.

"Wing is different," Lazar said. "A lot of stops and starts and stuff. My reads were a little off. I just think I was overthinking it. I had such a strong training camp that when I came back at the start of this year i kind of felt I had to impress again, instead of just playing my game. This time around I kind of knew what I had to do and when I'm playing with guys like Gussy and Okie, they make it easy. We play a similar style and it's very defensive-first."

Skinner watch: Jeff Skinner appears to be on the verge of a breakthrough. The 27-year-old winger was noticeably better against the Kings, assisting on Rasmus Ristolainen's goal and recording his most ice time (16:47) since Dec. 8.

Still, Skinner has zero goals with two assists and a minus-8 rating in his last eight games. He's not making much of an impact without the puck, failing to create turnovers at the rate he did at the start of the season.

Home-ice advantage: The Senators are 4-2-3 since losing five straight games from Nov. 25 through Dec. 3 and are succeeding despite having the league's worst power play, which has converted at a 11.8 percent clip in coach D.J. Smith's first season.

Ottawa is 10-5-1 at Canadian Tire Centre after winning only 18 games at home last season. They lost to the Sabres, 4-2, in KeyBank Center on Nov. 16. Buffalo has gone 11-3-3 in its last 17 games against the Senators. The home team has won each of the five games in the series since the beginning of last season.

"They've had a really good record in the last 10," Krueger said of the Senators. "I think they're the same as we are. They've definitely improved as a group. You see the coaching coming through. Watching especially their last three games you see better habits in their execution. We're expecting a really tight game tonight. They're a dangerous, hard-working team with a lot of strong individual players, and they're very strong at home, so lots of factors."

Opposing player to watch: Senators winger Anthony Duclair has already set a career high with 21 goals, which are tied for sixth in the NHL. The 24-year-old has scored 13 goals at home and leads the Senators with five power-play goals.

Ottawa defenseman Thomas Chabot leads the NHL in average ice time per game (25:59) and has two goals among 21 points in 37 games.

Four Sabres prospects to play in 2020 IIHF World Junior Championship

By Brayton Wilson

WGR 550

December 26, 2019

It is one of the greatest annual hockey spectacles every year - the IIHF World Junior Championship.

The 2020 World Juniors is slated to be a thrilling tournament this year as for the first time since 2016, the tournament heads back to Europe to take place in the Czech Republic.

Group A, that features the defending champion Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, Slovakia and Kazakhstan, will play their preliminary round games in the city of Trinec, while Group B, featuring the United States, Canada, Russia, Germany, and the host Czechs, will hold their preliminary round games in the city of Ostrava just about 45 minutes away. Both groups will then convene back in Ostrava for the semifinal round, as well as the bronze medal game and the gold medal game at the end of the tournament.

The Buffalo Sabres have been well represented at this tournament over the years, and this year is no exception with four prospects playing in the 2020 tournament.

Here is who will be playing for gold in the Czech Republic:

Mattias Samuelsson - Defense - United States

Mattias Samuelsson is one of two Sabres prospects taking part in their second World Junior Championship this year after he helped get the United States a silver medal at the 2019 IIHF World Junior Championship in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

The 19-year-old will serve as captain for the U.S. squad, which is the second time in his young career that he will captain the Americans in international competition (2018 U18 World Championship).

Buffalo's second round pick (32nd overall) in the 2018 NHL Draft played in a limited role with the United States last year in Vancouver, going pointless in seven games and picking up a plus-3 rating. However, Samuelsson is expected to be the bell-cow defenseman on the blue line this year that's playing in all situations, and chewing up minutes as a two-way defenseman for the Americans.

The 6-foot-4, 220-pound defenseman has put up four points (1+3) in 12 games played for Western Michigan this season after a 12-point (5+7) season in 35 games during his freshman campaign.

While Samuelsson may fit more of the old school mold for defensemen, especially with his size, he still is a smooth-skating player with his long legs, has good two-way vision, possesses a decent shot to his arsenal, and has good leadership qualities.

Dylan Cozens - Center - Canada

Canada may have the best group of top-six forwards in this year's tournament, and Dylan Cozens is going to have a big part of Canada's success in the Czech Republic.

The 18-year-old center will likely get plenty of chances to put up some big numbers for Canada in this tournament, and will be relied upon to be a solid two-way center when needed.

Cozens really came into the spotlight last season at the 2019 IIHF U18 World Championship, where he scored four goals and registered nine points in seven games and was one of Canada's best players in the tournament.

So far this season with the Lethbridge Hurricanes in the Western Hockey League, Buffalo's first round pick (7th overall) in the 2019 NHL Draft has 20 goals and 46 points in 30 games, which is good for fourth in league scoring.

It will be certainly interesting to see how the 6-foot-3, 185-pound forward is going to factor for Canada in this year's tournament. He could be just one of a number of players that could factor into being one of the top players of the entire tournament.

Matej Pekar - Left Wing - Czech Republic

Matej Pekar is the second Sabres prospect to return to the World Juniors after playing in last year's tournament in Vancouver.

The 19-year-old played a limited role with the Czechs last year, going pointless in five games and picking up a minus-1 rating. The Czechs did not have a great tournament in Vancouver last year, finishing in seventh place.

We've gotten the chance to see Pekar's style of play, being a feisty player on the ice with the ability to get under the skin of players he goes up against on the ice. However, he does have a sneaky offensive side to his game, possessing a decent shot while also the speed to keep up with the pace of play.

In his second season with the Barrie Colts this year in the Ontario Hockey League, Pekar has 16 goals and 29 points in 26 games played. His season last year was cut short due to a broken collarbone, but he has rebounded nicely since returning to Barrie this year.

Pekar likely will not light up the scoreboard for the Czechs in this tournament, but if he can do his job by rattling the other team and doing enough offensively to generate chances, they may be able to make some sort of noise.

Erik Portillo - Goalie - Sweden

Erik Portillo may not be the most well known Sabres prospect of this tournament, but he has been stellar in his first season in North America this year.

The 19-year-old Swede has already established himself as one of the best goalies in the United States Hockey League this season while playing with the Dubuque Fighting Saints. In 15 games played this year, Portillo has a 12-2-1 record with a 2.05 goals-against average and a .912 save percentage.

Portillo is one of three goaltenders the Swedes will carry throughout this tournament, so it is unknown how much he will play in this tournament. He is also in competition for the starting job with Tampa Bay Lightning 2019 third round pick Hugo Alnefelt, as well as Detroit Red Wings 2018 third round pick Jesper Eliasson.

The Sabres selected Portillo in the third round (67th overall) of the 2019 NHL Draft, and he is committed to go to Michigan University starting in the 2020-21 season.

Anderson makes 43 saves to beat the Sabres

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

December 23, 2019

(WGR 550) - The Sabres had plenty of great opportunities on Monday, putting 44 shots on Craig Anderson and 78 attempts at him, but they couldn't solve him in a 3-1 loss.

Linus Ullmark was also good in the Buffalo net, but he only had to see 29 shots.

Anderson came back from injury and was sharp early, stopping Victor Olofsson in front. As the period went on, Olofsson, Curtis Lazar, Zemgus Girgensons, Jeff Skinner and Jack Eichel all had good chances on Craig Anderson.

Eichel had the best chance, leading a 2-on-1 down the right side. He pulled the puck to the middle and ripped a shot, forcing Anderson into a huge save.

Not to be outdone, Connor Brown took advantage of a bouncing puck to walk in alone, but Ullmark stopped him.

Mistakes led to both Senators goals, leaving Ullmark with no chance. On the first one, Brady Tkachuk outbattled Jake McCabe in the corner and threw the puck to a wide-open Jean-Gabriel Pageau in front. The center wasted no time wiring a one-timer as the rest of the Sabres stood and watched.

On Pageau's second goal, Connor Brown easily beat Zach Bogosian wide and took the pack to the net. The rebound went to Pageau and he had a wide-open net. Bogosian only had one more shift in the final 14:44 after that. Overall, he played 10:53.

Evan Rodrigues played is best game since the Western Canada trip last season, but couldn't buy a goal. He thought he had an empty net, but Anderson sprawled across the ice and stopped the puck with his blocker. Rodrigues had six shots on goal, but hasn't scored in 30 games dating back to last season.

I thought he made a nice play from the wall, recognizing he had Girgensons going to the net. It's never a bad play to put the puck in traffic and Girgensons tapped home his sixth of the season. For Rodrigues, it was his first point in 12 games.

There was one huge negative in this game - many of Buffalo's chances wet wide of Anderson. Skinner played very well, but was guilty of that more than once.

Buffalo goes into the three-day Christmas break tied with Florida for fourth place in the Atlantic Division, three points behind Toronto, one back of Montreal and one point in front of Tampa Bay. The Sabres have lost four-of-five games, while the Leafs have won five in a row.

Since he was up on emergency recall, Lazar was sent back to Rochester after the game.

The Sabres come back from break to face Boston in a home-and-home series. The home game is Friday, while the road game is Sunday.

That's it from me. I hope you all have a safe holiday, and I'll be back with you Friday against the Bruins.

Senators defeat the Sabres, 3-1

WGR 550

December 23, 2019

In the last game before the Christmas break around the NHL, the Buffalo Sabres come up short in a 3-1 loss to the Ottawa Senators on Monday night at the Canadian Tire Center.

Buffalo's lone goal in the loss came from forward Zemgus Girgensons, who was able to re-direct an Evan Rodrigues pass toward the front of the Ottawa net.

The Sabres were able to get 44 shots to the Senators net, but goalie Craig Anderson stole the show with 43 saves to earn the win.

The game started off as a back-and-forth affair, and Sabres goaltender Linus Ullmark was up to the challenge for most of it. However, it was the Senators who struck first thanks to Jean-Gabriel Pageau, who found himself wide-open in front of the net close to the end of the period. After a turnover by Sabres defenseman Jake McCabe in the corner, Brady Tkachuk fed an uncovered Pageau, who let go of a one-time snap shot over the left shoulder of Ullmark.

The Sabres threatened at the end of the period, but weren't able to get one past Anderson, who stopped all 14 shots he faced.

The second period saw an even period between the Senators and Sabres with each team taking 11 shots, but only one found the net. This time, it was Girgensons who found the back of the net.

Rodrigues began a Sabres rush into Ottawa's end, and after nearly getting pinned on the boards, Rodrigues flipped a backhand pass to the front of the net, where Girgensons was able to tip the puck past Anderson.

Unfortunately, luck would not be on Buffalo's side as Pageau was able to find the back of the net again at the 5:16 mark of the third period. This time, Pageau was able to blow by defenseman Zach Bogosian to the Sabres net, and he eventually was able to backhand a rebound chance into a wide-open net.

The Sabres brought some pressure toward the end of the game, spending a good minute in the Ottawa zone with the goalie pulled. However, a shot from the point made it's way out of the zone and Tkachuk got past defenseman Henri Jokiharju for a chance at the empty net. However, Jokiharju hauled Tkachuk down from behind, and the officials awarded Tkachuk a goal to put Ottawa up 3-1.

With no points registered on the evening, Sabres captain Jack Eichel had his personal 18-game point streak come to an end. It was a streak that started back on Nov. 16 when Eichel scored four goals in a 4-2 win over the Senators in Buffalo.

GAME SUMMARY

Goal Summary:

First Period:

BUF: NONE

OTT: 19:06 - Jean-Gabriel Pageau (17) (Brady Tkachuk)

Second Period:

BUF: 15:12 - Zemgus Girgensons (6) (Evan Rodrigues)

OTT: NONE

Third Period:

BUF: NONE

OTT: 5:16 - Jean-Gabriel Pageau (18) (Brady Tkachuk, Connor Brown); 18:36 - Brady Tkachuk (13) ENG (Connor Brown)

Penalty Summary:

First Period:

BUF: NONE

OTT: NONE

Second Period:

BUF: 3:41 - Jimmy Vesey (Hooking - 2 min.); 7:41 - Zach Bogosian (Holding - 2 min.)

OTT: 0:40 - Chris Tierney (Hooking - 2 min.)

Third Period:

BUF: NONE

OTT: 5:47 - Vladimir Namestnikov (Tripping - 2 min.)

Shots on Goal:

BUF: 44 (14, 11, 19)

OTT: 29 (10, 11, 8)

Goalies:

BUF: Linus Ullmark - 26 saves

OTT: Craig Anderson - 43 saves

Power Plays:

BUF: 0 for 2 (0%)

OTT: 0 for 2 (0%)

Three Stars:

Craig Anderson - OTT

Jean-Gabriel Pageau - OTT

Brady Tkachuk - OTT

What's Next:

The Sabres get a small break to celebrate the holidays before they take on the Boston Bruins this Friday at KeyBank Center in the first game of a home-and-home series. Faceoff is set for 7 p.m. with the Paul William Beltz Pregame Show starting a 6 p.m. with Schopp and the Bulldog at (716) Food and Sport.

The Sabres head to Ottawa before the NHL Christmas break

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

December 23, 2019

(WGR 550) - Despite winning their last game on Saturday, the Sabres visit Ottawa on Monday tied for third place in the Atlantic Division, one point behind Toronto. The Leafs have won four straight games, including one over the Sabres last Tuesday.

Montreal is one point back of Buffalo, while Tampa Bay trails by three. That means four points separates second and sixth place.

The last time the Sabres played Ottawa, Jack Eichel score all four of Buffalo's goals. Eichel has picked up a point in each of the last 18 games he's played in. Eichel's 51 points is tied for fourth in league scoring, but he's still 10 points back of the leader, Connor McDavid. Eichel's 24 goals are No. 2 in the league, four behind Boston's David Pastrnak.

Victor Olofsson has points in six straight games. He also has 24 points in his last 22 games. Olofsson is the top scoring rookie in the NHL.

Linus Ullmark will get the call in goal on Monday. He's 7-2-2 in his last 11 starts and has started seven of the Sabres' last eight games.

The road has not been kind to the Sabres lately as they've lost seven out of eight games away from the arena.

Ottawa has lost three out of four games, and 10 out of 14. The Senators have scored nine goals in their last two games.

Anthony Duclair is having a career season as he has 21 goals. The Ottawa winger has six goals in his last five games, and 11 goals in his last nine.

Marcus Hogberg has played the last three games in net for Ottawa. Overall, he's 1-1-2 with a 3.10 goals-against average and .903 save percentage. Hogberg was drafted in the third round by Ottawa in the 2013 NHL Draft and has played nine career NHL games. Injuries to Craig Anderson and Anders Nilsson forced his recall.

Ottawa is 21st in league goal scoring and 27th in goals-against. Part of that is having the league's worst power play, but the Sens have scored three goals with the extra man in their last two games.

In addition to Nilsson, Ottawa will be missing defensemen Dylan DeMelo and Nikita Zaitsev. Ron Hainsey missed Saturday's game with injury.

Join Mike Schopp at 6:30 for the pregame, where you will hear from Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger.

Since moving to Buffalo full-time and returning from injury, Kyle Okposo's taken his game 'to another level'

By John Vogl

The Athletic

December 26, 2019

Kyle Okposo is home. That doesn't mean what it used to mean.

Okposo is as Minnesotan as they come. He was born in St. Paul, went to school at Shattuck-St. Mary's and the University of Minnesota. He met his Minnesota-born wife in high school and watched her play college hockey upstate at St. Cloud State. Water from the 10,000 lakes fills his veins.

But during the past year, the Sabres forward started thinking about his kids. They're Buffalonians. They go to school here and play with the friends they've grown up with in the neighborhood. Yet every summer, they'd have to say goodbye for two months and head to a state they barely knew.

So, after talking it over with his wife, Danielle, the Okposos decided to leave Minnesota and move to Buffalo year-round. Okposo is the only Sabres player who is a full-time resident, and he loves it.

"Yeah, it was a big decision, but this is becoming home," he said. "It's crazy how in our house it's diehard Bills fans now, whereas I grew up as a huge Vikes fan, you know? It's just like that little stuff."

Truthfully, Okposo never envisioned such a scenario. While playing with the Islanders, he was surprised some teammates would stay in New York during the summer rather than head back to their roots.

"I was like, 'Why would you stay? Why wouldn't you just go home?'" Okposo said. "Now I'm that guy, so it comes full circle."

For the most part, it was a family decision. The Okposos are set to welcome their fourth child in April, so they'll have a newborn plus 2-, 4- and 6-year-olds.

"I just thought about if I was a kid, if I was 5 years old or 6, 7, 8 and I had to move every summer away from my friends that I went to school with, that would be really hard," Okposo said. "That's a hard thing. It has nothing to do with hockey. That's just a life-changing thing."

"I think that kids do a lot better with stability. My daughter, my oldest, is in school until middle-to-late June, and it just didn't make sense to pack up, rush home for eight weeks or less and then come back. It just made sense for us to simplify and create some structure in our home and for my family."

The Okposos spent their first summer in Western New York this year. They joined a nearby country club that has a pool and activities for the kids. They went to Bisons games. They hit the festivals that populate the area every weekend during July and August.

"People do a ton outside in the summers and they do a lot of activities," Okposo said. "It's like they earn their summers (with cold winters), right? So they want to really maximize it, and I love that. We did so much and so much that I never would have expected."

"I just think that it's a real community."

Okposo is also feeling at home on the ice. Since returning from a concussion Dec. 7, his three goals in eight games rank third on the Sabres. His 20 shots are fourth.

The word "validation" might be too strong, but the performance shows he can still play hockey. Every time he gets a concussion, people say he shouldn't suit up anymore because of his scary history.

"I definitely did a lot of thinking in those three weeks," Okposo said of the latest head injury. "I feel good coming back. It helps a lot just to calm things down. I feel like I've played good in spurts this year and it's nice to get rewarded."

When the right winger scored in his return, it ended a 17-game drought.

"It's great to see him come back," said good friend and former teammate Matt Moulson. "Obviously, myself personally, I was worried for him as a person, not so much the hockey aspect but the family life. Obviously, he's done all his due diligence. He's very good at that, making sure he's seeing the right people and making sure he's feeling right mentally. To me, he almost looks fresher now than he has maybe before. He looks like he's playing some pretty good hockey.

"I was in a giant slump myself and we both started scoring at the same time. His wife said she said a little prayer for us one night, and I said, 'Ooh, you better say that every night then. It worked for me and Kyle.'"

Okposo has boosted his season totals to four goals and eight points in 27 games. In general terms, that's not overly impressive. But when taking Okposo's ice time into consideration — he's 21st on the team at 11:24 per game — the forward is among the Sabres' leaders in goals and points per 60 minutes.

"I think Kyle is underrated a little bit in what he does for us," coach Ralph Krueger said. "His habits are strong. He's a competitive player and his puck decisions have been outstanding since his return from his head injury. We actually feel that he's taken it to another level, which is good for us to see.

"He's just been such a strong voice in the room right through the year."

The 31-year-old isn't afraid to hold guys accountable. As one of the most avid readers in the dressing room, he's also not shy to give opinions on events outside Buffalo. He was asked about the NHL's "coaching code of conduct" that came out this month following the racially charged Bill Peters/Akim Aliu incident.

"As a society as a whole, you wish that it didn't have to happen and you wish that everybody treated people with respect and the way that they should," Okposo said. "It doesn't mean that you can't be hard on guys, and I think that's something that is getting lost a little bit in this whole situation. You still have to do your job. Sometimes the best way to do your job is to call a guy out or yell at a guy sometimes. It's what happens. This is a big business. You have to be able to, as a player and a person, take some of that constructive criticism and be able to look at it objectively.

"So, there's a lot of feeling-out process in this. Obviously, the first incident was extremely explosive and so now everybody is a little bit rattled, they're a little bit on their toes and trying to get ahead of everything. And that's understandable, but I think that everybody needs to take a deep breath. For the most part, there's good people in this game. Sure, you're going to get some bad apples in hockey and in life, but I think everybody just needs to take a deep breath. If you feel wronged, if you feel abused, persecuted, then you for sure should speak out. But let's not make every single small incident a major deal right now."

The decision to become a full-time Western New Yorker was a big deal. And so is his return to on-ice prominence in the Sabres' lineup.

"It feels good," Okposo said. "I feel like I've kind of come a long way this year and really worked on my game. I feel like I'm in a pretty good place with it since I've been back, so I just want to keep pushing and keep getting better."

How Andrew Hammond brought his idea for a Buffalo-inspired goalie mask to life

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

December 24, 2019

Andrew Hammond's "Hamburglar" nickname has followed him to each of his NHL stops. He's done his part by sporting the cartoon image of the McDonaldland burglar on his goalie mask in different forms since his early days in Ottawa.

After signing a one-year, two-way contract with the Sabres in July, Hammond wanted to add a little Western New York flavor to his mask art. He's been known as the "Hamburglar" since his college career at Bowling Green. The nickname gained national recognition when he carried the Senators to the Stanley Cup playoffs late in the 2014-15 season, going 20-1-2 with a .941 save percentage. During that run, Ottawa fans began to toss hamburgers on the ice to celebrate wins.

When moving to the Sabres' AHL affiliate, the Rochester Americans, Hammond brainstormed a way to localize his now-famous "Hamburglar" mask.

"The process, when you get the mask painted, is my painter will send me an email with broad questions if you have ideas, themes you want to go with, what colors you're looking for, sometimes other masks that you like and you follow along with that style," Hammond said. "For me, it was my first time to Buffalo/Rochester living here and I wanted to have something that I thought went with the area."

The 31-year-old Hammond came up with an idea, but in order to bring it to life, he had to find the right artist. The creative mind behind Hammond's previous masks, Jason Bartziokas, had recently left the business.

Enter Sylvie Marsolais and partner Alexandre Mathys, the creative duo at Sylabrush based west of Montreal. For Marsolais, a hockey goalie herself who grew up in Quebec and has been playing the sport for about 25 years, there is more to the artistic process than taking an idea and a request to "draw this."

"We start first by asking a couple questions to the goalie," Marsolais said. "Just basic things like, what would he like to have on his chin? Does he have a nickname or would he prefer to have a logo there? After that, we do a sketch — me and Alex — and then we send the sketch to the goalie. And when he approves the sketch, we start the painting."

In the 20 years that Marsolais has been in the business, she's built an impressive clientele of professional and amateur goalies who seek her out to come up with their designs. The masks of Tampa Bay Lightning starter Andrei Vasilevskiy, Columbus Blue Jackets starter Joonas Korpisalo, Tristan Jarry of the Pittsburgh Penguins and Dallas Stars backup Anton Khudobin are counted among her latest designs.

Hammond's idea that made the cut was an image featuring "Hamburglar" going over Niagara Falls in a barrel. The concept is a morbid, yet fascinating, part of Western New York's history. Since 1901, only 12 people have barreled over the Falls and lived to tell the story.

Before Marsolais and Mathys went to work, though, they considered one other idea.

"I think he's a bit of a funny guy by his previous masks," Marsolais said. "So he wanted to keep his 'Hamburglar' and he wanted him to do something funny like going down Niagara Falls in a barrel. His other idea was to have the Buffalo Bills Mafia and have Hammy jumping from maybe a Zamboni or something and jumping on a table."

Hammond's inspiration for the Bills-themed mask came from the NFL fan base's notorious tailgating behavior, which includes the rowdiest fans jumping off the tops of cars onto (and sometimes through) tables. He also recognized the Sabres' connection to the Bills, with Terry and Kim Pegula owning both Buffalo franchises.

"Outside of the Sabres, probably the most passionate thing about this area is the Buffalo Bills," Hammond said. "I try making (the mask art) funny at times and you see all the videos that are coming across that go viral of people

jumping through tables, so I thought if the 'Hamburglar' was jumping through a table, it might draw a few extra fans or something.

"But, I think from the painter's perspective, it may have been a little easier to have the 'Hamburglar' going over the Falls rather than through a table off a port-a-potty or something."

Marsolais explained why they landed on the Niagara Falls theme from the artists' perspective.

"We always start with one sketch and we'll redo it if they really don't like it," she said. "He told us he liked a mask we did in the past for Jeff Glass when he played for the San Diego Gulls. He wanted to have the colors similar to that, like the same kind of recipe, so we based the design on a little bit of Glass's previous elements. So we started with the two ideas and we discussed that, Alex and I, the one with the barrel and Niagara Falls were more representative of the Buffalo area and the team and that's why we went with that idea."

A goalie's mask is an artist's canvas, but the functions of the mask — the area for the cage and the fit on a player's head — don't leave the artist with much real estate to work with. It's one thing to come up with an idea that could go viral if done right, but it's another to find a combination that fits the surface area and represents the artistic vision of each person involved.

Creating the mask from first sketch to finished product, Marsolais said, takes anywhere from 20 to 60 hours, depending on the complexity of the designs.

"With the kind of design Andrew wanted, and to get something similar to Jeff Glass, it wasn't leaving enough room to be able to do that," she said. "So we thought the other idea, the barrel, was better for that. The idea of the Buffalo Bills Mafia was good, too; we just thought (the barrel) was fitting better with the design and representing the Buffalo Sabres better than the Buffalo Bills because they're the football team."

Nailing a goalie mask is a point of pride for all involved. It gets people to notice the goalies and artists alike.

A mask connecting Buffalo's two sports franchises may have attracted outside attention for the message alone. But, on top of the artistic challenges, Hammond knew the Bills Mafia tribute might face other roadblocks.

"It's got to get approved by (Sabres equipment manager) Dave Williams up in Buffalo, but it never got to that point really," Hammond said. "We erred on the side of caution and it turned out great, so I don't have any regrets about that. Who knows, maybe in the future it can still happen. We'll see."

Sabres now have time to think about the chances they missed — and the challenges to come

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

December 23, 2019

OTTAWA — Sometimes a team just gets beat by a goalie who's in the zone. Sometimes a couple of mistakes wind up beating you. When you've lost four of the past five games, sometimes all of those things will happen.

A 3-1 loss on the road to the Senators on Monday isn't what the Sabres were counting on as they head into the Christmas break. After bouncing back from a terrible loss to Philadelphia with a win against Los Angeles, the Sabres felt it was a chance to string a couple of wins together and use that to head into a wicked schedule after the break.

Craig Anderson didn't let that happen. He made 43 saves, highlighted by a sprawling blocker save on Evan Rodrigues in the third period. That save, in particular, summed up the game for Buffalo.

"I think the 25 scoring chances in 44 shots speak for themselves — Anderson had a world-class game today," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "We had good control early in the game, but we weren't creating the net pressure that we should've out of the puck control we had. They were opportunistic on their chances."

Ottawa's two goals came from Jean-Gabriel Pageau taking advantage of Sabres mistakes in the defensive end. On the first goal, Brady Tkachuk beat Jake McCabe in a puck battle on the end boards. Jack Eichel left Pageau to help out. By the time Sam Reinhart recognized he had to slide to cover Pageau, Tkachuk had the puck on the way to Pageau for a rapid-fire snap shot that beat Linus Ullmark.

Pageau's go-ahead goal in the third period occurred when he skated around Zach Bogosian to drive the net and create a chance. After Ullmark made the stop, Bogosian committed to crashing the net to protect the crease as the Senators brought pressure from the middle of the ice and from the opposite wing. Bogosian's effort sent him skating into Ullmark while Pageau slipped out, collected his own rebound and scored.

Those two breakdowns turned into two goals on a night when Ullmark played well. That's how things go sometimes.

"In the end, it's a failed opportunity. We just didn't use the opportunities we created and we had," Krueger said. "Anderson was as good as it gets, and we just need to regroup. Our goal as a team is to be in every game as much as we can. We were definitely in this one, and we have to take the good things with us, and we have to believe that more often than not we'll win a game like today."

There were good takeaways. The 44 shots on goal were the most the Sabres have had in a game this season and the second time they've had 40-plus. According to NaturalStatTrick.com, the Sabres dominated at five-on-five, holding a 50-30 advantage with unblocked shot attempts. They out-chanced the Senators 37-14 and had a 15-6 advantage in high-danger scoring chances.

Jeff Skinner, who hasn't scored in 10 consecutive games, had a dominant game with Jimmy Vesey and Marcus Johansson. As a unit, they generated 11 scoring chances, outshot opposing lines 11-5 and were 14-9 on unblocked shot attempts. Skinner alone recorded five shots on goal and was a persistent threat.

"I've just got to fight through it, that's kind of the way it's going for me right now," Skinner said. "We just got to work through it. Their goalie made some good saves. They did a good job of pushing us to the outside and eliminating our second opportunities. You have to fight through that and try to find ways to generate chances inside and finish our chances."

The makeshift line of Rodrigues centering Conor Sheary and Zemgus Girgensons gave the Sabres a spark, too. That unit produced the Sabres' lone goal, with Girgensons tipping a pass from Rodrigues past Anderson. For Girgensons, it was his sixth of the season and pushed him past the total he had a year ago. In Rodrigues' case, the assist was his first point in 12 games.

"We thought Rodrigues and Sheary really answered the bell today," Krueger said. "They brought in a lot of energy, they brought some speed with them, and with Z in there, there was something special going on. They scored the one goal and created multiple opportunities, and that's something that's exciting out of the game today."

On a night when Eichel's line had its hands full dealing with the Senators trio of Tkachuk, Pageau and Connor Brown, the secondary lines provided the help they desperately need with consistency. Although Kyle Okposo missed the game with an illness, the setup with 11 forwards and seven defensemen has allowed Krueger to shorten his bench late in games to go with the guys who are working out best. On Monday, that allowed him to find, perhaps, a line that can provide a spark to two players, Rodrigues and Sheary, who clearly need to get their offense going.

"I thought Rodrigues, in general, functioned well as a line," Krueger said. "Once Conor got his legs, and he hasn't played that much lately, I thought he was skating the way he needs to, battling the way he needs to, and with Rodrigues, it was a strong performance he can now build on."

Apart from the positive takeaways, negatives remained:

- Krueger noted that the power play, which went 0-for-2, didn't give the Sabres a lift. The power play has been better for the past few weeks after going through a miserable stretch, but the memory remains of previous games in which special teams sputtered.
- Eichel's line had a tough game compared with how it has been rolling in the past month-plus. The line was out-attempted and had fits trying to deal with Tkachuk's line. Considering how much the Eichel line has carried the team all season, that group is allowed an off game, hard as they are to see. To the credit of Tkachuk's line, it was relentless all game.

With Christmas break in effect until Dec. 27 and the roster freeze in effect until 12:01 a.m. ET on Dec. 28, the Sabres will head into their next five games staring at a brutal stretch: a home-and-home against Boston, New Year's Eve against Tampa Bay, Jan. 2 against Edmonton and Jan. 4 against Florida. Four home games and a lot of divisional points are on the line.

It's time to get right.

After years of scoring, Sabres' Kyle Okposo thriving in new checking role

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 27, 2019

BUFFALO – It's pretty easy to tell when Kyle Okposo's thriving. At his best, the Sabres winger is in the thick of the action, bumping bodies and aggressively pursuing and moving the puck.

"I love the grind," said Okposo, whose Sabres host the Boston Bruins tonight at KeyBank Center following a three-day Christmas break. "I love just being hard on pucks down low, taking pucks to the net, fighting for every inch, hunting pucks down, creating turnovers.

"I think that stuff, I thrive on that and I really enjoy doing that."

In eight outings since returning from a concussion Dec. 7, Okposo, 31, has been one of the Sabres' top and most active forwards, scoring three goals and pumping 20 shots on net.

Okposo's defensive play, meanwhile, has remained strong. Sabres coach Ralph Krueger often utilizes the veteran to close out tight games.

Twelve years into his career, at an age when many scorers are graying or no longer assets, Okposo has embraced a new checking role and essentially reinvented himself this season.

"Highly paid veteran players accepting new roles is difficult transition for most players," said one scout who has watched Okposo regularly over the years.

So what has helped Okposo, who's in the fourth season of a seven-year, \$42 million contract, adapt so well?

"He seems to be moving his feet and skating better," the scout said. "This allows him to play with more pace which allows him to get in on the forecheck and pursue the puck. I think he was used to playing with good players that would go and get him the puck."

After suffering a scary concussion in March 2017 – he was hospitalized in intensive care – Okposo often struggled for two seasons.

His offensive production dropped. His rating skyrocketed to a ghastly minus-34 in 2017-18. His ice time plummeted. He suffered at least two more concussions.

This season, Okposo returned hellbent on making an impact.

"I was ready to do whatever the team asked of me," he said Sunday.

Not surprisingly, Krueger cast Okposo in a new role, putting him at right wing beside center Johan Larsson and Zemgus Girgensons.

"I ... found some chemistry with Larry and Z right away," Okposo said. "I think we've been pretty solid all season. Just whatever the team needs, that's what I'm prepared to do."

Krueger said: "Kyle has not asked for a shortcut to the role that he has right now. He, from Day One in training camp, has put in the work. He came ready, came in great shape and he has 100% embraced the habits we are looking for as coaches."

From the get-go, Okposo's trio has been perhaps the Sabres' most consistent and soundest defensively, remaining together nearly all season.

Girgensons, Larsson and Okposo have the sixth-lowest goals-against per 60 minutes – just 1.47 – of any line or defense tandem in the NHL, according to MoneyPuck.com.

Okposo, having scored 18 or more goals in a season six times, is the only player with a significant offensive history in the big leagues.

Still, the line has generated offense and loads of zone time. At 53.7%, Okposo has the highest Corsi For – the percentage of shot attempts by his team while he’s on the ice five-on-five – on the Sabres, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

Larsson (52.1%) ranks fourth on the team in Corsi For and second among Sabres forwards. Meanwhile, Girgensons (51%) stands eighth overall and fourth among forwards.

Okposo said he enjoys the simplicity the line showcases.

“We make some plays at times, but a lot of the times it’s little 10-foot plays, little support plays in the offensive zone,” said Okposo, who has compiled four goals, eight points and an even rating this season.

Okposo, who’s used to playing on the first or second line, said his new role is “definitely a bit different.” While he said he possesses the same mentality, he’s playing fewer minutes than in the past.

Through 27 games this season, Okposo has averaged 11 minutes, 24 seconds. In 2018-19, he averaged a career-low 13:47 a contest.

Earlier in his career, he usually played around 18 or 19 minutes a game.

“It’s something that was an adjustment,” he said. “There’s times in a game where maybe you’re not going as frequently, and then you have to be ready for that next shift and just to be prepared to play a sound game, whether it’s offensively or defensively.”

Of course, concern was high when Okposo suffered another concussion Nov. 16. But after missing 10 games, he has returned at a level arguably higher than his early-season form.

In Okposo’s last two appearances – the flu sidelined him for Monday’s 3-1 road loss to the Ottawa Senators – he played 16:52 and 15:22, his highest totals this season.

“Kyle’s just building an exciting season,” Krueger said. “After his injury, he’s become a bigger offensive threat. We have a lot of confidence in him without the puck.”

Former Sabre Uwe Krupp loved starting career in Buffalo: ‘It was a special time’

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 24, 2019

BUFFALO – Their relationship started in 1986. Uwe Krupp was a teenager who had just joined the West Germans for the World Championship in Moscow. Ralph Krueger was the team’s veteran star.

“I was a really young player on a very experienced German team,” said Krupp, a 6-foot-6 defenseman who played 327 games with the Sabres in the late 1980s and early 1990s. “Ralph was one of the older players. There wasn’t so much talking to the lanky, too tall, skinny kid from Cologne. But Ralph was there every day, he took a moment to say hi, see how it goes.

“It’s been a relationship since then, really. Then your paths cross again after hockey.”

Krupp often coached against Krueger, who led the Swiss, at the World Championship and Olympics. Krupp also had Krueger’s son, Justin, on two junior teams.

Krueger respects and trusts Krupp, so before the Sabres hired him as coach in May, he called his friend to ask his opinions of the team and Buffalo.

“He always spoke proudly of his time here in Buffalo,” Krueger said.

Krupp told Krueger he was “going to love it” in Buffalo.

“The hockey aspect of it, you’ll go to a great setup, everything’s going to be on a very high level,” Krupp said. “But I think the part (that) was important for me to tell him, because knowing him, he’s a real-people oriented person, is that he’s going to love the people.

“Western New Yorkers are a special brand. They’re open, very down-to-earth and they love their hockey and they love the Sabres. I think for him, he’s come to a great place.”

It’s a place that still holds a special place close to Krupp’s heart.

On Dec. 12, Krupp, who now coaches HC Sparta Praha in the Czech Republic, helped the Sabres celebrate the 1980s and their first home, Memorial Auditorium, on “Aud Night.”

Krupp first arrived here as a 20-year-old in 1986.

Up to that point, Krupp said he had only lived with his parents. In Buffalo, he was learning English and trying to establish himself in the world’s top hockey league.

“A wide spectrum of adjustments,” he said. “But ... coming to Buffalo, it was special in a way that the environment that was set up in the Sabre organization and just the people of Western New York, it was a real safety net for me. It was a special time.”

Krupp joined the Sabres at a difficult time in the franchise’s history. The legendary Scotty Bowman, who drafted Krupp in the 11th round in 1984, had been fired. The Sabres would finish dead last in 1986-87.

“It was just so much over my head it just didn’t sink in for a long time on a lot of levels,” Krupp said of what was transpiring. “But Scotty always was a huge factor in me coming over, and him leaving the Sabres, you just didn’t know what was happening.”

But Krupp would develop into a terrific defenseman with some help. He said his support network included Mike Foligno, Craig Ramsay, Mike Ramsey and Lindy Ruff.

“They were exceptional people,” he said. “They took care of me.”

Krupp played for some talented-laden Sabres teams that always seemed to underachieve. In 1989-90, for example, they finished third in the 21-team NHL, yet fell to the Montreal Canadiens in the Adams Division semifinal.

He never won a single playoff round with the Sabres.

"We were missing that one piece of the puzzle that gave us the edge to move it on to the next next round," Krupp said. "There were great teams, they were good players. You look at when the guys left, they've all had a measure of success and won Cups and gained a measure of respect around the league.

"So it's a little sad in that way that we didn't."

In October 1991, the Sabres traded Krupp to the New York Islanders in the blockbuster deal that included Pat LaFontaine and Pierre Turgeon.

In 1996, Krupp's overtime winner in Game 4 of the Stanley Cup final clinched the Colorado Avalanche's first championship.

"It's brought up from time to time," Krupp said of the memorable goal, "but ... I don't really live that moment very often."

Sabres send Curtis Lazar to Amerks

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 24, 2019

BUFFALO – The Sabres sent forward Curtis Lazar back to the Rochester Americans following Monday's 3-1 road loss to the Ottawa Senators.

Lazar, 24, played in two games during his recall, his third this season.

The Sabres began their three-day Christmas break today. They don't play again until they host the Boston Bruins on Friday.

By then, two Sabres forwards who missed Monday's game – Johan Larsson (upper body) and Kyle Okposo (flu) – could be ready to play.

Lazar has scored one goal in eight games with the Sabres this season.

In other news, Team USA today named Sabres prospect Mattias Samuelsson its captain for the World Junior Championship, which begins later this week in the Czech Republic.

Samuelsson, 19, is a sophomore defenseman at Western Michigan. The Sabres selected him in the second round in 2018, 32nd overall.

Sabres fall short in Ottawa with 3-1 loss to Senators

By Adam Unger

WKBW

December 23, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — The Buffalo Sabres will go into their Christmas break on a bad note after a 3-1 loss to the Ottawa Senators on Monday night. Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored Ottawa's first two goals, the latter of which was the game winner. Buffalo's lone goal was scored by Zemgus Girgensons. Linus Ullmark made 29 saves in the loss, whereas the Senators' Craig Anderson made 43. The Sabres' next game will be at home against the Boston Bruins on Friday, December 27th.

5 observations from Monday's loss:

Out of options

Kyle Okposo was a last-second scratch with an illness tonight. I'm not saying that with him healthy, the Sabres would've gone with 12 forwards and six defensemen. But without Okposo, they had no option. There are eleven healthy forwards and eight healthy defensemen.

As of late, Zach Bogosian has been the odd man out. Tonight, it was Colin Miller. That extra defenseman in the lineup has worked for stretches, but tonight it became the only option. Rolling without four full lines of forwards could also subdue secondary scoring since it leaves two forwards in no man's land.

New line, new opportunity

When Jeff Skinner was one of the forwards in no man's land, I noticed this combination a few weeks ago. He was sent out with Jimmy Vesey and Marcus Johansson. Two of the three are new to Buffalo this season. All of them had established stretches of their careers elsewhere. Talent wise, they're all on a similar level.

The three of them complemented each other well, especially when entering the offensive zone. Their creativity created scoring chances on the rush without having a numbers advantage. That line couldn't cash in on Monday night, but they created more than their fair share of opportunities.

Protect the circles

The Sabres' defense was porous throughout the game, especially in the areas where it mattered most. Late in the first period, when the puck was jammed in the corner, Brady Tkachuk moved it to a wide open Jean-Gabriel Pageau. He put the Senators on the board with less than a minute to go until intermission.

Early on in the second period, another chance of the same caliber presented itself to Ottawa. Linus Ullmark made it across the crease in time to make a great save, but he shouldn't have even had to do so.

Ugly goals can be pretty

Zemgus Girgensons had to go without both of his regular linemates tonight. He was a key factor in the rotation of five forwards below the Olofsson-Eichel-Reinhart line and the Vesey-Johansson-Skinner line. He was also a key presence on the stat sheet with the Sabres' only goal of the game.

He did it by doing what the LOG line usually does: getting to the front of the net. A pass in front from Evan Rodrigues led to a perfect opportunity for a deflection for Girgensons. The goal itself was pretty because Girgensons was willing to get to the area where ugly goals are scored. His sixth of the year puts him behind four other Sabres: Eichel, Olofsson, Reinhart, and Skinner.

Getting pucks to the net

The Sabres peppered Craig Anderson with 44 shots on goal tonight. They just didn't get enough out of it to get the win. Evan Rodrigues led the way with six shots on goal. Jeff Skinner had five, and Jack Eichel, Jimmy Vesey, and Victor Olofsson each had four. In that much volume, they'll get to twine. They just couldn't tonight.

Sabres fall to Senators 3-1

By Josh Reed

WIVB

December 23, 2019

(WIVB)—The Sabres limp into the holiday break with another loss.

The team has just one win(3 points) in the past 5 games.

Ottawa was led by Jean-Gabriel Pageau's two goals and Brady Tkachuk added a goal in the 3-1 Sens win.

Senators goalie Craig Anderson stopped 43 of the 44 shots he faced.

Zemgus Girgensons had the Sabres only goal of the game.

Jack Eichel's personal 18-game point streak came to an end in Ottawa.

Buffalo's power play was 0-2.

The Sabres next game is Friday at home against the Boston Bruins.

Samuelsson to captain United States at World Junior Championship

NHL.com

December 24, 2019

Mattias Samuelsson was named captain of the United States for the 2020 IIHF World Junior Championship.

The 19-year-old defenseman, a Buffalo Sabres prospect, is playing in the tournament for the second straight time. He was a plus-3 in seven games to help the U.S. finish second at the 2019 WJC.

Defenseman K'Andre Miller (New York Rangers) and forward Oliver Wahlstrom (New York Islanders) were named alternate captains. Like Samuelsson, each played in the 2019 WJC.

"I'm excited about this group," U.S. coach Scott Sandelin said. "We've got five returners who are going to be a big part of this team. Going back to the summer (World Junior Summer Showcase), being around them in their second year, the maturity and leadership they showed is what we were looking for."

Also returning from the 2019 WJC are forward Jack Drury (Carolina Hurricanes) and Spencer Knight (Florida Panthers), who was the third goalie and didn't play.

The 2020 WJC will be played in the Czech Republic starting Thursday and running through Jan. 5. The U.S. is in Group B for the preliminary round, along with Canada, Russia, Czech Republic and Germany, and will play at Ostravar Arena in Ostrava. Group A consists of Finland, the defending champion, along with Sweden, Switzerland, Slovakia and Kazakhstan, and will play its preliminary-round games at Werk Arena in Trinec.

NHL Network will broadcast 20 games live, including the United States playing Canada on Thursday (1 p.m. ET), as well as the semifinals, consolation game and final.

U.S. WORLD JUNIOR CHAMPIONSHIP ROSTER

GOALIES: Spencer Knight, Boston College, H-EAST, (Florida Panthers); Isaiah Saville, Nebraska-Omaha, NCHC (Vegas Golden Knights); Dustin Wolf, Everett, WHL (Calgary Flames)

DEFENSEMEN: Ty Emberson, Wisconsin, BIG10 (Arizona Coyotes); Jordan Harris, Northeastern, H-EAST (Montreal Canadiens); Zachary Jones, UMass, H-EAST (New York Rangers); K'Andre Miller, Wisconsin, BIG10 (New York Rangers); Mattias Samuelsson, Western Michigan, NCHC (Buffalo Sabres); Spencer Stastney, Notre Dame, BIG10 (Nashville Predators); Cameron York, Michigan, BIG10 (Philadelphia Flyers)

FORWARDS: John Beecher, Michigan, BIG10 (Boston Bruins); Bobby Brink, Denver, NCHC (Philadelphia Flyers); Cole Caufield, Wisconsin, BIG10 (Montreal Canadiens); Jack Drury, Harvard, ECAC (Carolina Hurricanes); Parker Ford, Providence, H-EAST (2020 draft eligible); Curtis Hall, Yale, ECAC (Boston Bruins); Arthur Kaliyev, Hamilton, OHL (Los Angeles Kings); Shane Pinto, North Dakota, NCHC (Ottawa Senators); Jacob Pivonka, Notre Dame, BIG10 (New York Islanders); Nicholas Robertson, Peterborough, OHL (Toronto Maple Leafs); Alex Turcotte, Wisconsin, BIG10 (Los Angeles Kings); Oliver Wahlstrom, Bridgeport, AHL (New York Islanders); Trevor Zegras, Boston University, H-EAST (Anaheim Ducks)

Mailbag: Eichel's chances of winning Hart Trophy; holiday wish list

By Dan Rosen

NHL.com

December 24, 2019

Here is the Dec. 24 edition of Dan Rosen's weekly mailbag. If you have a question, tweet it to @drosennhl and use #OvertheBoards.

Is Jack Eichel a darkhorse for the Hart Trophy this season? It's hard to not make a case considering how hot he's playing. And what impact should the Sabres have come trade deadline? Should they be all in for depth scoring? -- @SPGavin0409

Eichel is a candidate for the Hart Trophy, which is awarded to the Most Valuable Player of the regular season. The Buffalo Sabres forward had points in 18 straight games before being held without a point in a 3-1 loss to the Ottawa Senators on Monday. He has shot up my list for Hart Trophy candidates and right now he'd be No. 2 behind Colorado Avalanche center Nathan MacKinnon if I had a vote. The Sabres are 13-8-5 in games in which Eichel has a point and 4-5-2 when he fails to score a point. They lost 6-1 against the Flyers in the one game he missed this season. Eichel has eight more goals (24) and 17 more points (51) than Victor Olofsson, who is second on the Sabres.. He doesn't have another driving force on his team like Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl for the Edmonton Oilers, or Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak for the Boston Bruins.

The Sabres need more scoring. They could look for help in a trade if they're still in the race. But they need the players on the team to give Eichel help. Forward Jeff Skinner had two points, both assists, in his past 10 games. He needs to pick up his production.

Chris Kreider is most likely out before the trade deadline. The Rangers have great young prospects. Is it time to maybe not go the route of getting another first-round pick and maybe instead get an NHL ready player in return? -- @1994_nyr

The New York Rangers have to go with what the market dictates if and/or when they decide to trade Kreider, a forward who can become an unrestricted free agent on July 1. The Devils didn't get an NHL-ready player from the Arizona Coyotes in their trade for Taylor Hall, who is also a pending UFA. There may have been a trade or two that included an NHL-ready player that New Jersey general manager Ray Shero was contemplating, but he opted to get a two draft picks, including a first-round pick in the 2020 NHL Draft, and three prospects from the Coyotes for Hall.

I wouldn't expect the Rangers to get a package that enticing if they decide to trade Kreider, but it's not impossible to think they can do so. The Rangers traded center Kevin Hayes, who was a pending UFA, to Winnipeg before last season's NHL Trade Deadline and got two draft picks, including the Jets' first-round pick in the 2019 NHL Draft, and forward Brendan Lemieux. I thought that was a steal for the Rangers. Lemieux has since become an integral third-line and second power-play unit forward for the Rangers. The Jets were knocked out of the playoffs in the Western Conference First Round. Hayes was traded to and signed with the Philadelphia Flyers. The Rangers sent that first-round pick and defenseman Neal Pionk back to the Jets to get defenseman Jacob Trouba.

That trade could also serve as a cautionary tale of why a team won't give up that much in a trade for only Kreider. My guess is, if the Rangers choose to trade Kreider, they will need to make it a bigger trade if that want to get more than a prospect and/or a high draft pick.

Since it's the holidays, what is on your wishlist of things you hope to see in the second half of the season? -- @Rob_Oswald

A healthy Sidney Crosby, because the NHL is always better when the Pittsburgh Penguins captain, who has been out since Nov. 9 after having core muscle surgery, is playing. He's 40 games away from 1,000 for his career, a mark he would have hit long ago if not for his injuries. ... For Arizona Coyotes goalie Darcy Kuemper, who is week to week, to overcome his lower-body injury sustained on Dec. 19 in enough time to regain his place as a Vezina Trophy candidate. ... For rookie forwards Jack Hughes of the New Jersey Devils and Kaapo Kakko of the New York Rangers to pick up their play and production enough to stop any questions about if they were the right picks, because they were the right picks and it sometimes takes 18-year-old players time to adjust to the NHL. ...

Whatever Marchand and Pastrnak do to make news and highlights during 2020 Honda NHL All-Star Weekend in St. Louis because we all know the forwards know how to play to the crowd and have some fun doing it. ... An overcast New Year's Day in Dallas with the temperature around 45 degrees at puck drop for the 2020 Bridgestone NHL Winter Classic between the Dallas Stars and Nashville Predators at Cotton Bowl Stadium (2 p.m. ET; NBC, SN, TVAS). ... Snow in Colorado Springs, Colorado on Feb. 15 for the 2020 NHL Stadium Series game between the Colorado Avalanche and Los Angeles Kings at Air Force Academy Falcon Stadium. ... Stanley Cup Playoff races in each conference that come down to April 4, the last day of the regular season. Better yet, the game between the Calgary Flames and Edmonton Oilers being for one playoff spot, because the Battle of Alberta could use it. ... For McDavid and Draisaitl to battle until the end of the season for the Art Ross Trophy as the League's leading scorer. ... For Alex Ovechkin to become the ninth player in NHL history to score 700 goals, certainly reasonable considering the Washington Capitals forward is 19 away and has 23 this season. ... For Flyers forward Oskar Lindblom to react well to his treatment for Ewing's Sarcoma and have a chance to live a healthy life and resume his career if possible. ... Ditto for Calgary Flames assistant general manager Chris Snow, whose has been diagnosed with ALS.

If the Flyers fail to reach the playoffs, what is next for general manager Chuck Fletcher? Do you see a complete turnover of the roster? -- @theashcity

Definitely not a complete turnover, but I expect Fletcher to be active in the offseason regardless of what happens this season. Some of what he does will depend on the availability of forwards Nolan Patrick (migraine disorder) and Lindblom. It's too early to make that determination. But I wonder if Fletcher's aggressiveness will be focused on defensemen.

Outside of Ivan Provorov, the defensemen for the Flyers could be in flux. I'm not sure what the Flyers will do with Shayne Gostisbehere, who has been hit or miss at times this season and will have three years remaining on his contract. Justin Braun can become an UFA. They might like him enough to re-sign him. If they fall out of the race, the Flyers could trade him. Matt Niskanen and Travis Sanheim will have each have one year remaining on their contracts. Philippe Myers and Robert Hagg can become restricted free agents. Hagg is arbitration eligible. I expect each to be back barring a trade. And goalie Carter Hart will have one year left on his entry-level contract. Safe to say he's not going anywhere.

There are veteran forwards under contract who also aren't going anywhere, including Claude Giroux, Hayes, Sean Couturier, Travis Konecny, James van Riemsdyk and Jakub Voracek. The Flyers may want to try to trade van Riemsdyk and Voracek, but their contracts make that difficult. Van Riemsdyk will have three years remaining on a five-year contract and Voracek will have four years left on an eight-year contract after this season. Scott Laughton and Michael Raffl could still be contributing. Morgan Frost and Joel Farabee should continue to progress. Depending on Patrick and Lindblom, there will be room to make some depth additions.

Eichel streak ends, Sabres lose to Senators

By Callum Fraser

NHL.com

December 23, 2019

OTTAWA -- Jack Eichel's personal point streak ended at 18 games, and the Buffalo Sabres lost to the Ottawa Senators 3-1 at Canadian Tire Centre on Monday.

Eichel, who had 32 points (16 goals, 16 assists) during the streak, tied the longest run Sabres history; Gilbert Perreault had an 18-game point streak from Oct. 24-Dec. 4, 1971. Eichel's run is not officially recognized by the NHL as a point streak because he missed a 6-1 loss at the Philadelphia Flyers on Thursday with a lower-body injury.

"Last time we played them, [Eichel] had four goals," Senators forward Brady Tkachuk said of the Sabres' 4-2 home win on Nov. 16, when Eichel started his streak. "So, something we really focused on was not letting him get those chances. We can't let that happen on home ice."

Tkachuk had a goal and two assists, and Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored twice for the Senators (16-18-4), who are 5-2-3 in their past 10 games heading into the Christmas break.

"Our goal in the last 10 games has been to get back in the pack, because you never know what's going to happen in the second half [of the season]," Tkachuk said. "It was a big game against a divisional team, so we're going to take that and use that when we get back from Christmas break."

Craig Anderson made 43 saves for Ottawa in his first start since sustaining a lower-body injury against Philadelphia on Dec. 7.

"I had several practices here in row where I was able to get back into the swing of things and get the rhythm back," Anderson said. "I think the best thing is just to go out there and play and not think. That was tonight. Just go out there and find the puck."

Zemgus Girgensons scored, and Linus Ullmark made 27 saves for the Sabres (17-14-7), who are 1-3-1 in their past five.

"Twenty-five scoring chances and 44 shots speak for themselves," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "I think Anderson had a world-class game today. We had good control early in the game, but we weren't creating the net pressure that we should've out of the puck control we had. They were opportunistic on their chances."

Pageau one-timed a pass from Tkachuk at the right face-off dot to give the Senators a 1-0 lead with 54 seconds remaining in the first period.

Girgensons redirected a backhand pass from Evan Rodrigues into the top left corner to tie it 1-1 at 15:12 of the second.

"We had ups and downs in this game," Rodrigues said. "Maybe we'd like to see more consistent pressure, but we definitely had our chances. They scored more than we did."

Pageau found a loose puck at the edge of the crease and finished with a backhand to make it 2-1 at 5:16 of the third.

Tkachuk scored into an empty net at 18:35 for the 3-1 final.

They said it

"For us, the important thing at this point in time is to be a part of the [Stanley Cup Playoff] race. We're definitely there, because we believe we're only going to get better. We believe we're going to improve and we're going to get stronger as this season builds, so to be in the mix, as we are now, is what we need to take with us." -- Sabres coach Ralph Krueger on Buffalo's mindset entering the Christmas break

"I was a little worried coming into the game, but then I saw him change sticks in warmups there a couple times, so I knew he wasn't feeling it. I just, in my head, knew to be ready. He can shoot, be ready for anything. Luckily we did a good job taking away his time and space, and frustrated him a little bit." -- Senators goalie Craig Anderson on Sabres center Jack Eichel, who had four shots in 22:33 of ice time

"Certainly, the start [to the season] wasn't what we wanted, but I think we've found our identity a little bit. When we work hard, we stay in games. And we've had some timely goals as of late, we've played well at home, but we've got to continue this after the break." -- Senators coach D.J. Smith

Need to know

Rodrigues had a game-high six shots. ... The Senators are 9-1-1 in their past 11 home games.

What's next

Sabres: Host the Boston Bruins on Friday (7 p.m. ET; ESPN+, SN1, SNE, SNP, MSG-B, NESN, NHL.TV)

Senators: Host the New Jersey Devils on Sunday (5 p.m. ET; RDS2, TSN5, MSG, NHL.TV)

Sabres at Senators preview

By Callum Fraser

NHL.com

December 23, 2019

SABRES (17-13-7) at SENATORS (15-18-4)

7:30 p.m. ET; RDS2, TSN5, MSG-B, NHL.TV

The Game

Jack Eichel can become the first player in Buffalo Sabres history to have a point in 19 consecutive games played when they visit the Ottawa Senators at Canadian Tire Centre.

The center has 32 points (16 goals, 16 assists) in his past 18 games; Gilbert Perreault had an 18-game point streak for the Sabres from Oct. 24-Dec. 4, 1971.

Eichel's run is not officially recognized by the NHL as a point streak because he missed Buffalo's 6-1 loss at the Philadelphia Flyers on Thursday with a lower-body injury.

Goalie Linus Ullmark will start for the Sabres, 1-2-1 in their past four games after a three-game winning streak.

Goalie Craig Anderson will make his first start for the Senators since sustaining a lower-body injury on Dec. 7. He missed six games and dressed as the backup in a 5-4 shootout loss to the Flyers on Saturday.

Ottawa is 4-2-3 in its past nine games following a five-game losing streak.

Players to watch

Sabres forward Victor Olofsson has eight points (four goals, four assists) in a six-game point streak.

Senators forward Anthony Duclair has 15 points (11 goals, four assists) in his past 10 games.

They said it

"He's definitely a goal-scoring threat that we're aware of, but we usually take care of our defense by committee, and I think that's important. Eliminate their time in our zone and it'll be difficult for him to score." -- Sabres coach Ralph Krueger on defending Ottawa forward Anthony Duclair

"What I saw in Buffalo the last time we played them, [Eichel's] speed and that ability might be the best I've seen since I've been around the NHL in the last five years. ... You're going to have to make him go through all five guys every time if you want to shut him down." -- Senators coach D.J. Smith on defending Buffalo center Jack Eichel

Sabres projected lineup

Victor Olofsson -- Jack Eichel -- Sam Reinhart

Jeff Skinner -- Marcus Johansson -- Jimmy Vesey

Zemgus Girgensons -- Curtis Lazar -- Kyle Okposo

Rasmus Asplund -- Evan Rodrigues

Jake McCabe -- Rasmus Ristolainen

Rasmus Dahlin -- Zach Bogosian

Marco Scandella -- Henri Jokiharju

Brandon Montour

Linus Ullmark

Carter Hutton

Scratched: Conor Sheary, Colin Miller

Injured: Johan Larsson (lower body), Tage Thompson (upper body), Vladimir Sobotka (lower body)

Senators projected lineup

Brady Tkachuk -- Jean-Gabriel Pageau -- Connor Brown
Vladislav Namestnikov -- Artem Anisimov -- Tyler Ennis
Nick Paul -- Chris Tierney -- Anthony Duclair
Logan Brown -- J.C. Beaudin -- Colin White

Thomas Chabot -- Cody Goloubef
Mark Borowiecki -- Erik Brannstrom
Maxime Lajoie -- Andreas Englund

Craig Anderson
Marcus Hogberg

Scratched: Mikkel Boedker

Injured: Scott Sabourin (illness), Dylan DeMelo (finger), Nikita Zaitsev (undisclosed), Anders Nilsson (concussion), Ron Hainsey (undisclosed)

Status report

The Sabres could dress 11 forwards and seven defensemen; that will be a game-time decision, Krueger said. ... Sabourin was supposed to play his first game since sustaining a facial injury on Nov. 2, but the forward will sit out because of the flu.

Stat pack

Eichel has 23 points (nine goals, 14 assists) in 14 games against Ottawa. ... Duclair, with 11 goals in December, needs two to tie the Senators record for goals in a month, set by Daniel Alfredsson (13) in November 2005.

4 Sabres prospects vying for World Juniors gold

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

December 25, 2019

Over the next two weeks, four Buffalo Sabres prospects will be competing at the 2020 IIHF World Junior Championship in the Czech Republic in search of a gold medal.

Dylan Cozens, Mattias Samuelsson, Matej Pekar and Erik Portillo will each try to help lead their respective countries to a championship.

Dylan Cozens

Forward, Canada

Height: 6-foot-3 - Weight: 185 pounds

Drafted: 1st round, 7th overall by Buffalo in 2019

The Sabres top pick in the 2019 NHL Draft will get his first taste of the World Junior tournament this week.

After missing the first weekend of the season due to a thumb injury, the 18-year-old center has been on an absolute tear for the Lethbridge Hurricanes of the WHL. In 30 games this season, he's posted 20 goals and 46 points with three game-winning goals. He's currently fourth in the WHL in scoring.

During his junior career, he's totaled 184 points (77+107) in 158 games. He signed his entry-level contract with the Sabres over the summer and skated in three NHL preseason games in September.

Mattias Samuelsson

Defense, United States

Height: 6-foot-4 - Weight: 220 pounds

Drafted: 2nd round, 32nd overall by Buffalo in 2018

Samuelsson will serve as captain of the U.S. national team at the tournament.

He's also one of the captains of his collegiate team at Western Michigan. Through 12 games of his sophomore season, the 19-year-old defenseman has recorded a goal, three assists and 35 penalty minutes.

"(He) certainly [leads] by example more than anything, but he has a voice that people listen to," Western Michigan head coach Andy Murray told NHL.com last summer. "Also, just a tremendous sense of humor. He puts a smile on my face every time I talk to him. He's mature beyond his years."

Samuelsson won silver last year as a member of Team USA. He previously served as captain during the U-18 World Junior tournament in 2018.

Matej Pekar

Forward, Czech Republic

Height: 6-foot-0 - Weight: 170 pounds

Drafted: 4th Round, 94th Overall by Buffalo in 2018

Pekar is building off his productive, but injury-shortened 2018-19 campaign with another strong season for the Barrie Colts. He has 29 points (16+13) through 26 games this season.

Pekar, whose scrappy and relentless efforts have gained notice, had a strong showing in Sabres training camp this season and earned the opportunity to play in one preseason game.

"He's got a good personality on him, wants to learn, wants to get better, works extremely hard - very ratty like that," Sabres forward Kyle Okposo, offering a smirk, back in September. "I think that the advice I could give a young player is don't be afraid to be yourself and push the envelope."

"I think that's really important now, to express yourself, express your personality and just be who you are. You can't change. ... I think he does a really good job of that."

He also played for the Czech Republic last year and will look to show well for his country on home ice.

Erik Portillo
Goaltender, Sweden
Height: 6-foot-6 - Weight: 209 pounds
Drafted: 3rd Round, 67th Overall by Buffalo in 2019

Portillo is one of three goaltenders on Team Sweden's roster along with Lightning draft pick Hugo Alnefelt and Red Wings draft picks Jesper Eliasson. Alnefelt will likely be Sweden's starter to begin the tournament.

In his first North American season, Portillo currently ranks second in the USHL with 12 wins (he's 12-2-1), second with a 2.05 goals-against average and third with a .931 save percentage.

Portillo was named the USHL's Goalie of the Week for the week ending Nov. 19 after stopping a combined 43 of 45 shots in a pair of victories for the Dubuque Fighting Saints.

Portillo, 19, is committed to the University of Michigan for next season.

World Junior Championship schedule
All times ET

Thursday, Dec. 26
Russia vs. Czech Republic, 9 a.m. (NHL Network)
Switzerland vs. Kazakhstan, 9 a.m.
Finland vs. Sweden, 1 p.m.
Canada vs. U.S., 1 p.m. (NHL Network)

Friday, Dec. 27
Slovak vs. Kazakhstan, 9 a.m. (NHL Network)
Germany vs. U.S., 1 p.m. (NHL Network)

Saturday, Dec. 28
Finland vs. Slovakia, 9 a.m. (NHL Network)
Czech Republic vs. Germany, 9 a.m.
Switzerland vs. Sweden, 1 p.m. (NHL Network)
Russia vs. Canada, 1 p.m.

Sunday, Dec. 29
Kazakhstan vs. Finland, 9 a.m. (NHL Network)
U.S. vs. Russia, 1 p.m. (NHL Network)

Monday, Dec. 30
Kazakhstan vs. Sweden, 9 a.m.
Germany vs. Canada, 9 a.m. (NHL Network)
Slovakia vs. Switzerland, 1 p.m.
U.S. vs. Czech Republic, 1 p.m. (NHL Network)

Tuesday, Dec. 31
Sweden vs. Slovakia, 9 a.m. (NHL Network)
Russia vs. Germany, 9 a.m.
Finland vs. Switzerland, 1 p.m.
Canada vs. Czech Republic, 1 p.m. (NHL Network)

Wednesday, Jan. 2 - Quarterfinals

Friday, Jan. 4 - Semifinals

Saturday, Jan. 5 - Medal Games

Stay tuned to Sabres.com for daily updates from the tournament.

Girgensons scores lone goal in loss to Senators

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

December 24, 2019

OTTAWA - If there was one moment to encapsulate the Buffalo Sabres' final game before the holiday break, it was a wrap-around opportunity Evan Rodrigues had in the third period.

The Sabres trailed, 2-1, and Rodrigues was toward the end of a long shift in the Ottawa zone. The puck slid through the blue paint behind goalie Craig Anderson as Rodrigues wrapped behind the Ottawa net, in perfect position to pounce at the other side.

Rodrigues timed it perfectly, only to see Anderson making a lunging stop with his blocker.

"He made the saves he needed to win the game," Rodrigues said afterward.

That save was one of 43 the veteran Anderson made to lead the Senators to a 3-1 victory. The Sabres outshot the Senators, 44-29, with 19 of those shots coming in the final 20 minutes, yet their only goal came on a feed from Rodrigues to Zemgus Girgensons in the second period.

Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored twice for the Senators, including the game-winner at 5:16 of the third period. Brady Tkachuk buried an empty-netter to complete a three-point night, which included the primary assists on both Pageau goals.

The Sabres entered the contest looking to build on their 3-2 victory at home over Los Angeles on Saturday. They began the night with good stretches of possession in the Senators zone, though coach Ralph Krueger felt they initially lacked the net-front presence to capitalize.

"The 25 scoring chances and the 44 shots speak for themselves," Krueger said. "I think Anderson had a world-class game today and we had good control early in the game, but we weren't creating the net pressure we should have out of the puck control we had, and they were opportunistic on their chances."

Pageau opened the scoring with 53.2 seconds remaining in the first period, burying a one-timer fed by Tkachuk from the corner. The Sabres began to attack the net more in the second, eventually connecting on Girgensons' deflection from the slot.

According to NaturalStatTrick.com, high-danger attempts at 5-on-5 during the second and third periods were in Buffalo's favor by a tally of 10-3. With Anderson in net, it didn't matter.

Before his blocker save in the third, Anderson delivered a poke check to stifle Rodrigues on a power play in the second. When the Sabres got bodies in front, Anderson evaded the traffic and swallowed shots without allowing second chances.

"I thought we went really a long stretch there without giving up any big chances," Krueger said. "In the end, it's failed opportunity. We just didn't use the opportunities we created and we had. Anderson was as good as it gets, and we just need to regroup.

"Our goal as a team is to be in every game as much as we can. We were definitely in this one, and we have to take the good things with us, and we have to believe that more often than not we win a game like today."

Linus Ullmark was strong in his own right throughout a 27-save performance. He stopped a Connor Brown breakaway in the first period and robbed Tyler Ennis with his pad on a power play in the second.

Even on Pageau's game-winning goal, Ullmark was able to make the initial save as the diminutive centerman cut across the blue pain. Pageau stuck with his rebound as it drifted wide of the net and buried the puck off his backhand.

The Sabres have three days off for the holiday, a welcomed break from what's been a grueling schedule since their return from Sweden. Their 21 games since Nov. 14 are the most in the NHL. They've had two days between games on just three occasions in that span, all of which included travel days.

While none of the players who spoke after the game found any consolation in their third-period push, Krueger put the first 38 games in perspective. He was disappointed with the result, yes, but remained optimistic about the bigger picture.

"For us, the important thing at this point in time is to be a part of the race," he said. "We're definitely there, because we believe we're only going to get better here. We believe we're going to improve and we're going to get stronger as this season builds.

"So, to be in the mix like we are now is what we need to take with [us]. We have three days to take a deep breath and back at it we go. Right back into the race, which we're having a lot of fun doing it. Out of painful days like today, we tend to grow. So, I'm sure we will this time too."

Girgensons finds chemistry with Rodrigues and Sheary

Girgensons' goal was his sixth in 38 contests this season, already surpassing his 72-game total from last season. He scored seven goals in each of the three seasons prior.

The goal was a product of a drive to the net (along with good hand-eye coordination). Evan Rodrigues carried the puck into the offensive zone and maintained possession after taking a hip check along the boards. With the puck on his backhand, Rodrigues waited a beat and lofted a pass to the slot.

Girgensons drove between two defenders and connected with the pass, deflecting it over Anderson's shoulder.

"I saw him coming and I was just kind of putting it there," Rodrigues said. "He's obviously a big body and strong on the puck so I thought if I just put it there you never know what could happen. Obviously, it turned out to be a good play."

After beginning the night on a line with Curtis Lazar and Rasmus Asplund, Girgensons moved permanently to a line with Rodrigues and Sheary in the third period. They were a consistent presence in the Ottawa zone, including on the shift that ended with Anderson's blocker stop.

Rodrigues finished the night with a game-high six shots. Girgensons and Sheary had two each.

"We thought Rodrigues and Sheary answered the bell today," Krueger said. "They brought in a lot of energy, they brought some speed with them. With Z in there, there was something special going on. They scored the one goal and created multiple opportunities. That's something that's exciting out of the game today."

Okposo sits due to illness

Kyle Okposo did not play due to an illness. The Sabres dressed 11 forwards and seven defensemen in his absence.

Up next

The Sabres return from the Christmas break at home against the Boston Bruins on Thursday. Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30 p.m., or you can listen to the game on WGR 550. Puck drop is scheduled for 7.

Sabres assign Lazar to Amerks

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

December 24, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres announced tonight that the team has assigned forward Curtis Lazar to the Rochester Americans (AHL).

In 18 games with the Amerks, he's picked up 14 points (6+8) and leads the team with 0.78 points per game.

The 24-year-old center has one goal with the Sabres this season in eight games played. He's been up with Buffalo three times this year after signing as a free agent on July 1.

The Amerks are 14-3-1-1 over their last 19 games dating back to Nov. 1, and have earned points in 16 games over that span. Their next game is Friday at home against Belleville. Visit Amerks.com for ticket information and the latest news.

At the Horn: Sabres 1 - Senators 3

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

December 23, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres fired 44 shots Craig Anderson's way, but they only beat the Ottawa Senators goaltender once in a 3-1 loss on Monday.

Zemgus Girgensons scored Buffalo's lone goal and Linus Ullmark made 27 saves.

Evan Rodrigues led the team with six shots on goal at Canadian Tire Centre. Anderson was between the pipes for his first appearance for Ottawa since Dec. 7.

What happened

Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored the game's first goal with 53.2 seconds remaining in the first period, just minutes after Ullmark stopped Connor Brown on a breakaway. On the goal, Brady Tkachuk won a battle in the corner and fed a one-timer to Pageau from the right faceoff circle, who was able to beat Ullmark.

"It felt like we took over the second half of that period," defenseman Marco Scandella told Rob Ray during the first intermission on MSG. "It's unfortunate that we gave up that goal at the end, but I like the way we're playing right now so we're just going to keep at it."

Midway through the second, Ullmark was strong again, stopping Tyler Ennis on the doorstep while shorthanded.

The Sabres tied it up with 4:48 left in the second when Girgensons redirected a bouncing backhand attempt from the halfwall by Rodrigues.

However, the Senators regained the lead 5:16 into the third period when Pageau knocked in a rebound for his second goal of the game.

And with 9:17 remaining in the third, Anderson made a tremendous save on Rodrigues, diving backwards into the crease and stopping Rodrigues' effort with his out-stretched blocker.

Brady Tkachuk was then awarded a goal when he was tripped up by Henri Jokiharju with the net empty with 1:24 remaining in regulation.

What it means

The Sabres are now 17-14-7 on the season and 6-11-4 on the road.

Jack Eichel saw his career-best 18-game personal point streak snapped. He tied Gilbert Perreault (Oct. 24 to Dec. 4, 1971) for the most consecutive games played with a point in franchise history.

It was the NHL's fifth-longest personal point streak in the last decade, trailing only Taylor Hall (26 in 2017-18), Patrick Kane (26 in 2015-16), Sidney Crosby (25 in 2010-11) and Patrick Kane (20 in 2018-19).

Victor Olofsson's six-game point streak also came to an end.

Roll the highlight film

Here's Girgensons' sixth goal of the season:

Up next

The Sabres will have the next three days off for the League-mandated holiday break.

They're back in action on Friday when the Boston Bruins come to town to kick off a home-and-home set against the two clubs. Faceoff is scheduled for 7 p.m. Tickets are on sale now.

Sabres readying for tight game in Ottawa

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

December 23, 2019

OTTAWA - Before they head home for the holiday break, the Buffalo Sabres have one last game to take care of against the Ottawa Senators tonight at Canadian Tire Centre.

Coming off a 3-2 victory at home over the Los Angeles Kings on Saturday, coach Ralph Krueger expressed confidence that his team was focused on the task at hand following their game day meeting.

"We're all feeling that opportunity and your families are pulling you in that direction, of course, so that's the human side of it," Krueger said. "But Ottawa has that too, so I think the key for us beginning here with this morning session that we've had is to just - as we have been doing all year - is just making that picture really small and taking care of our next task, whatever that is: the next shift, the next period, and so on and just build the game here tonight.

"But I feel a hunger here in the group to build on that L.A. game. I thought it was one that gave us a lot of energy. Against a division rival like this, it's a lot of fun to have this one here tonight."

Linus Ullmark - owner of a 7-1-1 record in his last nine starts - will be in net for the Sabres. Ullmark is undefeated in two career starts against the Senators, including the Sabres' 4-2 win in Buffalo on Nov. 16.

That last meeting will be remembered as the launching pad for what has been the most productive stretch of Jack Eichel's career. After scoring all four goals for the Sabres that night, Eichel has recorded at least a point in each of the 17 games he's played since, tying Gilbert Perreault for the longest personal point streak in franchise history. He leads the NHL with 16 goals and 32 in that span.

Eichel has 23 points (9+14) in 14 career games against Ottawa, his highest output against any opponent. Senators coach D.J. Smith spoke highly of the Sabres captain while addressing the media this morning.

"What I saw in Buffalo the last time we played them, that speed and that ability, might be the best I've seen since I've around the NHL in the last five years," Smith said. "His explosiveness in a 1-on-1 situation is really hard to contain, so you're going to need more than one guy. You're going to have to make him go through all five every time if you want to shut him down."

Beyond Ullmark, the rest of the Buffalo lineup will be revealed during warmups.

Scouting the Senators

As we've already covered, Eichel leads the NHL with 16 goals since the Sabres and Senators last met. The guy right behind him is Senators forward Anthony Duclair, who has 15 goals in that same timeframe.

Duclair's red-hot scoring touch has been a factor in what's been a strong stretch for the Senators of late, having earned at least a point in six of their last seven games (3-1-3). Another is the workload of 22-year-old defenseman Thomas Chabot, who, in the absence of regulars Dylan DeMelo and Nikita Zaitsev, has skated 33-plus minutes in each of their past three games.

"They've definitely improved as a group," Krueger said. "You can see the coaching coming through, watching especially their last few games. We see better habits in their execution, and we're expecting a really tight game tonight. They're a dangerous, hardworking team with a lot of strong individual players."

Craig Anderson will start in net for the Senators. It will be his first appearance since sustaining an injury on Dec. 7.

Who's hot?

- Victor Olofsson enters the contest riding a six-game point streak. He's only the second Sabres rookie to have two such streaks in a single season, joining John Tucker (1984-85).

- Rasmus Ristolainen has nine points (2+7) in Buffalo's last 12 games, including the tying goal against Los Angeles on Saturday. His plus-11 rating in that span ranks fourth in the NHL.

Tune in

Coverage on MSG begins at 7 p.m., or you can listen to the game on WGR 550. Puck drop is scheduled for 7:30.