



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*January 16, 2020*

## **With Rasmus Ristolainen taking up space, Sabres' power play again finding the mark**

By Mike Harrington  
The Buffalo News  
January 15, 2020

For two months, the power play was a main albatross ruining the Buffalo Sabres' season. It had become ultra-predictable, with players slowly moving the puck around or across the ice and seemingly the only mode of attack being one-timers from the flanks by Victor Olofsson or Jack Eichel.

But a funny thing happened after Olofsson went down for several weeks with a severe ankle injury during the Jan. 2 win over Edmonton. The absence of a top sniper forced the Sabres to do something different and Buffalo is again thriving with the man advantage.

Defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen, all 6 feet, 4 inches and 220 pounds of him, has shifted to the net-front spot to drive opposing defensemen and goalies crazy. Sam Reinhart is thus more free to slice through the slot. There are different ways to attack the net again. And, finally, there are goals.

What was the NHL's second-worst power play in November and December has quickly reversed to become one of the league's best in January. The Sabres enter Thursday's game against the red-hot Dallas Stars at 6 for 14 over the last five games.

"I enjoy it a lot. I take a lot of pride in it," Ristolainen said Wednesday of his work on the edge of the crease. "It's been working. I love it out there. I've been doing a pretty good job with loose pucks all over the goal line. I'm just trying to stay in front of the goalie. There's good battles with the 'D' and maybe they're focusing too much on me sometimes and other guys get more space."

The Sabres love Ristolainen's size to help them on puck retrievals near the net and to cause chaos down low.

"Risto is just outstanding in those battles and has the calmness still with the hands to be able to deal with what's necessary there," said coach Ralph Krueger. "With the goaltending in the NHL today, you've got to get in their eyes as much as you can. You've got to do it 5-on-5 and of course on the power play. He's able to make it very difficult for any defending in front of the net for both the goalie and the defensemen."

Ristolainen scored a goal in Sunday's win at Detroit and fed Reinhart with a nifty touch pass for a goal in Tuesday's triumph over Vegas. He did it with his back to the goal, taking a pass from Jack Eichel and drawing Vegas defensemen Deryk Engelland and Brayden McNabb to him. That allowed Reinhart to find a seam in front of William Karlsson and beat Marc-Andre Fleury.

"That's what we're asking for on the power play: To have different looks, different attacking points," Krueger said of Ristolainen's pass. "We're getting better at it as we evolve. That discussion in the pre-scouts (from opponents) will be around controlling him and making sure he doesn't get in front so maybe that's a deception, too. We need multiple points of attack and that was a good one to use."

Reinhart, who has spent much of the season in the net-front role, has three power-play goals over the last five games as he's now able to roam the slot far more.

"He's looked very poised down there. That's a big part of it," Reinhart said of Ristolainen. "If he didn't look so poised, maybe I'd be more tempted to go down there but he's been doing a great job, making great reads of knowing when to stay in front of the net and when to release so it's been fun to watch."

A smiling Ristolainen reminded reporters Wednesday that he played some wing as a teenager in Finland.

"It's fun to score a power-play goal," he said. "And I feel everyone was kind of choking with surprise I can pass the puck but I used to make plays, too. It's not that hard to make a 2-foot pass."

The Sabres were second in the NHL in October on the power play at 29.8% but fell apart in December by going 1 for 37. They were 7 for 41 in December, leaving them 8 for 78 in a two-month stretch with a 10.3% conversion

rate ahead of only New Jersey. They're third in January at 37.5% and their 42.9% clip since Jan. 4 is behind only Dallas (50) and St. Louis (45.5).

Overall, Buffalo is 16th at 19.9%.

"We're shooting," said winger Kyle Okposo, who scored his first power-play goal of the season in the second period Tuesday. "When it's not going well, you need volume of shots and that seems to be opening everything up. I think we've gotten some movement. It hasn't been as stagnant and guys have been in different spots, just playing and letting your instincts and skill take over."

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#### Recharged power play

The Buffalo Sabres' man-advantage figures by month this season

Month	PPG-Opp	Pct (rank)
October	14-47	29.8 (2nd)
November	1-37	2.7 (31st)
December	7-41	17.1 (23rd)
January	6-16	37.5 (3rd)
TOTAL	28-141	19.9 (16th)

## Why Sabres' Victor Olofsson should stay with Jack Eichel upon his return

By Travis Yost

The Buffalo News

January 15, 2020

Travis Yost has been involved in the world of hockey analytics for a decade and is part of TSN's Hockey Analytics team. Prior to joining TSN, Yost was a contributor at the Ottawa Citizen, the Sporting News and NHL Numbers, and he has been a consultant for an NHL franchise. He will be contributing breakdowns on the Buffalo Sabres for The Buffalo News this season. Follow Yost on Twitter: @travisyost.

Remember the 2014 NHL Draft? To say it was devoid of top-end talent would be an understatement. The Buffalo Sabres managed to grab at least one of the big names draft eligible that year in Kootenay forward Sam Reinhart at second overall, sandwiched between Barrie's Aaron Ekblad and Prince Albert's Leon Draisaitl.

Five years later, the 2014 draft class has been somewhat underwhelming. For frame of reference, 59% of players drafted that year have never played in an NHL game – that's nine percentage points worse than the prior year's draft class, and five percentage points worse than the subsequent (and one year younger!) draft class. And it's not just the class at aggregate – some of the bigger disappointments for the 2014 class came in the key areas of the first round, with Sam Bennett (fourth overall), Michael Dal Colle (fifth overall), Jake Virtanen (sixth overall), Nick Ritchie (10th overall) Brendan Perlini (12th overall) and Julius Honka (14th overall) going in the top half.

But teams did find value later in the draft. It started with Boston's brilliant selection of David Pastrnak at 25th overall, and continued into the later rounds with Tampa Bay grabbing Brayden Point (79th overall) and Nashville finding Viktor Arvidsson (112th overall). Ondrej Kase (205th overall) going to Anaheim looked like the one late-round player who would be a difference maker, too – at least until the emergence of Sabres seventh-rounder Victor Olofsson.

Olofsson, 24, appears to be a late-blooming weapon for a Buffalo team in dire need of more scoring talent. In his first NHL season, Olofsson has 16 goals and 19 assists in just 42 games. For players with at least 48 games played (Olofsson's career total), he's the fourth-leading scorer in the class behind Draisaitl, Pastrnak and Point.

Olofsson is sidelined five to six weeks with a lower body injury after getting hurt Jan. 2 against Edmonton.

One of the common refrains about Olofsson is that his surprising performance is largely a byproduct of Jack Eichel. There is absolute truth to the fact that Eichel is elevating the play of his teammates, which is why on a decent team, he would be at least an outside contender for the Hart Trophy. But it's also true to point out that Olofsson is scoring at a rate consistent with other Eichel regulars – Eichel regulars that have generally been successful top-nine forwards for years in the NHL.

Olofsson compares better than most forwards through the first half of the season offensively – some of it is driven by shooting percentage, but Olofsson has made the most of the minutes he has played on Eichel's line. His scoring compares nearly identically to the likes of Evander Kane and Sam Reinhart, and to a lesser extent Jeff Skinner – Skinner was more of the trigger man on the Eichel line, whereas Olofsson has a touch more of a distributor role.

Scoring, of course, isn't everything. We need to separately understand how the run of play is when Olofsson is on the ice, if only to understand the equally important role forwards have as defenders on the ice. Most measures, like Evolving Hockey's regression-based Goals Above Replacement model, see Olofsson as a negative contributor defensively. That's not surprising for a first-year NHL pro, but it's something that is worth noting as we talk about Olofsson's long-term projections. (Conversely, other Eichel linemates like Kyle Okposo and Conor Sheary have had favorable defensive impacts during the 2019-20 season.)

Still, this is an encouraging first step for the organization and the player. Any time you stumble upon a fringe NHL player that late in a draft class, it's a win. And Olofsson might still have holes in his game, but he has exceeded offensive expectations. Coach Ralph Krueger's decision to split Skinner and Eichel might still be suboptimal when it comes to maximizing the entire lineup, but at the very least the organization knows that they might have stumbled upon another weapon. Olofsson might not stay forever on the Buffalo top line, but he should solidify a role in the lineup for the future.

## **Colin Miller stunned as Vegas fires coach Gerard Gallant, hires Peter DeBoer after loss in Buffalo**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

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Approached by two reporters after practice Wednesday, Buffalo Sabres defenseman Colin Miller actually asked the first question about some news that had just been relayed to him by teammates.

"That happened?" said Miller, who played the last two years for the Vegas Golden Knights. "I didn't know if the guys were kidding or not."

That was probably the reaction around the NHL on Wednesday morning after the Golden Knights pulled a stunner in the wake of their loss here to the Sabres on Tuesday. In a move nobody saw coming, Vegas fired coach Gerard Gallant and replaced him with former San Jose and New Jersey coach Peter DeBoer.

The announcement was made in Ottawa, where Vegas continues its road trip Thursday night. Gallant was the only coach the Golden Knights have had in their two-plus NHL seasons, and led Vegas on its memorable run to the 2018 Stanley Cup final against Washington, earning the Jack Adams Award as NHL coach of the year. Assistant Mike Kelly also was fired.

"I'm completely shocked," said Miller, who scored Vegas' first goal in the Cup final. "When I was there, he was a fantastic coach, a players' coach. Everybody loved him. So yeah. A tough day for him. Hopefully he'll come out on top. He's a great coach. I'm sure he'll have another job soon. Tough to see that piece of their puzzle go."

Buffalo's 4-2 win in KeyBank Center was the fourth consecutive loss for Vegas, which has been outscored 10-0 in the first period of its last five games. The Golden Knights (24-19-6) are tied with Vancouver and Winnipeg for the final two spots in the wild-card race, but if the Western Conference playoffs started Wednesday, Vegas would be out. The Golden Knights are three points behind Arizona for the Pacific Division lead.

It's the second time this year a loss in Buffalo marked the end for an NHL coach. New Jersey fired John Hynes on Dec. 3, the day after a 7-1 loss to the Sabres. He has since been hired in Nashville.

"In order for our team to reach its full potential, we determined a coaching change was necessary. Our team is capable of more than we have demonstrated this season," Vegas General Manager Kelly McCrimmon said in a statement. "We would like to thank Gerard and Mike for their service to the Vegas Golden Knights. They were both instrumental to the success we have enjoyed in our first two-plus seasons and we wish them all the best moving forward."

"In Peter DeBoer, we have a proven, experienced head coach who we believe can help us achieve our ultimate goal. We are excited to welcome Peter and his family to the Vegas Golden Knights organization. We look forward to a strong finish to the 2019-20 season with Peter at the helm and a successful tenure in the seasons to come."

Gallant was set to coach the Pacific Division in next week's All-Star Game in St. Louis because the Golden Knights were in first place on Jan. 3 when those positions were firmed up.

McCrimmon and Vegas President George McPhee were seen grim-faced on the arena service elevator following Tuesday's game. The Golden Knights arrived in Buffalo after dropping the final three games of a seven-game homestand, and Tuesday's contest was the opener of an eight-game road trip that is actually a pair of four-game jaunts around the All-Star break.

DeBoer led New Jersey to the Cup final in 2012 and took San Jose there in 2016. His Sharks beat Vegas in a controversial seven-game first-round series last spring before losing to St. Louis in the Western Conference final. He was fired by San Jose last month.

After Tuesday's game, Vegas forward Mark Stone seemed to indict the team's preparation and how the losing streak was weighing on the club.

"It's tougher, especially when you're losing to teams you know that you're better than," Stone said of the Sabres. "And we're a better hockey team. Just have to find ways to put the puck in the net, and we've kind of gotten stale the last bunch of games."

San Jose has become Vegas' archrival, largely from the hard feelings created by the playoff series, so Miller also was surprised to see his old team reach out to DeBoer. Gallant called DeBoer a "clown" in a news conference prior to Game 7 of last year's series.

"It's interesting. We, they, definitely had some battles with San Jose and even a couple times 'Turk' (Gallant) and him had some disagreements," Miller said. "I don't know. That's their business. Their stuff to deal with and so I'm sure they'll move forward."

It's the second time in his career Gallant was fired in shocking fashion. He was dropped as the coach of the Florida Panthers on Nov. 28, 2016, following a loss in Carolina and was infamously left at PNC Arena in Raleigh. He was forced to call a taxi to get him to the airport and out of town.

Gallant is the seventh NHL coach fired this season and the fourth to have led a team to the Cup final, joining DeBoer, Toronto's Mike Babcock and Nashville's Peter Laviolette.

Stars shooting high

The Sabres headed for Dallas immediately after practice, where they'll meet the Stars on Thursday night in American Airlines Arena. Buffalo blanked Dallas, 4-0, here on Oct. 14 and that game was part of the Stars' 1-7-1 start.

Since then, Dallas has gone 26-8-3 for an NHL-best .743 points percentage. They also fired coach Jim Montgomery on Dec. 10 for unprofessional conduct and replaced him with Rick Bowness, who is 10-4-1. Montgomery has since announced he's entered alcohol rehab.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said he's floored by the difference in the Dallas team of today compared to the one of October. The Stars are second in the West, nine points behind runaway leader St. Louis.

"It's a different planet. Really. It's crazy watching them last night and this morning," Krueger said. "There's a directness in their attack. There's a speed in their game we didn't see when they were here. It's as well-oiled a machine as we've watched in a pre-scout in a while and it's going to be a big challenge for us."

"They're very confident. They play extremely simple, give you nothing and they defend better than any team that I've seen the last 4-5 weeks on video. So let's see it live. We need to break it down and we need to be as patient as they are to have a chance."

Home cooking coming

The Sabres play Saturday at Nashville and then are off for 10 days for their bye and the All-Star break. When they resume play Jan. 28 against Ottawa, it will start a 10-game stretch with nine of the games at home.

The win Tuesday improved the Sabres to 14-5-3 in KeyBank Center (they also have a "home" loss in Sweden). That's a .705 points percentage in their home rink, tied with Vancouver for sixth in the NHL.

With 18 home games left, the Sabres have a chance to win 25 games downtown for the first time since their 2009-10 Northeast Division championship season. Of course, a big issue is their 7-13-4 road record. That percentage of .375 ranks 27th in the NHL.

## **Ristolainen enjoying his playing time under Krueger**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 15, 2020

Buffalo, N.Y. (WGR 550) - Rasmus Ristolainen is having his best season as a Sabre.

It's not just his play in front of the net on the power play, although that's a plus. He's been better defensively too. Ralph Krueger said, "He's such a big tool for us. If you look at it, he has an unbelievable competitive spirit that he wants the Sabres to go in the right direction. He wants us to learn how to be a competitive team every night and he gives us excellent alternatives without the puck and with the puck. He has his own unique way of pressuring the opponent, plus he's an extremely hard-working athlete off the ice."

Ristolainen has never been a guy that will stand around and brag about his play, but as far as if it's his best season he said, "Yes I agree, but there's still a lot more to come and a lot more potential that I want to reach and I don't think there's any limits. I think you can get as good as you want and you work."

The biggest question that comes to mind is why now? Why is he playing so much better seven years in? He credits Krueger and the system that he's brought to the team, "It's the team game we're playing with everyone on the same page, with forwards defending really well and making our jobs a lot easier. So it's been a lot better."

Now back to him creating havoc in front of the other team's net. The big defenseman said, "I enjoy it a lot. I take a lot of pride in it and it's been working, so I'm having a lot of fun out there."

This isn't the first time Ristolainen has been used as a forward. He said he used to play there when he was in Finland.

All this has shown us a different side of Ristolainen. He's getting an opportunity to make plays down low, showing he has a little offensive flair. Ristolainen said, "I used to play forward back home, so I guess it's still there and I try to think of it the other way too. When I'm defending, I see what good net front players are doing well and also what's hard."

Ristolainen scored on the power play in Detroit and had a good setup to Sam Reinhart for a power play goal against Vegas. Ristolainen is always around the puck in the crease, "I've been doing a pretty good job with loose pucks all over the goal line and I try to stay in front of the goalie and get in good battles with their D. If they focus on me too much, that'll give other guys more space."

He's had some battles in front where I've counted more than 20 cross checks between the two players. Penalties are never called in those situations and that's what Ristolainen wants, "I like it when it's both ways, so you've got to pay the price to go to the net and I can take shots. But I'm going to give them back and so it all works out."

Krueger doesn't want to see penalties in that spot either, "That's a fun part of the game when it's tight and the fans want to see energy, but if it's only going one way that should be called, but if it's two guys battling net-front we need to let that go and I think it's part of the passion of the game of hockey."

In 47 games, Ristolainen has 22 points. Buffalo is in Dallas on Thursday.

## **Curtis Lazar earning keep with Sabres: 'I am an NHL player'**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
January 15, 2020

**BUFFALO** – In the waning minutes of Tuesday's 4-2 win over the Vegas Golden Knights, Sabres center Curtis Lazar couldn't get off the ice.

Lazar's marathon shift began with 2:18 left in the third period and the Sabres clinging to a one-goal lead. Following an icing and a timeout, the play kept going and going as the Golden Knights pressed with the extra attacker.

"We knew what we had to do," Lazar said following Wednesday's practice, "and I think it's kind of hang on."

As the clock ticked down, Lazar's linemates, Kyle Okposo and Evan Rodrigues, managed to change. Lazar, however, was stuck.

So when the puck squirted to a gassed Lazar in the slot above Sabres goalie Linus Ullmark, he quickly backhanded it out of the zone.

"I honestly was just trying to flip it out to the far blue (line) and got a little more on it," Lazar said. "Thankfully it went in."

"That's kind of how my year's going. I've worked hard for those chances. It's good to have luck on your side, too."

After staying on the ice for 1:54, Lazar could celebrate his fourth goal this season and the Sabres' second straight win.

"I was just praying it wasn't icing, because I would've had to hold for another 30 seconds or so there," said Lazar, who scored with 24.3 seconds left.

Lazar's presence on the ice late in a tight game is significant.

Since the Sabres recalled Lazar on Dec. 21, he has enjoyed regular duty, playing 11 straight games entering Thursday's road contest against the Dallas Stars.

Lazar, 24, has quietly become one of Sabres coach Ralph Krueger's trusted forwards. On Tuesday, he played just over 18 minutes, his highest total since Nov. 25, 2015.

"I know all along in my head that I am an NHL player," Lazar said. "But it's a matter of showing that but also getting the opportunity and being utilized in the right place."

Krueger has utilized Lazar all over the ice, including the faceoff dot, where he won seven of the 12 draws he took Tuesday. Only Sabres captain Jack Eichel took more faceoffs.

Lazar began the season in the AHL and shuttled back and forth between Rochester and Buffalo for nearly three months, playing 17 games with the Americans.

But Lazar, a veteran of 263 NHL games, might've secured a regular spot with the Sabres.

The 6-foot, 211-pound Lazar impressed from the Sabres get-go, nearly making the team out of training camp. He has been the first forward they've recalled all season.

Then in December, the Amerks shifted Lazar back to center, his natural position.

"I feel so comfortable down the middle," said Lazar, who signed a one-year, one-way contract worth \$700,000 on July 1. "I think that's a big part of it, actually playing my natural position. And Ralph put me in spots where I'm able to succeed. I feel comfortable. I really just control the game."

While Lazar, the 17th overall pick by the Ottawa Senators in 2013, possesses skill, he loves playing heavy hockey.

"The game (Tuesday), that's my type of hockey, too, right?" Lazar said. "Just (a) hard-nosed battle. I take a lot of pride in that and especially my defensive play. To have the coach's trust, it means a lot."

Krueger wants Lazar's line to match up against some of the opposition's best.

"He has that opportunity to be the leader of a line that is hard to play against but can also defend against top lines of the other team," Krueger said. "So that can release some of the ice time of our top lines, especially here at home, to free them up, to play against possibly weaker lines of the opposition.

"And Curtis is giving us that. He's working hard on his faceoffs. He gives us a powerful right-handed draw opportunity, and he's learning every day better to play within our defensive structure we want and our principles and concepts we need."

Lazar broke into the NHL in 2014-15 and played regularly for three seasons with Ottawa and the Calgary Flames.

When the Flames sent Lazar to the Stockton Heat last season, he embraced the opportunity.

"Last year was big kind of taking that step back and playing in the American League," said Lazar, who scored 20 goals in 57 games. "But the game's starting to slow down for me. I understand the game. ...

"I'm still young, I'm 24, I still got a long ways to go. It's good to see some results."

Lazar has scored at every level except the NHL. Two seasons ago, he mustered only two goals and 12 points in 62 games with the Flames.

But Lazar believes he can develop into a 15- or 20-goal scorer someday. Having scored three goals in his last eight outings, he has shown signs of breaking out offensively. He also registered two assists in Sunday's 5-1 road win over the Detroit Red Wings.

"I've always established that defensive game first to build that trust and get that ice time and then build on the offense," said Lazar, who has compiled seven points in 17 NHL appearances this season. "It's nice to (be) put in there and be relied upon in all situations."

## **Sabres' Rasmus Ristolainen impressing in front of net on power play**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
January 15, 2020

**BUFFALO** – Over the last four seasons, Rasmus Ristolainen has averaged 36 assists. No one should be surprised the Sabres defenseman can pass the puck well.

Still, seeing Ristolainen help create winger Sam Reinhart's power-play goal in Tuesday's 4-2 win over the Vegas Golden Knights looked unusual.

Ristolainen dished the puck from the front of the net, his new position on the power play.

"I feel everyone was kind of joking and surprised I can pass the puck," Ristolainen said following Wednesday's practice inside KeyBank Center. "But you know, I used to make plays, too. It's not that hard to make a two-foot pass."

Ristolainen made it look easy, corralling captain Jack Eichel's pass before adroitly feeding Reinhart at the edge of the slot.

Instead of having him man a point, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger has been utilizing Ristolainen and his 6-foot-4, 220-pound frame in front of the net.

"I enjoy it a lot and take a lot of pride in it," Ristolainen said. "It's been working."

The move has helped ignite the Sabres' power play, which has scored five goals in the last three games, as many as it produced in the previous 11 contests.

"He's looked very poised down there," Reinhart said of Ristolainen. "That's a big part of it. If he didn't look so poised, maybe I'd be a little bit more tempted to go down there, but he's been doing a great job. He's making great reads of when to stay in front of the net, when to release. It's been fun to watch."

As the Sabres power play endured a wretched stretch – it went zero of 16 over a recent six-game stretch – Krueger and his staff tried to find solutions.

So Ristolainen went up and Reinhart, who spent his first four and a half NHL seasons standing in front of the net, moved to the circle. With winger Victor Olofsson injured (lower body), Reinhart has taken over his duties one-timing pucks.

Krueger said he has often used defensemen up front during his coaching career. Ristolainen, who said he played winger for 10 years growing up in Finland, is three inches taller and 26 pounds heavier than Reinhart.

"Risto is just outstanding in those battles and has the calmness still and the hands to be able to deal with what's necessary there," Krueger said. "With the goaltending in National Hockey League today, you've got to get in their eyes as much as you can, you got to do it five-on-five and, of course, on the power play. He's able to make it very difficult for any type of defending in front of the net for both the goalie and the defenseman."

Ristolainen said: "I've been doing a pretty good job with loose pucks all over the goal line. I just try to stay in front of the goalie and maybe get good battles with their D. Maybe they focus on me too much sometimes and some other guys have more space."

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The Sabres, who play in Dallas on Thursday, beat the Stars 4-0 on Oct. 14.

Since that meeting, however, the Stars have been scorching, compiling a 26-10-3 mark.

"It's a different planet, really," Krueger said of the Stars in October versus today. "It's crazy watching them last night and this morning, there's a directness in their attack, there's a speed in their game we didn't see when they were here. It's as well-oiled a machine as we've watched in a prescout in a while.

"This is going to be a big challenge for us. They're very confident."

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Following Vegas' defeat to the Sabres, forward Mark Stone was asked how the Golden Knights can make sure their four-game losing streak doesn't weigh on them.

"I don't know," he said. "It's tougher, especially when you're losing to teams you know that you're better than. And we're a better hockey team. (We) just have to find ways to put the puck in the net, and we've kind of gotten stale the last bunch of games."

On Wednesday, the Golden Knights stunned the NHL, firing coach Gerard Gallant and replacing him with Pete DeBoer, who was let go by the San Jose Sharks earlier this season.

Gallant led the expansion Golden Knights to the Stanley Cup final in 2018, their first year of existence.

The New Jersey Devils also fired their coach, John Hynes, after losing to the Sabres this season.

## **Zemgus Girgensons up next on the Sabres' top line with Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart**

By Heather A Prusak

WGRZ

January 15, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Victor Olofsson is having a Calder Trophy- like season. He has 16 goals and 35 points in 42 games to lead all NHL rookies in scoring.

So it was a big blow to the Sabres when he went down with a lower-body injury that required five to six weeks recovery and since then the Sabres have been searching for his replacement on the top line with Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart.

Head coach Ralph Krueger has shuffled things around looking for the right fit using Rasmus Asplund, Jimmy Vesey and now has landed on Zemgus Girgensons.

"It's awesome, they're two elite players that are fun to play with. They create so much offense and they've been the backbone of this team for the whole season so it's definitely an honor," Girgensons said after practice on Wednesday.

Eichel scored his 28th goal of the season tying his career best last night on a 2-on-1 with Girgensons to give the Sabres a 3-2 lead.

"There's every game something that you watch that you're like 'oh man I don't know how he does that'. Even that goal that's not an easy play to pull off. You know it's awesome to watch it and experience it," Girgensons said.

Last night was the second game in a row Girgensons has been on the top line. The first was in Detroit last Sunday where he scored a shorthanded, breakaway goal for his 8th of the season. And he admitted there might be a little added pressure playing with those guys.

"Yeah definitely a little bit you know you always want your line to do good so there's definitely a little pressure but I've been around here for a while so that doesn't phase me too much," Girgensons explained.

Of course this is just a temporary fix while Olofsson recovers from that injury he suffered against the Oilers on January 2nd so it looks like he still has another three or four weeks left.

### Power play clicking

One bright spot for the Sabres lately is the efficiency of their power play, an area they were struggling in to close out 2019.

In the last five games, they're 6-for-14 (43%) over the last five games including two last night in that 4-2 win against Vegas where Kyle Okposo and Sam Reinhart scored on the man advantage.

"I think we're just shooting the puck a little bit more. That's what you gotta do when you go through a slump on the power play is you shoot and then everything else opens up, you let your skill take over after that but it starts with getting pucks to the net," Okposo said after practice on Wednesday.

Up next, the Sabres hit the road for two games, first in Dallas on Thursday then they're in Nashville on Saturday before hitting the All-Star break.

## **Sabres captain Jack Eichel continues MVP type season**

By Heather A Prusak

WGRZ

January 15, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Whenever the Sabres need a big, clutch, spark whatever you want to call it, Jack Eichel has answered the call and he did it again last night against Vegas.

With the game tied at two, Eichel scored the go-ahead goal on a 2-on-1 with Zemgus Girgensons in another highlight reel goal.

"There's every game something that you watch and you're like 'oh man I don't know how he does that'. Even that goal that's not an easy play to pull off and it's awesome to watch it and experience it," Zemgus Girgensons said.

That was Eichel's 28th goal of the season, tying his career high. He's now tied with Alex Ovechkin for third most goals in the NHL.

Eichel also has 61 points so far on the season which has him in the conversation for the Hart Trophy, and rightfully so.

Even though it's early, it's hard not to talk about the Sabres' captain when mentioning the league's MVP award given "to the player adjudged to be the most valuable to his team."

That screams Jack Eichel.

His 61 points so far on the season are 22 more than the next leading scorer on the team (Sam Reinhart is next with 39).

After this two-game road trip, Eichel will get ready to head to St. Louis and play in his third straight All-Star game.

Up next, the Sabres are in Dallas on Thursday then Nashville on Saturday to close out the first half of the season.

## **Sabres Work on Consistency Ahead of All-Star Break**

By Ted Goldberg

Spectrum News

January 15, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. - Before the Sabres enjoy the NHL's All-Star break, they have two more games to work on finding consistency - something that has eluded the team for much of the season.

"The last three games, we had two periods and one we would like to do better at," says head coach Ralph Krueger. "Consistency through these six periods into the break would be important for us. Hoping we get the results we want."

The Sabres play in Dallas Thursday before heading to Nashville Saturday.

"Both of these teams obviously do a good job of eliminating your chances. They're not gonna give you a whole lot," says Jack Eichel. "We have to protect our own net and work for everything we get. Try and play them for a full 60."

"We're not gonna get away with playing bad periods against the two teams we're playing on this road trip," says Kyle Okposo. "We gotta make sure we're playing six good periods of hockey. It's gonna take six of our best to be able to be in the game and have a chance to have some points."

One area of consistency lately has been the team's power play. The Sabres scored two man-up goals against Vegas, and have now put up power play goals in three straight games. When Okposo was asked what's the difference with the team's power play, his answer was pretty simple - shooting more.

"That's what you have to do when you're slumping on the power play. Just shoot," he says. "Everything else opens up. You let your skill take over after that. But it starts with getting pucks to the net."

After these games, every Sabre (besides Eichel) gets more than a week off to rest. Eichel will instead head to St. Louis for his third straight appearance in the All-Star game.

## **N.H.L. Draft Pick Inspires Dreams as Big as the Yukon**

By Gerald Narciso

New York Times

January 16, 2020

WHITEHORSE, Yukon Territory — Canada's largest city north of the 60th parallel, about 30,000 residents strong, sits between the emerald blue Yukon River and the evergreen-flecked hills on Whitehorse's eastern and southern edges.

At the top of Two Mile Hill Road, just past the Alaska Highway, dozens of young hockey players — some wearing new Buffalo Sabres hats — came in and out of the Canada Games Centre, a multipurpose sports facility, for the first day of tryouts for the Whitehorse Mustangs club teams. Not far from the players' minds, or, for that matter, their parents', was the legend of Dylan Cozens.

Months before, on June 21, Cozens, 18, a Whitehorse native, became the first player from the area to be selected in the first round of the N.H.L. draft, taken by the Sabres with the seventh pick.

"Everything stood still in Whitehorse that day," Michelle Dawson-Beattie, president of the Yukon First Nations Hockey Association, said. Everything, that is, except Sabres gear.

In the hours after the N.H.L. draft, the Whitehorse outpost of the Canadian retailer Sports Experts, situated on the town's sleepy Main Street, scrambled to import Sabres product. "Just being in the north, it's tough to get stuff shipped in," Matthew Hitchcock, the store manager, said. "We tend to get the slim pickings." When the shipment finally arrived, the generic assortment of Buffalo caps, T-shirts and nameless jerseys flew off the shelves.

Because of Whitehorse's isolation, hockey players have been as difficult to export as N.H.L. merchandise to ship in. It is a hockey-mad area, and it has produced a smattering of college-level players almost in spite of the obstacles the city's size and distance create for player development.

"Our location and our ability to get games, and get games at an appropriate level for our players," Martin Lawrie, Cozens's youth coach, explained, describing the region's barriers.

Edmonton is the closest N.H.L. market, at over 1,200 miles away, while Calgary (almost 1,400) and Vancouver (almost 1,500) are within relative distances. Only four players from the Yukon have been drafted into the N.H.L. in later rounds, and only two saw ice time: Peter Sturgeon played six games with the Colorado Rockies from 1979 to 1981, and Jarrett Deuling suited up for 15 games with the Islanders in the mid-90s.

So when Cozens, a 6-foot-3 forward who combines "Riverdale" cast member looks with explosive speed and a blindingly quick shot, became an elite hockey prospect, children in the Yukon suddenly had a model to aspire to.

Laura O'Brien's 11-year-old son, Kady, was one of the three dozen players who tried out for the Pee Wee Mustangs — the same team Dylan Cozens played for nine years before. A half-dozen evaluators with clipboards, sitting high in the stands, intently surveyed the group, which included four girls.

Cozens, who starred last season for the Lethbridge Hurricanes of the Western Hockey League, a major junior league, has been an inspiration for her son and many other children in the Yukon, O'Brien said.

"It gave them a lot more hope," she said.

'We've always prided ourselves in not being fun to play against.'

For many players in the towns in the territories, where the temperatures are low and the winters are long, the game starts on the pond.

When Dylan Cozens turned 3, his father, Mike, built a small rink in the backyard where Dylan, with his friends or brothers, would run games throughout the winter. When the ice melted, he spent hours alone atop a slick white hockey pad some 25 feet in front of the net, perfecting his wrist shots and dekes.

Even today, the mileage on the old rink is evident. Hundreds of divots and scuff marks fill much of the 12-foot wooden backstop behind the net.

"I've spent so much time out there, some of the best memories of my life," Dylan Cozens said in a phone interview from Buffalo in September.

Hockey culture in Whitehorse is a lifelong cycle. It's a place where people begin playing as toddlers and continue until they are in 55-and-over recreation leagues.

The people from Whitehorse are "just very honest hockey players," Lawrie said. "We've always prided ourselves in not being fun to play against."

When Cozens was 11, his profile soared regionally. In one tournament in Vancouver, he accounted for 28 of his team's 30 points, including seven goals in its 8-0 championship victory. He returned home ranked second in Western Canada in his age group by Western Elite Prospects.

But at home, he was caught between being too good for the youth leagues and too small for the men's. He joined a second-tier men's beer league anyway, and in one game he was chased down by an opponent — the two collided into the boards. "This guy was about 225 pounds, 6 feet; Dylan was 12 years old and a hundred pounds lighter," Mike Cozens said. "There was no comparison."

Dylan Cozens broke his leg, missing a full season.

By the time he turned 14, the family knew his future was elsewhere.

"I needed to leave if I was going to make a name for myself," Cozens said.

In the fall of 2015, he left Whitehorse for a hockey academy in Delta, British Columbia, embarking on a three-stop, linear path to the N.H.L.

#### The Dylan Effect

One by one, the mostly 13- and 14-year-old hopefuls whisked around cones and passed the blue line, firing pucks at a goalie, hoping to earn a spot on the Bantam Rivermen team.

The best, and youngest, of the bunch, Gavin McKenna, who was 11 at the time of the tryout, skated with speed and grace, handling the puck with creativity and control.

"He's doing things that I didn't see Dylan do at the same age," Lawrie, Cozens's youth coach, said.

Last summer, McKenna played with a club team based in Ontario that competed in Italy and Los Angeles. He said he dreamed of playing for Canada in the Olympics and, of course, starring in the N.H.L. He, too, will be expected to leave the Yukon.

"We hope to keep him around for at least two to three more years," his father, Willy, said.

Though hockey officials in Whitehorse still concede that the area's elite players will have to move out of the territory to realize their dreams, they hope an improved infrastructure will push back the departure date. Four years ago, Air North added flight options (flat rates, no change fees, unlimited baggage, chartered flights) for teams and parents that made it easier to travel to tournaments in distant destinations like Dawson Creek and Powell River in British Columbia.

Then there is the Bantam Rivermen team that joined the B.C. Hockey Zone Program, arriving in Whitehorse two years after Cozens left. In the third year of the program's three-year pilot, the team has the potential to make a difference in players staying home, if it continues. "And we actually get home games where teams actually come up to play us," said Justin Halowaty, president of the Whitehorse Minor Hockey Association. "That's making a difference for players to stay."

Mike Cozens, a territorial court judge, and his wife, Sue Bogle, a prosecutor, will not need Air North when Dylan first suits up with the Sabres — his entry-level contract states that his family will be flown to the N.H.L. city in which he makes his debut. Despite a strong showing in training camp and preseason, the Sabres sent Dylan back to Lethbridge for more development. He has tallied 46 points and 20 goals. Earlier this month, he scored a key goal in the gold medal game against Russia to help Canada win the 2020 world junior championships.

But back in the Yukon, Dylan Cozens is a pioneer.

“He showed kids that a kid from here can play at the highest level,” Lawrie said. “For years, we’ve been preaching to the kids that ‘the only difference between you and the kid from Vancouver is where you’re living.’”

## 7 Maple Leafs trade targets who could help shore up the blue line

By Sonny Sachdeva

Sportsnet

January 15, 2020

The Toronto Maple Leafs' tumultuous season has seen a new dose of chaos thrown into the mix.

If a coaching change, an off-season blockbuster deal that hasn't panned out, and injuries to Mitch Marner and John Tavares weren't enough to shake things up, the loss of the club's two ice-time leaders in Morgan Rielly and Jake Muzzin will add a fresh test for Sheldon Keefe's club to navigate.

Both defenders remain on the injured reserve with foot injuries, and while Muzzin will likely return first, neither seem likely to figure into the Leafs' plans any time particularly soon. Unfortunately, that's a key problem for Toronto, as the first half of the 2019-20 campaign didn't see the club build up enough insurance in the standings to withstand any significant drop-off.

As it currently stands, Toronto sits third in their division with 56 points. Florida — who just dealt the Leafs an 8-4 shellacking on Sunday — sits just three points back with two games in hand. Should Toronto get pushed into the wild-card race, the Hurricanes sit tied with them at 56 points, with Philadelphia and Columbus only trailing by a pair.

Suffice it to say, the Maple Leafs need to maintain their current level, or risk winding up in a tough race for the post-season down the stretch.

So far, so good. Without their top two defenders Tuesday, the Maple Leafs managed to put away the New Jersey Devils with a 7-4 win — with recently called up Rasmus Sandin chipping in two points to prove he can help his team weather the storm for the time being. Justin Holl and Travis Dermott led the way in ice-time, each skating over 21 minutes in the tilt. Tyson Barrie and Martin Marincin lined up as the second pair, with Cody Ceci and Sandin rounding out the blue-line group.

But here's betting things get tougher once the Leafs are up against a team better than one that struggled mightily even before they traded away their recent Hart Trophy winner. The state of Toronto's blue line has many among the Maple Leafs faithful clamouring for a trade to shore up the back end for tougher affairs that'll come.

So, what are the club's options? Blockbusters won't do, as the Leafs don't necessarily require major surgery but simply a band-aid to keep things from getting out of hand until Rielly and Muzzin return. What will serve the club best is a stopgap option, a veteran defender who can come in, eat minutes, hold down the fort and chip in offensively when the moment presents itself.

Let's take a look at a few realistic options for GM Kyle Dubas.

T.J. Brodie or Travis Hamonic, Calgary Flames

Let's start closer to the surgery side of the spectrum. There's no question T.J. Brodie could help the Leafs' cause, having held a top-line role for much of his time in Calgary. Given reports over the summer that a Brodie (and Mark Jankowski) for Nazem Kadri trade was considered, it's safe to assume the Leafs are interested in the smooth-skating defender's services.

But as a longtime staple in Calgary, Brodie wouldn't come cheap. The original reported deal had a two-time 30-goal-scorer in Kadri going the other way. While Toronto no longer has many of that calibre of extra pieces to move out — and is in no position to subtract from their blue line in the form of someone like Barrie — they do have a few pieces to entice teams, namely quick-footed depth winger Kasper Kapanen and AHL standout Jeremy Bracco.

With both Brodie and the more defensive-minded Travis Hamonic set to hit unrestricted free agency at the end of this season, and the Flames stocked full of talented blue-liners old and young, there may be a deal to be had there. Both clock in with fairly reasonable cap hits (\$4.65 million for Brodie, \$3.86 million for Hamonic), meaning little would need to be done to fit either in, as well.

Brenden Dillon, San Jose Sharks

Sportsnet's Elliott Friedman highlighted defender Brenden Dillon as a name San Jose could be looking to move, with the 29-year-old in the final year of his deal as well.

Though not able to provide the offensive spark that Brodie would bring, Dillon's a fairly steady presence on the back end, and able to eat up to 20 minutes a night if need be.

At six-foot-four, 225 pounds, the New Westminster, B.C. native also brings the added element of size and a physical game, assets that will become more useful down the stretch as the games slowly shift from regular-season to playoff-style hockey.

According to The Athletic's Kevin Kurz, a second-round pick and a prospect could be enough to pry him out of San Jose, meaning a deal starting with Bracco could be workable.

Alec Martinez, Los Angeles Kings

With the Kings in the same 2019-20 tailspin as their Californian counterparts, veteran defender Alec Martinez is reportedly on the block, too.

The fact that the 32-year-old has another year on his deal, at \$4 million, likely increases the cost for potential buyers, but Martinez could be both a short- and long-term solution for Toronto.

In the short term, he can easily eat 20 minutes a night — having topped that mark in each of the past four seasons — and brings some offensive capabilities too, with a 39-point effort on his resume just a couple seasons ago. In the long term, Martinez's familiarity with Muzzin from their Kings days can only help Toronto's efforts.

Nikita Zadorov or Ian Cole, Colorado Avalanche

The Avalanche are going to be the most interesting team involved in any trade deadline conversations given they've got an already promising squad and an absurd amount of cap space heading into the latter half of the season.

They also have a duo in Ian Cole and Nikita Zadorov who are currently limited to bottom-pairing minutes, but have shown the ability to eat more minutes if need be in the past and come with manageable cap hits.

Rumours were floated about a potential Zadorov trade last year before he signed a one-year deal to return to Colorado. With a strong team and title aspirations, there's no reason GM Joe Sakic needs to mess with his current blue-line setup, of course. But if Sakic opts to swing for a bigger blue-line piece to bolster his top four, perhaps that pushes one of Cole or Zadorov out and on to the trade block.

Neither are particularly game-changing options for the Maple Leafs — but given the state of their blue line and the responsibilities thrust upon still-emerging talents like Dermott, Holl and Sandin, a steady, veteran defender to plug into the mix for the time being wouldn't be a terrible idea.

### **Zach Bogosian, Buffalo Sabres**

The veteran reportedly requested a trade out of Buffalo back in December as a limited role has left him often sidelined in the rebuilding Sabres organization.

Little has changed since, with Bogosian still rarely getting legitimate minutes in his current situation. While a healthy Leafs squad would probably have taken the same approach, the current crew could likely use the 29-year-old's veteran presence, and could potentially get some special-teams use out of him as well.

The main issue here is cap hit, given the pending unrestricted free agent's 2019-20 hit sits at \$5.14 million per year. Perhaps Buffalo retains some salary to move on from the Bogosian debacle, and nets a future asset from the Maple Leafs to help their young guns' cause.

Of course, the central question is whether a deal is truly needed at all, particularly given the losses on Toronto's blue-line don't appear to be season-ending. There's no room for a slide down the standings, but the Leafs' roster is still dotted with more than enough talent to make up for a weaker blue-line, in theory.

Looking at the names available — those who could potentially be acquired in deals that wouldn't significantly alter the team's current roster or prospect cupboard, how much would the needle truly move? The biggest X-factor right now appears to be Sandin.

With the young Swede impressing in the big leagues once again, perhaps a combination of him raising his level and Barrie finally finding his game stems the tide for Toronto's blue line before their top-pairing game changers are back in the mix. Should there still be a blue-line hole seemingly in need of filling in Toronto, the question for Dubas is how minor or major a move is deemed necessary to shake things up.

## **Sabres get behind Krueger, set for Stars**

Yahoo! Sports

January 15, 2020

As the Buffalo Sabres try to come to grips again with another wildly inconsistent season, players such as forward Kyle Okposo say the organization is benefiting from the addition of new coach Ralph Krueger.

The Sabres started hot this season -- a repeat of a year ago when they authored a 10-game winning streak under former coach Phil Housley in November. That stretch put Buffalo atop the NHL standings, but the bottom soon fell out for the Sabres.

Housley was relieved of his duties after two seasons last April. Okposo said the hiring of Krueger has been a major asset, especially in the wake of a loss.

"You just come to work and it's a new day. There's no moping around, there's no hard feelings," Okposo said of Krueger's approach. "You're going to lose games in this league. Just the positivity and just the way that he speaks and motivates has been awesome for us this year."

The Sabres surely will lean on Krueger when the Atlantic Division club plays in Dallas against the Stars on Thursday night. Puck drop on the teams' lone meeting in the Lone Star State this season is set for 8:30 p.m. ET.

Buffalo played a strong game Tuesday night and won its second straight and fourth in six games by turning to superstar Jack Eichel for the tiebreaking tally in a 4-2 win over Vegas. Eichel beat goalie Marc-Andre Fleury on the short side at 7:57 for the game-winner.

Said Krueger: "It was definitely the genius that he has in him that came out on that goal."

Eichel's 28th goal gave him 61 points this season. Eichel is the first Buffalo player to score 60 points in 46 games or less since Alexander Mogilny (33 games) and Pat LaFontaine (34) did so in the 1992-93 season.

The Sabres announced Tuesday that forward Tage Thompson will be out for the remainder of the season after he had shoulder surgery.

According to Dallas coach Rick Bowness, the Stars put together a subpar performance in Denver against the Colorado Avalanche on Tuesday night but still rallied for a 3-2 win after defenseman Esa Lindell, who normally provides little offense, notched the game-winner in overtime.

Dallas trailed 2-0 in the first period and was outshot 43-30 in the game.

"We weren't very good at all," Bowness said. "We did respond, and that's a sign of a really good hockey club, and we are. But we're not going to be able to play like that very often and get away with it."

## **Ristolainen's net-front presence has helped fuel resurgent power play**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 15, 2020

Rasmus Ristolainen has never been one to shy away from contact. He gets under opponents' skin with his physicality during games, often smirking while doing so. His pregame routine involves an exchange of shoves with longtime teammate Zemgus Girgensons, both of whom laugh the whole time.

Combine that fondness for physicality with a 6-foot-4, 220-pound frame, and what do you get? On the power play, you get one heck of a net-front presence.

"I enjoy it a lot and take a lot of pride in it," Ristolainen said. "It's been working and, yeah, I have a lot of fun out there."

Playing without one of its foremost threats in winger Victor Olofsson, the Sabres' power play is 6-for-13 over its last five games. One of the keys to its resurgence has been the addition of Ristolainen down low, a spot he'd only briefly occupied earlier this season (with a goal to show for it).

Throughout his career, Ristolainen has traditionally occupied the point for the Sabres on the power play, often enjoying success while quarterbacking the top unit. His 91 power-play points since the start of the 2015-16 season rank 11th among NHL defensemen.

The Sabres now have another Rasmus who also excels at the point, freeing Ristolainen to take his talents down low. It's a look the team utilized on and off earlier in the season - including in 6-on-5 situations with the goalie pulled - that has become a fixture since Olofsson's injury on Jan. 2.

"It's just my 25 years of coaching, I've often done that where you have a very designated net-front personality," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "It could be a forward who has that personality or a defenseman. ... We definitely saw that as a 6-on-5 necessity, to have a definite presence who can win also retrievals and battles.

"That's what the net-front person on the power play is well positioned to [do], always get to retrievals first because the PK is above him. ... Risto is just outstanding in those battles and has the calmness still and the hands to be able to deal with what's necessary there."

The plays Ristolainen has made in the team's last two victories show the diversity of his skill set down low. In Detroit on Sunday, he simply outmuscled Red Wings defenseman Patrick Nemeth to locate a rebound in the crease and bury it for his fifth goal of the season.

Against Vegas on Tuesday, he was the middleman in a tic-tac-toe play that resulted in a one-time goal for Sam Reinhart in the slot.

"I feel everyone was kind of joking and surprised I can pass the puck," Ristolainen said. "But you know, I used to make plays, too. It's not that hard to make a two-foot pass."

His willingness to exchange cross-checks with net-front defenders make him an antagonizing distraction for the penalty kill. His large frame makes him an ideal screen in front of opposing goaltenders.

Meanwhile, he's shown an ability to retrieve loose pucks and keep possession alive. Reinhart's goal against the Golden Knights was precipitated by a battle won by Ristolainen in the corner. His goal in Detroit was made possible after he manhandled Filip Hronek down low and rimmed the puck along the boards, giving the Sabres possession off the opening draw.

While Ristolainen handles things down low, the remaining four skaters have made an effort to constantly show up in different spots, using movement to stay unpredictable. Reinhart, who used to occupy the net front full-time, has three power-play goals in the last five games: two from the left faceoff circle and one from the slot.

"That's what we're asking for on the power play, to have different looks, different attacking points, which we're getting better at now as we evolve," Krueger said. "Of course, that discussion in the pre-scouts will be around controlling [Ristolainen] and making sure he doesn't get in front so maybe that's a deception. But we need multiple points of attack and that was a good one to use last night."

"I think I've been doing a pretty good job with loose pucks all over the goal line," Ristolainen added. "I just try to stay in front of the goalie and you know maybe get good battles with their D. You know, maybe they focus on me too much sometimes and some other guys have more space."

The success on the power play is the latest chapter in what Ristolainen believes is his best NHL season so far. He's still seeing consistent matchups against other teams' top lines, but goals are in Buffalo's favor, 34-33, with him on the ice at 5-on-5. He credits Krueger and his staff and the connected structure they've instilled.

That's not to say he's satisfied.

"There's still a lot more to come and a lot more potential I want to reach," he said.

Lazar carving out a consistent role

Curtis Lazar provided a much-needed cushion with his empty-net goal on Tuesday, which traveled slowly from end to end off his backhand. Ironically, he admitted he wasn't even trying to score.

He had been on the ice for 1:53 - with an icing and a timeout in-between - when the puck found his stick in the slot of his own zone. He simply tried to flip it to the opposite blue line to relieve pressure and allow teammates to change.

Instead, it was game over.

"I mean, that's kind of how my year's going," Lazar said. "I've worked hard for those chances and it's good to have luck on your side, too."

Lazar came to Buffalo in the fall with the idea that he could blossom following an up-and-down start to his career. He was drafted 13th overall by Ottawa in 2013, began his NHL career at age 19 the following year, and admits he lost a piece of his offensive game in the years that followed.

He willingly spent last season in AHL Stockton, looking to reclaim his offensive identity. When he fell just short of making the Sabres' roster out of training camp this season, he kept a positive attitude in Rochester and stayed ready for his next opportunity.

It's paying off now. Lazar has dressed in 11 straight games for the Sabres, scoring six points (3+3). The long shift to end the game against Vegas brought his ice time to 18:06, his highest total since Jan. 13, 2016. His 52.8-percent mark in the faceoff circle is the best of his career, and he feels by playing his natural position at center, he's been put in a position to succeed.

"Curtis is, again, a different look up the middle with the size that he brings," Krueger said. "... He has that opportunity to be a leader of a line that is hard to play against but can also defend against top lines of the other team so that can release some of the ice times of our top lines, especially here at home to free them up to play against possibly weaker lines of the opposition.

"Curtis is giving us that. He's working hard on his faceoffs. It gives us a powerful right-handed draw opportunity and he's learning every day better to play within our defensive structure that we want and the principles and concepts that we need."

While it's the little things that earned him his role, the offense has started to come, too. He has four goals and seven points in 17 games - per-game averages of .23 and .41, respectively. Entering this season, he'd averaged .06 goals and .21 points in 246 NHL games.

Still just 24, he sees no reason why more offense can't be in his future.

"I've been that player before," he said. "I've done it at every level except the NHL. Again, with me, I've always established that defensive game first to build that trust and get that ice time and then build on the offense. It's nice to pit in there and be relied upon in all situations.

"My job is keep the puck out of our net. But I am a scorer, I have that instinct, I just want to keep on going. I am seeing the plays and I am creating. When I get chances, I am putting them in."

Wednesday's practice

Here's how the Sabres lined up prior to leaving for their two-game road trip, which begins in Dallas on Thursday:

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

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

35 Linus Ullmark  
40 Carter Hutton