



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres looking for Rasmus Dahlin to use his shot to ignite offense

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

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Rasmus Dahlin knew what to expect from the St. Louis Blues' defensive-zone coverage Thursday night.

The defending Stanley Cup champions prefer to use man-to-man defense, particularly against a superstar talent such as Jack Eichel. When Eichel circled around the back of St. Louis' net in the second period, Dahlin moved into the left-wing circle and set a pick by lowering his shoulder into Blues defenseman Vince Dunn.

"I saw the opportunity," Dahlin, 19, acknowledged following practice Friday. "I know Eichel likes to skate with the puck, so I tried to pick two guys to give him some room."

The pick, which the linesmen mistook for incidental contact, allowed Eichel to cut toward the slot and unleash a wrist shot for the Sabres' only goal in a 5-1 loss. The sequence illustrated how Dahlin is making a significant impact without the puck in his second NHL season.

The Sabres, though, need Dahlin to make more of an impact with the puck. Coach Ralph Krueger is using video to show Dahlin that his left-handed shot could ignite Buffalo's struggling offense.

"More than anything you have to show him what it creates, and we need to create more second chances," Krueger said. "It's going to come primarily from the defensemen getting pucks to the net. We're working on that kind of imagery so that he sees it in his head. That will then release him to make the brilliant one-on-one move."

Shooting was a focus of Dahlin's over the summer. He estimates that he took 100 during each of his on-ice offseason workouts, yet the former first overall draft pick has rarely unholstered the weapon this season.

Entering Friday, Dahlin ranked last among qualifying Sabres in 5 on 5 shots per 60 minutes, and his total shots per game ranked 12th. Over his past 25 games, Dahlin has recorded more than two shots only four times, despite ranking third among the team's defensemen in average ice time this season.

Dahlin quarterbacks the Sabres' top power-play unit, however, he typically uses his vision and elusiveness to try to create room for Eichel or Victor Olofsson, who is expected to miss the next four to five weeks with a lower-body injury.

Predictability has factored into the Sabres' power-play woes. Opponents game planned against Eichel and Olofsson. Shots from the point could create rebounds in front of the net or create more space for forwards.

"If he's a shooting threat they're going to play him different and defend against him differently," Krueger explained. "It's the same for the power play. We all know that's no secret. We need to get more of a shooting threat in our power play, and it begins at the top. He's so coachable and so excited to see these kind of secondary opportunities that we can create. I know he's going to find a way to get more offense out of his shot."

One of Dahlin's two goals this season occurred on the power play, and he ranks third among all Sabres with 22 shots on the man advantage. For context, Los Angeles' Drew Doughty leads all NHL defensemen with 47 power-play shots, though he has appeared in 10 more games than Dahlin.

The Sabres' languishing power play entered Friday ranked 22nd in the NHL and had the sixth-fewest shots on goal. It had earned only 14 goals on second-chance opportunities. Dahlin has also deferred at 5 on 5, registering only 31 shots in 36 games, the fewest among the team's qualifying defensemen.

"That's a thing I always want to improve on," Dahlin said. "I try to find my lanes. I have to get more of a shot mentality. When I see a lane, I take it."

Video is one pillar of the player development model used by Dahlin's former team in the Swedish Hockey League, Frolunda. He and his former teammates would be shown an entire game, rather than cut-ups of certain plays or sequences.

The process taught him the value of watching video to learn from his mistakes and confirm positive aspects of his play. He's now using it as a tool to gauge when he should pinch in the offensive zone or join his forwards rushing up the ice. Weighing risk versus reward is an important part of a defenseman adding offense.

"You need to find a balance there," Dahlin said. "Sometimes it's difficult to really know if you can go all the time or if you have to defend. It's a tough balance. When you find the opportunity it's pretty good. When you're wrong, it can affect us really bad."

Despite the low shot totals, Dahlin has two goals among 23 points with a minus-1 rating through 36 games. He has one goal among seven points in 12 games since returning from a concussion Dec. 12. Dahlin is also the Sabres' candidate for the NHL All-Star Game's Last Men In balloting.

Dahlin has blossomed in Krueger's defensive structure. While Dahlin has struggled at times against opponents' top forwards, he is no longer being out-muscled in front of the net or turning the puck over under pressure. His evolution without the puck came following a difficult start to the season.

"We all see the offensive inputs and how we missed him dearly when he was gone, whether it was on the power play or generally what we can create," Krueger said of Dahlin. "He just needs to continue to work on his strength, which is a natural evolution of somebody that age and that whole battle level that's needed for 82 home and away games throughout the season. ... We like his game away from the puck, the way it's growing, but that would be, for me, the next step – continuing to confirm what he's shown us here the last few weeks defensively."

Dahlin's play-making ability made him a Calder Trophy finalist last season. His 44 points were the second-most in NHL history by a defenseman ahead of their 19th birthday, trailing only Phil Housley.

Following his rookie season, Dahlin was determined to physically prepare himself to withstand the rigorous 82-game NHL schedule. A concussion forced him to miss eight games earlier this season, yet he's again showing why he's a cornerstone of the Sabres.

Following back-to-back games with fewer than 20 shots, the Sabres need Dahlin to be part of the solution.

"I've felt good," Dahlin said. "Better, more confident. I think it's my overall game. When you feel calm out there, it gets easier in both zones. I know I can play good in both zones."

Jake McCabe expected to return to Sabres' lineup against Canucks

By Lance Lysowski

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Ralph Krueger's lineup likely will change Saturday when the Sabres host the Vancouver Canucks in KeyBank Center.

Defenseman Jake McCabe, who missed the loss Thursday in St. Louis with an upper-body injury, returned to practice Friday and is on track to play against the Canucks. Additionally, winger Zemgus Girgensons is expected to play after missing practice Friday for what the Sabres called "maintenance."

McCabe, 26, has two goals among seven points and a minus-3 rating in 41 games, and he's averaging the second-most ice time among Sabres' defensemen. Krueger did not reveal when or how McCabe suffered the injury.

McCabe had one shot on goal with a minus-1 rating in 18:44 of ice time last Saturday against the Florida Panthers, but he was a limited participant in the Sabres' skills challenge Sunday and did not practice prior to the team's 5-1 loss Thursday to the Blues.

If McCabe returns, he will give the Sabres eight healthy defensemen against the Canucks. Lawrence Pilut, who played 19:42 against the Blues in his season debut with Buffalo, is still with the team and was paired with Henri Jokiharju during practice Friday.

Girgensons' availability could factor into Krueger's decision to use 11 or 12 forwards against Vancouver. Girgensons had a minus-3 rating in 11:37 against the Blues. If Girgensons is unavailable, the Sabres may dress Zach Bogosian, who is among their top contributors on the penalty kill.

Skinner update

Krueger told reporters following practice Friday that Jeff Skinner is "on track" in his rehab from an upper-body injury suffered Dec. 27 against the Boston Bruins. Skinner has missed five games after sustaining the injury on a hit by David Pastrnak and was expected to return in three to four weeks.

Krueger provided few details when asked about Skinner's progress.

"He's been extremely positive, working hard with the rehab," Krueger said. "So far, everything feels on track. Whatever that track will be, his body will decide it. He's working hard with the rehab group, and he also has the opportunity to watch us from the outside. We'll be tapping into that growth opportunity with him, too. Still talking hockey with him as he rehabs."

Skinner, 27, has 11 goals among 19 points in 39 games this season.

Another audition

Jimmy Vesey is the next Sabre up on the top line. The 26-year-old skated with Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart in practice Friday after the trio logged 8:26 of ice time together at 5 on 5 against St. Louis. The Sabres had more 5-on-5 shot attempts (8-4) than the Blues with Vesey, Eichel and Reinhart on the ice together.

Vesey, who was acquired from the New York Rangers in July, has five goals among 13 points in 41 games with the Sabres. He has only two shots on goal in his past five games and scored 50 goals over his three seasons with the Rangers.

"To be honest, I think I need to shoot more," Vesey said. "I don't know, I've passed up a couple in the last two games. ... So I think I got to get back to the shoot-first mentality, and I'd like to score more goals in front of the net. I think I've done that in my career. I don't think I've had as many opportunities right on top of the crease. So I got to get myself there."

Look ahead

This will be the final matchup between the Sabres and Canucks during their 50th anniversary seasons. Vancouver (23-17-4) entered Friday three points out of the Western Conference's second wild-card spot and has lost back-to-back games since having its seven-game win streak end with a 9-2 loss at Tampa Bay on Tuesday.

Canucks center Elias Pettersson, who won the Calder Trophy over Rasmus Dahlin in June, has 20 goals among a team-high 46 points in 44 games.

"Everyone knows how dangerous he is," Dahlin said of Pettersson. "Hopefully we can stop him."

Goalie decision

Linus Ullmark's run of consecutive starts is likely to end this weekend with the Sabres hosting the Canucks on Saturday at 1 p.m. and facing the Red Wings in Detroit on Sunday. Ullmark has started 13 of the past 14 games, including eight in a row.

Ullmark has a .896 save percentage over his past seven starts, and Carter Hutton has not been in goal for the Sabres since a 6-1 loss to Philadelphia on Dec. 19.

So, what now?

By Jeremy White

WGR 550

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So, what now?

What in the world are the Buffalo Sabres going to do to be good? Ever.

I need something to hold on to. I need something to believe in. The Sabres have a few pieces that generate good feelings, right? Jack Eichel, Rasmus Dahlin, Jeff Skinner, Victor Olofsson, and a few others. Two of those pieces are out of the lineup right now, making sledding even tougher these days.

But I need to believe that the future is bright, and I just struggle with that right now.

At least the tank brought with it visions of an elite player that you could watch every night. And drama, of course. It delivered.

From here, is the plan to just clear the cap? It's a start, and they'll do a lot of that at the end of this year with more than \$30 million coming off the books. The Sabres are carrying about 86 million dollars on the roster.

How much of that belongs to Jason Botterill? Most of it.

Here is a list of players that Botterill inherited, and had no contract decision on:

Kyle Okposo - \$6 million

Rasmus Ristolainen - \$5.5 million

Zach Bogosian - \$5 million

Three players totaling \$16.5 million dollars. And that's to say nothing about the idea of trading away either Ristolainen or Bogosian at any point in the last three years.

Botterill's inaction is still mind-boggling. He's slow-played this roster into short-term salary cap trouble, and will likely use this offseason to unload a problem that he has partially created. Occasionally I'll hear someone make a case that this was the plan all along; that the Sabres were going to follow the Buffalo Bills' plan of dumping off the bad stuff and loading up to go forward. Not only would that have been a tough sell when the general manager was hired, but there's no reason that couldn't have happened this year.

If it was about cap clearance, you dump Ristolainen and Bogosian for whatever. Maybe this is one last kick at the can to drive up any trade value and get whatever blood you can from that stone.

Bogosian has to be gone next year. Ristolainen? Are we sure they're going to let him walk? Another year with No. 55 would feel like another in this seemingly endless cycle of... bleh. If it's about cap clearance, it could have been happening. If it's about cap clearance, you're just throwing Eichel's prime years into a dust bin.

There are good signs mixed in. The Sabres are better at 5-on-5 this year. They're just about average in having the puck, shooting it, and shooting it from good spots. Most of that belongs to Eichel, though.

The thing that's killed them for nearly a decade is something they're doing relatively well right now. No, not Thursday night against the St. Louis Blues. But goaltending and special teams is sinking them into a familiar spot in the standings where 85 points seems like a big mountain to climb.

Trade... the middle parts?

A trade finally came last week with defenseman Marco Scandella going to the Montreal Canadiens for a fourth round draft pick. The Sabres then spun that pick to get forward Michael Frolik from the Calgary Flames. This trade seems like it should take all the effort of sending a mail-in rebate. Was Montreal reluctant to part with that fourth round pick that had belonged to the San Jose Sharks? Maybe the other general managers didn't want to

move on it or an injury delayed it or who knows, but we know it's not the "roster surgery" we've talked about so often. We're all waiting for more.

There have been good moves mixed in. Think we're generally happy with the Brandon Montour and Henri Jokiharju trades. The Skinner trade was magnificent, but that was for one year of service and now you're paying him top dollar to play on a line that takes a lot of the shine off that. The coach puts a nice tone on what they're trying to do, but expecting anything different from this roster is pretty tough.

Will they aim to add a goaltender? The Sabres are not giving up a ton of chances; they're playing a slow, safe defensive game. But when they give up the high-danger chances, they're going in. They're 29th in the NHL in high danger save percentage, so another goaltender to take Hutton's minutes and give Ullmark a day or two off here or there? Problem is your salary cap, of course. This whole time while the clear need was swapping a defenseman for a forward, turns out they also developed a need for help in net.

Curtis Lazar and Lawrence Pilut could have been here as soon as they were available. They could have about the same team, but with \$10 million more in cap space if they just decided that anyone wasn't good enough to play for them. Move along from Zemgus Girgensons, waive Evan Rodrigues, buy out Vladimir Sobotka, scuttle Bogosian or Ristolainen or Jake McCabe, and let young guys come up in those spots. You might find someone and also have space to make a supplemental move.

When will they be good? Is the best to hope to win another lottery, or wait for Dylan Cozens to arrive?

I need something to point to. Is this where I reach for Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen?

The cupboard isn't as bare as it has been. I get that. The wait has been long, but many Sabres fans will be fearful of another promise of what's to come. It seems that the conversation always moves forward to a year sometime off in the distance. The organization will restock, the players will grow together, the depth gets solid, the goaltending is good, the coach pulls the right strings, and then the Sabres will be good.

So when will "then" be now?

Tall tales and short stories: Sabres' 50th anniversary brings the best out of alumni

By John Vogl

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BUFFALO, N.Y. – Matthew Barnaby rarely passed up the chance to hit. He sure wasn't going to let this blast pass.

Brad May called Barnaby over and asked his old teammate about the Sabres' line that featured Pat LaFontaine, Alexander Mogilny and May.

"You ever see the flashing boxes on 'Sesame Street' where one thing doesn't belong?" Barnaby said with a wide smile. "That's it."

May laughed alongside his buddy, relishing their time together again. As the Sabres celebrate their 50th anniversary, they've hosted themed nights to honor the 1970s, '80s and '90s, captains and Memorial Auditorium. The events have been a hit with the fans, but they've meant even more to the former players.

"I haven't felt like this, so full, in a long time," May said in KeyBank Center. "I've played in eight different cities, but I get it in Buffalo. It makes me whole."

The longtime winger isn't alone. From Gilbert Perreault to Dave Andreychuk to Michael Peca, the alumni have had a buoyancy about them while pulling on old jerseys and talking about good times.

"To me," retired defenseman Jay McKee said, "I'll always be a Buffalo Sabre."

Here are stories and one-liners told by the returnees.

McKee, drafted 14th overall in 1995, joined the Sabres the following year at age 19. Maybe more than anyone, he's glad Buffalo had Hall of Famer Dominik Hasek in goal.

"My first year was a great experience," McKee said. "Having a guy like Dominik Hasek in net allowed me to start at a young age as a defenseman. It's fun watching Dom's highlights because I get to see a lot of myself making mistakes in front of him."

The list of infamous Sabres opponents is long and inglorious, and Brett Hull might be at the top. It's going on 21 years since the Dallas forward scored the Stanley Cup-winning goal with his foot in Buffalo's crease.

Things would have been different if Peca had the ability to see into the future.

"The only time I ever saw Brett Hull was my rookie year when I was with Vancouver in a bar in St. Louis," Peca said. "I would have taken him out then knowing what was going to happen in the future."

Alas, the former Buffalo captain is stuck with the memory of losing the 1999 final. He also has a memory of Hull admitting he skirted the rules.

"After that game I was walking down the hallway," Peca said. "He was doing an interview as I was walking down the hallway and I heard him. Basically, he said, 'It's a bad rule anyway.'"

"So, the whole premise is he acknowledged that the goal shouldn't have counted, but it was a bad rule so it doesn't matter anyway. Frustrating, to say the least."

During Mogilny's first seasons in the early '90s, the Soviet defector was camera shy. He'd see reporters coming and say, "No English, no English," recalls teammate Grant Ledyard. Then at night, Mogilny would head to Ledyard's house and become the biggest chatterbox in the place.

"He had a lot of fun with it," Ledyard said. "He kind of tested the waters around him and found out that not only was he comfortable playing, but off the ice it got a lot easier for him."

The easiest thing for Mogilny in 1992-93 was to score. He piled up a franchise-record 76 goals while LaFontaine set team marks with 95 assists and 148 points.

"Whenever you were on the ice with them, you made sure you looked around and you got them the puck right away," Ledyard said. "It was just magical to watch from the backside, so it was a fun time – very fun."

When Andreychuk walked into KeyBank Center, it had been transformed to look like the Aud through a T-shirt giveaway.

One memory of the old arena rushed back for Andreychuk, but it didn't involve playing.

"I was there when I was 8 years old," he said. "I came to watch the Washington Capitals with my dad. I sat actually in the second row, which was a very cool experience. That was my first time there."

Andreychuk is from Hamilton, Ontario, about an hour north of Buffalo, so it was easy for his family to head back to the Aud after he joined the Sabres in 1982.

"It brings back memories for me of skating in warm-ups and watching for my dad in the Golds and then praying that my mother wouldn't get hit (by a puck) in the Reds," said Andreychuk, noting how close the seats were to the ice.

When the Sabres win at home, an old recording of Perreault singing Elvis Presley's "The Wonder of You" blares through the arena speakers. The song choice would be a lot different if the organization taped Perreault today.

"No Elvis, not anymore," Perreault said. "I'm Tom Jones now."

Goalie Gerry Desjardins, who went 66-30 with 18 ties during parts of four seasons with Buffalo, joined the Sabres late in 1974-75. That was only because general manager Punch Imlach did his homework.

"I was probably with the worst hockey team in the world, the Michigan Stags," Desjardins said of the Detroit-based team in the World Hockey Association. "I had a clause in my contract that if the team moved out of town – which they did, they moved to Baltimore – then I was a free agent. Punch somehow got word of that and I got a call from Punch one day and he says, 'So, would you be interested in signing with the Sabres?'"

"I almost dropped the phone. I couldn't believe what he was asking me. I said, 'Are you kidding me?'"

Desjardins signed, played in nine regular-season games and made 15 playoff appearances as the Sabres lost the Cup in six games to Philadelphia.

"It was fun coming to a great team," he said. "Everybody thought I was the ticket to the Stanley Cup, I think, back then. I had highs and lows. There was a lot of pressure going down the stretch. Beating Montreal in the semis, that was probably the highlight of my career, beating Montreal right on their home ice. The low point, of course, is getting beat out by Philly."

When Rob Ray joined the Sabres in 1989, he lived with Ledyard. The defenseman quickly learned of Ray's interesting diet.

"He put ketchup on everything," Ledyard said.

Bill Hajt is in the Sabres Hall of Fame after skating in 854 games, the fifth most in team history. But the defenseman from the 1970s and '80s isn't sure he could play even one game in this era.

"It's all about speed and skill," Hajt said. "I wasn't real fast. I was an average skater. My reach would help because nowadays a lot of the physical play is gone and I wasn't a real physical player. You've got to be smart and that would work to my benefit because that's one of the reasons I was able to play as long as I did."

"But I'm not sure I could play because there's so much speed involved, so much skill. Although giving us more credit, a lot of us players if we would have had the coaching and the training that these guys have, maybe we could have been better, too. But, truthfully, I'm not sure I could have played."

Regardless, Hajt remains one of the best defensive defensemen Buffalo ever had. He gives credit to blueline partner Richie Dunn and defensive-minded forwards Don Luce and Craig Ramsay.

"We were usually matched up against the best line on the other team, so you had to be good defensively otherwise you were going to get embarrassed," Hajt said. "You were going to get embarrassed, so that's something we took pride in, for sure."

During McKee's first training camp, the Sabres boasted Ray, May and Barnaby. They combined for 73 fights and 917 penalty minutes during that 1995-96 season.

"I remember my first intersquad game," McKee said. "I was probably still 18. The first intersquad game, I went into a corner. Pat LaFontaine went for the puck and I kind of pushed him from behind. He went into the boards hard and all I could think of was, 'Who's on the other team right now? Is it May? Ray? Barnaby? Someone's coming.'"

"I kind of helped him back up to let everyone know I didn't mean to do what I did. It was intimidating. But as soon as we got into games, I knew that those guys had my back and it allowed me to play a physical, kind of in-your-face game. If I didn't have those players on the team with me, I wouldn't have had the career I had or be able to be the type of player I was at that age."

The Sabres traded for Ledyard and goalie Clint Malarchuk on March 6, 1989. Just two weeks later, Malarchuk nearly died on the Aud ice when a skate sliced his jugular vein.

Yet rather than avoid Buffalo, Malarchuk regularly returns to tip his cowboy hat and sign his book, "A Matter of Inches," and Ledyard settled down in Western New York.

"What I learned right away was the community pulled together, especially on something like that," Ledyard said. "It showed us that people around here cared and loved their athletes."

In January 1976, the Sabres hosted the Soviet Union Wings. With the Cold War raging and the Soviets believing they were the supreme hockey country, Buffalo whacked the visitors, 12-6.

The next night, the Sabres got a standing ovation from fans in Montreal.

"We used to have battles with Montreal always," forward Danny Gare said, "but the fans appreciated the fact of how well we played against the Russians and how we really kicked their butt. It was a big night."

The 50th anniversary theme nights are on game days, when team meetings and pregame routines take precedence, so there's not much interaction between the visiting alums and this year's Sabres. But coach Ralph Krueger found time to talk with Uwe Krupp. The former Sabres defenseman was a teammate of Krueger on the German national team and later coached Krueger's son, Justin.

Krupp and the coach had a long chat when Krueger was interviewing for the Buffalo job.

"I said, 'You're going to love, obviously, the hockey aspect of it. You're going to go to a great setup and everything's going to be on a high level,'" Krupp said. "But I think the part for Ralph 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 are open and very down to earth. They love their hockey, love their Sabres. I think for him, he's come to agree."

Krueger has indeed fallen for Western New York. The visitors from the past have given the coach a goal for the future.

"You can just feel the passion for the Sabres and the time they had here," Krueger said. "The memories are so nice to listen to and to speak to the guys about.

"But we're trying to build our own history here and our own story. It would be wonderful if we do things so that the players who are here now come back with that kind of enthusiasm in a decade or two."

DGB Grab Bag: When an anniversary isn't, what NHL broadcasts are missing and better days for the Sharks

By Sean McIndoe
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Trivial annoyance of the week

The Canucks are in Buffalo to face the Sabres tomorrow in their second of two meetings on the season. Normally, that matchup wouldn't exactly be a big deal. But this year it is, because both teams are celebrating their 50th anniversary.

The season has been an ongoing celebration for the 1970 expansion cousins. The Sabres unveiled special logos and golden jerseys. The Canucks have been breaking out old school jerseys all season, and both teams are flogging the concept at every opportunity. It's all been pretty cool, especially if you're a hockey history nerd like me. These two teams made their first impact on the NHL world before they'd ever played a game, when they gave us the infamous pre-draft wheel, and both have provided plenty of ups and downs ever since. I've always had a soft spot for the two franchises, as well as their fantastic fan bases, and I hope that both get to experience a Stanley Cup championship someday.

There's just one little problem with the whole 50th anniversary thing.

It's, uh, not either team's 50th anniversary.

Go ahead and do the math. The two teams debuted in the NHL with the 1970-71 season. That means that their actual 50th anniversary – the one marking five decades since their first game – won't happen until October. That's next season.

OK, sure, but you might argue that they're really referring to their 50th season. That's even what the NHL has been calling the whole deal. But 2019-20 isn't that either, thanks to the missing season from the 2004-05 lockout. This is both teams' 49th season in the league.

You could call this the teams' 50th year in the league, which is another way the whole thing has been sold. That much would be true. But it would be a strange thing to celebrate. If you're 29 years old, that means you're in your 30th year, but nobody gives you balloons with "30" on them until your birthday. And besides, if we're just going by year, then both team's 50th year in the league was 2019, which means the whole thing should be over by now. This is making my head hurt.

Either way, this much is clear: Both the Sabres and Canucks will have their 50th anniversary and their 50th season in 2020-21, but they're plastering a "50" on everything this year instead. It's weird.

This isn't either team's fault; it appears to be a league-mandated thing. Teams like the Kings and Blues did their 50th anniversary in 2016-17, their 49th season. The Stars did their 25th anniversary in Dallas in 2017-18, also a year early. Even the NHL itself started their 100th anniversary celebration during the 2016-17 season, although they at least waited for 2017 to kick it off and continued it into the 2017-18 season. And to make matters even more confusing, the Sabres actually celebrated their 40th anniversary in the right season, back in 2010-11 – nine years ago.

To be clear, the Canucks and Sabres and any other team can celebrate however and whenever they please. This falls into the same sort of category as retiring player numbers – if their own fans are good with it, teams can go ahead and do whatever they want, and the rest of us don't get to tell them they're doing it wrong. Go ahead and put a big "50" at center ice for your 49th season. Hell, put a 73 or a -68 or a pi symbol if you want. If it sells more merch and makes your fans happy, that's good enough.

Just be aware that somewhere out there, embittered pedants who can do basic math are confused by all of this. And don't expect us to forget about that when you inevitably try to sneak another round of 50th anniversary stuff by us next season.

(And in the meantime, the NHLPA might want to double-check that 50 percent of hockey-related revenue they're supposed to be getting, just to be sure the league didn't decide to change it to 49 for no good reason.)

The week's three stars of comedy

The third star: The case of the missing trousers – This technically isn't an NHL story, but we'll allow it because the BBC sure seems to be under the impression that it is. Besides, I don't think I've ever not laughed at a sentence that includes the word "trousers."

The second star: Wes McCauley – If you don't yell "WHISTLE!" at your problems for the rest of the week you're dead inside.

The first star: Scott and Wesley Hartnell – Scott's impression of McDavid's epic goal is pretty bang-on, but the kid's reaction is what seals it.

Be It Resolved

I've been watching a lot of NFL games lately. It's pretty much my favorite sport apart from hockey, and the league never fails to offer up some solid action and fascinating storylines. As I've mentioned more than a few times over the years, the NHL could learn a thing or two from their football friends.

So could their TV partners. There's been a recent trend on NFL broadcasts of having a former official available to explain rules and breakdown replay reviews in real time. The first was Mike Pereira, the NFL's former head of officiating, who was hired years ago by Fox. It was awkward at first, but once he settled in he became so valuable that other networks followed along. Sometimes it worked (Dean Blandino was pretty good), and sometimes it hasn't (Mike Carey was legendary for being wrong on reviews). Sometimes the expert is right in the booth, or sometimes he's back in a main studio helping out with multiple games at once. But they're available, and they're allowed to call a spade a spade when they think a call's been blown. Nobody's done it as well as Pereira, but the role has become an expected part of an NFL broadcast.

Some games, you barely need to hear from the guy. Other times, he's invaluable, like when there's a confusing review situation or an obscure rule comes into play. We saw that on Saturday, when the Titans started intentionally taking penalties late in their win over the Patriots. It was weird, but Gene Steratore was there to explain that the Titans were exploiting a loophole in the rules. He knew exactly what was happening, and how the situation would play out, and was able to explain to the audience in real time. It was great. (The fact that analyst Tony Romo knew the rule too certainly helped.)

Compare that to the NHL, where we're constantly getting controversial calls and replay reviews, and are often left to pretty much figure it out on our own because the broadcasters are just as confused as we are. Sometimes, their homer instincts kick in. Other times, they pretty clearly don't understand the rules. As a result, fans watching end up furious over what they think was a blown call, even if the refs actually got it right.

The NHL isn't the NFL; there are so many regional broadcast partners across so many networks at so many different times that you couldn't have a handful of experts available to everyone. But for big games, and certainly for the playoffs, the NHL should absolutely steal this idea.

They've tried it in the past, sort of. TVA has used Stephane Auger, and TSN introduced those "C'mon Ref" studio segments with Kerry Fraser, which have often been helpful. But hockey fans need something in real time.

Why don't we have it? The obvious answer might be that there isn't anyone out there who could do it. There are only so many former officials, and not everyone is good at TV. If every former ref out there just sounds like Carey, maybe it wouldn't work. But that excuse only goes so far. Sure, most people are bad at TV – at first. It takes experience and training to get better. Some network should be making that investment right now, getting a former official as many reps as they need to get good at this. Have them do practice games off the air for an entire season if they have to. Hire consultants to work with them until they feel comfortable.

Just get us that expertise. When the playoffs roll around and some crucial game hinges on a close call or review, hockey fans deserve more than a pair of play-by-play guys throwing their hands in the air and deciding it's all too confusing to understand. The model is right there. It works. Somebody just needs to step up and steal it.

Obscure former player of the week

Alexis Lafreniere had himself a world juniors. He looked great. Then he got hurt and looked like might be out for a while. Then he came back and looked even better. In the end, he went home with tournament MVP honors and a gold medal, cementing his status as the presumptive top pick in this year's draft.

So while we all wait to enjoy the Lafreniere experience in the NHL, let's look back on a time when we already did. This week's obscure player is Jason Lafreniere. (Thanks to reader Francois for suggesting his week's player.)

Jason has no relation to Alexis, but his father Roger was successful minor leaguer who had quick cups of coffee with the Red Wings and Blues a decade apart in the '60s and '70s. Jason was a shifty center who put up big numbers in the OHL before being drafted by the Nordiques with the 36th overall pick of the 1985 draft, going one pick after Benoit Hogue and four ahead of future playoff legend John Druce. He went back to junior for one more year, racking up 132 points, before joining the Nordiques for the 1986-87 season.

He was in and out of the lineup as a rookie, but managed 13 goals and 28 points while occasionally playing with Hall of Famers Peter Stastny and Michel Goulet. He followed that up with 10 goals and 29 points in 40 games as a sophomore.

That was it for him in Quebec; he was traded to the Rangers in the offseason along with Normand Rochefort in exchange for Walt Poddubny, Jari Gronstrand, Bruce Bell and a draft pick. He lasted half a season in New York, managing eight goals and 24 points in 38 games, and then headed to the minors.

He'd remain there for years, bouncing around the AHL and IHL and also having a stint with the Canadian national team. Expansion brought another shot at the big leagues, as he signed with the Lightning in 1992 and played 12 games over two seasons. That would be it for his NHL career, which finished with 34 goals and 87 points in 146 games spread across five seasons.

He continued playing in Europe, and that's where things take a bit of an interesting turn. After stints in Germany, Spain and Italy, he landed in a British league for a few seasons. He'd put up big numbers there, and is fondly remembered as one of the better plays in league history; this delightful profile from 2010 starts off by noting that "Jason Lafreniere is a name widely regarded in British ice hockey circles."

Classic YouTube clip breakdown

The Sharks suffered what may stand as the single most devastating loss of the season this week, by any team. On Sunday, they went into Washington to face the first-place Capitals, and held a one-goal lead late in the third period. When Logan Couture scored into an empty net with a minute left to pad the lead to 4-2, that was it. They'd iced the win. Teams that score empty net goals at the end of games never go on to lose. (Literally. As hard as it is to believe, it had apparently never happened in NHL history.)

But it all fell apart. The Caps scored twice in the final minute, then won the game in overtime. It was an almost unimaginable collapse from a team that absolutely couldn't afford one.

It was also one of the only times in NHL history that a team had blown a two-goal lead in the final minute. According to the league, it had only happened seven other times:

One of those games might look familiar to San Jose fans. So today, let's try to heal a few wounds by heading back to 2004, as the Sharks make some late-game magic against the Kings.

- It's April 4, 2004, and it's the last day of the regular season. The Sharks are hosting the Kings in a game that doesn't really matter for either team. But it's fan appreciation day in San Jose, so let's have some fun.
- We open with a dramatic intro that tells the story of the Sharks' season of redemption, and how they've rebounded from a disappointing 2002-03 season and "soared to new heights." That's technically true; they've topped the 100-point mark for the first time in history. They've had eight more since, and also made the playoffs every year but one. See, Sharks fans? I bet you feel better already. I'm assuming they also won a bunch of Stanley Cups over that run. (Note to self: Double-check that before publishing.)

- Glen Kuiper welcomes us to the show, and runs down the playoff situation. It's a little jarring to somebody today, because we see Detroit somewhere they clearly don't belong: in the playoffs Western Conference. They wouldn't move to the East for another nine years.
- Glen throws it to Randy Hahn and Drew Remenda, who tell us that the Blues have been talking a little trash about being happy to face the Sharks in the playoffs, presumably because they've been working on key strategies like stopping slapshots from center ice and not throwing pucks into their own net.
- With that, we jump cut to the final seconds of the game. The Kings are up 3-1 but are killing a penalty. (Fun fact: Current Kings president Luc Robitaille is the guy in the box.) There's a faceoff in the L.A. zone, but with only 23 seconds left, there's clearly no chance of a Sharks comeback, he said, building suspense.
- I'm going to give you fair warning on a couple of things. First, this is one of those mid-2000s clips where everything is kind of washed out and hard to see, because hockey was unwatchable until high-def came along and none of us noticed. More importantly, this is one of those games that is just filled with "Wait, that dude played for *them?*" guys if you're not a Kings or Sharks fan, and maybe even if you are. I'll point out a few, but both teams are basically stocked with them.
- Alyn McCauley wins the draw, and Obscure Player alumni Nils Ekman sends it back to the point. Brad Stuart hammers it home, but barely celebrates because there's only 19.8 seconds left and no time to get another goal, he said, still trying to build suspense for some reason even though he gave away what's going to happen in the intro.
- "Wait, he played for them?" alert: the Kings goalie is Roman Cechmanek.
- We get a shot of Ron Wilson drawing up a play on the Sharks' bench. Somewhat weirdly, we also see the team's leading scorer, Patrick Marleau, sitting there instead of being on the ice, because Wilson is going with big guns like Tom Preissing and Alexander Korolyuk instead. Then again, Marleau led this Cup-contending team with 57 whole points. You know, maybe this upcoming lockout isn't a bad idea.
- "Wait, he played for them?" alert: Vince Damphousse sighting! This is actually the last of his 1,378 career regular season games.
- We get back to the action, as the Sharks get it in deep. A bad pass to the point almost clears the line, but they keep it in and Stuart heads to the net to tap in a Damphousse centering pass for his second goal in 20 seconds. Man, this guy is awesome. I bet you could get some team out there to trade somebody pretty good for him.
- "Wait, he played for them?" alert: Trent Klatt as a King. I'm 90 percent this never actually happened.
- We get a few replays and a reference to the Sharks' recent comeback in Dallas (this game), and that's it for our clip. We don't get to see the overtime, which is a shame because Damphousse wins it with a nice goal you can find here. Vinny was the best.
- Epilogue: The Sharks went on to beat the Blues in the playoffs, and the Avs too before falling to the Flames in the conference final. At the time, it was their longest playoff run ever. As for the Kings, their season was a write-off and this game ended in disaster, but the good news is that they got a high draft pick that they used on (checks notes) Lauri Tukonen. So at least this year's Sharks have something to look forward to.

Sabres' Jimmy Vesey looking to seize opportunity beside Jack Eichel

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 11, 2020

BUFFALO – After enduring a 20-game goal drought to start his Sabres career, winger Jimmy Vesey has scored five times in his last 21 outings.

"Which is about where I want to be," Vesey said Friday after practicing on the top line beside center Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart.

Having averaged 17 goals over his first three NHL seasons with the New York Rangers, Vesey's recent numbers are in line with his normal production.

"The first 20 games wasn't what I wanted," Vesey said. "I think since then I've actually been on a pretty good pace."

The Sabres, however, need Vesey to produce more offense, especially with wingers Victor Olofsson (lower body) and Jeff Skinner (upper body) both sidelined.

Their secondary scoring has often been nonexistent this season. Skinner, Eichel and Reinhart have scored a whopping 53% of the Sabres' goals.

Vesey's first score with the Sabres on Nov. 25 ignited him a bit, kicking off a three-game goal streak. He has scored twice in the last 18 contests.

But the injuries have created opportunities for players like the 6-foot-3, 202-pound Vesey.

In Thursday's 5-1 road loss to the St. Louis Blues, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger moved rookie Rasmus Asplund off the No. 1 trio and inserted Vesey in Olofsson's usual spot at left wing.

Krueger said "there's a good chance" Vesey will play there again this afternoon against the Vancouver Canucks at KeyBank Center.

"An opportunity to step up," Vesey said of his new assignment. "We've been looking for scoring and it can't keep coming from the same guys. I think as a group collectively we've got to start pitching in up and down. I think when we do get secondary scoring, I think it just makes us that much more difficult to play against, because we know Jack and Sam and our power play are going to get looks.

"If they can cash in and we get secondary scoring, we're a tough team to play against."

Vesey, who has occasionally skated with Eichel and Reinhart, knows he must shoot more to score. He has registered zero shots on goal in the last two games and pumped just four on net in the last six contests.

"I've passed up a couple (shots) in the last two games," he said. "It feels good to make a pretty pass sometimes, but I think shooting the puck. ... I got to get back to the shoot-first mentality.

"I'd like to score more goals in front of the net. I think I've done that in my career. I don't think I've had as many opportunities right on top of the crease."

The Sabres as a whole must shoot more often – they mustered only 19 shots Thursday – and create traffic at the net.

"More than anything, as a group we're striving for a strong net presence," Krueger said. "Jimmy is the kind of guy that'll profit from second opportunities. Being around the net is somewhere you need to be to get those."

He added: "He's got some speed and body size. Getting him more into the slot area, getting him into those spaces in front of the net, we think he can get some opportunity off of Jack and Sam."

Despite his scoring struggles, Vesey evolved with the Sabres, establishing himself as one of Krueger's trusted checking forwards and penalty killers.

After compiling a minus-6 rating in 2018-19, Vesey has generated a plus-10 mark this season.

"I've been really consistent in that aspect," Vesey said of his checking abilities. "My plus-minus is way up this year, I've played on the penalty kill for pretty much the first 35, 40 games. It's kind of a new role for me, but I think I've done a good job and been responsible.

"It's my fourth year now, so I know the game is at both ends of the ice. Yeah, I've been happy with that aspect. I think I still have more to give offensively."

Sabres' Jake McCabe expected to return against Canucks

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 10, 2020

BUFFALO – Sabres defenseman Jake McCabe, who missed Thursday's 5-1 road loss to the St. Louis Blues with an upper-body injury, will likely play Saturday afternoon against the Vancouver Canucks.

McCabe, 26, practiced this afternoon beside Rasmus Ristolainen inside KeyBank Center.

"Just going to assess this practice with him now," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said of McCabe's status. "It looks like he'll be part of the mix."

McCabe said: "It's a coach's decision, but I felt great out there today."

In other news, winger Zemgus Girgensons missed today's session for maintenance. Krueger expects the Latvian to play Saturday.

"Just managing some minor issues," he said.

Sabres still searching for that elusive secondary scoring

By Stu Boyar

WGRZ

January 10, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Thursday night after the Stanley Cup champion St. Louis Blues demolished the Sabres 5-1, Blues head coach Craig Berube had high praise for the Sabres lone goal scorer, Jack Eichel. Berube said "he's one of the best in the league for sure. He's hard to handle. He's every bit as hard to handle as Mckinnon and McDavid I think. That's my opinion, he's a great player."

Friday afternoon Eichel and his Sabres teammates were back on the practice ice at the KeyBank Center. Zemgus Girgensons was given a maintenance day. Defenseman Jake McCabe practiced with his teammates. Head coach Ralph Krueger said after the session that both were on track to play against the Canucks Saturday afternoon. McCabe missed the game, he didn't even make the trip to St. Louis with an upper body issue.

The Sabres have really been struggling, with just three wins in their last 11 games. In the standings they are now behind the teams that currently occupy the wild card spots, Carolina and Philadelphia. The Sabres have 45 points, seven behind the Hurricanes and Flyers. The Sabres are also behind the Panthers, Columbus and New York Rangers.

The team is well aware that the teams above them in the standings continue to win. Kyle Okposo said "We have to take care of business ourselves or we're not going to be in the race."

While Jack Eichel has done his part to keep the Sabres in the race the team continues to lack secondary scoring. At practice Friday Jimmy Vesey was on a line with Sam Reinhart and Eichel. Vesey said "I think its time, or an opportunity to step up. We've been looking for scoring and it can't keep coming from the same guys."

The Sabres are home Saturday afternoon against Vancouver and at Detroit Sunday evening.

Canucks at Sabres preview

By Heather Engel

NHL.com

January 10, 2020

CANUCKS (23-17-4) at SABRES (19-18-7)

1 p.m. ET; SN, MSG-B, NHL.TV

The Game

Jack Eichel can match his NHL career high in goals when the Buffalo Sabres play the Vancouver Canucks at KeyBank Center on Saturday.

Eichel scored his 27th goal in his 43rd game, a 5-1 loss at the St. Louis Blues on Thursday, extending his point streak to five games (three goals, two assists). The Sabres captain set his NHL high with 28 goals in 77 games last season.

The Sabres, who are 2-5-0 in their past seven games, are 13-5-3 at home this season.

The Canucks have lost two in a row after a seven-game winning streak and have been outscored 14-4 in those losses. Vancouver, which will play the third game of a five-game road trip, is 9-12-1 on the road.

Players to watch

Canucks center Bo Horvat has eight points (two goals, six assists) in his past five games.

Sabres forward Marcus Johansson has six points (one goal, five assists) in his past five games.

They said it

"It's just a matter of dialing in our little details. Our team can play a winning style. We have that (mentality) in our dressing room and we just have to get back to it." -- Canucks goalie Thatcher Demko

"You look at some of the teams at home and on the road and a lot of teams play a little bit differently. I'm not sure what to attribute that to but just the confidence of being at home, in our building, making it a tough place to play, it's something that we wanted to do all season." -- Sabres forward Kyle Okposo

Canucks projected lineup

J.T. Miller -- Elias Pettersson -- Jake Virtanen
Tanner Pearson -- Bo Horvat -- Loui Eriksson
Antoine Roussel -- Adam Gaudette -- Brock Boeser
Tyler Motte -- Jay Beagle -- Tim Schaller

Quinn Hughes -- Christopher Tanev
Alexander Edler -- Tyler Myers
Jordie Benn -- Troy Stecher

Jacob Markstrom
Thatcher Demko

Scratched: Oscar Fantenberg

Injured: Josh Leivo (kneecap), Brandon Sutter (upper body), Micheal Ferland (upper body), Tyler Graovac (lower body)

Sabres projected lineup

Jimmy Vesey -- Jack Eichel -- Sam Reinhart
Conor Sheary -- Marcus Johansson -- Michael Frolik
Zemgus Girgensons -- Johan Larsson -- Kyle Okposo
Scott Wilson -- Curtis Lazar -- Evan Rodrigues

Jake McCabe -- Rasmus Ristolainen
Rasmus Dahlin -- Brandon Montour
Lawrence Pilut -- Henri Jokiharju

Linus Ullmark
Carter Hutton

Scratched: Zach Bogosian, Colin Miller

Injured: Victor Olofsson (lower body), Jeff Skinner (upper body), Tage Thompson (upper body), Vladimir Sobotka (lower body)

Status report

Girgensons did not practice Friday but Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said he is expected to play. ... McCabe could return after missing the game Thursday with an upper-body injury. ... The Canucks did practice Friday; only Markstrom and Fantenberg, a defenseman, skated.

Stat pack

Sheary will play his 300th NHL game. ... Reinhart has scored in each of his past four games against the Canucks. ... Pearson's next goal will be his 100th in the NHL. ... Edler is two goals away from 100.

Sabres focus on net presence heading into matchup with Canucks

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 10, 2020

Following a 5-1 loss in St. Louis on Thursday, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger highlighted shot volume and net-front presence as key areas in need of improvement as the team continues to play without two of its offensive threats in Victor Olofsson and Jeff Skinner.

The Sabres tallied 19 shots against the Blues, a figure they'll look to improve at home against Vancouver on Saturday.

"We had a meeting before practice. Even some of the drills, it was at the forefront of what we were trying to work on," forward Jimmy Vesey said. "I think it's just a mindset, though. Every goal's not going to pretty. So, you got to get guys to the front of the net and then shoot the puck when they're there."

Vesey will get an opportunity to provide offense after spending much of the game in St. Louis on a line with Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart. He practiced there Friday, and Krueger said he expects to utilize that same look against the Canucks.

Vesey is proud of the defensive game he established in the first half of this season. He's been used consistently on the penalty kill and, at plus-10, has a positive plus/minus for the first time in his career.

That said, he's also identified as a goal scorer his entire hockey life and hopes to utilize this latest opportunity to provide the Sabres with needed secondary scoring.

"To be honest, I think I need to shoot more," he said. "I've passed up a couple in the last two games. I don't know, it feels good to make a pretty pass sometimes, but I think shooting the puck, it might go in and it might create three more chances off rebounds, off scrums.

"So, I think I got to get back to the shoot-first mentality and I'd like to score more goals in front of the net. I think I've done that in my career. I don't think I've had as many opportunities right on top of the crease. So, I got to get myself there."

Krueger wants his entire forward group to adopt that same mindset.

"I think more than anything, as a group, we're actually striving for a stronger net presence," Krueger said. "Jimmy is the kind of guy that would profit from second opportunities. Being around the net is somewhere that you need to be to get those, so I think it's one of the many things we've learned out of the game yesterday is just getting stronger.

"We had a lot of neutral zone transition situations that just fizzled out on us yesterday against St. Louis. They were very committed to what they do defensively, and it exposed that. It's an area we're going to work on, to break down teams that do protect the inside as strong as they did. Jimmy's somebody who can really help us there with his size and his speed."

Pilut's debut

Lawrence Pilut took on his fair share of responsibility in his season debut on Thursday. He skated 19:42, second among Sabres defensemen behind partner Rasmus Ristolainen. Often, he was matched up with the Blues' top line of Zach Sanford, Ryan O'Reilly, and David Perron.

"I felt alright," Pilut said. "I mean, I think I can get more and more comfortable but that will come the more games you play and everything. I had a good jump in my pinches and stuff like that. I've just got to keep building on it and keep being more comfortable all the time."

Pilut played 33 games for Buffalo last season, his first in North America. More than anything on the ice, his biggest takeaway from the experience was the importance of staying "mentally fresh" through the grind of an 82-game schedule.

"I think I reflected on it a little after the season, just try to let go of hockey when you come out of the rink just because it's such a long season," he said. "It's different coming over. You play more games and it's a tighter schedule and everything. You've just got to be ready for that, and that's just mentally.

"... You just try to live a little more in the moment. When you're not at the rink, just cherish the moments you have with your family, your girlfriend, your friends and everything. I think that's a big part of it."

Friday's practice

Zemgus Girgensons took a maintenance day but is expected to be in the lineup Saturday. Jake McCabe returned to practice following a one-game absence and is also expected to dress against the Canucks.

Here's how the Sabres lined up:

13 Jimmy Vesey - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
43 Conor Sheary - 90 Marcus Johansson - 67 Michael Frolik
74 Rasmus Asplund - 22 Johan Larsson - 21 Kyle Okposo
20 Scott Wilson - 27 Curtis Lazar - 71 Evan Rodrigues

19 Jake McCabe - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 62 Brandon Montour
24 Lawrence Pilut - 10 Henri Jokiharju
4 Zach Bogosian - 33 Colin Miller

35 Linus Ullmark
40 Carter Hutton

Eichel scores lone goal for Sabres in loss to Blues

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 10, 2020

ST. LOUIS - An early deficit proved insurmountable for the Buffalo Sabres in a 5-1 loss to the St. Louis Blues on Thursday at Enterprise Center.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger had emphasized the importance of starting strong against a St. Louis team that entered the night with a 19-0-5 record when scoring first. The Blues struck quickly, however, taking the lead on a Robert Thomas goal just 4:47 into the contest.

Thomas assisted on a goal from Tyler Bozak later in the period to make it 2-0. The two linemates finished the night with three points each.

"It was definitely not the look we wanted after five minutes and breaking down as we did there was very disappointing," Krueger said. "It looked like we had trouble getting up to the speed that we needed to in the first period."

Jack Eichel scored the lone goal for the Sabres, which cut the deficit in half early in the second period. The Blues never relented, responding first with a power-play goal from David Perron later in the period and then with a pair of markers from Alexander Steen in the third.

It was the sort of persistent, grinding game that newly acquired forward Michael Frolik came to expect from the reigning Stanley Cup champions during his time in the Western Conference.

"It's always a lot of battles there and they play the right way," Frolik said. "It's never easy against them. ... You need to play the ugly game and be kind of patient. When you're behind them, when they're up, they even tighten up more defensively and it's not easy to beat them."

Part of the focus afterward was on the Sabres' lack of offensive chances. They were outshot, 30-19, and Krueger stressed the need both for more volume and additional net-front presence in the coming weeks while Jeff Skinner and Victor Olofsson recover from injuries.

"One is everybody needs to get hungrier to shoot on net," Krueger said. "I think we still give up too many opportunities, our D and our forwards, to try to make a play. And the other thing will be to get bodies there. There was opportunity around the net where we didn't stick around."

"So, those two components, with Ollie and Skins out, we need to find other ways to create net pressure. We're going to have to work hard on that to turn this result around on Saturday against Vancouver. We don't have a lot of time and it's going to be one of the main focuses, to create more net pressure."

The Sabres were coming off a four-day break between games, their first such stretch since returning from Sweden in mid-November. There will be no such time to dwell after this one, with back-to-back games against Vancouver and Detroit due up on Saturday and Sunday.

"It's important, I think right now, that we just concentrate on the next one, on the next challenge, and that's Vancouver," Krueger said. We need to get a rhythm here of getting at least two wins every three games for a while to push ourselves back into the race.

"We know that exists, but at the same time we are here to continue to grow this group and deal with the adversity that we have right now. No excuses, we need to get back to our game at home on Saturday."

Eichel stays hot

The four-day layover had no effect on Eichel, who extended his point streak to five games. His goal was his 27th in 43 games this season, already just one shy of matching his career high.

The play began with a stretch pass from Rasmus Dahlin to Sam Reinhart, who then delivered a one-touch pass to Eichel as he entered the zone. Eichel squeezed by defenseman Vince Dunn as he wrapped behind the St. Louis net, then buried his shot from the high slot.

Frolik, Pilut join the lineup

The game was Frolik's first as a member of the Sabres. Defenseman Lawrence Pilut, meanwhile, made his season debut after spending the first three months of the season in Rochester.

Frolik, who was acquired from Calgary last Thursday, skated 16:44 with two shots and three hits and drew a high-sticking penalty in the third period. It was his highest ice time since Nov. 21, also against St. Louis.

Pilut skated 19:42, fourth on the team behind Eichel, Sam Reinhart, and defense partner Rasmus Ristolainen.

Up next

The Sabres return home to host the Vancouver Canucks on Saturday afternoon. Coverage on MSG begins at 12:30, or you can listen to the game on WGR 550. Puck drop is scheduled for 1.