



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

January 2, 2020

Eichel and Buffalo take on Edmonton

Associated Press

January 1, 2020

Edmonton Oilers (21-17-4, fourth in the Pacific Division) vs. Buffalo Sabres (17-17-7, sixth in the Atlantic Division)

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

BOTTOM LINE: Jack Eichel and Buffalo square off against Edmonton. Eichel currently ranks seventh in the NHL with 53 points, scoring 25 goals and totaling 28 assists.

The Sabres are 11-5-3 at home. Buffalo has given up 33 power-play goals, killing 73.8% of opponent chances.

The Oilers are 11-9-1 on the road. Edmonton has scored 39 power-play goals, converting on 30.2% of chances.

In their last meeting on Dec. 8, Buffalo won 3-2.

TOP PERFORMERS: Eichel has recorded 53 total points while scoring 25 goals and adding 28 assists for the Sabres. Sam Reinhart has recorded seven assists over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

Zack Kassian leads the Oilers with a plus-four in 39 games played this season. James Neal has five goals and two assists over the last 10 games for Edmonton.

LAST 10 GAMES: Oilers: 3-7-0, averaging 2.8 goals, 4.9 assists, 2.8 penalties and 7.3 penalty minutes while giving up 3.8 goals per game with a .877 save percentage.

Sabres: 3-6-1, averaging 2.5 goals, 4.3 assists, 3.9 penalties and 9.7 penalty minutes while giving up 3.2 goals per game with a .887 save percentage.

INJURIES: Sabres: None listed.

Oilers: None listed.

Killorn scores twice, Lightning come back to beat Sabres 6-4

By Jonah Bronstein

Associated Press

January 1, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Alex Killorn and the Tampa Bay Lightning rallied late, extending their longest winning streak of the season into the new year.

Killorn had two goals and an assist to lead the Lightning back from a three-goal deficit for their fourth straight victory, 6-4 against the Buffalo Sabres on Tuesday night.

"Good teams find a way to win," Killorn said. "We didn't have the start we wanted. But we did find a way to win. And that's what's important."

Tyler Johnson added a goal and two assists, Ondrej Palat and Anthony Cirelli each added a goal and an assist, Kevin Shattenkirk also scored, and Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 18 shots as the Lightning opened a four-game trip with their 12th consecutive win against an Atlantic Division opponent.

"We are chasing for a playoff spot and every point against those teams are important," Palat said. "So we are happy we came out with two points."

Conor Sheary had a goal and two assists, and Marcus Johansson had a goal and an assist for Buffalo. The Sabres also got goals from Jack Eichel and Jimmy Vesey in losing their fourth in a row. Linus Ullmark made 16 saves.

"It's just not going our way," said Johansson, who received a hooking penalty that put the Lightning on a power play prior to Killorn's first goal.

"We do everything we can to get wins," Johansson added. "When they slip away, it's frustrating, and it's tough. We've just got to learn from it and put it behind us, and get back to how we started the game. Keep building off that."

Killorn's second goal of the game and 15th of the season gave the Lightning their first lead 8:08 into the third period. Pat Maroon set up the go-ahead goal with a pass from behind the net. Killorn beat Buffalo defenseman Rasmus Dahlin to receive the puck in the high slot and sent a wrist shot past Ullmark.

Shattenkirk got the tying goal less than two minutes earlier on a straightaway wrist shot that bounced off Johansson's skate and over Ullmark's glove.

Killorn recorded his third point when he assisted on Cirelli's empty-net goal in the closing seconds.

The Lightning scored twice in a span of 2:58 to get within a goal late in the second period.

Killorn knocked in the rebound from Point's shot that bounced off the right post on a power play. Then with about three minutes left in the period, Johnson received a long pass from Palat at the blue line and scored on a partial breakaway.

Mikhail Sergachev sparked the Lightning's comeback when he fought with Buffalo's Jake McCabe midway through the second period.

"Emotionally, we weren't really in the game for some reason," Killorn said. "Looking at the Sergachev fight, event though they scored right after, it kind of galvanized the group."

The Sabres appeared to gain momentum from the fight and take control of the game when Eichel made an outstanding individual effort to score his first career short-handed goal and give Buffalo a 4-1 lead.

The NHL's third-leading scorer blocked a shot from Shattenkirk before skating up the right wing and faking a shot from the circle to maneuver around Shattenkirk. Eichel moved the puck to his backhand and swept it past a sliding Vasilevskiy on the other side of the crease for his 25th of the season.

The goal came with 38 seconds remaining on a Lightning power play that followed McCabe receiving a penalty for instigating the fight with Sergachev in response to a hit on Eichel.

Sergachev also blocked two shots late in the third period that Killorn called "potentially game-savers."

This was the Sabres' first loss of the season when leading after two periods. They were 14-0-0 in such situations entering Tuesday.

"It's not acceptable, obviously," Eichel said. "A 4-1 lead and we lose the game."

Sheary gave Buffalo the lead in the final minute of the first period. Curtis Lazar set up Sheaty for the one-timer from the right slot.

Johansson made it 2-0 when he beat Vasilevskiy with a long wrist shot from the right wall in the early stages of the second period. Buffalo regained its two-goal lead later in the second when Johansson made a slick backhand pass to set up Vesey in front of the net, after Johnson fed Palat in the high slot for Tampa Bay's first goal on a power play seven minutes into the period.

NOTES: The Lightning swept the four-game season series with the Sabres for the second time in four seasons. ... Killorn played in his 553rd NHL game, passing Brad Richards for sixth-most in Lightning history. ... Sabres F Dalton Smith made his NHL debut after being called up from the minors and signing a one-year contract on Monday. ... Buffalo scratched F Evan Rodrigues to make room for Dalton in the lineup. Prior to Tuesday's game, TSN's Darren Dreger reported that Rodrigues has requested a trade. ... Sabres D Marco Scandella returned after missing two games due to an illness. ... Johnson's 16 assists against the Sabres are the most he has against any NHL team. ... The Lightning played their fifth of eight straight against Eastern Conference and fourth of six in a row against Atlantic Division foes.

UP NEXT

Lightning: At Montreal on Thursday.

Sabres: Host Edmonton on Thursday.

Grading each Sabres player at the season's midway point

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 2, 2020

How the Buffalo Sabres respond to their 41st game could determine the outcome of their first season under coach Ralph Krueger.

The Sabres capped their first half by allowing five consecutive goals to blow a three-goal lead Tuesday night against the Tampa Bay Lightning. The 6-4 loss dropped the Sabres to 17-17-7, six points out of a playoff spot, and they are on pace for 82 points.

The season's first half included Jack Eichel's dominance, a surprising resurgence from several players who struggled under former coach Phil Housley and an injury that will likely sideline Jeff Skinner until after the All-Star break.

Krueger's ability to coax more out of players who have not performed up to expectations could help the Sabres snap their eight-year playoff drought.

"Maybe New Year's is coming at the right time," Krueger said Tuesday night. "You've got an opportunity psychologically to try to cut the halfway mark and say, 'This is where we are today and here is what we need to do second half,' and work with the guys together the same way we always have where quickly we digest results and look at processes. Whether they're good or bad, that's what you have to do in the National Hockey League and that's what we need to learn to do if we want to be a competitive team in this league."

Here is a look at how each Sabre performed during the season's first half.

Exceeded expectations

Jack Eichel: The Sabres' 23-year-old captain finished the schedule's first half ranked third in the NHL with 25 goals, and his 53 points were seventh. He had a league-best 17-game point streak that ended with his upper-body injury moments before puck drop Dec. 17 in Philadelphia, and he was named to a third consecutive All-Star Game.

Marco Scandella: After posting a minus-28 rating over his first two seasons in Buffalo, Scandella has emerged as a steady presence on the blue line. Entering Tuesday, the Sabres had a 52.99 shot-differential percentage at 5-on-5 with Scandella on the ice, the second-highest mark on the team, and he's among their most trusted defensemen.

Henri Jokiharju: The 20-year-old has far exceeded anyone's expectations, at least defensively. Jokiharju has been strong in front of his own net and rarely makes mistakes in coverage. He's been used on the penalty kill and power play, in addition to helping close out tight games in the third period.

Johan Larsson: Perhaps no player benefited more from the coaching change than Larsson. He's no longer relegated to only taking defensive-zone faceoffs, and his performance without the puck has sparked an offensive resurgence. The 27-year-old has become the Sabres' second-best center, and his line has become a model for how Krueger wants the team to forecheck in the offensive zone.

Zemgus Girgensons: Like Larsson, Girgensons is showing he can contribute some offense in a checking-line role. He has surpassed his goal total from last season and is on pace for his highest point total since 2014-15.

Rasmus Ristolainen: The 25-year-old defenseman is finally starting to realize his potential. Ristolainen has four goals among 19 points with a plus-2 rating through 41 games in his seventh NHL season. More impressive, Ristolainen has been reliable in the defensive zone with puck management and coverage.

Victor Olofsson: Sabres fans had high expectations for Olofsson after he scored 30 goals in Rochester last season. However, no one could have predicted he would lead all NHL rookies in points with 34 and goals with 16 through the Sabres' first 41 games. The 24-year-old has also been strong defensively.

Linus Ullmark: Ullmark has emerged as the Sabres' No. 1 goalie, starting 10 of their last 11 games and posting a .909 save percentage in 15 starts since Nov. 24. He is on pace to appear in a career-high 50 games.

Met expectations

Rasmus Dahlin: Dahlin has improved his 5-on-5 play since returning from his eight-game concussion absence, and entering Tuesday, he was on pace for the best offensive season by a Sabres defenseman since Gary Galley had 54 points in 1995-96. Dahlin quarterbacks the Sabres' top power-play unit and has two goals among 21 points in 33 games.

Jake McCabe: McCabe is averaging the second-most ice time among Sabres defensemen and has a minus-2 rating in 39 games. There have been some mishaps in the defensive zone, but McCabe brings leadership as an alternate captain and often plays against the opponents' top forwards.

Sam Reinhart: Reinhart is on pace for 24 goals among 62 points and is amid a nine-game scoring drought. He's improved defensively and has been a more consistent threat on the forecheck. A strong second half could earn Reinhart a significant raise in restricted free agency this summer.

Brandon Montour: The 25-year-old is playing his fewest minutes per game since his rookie season with Anaheim in 2016-17, and he hasn't ignited the Sabres' second-power play unit in the way you would have expected. Montour has 10 points in 27 games, and he's used his elite skating to make a significant impact in the defensive zone.

Rasmus Asplund: One could argue Asplund has exceeded expectations because he's remained in the NHL since making his debut Nov. 16 against Ottawa, and he has emerged as one of the better options on the penalty kill. Asplund, though, has just one goal among three points in 23 games, and he's seen his ice time dip to less than 10 minutes in each of the past three games. It's time to wonder if he's better off having a significant role in Rochester

Curtis Lazar: The Sabres signed Lazar as a depth option, and he's filled the role admirably. The 24-year-old has brought a physical presence to the lineup and appears more comfortable playing center. It's likely he'll remain with the team through the second half.

Kyle Okposo: Expectations have changed significantly since Okposo arrived. There's no question he's not performing up to his \$6 million salary. After all, he has four goals among eight points in 30 games. However, he's been effective in a checking-line role, and the Sabres' 53.29 5-on-5 shot differential with Okposo on the ice leads the team.

Did not meet expectations

Jimmy Vesey: The Sabres are still waiting for Vesey to break through. Vesey has just five goals among 12 points in 38 games. That's a far cry from the 50 goals he scored over three seasons with the New York Rangers. The Sabres traded a second-round draft pick to acquire Vesey in July, and they need more from the pending unrestricted free agent in the second half.

Colin Miller: The 27-year-old was expected to have a prominent role with the Sabres upon being acquired from Vegas in exchange for a second-round pick in the 2021 draft and a fifth-round pick in the 2022 draft. However, he's been a healthy scratch 12 times, including five times in the past eight games.

Conor Sheary: The move to Buffalo hasn't gone well for Sheary. There are games he reminds Sabres fans why Botterill acquired him from the Pittsburgh Penguins. Sheary, though, has been prone to scoring droughts throughout his career, and he has struggled to make a consistent impact with the Sabres. He has only three goals in his last 30 games, though he's played better as of late.

Evan Rodrigues: Bad luck has played a role in Rodrigues having zero goals in 24 games. Remember, he was on the wrong side of two of the best saves this season, first by Boston's Tuukka Rask and second by Ottawa's Craig Anderson. The Sabres need Rodrigues to contribute in other ways if he's not scoring, though advanced metrics indicate he's performed above his production.

Marcus Johansson: A few factors are to blame for Johansson's offensive output, or lack thereof. He was forced to play out of position for most of the first half and missed seven games with an upper-body injury in November. He seems to be gaining traction, but the Sabres need him to contribute more with and without the puck.

Jeff Skinner: The Sabres' 27-year-old winger is out for the next three to four weeks with an upper-body injury and is amid an 11-game scoring drought. He has only 11 goals among 19 points in 39 games and is unlikely to match the career-high 40 goals he scored last season. Skinner has been affected by being removed from the top power play, and he was no longer on a line with Eichel.

Casey Mittelstadt: Perhaps expectations for Mittelstadt were too high when he arrived in the NHL in March 2018. He was not ready to become a second-line center and struggled with the nuances of the positions. His lack of progress this season resulted in an assignment to Rochester, where he'll stay until he shows he's ready to be a consistent threat with the Sabres.

Zach Bogosian: Bogosian, a pending unrestricted free agent, played in 10 consecutive games upon returning from hip surgery in November, and he reportedly requested a trade upon being scratched Dec. 12 against Nashville. Bogosian has been scratched in seven of the past nine games.

Carter Hutton: The 33-year-old experienced the biggest shift in performance of any Sabre this season. He went 6-0, including back-to-back shutouts, with a .943 save percentage during his first six games, only to go 0-6-4 with a .867 save percentage in his past 10.

Sabres' Evan Rodrigues does not deny he wants a fresh start elsewhere

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 1, 2020

Evan Rodrigues did not deny he wants a fresh start after spending four-plus seasons with the Buffalo Sabres. However, the 26-year-old forward acknowledged to reporters Wednesday that he's unhappy with his role under coach Ralph Krueger and wants more ice time.

"I'm a hockey player who wants to play hockey," Rodrigues said outside the Sabres' dressing room in KeyBank Center. "I think that's pretty much, anyone out there will tell you the same thing. It's a job, it's a career. Just want to play hockey."

Rodrigues, a pending restricted free agent making \$2 million, was scratched Tuesday for the 17th time this season. Two hours before puck drop against the Tampa Bay Lightning, TSN's Darren Dreger reported that Rodrigues, like defenseman Zach Bogosian, expressed a desire to be traded by the Sabres.

Krueger declined to say whether he was frustrated by another report of a player wanting out, but he made his stance clear.

"I can only speak to what is, and what is is we will end up here with a group of players that really want to be here, and we will work with the players that really want to be here, and quite clearly, play the players that want to be here," Krueger said following the Sabres' team meeting.

Rodrigues has zero goals in 24 games and only one in 51 games dating back to last season. He was scratched Tuesday in favor of forward Dalton Smith, who played only 1:26 and received a two-minute penalty for roughing. Rodrigues played less than 10 minutes in six of the Sabres' previous 10 games.

Rodrigues is averaging a career-low 10:42 of ice time while recording three assists with a minus-5.

"Yeah, I'm not going to say I'm happy with that," Rodrigues said of his production. "I expect more from myself. Just getting those chances and playing, it will come. I don't doubt myself, but obviously it's not the result I wanted."

His role is different than the one he had last season under former Sabres coach Phil Housley.

Rodrigues, who signed with the Sabres as an undrafted free agent in April 2015, set career highs in goals (9), assists (20) and points (29) while averaging 15:49 of ice time. He emerged as their second-best option at center and was a key cog on the team's penalty kill while solidifying himself as a full-time NHL player. The performance resulted in him being awarded a one-year, \$2 million contract through arbitration in July.

However, Rodrigues struggled in his first training camp under Krueger and was a healthy scratch in seven of the Sabres' first 11 games. He has played only 12:53 on the power play this season and remained in a bottom-six role when the Sabres were in need of a second-line center. While Rodrigues denied that playing in a new system slowed his progress, Krueger views the situation differently.

"What happens is the competition in the group has been hard and some players will profit from it and some of them will struggle," Krueger said of Rodrigues. "It's also the principles and concepts we're looking for. I told you early on that some players who play a different way, they'll have to give up some of themselves to become part of a group dynamic, which gives us a chance to win every night here. If all five guys on the ice are connected then we have a chance and if we're not we won't."

"What would happen is often players will give up or lose on the offensive side, and it's possible with him that's the pathway that's been difficult for him. Not for everybody does that come as easy, and he just needs to continue to work on his game, and we'll make decisions on lineup for lineup and look at the facts. Again, we'll deal with that inside and internally with what the truth is of the situation. Not everybody evolves at the same pace within the concepts or principles of a team."

This is the third time in less than 12 months a Sabre has reportedly requested a trade. Defenseman Nathan Beaulieu did so before he was dealt to the Winnipeg Jets shortly before the deadline last February, and Bogosian allegedly made his intentions known after being a healthy scratch Dec. 12. Bogosian has been scratched in seven of the Sabres' past nine games.

Rodrigues has 21 goals among 65 points in 178 career regular-season games in the NHL, and he played 128 regular-season games with the Rochester Americans. Consistency has eluded him this season.

Rodrigues recorded a season-high six shots on goal with one assist in 13:54 during a 3-1 loss in Ottawa on Dec. 23, only to play 6:29 against the Boston Bruins four days later.

"I think you always believe in yourself and always have that confidence," Rodrigues said. "Yeah, a game like that kind of gives you a little boost, and it's frustrating for myself to not see myself do that consistently. That's kind of what I see myself as and what I want to be doing. I just want to be playing and getting those chances."

Team meeting

Rather than practicing or dissecting their latest loss, the Sabres gathered Wednesday morning for a team meeting where Krueger summarized their first 41 games, and they went over what's possible during the season's second half. He also wanted to evaluate how they were affected by having to play 21 games in 39 days.

The Sabres host the Edmonton Oilers in KeyBank Center on Thursday night to begin a stretch of 18 games in 46 days. Krueger also spoke about how the Sabres are forming the habits necessary to be consistent, and he explained why their play has started to slip recently.

"What's happening is the mental fatigue of sustaining those habits over and over and over again for 60 minutes, it's still not there," Krueger said. "It's still not there. We still don't have the mental wherewithal to stick with those habits. As soon as we are plus-35 seconds in a shift, as soon as we're four games in seven days and it's tough time, we have individual breakdowns still in those situations. And those will go away because the hearts are in the right place."

'Processing pain'

Krueger spoke to the media for approximately 15 minutes following the team meeting in what could be called a state-of-the-Sabres address. Though Krueger wanted his players to not dwell on the negative aspects of the 6-4 loss to Tampa Bay, he emphasized the importance of learning from what went wrong.

"What winners are able to do is bring themselves into constructive processes quickly," Krueger said. "That's what processing pain in life is all about. So, if you stick with the pain and you stick with the process too long, it will eat you up. There's no room in this National Hockey League to feel sorry for yourself. ... So, pain is there to test you and for you to learn and grow from is you use it properly. Otherwise, all it does is eat you up and turn you into a loser. So, it's making those winning decisions is what we need to learn to do better."

Five years later, Sabres and Oilers have given Jack Eichel and Connor McDavid little help

By Travis Yost
The Buffalo News
January 1, 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.

When the 2015 NHL Draft started to take shape, observers around the National Hockey League knew that Connor McDavid and Jack Eichel would forever be linked. McDavid, taken first overall by Edmonton, was billed as hockey's next superstar – a generational talent in the same vein as Sidney Crosby or Alexander Ovechkin.

Eichel was taken second overall by Buffalo. Eichel, a talent worthy of being first overall, was available at the time when Buffalo had the No. 2 pick by random chance – the random chance of McDavid being draft eligible the same year as Eichel and the random chance of the lottery. But neither Edmonton nor Buffalo would complain.

With a bona fide superstar down the middle of the lineup for the foreseeable future, the teams and their fans expected playoff hockey and perennial Stanley Cup aspirations would return to two vintage hockey markets.

But hockey remains a team sport – you can have weapons like McDavid and Eichel in your lineup, but asking them to unilaterally pull a roster to a postseason finish line is the tallest of orders. And that's why Oilers and Sabres fans have been so frustrated for so long.

Since entering the league (and prorating the expansion team in Vegas), these two franchises are 24th and 31st respectively in the win-loss column.

It is mind-boggling how difficult it has been for these organizations to build around their stars. And it's on full display again in the 2019-20 season, where after hot October starts, the Oilers and Sabres have emphatically regressed to the middle of the pack.

McDavid is having a Hart Trophy caliber season, and Eichel isn't far behind. But with little to no help around them, it's starting to feel like nothing will change. The two superstars will be on the ice together Thursday in KeyBank Center for the Oilers' annual visit.

Edmonton did little to improve the roster around McDavid this season – mostly because of terrible cap management under the prior regime, but some because of new General Manager Ken Holland's "wait and see" approach. Buffalo was the opposite: The Sabres targeted the trade market and free agency to improve at both the forward and defensive positions, bringing in a litany of new names.

The forward position specifically was supposed to be an upgrade: Marcus Johansson, Conor Sheary and Jimmy Vesey were supposed to give Buffalo more juice in the middle six of their lineup, as were new faces Victor Olofsson and Rasmus Asplund. Olofsson has produced admirably. The rest of the group? Not so much.

To understand just how top heavy these teams are, I plotted out each team's scoring contributions from its forward group as a percentage of total goals scored by forwards this season. Skaters of similar usage are measured against one another, so the most commonly used forward on Buffalo's roster (Eichel) is compared to the most commonly used forward for the other 30 teams, and so on.

Eichel has scored a whopping 25% of goals from Buffalo forwards this year, and McDavid is at 30%. Those are extreme outliers for both – in part because of how strong Eichel and McDavid have been, and in part because of how poor the rest of the forward groups for these respective teams have been:

For the Sabres, you can see that the middle six is crushing this team. Outside of Jeff Skinner – who curiously is playing the fifth-most minutes on the team and is now out for three to four weeks – the Sabres' middle six pales woefully in comparison to the rest of the league. The group of Marcus Johansson, Johan Larsson, Vladimir

Sobotka, Jimmy Vesey, Zemgus Girgensons, Conor Sheary and Casey Mittelstadt have a total of 33 goals in more than 3,500 minutes. Eichel and Sam Reinhart alone, the team's top two forwards by usage, have 36 goals in less than half the time.

In Edmonton, the issues are really with any forward who hasn't played with one or both of McDavid or Leon Draisaitl this season. The Oilers have the least productive bottom six in the league – forwards six through 14 by usage total 24 goals, which would mean four forwards (David Pastrnak, Auston Matthews, Eichel and McDavid) have met or exceeded Edmonton's entire depth scoring.

When you are thinking about the resumes put together by the likes of Eichel or McDavid through the first few years of their careers, it's important to keep this context in mind.

Both organizations have failed to build around their stars, and at least for this season, it's hard to see where help will come from.

Sabres' meltdown includes five unanswered goals in 6-4 loss to Tampa Bay

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

December 31, 2019

Linus Ullmark sat quietly at his stall, pads still strapped to his legs and a blank expression on his face late Tuesday night. Meanwhile, Jack Eichel, who was the only other Sabre in the KeyBank Center dressing room, lamented what he described as a collapse.

"It's not acceptable, obviously," Eichel said following a 6-4 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning in which the Buffalo Sabres allowed five unanswered goals and blew a three-goal lead. Rather than gaining ground in the Atlantic Division, the Sabres lost for the seventh time in eight games and their seventh straight to Tampa Bay.

This had the potential to turn the tide on what has become a disastrous stretch for the Sabres. Jack Eichel scored his 25th goal of the season less than two minutes after his teammate, Jake McCabe, stood up for him by fighting Lightning defenseman Mikhail Sergachev.

Marcus Johansson, Conor Sheary and Jimmy Vesey provided the supplementary scoring, and the Sabres finally solved the Lightning's dynamic attack to lead 4-1 through 33 minutes. Yet an ill-timed penalty and more issues on special teams resulted in what coach Ralph Krueger hopes is not a devastating loss.

"Everybody's going to have a night like this," Krueger said. "I think the reaction and the way you come out of it and how quickly you can recover is also a test. We are still in a phase of growth where we're going to have a lot of tests, and this is a painful one, a really painful one. This group has fought hard together, they've kept the dialogue in the right direction, and we will do that again. It's a short turnaround, but we need to come out and be the team in the first 30 minutes right through the next game."

The Sabres finished the first half of their 82-game schedule with a 17-17-7 record for sixth in the Atlantic Division, and they are five points out of a playoff spot entering New Year's Day. Krueger acknowledged this latest loss was "going to take a little longer to digest."

Conor Sheary, who scored for only the third time in 30 games, admitted he could not pinpoint one area of the Sabres' play that resulted in the Lightning roaring back. Momentum began to change at 12:59 into the second period when Marcus Johansson was penalized for hooking, abruptly ending a Sabres power play with Buffalo leading 4-1.

Fifty-eight seconds later, Alex Killorn scored his first of two goals on a rebound in front of Ullmark. The Lightning then cut the deficit to one goal at 16:55 into the period with Tyler Johnson scoring by corralling a stretch pass and skating behind Sabres defenseman Henri Jokiharju before beating Ullmark.

Tampa Bay (21-13-4), which improved to 14-2 against Atlantic Division opponents, tied the score, 4-4, on Kevin Shattenkirk's shot from the slot with 13:40 remaining in regulation. The Sabres allowed the go-ahead goal with Killorn scoring on a centering pass from Pat Maroon less than two minutes later, and Buffalo lost when leading after two periods for the first time this season.

"We were playing well, obviously, a 4-1 lead," Eichel said. "We have momentum and then we (threw) the game away."

The Sabres had opportunities to tie the score. Their first of two third-period power plays included three shots sailing wide of the net, and Johansson's rebound shot was stopped by Andrei Vasilevskiy's leg pad. Buffalo's second chance on the man-advantage included two blocked shots and another that went wide of the net.

The Lightning clinched the victory on Anthony Cirelli's empty-net goal with three seconds remaining in the third period. Buffalo allowed multiple power-play goals for a second straight game and its power play went 0 for 4, extending its scoring drought to 0-for-14 over the past five games.

The Sabres allowed only three shots on goal in the first period after holding the Boston Bruins to two in the first 20 minutes Sunday at TD Garden. Yet Krueger and his players walked away from both games with zero points.

"It's tough, it's frustrating, it's never fun," Johansson said. "All the hard work we put, I think we come out here, guys are exhausted. We tried everything we can. It's just it's not going our way. It's tough on us. We work hard for this. We do everything we can to get wins."

The meltdown followed an impressive stretch of play in which the Sabres offense seemed to experience a breakthrough. They had scored only seven goals over their previous five games and lost Jeff Skinner to an upper-body injury that will keep him out of the lineup for the next three to four weeks.

Sheary broke the scoreless tie with 57 seconds remaining in the first period, and Johansson scored for the first time in 11 games on a wrist shot from near the right-wing boards for a 2-0 lead. Ondrej Palat trimmed Tampa Bay's deficit with a one-timer power-play goal, but Jimmy Vesey answered with a wrist shot from the right circle for a 3-1 Buffalo lead.

During the game's first half, the Sabres showed the sort of bravado and poise they lacked during the Lightning in the past. When Sergachev took a run at Eichel, McCabe immediately defended him by fighting the Tampa Bay defenseman.

Less than two minutes later, Eichel scored a highlight-reel goal in which he stickhandled around Shattenkirk for a 4-1 lead with 11:04 remaining in the second period.

"I think we were just simple in our game," Sheary said. "I mean, it sounds cliché, but we were just getting pucks behind them and going to work, and I think with the group we have in here, we have a lot of hardworking guys and gritty guys and that's where our game's our best. I think we started turning the puck over and not getting it deep, and I think that led to their transition."

Krueger doesn't have much time to make corrections. The Sabres host the Edmonton Oilers on Thursday, followed by the Florida Panthers on Saturday. He and Sheary emphasized the importance of focusing on all that went well against Tampa Bay.

However, the Sabres may have trouble overcoming the sting of this collapse.

"I think more than anything it's building experience as a group together and speaking openly about these processes that are happening and not shying away from what went wrong here," Krueger said. "Being brutally honest with each other, putting everything on the table, and then regrouping with the lessons and being better the next time it comes around."

The Wraparound: Lightning 6, Sabres 4

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

December 31, 2019

The crowd inside KeyBank Center roared at the sight of Jack Eichel scoring one of his signature goals, a remarkable individual effort in which he stickhandled around Tampa Bay Lightning defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk.

Conor Sheary, Marcus Johansson and Jimmy Vesey provided secondary scoring, and the Buffalo Sabres stood up to the Lightning when Jake McCabe fought Mikhail Sergachev.

Yet Tampa Bay roared back from a three-goal deficit to defeat Buffalo, 6-4, on Tuesday night. The Sabres (17-17-7) were 14-0 when leading after two periods, and they have lost seven of their last eight games. Tampa Bay (21-13-4), meanwhile, improved to 14-2 against Atlantic Division opponents and has won seven straight against Buffalo.

Alex Killorn scored his second goal of the game with 11:52 remaining in regulation to give the Lightning a 5-4 lead, and Anthony Cirelli added an empty-net goal.

"We definitely came out and played the game we wanted to play," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "It's a story of two halves where that first half was very disciplined and we didn't give up much. ... We took away the space Tampa likes to have and the last 26, 27 minutes were just unacceptable."

McCabe fought Sergachev as retaliation for the Lightning defenseman hitting Eichel along the boards. In addition to the fighting major, McCabe received a two-minute minor and a 10-minute game misconduct. One minute, 22 seconds later, Eichel scored his 25th goal of the season. However, the Sabres struggled to contain the Lightning's power play, which scored twice in the second period.

Ondrej Palat, Tyler Johnson and Shattenkirk scored for Tampa Bay. Linus Ullmark made 21 saves for the Sabres.

"It's tough, it's frustrating, it's never fun," Johansson said. "All the hard work we put, I think we come out here, guys are exhausted. We tried everything we can. It's just it's not going on our way. It's tough on us. We work hard for this. We do everything we can to get wins. When they slip away, it's frustrating and it's tough. We just got to learn from it and put it behind us and get back to how we started the game, keep building off that."

Five: The Sabres have held the Lightning and Boston Bruins to a total of five shots on goal in the first period over the past two games. Tampa Bay had only three in the first 20 minutes Tuesday, and its best opportunity came when Cedric Paquette missed the wide-open net on a shot from the right-wing circle.

Killorn and Brayden Point each hit the post during the Lightning's first-period power play.

Chances aplenty: The first period was one of the Sabres' finest stretches of play since their 3-2 win over Los Angeles on Dec. 21. Sam Reinhart nearly scored one minute into the game on a backhanded centering pass from Johan Larsson, Eichel missed the open net on a pass from Reinhart and Vesey had a scoring chance from the slot.

Opening salvo: The Sabres finally broke through with 56.9 seconds remaining when Sheary scored his third goal in 30 games by one-timing a cross-ice pass from Curtis Lazar, who intercepted the puck at Tampa Bay's blue line. The Lightning had a plus-15 goal differential in the first period, and the Sabres entered Tuesday 6-1-1 when leading after the first period.

Drought ends: Johansson gave the Sabres a 2-0 lead at 2:20 into the second period on a shot from near the right-wing boards that went over goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy's blocker. The goal was Johansson's first in 11 games and second in 25 games.

Breakdown: After taking consecutive penalties in the second period, the Sabres had another special teams breakdown when Palat scored on a one-timer with 13 minutes remaining. The goal came shortly after Ullmark made a highlight-reel stick save on Steven Stamkos.

Pouring on: Vesey pushed the lead to 3-1 with 11:48 remaining in the second period on a shot from the right-wing circle for his fifth goal of the season and first in eight games. With his goal and two assists, Sheary tied his career high by recording his fifth career three-point game and first since March 1, 2019.

Additionally, Johansson had his first multipoint game since Oct. 19, when he had a goal and an assist against San Jose.

Night of firsts: Eichel scored the first shorthanded goal of his career at 9:56 into the second period when he stickhandled around Shattenkirk and beat Vasilevskiy with a backhanded shot for a 4-1 lead.

The goal was Eichel's 25th of the season, three off the career-high 28 he scored in 77 games last season.

Not-so-special teams: The Sabres allowed their second power-play goal of the second period when Killorn capitalized on his own rebound with 6:03 remaining to cut Buffalo's lead to 4-2. The Sabres have allowed multiple power-play goals in consecutive games.

The Sabres went 0-for-4 on the power play and are amid an 0-for-14 slump.

"Same story; nothing new," Eichel said of the special teams struggles. "You guys saw it. ... Our PK has been great. It's not the PK at this point. It's the power play, so we have to find a way to change that."

Momentum swing: The Lightning drew within one at 16:55 into the second period when Johnson sneaked behind Henri Jokiharju and scored on Ullmark to make it 4-3. The Sabres were outshot, 15-9, in the second, but they entered Tuesday 14-0-0 when leading after two periods.

Tough break: Shattenkirk tied the score, 4-4, with 13:40 remaining in regulation when his shot from the slot ricocheted off Johansson's skate and in the net.

Meltdown: Killorn scored the go-ahead goal from the slot on a centering pass from Pat Maroon.

Debut: Forward Dalton Smith made his NHL debut for the Sabres after signing a one-way contract with the team Monday. He played only 1:26 and received a two-minute penalty for roughing.

Lineup: Defensemen Zach Bogosian and Colin Miller, and forward Evan Rodrigues were the Sabres' healthy scratches. Defensemen Jan Rutta and Braydon Coburn were scratched for Tampa Bay.

Next: The Sabres are scheduled to practice Wednesday in preparation for their game Thursday against the Edmonton Oilers in KeyBank Center.

Sabres say good riddance to a lousy decade with one final bizarre night

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

December 31, 2019

Blowing a three-goal lead at home to your arch nemesis was an oddly absurd way to end the biggest pile-of-garbage decade in Sabres history.

It wasn't much of a Happy New Year for the Sabres after Tuesday's collapse against the Tampa Bay Lightning, a 6-4 disaster in KeyBank Center that makes you wonder how long into 2020 it might linger.

Now that we can finally put the 2010s mercifully in the rear-view mirror, here's a little tic-tac-toe passing through my brain on the final night before we hit the new Roaring '20s.

(At least, you'd hope it would be roaring compared to the way the decade before it went).

- Veterans on \$9 million free agent contracts can't do the kind of things Marcus Johansson did in this game. Sure, he scored a goal to stake the Sabres to their three-goal lead. But a bad pass and a even worse hooking penalty in the offensive zone ended a second-period power play where a 5-1 lead was in the offing with a goal.

Instead, the Lightning got a power-play goal from Alex Killorn to breathe life back into their game and the Sabres spent the rest of the night on their heels. Johansson brought up his mistakes unprompted afterward.

"It's tough on everyone. I thought we played well in the first 25 minutes of the game and earned ourselves the position that we were in," Johansson said. "Then we kind of did it to ourselves tonight. It's just tough to swallow right now."

Johansson has played in 94 playoff games in his career, including 22 last spring for Boston on the road to Game 7 of the Stanley Cup final. He knows how to win. What's this team missing?

"It's details. It's when you're up 4-1 or 4-2 or 4-3 or whatever it is, it's just keep playing the right way," he said. "You can't sit back too much and be scared of playing. You can't start thinking you can do whatever you want because you're leading. You've just got to find ways to win. Get that winning mentality."

- Coach Ralph Krueger called the loss unacceptable. He didn't let Johansson off the hook either.

"That penalty definitely did it, shifted the momentum," he said. "We all know how dangerous Tampa Bay is. We never expected the game to be over at 4-1.

It was a change of momentum against a very dangerous team but we are to blame. We gave them more than they actually took."

- The Sabres went 29-43-11 in calendar year 2019, finishing last season 12-26-4 and opening this one 17-17-7. That's a 68-point pace for an 82-game season. That's lottery land. Most of these players aren't good enough. That's GM Jason Botterill's issue to try to fix. Again. How many more chances does he get?

- You would guess Evan Rodrigues was less than thrilled to lose his spot in the lineup to career minor leaguer Dalton Smith. Less than two hours before faceoff, TSN's Darren Dreger tweeted that the goal-less Rodrigues wants a trade.

Can't imagine there's much of a market for a guy with no goals in 24 games this season. Not to mention no goals in 32 games and one goal in 51 dating to last season. What kind of PR wizardry would need to take place to sell that kind of deal to a new fan base?

- So Rodrigues and Zach Bogosian have both gone public looking for their exit ticket through Dreger, ostensibly from their agents reaching out to TSN. Bogosian still has some value to the Sabres and likely to some other clubs.

Rodrigues should be put on waivers Wednesday and told to go to Rochester. At this point, he's an AHL player anyway and the Sabres can save a little bit of his \$2 million salary.

Botterill can send a message to his club by doing that and can send the word to agents they should zip it, too. Botterill overplayed his hand all summer and now he's stuck trying to upgrade this roster. Bad spot.

- A lot of time and energy was spent talking to and about Smith on Monday. It turns out the Rochester tough guy played a whole four shifts totaling 86 seconds and got into a one near-scrap with Luke Schenn that the linesmen interrupted.

Still, it was a clear message to his own team from Botterill about what went on in previous meetings with Tampa. If you guys aren't going to protect your own, I'll bring someone else in to do it. Message received.

When Jack Eichel took a hard hit from Mikhail Sergachev – which it should be noted was a clean one – Jake McCabe was there to answer and engage. He probably lost the fight but sent a surge of energy through the building and his team. It's what needed to happen when Vladimir Sobotka went down in Sweden and when Rasmus Dahlin went down last month in Tampa.

"One of the best teammates you'll come across," Eichel said of McCabe. "He's a character guy who brings grit, work ethic. You can't say enough good things about him. It's a big fight. Obviously we used the momentum to score a goal. It's too bad we couldn't keep it."

- Very strange to see the Sabres become a completely streaky team. They opened the season with a 9-2-2 mark through October. They followed that by going 1-7-1 as injuries ravaged the forward group. They recovered to go 6-2-3 as Eichel exploded on the bulk of his point streak. Now they're 1-6-1 again.

- That's 12 straight wins in the Atlantic Division for the Lightning, 10 of them in regulation. That's a remarkable string of success in four points games. Tampa Bay is 14-2 in its division this season -- but just 7-11-4 outside it. Weird.

- The key play on Conor Sheary's first-period goal was made by Curtis Lazar speeding off the bench up the gut of the ice to intercept an ill-advised pass by Tampa Bay veteran defenseman Ryan McDonagh. Lazar fed Sheary and the puck was in the net.

Lazar makes two or three very alert and very noticeable plays every night. Exactly what guys like Rodrigues don't do. Should have made the team out of training camp. With apologies to the good folks in Rochester, Lazar isn't going anywhere now.

Sabres' Jack Eichel calls third All-Star nod a 'huge honor'

By Lance Lysowski
The Buffalo News
December 31, 2019

Jack Eichel joined elite company Tuesday when he was named to the NHL All-Star Game for the third consecutive season.

The Buffalo Sabres' 23-year-old captain became the seventh player in franchise history to represent the team in at least three All-Star Games, joining Rick Martin (7), Gilbert Perreault (6), Dominik Hasek (5), Mike Ramsey (4), Phil Housley (3) and Alexander Mogilny (3).

All-Star festivities will be held in St. Louis on Jan. 24-25, culminating with the 3-on-3 game in which Eichel will represent the Atlantic Division.

Being named among the league's elite players remains a point of pride for Eichel in his fifth NHL season.

"It was a big honor, a lot of guys to credit," Eichel said. "I've been playing with a lot of good players here, the beneficiary of a lot of good hockey players. So it's a huge honor."

Eichel entered the Sabres' game Tuesday against Tampa Bay ranked third in the NHL with 24 goals and seventh with 52 points. With his 50th point of the season on Dec. 17 at Toronto, he became the first Sabre to reach 50 points in 35 or fewer games since Pat LaFontaine and Mogilny in 1992-93. Eichel also joined Martin as the second player in franchise history to record at least 20 goals and 50 points in each of his first five seasons.

Entering Tuesday, Eichel's output through 40 games had him on pace for 50 goals among 108 points. His 18-game personal point streak was the fifth-longest in the past decade, trailing only Taylor Hall (26 in 2017-18), Patrick Kane (26 in 2015-16), Sidney Crosby (25 in 2010-11) and Kane (20 in 2018-19).

During the streak, Eichel led the NHL with 18 goals among 32 points with a plus-19 rating. However, the league recognizes the streak as only 17 games because an upper-body injury prevented him from playing Dec. 19 in Philadelphia.

"For us, it's certainly expected," Krueger said of Eichel's All-Star nod. "There's no question he's been one of the premier players in both directions, with and without the puck, this season. A leader in so many different ways, and his work ethic, his lead on how we want to get Sabres hockey going. There's no question if you watch him you're being entertained every night, whether you're a coach or whether you're a spectator. He's very deserving to be in that circle, if not near the top of that circle."

Eichel will be joined on the Atlantic Division team by Toronto center Auston Matthews and goaltender Frederik Andersen, Boston's David Pastrnak and goalie Tuukka Rask, Tampa Bay's Victor Hedman, Montreal defenseman Shea Weber, Florida center Jonathan Huberdeau, Ottawa winger Anthony Duclair and Detroit winger Tyler Bertuzzi.

Additionally, Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin is one of the Atlantic's Last Men In candidates. The highest vote-getter by division will be added to the game. Voting opens at noon Wednesday and closes at 11:59 p.m. Jan. 10.

Entering Tuesday, Dahlin was on pace to record 49 points this season, which would be the highest total by a Sabres defenseman since Garry Galley had 54 in 1995-96.

Victor Olofsson, on the other hand, was not recognized for his success during the season's first half. The 24-year-old entered Tuesday with 16 goals among 34 points in 40 games. If he maintains his current pace, Olofsson would finish the season with the most goals by a Sabres rookie (33) since Ray Sheppard's 38 and the third-most points by a Sabres rookie (70), trailing only Martin (74 in 1971-72) and Perreault (72 in 1970-71).

"Yeah, you always want to see your teammates get recognized," Eichel said when asked about Olofsson. "It was awesome to be able to spend the weekend with 'Skins' last year, it was really cool. Whenever you have a

teammate, someone you're really close to, it makes the experience a lot more special. There's so many great players that don't get recognized. There's only so many spots, unfortunately.

"Vic's been having a great year. I'm sure there's a lot of other guys in the Eastern Conference and the Atlantic Division that probably feel like they got snubbed a bit and they've been having really good seasons as well. It's unfortunate, but I guess it's the way it has to go."

World juniors

Sabres prospect Dylan Cozens had a power-play goal and three assists to earn player of the game honors in Canada's 7-2 win over Czech Republic at the IIHF World Junior Championship on Tuesday.

With the victory, Canada finished first in its group and will play Slovakia in the quarterfinals on Thursday at 8:30 a.m., Eastern. Additionally, the United States, which is led by Sabres prospect Mattias Samuelsson, will face Finland in the quarterfinals Thursday at 6:30 a.m.

Sabres prospect Matej Pekar and the Czech Republic will play Sweden at 2 p.m., Eastern. Cozens, who was drafted seventh overall by the Sabres in June, has one goal among five points in four tournament games.

Mueller traded

Chris Mueller, a West Seneca native and 33-year-old forward, was traded by the Tampa Bay Lightning to the Anaheim Ducks in exchange for defenseman Patrick Sieloff on Monday.

Mueller, who was last appeared in an NHL game in 2014-15 with the New York Rangers, will report to the San Diego Gulls of the American Hockey League. He had 11 goals among 23 points in 31 games for the Syracuse Crunch this season.

Sabres game day: Ending 2019 against 'dynamic' Lightning

By Lance Lysowski
The Buffalo News
December 31, 2019

Matchup: Buffalo Sabres (17-16-7) vs. Tampa Bay Lightning (20-13-4)

Where: KeyBank Center

When: 7 p.m.

TV: MSG

Radio: WGR 550

Breaking through: The Sabres have lost six straight and 19 of their last 23 games to the Lightning, including a 5-2 road loss last month in which Rasmus Dahlin suffered a concussion on an elbow by defenseman Erik Cernak.

Tampa Bay has won three straight and has earned points in seven of its last nine games to take over fourth place in the Atlantic Division. The team's plus-15 goal differential ranks fifth in the Eastern Conference, and the Lightning have the conference's second-best record in December.

Buffalo four points out of a playoff spot, but it began Tuesday sixth in the Atlantic Division after losing six of its last seven games. Tampa Bay is 13-0 this season when allowing two or fewer goals, and it ranks fourth in the league with 3.51 goals per game.

"Tampa, as a group, really with the inclusion of their defensemen, is even more dynamic than Boston," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "We'll be tested defensively here for sure, and we need to confirm the defense we've been playing of late, but need to add to the offense and hoping the power play takes that lead.

"Not necessarily in scoring, but in its habits and the way it executes and how it performs. We will always feel that momentum into our 5 on 5 game, so we need that to happen tonight to finish 2019 with a game we're really proud of. That's what we see tonight here."

New look: With the Sabres not holding a morning skate Tuesday, we'll have to wait until warmups to see what their lineup will look like in their final meeting of the season against Tampa Bay.

Retribution could be on their minds, if Dalton Smith makes his NHL debut. Smith, a 27-year-old former second-round draft pick, was signed to a two-way contract Monday and recalled to Buffalo. His physical play and propensity to stick up for teammates made him a fan favorite in Rochester. Smith had four goals in two-plus seasons with the Amerks, while totaling 240 penalty minutes.

In addition to Cernak's hit, Nikita Kucherov possibly ended Vladimir Sobotka's season with a late hit at the NHL Global Series games in Stockholm. Though Smith is unlikely to run around picking a fight, the Sabres wanted to add his strengths to a lineup that seems to be getting pushed around most nights.

"There's a good chance he'll be in our lineup today," Krueger said of Smith. "We're still making a final decision. Planning to warm up with 13 forwards and make that final call. There's a good chance we'll see him. It's an opportunity for us to get to know him. As he missed training camp, it's good to run him through all the different stages of becoming a part of our group."

Here's how the Sabres lined up during practice Monday in KeyBank Center:

Olofsson-Eichel-Reinhart
Girgensons-Larsson-Okposo
Johansson-Asplund-Sheary
Smith-Lazar-Rodrigues
Vesey rotating in as extra

Starting goalie: Linus Ullmark will be in net for the Sabres for the 10th time in 11 games. Ullmark is 11-10-3 with a .913 save percentage and 2.80 goals-against average.

Improvement: Despite missing eight games with a concussion, Rasmus Dahlin is on pace to record 49 points this season, which would be the highest total by a Sabres defenseman since Garry Galley had 54 in 1995-96. Dahlin, who could be elected to his first career All-Star Game as part of the Last Men In vote, has two goals among 21 points in 40 games.

"I think we're all excited about what we're seeing with Dahlin in his 5 on 5 game," Krueger said. "He's so much more confident in finding his responsibility without the puck. With it, he's always exciting to watch, but he's also very responsible that way. On the power play, he's a lot of fun to work with. ... Of course, his shot – he's working on it so hard. That's a weapon that we'd like to see used more often and bit by bit, Rasmus, because of his hard work off the ice, his hard work in practice, and his hard work in the video sessions, he's improving."

Not-so-special teams: The Sabres' 5-on-5 play has shown improvement as of late, however, they continue to struggle on special teams. They are 0-for-10 on the power play over their last four games and have allowed three power-play goals over their last two.

Bruins winger Jake DeBrusk scored two power-play goals in 18 seconds during Boston's 3-2 win over the Sabres on Sunday in TD Garden. The Lightning's power play is tied for first in the league (29.3 percent), as Steven Stamkos and Brayden Point each have seven goals with the man advantage.

Rolling along: Sabres captain Jack Eichel is on pace for 50 goals among 108 points, and he became the seventh player in franchise history to represent the team in at least three All-Star Games, joining Rick Martin (7), Gilbert Perreault (6), Dominik Hasek (5), Mike Ramsey (4), Phil Housley (3) and Alexander Mogilny (3).

Eichel hasn't been held without a point in three consecutive games since early November. In his 23 games since then, he has 17 goals among 35 points, and he joined Martin as the only other player in franchise history to record at least 20 goals and 50 points in each of his first five NHL seasons.

Home-ice advantage: The Sabres are 11-3-3 at KeyBank Center this season, putting them on pace for their best home record since 2006-07. Ullmark has won five of his last six games in Buffalo, posting a .928 save percentage and a 2.35 goals-against average.

With 31 points in 18 home games this season, Eichel's 1.72 points per game at home ranked second in the league entering play Monday.

Sabres still striving for consistency halfway through season

By Pat Malacaro

WGR 550

December 31, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres have reached the exact halfway point of their season after a 6-4 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning on Tuesday night at KeyBank Center. It marked the fourth straight loss for the team as they hit the end of the 2019 calendar year.

It has been a roller coaster ride through the first three months of the year with several peaks and valleys over Ralph Krueger's first 41 games as head coach. Tuesday followed that theme with the team jumping out to a 4-1 lead, only for Tampa Bay to score five unanswered goals.

Consistency is something every team strives for, no matter if you play for Krueger or Jon Cooper, who has 546 games behind the bench for Tampa Bay in his eighth season.

Consistent play from Game 1 to 82 has evaded the blue and gold for quite some time and is one of the reasons they have not made the postseason in recent years. However, Jack Eichel has seen growth for himself and teammates since the start of the 2019-20 season.

The Sabres captain thinks, "we're starting to establish the way we want to play more and more every night, and we're consistent to it and I think that should really help us in the second half of the year." For the first two periods, Buffalo looked like the better team. But a Marcus Johansson hooking penalty seemed to give the visitors the life that they needed.

Eichel scored one the prettiest goals you will see for his first career shorthanded goal. He led a two-on-one chance on the penalty kill, deked between a Lightning defenseman and used the back hand to beat Andrei Vasilevskiy for the goal that made it 4-1 Buffalo.

Krueger has talked a lot recently about how important special teams are to Buffalo's overall success in 5-on-5 play. Jake McCabe has liked the team's even strength play despite mixed results on special teams. McCabe offered that the team's "5-on-5 play has been great. We emphasize a lot on our defensive play and our play away from the puck, and I think that's evident a lot of times on our nights that we've been playing as of late." Over the first two periods, the team was supplying most of the offense 5-on-5 with three of their goals coming at even strength.

The alternate captain continued that "when that starts slipping, I think our game starts slipping, so that's kind of our foundation is of our game is our back pressure away from the puck and our good gaps in the neutral zone and just our neutral zone play in general sets us up for a good game." This was evident as the Lightning worked their way back into the game with strong even strength play after a power play goal.

Buffalo seemed to be in complete control of the game up until Johansson's hooking minor that was called with about six minutes to go in the middle frame. Tampa Bay scored on the ensuing power play and again three minutes later to cut a three-goal deficit down to one, 4-3, before the end of the period.

Sometimes bounces tend to go one way or another due to effort, and that appeared to be the case for Tampa Bay in the third. Kevin Shattenkirk was the victim of Eichel's shorthanded goal in the second, but had a shot from the slot go off of a Sabre and change direction before going in the net to tie the game at 4-4. The Lightning were in control of the game at that time and had the bounce go their way. They would not let go of it for the rest of the night.

Alex Killorn's second goal of the game came just over eight minutes into the final frame and seemed to stun almost everyone in the building. Despite a pair of power plays late in regulation, the blue and gold failed to get the game-tying goal and suffered the defeat.

Sabres cough up 4-1 lead, fall 6-4 to the Lightning

By Kyle Couell

WGR 550

December 31, 2019

With a golden chance to salvage a game in the final matchup of the season series, the Buffalo Sabres relinquished 4-1 lead on home ice to the visiting Tampa Bay Lightning at KeyBank Center. The Lightning went on to rack up five unanswered goals from the 13:57 mark of the second period on to down the Sabres 6-4 in front of their home crowd.

There were chances aplenty in the first period, despite the scoresheet reading a 10-3 shot advantage favoring Buffalo. Both the Sabres and the Lightning racked up dangerous opportunity after dangerous opportunity, as the wide-open game constantly tested goaltenders Linus Ullmark and Andrei Vasilevskiy.

Vasilevskiy weathered a couple of high-danger scoring chances by Buffalo in particular. The first came off the stick of Sam Reinhart in the early goings of the game as he snuck into the high slot all alone, and the unguarded winger shot the puck right into the pads of the Tampa Bay netminder.

A couple minutes past the halfway point of the period, Jack Eichel and the Sabres were seconds removed from killing off a penalty to defenseman Henri Jokiharju. The captain put some nifty moves on the left boards before springing himself free into the slot after dishing the puck off, but then Eichel's one-time shot lifted high and wide past Vasilevskiy and the Lightning net.

Buffalo finally broke through in the final minute of the opening period as forward Curtis Lazar was able to keep a puck in the Tampa Bay zone and dish it off to Conor Sheary. The second-year Sabres winger wired a shot past Vasilevskiy, giving the blue and gold a much-deserved 1-0 edge.

The Sabres picked up where they left off to start the second period as they extended their lead to 2-0 just 2:12 into the middle frame. This time, it was Marcus Johansson scoring his first goal since Dec. 7 in Vancouver as he corralled a pass from Sheary off the right wing boards and wired a shot past Vasilevskiy.

Tamp Bay got on the scoreboard less than five minutes later on the power play, cutting the Buffalo lead in half at 2-1. Ondrej Palat accepted a pass from Tyler Johnson on the man advantage, and Palat's one-time shot blew past Ullmark for the first Lightning goal.

The Sabres responded well to the Lightning goal as they padded their lead to 4-1 in the ensuing minutes of the second period.

Just 72 seconds after Palat's goal, Jimmy Vesey scored his fifth goal of the campaign from a knee to make it 3-1.

Moments later the Sabres found themselves shorthanded following a fight between Jake McCabe and Lightning defenseman Mikhail Sergachev that saw the Sabres defenseman earning a two-minute instigator penalty along with a 10-minute misconduct.

A little more than a minute into the penalty kill, Eichel put the Sabres up 4-1 as he picked up a loose puck in the defensive end and skated all the way into the Tampa Bay zone as a 2-on-1 developed. The Buffalo captain opted to keep the puck, curl and drag it past Lightning defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk, and eventually had a wide-open net with Vasilevskiy down and out of position.

Tampa Bay did not go down without a fight as the Lightning came back and concocted a two-goal run of their own before the end of the second period. Alex Killorn cut the lead in half at 4-2 on the power play, before Tyler Johnson jetted out on a breakaway to make it 4-3 Sabres with just over three minutes left in the period.

The Lightning found the equalizer 6:20 into the final period of regulation as the Sabres' end started to look like a fire drill trying to get the puck from Tampa Bay. As a result, Shattenkirk was able to sneak into the slot all alone, take a pass from Johnson and fired a shot that deflected off the body of Johansson and floated past Ullmark to make it a 4-4 contest.

The run of unanswered goals for the Lightning reached four less than two minutes later as they snatched their first lead of the night over the Sabres. It was Killorn taking a pass from Patrick Maroon and dumping the fifth goal of the night past Ullmark for the 5-4 Tampa Bay advantage.

Buffalo had their chances down the stretch, but failed to score on either of their third period power plays after losing the lead. For good measure, Anthony Cirelli cashed in on the Sabres' empty net with less than three seconds in the contest, ballooning the final score to 6-4.

GAME SUMMARY

Goal Summary:

First Period:

BUF: 19:03 - Conor Sheary (6) (Curtis Lazar)

TBL: NONE

Second Period:

BUF: 2:12 - Marcus Johansson (6) (Conor Sheary, Marco Scandella); 8:12 - Jimmy Vesey (5) (Marcus Johansson, Conor Sheary); 9:56- Jack Eichel (25) SHG (Unassisted)

TBL: 7:00 - Ondrej Palat (12) PPG (Tyler Johnson, Mikhail Sergachev); 13:57 - Alex Killorn (14) PPG (Brayden Point, Nikita Kucherov); 16:55 - Tyler Johnson (8) (Ondrej Palat, Ryan McDonagh)

Third Period:

BUF: NONE

TBL: 6:20 - Kevin Shattenkirk (6) (Tyler Johnson, Anthony Cirelli); 8:08 - Alex Killorn (15) (Patrick Maroon, Cedric Paquette); 19:57 - Anthony Cirelli (9) ENG (Alex Killorn, Steven Stamkos)

Penalty Summary:

First Period:

BUF: 10:29 - Henri Jokiharju (Slashing - 2 min.)

TBL: 4:03 - Steven Stamkos (Tripping - 2 min.)

Second Period:

BUF: 0:08 - Dalton Smith (Roughing - 2 min.); 3:21 - Kyle Okposo (Slashing - 2 min.); 5:08 - Henri Jokiharju (Tripping - 2 min.); 8:34 - Jake McCabe (Instigator - 2 min.); 8:34 - Jake McCabe (Fighting - 5 min.); 8:34 - Jake McCabe (Instigator: Game Misconduct - 10 min.); 12:59 - Marcus Johansson (Hooking - 2 min.)

TBL: 0:08 - Luke Schenn (Roughing - 2 min.); 8:34 - Mikhail Sergachev (Fighting - 5 min.); 11:06 - Tyler Johnson (Interference - 2 min.)

Third Period:

BUF: NONE

TBL: 12:07 - Mikhail Sergachev (Delay of game - 2 min.); 15:42 - Nikita Kucherov (Cross-checking - 2 min.)

Shots on Goal:

BUF: 28 (10, 9, 9)

TBL: 27 (3, 15, 8)

Goalies:

BUF: Linus Ullmark - 21 saves

TBL: Andrei Vasilevskiy - 24 saves

Power Plays:

BUF: 0 for 4 (0%)

TBL: 2 for 5 (40%)

Three Stars:

Alex Killorn - TBL

Conor Sheary - BUF

Tyler Johnson - TBL

What's Next:

The Sabres kick off the 2020 portion of the schedule with a home matchup against the Edmonton Oilers on Thursday. Puck drop at KeyBank Center is set for 7 p.m. with the Paul William Beltz Pregame Show with Mike Schopp and the Bulldog starting at 6 p.m. on WGR from (716) Food and Sport.

Report: Rodrigues unhappy with his role, requesting a trade

By Derek Kramer

WGR 550

December 31, 2019

It seems that another member of the Buffalo Sabres wants out.

According to TSN hockey insider Darren Dreger, Sabres forward Evan Rodrigues has requested a trade out of Buffalo.

Joe Yerdon of The Athletic also added that Rodrigues is reportedly unhappy with his role on the team and his lack of ice time, and that he wants to play where he can get more ice time.

Rodrigues will be scratched on Tuesday night against the Tampa Bay Lightning for newly signed winger Dalton Smith.

The 26-year-old has had a tough season in Buffalo this year with zero goals and three assists in 24 games this season. He has played parts of five seasons in the NHL, all with the Sabres, producing 21 goals and 44 assists in 178 career games.

Coming off of a career year in 2018-19, Rodrigues and the Sabres went to salary arbitration in the offseason, where Rodrigues was awarded a one-year, \$2 million contract.

Sabres look to end 2019 with a win against Tampa Bay

By Pat Malacaro

WGR 550

December 31, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres hit the halfway point of the season on Tuesday, closing out the 2019 portion of the schedule against the Tampa Bay Lightning at KeyBank Center. It also concludes the season series between the two teams that met twice in Sweden early last month.

Buffalo finds themselves in sixth place in the Atlantic Division, and three points behind a surging Lightning club that has won three straight games. Tampa Bay has outscored opponents 13-6, including a 6-1 win over the Florida Panthers to begin the streak.

Head coach Ralph Krueger would like to see a similar effort to the previous two games against the Boston Bruins. He believes that Tuesday night is "more about us confirming what we felt good about against Boston. We'll be tested. Tampa goes a little deeper in the way they can attack, their first two lines kind of spread out the scoring versus Boston being such a top line leading team." Brayden Point leads the way with 15 goals, while four others have 11 or more as well.

Krueger confirmed that Linus Ullmark will start in goal for Buffalo. It is the fifth straight start for the netminder, who will try and snap a three-game losing streak along with the rest of the blue and gold.

The Sabres head coach also added that it is a "good chance" that Dalton Smith makes his NHL debut on Tuesday. Smith was signed to a contract by the Sabres on Monday after spending parts of the last three seasons with the Rochester Americans in the American Hockey League.

It is also expected to see a lineup that will look similar to the group that took the ice for practice on Monday, and that 13 forwards will dress for warmups. Smith was on a line with Curtis Lazar and Evan Rodrigues yesterday.

Tuesday continues a tough stretch against teams from both conferences that have strong offensive presences. The Buffalo bench boss believes that his team "will be tested defensively here, for sure, and need to confirm the defense we've been playing of late but need to add to the offense and hoping the power play takes that lead, not necessarily in scoring but in its habits and in the way it executes and performs." The Edmonton Oilers visit Buffalo on Thursday.

Jake McCabe and the rest of the Sabres have a tough assignment against the NHL's best power play unit. The Lightning and Oilers are tied with a 29.3% (36-for-123) rate that is nearly three points better than the next closest team.

McCabe knows that "special teams is definitely an area that we need to continue to grow at, our PK's [penalty kill] been letting us down and I'm a big part of that. I need to be better at that, and we all just need to have the confidence to, you know, trust our instincts." Buffalo's 74.4% (90-for-121) penalty kill ranks above three other teams in the league.

The Lightning have won all three meetings between the two clubs this season, including a 5-2 victory at Amalie Arena in Tampa Bay on Nov. 25. This season, Buffalo in 4-of-11 in the penalty kill against the Lightning, while Tampa Bay has not allowed a power play goal to the Sabres in eight tries.

Tune in for the Paul William Beltz Pregame Show with Schopp and the Bulldog starting at 6 p.m. from (716) Food and Sport. You will hear more from Krueger, McCabe, as well as Jack Eichel's thoughts on being selected to the NHL All-Star Game.

Why the Sabres and Jason Botterill want to end their reliance on Long-Term Injured Reserve

By John Vogl

The Athletic

January 1, 2020

Jason Botterill's resolution is to become cap compliant. Otherwise, the problems of 2019 will drag into 2021.

For likely the first season in Sabres history, they're taking advantage of Long-Term Injured Reserve (LTIR). Many nuances of LTIR aren't even laid out in the collective bargaining agreement, making it one of the more convoluted aspects of the NHL's salary cap.

Long story short: Placing a player on LTIR allows a team to add replacement players and exceed the salary cap.

But it certainly has its drawbacks. The biggest is its possible impact on the following season – and that's where Sabres fans should worry.

While we'll get more detailed below, let's note that the Sabres have zero cap space right now. If they keep players on LTIR, they'll have zero cap space at the end of the season. That's when more dollars get added to the payroll.

Entry-level contracts typically include performance bonuses. The categories range from goals, assists and points to ice time, plus/minus, blocked shots, All-Star Game appearances and league awards. Rasmus Dahlin, for example, can achieve \$2.85 million in bonuses this year, according to CapFriendly. There are smaller bonuses available for Victor Olofsson, Henri Jokiharju, Rasmus Asplund and others.

Teams try to stay well under the cap because that cushion ensures they are cap compliant even when year-end bonuses are added. Because if bonuses push a team over the cap limit, the total comes off the team's cap the following season.

Here's the real-life example. Let's say the Sabres keep using LTIR and have no cap space available at the end of the year. Dahlin and his fellow youngsters rack up \$3 million in bonuses. If the NHL salary cap rises to \$85 million next season, Buffalo's cap limit will be only \$82 million. This year's overage from bonuses would come off next year's budget.

In this scenario, the Sabres would be at a \$3 million disadvantage for the 2020-21 season, potentially hurting their ability to make trades or add free agents. That's not good.

In Buffalo's case, its large number of pending unrestricted free agents would help the situation. The Sabres are scheduled to get more than \$23 million in cap space from the expiring contracts of Zach Bogosian, Marco Scandella, Vladimir Sobotka, Conor Sheary, Jimmy Vesey, Matt Hunwick, Zengus Girgensons and Johan Larsson. So even if the team was penalized \$3 million in cap space next year, there's still plenty of room to make deals and sign players.

But avoiding any penalty is the goal. Botterill wants to end the Sabres' reliance on LTIR, become cap compliant and create a cushion to account for bonuses.

It's going to take trades to make it happen. If we ignore LTIR for a moment, the Sabres have 27 players on the roster at a total of \$84,634,524. Their buyout of Cody Hodgson adds another \$791,667, bringing the Sabres' salaries to \$85,426,191.

A return to health will trim that down. Tage Thompson (\$925,000), Asplund (\$845,000), Curtis Lazar and/or Dalton Smith (\$700,000 each) could be sent to Rochester when Thompson and Jeff Skinner recover from injuries.

But that's still not enough cap space to create a cushion. In order to make a serious dent in the payroll, Botterill will have to trade guys such as Bogosian (\$5.14 million), Scandella (\$4 million) or Sheary (\$3 million).

The problems intensify if and when Sobotka (and his \$3.5 million cap hit) comes back. Sidelined with a knee injury since early November, Sobotka hasn't been ruled out for the season. He still has a stall in the Sabres' dressing room. But for right now, he is on LTIR along with Hunwick, who at \$2.25 million is done for the year with a neck ailment.

The combined \$5.75 million LTIR salaries of Sobotka and Hunwick have allowed Buffalo to eclipse the cap substantially. But as soon as Sobotka is ready to play – even on a conditioning stint in Rochester – the forward and his salary must come off LTIR.

Let's say Botterill hasn't shed any significant salaries when Sobotka returns and everyone but Hunwick is healthy. The Sabres could send down Thompson, Lazar, Asplund and Smith, which would get them from \$85,426,191 to \$82,256,191 – but that's still \$756,191 over the \$81.5 million cap. Hunwick would have to stay on LTIR and there'd still be no cushion for bonuses.

And since Hunwick gives the Sabres just a \$2.25 million break through LTIR, a few minor injuries would seriously hamstring the team. LTIR is only available for players who'll miss at least 24 days and 10 games. If the Sabres lost a couple of forwards to day-to-day injuries, they'd have less than \$1.5 million to spend on recalls. It could limit them to guys making the NHL minimum of \$700,000.

And if one more forward got dinged up, the Sabres would have no choice but to dress 11 forwards and seven defensemen because there'd be no room to recall anyone else.

So Botterill wants to eliminate his use of LTIR and become cap compliant before the season is up. Ideally, he'd like to get the Sabres' payroll down to about \$77.5 million, which would give the team a suitable cushion to account for year-end bonuses.

With the payroll hovering at about \$85 million now, it's not going to be easy. If it doesn't happen, the Sabres will pay for it next season.

Sabres say so long to 2019 with another disappointing finish after blowing three-goal lead

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

December 31, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Ending 2019 with a blown three-goal lead and a 6-4 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning seemed almost too on the nose for how things went in the calendar year for the Buffalo Sabres.

They've ridden the roller coaster of emotions that started in January by falling out of a playoff spot and into a season-ending funk that buried last season. Now they've closed out December going winless in seven of the past eight games. They've hung in there well with divisional foes but have been unable to crack through a tough goalie or push through to gut out a win. To make matters worse, they ended the season series against Tampa Bay going 0-4-0.

"We were playing well, 4-1 lead and we had a little momentum, and then we pissed the game away," captain Jack Eichel said.

On a night when another Sabres player, Evan Rodrigues in this case, voiced his displeasure and is seeking a new place to play, Tuesday's loss exemplified a few of the issues that have gotten in the Sabres' way of being a consistent team. Here are four observations from a lousy way to end a year.

My goodness, the special teams

This is not a recording, but it might as well be: Special teams let down the Sabres. The Lightning went 2-for-5 on the power play while the Sabres power play went 0-for-4.

On the upside, Eichel scored the first short-handed goal of his career in the second period. The Sabres were killing Jake McCabe's instigator penalty that he earned for stepping up and fighting Lightning defenseman Mikhail Sergachev after he laid out Eichel with a big hit.

"It's a big fight, we use the momentum to score a goal, it's too bad we weren't able to keep it," Eichel said. "It's a great fight by him. He's a leader on our team."

Eichel's goal was the last one Buffalo scored on the night. Nearly two minutes after Eichel's goal, the Sabres went on the power play, but a turnover in the zone by Marcus Johansson became a penalty against Johansson when he hooked forever pain in the Sabres neck Cedric Paquette. The Lightning then changed the face of the game when Alex Killorn scored the first of his two goals on the power play that followed.

"Obviously we've got to score on our power plays and keep the puck out of our net on the PK. I thought our PK did a really good job," Eichel said. "They get those couple of bounces there. I mean, our PK's been great. It's not the PK at this point — it's the power play — so we've just got to find a way to change that."

In the past 10 games, the Sabres power play scored four times in 24 chances (16.7 percent) and their penalty kill has allowed eight goals in 32 opportunities (75.0 percent killed). Five of those eight goals came in the two losses to Boston and against Tampa Bay, three more in the 6-1 loss in Philadelphia. The goals against have either come in bunches or at the worst times. Problems compound themselves.

"Without shots you're not going to get any fruit of the labor on the power play, and the shots have to hit the net, right," coach Ralph Krueger said. "We're just ... it looks like squeezing it, trying too hard, forcing it — I'm not sure. Guys are working hard, but we're not working right in some ways. We've got to get back to the fundamentals and get back to the basics and over and over again, work on that until we get it going the right way."

About sending a message ...

A lot was made of the Sabres signing AHL tough guy Dalton Smith to a contract Monday ahead of the final tilt with Tampa Bay. After all, the Lightning took out Vladimir Sobotka during the Sweden trip when Nikita Kucherov low-bridged him and injured Rasmus Dahlin for a spell with a concussion by way of Erik Cernak's elbow to his head a few weeks ago. No responses occurred during those games.

Although Krueger was adept in explaining Monday what Smith could bring to the Sabres lineup, the results of the game were clear as to why he was here: If things went sideways physically, Smith would be there to take care of business.

Smith played four shifts against Tampa and played 1:26. He was a plus-one as he was on the ice for Johansson's goal early in the second period. He took a run at Cernak in the first period and also got matching roughing minors with Lightning defenseman Luke Schenn when the two attempted to solve things with their fists eight seconds into the second. After Johansson's goal, Smith did not see the ice again.

You could chalk it up to being much ado about nothing regarding Smith if it weren't for Rodrigues asking to be moved after he was the forward scratched in favor of Smith. Still, it's a first NHL game for a player who maybe never thought the day would come that he would play in the NHL. You can feel happy for him but also question everything surrounding how it all came about.

"It felt unbelievable, it was my dream to get into a game," Smith said. "I'm just very grateful for the opportunity, and I'm just going to keep working hard and earning everything I get. ... It's something I've been working for my whole life, so it was really cool, I couldn't be more grateful."

Seeking out mental resilience

A key thing mentioned by Johansson and Krueger after the game was about how parts of what they're doing are the right things, but the results just haven't come. Sabres teams in the past haven't had the psychological strength to fight through prolonged losing skids, and it's snowballed on them as seasons have gone on.

"It's tough, it's frustrating, it's never fun," Johansson said about not getting results. "All the hard work we put in, we come out here and guys are exhausted (after games), and we try everything we can — it's just not going our way. It's tough on us. We work hard for this, we do everything we can to get wins. When games slip away it's frustrating and it's tough — we've just got to learn from it and put it behind us and get back to how we started the game and keep building off that."

Krueger is skilled at finding the good things they're accomplishing while working to find healthier ways of dealing with setbacks. The loss to Tampa Bay and the home loss to Boston on Dec. 27 had moments that stunned the Sabres into spiraling out. Finding a way to not allow that to happen is vital.

"I think more than anything it's building experience as a group together and speaking openly about these processes that are happening and not shying away from what went wrong here, being brutally honest with each other and putting everything on the table and regrouping with the lessons and being better next time it comes around," Krueger said. "Over and over again, we have to continue to work for growth and keep our heads up and stick together and fight through these kinds of situations."

Finding light in the darkness

It's hard to find a positive to take away from another tough loss, but after wondering where the goals would come from with Jeff Skinner out of the lineup, three Sabres snapped out of funks.

Conor Sheary, Johansson and Jimmy Vesey each scored to help build the Sabres a 4-1 lead. For Vesey, it was his first goal in eight games. In Sheary's case, it was his first goal since he scored twice against New Jersey on Dec. 2. Johansson hadn't scored since Dec. 7 in Vancouver. If the Sabres are going to get things right, those guys all have to let these goals turn into a streak.

Another Sabre wants out: Evan Rodrigues, unhappy with role, wants to play elsewhere

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

December 31, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Sabres forward Evan Rodrigues has been unhappy with his role on the team and now feels it is time to move on from Buffalo.

A source tells The Athletic that Rodrigues, who will be a healthy scratch Tuesday against Tampa Bay in favor of recent Rochester signing Dalton Smith, is unhappy and does not see a future with the Sabres organization.

Rodrigues wants to be able to help the Sabres, who have one win in the past seven games, but has not enjoyed being scratched this season and is displeased with his ice time. According to the source, if Rodrigues is not going to play he would like the opportunity to do so elsewhere. He will be a restricted free agent again this summer.

Rodrigues is the second Sabres player to be unhappy with his role. Defenseman Zach Bogosian reportedly asked to be traded earlier in December when he was scratched for a game.

Rodrigues is in his fifth season with the organization. He was signed as an undrafted free agent out of Boston University and has three points, all assists, in 24 games this season. Rodrigues is averaging 10:42 in ice time this season, the lowest of his career. His average ice time is second-lowest on the Sabres, just ahead of Curtis Lazar.

During the offseason, Rodrigues took the Sabres to salary arbitration and, according to Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman, sought a salary of \$2.65 million while the Sabres sought a \$1.5 million salary. Rodrigues was awarded \$2 million in arbitration and re-signed with Buffalo.

Rodrigues has not scored a goal since March 17, 2019 — a span of 32 games. He has 21 goals and 65 points in 178 career NHL games.

Sabres' Evan Rodrigues on trade request: 'I just want to play hockey'

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 1, 2020

"I have all the confidence in my ability, I have all the confidence in my defensive ability, I have all the confidence in my speed and my skill to play with everyone in this league." – Evan Rodrigues, Sept. 23, 2019

BUFFALO – Barely three months ago, Sabres forward Evan Rodrigues was brimming with confidence.

Fresh off a season in which he set career highs and showcased his versatility by playing 11 of the 12 forward positions, Rodrigues was expected to provide offense and play a large role.

Instead, Rodrigues, 26, has struggled from the get-go under new Sabres coach Ralph Krueger, compiling zero goals and just three assists in 24 outings.

Rodrigues started the season as a healthy scratch, sitting out the first three games and beginning a trend. When he has played, he has often skated short minutes.

In recent weeks, Rodrigues' ice time has often dipped below 10 minutes. On Tuesday, the Sabres benched him for winger Dalton Smith, a tough guy who ended up playing less than two minutes in his NHL debut.

Before the Sabres' 6-4 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning, TSN and The Athletic reported Rodrigues has requested a trade.

"I'm a hockey player who wants to play hockey," Rodrigues said Wednesday inside KeyBank Center when asked if he requested a trade and wants a fresh start. "I think that pretty much anyone out there will tell you the same thing. It's a job, it's a career. I just want to play hockey."

That response, of course, isn't a denial.

Rodrigues isn't the only Sabre frustrated by his playing time. TSN reported Dec. 12 defenseman Zach Bogosian requested a trade.

Bogosian, 29, has been scratched seven of the last nine games entering Thursday's home contest against superstar Conor McDavid and the Edmonton Oilers.

Clearly, Krueger doesn't want to deal with any distractions.

"I can only speak to what is, and what is we will end up here with a group of players that really want to be here, and we will work with the players that want to be here, and quite clearly, plenty of the players that want to be here," he said.

Rodrigues enjoyed his best season in 2018-19, scoring nine goals and 29 points in 74 games. An independent arbitrator awarded him a one-year, \$2 million contract in July.

Growth was expected. Rodrigues, who can play up and down the lineup at center and wing, also compiled seven goals and 25 points in 2017-18.

Rodrigues acknowledged he's shocked he hasn't scored a goal exactly halfway through the season.

"Yeah, I'm not going to say I'm happy with that," said Rodrigues, who scored his last goal March 17 and has just one in his past 51 games. "I expect more for myself. Just given those chances and playing, it'll come. I don't doubt myself. But, yeah, it's obviously not the result I wanted."

So what has happened to the Boston University product this season?

For starters, while the Sabres' forward depth is still weak, it's better than past years. The Sabres are also playing a new system under Krueger that forces players to give up some individuality for the group.

"What happens is the competition in the group has been hard," Krueger said. "Some players will profit from it and some ... will struggle. And it's also the principles and concepts we're looking for. I told you early on that some players who played a different way they'll have to give up some of themselves to become part of a group dynamic, which gives us a chance to win every night here if all five guys on the ice are connected, then we have a chance.

"And if we're not, we won't, and what would happen is often players will give up or lose on the offensive side. And it's possible with him that that's the pathway that's been difficult for him. And not for everybody does that come as easy."

Rodrigues said grasping Krueger's system hasn't been a problem.

"No, hockey's hockey," he said. "I think anywhere around the league any guy in this league can play any system. We've all been doing this for 20-plus years or close to it. So, yeah, no, the system's not really an issue."

Rodrigues has displayed some glimpses of his old self at times in recent weeks. He played one of his best games this season Dec. 23 in Ottawa, skating 13 minutes, 54 seconds in the Sabres' 3-1 loss to the Senators.

Rodrigues' nifty backhand feed from the boards created linemate Zemgus Girgensons' goal.

"You always kind of go back to that," Rodrigues said of his performance that night. "You always believe in yourself and always have that confidence. But a game like that kind of gives you a little boost.

"It's frustrating for myself to see myself not do that consistently. That's kind of what I see myself as and what I want to be doing. Just want to be playing and getting those chances."

—

Krueger, whose Sabres blew a 4-1 lead to the Lightning and lost their fourth straight game, said Wednesday "the group in there is coming out fighting this morning."

"The coaches are fighting, the players are fighting, and we'd like to show the crowd here who were unbelievable in my first half of my first season here in Buffalo, we want to give them that as a New Year's gift tomorrow against Edmonton," he said. "We want them to see the fight and the reaction. ...

"We went big picture to get some sanity out of the pain yesterday."

The Sabres stayed off the ice Wednesday.

Stunner: Sabres blow three-goal lead, fall to Lightning

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 1, 2020

BUFFALO – Halfway through Tuesday's shocking 6-4 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning, Sabres captain Jack Eichel showcased why he might be underutilized as a penalty killer.

With the Sabres up 3-1, Eichel pounced on a loose puck in his own zone and zoomed down the ice. When the slick center hit the right circle, he undressed defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk before skating through the slot and backhanding a shot by goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy for his first NHL short-handed goal.

The goal ignited Eichel, who celebrated wildly, and the crowd of 18,465 inside KeyBank Center, which was still buzzing from watching Sabres defenseman Jake McCabe fight Mikhail Sergachev after the defender hit Eichel.

But within minutes, the Sabres would be reeling.

"We have momentum and then we piss the game away," a curt Eichel said following the Sabres' fourth straight loss and seventh in eight games (1-6-1).

The Sabres' began imploding during a power play minutes later. Instead of seizing an opportunity to grab a commanding lead, center Marcus Johansson was whistled for hooking after giving the puck away.

"That penalty definitely did it, shifted the momentum," Krueger said.

Then Tampa Bay's talented forwards took over. Alex Killorn scored on the ensuing power play at 13:57. Tyler Johnson followed at 16:55.

Shattenkirk tied the game 6:20 into the third period, exacting some revenge after looking silly earlier. Then Killorn's second goal at 8:08 gave put the Lightning up.

The Sabres lost all four of their meetings with the Lightning this season and have dropped 20 of the last 24 games against their Atlantic Division rival.

"We definitely came out and played the game we wanted to play," Krueger said. "It's the story of two halves. That first half was very disciplined and we didn't give up much. ... More than anything, we were on our toes, we were playing aggressive, we took away the space that Tampa likes to have, and the last 26, 27 minutes (are) just unacceptable. It's going to take a little longer to digest here, a few hours."

Johansson said: "It's just tough to swallow right now."

So now what? The Sabres, a fragile team with a recent history of enduring some long losing streaks, need a quick response. They host the Edmonton Oilers on Thursday.

Right now, exactly halfway through the season, the Sabres are 17-17-7. Their 41 points rank sixth in the Atlantic Division, five points behind the third-place Lightning, which has three games in hand.

What can help the Sabres break out of this rut?

"It's details," said Johansson, who played for the Stanley Cup last year with the Boston Bruins. "It's when you're up 4-1, 4-2, 4-3 or whatever it is, just keep playing the same way. You can't sit back too much and be scared of playing and start thinking you can do whatever you want, either, because you're leading.

"So you just got to find ways to win, get that winning mentality. I feel like we're on the right path. We're playing some really good hockey. Games like these, we got to find ways to close it out."

Converting some power plays would help. So would shooting.

The Sabres are zero of 14 over the past five games and just two of 18 in the past seven contests.

"You could even hear it from the crowd," Krueger said of the plea for shots. "We definitely gotta put pucks on the net. There is a lot of control, there is a lot of O-zone time there, and without shots, you're not going to get any fruit of the labor of the power play. And the shots have to hit the net, right?"

"It (just) looks like (we're) squeezing it, trying too hard, forcing it."

Eichel said of the power play: "Same story. Nothing new. You guys saw it."

The Sabres had a few bright spots Tuesday. Johansson, Conor Sheary and Jimmy Vesey all scored.

All three forwards have been struggling to produce offense.

McCabe's retaliation was also notable. In the two earlier meetings, the Sabres let the Lightning get away with injuring two Sabres regulars – forward Vladimir Sobotka and defenseman Rasmus Dahlin – with dirty hits.

"That's what we need to see from the team, of course," Krueger said of McCabe's response. "We've had a strange series against Tampa this year with the physicality, but it was good to see Jake step up there. We know he's got it in him."

"He did get an instigator for the talking, but it was important that he did that."

Winger Dalton Smith, a tough guy the Sabres signed to an NHL contract Monday and brought up just for this game, skated just one minute, 26 seconds over four shifts. He didn't play after the second period.

Smith tried fighting Lightning defenseman Luke Schenn, but an official broke it up. On his way out of the penalty box following his roughing minor, the Sabres scored.

So Smith earned a plus rating in his NHL debut.

Sabres notes: Curtis Lazar thriving back at center

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 1, 2020

BUFFALO – Curtis Lazar loves playing center. After thriving back at his natural position a year ago with the Stockton Heat, the Calgary Flames' AHL affiliate, he talked to the Sabres during free agency about remaining there.

"All my conversations during the summer said I'd be down the middle, and then I come to camp and played strictly wing," said Lazar, who signed a one-year, \$700,000 contract July 1. "I'm honestly fine with whatever. I think it shows, though, that I do have that (comfort) down the middle. I feel like I can see the ice a lot better and my reads are there."

The affable Lazar, 24, might be fine with playing wherever, but he clearly prefers pivoting a line. After skating at wing all season, he switched back to center Dec. 11 with the Rochester Americans.

In his two recalls since then, the Sabres have kept Lazar in the middle.

His comfort keeps growing. In Sunday's 3-2 loss to the Boston Bruins, he scored his second goal in 10 games with the Sabres this season and skated 14 minutes, 14 seconds.

It was the second time in four games Lazar surpassed the 14-minute mark. In his previous 109 NHL outings, the former first-round pick played more than 14 minutes just twice.

In the first period of Tuesday's 6-4 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning, Lazar jumped off the bench and intercepted defenseman Ryan McDonagh's pass before quickly feeding winger Conor Sheary, who scored with 57 seconds left.

"I wanted to be at center so I could kind of control the play a little bit more, control the puck, take off that way," Lazar said inside KeyBank Center. "I think that was a big part of it, kind of reestablishing my game down the middle, having the chance to do it at the NHL level and seeing the results, it feels good."

"That doesn't mean I can't play wing anymore. I just think that I was thinking a little too much, I was a little antsy and trying to do too much in the beginning of the year."

Lazar, who made only one appearance with Calgary last season, said things are "starting to slow down for me."

"I'm starting to see plays and make reads," he said. "I've done a lot of work with (assistant coach) Donny Granato in the video room, just kind of identifying areas of games that I can grow. But the confidence (is) rising."

"Scoring a goal obviously helps. But also the role I'm being put in, the responsibility I'm getting, the coaches trust me in key situations and I'm embracing that."

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger has also utilized Lazar as a penalty killer beside rookie Rasmus Asplund.

"His evolution through training camp – going to Rochester, coming back, going to Rochester, coming back, going to Rochester, coming back – has been really positive because he's now settled in and feels comfortable and is relaxed actually in his execution," Krueger said of Lazar.

He added: "He understood the role he needs to take on to be a National Hockey League player."

Lazar centered Dalton Smith and Jimmy Vesey early Tuesday.

To make room for Smith, who made his NHL debut, the Sabres scratched forward Evan Rodrigues.

Rodrigues has struggled all season, compiling zero goals and three assists in 24 games. He has mustered just one point in his last 15 contests.

Meanwhile, with defenseman Marco Scandella back from a two-game absence (illness), Krueger scratched defenseman Colin Miller. Defenseman Zach Bogosian was also a healthy scratch for the seventh time in nine games.

–

Amerks coach Chris Taylor has been named coach of the North Division for the AHL All-Star Classic on Jan. 27 in Ontario, Calif.

The 44 points the first-place Amerks earned through the first 30 games this season clinched the honor.

Taylor, 47, spent the first two months of the season subbing as an assistant coach in Buffalo for Granato, who was recovering from pneumonia.

NHL All-Star Jack Eichel enjoying one of greatest seasons in Sabres history

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 31, 2019

BUFFALO – Sabres captain Jack Eichel's selection to the NHL All-Star Game, of course, was a no-brainer.

Eichel's fifth NHL season has quickly become his best. Right now, he ranks among the game's elite stars.

The slick center has already scored 24 goals, just four off his career high, and 52 points in 39 games. He's tied for third in NHL goal scoring and is seventh in points entering tonight's game against the Tampa Bay Lightning.

Halfway through the season, Eichel, having evolved into a stronger defensive player, is a legitimate MVP candidate.

At his current pace, Eichel, 23, would score 50 goals and 108 points over a full season.

"For us, it's certainly expected," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said of Eichel being named to represent the Atlantic Division on Monday for the third straight season. "There's no question he's been one of the premier players in both direction, with and without the puck, this season. A leader in so many different ways, and his work ethic, his lead on how we want to get Sabres hockey going.

"There's no question if you watch him you're being entertained every night, whether you're a coach or whether you're a spectator. He's very deserving to be in that circle, if not near the top of that circle."

Eichel was the only Sabre selected for the Jan. 25 game in St. Louis.

Defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, however, can still receive a spot in the game as part of the "Last Men In" vote at NHL.com. Fans voted Sabres winger Jeff Skinner into last year's game as the final member of the Atlantic Division.

"You always want to see your teammates get recognized," Eichel said. "It was awesome to be able to spend the weekend with Skins last year, it was really cool. Whenever you have a teammate, someone you're really close to, it makes the experience a lot more special."

Who was the Sabres' biggest all-star snub?

Sabres winger Victor Olofsson, having scored 16 goals and 34 points in 40 games, has more goals and points than any NHL rookie.

"There's so many great players that don't get recognized," Eichel said. "There's only so many spots, unfortunately. Vic's been having a great year. I'm sure there's a lot of other guys in the Eastern Conference and the Atlantic Division that probably feel like they got snubbed a bit and they've been having really good seasons as well."

The NHL's Hockey Operations Department selected the players announced Monday.

In other news, Krueger said 13 forwards will warm up tonight inside KeyBank Center. Winger Dalton Smith, a tough guy the Sabres signed to an NHL contract on Monday, will likely play.

"There's a good chance he'll be in our lineup today," Krueger said.

Smith, 27, has been playing on an AHL contract with the Rochester Americans.

Krueger said goalie Linus Ullmark will start, his 25th nod this season.

The Sabres, who hit the halfway point of the season tonight, have lost three straight games and six of the last of seven (1-5-1).

Report: Buffalo Sabres forward Evan Rodrigues has requested a trade

By Paul Ross

WKBW

January 1, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — Another Buffalo Sabres player has requested a trade this season.

According to TSN Hockey Insider Darren Dreger, Sabres forward Evan Rodrigues is looking at other options for his career.

Rodrigues, 26, hasn't scored a goal in 24 games this season with the Sabres, while only recording three assists.

The forward signed a one-year deal worth \$2 million, and will be a restricted free agent at the end of the season.

Sabres wrap up 2019 calendar year with 6-4 loss to Lightning

By Jenna Callari

WKBW

December 31, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — It wasn't the kind of ending they wanted for 2019 as the Buffalo Sabres fell to the Tampa Bay Lightning in a 6-4 defeat. The loss dropped the Sabres to 17-17-7 overall on the season as they finished the month of December with a 5-7-2 record. The Sabres are back on the ice Thursday when they host the Edmonton Oilers.

5 Observations from tonight's game

No lead is a safe lead

When the Sabres took a 4-1 lead midway through the second period, KeyBank Center was rocking and it looked like the team wasn't going to be denied at home in their last game of 2019. The tide turned. The Lightning started to play more aggressive late in the 2nd period and it paid off, scoring twice to make it a one goal game. They followed that up with two more goals in the third to take their first lead of the night and capped it off with an empty-netter. We all know no lead is a safe lead, especially when you're playing the Lightning, but to give up five unanswered is unacceptable.

Downhill December

The Sabres kicked the month off with a 7-1 win over New Jersey back on December 2nd and went 4-1-1 through their first six games. How did they end things? Not the way they started them. They lost seven of their last eight games, and managed to score just 15 goals compared to their opponent's 32. Starting off a month hot is great but there's no point if you end things not so hot.

Jack is back

It's hard to believe but Sabres captain Jack Eichel was riding his longest goal-less streak of the season heading into tonight's game. After being scratched on December 19th, Eichel hadn't managed to score a goal in four straight games but finally got back on the stat sheet tonight in a big way. With the Sabres shorthanded, Eichel took control of a loose puck and made an ELITE move at the other end to score his 25th of the season and the first shorthanded goal of his career. You can watch his insane goal below.

Secondary scoring

How many times have we mentioned the importance of secondary scoring? Well tonight, three different players finally got back on the stat sheet following their own lengthy goal-less droughts. Conor Sheary struck in the first period, scoring his first goal since December 2nd. That was followed up by Marcus Johansson's first goal since December 7th. Then it was Jimmy Vesey joining the party, notching his first since December 12th. Each player has had their fair share of opportunities over the last few games and it was good to see things finally go their way.

Turning a new page

The 2019 calendar year is over and the 2020 portion of their schedule has begun. With an 17-17-7 overall record, the Sabres are still in the mix of things but need to start and continue the new year with a bang. There's a lot going on with the team right now between forward Jeff Skinner out for another few weeks, head coach Ralph Krueger mixing up lines during practice, and reports surrounding another player wanting a trade. A new year brings a new slate and it all begins on Thursday.

Sabres See Three Goal Lead Fade, Fall 6-4 To Tampa

WIVB

December 31, 2019

The Buffalo Sabres held a 4-1 lead against Tampa Bay in the second period Tuesday night, but would give up five unanswered goals and fall 6-4 to the Lightning. Tampa earns the season series sweep, winning all four games against the Sabres this season.

Conor Sheary opened up the scoring with just under a minute to play in the first period. Curtis Lazar would intercept a pass as the Lightning tried to clear the puck out of the zone. Lazar fed Sheary, who finished home the one timer to give the Sabres the 1-0 lead.

Buffalo would add another goal with a one timer from Marcus Johansson to take the 2-0 lead. Tampa pulled within one goal seven minutes into the period on the power play.

The Sabres would generate momentum as they scored two goals in just under two minutes. Jimmy Vesey gave the Sabres the 3-1 lead after finishing off a tic-tac-toe sequence from Sheary and Johansson.

Jack Eichel gave the Sabres the 4-1 lead with a goal of the year candidate shorthanded tally.

However Buffalo would see their lead fade, as Tampa scored five unanswered goals between the second and third periods. The Sabres drop their fourth straight game. Buffalo hosts Edmonton Thursday, January 2nd.

Sabres sputter into 2020 after Lightning score five straight to win

WIVB

December 31, 2019

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) — The Buffalo Sabres have lost seven of the last eight games, all to fellow Eastern Conference teams, with perhaps none as frustrating as a 6-4 home loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning on New Year's Eve.

The Sabres held a 4-1 lead halfway through the 2nd period after a highlight reel shorthanded goal by Jack Eichel, his 25th.

The Lightning responded with a powerplay goal four minutes later, potted another before the horn, then added three unanswered goals in the 3rd, including an empty-netter.

The loss drops Buffalo's record to 17-17-7. Five teams in the Atlantic Division have more points than the Sabres entering 2020.

Buffalo Sabres' Jack Eichel dangles Kevin Shattenkirk, scores outstanding short-handed goal

By Tommy McCardle

Sporting News

December 31, 2019

Buffalo Sabres star Jack Eichel bookended the 2010s for his club with an outstanding short-handed goal on New Year's Eve.

Midway through the Sabres' game Tuesday against the Tampa Bay Lightning, Eichel pounced on an opportunity to score when Tampa Bay's Yannick Gourde slipped while handling the puck in Buffalo's defensive zone during a Lightning power play.

Eichel immediately picked up the puck and raced toward the Lightning net, looking to fire a cross-ice pass to teammate Curtis Lazar. When Tampa Bay's Tyler Johnson cut off Eichel's passing option, the forward took it to the net himself.

The impressive move fooled defender Kevin Shattenkirk and caught goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy off-center to the puck, and his desperate lunge could not stop the Sabres' captain from increasing Buffalo's lead to 4-1.

Shattenkirk and the Lightning got the last laugh, though: the blueliner Eichel deked scored the game-tying goal in the third period, and Tampa Bay earned its fourth consecutive win with five unanswered tallies in the second half of the contest.

Eichel, 23, finished his team's fourth consecutive loss with the lone goal. His 53 points rank seventh among all NHL skaters, and his 25 goals place him behind only division rivals David Pastrnak and Auston Matthews for the league lead.

11 takes, thoughts, trends as NHL heads into new calendar year

By John Matisz

The Score

December 31, 2019

Lacrosse-goal fever

First, it was Nils Hoglander in October during a Swedish league game. Then it was Andrei Svechnikov a few days later during an NHL game. Then it was Svechnikov again in early December. And, as if to say "let me catch up here," Hoglander did it again last week at the World Junior Championship.

The so-called lacrosse goal was all the rage toward the end of 2019. A Minnesota high schooler recently got in on the fun as well:

Svechnikov, the fantastic Carolina Hurricanes sophomore, isn't the only NHLer capable of filling the highlight reel with such skill. Someone will join him soon.

Toronto Maple Leafs sniper Auston Matthews has tried to pick the puck up behind the net numerous times this year. Elias Pettersson, the wizardly Vancouver Canucks center, is open to the idea. Might Jack Eichel, whose puck skills are off the charts, attempt a lacrosse goal in the near future?

"Probably not. ... If the opportunity presented itself, maybe, I don't know," the Buffalo Sabres captain said this past weekend. "You've seen it done a few more times, so teams are probably a little more prepared for it. It's tough to do. To be able to do it as smoothly as (Svechnikov's) done it, it's really, really impressive. You've seen a lot of guys try and not be successful, and he's done it twice. It's awesome, honestly."

Old-school Boston Bruins forward David Backes - who, at 35 years old, admits he would never try to pull off a lacrosse goal - is intrigued by the recent development and tips his cap to Svechnikov. As he explains, so much goes into the result.

"Fresh ice, fresh stick, warmer puck - all of those things. What you've got on your stick for tape or wax. Everything can factor into how easy or difficult that would be. Or, if it just hops (onto the toe of your stick) as you're going behind the net, maybe you can fling it in there. I'm impressed by them," Backes said before adding with a smile: "Would I try to take a run at that guy in the next shift against him? I certainly would. But that's my thought process."

Fully evolved Eichel

Speaking of Eichel, he's firmly in the Hart Trophy discussion. For my money, Nathan MacKinnon has been more valuable to his team, but if the Sabres break their eight-season playoff drought, Eichel has a chance with voters. It's been a treat to watch him level up to bona fide superstar status.

Always a strong skater, a neutral-zone champion, and the heartbeat of the Sabres, it's this year - his fifth in the NHL - that's been Eichel's most impressive. He's produced 52 points in 39 games, and at times, he's been unstoppable. The 23-year-old plays 21:51 a night, second on the entire squad.

Asked what he's learned about Eichel since joining the Sabres in training camp, forward Marcus Johansson's eyes widened.

"I didn't know that he could be so dominant so consistently like he's been. I don't know how many games he's won for us this year. He's got something special," said Johansson, who has also played for the Capitals, Devils, and Bruins over a 10-year career. "There's only a couple of guys, maybe, that have that. He can take over games completely, and he puts the team on his shoulders. It's impressive. I don't know what to say - if it's a talent or what it is - but it's special."

What exactly is Eichel doing so well when he's dominating?

"(It's about) how in control he is," Johansson said. "He's got the puck on his stick a lot. It's anything from making moves to unbelievable passes, unbelievable shots. There's just nothing that he can't do. To be as big as he is and to have all of that skill, it's pretty fun to watch."

Johansson didn't mention the sequence below as an example of this evolved form of Jack Eichel, but it qualifies, with a tremendous mix of skill, confidence, and patience on display:

The Marchand Show

Based solely on raw production, Brad Marchand is 2019's king.

Counting regular-season and playoff action, the Bruins star ranks first in points, first in assists, and second in goals, with only Tuesday's 13-game slate remaining in 2019. Marchand, who has appeared in 105 total games and faces the New Jersey Devils on Tuesday afternoon, obviously benefited from team success. Nevertheless, the "Little Ball of Hate" accomplished a ton.

Marchand has piled up 140 points in the calendar year. Edmonton Oilers captain Connor McDavid ranks second with 121 points, and his teammate Leon Draisaitl is third with 117. Just eight others have hit triple digits - among them Marchand's center, Patrice Bergeron.

The lone player to accrue 80 assists in 2019, Marchand is at 88. McDavid is second with 79. As for goals, David Pastrnak, the third member of Boston's top line, has scored one more than Marchand's 52. Draisaitl (51) and Washington Capitals gunslinger Alex Ovechkin (50) are the only others who have bagged 50 in the calendar year.

The main takeaway here is that Marchand, 31 years old, is bucking the typical NHL aging curve. He didn't really arrive as a top-line producer until he was 27, and he is wrapping up his finest year four seasons later. Quite a career arc.

Duclair, Sens a match?

Sixteen players on the Ottawa Senators' 22-man roster are on expiring contracts, but none of them are showcasing themselves like Anthony Duclair.

The 24-year-old pending restricted free agent can start negotiating a new contract with the Sens on Wednesday. Since October, general manager Pierre Dorion must have been asking himself: Is Duclair's breakout season for real, and is he part of the club's long-term core?

If the answer is "yes" to both questions, there should be a fit.

Now with his fifth NHL organization, Duclair seems to have found stability in the form of playing time and production. In just 40 games, he's set a career high in goals with 21. He was named an All-Star on Monday.

Rare 1-2 punch

Fun fact: 1966-67 was the last time defensemen finished first and second in Calder Trophy voting. Bobby Orr was crowned rookie of the year, while tough-as-nails Ed Van Impe earned runner-up honors.

More than 50 years later, with Vancouver's Quinn Hughes and Colorado's Cale Makar dominating the first three months of the 2019-20 season, we may finally witness another one-two showing. (Just 11 defensemen have won ROTY in the Calder's 82-year existence.)

Only a drastic drop-off in production or a severe injury to Hughes or Makar, and/or a transcendent second half from another rookie, can derail the tandem's momentum. They're simply peerless in the crop of first-years.

The best part? The numbers suggest neither player is running away with the award:

STAT	HUGHES	MAKAR
Games	39	31
Points	28	29
Time on ice	21:15	20:27
5v5 Corsi %	54.2	50.5
5v5 Corsi Rel. %	7.6	1.7
5v5 xGF %	49.1	51.7
5v5 Off. ZS %	66.8	67.5

Source: Natural Stat Trick

If we're splitting hairs, Hughes has been a smidgen better. Through the prisms of advanced stats and the eye test, the Canucks cornerstone is a more well-rounded player. On several occasions, the 20-year-old has demonstrated the rare ability to control the flow of an entire game.

But, again, it's stupidly close. Makar, who has missed some time due to injury, has proven his 2018-19 playoff performance was no fluke. He's 21 and already a legit star. Flashier and more productive than Hughes, Makar has no problem keeping up with MacKinnon and the Avalanche's other skilled forwards.

It'll be interesting to see if either stud earns a spot on his divisional team ahead of All-Star Weekend in late January. Both can be added to the festivities in St. Louis through the NHL's "Last Men In" fan vote. Something to remember: Hughes' competition in the Pacific (Getzlaf, Keller, Gaudreau, Nugent-Hopkins, Doughty, Hertl, Pacioretty) pales in comparison to Makar's rivals in the Central (Toews, Benn, Suter, Duchene, Perron, Laine).

The ideal scenario, of course, would be the inclusion of Hughes and Makar. These super rookies are made for the skills event and three-on-three tournament.

Fascinating rookie class

Behind Hughes and Maker is a lengthy list of lesser-known freshmen who haven't encountered the dreaded rookie wall so far.

Victor Olofsson of the Sabres leads all rookies in offense with highs in goals (16) and points (34). Ilya Mikheyev, the leader in even-strength points with 22, has been a crucial component of Toronto's attack. Edmonton's Ethan Bear and Pittsburgh's John Marino are playing 20 minutes a night as defensemen and, for the most part, looking comfortable in their high-profile roles. Adam Fox of the Rangers, another blue-liner, has quietly recorded 17 points in 38 games.

The rookie goalie group is holding its own, too. Washington's Ilya Samsonov (.918 save percentage in 14 games), Vancouver's Thatcher Demko (.907 in 13), and New Jersey's Mackenzie Blackwood (.906 in 29) have quickly established themselves at the NHL level, which is much easier said than done.

If I were to fill out my Calder ballot right now, I'd put Hughes first, Makar second, Olofsson third, Marino fourth, and Mikheyev fifth.

McCann's new groove

Scouts say Jared McCann had a pro-level shot at 14 years old. He had worked tirelessly on his wrist growing up in the London, Ontario, area, and it had started paying off early. At 18, he became a first-round NHL draft pick.

Yet it wasn't until the former Canucks speedster landed in Pittsburgh four years later that he really hit his stride at the NHL level. Playing mostly center for the Penguins, McCann's built off a strong finish to the 2018-19 season by collecting 10 goals and 13 assists for 23 points in 37 games this year.

That's big-time production compared to his stint with the Florida Panthers, where McCann struggled to cope with dry spells. He sought professional help in Florida and found it made a world of a difference for his mental health.

"The pressure of playing well every single night weighs on you. It really does," McCann, 23, explained. "I put a lot of pressure on myself to be a good player, and when you have a bad night, and everybody's on you - like the media, and stuff. It's not fun. It gets into your head. Even if you say it doesn't, it does."

"You don't need to take everything so seriously," he added. "But that's the kid I am, right? Growing up in a construction family, when you do a job you do it right and you move on. But going through that stuff is tough, and you need to talk to someone. You really do."

McCann emphasized that his struggles weren't overly serious; he wasn't diagnosed with any condition, as his issues were mainly linked to on-ice success. Still, he seems to be playing freer in Pittsburgh, and it's nice to see.

Sharks still drowning

No underachieving club has a steeper hill to climb in the 2020 portion of the 2019-20 campaign than the San Jose Sharks.

Unlike three of the NHL's four other coaching changes this season, the Sharks' fire-and-hire earlier in December hasn't yielded much success:

TEAM	GAMES	RECORD	PTS%
Leafs	17	12-4-1	.706
Flames	13	8-4-1	.615
Stars	9	5-3-1	.556
Devils	12	4-6-2	.333
Sharks	7	2-4-1	.286

Yes, seven games is a small sample size. That's why concluding anything definitive about Bob Boughner and his job as Pete DeBoer's replacement would be unfair. The facts are the facts, though: A team is in trouble when it doesn't get the usual new-coach bump. Time is running out for the Sharks.

Heading into Tuesday's tilt against Detroit - San Jose's 41st of the season - the team is eight points out of a playoff spot in the Western Conference. Only the Red Wings, Devils, and Kings, squads firmly in rebuild mode, have accumulated fewer points than the 17-20-3 Sharks.

Terrible goaltending, porous five-on-five defense, and an uncharacteristically mediocre offense have put the Sharks in a peculiar spot: They are in great danger of missing the postseason during a year in which they don't own a first-round pick. It's a cringeworthy reality for one of the NHL's top franchises.

And the most puzzling part is their special teams, which rank first (penalty kill) and 28th (power play). Such an odd dynamic. The most recent NHL team to finish a season with the top-ranked penalty kill/power play and also a bottom-five PK/PP was the 2014-15 Minnesota Wild (1st in PK, 27th in PP).

Disaster in the Pacific

How crazy is it that, at what's essentially the midway point of the season, no Pacific Division team has banked enough wins and overtime/shootout losses to crack the league's top 10 in points percentage?

The fast-starting Canucks, at .575%, are now 14th among 31 teams; the sleeping-giant Golden Knights, at .571%, are 15th; the steady Coyotes, at .561%, are 16th; the roller-coaster Flames, at .549%, are 19th; the reeling Oilers, at .537%, are 23rd; the retooling Ducks, at .474%, are 26th; the disappointing Sharks, at .463%, are 27th; and the lifeless Kings, at .439%, are 29th.

What a gong show.

Winter Classic beauties

In my humble opinion, the Dallas Stars' Jan. 1 attire is among the best in Winter Classic history. It's truly a wonderful work of art:

The look, in part a tribute to the Dallas Texans of the 1940s, strikes a balance between clean and creative. It's simple from a design standpoint, yet the jersey's large "D" logo and the colors of the throwback gloves and pants command attention. The state of Texas arm patch is a neat touch.

This year's event - Stars versus Predators on Wednesday at the Cotton Bowl - is the 12th of its kind, which means there have now been 24 Winter Classic looks. The 2009 Red Wings, 2010 Bruins, and 2017 Blues donned noteworthy ensembles. But let's be honest: The 2020 Stars look deserves a stall alongside the 2008 Penguins and 2016 Bruins in the Winter Classic Looks Hall of Fame. (That is, if such a museum existed ...)

Empty-net dreams

One final thing: Whatever happened to goalie goals?

The beginning of the decade produced three - Cam Ward in December 2011, Martin Brodeur in March 2013, Mike Smith in October 2013 - but there hasn't been a single, glorious netminder tally in the six-plus years since.

On the surface, it doesn't add up. NHL teams send out an extra attacker more frequently than in previous eras. And the sixth skater typically hops over the boards earlier in the third period. Oftentimes, the trailing team is down by two or more goals, which gives the goalie on the leading team a prime opportunity to shoot their shot. Despite all of these factors, however, no five-on-six empty-netters have come to fruition.

Since I'm far from a goalie expert, I reached out to InGoal Magazine writer Paul Campbell for his take on the disconnect. He shared three rough theories.

"If I had to guess, I'd say that teams can't obstruct like they used to, so goalies get far fewer chances to do it. Like a QB with a bad O-line," Campbell said, referring to the lack of quality shooting opportunities and lanes available to netminders in an NHL that disincentivizes forms of interference.

The modern goalie operates on his knees regularly throughout a game, "which is great for sealing the posts, but bad for playing the puck," Campbell noted.

"I also think we're seeing the aftermath of the trapezoid rule now," he added. "Goalies and goalie coaches have been prioritizing puck handling far less, so we have a generation of goalies that isn't so confident with it."

Hmm. Maybe 2020 won't be the year of the goalie goal after all.

Calder Trophy Power Rankings: Olofsson charges up list with big December

By Sean O'Leary

The Score

December 31, 2019

In the third edition of theScore's Calder Trophy Power Rankings, we feature one rookie making his debut on the list, and four others who have been jockeying for position throughout the 2019-20 season.

5. Ilya Mikheyev, Toronto Maple Leafs

GP	P	ATOI	XGF%
39	23	15:35	53.02

Unfortunately, this will be Mikheyev's final appearance in these rankings, as he's been sidelined indefinitely following a scary incident when a skate sliced his wrist.

Although he's bound to fall out of the race, Mikheyev's freshman showing deserves some recognition. The 25-year-old Russian is fourth in rookie scoring, and he developed into a fixture in the Maple Leafs' top six under head coach Sheldon Keefe before the injury.

4. John Marino, Pittsburgh Penguins

GP	P	ATOI	XGF%
37	18	20:07	57.58

A pair of defensemen have been dominating these rankings, but it's time to shed some light on Marino, the rearguard who's been shining in anonymity for the Penguins.

Injuries have thrust the 22-year-old into an elevated role, and Marino now ranks fourth among rookies in average ice time, is tied for seventh in points, and he owns the top expected goals rate among Pittsburgh blue-liners.

3. Quinn Hughes, Vancouver Canucks

GP	P	ATOI	XGF%
39	28	21:15	55.89

Hughes is enjoying a fantastic season, but although he's likely to be a finalist by the end of the campaign, the Canucks defenseman has fallen out of the No. 2 spot on our list for the first time.

The 20-year-old ranks first in rookie ice time and third in points, but a quiet December production-wise bumps him down a spot. After finding the scoresheet 12 times over 14 games in November, Hughes registered just six points in 13 contests this month despite an uptick in minutes.

2. Victor Olofsson, Buffalo Sabres

GP	P	ATOI	XGF%
40	34	18:48	48.52

Olofsson returns to our ranks after missing the cut in November. The Sabres rookie posted his best month yet in December, recording six goals and eight assists in 13 games.

The 24-year-old sniper should remain in the Calder conversation throughout the year while playing alongside Jack Eichel on Buffalo's top line.

1. Cale Makar, Colorado Avalanche

GP	P	ATOI	XGF%
31	29	20:27	52.98

He's only appeared in five games this month, but Makar is still the front-runner for rookie-of-the-year honors.

Despite missing eight outings, the Avalanche defenseman still ranks second among his peers in points, and first in points per game. While he was out, Colorado's usually dangerous power play ranked 20th while converting just 18.5 percent of its opportunities, and the team struggled to find consistency, posting a 4-4 record.

Trophy Tracker: Calder

By Mike G. Morreale

NHL.com

January 2, 2020

To mark the halfway point in the season, NHL.com is running its third installment of the Trophy Tracker series this week. Today, we look at the race for the Calder Trophy, the annual award given to the player selected as the top rookie in the NHL in a Professional Hockey Writers Association poll.

Cale Makar has learned the art of being an NHL defenseman a lot sooner than most.

Colorado Avalanche coach Jared Bednar discovered this during Makar's NHL debut in the Stanley Cup Playoffs last spring, when he scored six points (one goal, five assists) in 10 postseason games.

The 21-year-old right-handed shot hasn't missed a beat his first full season, ranking second among NHL rookies with 29 points (eight goals, 21 assists) and third with 12 power-play points (two goals, 10 assists) in 32 games; he missed eight others with an upper-body injury.

"He's a well-rounded player already, at a young age," Bednar said. "He's a very mature player, has high expectations for his own game and he holds himself to a high standard, so he's really self-aware of how he's going from shift to shift and what he wants to accomplish. He expects to be an impact player, is a real coachable kid and comes as advertised."

Makar remains the favorite to win the Calder Trophy at the midseason mark of the season according to a panel of 18 NHL.com writers. He received 16 first-place votes and 88 points in the poll.

Buffalo Sabres forward Victor Olofsson, who was third at the quarter mark, moved into second place with two first-place votes and 69 points, followed by Vancouver Canucks defenseman Quinn Hughes with 59 points, Carolina Hurricanes forward Martin Necas with 11 points. Toronto Maple Leafs forward Ilya Mikheyev and New York Rangers defenseman Adam Fox each had 10 points; Mikheyev will be out for at least three months after having surgery to repair an artery and tendons in his right wrist that were severed in Toronto's 5-4 overtime win at the New Jersey Devils on Dec. 27.

Olofsson, who has averaged 18:53 in ice time and has been playing on Buffalo's top line, leads all rookies in goals (16), points (34) and power-play goals (nine) in 41 games.

Bednar said Makar's most impressive skill is his ability to evade forecheckers.

"He's a strong-checking defenseman, and his knack to beat the first forechecker and get us in and out of our zone is so critical," Bednar said. "His explosiveness up the ice to be able to either join or lead the rush has been outstanding -- and on the power play, he's becoming more of a threat himself and not just deferring to other players on the ice."

The No. 4 pick in the 2017 NHL Draft signed a three-year, entry-level contract with the Avalanche on April 14, three days after winning the Hobey Baker Award, presented annually to the top men's player in NCAA hockey.

"I think the maturity level that he has and just his whole approach to coming into the NHL he was patient in college, stayed an extra year and I think that was a mature decision to want to go back, help his team and be an impact player," Bednar said. "I think that kind of was the start of it. When I talked to him last year during the Stanley Cup Playoffs, he didn't have high expectations and just wanted to go out and play and try to help."

Makar earned 14:19 in ice time in his first NHL game, scoring a goal in a playoff win against the Calgary Flames on April 15. He earned 20:06 in ice time in his second game, a sign that Bednar had complete confidence in Makar's ability to play at the next level.

"I think there will eventually be an efficiency to his game where we're going to see him on the ice for 27-28 minutes a night, and he's going to be able to handle that," Bednar said. "Now it's full throttle every shift, so it's a lot of work to try and play that way. I think he's going to be able to eat more ice time, then play just a touch

more efficiently as he kind of gets used to the League and understands where his opportunities to help create offense are going to come from and where it needs to be a little bit more on the defensive side.

"He's just going to figure that out through experience and a little bit of help."

Voting totals (points awarded on a 5-4-3-2-1 basis): Cale Makar, Avalanche, 88 points (16 first-place votes); **Victor Olofsson, Buffalo Sabres, 69 (two first-place votes)**; Quinn Hughes, Vancouver Canucks, 59; Martin Necas, Hurricanes, 11; Ilya Mikheyev, Toronto Maple Leafs, 10; Adam Fox, New York Rangers, 10; John Marino, Pittsburgh Penguins, 8; Ilya Samsonov, Washington Capitals, 8; Mackenzie Blackwood, New Jersey Devils, 3; Nick Suzuki, Montreal Canadiens, 3; Ethan Bear, Edmonton Oilers, 1

Killorn scores twice, Lightning rally past Sabres for fourth straight win

By Heather Engel

NHL.com

December 31, 2019

BUFFALO -- Alex Killorn scored two goals and the Tampa Bay Lightning rallied for their fourth straight win, 6-4 against the Buffalo Sabres at KeyBank Center on Tuesday.

Tyler Johnson had a goal and two assists for Tampa Bay (21-13-4), which trailed 4-1 midway through the second period. Andrei Vasilevskiy made 24 saves.

"I think just emotionally we weren't really in the game for some reason," Killorn said. "It seems like we've had really bad starts. ... We ended up getting a goal at the end of the period. It gives us a little bit of hope, and third period we really took over."

Jack Eichel scored shorthanded for his 25th goal of the season, and Conor Sheary had a goal and two assists for Buffalo (17-17-7), which has lost four in a row. Linus Ullmark made 21 saves.

"We were playing well, obviously a 4-1 lead, we have momentum and then we [throw] the game away," Eichel said.

Killorn scored a power-play goal on a rebound of Brayden Point's one-timer at 13:57 of the second period to make it 4-2.

Johnson turned a stretch pass from Ondrej Palat into a partial breakaway and put a shot between Ullmark's pads to make it 4-3 at 16:55.

"[Killorn] gets us one, but I thought the big goal was Johnson's," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said. "It's a big difference coming back into the room one down instead of two. When you're one down, you're feeling you're close. It was a big effort to come back."

Kevin Shattenkirk's shot from the slot tied it 4-4 at 6:20 of the third period, and Killorn's second goal of the game gave the Lightning a 5-4 lead at 8:08 when he spun away from defenseman Rasmus Dahlin in front.

Sheary gave the Sabres a 1-0 lead on a one-timer from the right circle with 57 seconds remaining in the first period.

Marcus Johansson took a Sheary pass attempt off the side boards and beat Vasilevskiy far side from the right circle at 2:12 of the second to make it 2-0.

Palat made it 2-1 with a power-play goal at 7:00 with a shot from the slot.

Jimmy Vesey scored top corner on a one-timer from the right circle at 8:12 to make it 3-1.

Eichel's 25th goal extended the Sabres lead to 4-1 at 9:56 when he deked Shattenkirk in the right circle, cut towards the net and lifted a backhand shot past an outstretched Vasilevskiy during a Lightning power play.

Anthony Cirelli scored an empty-net goal with three seconds left for the 6-4 final.

"We never expected the game to be over at 4-1, but you sure expected to have a much more controlled situation," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "When we do get into these penalty, power play, specialty team situations, they seem to break our 5-on-5 momentum, and we need to stop changing our 5-on-5 game due to the feelings on the specialty teams.

"It was a change in momentum against a very dangerous team, but we are to blame. We gave them more than they actually took."

They said it

"At the beginning, we didn't skate very good. We were a little flat, and then halfway into the game we started chipping the puck. We were forechecking hard, we were winning battles, and that was it. ... I think it's the third game in a row where the start wasn't good, so we have to focus on that and be better next game." -- Lightning forward Ondrej Palat

"We definitely got to put pucks on the net. There is a lot of control, there is a lot of O-zone time there, and without shots you're not going to get any fruit of the labor of the power play. And the shots have to hit the net, right? Just looks like [we're] squeezing it, trying too hard, forcing it, I'm not sure. The guys are working hard, but we're not working right in some ways. We've got to get back to the fundamentals and we've got to get back to the basics, and over and over again, and work on that until we get it going the right way." -- Sabres coach Ralph Krueger

Need to know

Lightning defenseman Mikhail Sergachev left the game with 2:57 remaining after blocking a shot by Victor Olofsson. ... Tampa Bay swept the season series against Buffalo for the second time (4-0-0 in 2016-17). The Lightning are 23-4-2 against the Sabres since the start of the 2013-14 season. ... Sheary scored his first goal since Dec. 2 and matched an NHL career-high with three points. ... Buffalo is 0-for-14 on the power play in its past five games.

What's next

Lightning: At the Montreal Canadiens on Thursday (7 p.m. ET; TSN2, RDS, SUN, NHL.TV)

Sabres: Host the Edmonton Oilers on Thursday (7 p.m. ET; MSG-B, SNW, NHL.TV)

Lightning at Sabres preview

By Heather Engel

NHL.com

December 31, 2019

LIGHTNING (20--13--4) at SABRES (17-16--7)

7 p.m. ET; MSG-B, SUN, NHL.TV

The Game

The Tampa Lightning will look to extend their winning streak to four games when they play the Buffalo Sabres at KeyBank Center on Tuesday.

The Lightning are 6-2-1 in their past nine games and have won six in a row against the Sabres. With a win, they can sweep the season series against Buffalo for the second time (4-0-0 in 2016-17).

The Sabres have lost three straight and are 1-5-1 in their past seven. They've been outscored 22-10 in that stretch.

Players to watch

Lightning defenseman Victor Hedman has eight points (two goals, six assists) in a three-game point streak.

Sabres center Jack Eichel has 33 points (16 goals, 17 assists) in his past 21 games and six points (one goal, five assists) in his past six games against the Lightning.

They said it

"We understand we're 3-0 against them this year but those games were all pretty darn close and very competitive.

This is most definitely a different Buffalo team than we've seen in the past. Pretty dynamic group led by their captain (Eichel). If there was a time in the past where you might be able to come in here and take them lightly, you definitely can't do that anymore." -- Lightning coach Jon Cooper

"You've got to match up well against their skill. Obviously, there's a lot of will over there; they have some good role players that play a big part in their team success. We need to find a way to match their intensity and try to play our game as much as possible." -- Sabres center Jack Eichel

Lightning projected lineup

Ondrej Palat -- Brayden Point -- Nikita Kucherov
Alex Killorn -- Anthony Cirelli -- Steven Stamkos
Pat Maroon -- Cedric Paquette -- Mitchell Stephens
Yanni Gourde -- Tyler Johnson -- Carter Verhaeghe

Victor Hedman -- Luke Schenn
Ryan McDonagh -- Erik Cernak
Mikhail Sergachev -- Kevin Shattenkirk

Andrei Vasilevskiy
Curtis McElhinney

Scratched: Braydon Coburn
Injured: Jan Rutta (undisclosed)

Sabres projected lineup

Victor Olofsson -- Jack Eichel -- Sam Reinhart
Conor Sheary -- Marcus Johansson -- Rasmus Asplund
Zemgus Girgensons -- Johan Larsson -- Kyle Okposo
Dalton Smith -- Curtis Lazar -- Jimmy Vesey

Jake McCabe -- Rasmus Ristolainen
Rasmus Dahlin -- Brandon Montour
Marco Scandella -- Henri Jokiharju

Linus Ullmark
Carter Hutton

Scratched: Evan Rodrigues, Colin Miller, Zach Bogosian

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

Status report

Scandella returns after missing two games because of an illness. ... Smith was recalled from Rochester of the American Hockey League on Monday and could make his NHL debut. He was selected by the Columbus Blue Jackets with the No. 34 pick in the 2010 NHL Draft.

Stat pack

Reinhart is one goal away from 100 in the NHL. ... Olofsson has 20 points (nine goals, 11 assists) in his past 20 games. ... Killorn will play in his 553rd NHL game, passing Brad Richards for sixth-most in Lightning history. ... Johnson's 14 career assists against the Sabres are the most he has against any NHL team.

Krueger evaluates big picture with Sabres at the halfway mark

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 1, 2020

Ralph Krueger speaks often about the importance of processing pain. In the aftermath of losses, his comments are typically geared toward finding solutions out of disappointment.

Tuesday's 6-4 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning may have been the Sabres' most painful of the season. They led 4-1 in the second period, capped by a thrilling shorthanded goal from Jack Eichel, then allowed five unanswered goals to drop their fourth game in a row.

Rather than get lost in the details of that game, Krueger utilized Wednesday morning to reflect on the big picture with his players. They assessed where they stand after 41 games and looked ahead to the opportunities of the second half.

"The pain needs to remain and we shouldn't [gloss] it over, but what we need to do is concentrate on the process again," Krueger said. "We know we're in a group phase of learning and growing and the group in there is coming out fighting this morning.

"The coaches are fighting, the players are fighting, and we'd like to show the crowd here - who were unbelievable in my first half of my first season here in Buffalo - we want to give them that as a New Year's gift tomorrow against Edmonton. We want them to see the fight and the reaction. So, that's kind of the feeling here this morning, quite honestly. We went big picture to get some sanity out of the pain yesterday. Again, there are good things we need to grab onto and get right back at it tomorrow."

So, where do the Sabres stand at the midway point? They sit five points out of third place in the Atlantic Division, currently occupied by Tampa Bay. Yet Krueger has seen developments in players' understanding of the identity they're trying to build.

Even during their 8-1-1 start - which was fueled heavily by a red-hot power play - Krueger says players were still grasping their roles within the team's principles. The switch flipped somewhere around their loss in Boston on Nov. 21, a game they controlled in every sense except the score sheet.

Around that time, players began calling out their own mistakes in the meeting rooms and on the bench. Their understanding of the principles showed in the results; they earned points in 10 of 12 games following the loss in Boston.

It's still there, Krueger said, even in their current stretch of six losses in seven games. The difference is the consistency during what's been a rigorous schedule of 21 contests in 39 days before Christmas.

"What's happening is the mental fatigue of sustaining those habits over and over and over again for 60 minutes, it's still not there," Krueger said. "It's still not there. We still don't have the mental wherewithal to stick with those habits.

"As soon as we are plus-35 seconds in a shift, as soon as we're four games in seven days and it's tough time, we have individual breakdowns still in those situations. ... So, that's the next phase of habits becoming the norm."

The stretch ahead is less daunting. The Sabres only play 10 games in January, with no back-to-backs plus a bye week toward the end of the month. They play six times at home, where they're 11-5-3.

Krueger said the reaction from his players on Wednesday and the habits he's seen develop have him excited for the opportunity ahead. He also acknowledges that it's results, not behind-the-scenes improvement, that will persuade fans to share that optimism.

"It's nothing for our fans to be excited about," he said. "What they need to be excited about is that these guys are working on this and that these habits are becoming something we believe in as a group and that Sabres

hockey is going to have an identity. We are building an identity here. We are going to show our identity even still this season. It's going to come out more and more consistently, I am sure."

Rodrigues addresses TSN report

TSN's Darren Dreger reported Tuesday that forward Evan Rodrigues "made his interests in a trade known" to Sabres management.

Rodrigues, who was scratched for the game against Tampa Bay, met with the media Wednesday and acknowledged disappointment with his role. He's averaged 10:42 and tallied three assists in 24 appearances after playing a career-high 74 games last season.

"I'm a hockey player who wants to play hockey," he said. "I think that pretty much anyone out there will tell you the same thing. It's a job, it's a career. I just want to play hockey."

Asked if he was disappointed with the report, Krueger said, "I can only speak to what is, and what is is we will end up with a group of players who really want to be here. We will work with the players who really want to be here and, quite clearly, play the players who really want to be here."

Up next

The Sabres host Edmonton on Thursday. Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30 p.m.

Dahlin on NHL All-Star 'Last Men In' ballot

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

January 1, 2020

Want to see Rasmus Dahlin at the 2020 NHL All-Star Game?

The Buffalo Sabres defenseman is on the ballot for the 2020 NHL All-Star Last Men In fan vote.

For the second straight season, the NHL is allowing fans to select four players from a list of 31 players - one from each NHL team as determined by the League's Hockey Operations Department - to be added to the divisional rosters for All-Star Weekend in St. Louis on Jan. 24 and 25.

The highest vote-getters by division then will be added to their respective All-Star rosters. Voting for the Last Men In runs until Friday, Jan. 10, at 11:59 p.m. ET.

In the Atlantic Division, Dahlin is competing against Patrice Bergeron (BOS), Dylan Larkin (DET), Aleksander Barkov (FLA), Max Domi (MTL), Jean-Gabriel Pageau (OTT), Steven Stamkos (TBL) and Mitchell Marner (TOR).

Sabres captain Jack Eichel was named to the Atlantic Division team on Monday.

Dahlin is fourth in team scoring with 21 points (2+19), and although he has missed eight games due to injury, he is currently on pace to record 47 points this season.

Fans can vote at [NHL.com/Vote](https://www.nhl.com/Vote) or on a mobile interactive ballot on the NHL app.

Last season, Sabres fans successfully voted Jeff Skinner into the All-Star Game.

Sabres unable to hold lead in loss to Lightning

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

December 31, 2019

Special teams once again made the difference as the Buffalo Sabres lost their season series finale against the Tampa Bay Lightning, 6-4, at KeyBank Center on Tuesday.

The Sabres led 4-1 at the 9:56 mark of the second period, then went on a power play less than two minutes later. Marcus Johansson was called for hooking with eight seconds remaining on the man advantage, giving the Lightning its fifth power play of the night.

Alex Killorn scored on that power play, kicking off a string of five unanswered goals to conclude the contest.

"That penalty definitely did it, shifted the momentum," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "We all know how dangerous Tampa Bay is. We never expected the game to be over at 4-1, but you sure expected to have a much more controlled situation.

"When we do get into these penalty, power play, specialty team situations, they seem to break our 5-on-5 momentum and we need to stop changing our 5-on-5 game due to the feelings on the specialty teams. It was a change in momentum against a very dangerous team, but we are to blame. We gave them more than they actually took."

Looking for their first win of the four-game season series against the Lightning, the Sabres seemed to take control through the first 30 minutes. They outshot the Lightning in the first period, 10-3, and took the lead on a goal from Conor Sheary in the final minute.

The line of Sheary, Marcus Johansson, and Jimmy Vesey continued to contribute with two more goals in the second period. The atmosphere in the building reached its peak when, with Jake McCabe serving an instigator minor, Jack Eichel turned in a highlight-reel shorthanded goal to make it 4-1.

The fact that McCabe's penalty came in defense of Eichel - he fought defenseman Mikhail Sergachev following an open-ice hit on the Sabres captain - only added to the moment.

"I think, I mean it sounds cliché, but we were just getting pucks behind them and going to work," Sheary said of the Sabres' start. "I think, with the group we have in here, we have a lot of hardworking guys and gritty guys and that's where our game's our best.

"I think we started turning the puck over and not getting it deep and I think that led to their transition."

Killorn's power-play goal came at 13:57 of the second period. Tyler Johnson scored on a breakaway less than two minutes later to cut the Sabres' lead to 4-3.

The Sabres had chances to add insurance in the opening minutes of the third period, but to no avail. Kevin Shattenkirk scored from the high slot at the 6:20 mark, followed by a second goal from Killorn that stood as the game winner less than two minutes later. Anthony Cirelli added an empty-net goal in the final seconds.

Buffalo had two power plays with a chance to tie the game in the third period but was unable to score despite long stretches of possession. The power play finished the night 0-for-4 with three shots on goal, while Tampa Bay went 2-for-5. (Ondrej Palat scored the Lightning's first goal with the extra man in the second period.)

"You could even hear it from the crowd, we definitely gotta put pucks on the net," Krueger said. "There is a lot of control, there is a lot of O-zone time there, and without shots, you're not going to get any fruit of the labor of the power play. And the shots have to hit the net, right?"

"Just looks like [we're] squeezing it, trying too hard, forcing it, I'm not sure. The guys are working hard, but we're not working right in some ways. We've got to get back to the fundamentals and we've got to get back to the basics, and over and over again, and work on that until we get it going the right way."

The Sabres will open 2020 with a practice at KeyBank Center on Wednesday in preparation for their next game, at home against Edmonton on Thursday. Krueger stressed the need for an honest assessment in order to respond for the home fans.

"I think more than anything it's building experience as a group together and speaking openly about these processes that are happening and not shying away from what went wrong here," he said. "Being brutally honest with each other, putting everything on the table, and then regrouping with the lessons and being better the next time it comes around.

"Over and over again, we have to continue to work for growth and keep our heads up and stick together and fight through these kinds of situations. We come out fighting here."

Up next

The Sabres continue their homestand against the Edmonton Oilers on Thursday. Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30 p.m., or you can listen to the game on WGR 550. Puck drop is scheduled for 7.

At the Horn: Lightning 6 - Sabres 4

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

December 31, 2019

In the final game of the decade, the Buffalo Sabres let a three-goal lead slip away in their 6-4 loss to the Tampa Bay Lightning on Tuesday.

Buffalo led 4-1 midway through the second period, but the Lightning rallied back with five unanswered goals in a New Year's Eve victory at KeyBank Center.

Conor Sheary recorded a goal and two assists for Buffalo. Marcus Johansson, Jimmy Vesey and Jack Eichel also scored for the Sabres.

Eichel, on the penalty kill, scored the first shorthanded goal of his career when he bobbed and weaved and shook the Tampa Bay defense on his way to a backhand shot that should end up on everyone's Best of 2019 lists.

Linus Ullmark made 21 saves.

What happened

The Sabres jumped out to a 1-0 lead when Sheary's one-timer beat Andrei Vasilevskiy with 57 seconds remaining in the first period. Buffalo doubled their advantage when Johansson scored 2:12 into the second period.

The Lightning earned their first goal with a power-play marker by Ondrej Palat at the 7-minute mark of the second but just Vesey restored Buffalo's two-goal lead just 1:12 later.

Then it was time for Eichel's dazzling display 9:56 into the second when he and Curtis Lazar pushed the play up ice while on the penalty kill. That goal made it 4-1, but the three-goal lead wouldn't last.

The Lightning closed out the second period with a pair of goals. First, Alex Killorn scored on the power play with 6:03 remaining and then Tyler Johnson scored on a breakaway with 3:05 left.

Kevin Shattenkirk then tied it up 6:20 into the third period on a deflected shot. Killorn then delivered the go-ahead goal 8:08 in the period.

Buffalo came close to tying it on a power play with under 8 minutes to play and had another opportunity with 4:18 to go, but the Lightning penalty kill held strong on both occasions. The Sabres power play finished 0-for-4.

Anthony Cirelli added an empty-net goal with 2.2 seconds remaining.

What it means

Buffalo is now 17-17-7 on the season and 11-5-3 at home.

Sheary tied his career high by recording his fifth career three-point game. His last three-point effort came on March 1, 2019 vs. Pittsburgh (2+1).

Dalton Smith made his NHL debut. The 27-year-old forward skated 1:26 on four shifts. He signed a one-year deal with Buffalo on Monday.

Coming up

The Sabres are back at it on Thursday when they host the Edmonton Oilers at KeyBank Center. Faceoff is scheduled for 7 p.m. with pregame coverage on MSG starting at 6:30. Tickets are on sale now.

Smith expected to make NHL debut vs. Lightning

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

December 31, 2019

Dalton Smith is expected to make his NHL debut when the Buffalo Sabres close their season series with the Tampa Bay Lightning tonight at KeyBank Center.

Smith practiced on a line with Curtis Lazar and Jimmy Vesey on Monday after signing a one-year, two-way deal to join Buffalo. We detailed his long journey from second-round pick to 2010 to the NHL in yesterday's practice report.

"There's a good chance he'll be in our lineup today," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "We're still making a final decision. Planning to warmup with 13 forwards and make that final call. There's a good chance we'll see him.

"It's an opportunity for us to get to know him. As he missed training camp, it's good to run him through all the different stages of becoming a part of our group."

Smith, 27, was a member of the Lightning organization during the 2013-14 and 2014-15 seasons. He was teammates with current Lightning forwards Brayden Point, Cedric Paquette, and Yanni Gourde with AHL Syracuse.

In fact, Smith played his first game for Syracuse against Rochester on March 8, 2014, following a midseason trade from Columbus. He fought then Amerks forward Tim Schaller just 2:38 into the contest. Johan Larsson (who scored two goals) and Rasmus Ristolainen were in the lineup for Rochester.

Krueger said the remainder of the lineup will resemble what the Sabres ran in practice on Monday. Here's what they could go with tonight, subject to change:

68 Victor Olofsson - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
28 Zemgus Girgensons - 22 Johan Larsson - 21 Kyle Okposo
43 Conor Sheary - 90 Marcus Johansson - 74 Rasmus Asplund
67 Dalton Smith - 27 Curtis Lazar - 13 Jimmy Vesey

19 Jake McCabe - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 62 Brandon Montour
6 Marco Scandella - 10 Henri Jokiharju

Linus Ullmark is expected to start in net. He's won five of his last six games at KeyBank Center, posting a .928 save percentage in those games.

Eichel reacts to All-Star nod

Jack Eichel was selected to represent the Sabres at All-Star Weekend for the third straight season on Monday. He credited his teammates with helping him put together what's been his best statistical start to a season in his career.

"It was a big honor, a lot of guys to credit and stuff," he said. "I've been playing with a lot of good players here, the beneficiary of a lot of good hockey plays. So, it's a huge honor."

Rasmus Dahlin is Buffalo's candidate to be voted in as the Atlantic Division's Last Man In. Voting opens Wednesday, Jan. 1 at 12 p.m. and closes Friday, Jan. 10 at 11:59 p.m.

Scouting the Lightning

This will be the fourth and final matchup between the Sabres and Lightning this season. The Lightning swept the NHL Global Series in Stockholm, Sweden on Nov. 8 and 9 and then earned a 5-2 victory in Tampa Bay on Nov. 25.

Though the results have favored Tampa Bay, the 5-on-5 play has been close to even. Shot attempts at 5-on-5 are 128-126 in favor of the Sabres; goals are 7-6 Lightning.

The difference has been special teams. The Lightning's top-ranked power play has gone 4-for-11. The Sabres have gone 0-for-8 and allowed a pair of shorthanded goals in the most recent meeting.

"We'll be tested defensively here for sure, and we need to confirm the defense we've been playing of late, but need to add to the offense and hoping the power play takes that lead," Krueger said. "Not necessarily in scoring, but in its habits and the way it executes and how it performs.

"We will always feel that momentum into our 5-on-5 game, so we need that to happen tonight to finish 2019 with a game we're really proud of. That's what we see tonight here."

Andrei Vasilevskiy is expected to start in net for Tampa Bay.

Numbers to know

- 100 - Sam Reinhart leads the season series against the Lightning with five points, including four goals. He enters the contest one goal shy of 100 for his career.
- 3 - Gourde has tallied the winning goal in all three games between the Sabres and Lightning this season.

Tune in

Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30 p.m., or you can listen on WGR 550. Puck drop is scheduled for 7.