



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres look to correct struggles away from KeyBank Center

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 8, 2020

During a team meeting last week to begin the schedule's second half, coach Ralph Krueger summarized to the Sabres what they accomplished over the first 41 games and emphasized the opportunity that lies ahead.

A playoff run could hinge on the Sabres addressing their struggles away from KeyBank Center. They have gone 2-10-3 in their last 15 away games and entered Wednesday with the NHL's fifth-worst road record.

Four of the Sabres' final six games before the All-Star break are on the road, beginning Thursday night in Enterprise Center against the defending Stanley Cup champion St. Louis Blues. Krueger explained following practice Wednesday that missed opportunities are to blame for the Sabres' road woes.

"We've been in games without taking opportunity early," he said. "I think we've had excellent starts on the road this season and just haven't been able to finish on some of those early chances. Just being hungrier, even that much hungrier on the road where you're not going to get any help from the energy in the building or being at home. You need to be able to just do that little bit extra where it comes to grip on the offensive side. ...

"It's our offense that's gone quite a bit more flat than here at home. That's, for me, the biggest opportunity we have is early chances, get some leads, learn to play with those leads on the road and just get a little bit grittier around the offensive game."

Entering Wednesday, the Sabres' penalty kill on the road ranked 30th in the NHL, compared to 13th at home. Their shortcomings away from Buffalo also include a negative-24 goal differential and the fifth-most goals per game against.

The Sabres have scored only 14 first-period goals, compared to 24 goals against in 22 road games. Comparatively, they entered Wednesday with the league's 10th-best home record and own a plus-16 goal differential inside KeyBank Center.

There have been some signs of progress on the road. The Sabres rallied from a pair of two-goal deficits to earn a point in a 6-5 overtime loss at Vancouver on Dec. 7, and Jack Eichel scored with 1:46 remaining in regulation to force overtime in a 3-2 loss to the Islanders Dec. 14 on Long Island.

The Sabres also mounted a rally that fell short in a 3-2 loss at Boston on Dec. 29. However, they need to gain ground in the Atlantic Division with the Tampa Bay Lightning and Toronto Maple Leafs surging. Buffalo (19-17-7) entered Wednesday six points out of a playoff spot and are without Jeff Skinner and Victor Olofsson.

The Blues (27-10-7), meanwhile, are first in the Central Division, seven points ahead of the Colorado Avalanche, and entered Wednesday with the third-best home record in the NHL. They're 9-2-1 in their last 13 games, including an eight-game win streak that ended Dec. 31.

"Every time we've spoken lately, I feel like we've played some really good games," Marcus Johansson said of the Sabres' play on the road. "We just haven't gotten the results. That's obviously the main thing when you're playing hockey, but if we keep playing like that, we're definitely going to get a lot more wins coming up here."

Eichel, Okposo return

Eichel and winger Kyle Okposo, both of whom missed practice Tuesday for "maintenance," skated with the Sabres on Wednesday and are set to play Thursday night against St. Louis. Eichel and Okposo were injured by high sticks during the Sabres' 3-2 win over the Florida Panthers on Saturday.

Power-play adjustments

Lawrence Pilut is unlikely to have a role on the Sabres' power play if he makes his season debut Thursday in St. Louis. The 24-year-old defenseman practiced with the team's penalty-killing unit Wednesday, and Krueger did not make any personnel changes on the power play.

Defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen remained as the net-front presence on the first unit with Olofsson out of the lineup. The Sabres broke an 0-for-16 power-play slump last Saturday against Florida. The top unit also included Eichel, Sam Reinhart, Marcus Johansson and Rasmus Dahlin.

"He has his own offensive style," Krueger said Saturday of using Ristolainen in front of the net. "It's one of force and one of power, which is sometimes undervalued. In the National Hockey League today, it's excellent to have a player with that personality as a contrast, let's say, to Rasmus Dahlin, who does it more on the technical side. Risto has good technique in those battle situations, which we need to create more of."

Pekar traded

Sabres prospect Matej Pekar, a 19-year-old forward, was traded Wednesday by the Ontario Hockey League's Barrie Colts to the Sudbury Wolves in exchange for five draft picks.

Pekar, who was a fourth round draft pick of the Sabres in 2018, had 16 goals among 29 points in 26 games for Barrie this season. Most recently, he represented Czech Republic at the IIHF World Junior Championship, where he had one assist in five games.

Michael Frolik joins Sabres following chaotic journey from Calgary

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 8, 2020

With the seats in KeyBank Center empty and most of his new Buffalo Sabres teammates enjoying a night off, Michael Frolik skated on his new home ice for the first time Tuesday at approximately 8:30 p.m.

The solo skate culminated a chaotic day in which Frolik awoke at 6:30 a.m., visited the U.S. Consulate General in Toronto twice to acquire his work visa and traveled south through rush-hour traffic on Queen Elizabeth Way.

"I'm really excited to be here," Frolik, a native of Czech Republic, beamed following his first Sabres practice Wednesday. The 31-year-old winger smiled and exhaled before recalling the six-day saga that began last Thursday with his trade from the Calgary Flames to Buffalo.

Frolik could not join the team until he received his work visa, a process that typically takes four business days. Now he can embark on what he called a "fresh start," and the Sabres are using every resource to prepare Frolik to make his debut Thursday night in St. Louis against the defending Stanley Cup champion Blues.

"He didn't get in here until last night, so the important thing when you integrate somebody like that is you want him, like everybody else, to actually just play free and play naturally within the principles," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "So, we have to be patient on him automating those principles and we're not going to overload him here. He has such a good instinct and you could see his speed already today. His defensive decision-making is strong and we feel he's going to slide into the way we want to play quickly."

The Sabres' equipment staff prepared Frolik's dressing room stall hours before he arrived in Buffalo. Upon arriving to work Wednesday morning, he and the coaching staff went over the basics of Krueger's offensive, defensive and penalty-kill systems.

Frolik then practiced on a forward line with Conor Sheary and Marcus Johansson, a 29-year-old alternate captain with 624 regular-season games of NHL experience. The thinking was Johansson could be a resource for Frolik as the latter grows accustomed to playing on a new team in a different conference.

The two veterans spoke about the Sabres' on-ice systems throughout practice Wednesday. Additionally, Frolik practiced on the penalty kill, an area in which he's expected to make an immediate contribution. At the time of his trade from Calgary, only one other Flames forward logged more ice time on the penalty kill than Frolik since he joined the team at the start of the 2015-16 season. The Sabres' penalty kill ranked 28th in the league entering Wednesday.

Following practice, Frolik tried on his other equipment, including a white Sabres helmet, and he planned to meet with the coaching staff during the flight to St. Louis. Krueger wanted to show Frolik a few video clips and planned to continue the conversations into Thursday, when the Sabres are expected to hold a morning meeting in Enterprise Center.

"Yeah, just talking about the systems and stuff like that," Johansson said of his conversations with Frolik. "I felt like we had some good chemistry out there already today. I'm not too worried about that. I'm just trying to get him to understand what we're doing. It's not too hard, but as a new guy, there's always a lot of stuff you're trying to take in. Just small stuff you want to help out with to make it a little easier."

The timing of the trade forced Frolik to cold call a local rink in Calgary to set up ice time over the weekend, and the Sabres assisted him in the extensive process of acquiring a visa. He used his solo skate Tuesday night in KeyBank Center to shake off any remaining rust from not having played in a game since Dec. 31.

This is potentially a crossroads in Frolik's career. He had five goals among 10 points while averaging a career-low 11:56 in 38 games with the Flames this season. A pending unrestricted free agent, Frolik welcomed a trade with the hope he could have a more prominent role in Buffalo. He has played in 831 regular-season games during his 12-year NHL career and won a Stanley Cup with the Chicago Blackhawks in 2012-13.

In addition to his relentless play on the ice, the Sabres want Frolik to inject his leadership and wisdom into the dressing room. Frolik is the second-oldest player on the roster behind goalie Carter Hutton and has 47 games of playoff experience.

"Just watching practice today, he was flying out there and you can see he went for a little skate last night here with nobody around so he could warm up the blades," Krueger said. "But he's definitely hungry and extremely engaging. He's everything that the information on him was as far as his off-ice presence and his confidence, and his personality fits into our group really well right off the hop. But we definitely sense a passion for this challenge and a hunger to want to be here."

The former 10th overall draft pick began his career as an offensive-minded forward and scored 21 goals in each of his first two seasons with the Florida Panthers. However, Frolik evolved into a defensive force upon joining the Blackhawks in 2010. He brought both elements to Winnipeg and Calgary.

At the time of the trade, the Flames' 54.79% 5-on-5 shot differential with Frolik on the ice since his arrival in 2015 was the second-best mark among any of the team's forwards during that span. He also scored 34 goals during his two seasons in Winnipeg from 2013-15.

Frolik wants to prove he can still be the top-six forward he was during most of his time in Calgary, and he'll have that opportunity following his chaotic journey to Buffalo.

"Hopefully we're going to have a good start here, for me as well, and I feel like this a reset button a little bit for me and a fresh start," Frolik said. "It obviously didn't work out in Calgary at the end, but I had a great few years here and looking for more here in Buffalo."

When Jeff Skinner returns, he should return to Sabres' top line with Jack Eichel

By Travis Yost

The Buffalo News

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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.

A year ago, Jeff Skinner was in the midst of a career season – a 40-goal, 23-assist performance that was the impetus for an eight-year, \$72-million dollar contract extension for a Sabres team in dire need of a high-end scoring winger.

Year 1 of Skinner's new deal hasn't exactly gone to plan, notwithstanding that he is currently sidelined three to four weeks with an upper body injury suffered Dec. 27. At the halfway mark of the regular season, Skinner is pacing for a 23-goal and 17-assist season. That's very different from last season's output, and increasingly a concern for a Sabres team that heavily invested in the 27-year-old last summer.

But we have seen this story a couple of times before from Skinner, most notably during his final season with the Carolina Hurricanes. What was billed as a disappointing season – one that surely soured Carolina's front office, and perhaps some bidders around the league – was a lot more about the struggles of Skinner's teammates than the struggles of Skinner individually. The bet at the time was that an increase in quality of teammates, be it in Carolina or another hockey city, would spark Skinner's production again.

That's what happened during the 2018-19 campaign with the Sabres. Skinner went on a shooting percentage bender, but a lot of that was borne from significant offensive zone time and teammates who could get their best weapon the puck. Skinner played about 75% of his 5-on-5 time with Jack Eichel, and 54% of his 5-on-5 time with Sam Reinhart.

A new coaching regime has ushered in a new era of deployment this season – Skinner was the trigger man on an elite line last year, he's now anchoring a middle-six line regularly featuring Marcus Johansson, Conor Sheary and Vladimir Sobotka.

Qualitatively, it is not hard to see how and why Skinner's point production might be down. But consider just what type of offensive burden Skinner carries on such an offensively challenged line. At 5-on-5, he is uniquely responsible for a significant piece of the offense. In other words: If he's not scoring, no one is.

Think about this: At 5-on-5 during the 2019-20 season, Skinner is responsible for just more than 30% of the team's offense. That means Skinner's four teammates – regardless of which teammates they have been over the course of the season – combine for the other 69%. That is a substantial burden, and not one shared by the other Sabres forwards. Eichel (23%), Reinhart (21%), and Olofsson (19%) are not surprisingly much closer to the league average (21%).

What happens when players see such limited help around them? Their points tend to drop, unless their teammates have a rash of puck luck. Skinner's 11 goals seem paltry, but remember that those 11 goals are equivalent to the same number of goals all his teammates have scored in substantially more minutes. Even looking at other top-six skaters around the league, it's hard to find a comparison for Skinner here:

We know Skinner is limited with the weapons around him, directly softening his assist totals and indirectly softening his goal totals. But weak teammate play at 5-on-5 wouldn't unilaterally explain such a drop in his goal-scoring, specifically.

There is a secondary issue at play, and it's the fact that Skinner's been stuck on zero on the power play in more than 114 minutes. Last season, Skinner had eight power-play goals (or, 1.9 per 60 minutes of play). But Skinner isn't alone in his power-play struggles – almost every Sabres attacker is down in production on the power play year over year, and it's increasingly an area of concern for head coach Ralph Krueger. (Buffalo's power play last

season finished 18th in scoring and 16th in expected goal-scoring; entering Tuesday night's games, it is 23rd in scoring and 29th in expected goal-scoring, which has been nothing short of a disaster.)

The conclusion? I will let Buffalo's video teams and coaching staff further dissect the problematic power play, but the solution at 5-on-5 is clear. Buffalo needs to abandon any notion that they have the supporting talent to blend Skinner into a middle-six role. The team is hurting, and sacrificing another skilled player for the sake of balancing lines just hasn't worked.

Krueger: We need more scoring 'by committee'

WGR 550

January 8, 2020

We are past the halfway point of the 2019-20 season and the Buffalo Sabres currently find themselves on the outside looking in on a playoff spot in the Eastern Conference standings.

Buffalo currently has a 19-17-7 record through 43 games this season with 45 points, which puts the Sabres in fifth place in the Atlantic Division. The Sabres currently sit eight points out of a top-three spot in the division, behind the Toronto Maple Leafs, who have 53 points. In the Wild Card picture, the Sabres are five points back of the final spot that's currently being occupied by the Philadelphia Flyers.

Where the Sabres have succeeded a majority of the season is while playing at KeyBank Center, where the team is 13-4-3 in 20 games in front of the home crowd. One of the home games counting on their schedule was played in Stockholm, Sweden as part of the NHL Global Series in November.

However, Buffalo has struggled away from home this season with a 6-11-4 record, which is one of the worst road records in the NHL to date.

The Sabres will have a tough test on Thursday night as the team will head out on the road to take on the defending Stanley Cup champion St. Louis Blues at the Enterprise Center in St. Louis, Missouri. The Blues find themselves as the top team in the Western Conference with a 27-10-7 record and 61 points.

The good news for the Sabres is that they already have one win this season over the Blues back on Dec. 10 when Buffalo skated out to a 5-2 win at KeyBank Center. Buffalo get two goals from captain Jack Eichel, while also getting contribution from Sam Reinhart, Johan Larsson and Zemgus Girgensons.

After the Blues, Buffalo's schedule strength of opponent will lighten up a bit with a home matchup against the Vancouver Canucks (23-16-4) on Saturday, followed by a road meeting with the Detroit Red Wings (11-30-3) on Sunday.

If the Sabres are to seriously get in contention for a playoff spot come March or April, a few wins this week will help Buffalo's cause greatly.

Not to mention, the team has fought its way to two wins to kick off the 2020 calendar year over the Edmonton Oilers last Thursday and the Florida Panthers this past Saturday afternoon.

Buffalo Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger joined Howard Simon and Jeremy White on Wednesday morning for his weekly appearance on WGR. Krueger took the time to talk about the call up of defenseman Lawrence Pilut, the expectations of newly acquired forward Michael Frolik, and more.

Frolik practices for the first time with the Sabres

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 8, 2020

Buffalo N.Y. (WGR 550) - Things weren't easy for Michael Frolik after he found out he got traded to Buffalo last Thursday. Being from the Czech Republic and working in Canada, Frolik had to get a visa to work in the United States. He said he's glad it's finally over, "It took a couple of days and over the weekend didn't help, so it's been a busy few days, but I'm really excited to be here and it seems like the group is a great group of guys."

Frolik traveled to Toronto to take care of the work visa. Early Tuesday morning, he had to go to the embassy and he finally left with a work visa at 4:30 p.m. He said with traffic, he didn't arrive in Buffalo until 7:30 p.m. and then he laced up the skates and took a few laps on the arena ice.

Frolik has played in Chicago, Winnipeg, Florida and Calgary. He really wanted this trade and will have no trouble handling it, "The first trade is always hardest one, but this is my fifth team. I know what to expect and it was a very nice welcome here."

Ralph Krueger wanted to make sure Frolik got a practice in before he played a game. Frolik isn't too worried about fitting it, "You get one practice and straight to the games, so hopeful we have a big game and come home with a big win."

Krueger said Frolik will be in the lineup, but he's not going to throw too much at him, "The important thing is you want him to play free and play naturally within the principles. We have to be patient on him automating those principles and we're not going to overload him here. He has such a good instinct, and you see his speed and his defensive decision making is strong. We feel he's going to slide into the way we play quickly, so you don't overload him."

Frolik skated twice in Calgary before arriving in Buffalo. He skated at 8:30 p.m. Tuesday night before Wednesday's practice.

Frolik has played with a few of the Sabres. He said, "I know Bogo [Zach Bogosian]. He was with me in Winnipeg, so I know him pretty good. I was with Laser [Curtis Lazar] in Calgary and Huts [Carter Hutton], he was in Chicago. It's always a little easier when you have a guy here that you can ask some questions and some names."

In practice on Wednesday, Frolik was on the left wing with Marcus Johansson and Conor Sheary. Frolik is happy to try to get a chemistry with those two, "Being in the West a long time, I didn't see those guys that much, but I know Johansson is a skilled player and he's a really smart centerman and that's what I need - a good playmaker in the middle."

Frolik will jump right into the penalty killing units on Thursday. It's something he's done his whole career, "Things are pretty similar and we'll talk about it a little bit on the ride in the plane, you know, what the structure is, but I doubt there's going to be anything I haven't seen before. It's pretty standard."

Wednesday's Lines:

Asplund - Eichel - Reinhart
Frolik - Johansson - Sheary
Vesey - Lazar - Wilson (Rodrigues)
Girgensons - Larsson - Okposo

Pilut - Ristolainen
Dahlin - Miller
Montour - Jokiharju
Bogosian

Sabres newcomer Michael Frolik arrives in Buffalo ready for new opportunity

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 8, 2020

BUFFALO – Michael Frolik's whirlwind Tuesday started around 6:30 a.m. in Toronto. After waking up, the Sabres newcomer headed to the U.S. Embassy.

Around 3 or 4 p.m., Frolik picked up his visa – he said it was approved in just one day – and left for Buffalo. But traffic added nearly an hour to the drive, so the Czech arrived around 7:30 p.m.

Five days after the Sabres acquired Frolik from the Calgary Flames for a fourth-round draft pick, he had finally made it to Buffalo. Still, his day wasn't over.

As Frolik waited in Calgary, he only skated twice at a local rink. So he wanted to get back on the ice in Buffalo right away.

At 8:30 p.m., Frolik enjoyed a solo skate at KeyBank Center.

"It was a little skate, I need to feel the legs a little bit," Frolik said following today's practice.

While the affable Frolik, 31, has only skated once with his new teammates, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said he will "definitely" play in Thursday's road game against the St. Louis Blues.

Frolik practiced at left wing today beside center Marcus Johansson and Conor Sheary. The veteran also took reps killing penalties.

"He was flying out there and you can see he went for a little skate last night here with nobody around so he could warm up the blades," Krueger said. "But he's definitely hungry and extremely engaging. He's everything that the information on him was as far as his off-ice presence. His confidence and his personality fits into our group really well right off the hop.

"But we definitely sense a passion for this challenge and a hunger to want to be here."

Frolik has endured a tough season. After spending most of his career with the Flames skating on the second line, his minutes dropped. He was even a healthy scratch.

The Sabres offer Frolik, a veteran of 831 NHL games, a fresh start.

Krueger said he wants Frolik to "just play free and play naturally within the principles."

"We have to be patient on him automating those principles and we're not going to overload him here," Krueger said. "He has such a good instinct and you could see his speed already today. His defensive decision making is strong and we feel he's going to slide into the way we want to play quickly."

Krueger said the Sabres plan to show Frolik some video clips on the flight to St. Louis and give him more information Thursday "on a need-to-know basis."

"If he's lost, playing with Marcus is going to help a lot," Krueger said. "He's a good sidekick for him here early on to support him in the process. But let's let Michael play, let's bring his strengths into the game and be patient, of course, with the process."

Frolik, who won the Stanley Cup with the Chicago Blackhawks in 2013, has evolved over his 12 NHL seasons.

In his early years with the Florida Panthers, he often scored around 20 goals.

"When I got to Chicago, there was a lot of offense there, so I got to switch roles a little bit to have more (ice time) and learn the PK and shut down the other lines and play more defensive," Frolik said.

Frolik has compiled five goals, 10 points and a minus-10 rating while averaging a career-low 11 minutes 56 seconds of ice time over 38 games this season. The Flames regularly utilized him as a penalty killer.

"I had a great few years there," he said. "I'm looking for more here in Buffalo."

Lawrence Pilut could have opportunity to stick with Sabres

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 8, 2020

BUFFALO – Before the Sabres departed for Sweden in early November, they recalled defenseman Lawrence Pilut from the Rochester Americans for some insurance.

While Pilut, 24, did not play overseas, he practiced, giving Sabres coach Ralph Krueger an opportunity to watch the slick prospect up close for the first time.

Despite missing all of training camp as he recovered from offseason shoulder surgery, Pilut, who was recalled Tuesday, had made a positive early impression on Krueger.

The Swede, of course, was still around the team – “He left a really good mark in the way he was as a person,” Krueger said – he just couldn’t practice.

So spending a week around the 5-foot-11, 194-pound Pilut in Sweden allowed Krueger to learn more about the youngster’s on-ice talents.

“I was able to see firsthand what he’s capable of and where his abilities are,” Krueger said following Tuesday’s practice inside KeyBank Center. “So the first part was the person, second part was the hockey player.”

The Sabres summoned Pilut because an upper-body injury will sideline defenseman Jake McCabe for Thursday’s road game against the St. Louis Blues.

Pilut, one of the Sabres’ top prospects, was expected to earn a trip to Buffalo sooner or later.

“He’s gone down and played really, really well,” Krueger said. “We’re getting good reports back to us.”

Pilut played 33 NHL games as a rookie last season. Following a standout campaign with the Amerks in 2018-19, he has ranked among the AHL’s most dynamic defensemen again, scoring five goals and 21 points in 29 games.

He just earned his second straight selection to the AHL All-Star Classic.

“He’s got that foot speed and the hunger to close gaps and to play aggressively all over the ice while adding a really good first pass,” Krueger said. “He adds nicely to the offense.”

But Pilut said he started slowly after making his season debut Oct. 18.

“It took a couple games to just find the flow again,” he said. “Once you find it just never let go of it.”

He added: “I’ve been getting into my game and getting into my groove more and more. Lately I’ve been playing a pretty good game.”

He dazzled and played one of his best games Dec. 27, a rousing 4-3 victory against the Belleville Senators. After tying the contest late, he set up winger Taylor Leier’s game-winning goal with two seconds left in the third period.

Pilut’s 15 assists rank second on the Amerks. His point total trails only center Jean-Sebastien Dea. He has recorded three goals and eight points in his last nine outings.

After five seasons in the Swedish Hockey League – he was named the circuit’s top defenseman two years ago – Pilut quickly morphed into an AHL star last year, compiling a whopping 22 points in his first 15 games.

By early December 2018, he had forced the Sabres to give him a look. His impact, however, was minimal, and they sent him down in late February.

Pilut said the NHL taught him he must "keep being fresh."

"Make sure you come out with a lot of energy, just keep that mind fresh all the time, that's a big thing," he said. "I think that's what I worked on a lot. I think I'm ready for that."

Pilut, who practiced beside Brandon Montour on Tuesday, said his consistency has grown this season.

"(I'm) trying to play at a high level all the time and just try to focus on my D-zone play all the time," he said. "I think that's been a big part of me so far. I think I can just keep going on that and keep developing also the offensive skill I have."

Pilut will need to utilize his array of skills against the powerhouse Blues, the defending Stanley Cup champion.

"It would be really exciting," he said of facing the Blues. "I feel like I'll be ready when the opportunity's there."

An opportunity could materialize soon. The Sabres have had a crowded blue line all season. But trading Marco Scandella to the Montreal Canadiens on Thursday might've created a new spot.

If Pilut performs well, he could stick around.

Frolik excited to contribute as newest Buffalo Sabre

By Jenna Callari

WKBW

January 8, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — Nearly a week after acquiring him in a trade, Michael Frolik finally hit the ice as the newest member of the Buffalo Sabres.

"It's been a busy few days but I'm really excited to be here," Frolik said. "It seems like the group is a great group of guys and I'm glad I'm here."

Visa issues stalled Frolik for a few days but he was able to join the team Wednesday morning in his first official practice with his new teammates. He came into Buffalo Tuesday night and found some time to hit the ice and get back in the swing of things.

"It was just a quick skate, thirty minutes or so," Frolik said. "I needed to feel the ice a little bit before I jumped into it."

Frolik had played with the Calgary Flames since the 2015-2016 season. He appeared in 319 games with the Flames, scoring 63 goals and adding 82 assists. He hasn't had the best year offensively with just five goals under his belt, but he has contributed heavily when it comes to the penalty kill.

"He'll definitely be seeing some penalty killing time tomorrow," Krueger said. "It's one of the areas where we expect him to help our group and he'll be seeing some penalty killing time right off the bat."

During Wednesday's practice, Frolik primarily skated on a line with Marcus Johansson and Conor Sheary. Both players afterward saw really good things from the newcomer.

"He's an experienced guy, a penalty kill type guy," Sheary said. "I think he brings some good to our lineup and our line and I'm excited."

"I felt like we had some good chemistry out there already today and I'm not too worried about that," Johansson said. "We're just trying to get him to understand what we were doing and it wasn't too hard."

Frolik is expected to get some quality ice time with a number of key injuries to various Sabres players. Forwards Victor Olofsson and Jeff Skinner are currently out with prolonged injuries while defenseman Jake McCabe is day-to-day with an upper-body injury. Lawrence Pilut was recalled from the Rochester Americans yesterday afternoon.

The Sabres will be back in action on Thursday night when the team takes on the St. Louis Blues.

Michael Frolik excited about fresh start with Sabres

By Heather A. Prusak

WGRZ

January 8, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. — After things "didn't work out" in Calgary, forward Michael Frolik is excited about a fresh start as he joined the Sabres for his first practice with his new team on Wednesday after a whirlwind 24 hours.

"It was a long day yesterday. I had to wake up at like 6:30, go to the Embassy and have the visa there, then waited a little bit at the hotel, then picked it up around three or four and then had to drive here [from Toronto]. And with the traffic, it took almost three hours. I got here around 7:30 I think, and I skated at 8:30. It was just a quick skate, but I needed to feel the ice a little bit," Michael Frolik said after practice on Wednesday.

Even after all of that, he still wanted to get on the ice before his first official practice.

Last week, Sabres acquired Frolik from Calgary for a fourth-round draft pick in 2020 that they got from Montreal by trading defenseman Marco Scandella earlier that day.

The veteran forward brings experience and will hopefully provide a spark in the room and on the ice.

"Whenever you add something or you change something it adds a little bit of a spark. You could see it out there it looked like he was having fun and that kind of spreads around the team as well," Sabres center Marcus Johansson said.

Frolik skated alongside Johansson and Conor Sheary at practice on Wednesday. Head coach Ralph Krueger said Frolik will be in the lineup on Thursday for their next game in St. Louis. Krueger also said another big way they're expecting him to contribute is on the penalty kill that needs some help.

The Sabres penalty kill ranks 28th in the league at just 74%. The only teams with a worse penalty kill are Nashville, Detroit and Winnipeg. San Jose leads the NHL with an 88.5% penalty kill.

In these back-to-back wins the Sabres have against Florida and Edmonton, they haven't given up a power play goal, but they ended December giving power play goals in three straight games with 2 against the Lightning and Bruins and another one in Boston.

This is Frolik's fifth NHL team after spending time with Calgary, Winnipeg, Chicago and Florida. The Panthers drafted him 10th overall in 2006 and he won the Stanley Cup with the Blackhawks in 2013.

Frolik Joins Sabres on Ice for First Time

By Greg Vorse

Spectrum News

January 8, 2020

It took four days to get his work visa straightened out, but the newest Sabre, forward Michael Frolik, was finally on the ice Wednesday.

"It's been a busy few days, but I am very excited to be here. Seems like a great group of guys. It was a little bit of a wait, but I am glad I'm here," said Frolik.

The winger who came over from Calgary for a fourth round pick was skating on the left wing of Marcus Johansson and Conor Sheary to the right.

"Johansson, he's a skilled player. He is a really smart centerman. For me as a winger that is what you need, is a good playmaker in the middle and that is what he is. Hopefully it will click sooner than later," said Frolik.

"Really good hockey player. It was fun to be out there. He's quick, he's smart, so I'm looking forward to it," said Johansson.

"Just from watching him in the past he is an experienced guy. He's a responsible, penalty kill-type guy. I think he brings some grit to our lineup and our line so I'm excited," said Sheary.

Frolik isn't having his best year statistically speaking, just five goals for 10 points in 38 games with the Flames. But that's not where the Sabres are looking for immediate dividends: they want that on the penalty kill.

"It's one of the areas where we expect him to help our group. Yeah, he'll be seeing some penalty killing time right off the hop," said head coach Ralph Krueger.

Krueger and his staff also don't want to put too much on his plate at first.

"We feel he's going to slide into the way we wanna play quickly, but you don't overload him. We'll do a few clips on the plane now and continue the conversation, and then tomorrow you do more on a need to know basis," said Krueger.

A couple other notes: Jack Eichel and Kyle Okposo were back after maintenance days, and Lawrence Pilut was skating with Rasmus Ristolainen. The Sabres will be back on the ice tomorrow when they visit St. Louis to face the Blues.

Midseason fixes for NHL teams in the playoff hunt

By Dimitri Filipovic

ESPN

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each team having passed the 41-game mark, we've reached the midseason point of the 2019-20 NHL season. While most clubs typically treat the trade deadline as the key point on the schedule for self-reflection and tough personnel decisions, some teams can't afford to wait until then.

Given how tightly packed the standings are thanks to the number of loser points being handed out on a nightly basis, there's an opportunity cost in procrastinating until the Feb. 24 deadline. Each passing day makes it that much more difficult to gain ground in the standings, meaning even more value for shrewd general managers who are proactive when it comes to identifying and addressing their team's current flaws.

Let's help out a handful of these teams with some recommendations on how best to proceed in the short term to generate an impact down the stretch. But we'll begin by breaking down a team that has already seen that kind of impact thanks to an in-season coaching change.

How the Maple Leafs got their swagger back

The turnaround that the Toronto Maple Leafs have made since making a difficult, yet necessary, change of their own is living proof of the power of a midseason fix. At the time they decided to pull the parachute in an attempt to save their season, they were a miserable 9-10-4, with a minus-7 goal differential, and ahead of only the lowly Detroit Red Wings when it came to how often they held a lead in their games.

Since replacing Mike Babcock with Sheldon Keefe behind the bench, the results have been night and day:

15 wins (first in the NHL)

.738 point percentage (first)

plus-26 goal differential (first)

Held lead for 50.4% of total game time (first)

While the results have undoubtedly been tremendous, the process has been just as important when it comes to sustaining that success. Under Babcock, the Leafs had allowed their recent postseason failures to seep into their playing style, undoing what made them effective in the first place.

The biggest change Keefe has made in his short time with the team is a rather simple one: He's enabled his best players to play to their strengths, using the personnel he was given in the way it was originally intended when GM Kyle Dubas put the team together.

The Leafs are once again playing fast, using their speed to attack off the rush, which is when they're at their most devastating offensively. When there's nothing there, they're able to pass it back and reload even if it means surrendering territory for the time being. It's a play that's more common in soccer than it is in hockey, but it makes sense intuitively because it allows you to keep possession of the puck in the pursuit of doing something more productive with it. It's also a complete 180 from what they were instructed to do under Babcock, when they were routinely opting for the safe play by dumping it in and chasing after it.

It's no coincidence that the new coach has also gotten the most out of his best player, finally unleashing Auston Matthews by using him the way a scorer of his esteemed caliber should be used. The training wheels are finally off Matthews now, with his usage up significantly after years of wondering why he was being handled with such kid gloves by Babcock.

Not only are Matthews, Mitch Marner and John Tavares all playing more under Keefe, but the Leafs have done an excellent job of experimenting with all sorts of different ways to get them out there in advantageous situations. Whether it's pairing up Matthews and Marner at even strength or keeping them all out there for the full extent of

power plays and alternating only defensemen, things like that go a long way when the margin between winning and losing is so thin in certain games.

The most important development in Toronto is that the Leafs have clearly gotten back to building their game plan around what their best players do best, and it's immediately made them a frightening offensive juggernaut again after that bizarre hiccup to start the season. It might not seem like a big thing, but it just goes to illustrate the impact small adjustments can make when it comes to roster optimization.

That's the most recent example of a success story, but it's hardly the only way a team can give itself a much-needed face-lift. Whether it's through a coaching change, a trade to fill a glaring hole on the depth chart, or an adjustment to the allocation of minutes to existing players, there are any number of ways a team can improve its performance by removing its weak link.

Let's take a closer look at some other teams that could similarly benefit from a quick fix that's doable, and highlight what it would look like exactly in their respective cases.

Nashville Predators

The fix: Better forward deployment and something from the goalies.

In an act of perfect timing with regard to this exercise, the Predators just made what they hope will be the change they needed to save their season, hiring John Hynes to replace Peter Laviolette behind the bench. There's certainly some logic behind the move. There's an irreconcilable difference between the level of talent on the roster and the team's results thus far, and whenever that happens the attention usually shifts to the coach.

On the one hand, Laviolette certainly isn't blameless. While we don't know how much there is to the idea that his message had grown stale and that he'd lost the room, there are other quantifiable things we can point to as areas where he fell short.

The most glaring is the usage of the team's forwards, in which there's very little difference between how many minutes his top and bottom lines were playing. One area where Hynes can make an instant impact is by simply handing over the keys to his most skilled players and relying far less on the likes of Colton Sissons and Austin Watson.

What throws a monkey wrench into all of this is that it's not necessarily a foregone conclusion that a new voice is going to lead to a tangible change in results -- unless the Predators' goalies remember how to stop a puck at some point in the immediate future. We know how inextricably linked a goalie's performance is with his team's outlook, but it's quite jarring to see how much of a role it's played in the fate of coaches around the league this season. Here's the list of the five worst in team save percentage for the season:

31. Detroit Red Wings
30. Los Angeles Kings
29. San Jose Sharks
28. Nashville Predators
27. New Jersey Devils

Of these five teams, three of them have made in-season coaching changes. The other two never had any delusions about being good this season, and they're perfectly content with losing at the moment (not to mention that the Kings just hired their coach this summer, buying him more time anyway).

To put it bluntly, the Predators need Pekka Rinne and Juuse Saros to be a whole lot better than they've been to date. Among 59 qualified goalies this season, they're 54th and 55th, respectively, in goals saved above average, combining to cost Nashville nearly 18 goals against more than we would've expected a league-average netminder to surrender under the same workload.

All of Nashville's other underlying numbers suggest that the Predators are a team that should be winning a lot more games. They're a top-10 team in essentially every underlying 5-on-5 performance metric, from shot share to high-danger chance share to expected goals. But none of it will matter unless the team can start getting saves

more reliably. Hynes is stepping into a situation with which he's all too familiar, given what happened at his previous stop. The good news is that the track record of Rinne and Saros is significantly better than what he had to work with in New Jersey, which should present reason for optimism.

Chicago Blackhawks

The playoffs look like a stretch for Patrick Kane & Co. this season, but GM Stan Bowman can make some wise moves for the franchise's long-term outlook. Joe Puetz/NHLI via Getty Images
The fix: Trade-deadline market maker.

The Blackhawks don't technically fit the description of a team in the hunt, because they're not likely to make much of a run this season. They're right there with the New York Rangers as one of the most hapless teams in the league defensively, and if it weren't for herculean goaltending (particularly from Robin Lehner) they'd be even closer to the bottom of the standings than they already are.

They're on this list despite that because they're still uniquely positioned to play a supporting role in the playoff race around the trade deadline. In the obvious sense, they have two goalies on expiring deals who should draw plenty of interest from any number of teams that aren't confident in what they already have at the position.

Lehner is incredibly fascinating because he's been every bit as good as he was last season, despite finding himself in a significantly less forgiving defensive environment. It remains to be seen whether the Blackhawks see him as a future building block or a one-year rental they'll cash in ahead of the deadline, but the potential return for him -- given the possible effect he would have on a playoff team's outlook -- could be too good for Chicago to pass up.

From a more subtle perspective, the Blackhawks suddenly find themselves in a spot where they can play the role of a third-party facilitator in trades after shutting down Brent Seabrook and Calvin de Haan for the season. They can't take on any tangible future money at the moment because those two salaries will come back on the books at the end of the campaign, but what they can do is help contenders open up salary-cap space by freeing them of bad expiring money in exchange for some kind of sweetener.

It's not the easiest exercise to find a willing trade partner who checks all of those boxes, because most sizeable contracts come in the form of contributing players a contender presumably wouldn't want to pay to jettison, but there are three that fit the bill:

1. The Vegas Golden Knights are up against it financially at the moment, but if they want to upgrade their team somewhere, dumping the cap hits of Cody Eakin (\$3.85 million) and Nick Holden (\$2.2 million) would go a long way toward creating the room to do so.
2. The Maple Leafs don't have much financial flexibility given how top-heavy their roster is, but if the opportunity presented itself, shedding Cody Ceci's \$4.5 million price tag seems like the most logical starting point. After starting the season on the top pair under Babcock, his role has significantly changed under Keefe as the team's system has changed. He's gone from playing 22 minutes, 5 seconds overall and 17:54 at 5-on-5 per game under Babcock to just 20:01 and 16:39, respectively, under Keefe, being eclipsed by Justin Holl on the depth chart.
3. The case for the Buffalo Sabres is more flimsy because you could fairly argue that they shouldn't be trading future assets to improve their team in the short term, given their current place in the Atlantic Division hierarchy. But if they keep hanging around and decide that it's worth it to make a valiant effort to throw Jack Eichel a bone and play meaningful hockey into the spring for the first time in ages, finding someone to take Zach Bogosian's \$5.14 million expiring contract off their hands could be handy.

Winnipeg Jets

Whether outdoors in a snowstorm, or in more traditional environments, Connor Hellebuyck has generally been great for the Jets this season. But at some point, blue-line shortcomings will catch up to everyone. Minas Panagiotakis/NHLI via Getty Images
The fix: Find some D help on the cheap.

We've seemingly written about the Jets ad nauseam already this season, but it's largely because they've done an admirable job of beating the odds by staying afloat after a widespread blue-line talent exodus last summer. Without sugarcoating it, as currently constructed their defensive corps is best described as a patchwork group that's being held together loosely by duct tape and bandages.

Unless something changes, it'll eventually fall apart and crumble around them, and we've already started to see the first signs of that over the past couple of weeks as goaltender Connor Hellebuyck has started to look human. He's still having a remarkable season in totality, but his performance in December started to show some holes in the armor, and the team started taking on water as a result.

The good news is that the Jets find themselves in a wild-card spot at the moment, and while there are a number of other teams in the mix for a small number of available positions, they all have noticeable flaws of their own. With the combination of Hellebuyck and a number of game-breaking talents up front, the Jets should continue to be in the mix the rest of the way.

The most obvious upgrades can be made on the blue line, although the current state of the rental market at the position complicates matters. The biggest names -- Alex Pietrangelo, Torey Krug, Tyson Barrie -- are all currently on contending teams that won't be moving them at the deadline, which limits the available options who could realistically make a difference.

That said, that might not ultimately matter for the Jets. After investing premium draft capital in rentals such as Paul Stastny and Kevin Hayes in recent seasons, they'd presumably be cautious about doing so again even if there were big names available, especially considering this current incarnation's underlying numbers, which are much closer to that of a bubble team than one that's just one piece away.

The silver lining is that the bar the Jets need to clear to improve their defense is as low as it gets, making the goal of upgrading it a perfectly attainable one. They currently have players such as Luca Sbisa and Anthony Bitetto eating up valuable minutes regularly, so replacing them on the cheap shouldn't be too difficult. Unless Dustin Byfuglien finally walks through the door and resembles his old self, the Jets likely aren't significantly making over their blue line this season. But in their case, a half-measure -- at a reasonable price -- actually makes a fair bit of sense.

Buffalo Sabres, New York Islanders

There have been a lot of smiles for the Isles this season, but they could use some additional scoring help to extend their playoff run this spring. Mike Stobe/NHLI via Getty Images

The fix: Find some scoring help!

It's not necessarily a new development to suggest that both of these teams need more offensive playmaking talent, but it's becoming unavoidable at this point.

For the Islanders, they've done a remarkable job of compensating for it over the past year and a half in various ways and from various sources. But it's really caught up to them of late, and there's a limit to how far their splendid goaltending and team defense can take them if they can't clear a certain bar of respectability offensively.

Here's how they stack up as a team since Dec. 1:

24th in 5-on-5 goals for

26th in 5-on-5 expected goals for

25th in all situations goals for

31st in all situations expected goals for

The good news is that if there's one archetype of player with which the rental market is flush on an annual basis, it's scoring at the wing position. Tyler Toffoli makes a ton of sense, both in terms of fit and reasonable acquisition cost. Kyle Palmieri is going to be pricier, but he's also a superior player, has an extra year of control on his deal,

and should be on his way out of New Jersey given its contention timeline following the Taylor Hall trade. Since Isles GM Lou Lamoriello has seemingly been reluctant to invest heavily in rentals, Palmieri would make an awful lot of sense from the perspective of going for it not only this season but next season as well. He'd also look quite good as a triggerman on the receiving end of passes from Mathew Barzal.

For the Sabres, the acquisition of Michael Frolik certainly shouldn't hurt, but it's also not nearly enough given the starting point. He's been a subtly excellent possession player over the course of his career, but even when he was at his best, he was never a particularly proficient scorer. Having players who constantly hover around the puck is never a bad thing, particularly for a team like the Sabres who aren't especially deep with above-average players up front. But at this point, they need someone who can help put the puck into the net, especially with Victor Olofsson out for five to six weeks.

Jack Eichel has been an absolute rock star this season, putting the team on his back and carrying it as far as humanly possible. He's factored into 43.7% of Buffalo's total goals scored this season and has directly created exactly one-third of them himself.

With Eichel on the ice, the Sabres have scored 39 goals in 675 5-on-5 minutes and 75 goals in 921 total minutes. Without Eichel on the ice, the Sabres have scored 46 goals in nearly 1,400 5-on-5 minutes and 51 goals in 1,690 total minutes. The fact that they've scored nearly the same amount of goals in half the time with him on the ice says a lot about all parties involved.

As superhuman as he's been, Eichel can't be on the ice at all times. So as good as he's been while out there, it ultimately doesn't matter if the Sabres are going to continue to be such a black hole offensively whenever he's not. Get this man some help!

Frolik joins Sabres with debut set for Thursday

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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Michael Frolik woke up Tuesday around 6 a.m. He picked up his work visa at the U.S. Embassy in Toronto, went back to his hotel for the afternoon and, finally, began his drive to Buffalo around 4 p.m. Traffic on the QEW made the trip take nearly three hours.

It was 7:30 p.m. by the time Frolik arrived at KeyBank Center. An hour later, he was alone on the ice for his first official skate as a member of the Buffalo Sabres.

"It was a quick skate, 30 minutes, and it was good," Frolik said. "I needed to feel the ice a little bit before I jumped into it."

Frolik took the ice again Wednesday, albeit with more company. He practiced with his Sabres teammates for the first time, skating on a line with Marcus Johansson and Conor Sheary.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said that Frolik will be in the lineup against St. Louis on Thursday. In the meantime, the coaching staff will look to strike a balance between getting the forward up to speed on the team's principles and cluttering his mind with too much information.

"The important thing when you integrate somebody like that is you want him, like everybody else, to actually just play free and play naturally within the principles," Krueger said. "So, we have to be patient on him automating those principles and we're not going to overload him here."

"He has such a good instinct and you could see his speed already today. His defensive decision making is strong and we feel he's going to slide into the way we want to play quickly. But you don't overload him."

Next home game: Saturday vs. Vancouver

Krueger said the coaches would go over select video clips with Frolik on the flight to St. Louis, then any teaching tomorrow would come on a need-to-know basis. Frolik will play right away on the penalty kill, an area he's been accustomed to throughout his 12-year career.

"In this league there's really no big changes," Frolik said. "It's pretty similar. I think we're going to talk about it a little bit now on the ride on the plane and what the structure is. I think there's probably nothing I haven't seen before. It's pretty standard. We already talked about it a little bit. We'll see how the meeting goes with the coaches and go over the systems and everything. Hopefully, I can jump right into it."

It's no accident that Frolik was skating alongside a fellow veteran in Johansson, which Krueger believes will help ease the transition. Johansson was already seen offering insight on Tuesday, answering Frolik's questions about the system between drills.

Krueger and general manager Jason Botterill have already spoken at length about the intangibles they believe Frolik will add to the group, be it his penalty kill ability, his two-way game at 5-on-5, or his experience of winning a Stanley Cup with Chicago in 2013.

Another aspect of Frolik's arrival is the added internal competition it brings to the dressing room. The Sabres practiced with 13 forwards on Tuesday and still have Jeff Skinner and Victor Olofsson working back from injuries. Rasmus Asplund and Curtis Lazar have both found ways to contribute regularly after beginning the season in Rochester, with Scott Wilson looking to do the same following a recall last week.

"This definitely brings energy at a good time," Krueger said. "We're having to dig deep into our resources to maintain the pace that we're expecting from each other right now. Again, his leadership dealing with these kinds of stretches will help us also."

"It's also the competition. We love the internal competition. It raises the level of the group whether it's on defense or offense. You bring in a body with that type of attitude and that type of personality it increases the competition as injured players return and that will be good for us as we move forward."

Wednesday's practice

Jack Eichel and Kyle Okposo were both back on the ice after taking maintenance days Tuesday.

Defenseman Lawrence Pilut, meanwhile, practiced on a pair with Rasmus Ristolainen after skating as the seventh defenseman on Tuesday. Here's how the team lined up in its entirety:

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

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

35 Linus Ullmark
40 Carter Hutton