



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

January 28, 2020

Eichel, Sabres to host the Senators

Associated Press

January 28, 2020

Ottawa Senators (17-23-9, seventh in the Atlantic Division) vs. Buffalo Sabres (22-20-7, fifth in the Atlantic Division)

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

BOTTOM LINE: Jack Eichel and Buffalo square off against Ottawa. Eichel is ninth in the NHL with 62 points, scoring 28 goals and totaling 34 assists.

The Sabres are 11-13-4 against Eastern Conference opponents. Buffalo has converted on 19.2% of power-play opportunities, scoring 28 power-play goals.

The Senators are 6-7-4 against the rest of their division. Ottawa leads the league with 10 shorthanded goals, led by Jean-Gabriel Pageau with three.

In their last meeting on Dec. 23, Ottawa won 3-1. Pageau totaled two goals for the Senators.

TOP PERFORMERS: Eichel has recorded 62 total points while scoring 28 goals and adding 34 assists for the Sabres. Sam Reinhart has totaled six assists over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

Thomas Chabot leads the Senators with 23 total assists and has collected 27 points. Chris Tierney has five goals and one assist over the last 10 games for Ottawa.

LAST 10 GAMES: Senators: 1-5-4, averaging 2.4 goals, 3.7 assists, 3.3 penalties and nine penalty minutes while giving up 3.6 goals per game with a .898 save percentage.

Sabres: 5-5-0, averaging three goals, 4.9 assists, 3.8 penalties and 9.5 penalty minutes while giving up 2.7 goals per game with a .906 save percentage.

INJURIES: Sabres: None listed.

Senators: None listed.

Visit by Senators opens long run at home that will determine Sabres' fate

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 27, 2020

Ten points out of a playoff spot with a crucial 10-game stretch coming. This is last-chance time for the Buffalo Sabres and they know it.

Nine of the games are at home, beginning with Tuesday's matchup against the Ottawa Senators. The Sabres are 14-5-3 in KeyBank Center this season and need to continue to channel that kind of success to get back in the race.

"The fans have been great," winger Kyle Okposo said Monday. "There's been some really good energy and really good atmosphere in the building. ... We know we're going to have to win some road games in March as well, so it's one game at a time. Take care of business (Tuesday) and go from there."

The schedule is favorable for Buffalo on this run. The home games are against Ottawa, Montreal, Columbus, Colorado, Detroit, Anaheim, Detroit again, Columbus again and Toronto. The lone road game is Feb. 7 against the New York Rangers. Among those teams, only Columbus and Colorado entered Monday in a playoff spot.

"What we feel is a real comfort here playing in front of our home crowd and playing in our building," coach Ralph Krueger said. "We made it a goal this year to make it a difficult place to play in and we believe it is that.

"We need to feed on that and make sure we don't get comfortable being at home, either. Sometimes flip-flopping between road and home games makes it more fun to be at home. You should never take it for granted to be in front of your own crowd and we will not do it during this stretch. It is an opportunity that we all know will decide which direction this season goes."

The Sabres suffered a 3-1 loss to the Senators Dec. 23 in Ottawa. Their 4-2 win against the Senators here Nov. 16 was the first four-goal game of Jack Eichel's career. Eichel has 23 points (9-14) in 15 career games against Ottawa, his most against any opponent.

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As expected, Krueger confirmed that winger Jeff Skinner will play Tuesday for the first time since suffering his upper-body injury Dec. 27 against Boston. He has skated the last two days on a line with Marcus Johansson and Michael Frolik.

Jack Eichel returned to practice Monday from the All-Star break and centered Zemgus Girgensons and Sam Reinhart. The other two lines had Curtis Lazar centering Jimmy Vesey and Kyle Okposo, and Johan Larsson between Conor Sheary and Evan Rodrigues.

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The Senators will not be playing their first game since the break, as they skated Monday night at New Jersey before heading to Buffalo. Their previous game, a 5-2 win Jan. 18 against Calgary, snapped an 0-5-4 slide.

"There's no question coming out of this game against Jersey that Ottawa will have that game-warm edge so we need to be bang-on," Krueger said. "We need to be simple and just stay true to our principles as we find our legs. We need to expect that there will be 10 minutes of acclimatization but once we get that, I feel confident we can use the energy we feel in the group right now and channel it in the right way."

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The Sabres continue to list winger Victor Olofsson as week to week with the ankle injury he suffered Jan. 2 vs. Edmonton.

"We're optimistic. We still need to give it a couple of weeks probably but he's progressing in a really good way," Krueger said. "Every step has been positive but we're not going to rush the situation here."

In life and now in death, Kobe Bryant's lessons resonate with Jack Eichel

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 27, 2020

When he was sidelined with a high ankle sprain for nearly two months at the start of the 2016-17 season, Jack Eichel drew plenty of inspiration from Kobe Bryant.

A year earlier, Showtime released an 83-minute documentary entitled "Kobe Bryant's Muse" that took a deep dive into the career of the Los Angeles Lakers legend and paid particular emphasis to his 2013 rehab from a severe Achilles injury. The Buffalo Sabres' captain returned to practice from the All-Star break Monday and said the film made a huge impact on his mindset to overcome adversity as he was turning 19.

"He's obviously on the back end of his career and I just look at the way he rehabbed himself, the way that he worked, the way that he did everything to get himself back to play again," Eichel said. "Even though their team wasn't great, I thought it was motivational for somebody who has done so much to feel like he had more to prove and had so much more to give.

"Even though he was whatever he was of age at that time (34), I thought it was a great documentary. He was a tremendous athlete, tremendous competitor. He set the bar for work ethic and compete for so many other athletes. There's so many different things you read and see about him. His dedication to his craft honestly makes you want to be better every day."

Eichel was in his downtown townhouse Sunday when he received a text from his father, Bob, with the news of the helicopter crash in Los Angeles County, Calif., that claimed the lives of Bryant, his 13-year-old daughter and seven others. Growing up in Boston, Eichel had followed Bryant's career closely. That was topped of course by the 2008 and 2010 NBA Finals that the Celtics and Lakers split.

"I don't know there's been a tragedy quite like this in sports in my memory," Eichel said. "He's 41 years of age, arguably one of the best basketball players of all time. His daughter being 13 and the two of them going to a basketball game, and the other families affected, too. Your thoughts and prayers go to their families."

In moments like these, you think of athletes gone far too soon. Names like Roberto Clemente, Thurman Munson, Len Bias and Hank Gathers had more games to play. Like Bryant, baseball Hall of Famer Roy Halladay had an entire post-playing life still to build. Bryant's death, however, is global and stretches far outside the NBA.

Soccer great Neymar made the "2-4" for Bryant's numbers with his fingers after scoring a goal Sunday in Paris. Australian tennis star Nick Kyrgios choked back tears while wearing a No. 8 gold Bryant jersey during warmups Monday at the Australian Open. Derek Jeter wrote about his relationship with Bryant on the Players Tribune and Alex Rodriguez did likewise with a Twitter thread and on Instagram.

Bryant had plenty of impact on hockey players as well. Washington star Alex Ovechkin tweeted about Bryant on Sunday and spoke in Montreal about their meetings in Los Angeles, which included Bryant giving him a signed jersey and pair of sneakers.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said his family is currently in Switzerland, not a top European basketball country, and Bryant's death is front-page news there.

"I love world-class athletes and I get goosebumps thinking about the amount of amazing athletic performances I saw from Kobe," Krueger said. "If you look at how he was working on his next stage of life, that's being spoken about a lot because it's a tough step for a superstar like that. It's extremely tragic to have a life cut so short from somebody who had the opportunity now to inspire so many people and that's gone.

"That's gone forever. Nobody can take that space. I always find that tragic because the world needs good leaders, the world needs good examples and the world needs people that can inspire other people. The world lost a big inspiration yesterday."

Eichel agreed.

"The impact he had on athletes across the world was greater than just basketball," Eichel said. "Somebody like myself he impacted so much and he would never know that."

Winger Kyle Okposo grew up in the 1990s in Minnesota and said he was a basketball fan first, before he grew into hockey. He grew up in the days of Michael Jordan and at the start of Bryant's career coming out of high school in the Philadelphia area. Okposo, whose wife is expecting their fourth child in April, was particularly touched by the death of Bryant's daughter when he tweeted about the tragedy Sunday night.

"Everybody talks about that Mamba Mentality and he had it every day," Okposo said. "Just watching him from afar and how competitive he was, how fiery he was, it was amazing to see his whole career and what he did. Then to transition to becoming a family man. ... Just all the things he was doing for women's basketball with daughter, the schools, the businesses. He was just getting started with his life after playing. To lose somebody like that, he was a larger-than-life figure. He was a titan. He was a global icon and he will be sorely missed."

Okposo was among a group of Sabres to attend LeBron James' first game as a Laker in Staples Center in October 2018, on the night the Sabres beat the Kings in a matinee the same day. He said it was a thrill to see James and to see a game in Bryant's house.

"I saw Kobe play live in Philly once," Okposo added. "Saw him in the elevator at the hotel. We were in the same hotel and I'll never forget it. Didn't say anything to him but he just had that presence about him."

"My wife and I were sitting on the couch last night and I must have said 10 times, 'I can't believe he's gone.' My wife knows nothing about basketball. She couldn't care less but she knew Kobe Bryant and understood the impact that he had on especially Los Angeles but on a global scale. Just amazingly sad."

Even in death, just as in his documentary, Eichel said he is taking lessons from one of his athletic heroes.

"The bigger message through everything that happened is how fragile and precious life is. You can't take a day for granted," Eichel said. "I think it was a really big eye-opener for so many people. ... It's so important to enjoy it every day and make the most of it. Something like that happens, that's real life. That's not wins and losses and standings and points. That's somebody who was a father, a husband, a friend. I think that puts a lot of things in perspective."

The Sabres will need to repeat history to make the playoffs

By Joe DiBiase

WGR 550

January 28, 2020

It's been a while, but we've been here before.

This will be a tough sell. Not necessarily because the math is tough, but convincing Buffalo Sabres fans that this team is capable of the type of run it would take to make the postseason is an unfair ask. Almost nothing about this team, at the moment, makes me think they can do it.

However, the math to making the playoffs is math we've seen, although it's been a while.

The Sabres have the longest active playoff drought in the National Hockey League, going on it's ninth season. Smashing the previous team record of three seasons, missing the playoffs from 2001 to 2004.

The Sabres currently have 51 points in 49 games. That's the exact amount of points the 2010-11 Sabres had after 49 games. Both this year's team and that 2010-11 team also had a minus-7 goal differential after 49 games.

The 2010-11 Sabres team went 20-8-5 over their last 33 games, which is a total of 45 points. That was good for the fourth-best total in the NHL in that span.

This time around, it will be more challenging.

On Jan. 28, 2011, the Sabres sat six points out of a playoff spot, but did finish the season with a five-point cushion between themselves and the ninth place Carolina Hurricanes. This year's Sabres team is 10 points out of a playoff spot as of Jan. 27, 2020.

The same point total the 2010-11 Sabres finished with, 96, may be enough for this year's team. That point total is, coincidentally, the exact point pace of both the Philadelphia Flyers and Hurricanes as the two Wild Card teams.

That means the 20-8-5 record is the magic mark for the Sabres.

The biggest difference between the Sabres from eight years ago and this year's team is goaltending. Ryan Miller was very capable of putting together three months of Vezina level goaltending. Though Miller wasn't quite on that level in the final three months of that season, he was still very good, posting a .921 save percentage, and a record of 14-8-4 in that stretch.

Linus Ullmark looks to be capable of that type of production.

What doesn't look to be possible is the tremendous play from the backup that Jhonas Enroth gave the Sabres once upon a time. The Sabres with Enroth went 7-0-1 in their final 33 games. Carter Hutton has lost his last 11 games and looks more like Patrick Lalime than Jhonas Enroth.

The Sabres weren't just stopping pucks in the 2010-11 season. They did have the fifth most goals in the NHL in the final 33 games. There wasn't a Jack Eichel level star on that team, but the depth scoring stepping up.

Is the current Sabres team going to get scoring from 10 players like that? I'd be surprised.

In all likelihood, the Sabres are not going to make the playoffs this season and will extend the NHL's longest playoff drought to nine seasons. With the lack of scoring depth, especially down the middle, it's hard to see the scoring needed in the final 33 games to win at least 20 games.

This current five-game homestand is really the last stand for the Sabres. Three of the five games are against teams below the Sabres in the standings. The Montreal Canadiens have been a disaster the last month, the Ottawa Senators are one of the least talented teams in the league, and the Detroit Red Wings are possibly the worst team in a generation.

To make anyone believe that a torrid stretch of play is on the way, the Sabres will have to get at least eight or nine points in their next five games. Then maybe, people will believe that this team can do what the last Sabres team to make the playoffs did.

The Sabres remember Kobe Bryant

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 27, 2020

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) - The tragic news of Kobe Bryant's death, as well as the eight others killed on Sunday in a helicopter crash, has rocked people all around the world. It's no different in the Sabres locker room.

Ralph Krueger couldn't believe the news, "That was really shocking. I don't watch television at all, but I did last night. I love the world class athletes, and I get goosebumps thinking about the amazing athletic performances I saw from Kobe, and then if you look at how he was working on his next stage of life, it's just extremely tragic to have a life cut so short by somebody who had the opportunity to inspire so many people and that's gone. It's gone forever because nobody can take that space."

Jack Eichel got really serious and spoke from the heart as he remembered a guy he grew up admiring as an athlete, "Kobe was one of my favorite athletes. It's just such a tragedy.

"Growing up in the Boston area with the Celtic/Laker final, I got a chance to follow him a bit, and since then I just look at the way his life has gone on and it seemed like he was really getting into life after basketball and you see how involved he was with his daughter. It's such a tragedy that the two of them passed away."

Eichel is starting to become a superstar in his sport, but he still looks at what Kobe meant to others, "I think the impact he had on athletes across the world greater than just basketball. I mean, somebody like myself he impacted so much, but he would never know that. But just the way he went about his business and competed and worked." Eichel added, "He set the bar for work ethic and compete for so many other athletes and it makes you want to be better every day."

Eichel missed the beginning of the 2016 season with a severely sprained ankle. Eichel took strength from the way Kobe handled injuries, "I remember watching his documentary about coming back from his Achilles injury after I sprained my ankle, and it's just little things like that you watch how dedicated he was to his craft and it made you want to be better."

Eichel said this kind of news isn't something that people will forget quickly. The captain said, "I think this is going to take a long time for everyone to move on from.

"Time's going to be the best healer for people, and I don't know if there's been a tragedy quite like this in sports in my memory. He was 41-years of age and, arguably, one of the best basketball players of all-time, and his daughter being 13 and the two of them going to a basketball game, your thoughts and prayers go to all the families."

Eichel returned to practice after the All-Star Game in St. Louis. Many fans want Krueger to play Jeff Skinner on Eichel's line, but that doesn't appear to be happening. Krueger did say that Skinner is back and will play on Tuesday against Ottawa.

Victor Olofsson is still rehabbing. Krueger said, "We're optimistic, but we still need to give it a couple of weeks probably. But he's progressing in a really good way."

Krueger said it's all positive with Olofsson, but they're not going to rush the situation.

The NHL gets back to games on Monday night, which means Ottawa has a home game against New Jersey before getting on a plane and coming to Buffalo for Tuesday night's matchup.

Monday's lines:

Girgensons - Eichel - Reinhart

Skinner - Johansson - Frolik

Sheary - Larsson - Rodrigues

Vesey - Lazar - Okposo

Dahlin - Montour
Pilot - Ristolainen
Miller - Jokiharju
McCabe – Bogosian

Wheeler's 2020 NHL prospect pool rankings: No. 16 Buffalo Sabres

By Scott Wheeler

The Athletic

January 28, 2020

Welcome to Scott Wheeler's 2020 rankings of every NHL organization's prospects. You can find the complete ranking and more information on the criteria here, as we count down daily from No. 31 to No. 1. The series, which includes evaluations and commentary from coaches and staff on more than 500 prospects, runs from Jan. 13 to Feb. 11.

This is an interesting moment in the course of the series because the Sabres represent a shift into a new class of prospect pool. There are a few clear divisions throughout the ranking, where one cluster of teams breaks apart from another. For me, it broke down into five tiers of prospect pools. They are: 1-5, 6-16, 17-22, 23-26 and 27-31.

You'll notice that one of those groups (this new one we're beginning today) is not like the others. There are four tiers there with just handful of teams and another that runs 11 organizations deep.

So while it may look like the Sabres are in the bottom half of the league as a prospect pool, I don't view it that way. They're much closer to a few teams in the top 10 than they are to any of the teams in the bottom 10.

The problem the Sabres face with their prospect pool relative to the teams ahead of them is a problem depth, not of the strength of their top prospect. Most of the teams we'll see in the days that follow boast pools that run upwards of 20 prospects deep. Buffalo's doesn't.

1. Dylan Cozens, C, 18 (Lethbridge Hurricanes)

One of the interesting internal debates I've had with myself in the last couple of month centres around hockey's top prospect. When I put together my annual top 50 drafted prospects rankings every summer, the top few players are easily identified. Last summer, Jack Hughes, Kaapo Kakko, Cale Makar and Quinn Hughes were in a stratosphere of their own. Spoiler alert: Alexis Lafreniere is going to be No. 1 when I do it all over again in July. But what happens when those players graduate? Then things get murky. If I were to put together a midseason list (which I'm not, sorry!), there's more than half a dozen players I'd probably consider for the top of the ranking. Coincidentally, none of those players belonged to teams 31-17. Enter Cozens, who would be in that conversation.

My fourth-ranked prospect ahead of the 2019 draft, Cozens has turned a shortened summer due to injury into an excellent first half, with his 19th birthday around the corner in February. He's a rare blend of size, speed, hands, playmaking ability and finishing touch. He can fly north-south, he's always going to be a major factor as a forechecker and backchecker and because his decision-making can keep up with his feet, he's extremely dangerous off the rush. If I have one concern with his toolkit, it's that his shot isn't a major threat. I've been particularly impressed by the development of his creativity this season. Cozens has begun to make more plays below the goal line and off the cycle both by surprising defenders with a slick pass through their feet or with a quick cut through traffic.

He was in good spirits throughout the world juniors — and looked confident on the ice.

"It was disappointing getting hurt at development camp and having to miss a lot of my summer training. The big thing my injury helped me with was just my lower body strength. I wasn't really able to work on my upper body so it was just all focussed on explosiveness and power down low and I think it helped a lot. You've got to take the positives out of the negatives and I think I did," Cozens said.

Keep an eye on his Hurricanes because they currently are fifth in the 22-team WHL and this could be his last year in the league.

"I want to win. I think we have a team that can go all the way so my goal is to win the whole league and then hopefully go to the Memorial Cup and win there. We're not looking at anything less than that," Cozens said.

2. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, G, 20 (Cincinnati Cyclones/Rochester Americans)

Luukkonen has put together a good first year of pro for a 20-year-old. He's huge, even relative to other goalies who are 6-foot-4, with broad shoulders and a bulky build. That can work against some goalies, who tend to be leaner these days, but he moves well in his net. He makes most saves along the ice and does a good job getting into his butterfly or pokechecking to avoid getting beat five-hole. He's also got solid rebound control, pushing low hard shots to the corners and swallowing most medium danger shots up high. If I were to complain about one area of his game, it would probably be his reflexes on high danger opportunities in the slot. He can freeze when he's challenged by NHL-level shooters.

3. Erik Portillo, G, 19 (Dubuque Fighting Saints)

You can count on one hand the number of NHL teams that have two legitimate goalie prospects. You can also count on one hand the number of goalies prospects I'd be willing to rank this high in a system. I tend to be cautious with my goalie projections, in part because I haven't played the position but also because of the volatility of the position. But when a goalie is 6-foot-6, he's not slow in the net and he's got a track record of standout numbers, it's hard to ignore him. He also doesn't play an overly aggressive style, which means he doesn't box himself into having to make too many scramble saves. He's a calm, deep-in-his net goalie who has worked to condense how active he is in the crease (something that every goalie his size needs to work on). When he's on, he can steal games. And when he's not on, he rarely has a stinker (he has given up more than four goals just once this season). I've seen him let in some soft goals but that's not uncommon for a young goalie with his size (they often look awkward technically at times). Between Portillo and Luukkonen, I wouldn't be surprised if the Sabres have their future starter.

4. Rasmus Asplund, C, 22 (Rochester Americans)

Asplund is a bit of a throwback in that he's the kind of player every team used to prefer over the slick, come-and-go playmakers. He's the hard-working, diligent, puck-pressure forward who finishes his checks, endears himself to coaches and plays fast. He's not a pest type, but he's always on the puck, working to win it back and making smart, low-risk plays. That isn't to say there's no talent there, or that he can't make plays through seams. His passing is actually his strength offensively, he does a good job getting the puck to teammates in dangerous areas. But he's not a dynamic offensive threat, nor is his shot particularly dangerous. He's the kind of player who has always had the tools to drive a third line or complement a second line. And though he probably projects closer to that third line role than the second line one, I like his versatility. He goes to the quote-unquote dirty areas (a term I usually hate but fits the bill).

5. Ryan Johnson, LHD, 18 (University of Minnesota)

Johnson was definitely a bit of a reach for my liking at the end of the first round and he hasn't followed it up all that well either. But he has also been asked, on a team filled with lefties, to play his off-side, on a second pairing, as a true freshman. It's not hard to understand why the Sabres liked him. His skating grades at A, if not A-plus, not only forwards as he's escaping pressure to make a pass but backwards in transition as he gaps and side-to-side on light, fluid crossovers and sidesteps. Though he's not the type to hang onto the puck and weave through the neutral zone or attack behind the goal line as a carrier, he can make plays when he has to. I'm not entirely sure what he might look like in the NHL because I don't think there's much power play upside to his game but I do think he has more to offer and will blossom into a dangerous college player over time. He'll have to rely on his mobility to continue to elevate as a defender, driving possession by closing on players quick and moving the puck in transition.

6. Arttu Ruotsalainen, C/LW, 22 (Ilves)

Ruotsalainen could end up being one of those players that makes the Sabres scouting department look really good. And if he doesn't work out, there was little-to-no risk in the decision to sign him in the first place. He has become one of Liiga's most consistently-dangerous players this season. After missing more than a month with an upper-body injury, he has also played the best hockey of his career since returning, with 11 points in his last seven games. The big concern — and the reason he went undrafted in the first place — has always been his size (he's 5-foot-8). But he just keeps producing and he's stronger on his feet than he looks, which is enough to make him intriguing as a potential middle-six creator at the next level. On the year, his 1.03 points per game now leads all under-23 Liiga players, just ahead of Jesse Puljujarvi (0.97).

Note: He's No. 22 in green in the clips below. All of these plays are also from that recent stretch I talked about, rather than hand-picked across his career.

His shot is lethal when he has the time and space to lean into it, which you don't often see in players his size (another indication of that aforementioned strength):

He's also got a nice touch with the puck and a knack for making plays under pressure.

And then there's a skill level that you can't teach ...

His skating does need some work, though. He's quick from a standstill but his top speed is average. That's because his feet splay backwards, rather than out and through his stride, a pretty ineffective mechanic. Watch for it here:

(Smart play defensively there with his stick, too.)

There will also be questions when (or if) he comes over to play in North America as to his position. He still plays centre in Liiga but I wouldn't be surprised in the Sabres view him as a winger.

7. Linus Weissbach, LW/RW, 21 (University of Wisconsin)

Like Ruotsalainen, Weissbach is a 5-foot-8 forward who has always produced but still faces the same, tired questions of size. He dominated SuperElit and then the USHL and now he's in his third year as a standout in college, where he leads the Badgers in assists. His skating is his biggest asset. He can push tempo with the puck, win races without it, dart in and out of traffic, change directions and make a lot of small area plays to his teammates. He lacks the finishing ability of Ruotsalainen but he's more evasive. There's a boom or bust element to his game, if only because of his size and the fact that's he's not much of a scorer, which could limit the kind of role he can play at the pro level.

8. Mattias Samuelsson, LHD, 19 (Western Michigan University)

Samuelsson, like Johnson, is a player I felt the Sabres reached on. I also expected more out of him at the world juniors, too. But as with Johnson, it's not hard to understand why they did. He's huge, he's got a meanness and physicality to his game that is still coveted — even if it's less valuable than it used to be — and he's an adequate skater. All of those things help him cover a lot of ice and force opposing forwards to get rid of pucks instead of trying to go through him. But he also seems stilted when he has the puck and his ability to make plays beyond powering shots through traffic isn't really there. He's not bad with the puck, at least not enough to say "this kid doesn't have the skill to make it" but I do believe he's going to struggle to execute on breakouts and entries once pace of play picks up at the pro level. He may become a fine shutdown player who can kill penalties and give a group of six defencemen a bit of a different element, but I wouldn't expect him to drive possession and he'll probably need a partner he can defer to with short passes.

9. Oskari Laaksonen, RHD, 20 (Ilves)

Laaksonen has made waves in the last couple of years, following up some strong showings with Finland at the under-20 level with a breakout year as a 19-year-old in Liiga. Though he lacks weight on his 6-foot-2 frame (which can show up in man-on-man battles despite a willingness to engage physically), Laaksonen has a lot of interesting qualities. Chief among them is an ability to both identify and execute east-west plays that most defencemen can't:

And while he doesn't have a hard wrist shot, he can blast his slap shot thanks to good technique and follow-through, as well as strong footwork:

Even when the wrist shot isn't falling, he's also not afraid to activate into open space and use it. Watch here the way he pushes through the neutral zone to make himself available for the pass (I spy with my little eye a Ruotsalainen too):

His challenge is that defensively he's just fine — and he needs to bulk up to turn a smooth stride into a powerful one, or hold his own on smaller ice in a more physical style of game. I think there's enough offence in his game to progress to the NHL if the rest can catch up.

10. Matej Pekar, C/LW, 19 (Sudbury Wolves)

For a long time, I thought Pekar projected relatively safely as a potential third-line forward. He can be a pain in the ass, he's got decent speed, he plays a north-south, net-driven style and though he's not a scorer or a

dynamic playmaker he can do a little bit of both — maybe enough to get by at the next level in time. But when he's not engaged he can get lost in games. He was one of the bigger disappointments of the world juniors, a tournament he began on the top line and he only began to produce at the level you'd expect of him in the OHL recently, after a trade from Barrie to Sudbury. So my positive take on him has definitely begun to sour a little.

11. Marcus Davidsson, C, 21 (Växjö Lakers HC)

After two impressive seasons relative to his age and league with Djurgårdens, Davidsson hasn't had the same impact with Växjö this year. He has always been a relied upon defensive player because he anticipates the play well, he tracks the puck aggressively, he's strong on his feet and he's not going to burn his team with a turnover in a bad area of the ice. There's some offence to his game, too, though. He's not the fastest player on the ice but he plays quickly, he's got decent top speed and if — or when — he decides to give Rochester a try I suspect he'll quickly become a contributor who has depth upside at the NHL level. He's not going to be a point producer if he ends up with the Sabres in the next couple of years but I could see him as one piece of a good fourth line.

12. Casey Fitzgerald, RHD, 22 (Rochester Americans)

After a good — though not great — college career, Fitzgerald began his pro career with a lower-body injury. He's having a decent year, all things considered. Fitzgerald's four-way skating ability is always going to make him a fine player at just about any level. His defensive game, which includes a physical element, is also good for a 5-foot-11 defender. Though his offensive game never really took the steps forward some expected after a standout freshman and sophomore year, part of that was also driven by the tougher minutes he was asked to play after he was named BC's captain. I still don't think he's skilled enough to be a top four guy but I could definitely imagine him playing a modern, smooth role as a No. 5-7 at some point in the next couple of years.

13. Jacob Bryson, LHD, 22 (Rochester Americans)

Bryson isn't what you might expect out of a 5-foot-9 defenceman. It's easy to look at his size from afar and think "he's probably dynamic offensively" but "he probably struggles defensively." The reverse is actually true. Bryson has shown yet again in the AHL this year that he can defend at a high level, particularly off the rush (though he's good with his stick along the boards too). He's not going to take over a game offensively, though, or pull you out of your seat with his shot or his hands. He is, however, a smooth skater who can pull away from pressure with his feet, carry it through the neutral zone, walk the blue line laterally or stretch the ice with a pass.

14. Lukas Rousek, RW/LW, 20 (HC Sparta Praha)

Rousek has progressed nicely over the last couple of years, going from a dominant junior player who didn't belong to a dangerous offensive threat in the Czech Republic second division and now to the top tier, where he has continued to prove he can contribute against pros. He's a slight 5-foot-11 winger who slows the game down to make his plays, can execute in transition and does a good job jumping around pressure while hanging onto the puck. He can fade in and out of shifts, though, and I question whether he's talented enough to be more than a PP2 guy. He also hasn't been a particularly dominant player on the international circuit, which gives me pause. He's putting up good numbers in Extraliga for his age but I'd like to see him in North America before I draw any hard conclusions on his upside.

15. Brett Murray, LW, 21 (Rochester Americans)

Murray has followed a weird progression, going from dominant CCHL forward at 17 to good USHL player and bad college player at 18, ineffective college player at 19, a return to predictable dominance in the USHL last year during a gap year move to Miami (one he never made) and he's now, against my better judgment, having a decent rookie season in the AHL. Some of the concerns with his game that played out in college remain evident, though. While he has good touch with the puck for a 6-foot-4 winger, which he was able to show off against weaker competition, he doesn't skate well enough to be able to get to the net and make those plays when the pace is ratcheted up. There may be a fourth-line player in there somewhere but I have my doubts.

Aaron Huglen, RW, 18 (Fargo Force)

After losing his summer to a back injury, Huglen has yet to play a game for the Force this season. He gets a mention because of his skill level, even if there are some lingering unknowns at this point. He was a terror on the Minnesota high school circuit last season, showing off A-level hands and creativity with the puck. Before that, he also did this:

The Tiers

Each of my prospect pool rankings will be broken down into team-specific tiers in order to give you a better sense of the talent proximity from one player to the next (a gap which is sometimes minute and in other cases quite pronounced).

If the Sabres' prospect tiers highlight anything, it's the drop-off after Cozens. As good as Luukkonen and Portillo are, goalies are extremely hard to project and there's major risk there. After that, you've got a couple of little forwards with major skill, a couple of big forwards that lack it and low-upside players like Samuelsson and Asplund who look like they'll be NHLers but likely won't play high in a lineup. A lost season for Huglen doesn't help, either.

A look at which Rochester players could potentially help out in Buffalo during the final months of the season

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

January 27, 2020

We know the Buffalo Sabres are going to need help at some point in the second half of the season. We also know everyone is thirsty for trades to really change things up.

What we are sure of is that trades don't happen as often as some would like. That means casting an eye towards Rochester when it's time to get some help. The Americans have straightened things out with three straight wins after going winless in seven straight. But if the Sabres are going to go on a run that gets them more thoroughly into the playoff discussion, they'll need a helping hand from Rochester.

Let's take a look at which players are in the best position to possibly pitch in with some goals as well as those who can help prevent them.

Forwards

Andrew Oglevie

The speedy forward from Notre Dame has rebounded well after missing much of last season with two separate concussions that allowed him to play just 28 games. He's up to 13 goals (tied for best on the team) and 23 points in 36 games this season. He's scored three of his goals in the past two games and although he recently missed seven games this season, his latest offensive outburst has him back on the path the organization has hoped for after signing him out of college.

Should the scoring continue and his health keep up, Oglevie will very much be on the Sabres' radar for a recall. He'll have the opportunity to make the NHL debut he's been eager to have. He's a righty shot and naturally a center, although he plays on the right wing more often than not. Oglevie has always reminded me a bit of Conor Sheary. Considering Sheary is a UFA this summer and a player who could be moved at some point before the Feb. 24 trade deadline, that similarity could also lead him to take Sheary's place in the lineup if that happens.

C.J. Smith

We're familiar with Smith already from previous call-ups to Buffalo in recent seasons. We know the kind of player he is for the most part as well. When he was with the Sabres for a stint last season, he averaged a bit over 10 minutes of ice time per game and got some time on the penalty kill.

This season in Rochester, he missed over a month due to a lower-body injury in early November. Since returning in December, he's been getting his game back up to speed. Through 31 games, he has eight goals and 18 points, with eight of those points coming on the power play. We know he can fill the net in the AHL (he had 28 goals and 58 points last season) but he's needed more of an opportunity in the NHL (read: not play the fourth line) to generate offense.

But for Smith (and Oglevie), the the AHL affords them the opportunity to get their games going again while still going through the recovery process.

Jean-Sebastien Dea

We got a brief look at Dea earlier this season when injuries kicked in hard in Buffalo, as he provided depth support in the lineup for one game. In Rochester, he's been the solid producer the organization knew they were getting when they signed him to a two-year contract in the offseason.

Dea leads the Americans in scoring with 30 points in 41 games. He's tied with Oglevie for the team lead in goals at 13. He's a center who plays wing, joining Casey Mittelstadt's line on the right side since his arrival in Rochester. It's a good spot to be in while Mittelstadt gets his confidence and his game back, because they log high-leverage minutes to drive offense.

Dea is versatile and if there's one thing Ralph Krueger has proven to be a big fan of, it's the ability to hop around the lines and not lose a step.

Rasmus Asplund

His return to Rochester may not be for long, but if he's needed back in Buffalo there are some improvements to be made. He was scratched for three of his last four games with the Sabres before the bye week and he's very comfortable being a key contributor with the Americans. He'll be back in Buffalo and part of the lineup, but it's possible that might not happen until Evan Rodrigues is dealt elsewhere now that Curtis Lazar has established himself with the Sabres.

Casey Mittelstadt

It's wild that it's been over a month since the 2017 eighth overall pick was sent to Rochester. He's been enjoying his time getting his game together, but the likelihood of him returning to Buffalo this season seems low. It's vital they get Mittelstadt's game to a level where when he gets back to the NHL, it's for good as a point producing playmaker. Getting that time in the AHL is the best place to do it as opposed to playing 11 minutes a game in the NHL in low-leverage situations.

Scott Wilson

We just recently saw Wilson in Buffalo before the bye week and All-Star break. By now we know what he's capable of. He's a solid depth player who can score on occasion and he gets involved in the play. We might see him back in Buffalo very soon, but we know he's on the short list of guys who are ready to go back to the NHL at a moment's notice.

In a more normal world, he's probably in Buffalo full-time as the 13th forward, but when the NHL team is tight against the cap and spending into LTIR with eight defensemen on the roster, well, some guys go to the AHL because cap life is cruel. Wilson will be back, but he's helpful to the developing players in Rochester and productive (15 points in 25 games) when he hasn't been battling injuries.

Remi Elie

Unfortunately for Elie, Phil Housley isn't here anymore to give him a very fair crack at showing what he can do at the NHL level. Elie is who he is and he's a pretty productive AHL player. His season has also been hampered by injury, but he has nine points in 18 games. He's the left wing next to Mittelstadt these days and, like with Dea, it's a great spot to be.

He's a hard worker, he gets up on the forecheck, but he also struggles to score at the NHL level (seven goals in 106 career games). If there's a need or a reason to replace a player like Zemgus Girgensons in the lineup, then Elie's chance to get back to Buffalo would be there. If offense is needed, however, Elie's best chance to provide that remains in Rochester.

Defense

John Gilmour

Gilmour was the darling coming out of training camp, impressing fans and opponents with his speed and knack for driving offense. Things got a bit more difficult when the regular season started. He wound up not seeing a lot of action and played in four games, one of which came at forward. He has 12 points in 26 games in Rochester and he's leaned into his desire to push things offensively, which sometimes makes life defensively a bit trying as he's a team worst minus-10 in plus-minus (I know, I know, it's a bad stat – shush).

All that said, if injuries pop up in Buffalo and trades are (finally) made to clear up the logjam on the blue line, he could be the next man up depending on who stays and who goes. That said, with Lawrence Pilut now in Buffalo, his opening to sneak back into the Sabres' lineup may be closed.

Casey Nelson

Nelson is the most experienced of eligible defensemen who could get the call if things are loosened up in Buffalo, but the right side is still stacked. Nelson has had a good season as a steady defenseman for the Americans with 11 points in 39 games. He does whatever he's asked to do and he's a loyal soldier in that respect. We know he can hold his own a bit in the NHL (52 percent CorsiFor last season – via NaturalStatTrick.com) and that gives some comfort to management should it come down to making a decision on who to recall. But the most likely scenario is he'll be key in trying to help the Americans go far in the Calder Cup playoffs.

William Borgen

The thing about Borgen that makes the possibility we'll see him this season is he provides the muscle and nastiness that's not currently part of the defensive crew. There are puck movers, there are shooters, there are guys that enjoy laying the body — but there's not someone who feeds off laying the big hit the way Borgen does. He leads the Americans in penalty minutes because he's willing to engage physically via fists. We know that part of the game has gone by the wayside, but it's not all Borgen is capable of doing. He can handle himself well in the defensive zone and clear the front of the net. If nothing else, he'd make for a good call-up to provide a change of pace, but you can't stunt his development (read: call him up and not play him) to do it.

Goalies

Jonas Johansson

To say Johansson's AHL All-Star season is a surprise would be downplaying it. His numbers in the organization the first couple seasons weren't stellar either in Rochester or Cincinnati, but he's been a very different player the past two seasons, especially this year. He has a .925 save percentage and has won 13 of 20 games he's played in and seized the starting role with the Americans. For a bit it was believed he was the guy keeping the seat warm until Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen was ready to join Rochester, but now Johansson has supplanted Andrew Hammond as the guy next in line for a recall to Buffalo if injury occurs or Carter Hutton can't snap out of his lengthy funk. If Johansson doesn't get to make his NHL debut at some point this season, it would be stunning.

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen

There's a plan in place for how to get Luukkonen accustomed to play both as a pro and as a guy coming off double-hip surgery. His most recent recall to Rochester was scheduled even though it happened to come at a time when the Americans were in the middle of a losing streak in which both Johansson and Hammond were struggling. That said, Luukkonen was an All-Star in the ECHL this season and his trajectory is very much on the way up. It's very possible we see him get a game in the NHL this season, but he might also be the guy to help the Americans in the Calder Cup playoffs as well.

Goalie Linus Ullmark thriving in new role as Sabres' starter

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 27, 2020

BUFFALO – Goalie Linus Ullmark's second full NHL season has quickly become a blur. The Swede has started 32 of the Sabres' 49 games, putting him on pace to play a career-high 54 times entering Tuesday's contest against the Ottawa Senators.

The loquacious Ullmark, 26, has enjoyed a massive workload since Nov. 19, starting 24 of the last 29 games. During his emergence as the Sabres' No. 1 goalie, he has played more games and minutes – a whopping 1,427 – than any NHL netminder.

"You don't really realize how many games you've played until you actually stop and you have a break," said Ullmark, whose Sabres had a bye last week before the NHL All-Star break. "You realize, 'Oh, shoot, we only have like 30 games left.' But it doesn't feel like you played 50 (team) games, because it feels like the other week we were in Sweden."

The Sabres played in Sweden on November 8 and 9. Back then, Ullmark would start about every third game as Carter Hutton's backup.

But Hutton's struggles – he hasn't won a game since Oct. 22 – have forced the Sabres to rely heavily on Ullmark. Tuesday's game at KeyBank Center will likely be Ullmark's 13th nod in the last 14 contests.

The 6-foot-4, 215-pound Ullmark has often been the Sabres' backbone over the past two months, compiling a 12-10-2 record with a 2.61 goals-against average and a .914 save percentage during his 24-game run. He is 5-2-0 in his last seven starts.

"It seems like every game he's making three to four saves that could be highlight-reel saves," Sabres winger Kyle Okposo said following Monday's practice inside LECOM Harborcenter. "He seems like a goalie who doesn't beat himself. You're going to have to make good plays to beat him."

Overall, Ullmark has compiled a 16-13-3 mark with a 2.70 goals-against average, a .914 save percentage and one shutout this season.

As his role has morphed into perhaps the team's most demanding and pressured-packed, Krueger said affable Ullmark, a unique personality who loves focusing on positives, has remained the same person.

"What we like is nothing has changed in the way he behaves off the ice or away from the games. Nothing," he said. "He's the same guy he was in the summer when I spoke to him. He seems to have a really good balance, which helps as a starter."

"And somebody taking the workload he has, he's managing his game, his life away from the rink really well, because, to tell you the truth, I don't see a difference in him to entry to today."

Krueger, of course, sees a difference in Ullmark during games and practices.

"That's where you want to see it in somebody carrying the load he does," he said. "His personality, he's stayed very upbeat, he's positive, he's a very high-energy guy in our environment of team and he's always looking for solutions, and it shows up in his game."

Ullmark credits the coaches and staff he has worked with throughout his career for letting be himself.

"There hasn't been any need to be anyone else," he said. "You're fine as you are. That's what I appreciate in the organization here, too, that you're allowed to be who you are. There's no need to put up a front or anything."

Four years ago, Ullmark seemed destined to become an NHL starter. After just three appearances as a rookie with the Rochester Americans, the Sabres recalled him.

Ullmark returned to the minors after playing 19 times and developed into one of the AHL's top goalies over the next two and half seasons, occasionally receiving recalls to the Sabres.

In Rochester, he evolved, playing a career-high 55 games in 2016-17. He also worked with Katy Tran Turner, the Sabres' former head of human science, to improve his focus.

Ullmark, for example, used to watch replays of bad goals he allowed during intermissions.

"I just got caught worrying too much about what happened, even though it didn't happen all the time," said Ullmark, who played 37 games last season. "If I had a good game, I wouldn't worry too much. But if I played badly and let in a bad goal, yeah, I wanted to see it right away. I got caught up too much in the past.

"So that was one of the main focuses in the beginning, and then we just kept on working on different things to give myself a little bit of peace and quiet when the stress level around me rises."

Ullmark said Hutton, 24, and goalie coach Mike Bales have been great "role models" for him.

"Just try to keep it even-paced, because they know how fast it goes and how quick your career is over, everything like that," he said. "So enjoy the moment and don't worry too much."

Sabres' Kyle Okposo hit hard by Kobe Bryant's death: 'He was a titan'

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 27, 2020

BUFFALO – Kyle Okposo grew up a rabid basketball fan in the 1990s and said he played the sport “way before” he took up hockey. The Sabres winger still loves talking about the NBA of his youth and its stars.

So the death of 41-year-old basketball legend Kobe Bryant has impacted Okposo. He sounded emotional this afternoon discussing Bryant, who died in helicopter crash Sunday in Los Angeles with his 13-year-old daughter, Gianni, and seven others.

Okposo watched Bryant transform from a rookie out of high school into one of greatest players ever.

“(Michael) Jordan was in his heyday and then Kobe came in, this 18-year-old kid, just this pretty raw talent,” Okposo said inside KeyBank Center. “And all of a sudden, he grows into this extremely special, elite player, and all you heard about was his work ethic and you could see his passion every time he stepped on the court.”

Bryant, who spent his entire 20-year career starring for the Los Angeles Lakers, was a global icon who transitioned into a slew of successful post-basketball ventures following his retirement in 2016, including the Mamba Sports Academy.

“It hit hard yesterday, just because of his impact and his mentality,” Okposo said. “Everybody talks about the Mamba (Bryant’s nickname) mentality, and he had it every day. Just watching him from afar and how competitive he was and how fiery he was, it was amazing to see kind of his whole career and what he did.

“And then to transition to becoming a family and to having four daughters and myself about to have my fourth child in April, it really hit home with him in the crash and passing away with his daughter. Just all the things he was doing for women’s basketball with his daughter and the schools, the businesses, he was just getting started in his life, his life after basketball, after playing.

“To lose somebody like that, he was a larger than life figure. He was a titan, he was a global icon and he will be sorely missed.”

When Okposo learned during a break in Sunday’s practice inside LECOM Harborcenter that Bryant had died, he was stunned.

“It was just like shocking,” he said. “I was like, ‘No, no way.’”

Okposo said he talked to a lot of different people about Bryant on Sunday, including his wife, Danielle.

“My wife and I were sitting on the couch last night (and) it’s like 10 times, ‘I can’t believe he’s gone,’” he said. “Like, my wife knows nothing about basketball, she could care less. But she knew Kobe Bryant and kind of understood the impact he had on especially Los Angeles but on a global scale. So just amazingly sad.”

On Saturday, Lakers superstar LeBron James passed Bryant for third place on the NBA’s all-time scoring list in Philadelphia, Bryant’s hometown.

Okposo said he watched Bryant play in person once in Philadelphia. The New York Islanders happened to be staying at the same hotel as the Lakers, and he ran into Bryant in the elevator.

“I’ll never forget it,” Okposo said. “(I) didn’t say anything to him, but he just had that presence about him. When he was in the same room, you knew.”

Sabres captain Jack Eichel said Bryant’s influence transcended basketball.

“Somebody like myself, he impacted so much and he would never know that,” said Eichel, who called Bryant one of his favorite athletes.

Eichel said he watched the documentary "Kobe Bryant's Muse" when he suffered a high ankle sprain.

"I think you watched how dedicated he was to his craft, it made you want to be better," he said. "Just how inspiring of an athlete he was, I think this is going to take a long time for everyone to kind of move on from. Time's going to be the best healer for people.

"It's just, I don't know if there's been a tragedy quite like this in sports, in my memory."

—

Sabres winger Jeff Skinner, out the last 10 games with an upper-body injury, practiced again today in Harborcenter and will play Tuesday against the Ottawa Senators at KeyBank Center, coach Ralph Krueger said.

Skinner practiced at left wing beside center Marcus Johansson and Michael Frolik.

Head coach Ralph Krueger, Sabres players share thoughts on Kobe Bryant's death

By Adam Unger

WKBW

January 27, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — Kobe Bryant's impact transcends both the sport of basketball and North America. Sunday's news shocked the Buffalo Sabres' locker room.

Head coach Ralph Krueger's family is in Switzerland; the news of the helicopter crash was still as shocking and as ubiquitous in Europe.

"It's front news everywhere, even in a place where basketball isn't as big, like Switzerland," Krueger said. "You can see how much basketball means in countries that people wouldn't believe that it's such a major sport."

Massachusetts native and Sabres captain Jack Eichel had a chance to witness Kobe firsthand in the Lakers-Celtics rivalry throughout his childhood. He always looked up to Bryant.

"Kobe was one of my favorite athletes," Eichel said. "I think the impact he had on athletes across the world, greater than just basketball. Someone like myself he impacted so much. He would never know that."

Bryant, nicknamed the Black Mamba, especially served as inspiration for Eichel when the latter was working back from a sprained ankle. He looked back at Bryant's achilles injury.

"You look at his career, and everything he's accomplished, it was towards the end of the career," Eichel said. "I just look at the way he rehabbed himself, the way that he worked, and the way that he did everything to get himself back to play again," "I thought it was motivational for somebody who's done so much to feel like he had more to prove."

Veteran forward Kyle Okposo shared a story about crossing paths with Kobe Bryant in Philadelphia.

"I saw him play live in Philadelphia once, and I saw him in the elevator. We were staying in the same hotel," Okposo said. "I didn't say anything to him, but he just had that presence about him. If he was in the same room, you knew."

"The world needs examples and the world needs people that an inspire people," Krueger said. "The world lost a big inspiration yesterday."

Sabres play 9 of next 10 games at home

By Stu Boyar

WGRZ

January 27, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. — When the Sabres host Ottawa Tuesday night at the KeyBank Center they are expected to have forward Jeff Skinner back in the lineup.

Skinner has been out since late December when he suffered an upper body injury in a collision with Boston's David Pastrnak.

Nine of the Sabres next 10 games are at home, giving them a golden opportunity to make up some ground in the playoff chase.

"You should never take it for granted to be in front of your own crowd and we will not do it during this stretch," said Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger. "It is an opportunity that we all know will decide which direction this season goes and we need to be an outstanding home team for the next few weeks."

Sabres look to stay positive as second half begins

By Christian Storms

Dunkirk Observer

January 28, 2020

Tonight, the Buffalo Sabres return from their week long break for the 2020 All-Star Weekend in St. Louis and for the first time in a while I am satisfied where the Sabres currently stand headed into the second half of the season.

Usually at this juncture, the Sabres have already played themselves out of a playoff spot and you can tell that there is nothing positive happening with the team. But this year the Kruger coached squad has me feeling different. Now by no means are the Sabres in a perfect spot — sitting 10 points back of Florida for third in the Atlantic Division — but considering the circumstances of this season, Sabres fans have a lot to be happy about.

The top line of Eichel-Olofsson-Reinhart can certainly have the case be made that anyone could coach that line to success with the generational talent Eichel driving it, but the fact of the matter is both Eichel and Reinhart are having career years and Olofsson was having a monster rookie campaign before getting injured.

Ristolainen was notorious for being defensively irresponsible with his laughable career plus/minus of (-141), but under Kruger he is a (+2) which is an unbelievable improvement considering last season he was a (-41). Without completely limiting Ristolainen's time on ice — as he still leads the team with 22:46 oppose to last year's 24:38 — Kruger has somehow gotten the blueliner to figure out many of his defensive issues that made him the subject of trade talks this offseason.

In net, sometimes coaches give players way too long to prove their chance and sometimes a players chance is gone before you can blink, with the Buffalo goaltending controversy I think Kruger waited the right amount of time to make Linus Ullmark the starter.

The biggest knock on Kruger would be the low production of Jeff Skinner who GM Jason Botterill shelled out nine million per year to for his 40 goal campaign last year. The easiest way to fix Skinner's production would be to slot him right back with Jack while Olofsson is injured, but that will cause issues when the rookie returns and I am all for giving the rookie the best chance to succeed and forcing the highly paid guy to figure it out. So what should be done is separate Eichel and Reinhart and put Reinhart with Skinner and Johansson, while Eichel can play with literally anyone from our entire organization top to bottom and still produce because of how talented he is.

If people closely watch they will see that Reinhart is our smartest player, while not being the most talented he is certainly capable of driving his own line as he can slide into any role a line needs whether it's a puck getter, distributor or goalscorer he can do it all and would fit well with Johansson and Skinner.

Skinner will return to the lineup tonight against Ottawa after missing the last 10 games due to an upper body injury sustained against the Bruins on Dec. 27. It won't be surprising if Skinner nets a goal against the lowly Senators to hype Sabres fans up about his return, but he will continue to have a lackluster year if he's not on a good line.

As every coach has them it is obvious Kruger has missed on some things, but the consensus is he's had a good first year, while most of Buffalo's complaints have been directed at Botterill. I understand that Botterill has done things that will make you scratch your head, like overloading our system with NHL ready defensemen that created a controversy that has made people consider Kruger's control of the room because some players (Zach Bogosian) complain about ice time and request trades.

Many people think that if we don't make a strong playoff push then Botterill should be fired. I could not disagree more. If we fire another GM, then we'll have to bring in another one who will likely want their own coach and their own prospects because everyone's vision is different. Everytime we reset the clock with another GM or coach it resets the success clock.

In Botterill's defense, a couple of his prospects are coming along nicely, which should be cheerful for Sabres fans because our roster clearly has some gaping holes in it. The reason we're not a playoff team is because we have one scoring line and the pieces that will change that in the future are Dylan Cozens and Casey Mittelstadt.

Cozens (7th pick, 2019 Draft) turned out to be a bigger piece in Canada's WJC Gold Medal squad, helping them in a big role with nine points in seven games. At Lethbridge in the WHL, Cozens has been on fire with 59 points in 35 games for a league best 1.69 points per game.

Mittelstadt (8th pick, 2017 Draft) has been crossed off many people's list after showing flashes of greatness the year after being drafted. Mittelstadt was rushed into the lineup by a terrible coach in Phil Housley and stayed there when he was clearly struggling. It just seemed like the former Minnesota High School star in Housley wanted the same success from Mittelstadt. Since being sent down to where he belongs in Rochester, Mittelstadt has been adjusting well and is continuing to find more success in transferring that dynamic offensive game we saw at the World Juniors to the pros.

As the year moves along, give patience to the Sabres. We are in the best division in hockey where four teams have legit shots at winning the Cup — Boston, Tampa Bay, Florida and Toronto — so don't get caught up in missing the playoffs just look for the continued growth. And next time you think about firing a GM or coach we'll just be one step closer to officially becoming the Cleveland Browns of the NHL.

Skinner will return to Sabres lineup against Senators

By Heather Engel

NHL.com

January 27, 2020

BUFFALO -- Jeff Skinner will return to the lineup for the Buffalo Sabres when they host the Ottawa Senators at KeyBank Center on Tuesday (7 p.m. ET; NHLN, MSG-B, TSN5, RDS, NHL.TV).

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said Monday that the forward is good to go. Skinner was a full participant at practice Sunday, his first since sustaining an upper-body injury against the Boston Bruins on Dec. 27 that caused him to miss 10 games.

"Jeff looks really, really good today. He felt good," Krueger said Sunday. "Obviously, his first time back in the bigger group after multiple weeks. We have to be patient with the process, but the first reports are that he feels strong and ready to go, so let's hope it continues down this path for the game on Tuesday."

Skinner had been skating on his own for almost two weeks before rejoining the Sabres for their first practice following their League-mandated break prior to the 2020 Honda NHL All-Star Game.

"Any time you get back out there rehabbing, you always start by skating by yourself, so it's always nice to take the step of skating with your teammates," Skinner said. "I felt good. I was the only one that wasn't rusty out there. I felt really good."

Skinner, who skated at left wing with center Marcus Johansson and right wing Michael Frolik on Sunday, has 19 points (11 goals, eight assists) in 39 games this season but had gone 11 games without scoring a goal at the time of his injury.

"I felt like I was playing pretty well," Skinner said. "Obviously, during the season you go through stretches where you feel better than others. I think I felt like I was playing well. I thought our line was sort of clicking a little bit more."

Said Krueger, "There were four, five games at the end where we really felt he was finding his rhythm and the goals were just going to come. That was the final piece that was missing. As a result, the injury at that time was very disappointing because it felt like he was in that space and I think he's had some good time here to observe what the game is that we're playing and need to play. His re-entry will be exciting for us. It gives us more depth in scoring and more offensive punch. We look forward to him just stepping right back in where he left off."

Buffalo (22-20-7), which won three of its final four games before the break, will be looking to make up ground in the Stanley Cup Playoff race, trailing the Carolina Hurricanes by 10 points for the second wild card from the Eastern Conference, and the Florida Panthers by 10 for third place in the Atlantic Division.

However, the Sabres will play nine of their next 10 games at KeyBank Center, where they are 14-6-3 this season.

"We got a good opportunity, I think. It's a big home stretch," Skinner said. "Coming off the break, guys should be refreshed, a little bit more excited coming out of the break here. Hopefully we can get off to a good start here and sort of get some momentum on our side and sort of roll with it."

Sabres see opportunity in long stretch of home games

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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The Buffalo Sabres have 33 games remaining with 10 points separating them from both third place in the Atlantic Division and the second wild card in the Eastern Conference. They play nine of their next 10 games at home, beginning against the Ottawa Senators on Tuesday.

It's a prime opportunity to re-enter the playoff picture. With two practices now under their belt following a week off, Ralph Krueger likes his team's mindset.

"There's going to be some good battles ahead," Krueger said. "This group looks battle ready to be and feels battle ready and you can feel a freshness that's channeled down the right path right now, so may we turn that into some good hockey here."

The Sabres are 14-5-3 at KeyBank Center this season. They made it an early goal to establish their home rink as a difficult place to play, something they feel they've accomplished to date.

"I have to say that what we feel is a real comfort here playing in front of our home crowd and playing in our building," Krueger said. "We made it a goal this year to make it a difficult place to play in and we believe it is that and we need to feed on that and make sure we don't get comfortable being at home, either.

"Sometimes flipflopping between road and home games makes it more fun to be at home. You should never take it for granted to be in front of your home crowd and we will not do it during this stretch. It is an opportunity that we all know will decide which direction this season goes, and we need to jump and be an outstanding home team here for the next few weeks."

Though the upcoming stretch of home games represents a chance to make up ground, the Sabres are aware of the need to improve their road record to remain in contention. Krueger pointed to increases in opponents' levels of play and decreased results on special teams as possible reasons for their 8-14-4 mark away from home.

That said, the coach liked the way his team handled its road contests leading up to the break. They lost, 2-1, in Nashville on Dec. 18, but won in Detroit and Dallas as part of a three-game winning streak.

The outlook moving forward, he said, remains the same as it has been all season: Keep the picture small and focus on the day at hand.

"We're working in very small pictures of development here and we are pushing each other to continue the growth every day and not to do anything other than take care of what we need to take care of," Krueger said.

"We know there's some business ahead, everyone's clear about that. We speak openly about it. But as soon as the path ahead and the challenge of it is clear, we get back to a small picture. That's what we're going to do right now, is keep it small, keep pushing each other to improve, keep cementing the type of hockey we need to play to be competitive and to be a top team in this league. We all knew it wouldn't happen overnight, but we want to fight for that here every day."

Monday's practice

Jeff Skinner skated for the second day in a row and will play against the Senators on Tuesday, Krueger announced. The coach also offered an update on forward Victor Olofsson, who has been out since Jan. 2 with a lower-body injury.

"We still need to give it a couple weeks, probably, but he's progressing in a really good way," he said. "So, every step's been positive, but we're definitely not going to rush the situation."

Here's how the team lined up:

28 Zemgus Girgensons - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart

53 Jeff Skinner - 90 Marcus Johansson - 67 Michael Frolik
43 Conor Sheary - 22 Johan Larsson - 71 Evan Rodrigues
13 Jimmy Vesey - 27 Curtis Lazar - 21 Kyle Okposo

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

35 Linus Ullmark
40 Carter Hutton

Eichel, Okposo were among those inspired by Kobe

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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Kyle Okposo once stepped into a hotel elevator and had an experience he would never forget. Even for a professional athlete, just being in a room with Kobe Bryant was special.

"I didn't say anything to him, but he just had that presence about him," Okposo said inside the Sabres' dressing room Monday. "When he was in the same room, you knew."

Bryant and his 13-year-old daughter, Gianna, were among the nine victims of a helicopter crash that occurred in Calabasas, Calif. on Sunday. Like Kobe himself, the news transcended basketball. The soccer star, Neymar, dedicated a goal in his honor. Chants of his name were heard at the NFL's Pro Bowl. In Montreal, a somber Alex Ovechkin reflected on their interactions.

Count members of the Sabres among those who found inspiration in Bryant's life and grief in his passing. Jack Eichel wrote in an open letter following his recovery from a high-ankle sprain in 2016 about the motivation he felt watching the documentary *Muse*, which detailed Bryant's comeback from a ruptured Achilles' tendon at age 34.

The Sabres captain found himself revisiting that inspiration after practice on Monday.

"It's obviously kind of on the back end of his career and I just look at the way that he rehabbed himself, the way that he worked, the way that he did everything to get himself back to play again and even though their team wasn't great, I thought it was motivational for somebody who's done so much just to feel like he had more to prove and he had so much more to give," Eichel said.

"... The impact he had on athletes across the world [were] greater than just basketball. Somebody like myself, he impacted so much and he would never know that."

While Eichel was home resting from his appearance at All-Star Weekend when he heard the news, Okposo and his teammates were between practice sessions at Harborcenter. Okposo describes himself as an avid basketball fan. With another child due in April, he, like Bryant, will soon be a father of four.

"It hit hard yesterday, just because of his impact and his mentality," Okposo said. "Everybody talks about the Mamba mentality and he had it every day. Just watching him from afar and how competitive he was and how fiery he was, it was amazing to see kind of his whole career and what he did. And then to transition to becoming a family and to having four daughters and myself about to have my fourth child in April, it really hit home with him in the crash and passing away with his daughter.

"Just all the things he was doing for women's basketball with his daughter and the schools, the businesses, he was just getting started in his life, his life after basketball, after playing. To lose somebody like that, he was a larger than life figure. He was a titan, he was a global icon, and he will be sorely missed."

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said Bryant's passing was front-page news even in Switzerland, where much of his family is now.

"I don't watch television at all, and I did last night," Krueger said. "I love the world-class athletes and I get goosebumps thinking about the amount of amazing athletic performances I saw from Kobe and then if you look at how he was working at his next stage of life, I think that's being spoken about a lot because it is a tough step for a superstar like that.

"It's just extremely tragic to have a life cut so short from somebody who had the opportunity to inspire so many people, and that's gone. That's gone forever, nobody can take that space, and I always find that tragic because the world needs good leaders, the world needs good examples, and the world needs people that can inspire other people. The world lost a big inspiration yesterday with Kobe going."

Eichel spoke poignantly as he attempted to sort through the tragedy.

"The bigger message through everything that happened is how fragile and precious life is," Eichel said. "You can't take a day for granted. I think it was just a really big eyeopener for so many people. You would never expect something like that to happen, but I think when it does it puts a lot of things in perspective.

"We complain and we worry about so many different things in our lives, but at the end of the day we've been given this precious gift of life and it's so important to just enjoy it every day and make the most of it because something like that happens, that's real life, that's not wins and losses and standings and points. That's somebody who, he was a father and a husband, a friend, a family [member]. I think that puts a lot of things in perspective. We're living this life and at the end of the day, you never know when it's going to go for you. Somebody like Kobe, who is a worldwide figure for so much more than just basketball, his life was cut short and so was his daughter's. It's a terrible tragedy."