



Buffalo Sabres

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Rasmus Dahlin finding his groove on both sides of puck for Sabres

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 12, 2020

The numbers are going to historic levels, but look even deeper and you can see this is some of the best hockey of Rasmus Dahlin's young career.

Even after missing 10 games due to a concussion and shoulder injury, Dahlin is up to 28 assists and 32 points for the season. His 76 points for his career are tied with former California Golden Seals star Rick Hampton for third all-time among under-20 defenseman. Dahlin should soon pass Ray Bourque (79) and settle into second all-time behind Hall of Famer and former Sabres coach Phil Housley (132).

Over the last three games, Dahlin is running a 64.3% overall Corsi and a 60.5% rate at 5-on-5, both of which lead the club. He's been over 50% for four straight, including a 65.4 mark at 5-on-5 Feb. 1 against Columbus and a 73% clip Sunday against Anaheim.

As impressive as those figures are, it's without the puck that Dahlin is also making big strides. The 19-year-old is in better position defensively and using the wall more to keep onrushing opponents to the outside.

"We really like technically how he's attacking his one-on-ones right now and playing without the puck, which needs to happen for a defenseman of that caliber," coach Ralph Krueger said Wednesday. "And with it, he's just finding a really good balance."

Dahlin feels the difference, too.

"A lot better. I'm not thinking," he said. "I just go out there and play. You want to do everything to not get scored on, and not really focus on the offensive side. We've been playing a little better but I've been really confident."

Dahlin seems to be making one or two highlight reel plays a night, either a stickhandle around an opponent or a sublime pass to a teammate for a scoring opportunity. Tuesday's prime example was the drop pass he feathered to Marcus Johansson that the veteran converted for Buffalo's second goal in the 3-2 win over Detroit.

"The Swedish connection. I feel when there's a Swedish guy around me," Dahlin joked. "I came with a lot of speed there. I saw him coming behind me and he screamed for it and I just gave it to him."

"If we look earlier in the season in some of the hotter situations he would try to make plays, he's now being patient and waiting until those opportunities and openings are actually there," Krueger said. "It's simple play, simple play, boom, genius. Simple play, simple play, simple play, genius."

Dahlin said the team's tough finish to last year was a tremendous learning experience for him. He knows to let one game go and prepare for the next one, something that was difficult to do as a rookie.

"I need to stay patient and just shake it off," he said. "I've been more mature, grown a lot. Last year I learned so much. This situation we're in right now, we're never going to quit. I'm never going to quit. That's the biggest thing I've learned."

Krueger said he often reads players' eyes to get a gauge on their feelings and can tell when Dahlin is angry about the way something has gone. But that competitiveness has not overshadowed his game.

"He's learning how to manage that anger towards something that's not going the way he would like it to go, whether it's the team or himself. He's channeling that energy way better right now. Into his next shift. Into the next thing he can influence and change. That's what we like about him. There's a different rhythm all the time and he's finding that rhythm now that the great defensemen do.

Supremely confident with the puck since he was a youth, Dahlin said he's more comfortable in the physical nature of NHL play. And Krueger feels the all-around game blossoming.

"That simple mix between simplicity when the team needs it and brilliance when we need it," Krueger said.
"Because he can really make a play when he has that space and time. It's exciting to watch him grow week in and week out here. Who knows where that limit will be?"

Carter Hutton stunned by collapse of former Blues teammate Jay Bouwmeester

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 12, 2020

Sabres goaltender Carter Hutton was on his way home from KeyBank Center Tuesday night when he got a text from defenseman Colin Miller asking if he had talked to anyone connected to the St. Louis Blues.

Hutton had no idea what Miller was talking about, so Miller had to provide Hutton with the news: Former teammate Jay Bouwmeester had collapsed on the bench in Anaheim and was taken from Honda Center on a stretcher to a hospital.

Hutton immediately texted Blues defenseman Colton Parayko, who is Bouwmeester's defense partner. The Blues' game against the Anaheim Ducks had been postponed and players were awaiting word on Bouwmeester's condition.

"He filled me in a little bit and at that point they still didn't know," Hutton said of Parayko after practice Wednesday. "Colton was shook up at the time and that's all he had said. It was obviously pretty scary stuff."

Bouwmeester's issues came less than eight minutes into the game due to what the Blues termed a "cardiac event." Players scrambled to get attention of athletic trainers and doctors and the game was immediately stopped. It will be made up at a later date.

Bouwmeester, 36, is the senior member of the Blues. After captain Alex Pietrangelo hoisted the Stanley Cup following the Game 7 victory last June in Boston, the first player he handed the Cup to was Bouwmeester, who had played 1,184 regular-season games to that point.

"As a friend too, he's just the ultimate pro," said Hutton, who played two seasons with the Blues from 2016-18. "He takes unbelievable care of himself and obviously that shows. You see the guy getting the Cup first and that's kind of the ultimate respect in hockey."

This situation, of course, goes far beyond hockey.

"We spent time at their house with their kids," Hutton said. "He's got three little girls at home and we'd go over all the time for dinners and you start thinking the big picture, right? Hockey's just a sport and there's a lot more to life than that.

"Especially the way it happened. Right on the bench. There's nothing going on. It happened. It's obviously really, really scary stuff."

Thursday's game against Columbus will be 2000s Night, with the Sabres honoring alumni from the decade that included the 2006 and 2007 Eastern Conference finalists. Former owner Tom Golisano and managing partners Larry Quinn and Dan DiPofi will be on hand and the roster of players scheduled to appear in a pregame ceremony is highlighted by Daniel Briere, Tim Connolly, Jason Pominville, Brian Campbell and Paul Gaustad.

Gaustad was at practice Wednesday to see Hutton, his former teammate for three years in Nashville.

The Blue Jackets have dealt with a slew of injuries this season and they hit town dealing with two more big ones. All-Star defenseman Seth Jones is out for 8-10 weeks – certainly the rest of the regular season – and will need surgery for a sprain and hairline fracture in his ankle, and the team announced Wednesday morning that winger Cam Atkinson will miss two to three weeks due to a sprained ankle.

Jones, who led the team in ice time with an average of 25:17 per game, was injured in Saturday's game against Colorado after crashing into the side of the net. But he returned to the game and scored a power-play goal, as it turned out, while playing on the fractured ankle.

Columbus is 19-3-6 in its last 28 games, but its offense has struggled of late and its 2-1 overtime loss here on Feb. 1 was symptomatic of that. The Jackets have scored just one goal four times in their past six games, including Monday's 2-1 overtime loss to Tampa Bay.

Their only goal in that game was a second-period tally by Oliver Bjorkstrand and that ended a string of 10 consecutive periods without an even-strength tally.

The Blue Jackets have also been struggling for weeks on the power play. They're last in the NHL since Dec. 1 at 12.5% and 26th for the season at 16.6%. Buffalo is 22nd at 18.8%.

Columbus is leading the Eastern Conference wild-card standings with 70 points and is one point ahead of Philadelphia, three ahead of Carolina and four up on Florida. The Sabres, who are 12 points back, are actually closer to third place in the Atlantic Division as they are 10 points behind Toronto.

Sabres may get Victor Olofsson, Kyle Okposo back in the lineup Thursday night

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 12, 2020

The Buffalo Sabres could be getting big reinforcements on the wing for Thursday's game against the Columbus Blue Jackets as Victor Olofsson and Kyle Okposo both practiced on their lines Wednesday in KeyBank Center.

Olofsson, who has been out since Jan. 2 with a high-ankle sprain, returned to the ice Saturday. Okposo, who suffered an upper-body injury during the Jan. 30 loss to Montreal, joined the club for the morning skate on Tuesday.

As they have much of the season, Olofsson was with Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart in practice Wednesday while Okposo skated with Johan Larsson and Zemgus Girgensons.

"Victor Olofsson and Kyle Okposo showed good signs here today," coach Ralph Krueger said. "We're going to assess post-practice and take a final look in the morning but it looks like they're an option already for tomorrow. We'll make that final call again tomorrow."

"I didn't really know what to expect," Olofsson said. "I haven't been through one of these things before so I'm just trying to be really patient. Tomorrow is six weeks so that's kind of where we thought it would be. I feel like there's been good progress and we're where we want to be at."

Olofsson remains second in the NHL among rookies with 16 goals and has 35 points in 42 games. Okposo has five goals and seven assists

"You don't plan for anybody to be ready until they're actually skating with you in practice," Krueger said. "But what we like is just how good the rehab has worked here and how fit they feel within a couple of days. I've seen this multiple times this year so it's just a compliment to the work that's being done and the preparation for these players returning. We just like where they're at right now and it's looking good."

The Sabres could be without Marcus Johansson on Thursday as he sat out practice for maintenance of an upper-body injury.

"He's definitely in a day-to-day category again and we'll look at it tomorrow," Krueger said. "It's not a concern, long-term/big picture. If anything, it would be potentially one game."

Sabres need to trade Rasmus Ristolainen before it's too late

By Travis Yost

The Buffalo News

February 12, 2020

With the Buffalo Sabres' playoff odds crashing by the day, attention in Buffalo should be shifting to the Feb. 24 trade deadline. An aspiring front office – one that surely believed they would be in the midst of playoff contention by now – has to once again run through the roster and start putting together a three-year plan.

And depending on how bearish you are about the talent both on the active roster and in the pipeline, that three-year plan may seriously include yet another phase in a near-decade long rebuild.

Roster mismanagement excluded, rebuilds shouldn't take particularly long. We have seen plenty of teams quickly stock the cupboards. Lest we forget, the Toronto Maple Leafs were once in the same position as the Sabres – they just happened to nail an impressive number of draft picks and parlayed some of their roster assets into pieces more suitable for long-term success.

And if you don't like the cross-border rival, you can consider the Colorado Avalanche, a team that engineered as quick and emphatic a rebuild as any team in the league. (The Avalanche had 48 points in the 2016-17 season; yes, 48!)

When it comes to the trade deadline, it's imperative that your organizational personnel are ahead of competitors sniffing around your roster. We have seen a breathless number of one-sided trades and that will continue as long as human beings are making decisions.

In Buffalo, that situation is unfortunately difficult this season. This is one of the more top-heavy rosters in the league, and most of the team's tradeable depth players have either been shaky for some time or are without any sort of resume or draft pedigree you could parlay into a bigger trade.

The one exception on the roster might be defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen. His contract is significant enough for Buffalo to consider trading him, and yet friendly enough for teams around the league that believe the 25-year old is a victim of circumstances largely out of his control. He is owed \$5.4 million per year through 2021-22 and then would be an unrestricted free agent.

And he has the individual skills that are attractive – he is a good skater for his size, and is a great puck mover on the power play.

But, as is the case with many defenders with "draft pedigree" over the years, teams tend to wait an awfully long time to understand what they have – it's the ultimate low-risk, low-reward type of play. Ristolainen has played nearly 500 games and what we know is that the Sabres are aggressively out-chanced and out-scored with him on the ice, and the team's results with him or without him on the ice are largely indiscernible from each other:

Buffalo's underlying numbers have been poor with Ristolainen on the ice for years now and a lot of it is because the team is so ineffective at sustaining offensive zone pressure. One of the complicating factors here is that Buffalo's top-heaviness doesn't help matters for evaluating a first-pairing defender such as Ristolainen.

He gets ample ice time with the top line, but he also gets a significant amount of ice time with the team's disastrous bottom six. And in those minutes, Buffalo is really just playing to survive – that's certainly the case this season, and it's just a carryover from what has plagued this team for a long time.

But that isn't the case when Rasmus Dahlin and Jack Eichel are playing together. And when Dahlin plays with Buffalo's depth forwards, the numbers are slightly less than average. Compare that to Ristolainen, whose numbers scream draft lottery both with Eichel and away from Eichel:

There isn't a single Sabres fan who is seriously interested in another prolonged rebuild. How you avoid those prolonged rebuilds is making smart organizational decisions that benefit your team in the long run. We know from the rumor mill over the years that teams around the league are vulturing players such as Ristolainen from the Sabres, believing that his development has been stunted by a bad organization and that his play would dramatically improve if playing with a contender.

Buffalo has refused to take that bet, and teams are getting increasingly smarter around the league. But if someone out there believes he is truly salvageable and a better player than what he has shown in Buffalo – well, it's time for them to make that bet.

It's not working in Buffalo, and getting assets for a player who is having no impact on your team's performance is always worth consideration.

Pilut is working his way to earning more ice time

By Brayton Wilson

WGR 550

February 12, 2020

The road to the National Hockey League for Buffalo Sabres defenseman Lawrence Pilut this season has been a long one.

It started when he was forced to miss training camp and the preseason following offseason shoulder surgery from an injury suffered in the final game of the 2019 Calder Cup Playoffs for the Rochester Americans.

Once he was healthy enough, he made his season debut with the Amerks on Oct. 18 but got off to a slower start than compared to last year when he stormed the American Hockey League with his offensive capabilities from the blue line.

The 24-year-old was called up for the Sabres' trip to Sweden as part of the NHL Global Series in Stockholm, but he did not dress for either of the two games with the Tampa Bay Lightning.

After being sent back down to Rochester, Pilut picked up his game again and found his offensive touch with four goals and 11 assists for 15 points in 21 games. That, on top of his five points (1+4) in eight games prior, earned him his second All-Star appearance of his short career in the AHL.

His next call up came back on Jan. 7, where he made his season debut with the Sabres on Jan. 9 against the St. Louis Blues. From there, he appeared in six games before the NHL All-Star break, and then was re-assigned to the Amerks to play in one game before being recalled again to Buffalo. After three more games in Buffalo, Pilut was sent back to the AHL for one game before, once again, getting called back up to the Sabres on Feb. 9.

Overall this season, Pilut has played in 11 games for the Sabres, but has been held pointless with five shots on goal, a penalty taken and a minus-4 rating.

However, a problem the Sabres have run into quite a bit this season is the number of NHL caliber defensemen on the roster versus the number of defensemen that can play in a game. Buffalo has played with 11 forwards and seven defensemen on numerous occasions this season, but as of late the team has found itself playing the usual 12 forwards and just six defensemen.

Pilut currently finds himself as one of two defensemen on the outside of the top-six defensemen on the roster looking in. He was a healthy scratch for the Sabres on Tuesday night in a 3-2 win over the Detroit Red Wings, and is likely to be a healthy scratch again on Thursday night against the Columbus Blue Jackets.

Even though Pilut finds himself in a tough spot on the roster, the young blue liner is staying patient and waiting for his chance.

"I'm just staying ready. I'm staying ready mentally and keeping my body in shape," Pilut said following practice on Wednesday. "Working on the small details such as handling guys and [defensive] zone work. I think if I just keep working on that every day, keep working hard and just waiting for the chance to come, I'll be ready for it." "I'm just staying ready. I'm staying ready mentally and keeping my body in shape. Working on the small details such as handling guys and [defensive] zone work. I think if I just keep working on that every day, keep working hard and just waiting for the chance to come, I'll be ready for it."

Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger has had the tough task of trying to deviate which defensemen he will dress for each game because each defensemen in Buffalo has their own skill set that they can bring to the table.

Pilut is certainly more of an offensive and instinctual defender with good ability to move the puck. However, there is more to his game that Krueger has liked for his defensive group.

"His smarts, his ability to read the game, and his compete. His compete is very high when he goes in for any challenges 1-on-1. The way he can escape under pressure and solve that pressure. Those are assets for sure,

and his offense will grow eventually," Krueger said on Wednesday following practice. "It's his defensive game we're quite impressed with at the moment."

With the Amerks, Pilut has seen plenty of ice time as a top defenseman at even strength, is a quarterback on the power play, and has been relied upon to play key minutes on the penalty kill and in last-game situations. In Buffalo, his ice-time is more limited and his power play time is occupied by other defensemen, but he has been given some quality time on the penalty kill.

The young Swedish defenseman feels like his defensive game has grown even more at the NHL level since he came to North America last season.

"I think more and more my [defensive] zone work has been good," Pilut said. "It feels like I'm on the right side of guys, angling off guys real well, and obviously with the breakouts and everything. I think I have a little more to give out of the offensive game up here. I think I've created a couple of chances. The points haven't really come my way, but I just try to focus on playing good and it's been solid up here for me so far. I just keep developing that game all the time and I've been feeling more and more comfortable all the time."

While Pilut has played well and has not been much of a liability on the ice, getting the young blue liner ice-time is difficult, especially with how Krueger utilizes the defensemen he already has playing every night. However, the head coach is working with Buffalo's management team of general manager Jason Botterill and assistant general manager Randy Sexton to make sure that he is not sitting too long while he's waiting for his next opportunity to play.

"We look at every day and what's best for him at the moment," Krueger said on Wednesday morning on the Howard and Jeremy Show on WGR. "We feel this experience of being in the group, practicing with the group, being in our meetings, feeling what it takes to compete in the National Hockey League in February, in March, in April. This is a different level that's coming at us now, and it's learning to play good hockey at this time. He's part of us, he's here, he's important for us and we feel comfortable with him jumping in at any time. But we do have to keep an eye on that. You don't want him to go too long without playing any games, but also it's kind of a day-to-day basis. If we don't need him in the next few games, he might play some games down in Rochester and then come back again."

"Lawrence has just been fantastic with us. He's got a really professional attitude, he works hard on and off the ice, he brings a good spirit. He's just adding to our depth on defense."

As for the message for Pilut from management and the coaching staff, he's been told to just be ready to jump into the lineup at any time.

"It's just keep working hard and be ready for it," Pilut said. "Just keep being fresh, keep working on all the small details, and I take pride in that. I do a lot of work on and off the ice and try to just stay fresh all the time."

Last season, Pilut got his first crack at the NHL with Phil Housley as the head coach in Buffalo. In 33 games with the Sabres last year, he managed to score a goal and also register five assists for six points.

So far under Krueger's leadership in Buffalo, he has some positive reviews with the first-year head coach.

"He's a great coach so far," Pilut said. "Great guidelines, and I think it's a good game we're playing out there. It's been good so far."

Pilut was skating on the fourth defensive unit at Wednesday's practice with Zach Bogosian.

Both Kyle Okposo and Victor Olofsson were on the ice for their first full practice on Wednesday. It was their first full skate with their teammates since their return to the ice from their injuries. Krueger said following Wednesday's skate that both players appear to be options to play in Thursday night's matchup with the Blue Jackets at KeyBank Center. He also said that both would be evaluated after Wednesday's session, and that a decision about their game status would be determined at some point before puck drop.

As for Marcus Johansson, he did not practice with what the team called a maintenance day. However, Krueger said after practice that Johansson is very much day-to-day with an upper-body injury.

Here's a look at Wednesday's lines at practice:

Olofsson - Eichel - Reinhart
Vesey - Lazar - Sheary
Skinner - Rodrigues - Frolik (Wilson)
Girgensons - Larson - Okposo

Montour - Ristolainen
Dahlin - Miller
McCabe - Jokiharju
Pilut - Bogosian

PP1:

Ristolainen
Eichel - Reinhart - Olofsson
Dahlin

PP2:

Skinner
Montour - Okposo - Sheary
Miller

Krueger: Skinner is 'getting opportunity and he's trying'

WGR 550

February 12, 2020

The Buffalo Sabres had a bounce back win on Tuesday night over the Detroit Red Wings, rebounding twice from an early goal given up to start a period and then finally coming out of the game with a 3-2 win.

This win comes after a 3-2 loss to the Anaheim Ducks on Sunday, where the team found themselves in a deep 3-0 hole through the first 12 minutes of action that they could never dig out of.

In Tuesday night's win, Sabres captain Jack Eichel reached the 70-point mark for the second straight season, becoming the first player since Derek Roy to achieve 70 points in consecutive seasons. Sabres forward Conor Sheary ended a 13-game goalless drought in the first period with a goal to tie the game at 1-1, then Marcus Johansson ended a 14-game goalless drought with a goal in the second.

Meanwhile, goaltender, Carter Hutton earned this third win in his last four starts in goal for Buffalo, making 27 saves on 29 shots faced. This stretch comes after Hutton faced a tough stretch of games where he lost 12 consecutive starts in goal.

However, one player who continues to struggle is forward Jeff Skinner, who's goal drought has now reached a career-high 19 games. He has not scored a goal since Dec. 2, and has only registered two points in that stretch of games.

Skinner was skating Tuesday night on a line with Evan Rodrigues and Michael Frolik, and ended up playing just 13:11 of ice-time and registered two shots on goal.

The 27-year-old has not had much of a chance this season to skate on a line with Eichel and Sam Reinhart, who he skated with for a majority of the 2018-19 season under head coach Phil Housley. With Eichel and Reinhart, Skinner was able to generate a majority of his 40 goals last year, which helped him earn a nice new contract with the Sabres this past offseason.

There has been much debate as to whether or not Skinner should be put back with Eichel and Reinhart while Victor Olofsson recovers from a lower-body injury. However, Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger does not believe in making his roster decisions based on individual needs for certain players.

"We wake up every morning here growing the team, and we wake up every morning here doing what's best for the team," Krueger said on the Howard and Jeremy Show during his weekly Wednesday visit on WGR. "We base our decisions on the mixes, the chemistry and the lineup that we think is the strongest for the Buffalo Sabres. That's the way we work and that's the way we're going to continue to work. When Jack is playing up against the top lines and top [defensive] pairs of the other teams, we need other lines to be able to produce against the second and third pairs of the opposition.

"Everything is about the team game, and that's the way the Buffalo Sabres are going to be built moving forward and that's the way we're going to become competitive in the National Hockey League. We're going to hold that line. We believe in it, we feel confident in it. The guys are embracing it, and what we have to learn is to finish games better. What we have to learn as a group to manage our specialty teams better, and we're excited about what's going on here behind closed doors. We understand people aren't happy with the results and they'd like to see us with six, seven, eight points more in the standings, but again it's all about the team here and we will continue to work in that way."

Skinner has been working hard trying to find a way to help generate offense while serving in more of a depth role, but Krueger believes that when he finally does find the back of the net, he can start to really make a bigger impact on the game.

"He's getting opportunity, and he's trying," Krueger said. "He's working on it, and when he gets one; he's a bunch scorer. He'll get a bunch."

Krueger also maintains that the Sabres want to be more than a one line team, and keeping Skinner and Eichel apart seems to be a part of that plan for the long-term.

Reinhart is on pace for a career-year with the Sabres, on track to score 30 goals for the first time in his career while registering a career-high 67 points. He is, arguably, Buffalo's second-best playmaker on the team, and for most of the year has been linemates with Eichel.

There has been thought that to spread some offense around the lineup, it may be an option to put Reinhart on his own line from the wing and drive play from there. However, Krueger went again with his team first approach to constructing the lineup.

"Why would you break up that pair right now? They're as good of a duo as there is the National Hockey League," Krueger said. "The way they synergize also defensively, we just don't see that as an option at the moment.

"Sam Reinhart is a very complete athlete and player. He's a leader in our group, and you've got to love the season that he's having. He's working for everything, and the way he compliments Jack is outstanding. It's very important that you have an extremely strong two-way player who is able to free Jack and Sam from defensive responsibilities. Jimmy Vesey has done an excellent job of that in the last few games. That's the way Jack, for us, needs to be complimented, and Sam has just done a fabulous job... Right now, he's doing everything we ask, and there would be no reason to move him."

Krueger's team first stance continued when talking about ice time minutes, especially Eichel's minutes after he played more than 28 minutes against the Ducks, but only registering a little more than 20 minutes against Detroit.

"We are truly trying to work in a small picture here," Krueger said. "We do what we feel is right for the game, and yesterday was a good four-line game going, but against Anaheim we did not have a four-line game going. We needed to reduce our roster really quick, and Jack was playing either side of timeouts. We're going to always do on the day what we think is going to give us the best chance to win. There's not a day where we're not going to go after the [win], and this group has no quit in it. We appreciate the way the guys are always fighting back. We have fallen behind too much as of late, and we need to work on getting some leads here in the next games.

"Jack's minutes aren't planned before the game. He dictates that often, and the game dictates that. That's what makes it fun. It's the greatest game to be coaching. I just love coaching the game of hockey, where you are really truly submersed in the moment where you submerge with the feeling of who's on today and who's off. Do I always get it right? No way. I'm going to make mistakes. I always have, and I always will, but they're there because you try and you risk and you try to do things. Jack's just been fantastic in the process. Whether he plays 20 minutes or he plays 28, he's going to give his best every single shift. He's as hard working as anybody on the team. What a leader he is moving forward."

In terms of injuries, Krueger said that both Victor Olofsson and Kyle Okposo will return to a full practice for them on Wednesday afternoon and that they are now day-to-day, in terms of their return. However, goaltender Linus Ullmark is still a few weeks away from returning, according to the Sabres head coach.

Jeff Skinner is still unable to shake slump: What's going on with the Sabres star?

By John Vogl

The Athletic

February 11, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. – Jeff Skinner rejoined the Sabres' top line Tuesday night, skating alongside Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart.

For 16.2 seconds.

Though calls continue for Buffalo to reunite last season's dominant trio, it's clear with 25 games remaining in the regular season that it's not on coach Ralph Krueger's to-do list. And the way things are going for Skinner, he has work to do to reach the second line, let alone the first. About the only notable thing he did Tuesday was make general manager Jason Botterill slam his hand on a table.

The Sabres' erstwhile sniper failed to score during a 3-2 victory over Detroit at KeyBank Center, making it 19 straight games without a goal. It's the longest drought of his 10-year career, eclipsing an 18-game slump in 2014-15. He has only two assists during this stretch and no points in his past 10 games.

After scoring 40 goals last season, Skinner is on pace for 17. It would be the lowest total of his career, excluding the lockout-shortened 2012-13 season (13 goals in 42 games). As the hockey world knows, the plummet immediately follows the signing of an eight-year, \$72 million contract extension.

So, with all that in mind, would Skinner like to skate next to Eichel again?

"He's one of the best players in the world," Skinner said. "I think everyone in here wants to play with him. But we're all a team. We're all trying to win the game, so it's just trying to help the team, I guess."

Skinner hasn't really helped the Sabres since early December. In addition to the slump, he missed 10 games with an upper-body injury. When he scored his last goal Dec. 2 against New Jersey, the Sabres were 13-10-5 and in third place in the Atlantic Division. They've gone 12-14-3 since and have fallen to sixth place, 11 points out of a playoff spot.

As the calendar moves toward the Sabres' ninth straight postseason miss, Skinner edges toward his 10th.

"The year's not over yet," he said. "We're still trying to get there, but obviously it's sort of an uphill battle for us."

Skinner's slump has deepened, so his spot in the offensive hierarchy has fallen. He's a third-line winger now, something few would have imagined when the season started. Against the Red Wings, he skated with center Evan Rodrigues, who requested a trade after being a frequent healthy scratch, and right wing Michael Frolik, who has one goal and one assist in his 14 games with the Sabres.

"You want to help the team win, and coach puts together a lineup that he thinks is going to have the best chance of that," Skinner said. "As a player, you go out there and you do your best to contribute to the team in the role that's asked. I think that's the only thing you can control."

Where has it all gone wrong for Skinner? How did one of the NHL's top scorers fall to 170th in the league?

The numbers show significant drops in power-play points ...

	Goals	Assists	Pts/60	Avg. ice time
2019-20	0	3	1.4	2:44
2018-19	8	8	3.8	3:05

high-danger chances and shooting percentage (which can partially be attributed to not playing with Eichel) ...

	HDGF	HDGA	Shooting %
2019-20	12	19	7.5
2018-19	43	25	14.9

ice time and offensive-zone starts ...

	Avg. ice time	OZS%
2019-20	16:46	54.6
2018-19	18:31	76.0

points per 60 minutes ...

	Goals	Assists	Points
2019-20	1.04	.38	1.42
2018-19	1.34	.74	2.08

and road production.

	Games	Goals	Assists	Points
Home	25	8	6	14
Road	22	3	2	5
2018-19				
Home	41	21	15	36
Road	41	19	8	27

Plus, Skinner is completely invisible when the Sabres lose.

	Goals	Assists	Points	Plus/minus
20 wins	8	4	12	9
19 losses	0	1	1	-30
8 OTL	3	3	6	3
2018-19				
33 wins	29	7	36	28
39 losses	7	11	18	-33
10 OTL	4	5	9	3

One thing from the charts worth noting: Skinner's rate of goals per 60 minutes (1.04) is 53rd in the NHL and second on the Sabres to Eichel (1.05). With more even-strength time – it's dropped from 15:24 per game under former coach Phil Housley to 14:02 under Krueger – it's possible Skinner would have more goals.

"We're responsible for everything, good and bad," Krueger said of the coaching decisions. "We take responsibility in everything. We are working with players whether they are in scoring streaks or slumps. We work with them and give them very honest feedback. We're using video, one-on-one coaching, meetings. We're trying to get them to focus on certain things in practice.

"We're all in this together, so when a player is struggling to perform in the way he wants to perform, we do what we can to try to get him in spaces where he can be successful. ... Everybody, including Jeff, is trying to find their 'A' game on a daily basis."

Krueger has repeatedly cited line balance and defensive responsibilities as the main reasons for not putting Skinner alongside Eichel. The left winger doesn't want to look that deep.

"I don't know how philosophical you can get about playing hockey," Skinner said. "It's hockey. Everyone in here has made it to the NHL and competes and has certain skill sets and certain talents. He makes the lines the best way he thinks is going to win the game, and as players you go out there and do your best to help the team win. That's pretty much as deep as it gets, in my eyes.

"You can kind of dissect things. You can sort of analyze things on different levels, but to me, I think it's about winning. We have to find a way to get the job done."

The Sabres beat the Red Wings, but Skinner didn't contribute much during his 16 shifts.

Shift No. 1: Helped steal the puck in the Red Wings' zone but no scoring chance.

No. 2: Turned puck over during a one-on-two, then knocked puck away from Filip Hronek for a steal. He promptly had the puck stolen. He pulled a rebound from goalie Jonathan Bernier, spun and shot.

No. 3: During the first power-play shift of the game, Skinner fed Rodrigues for a shot and watched a cross-ice pass from Eichel bounce over his stick. His shot from the left circle went into Bernier's shoulder.

No. 4: Nothing of note.

No. 5: Pressured Alex Biega at the Buffalo blue line to get the puck out of the zone, then stole it from Biega.

No. 6: Nothing.

No. 7: With 40.5 seconds left in the first period, Skinner joined Eichel and Reinhart. The left winger lost the faceoff in Detroit's zone and went to the bench 16.2 seconds later.

No. 8: Lost puck to Gustav Lindstrom in Detroit zone, got it back, then lost it again.

No. 9: Skinner skated to crease with Trevor Daley as neither gave up ground, which resulted in Skinner dropping Bernier to the ice. No penalties.

No. 10: The puck bounced to Skinner late in the shift and his close-range shot deflected into the netting.

No. 11: The outing that made Botterill angry. Near the end of Skinner's 1:13 shift, he circled with the puck near center ice and sent a no-look pass back to the Sabres' zone. The Red Wings scooped it up for a scoring chance. Botterill banged the table in front of him, got out of his chair and walked away from the action.

No. 12.: Nothing.

No. 13: Nothing.

No. 14: Spun with the puck in the corner of Detroit's zone, then turned it over. In the defensive zone, he gave his stick to Rasmus Dahlin after the defenseman lost his lumber.

No. 15: Nothing.

No. 16: Skinner picked up the puck at the blue line but gave it back to the Red Wings.

The left winger finished with 13:11 of ice time, including 54 seconds on the power play, and skated shifts of 13, 16 and 19 seconds. The only Sabres with fewer minutes were Conor Sheary (12:32), Zengus Girgensons (11:25), Rodrigues (11:12) and Scott Wilson (8:50).

Until Skinner starts doing something with the minutes he's given – or Krueger has a massive turnaround in philosophy – neither Skinner nor Sabres fans should expect him with Eichel anytime soon.

"I'm in the position I'm in, and I have to do the best I can to make the best of it," Skinner said. "I'm a competitive person and I've played hockey a long time. You get to this level and you have to have a certain belief in yourself and your abilities and what you can contribute.

"It comes back to confidence. You have to keep that in yourself. When you get into a little bit of a slump like I've been, you have to try and fight your way out of it."

Even against the lowly Red Wings, there are things to discover about the victorious Sabres

By Joe Yerdon

The Athletic

February 11, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. — It could've been one of those games for the Sabres. You know what kind of game I'm talking about because we've seen those games more often than not the past couple weeks. But it turned out to not be one of those games and instead turned out to be a 3-2 win against a Detroit team they lost a 4-3 shootout to just last week.

There shouldn't be a lot to learn about the Sabres when they knock off one of the worst teams in the NHL, but here we are finding out some new things and some old things that are new again. Here are some observations from Tuesday that stood out:

How to pick up your goalie

What gave this game the initial feeling it was going to be a long night was the first of Darren Helm's two goals coming 27 seconds into the first period. Carter Hutton trapped a shot by Anthony Mantha and thought he had it covered, but Helm saw it, snagged it and deposited it.

In four of the previous six home games since returning from the break, the Sabres have allowed the first goal of the game and lost all four. Tuesday was the fifth time it's happened and playing from behind hasn't been a strong suit. Headed into the game against the Red Wings, Buffalo was 6-16-6 when opponents got the first goal, which made Conor Sheary's tying goal 33 seconds later vital.

"I think we were playing with a little bit of a chip on our shoulder. You know the start wasn't ideal but we responded the shift after which was nice," defenseman Jake McCabe said. "For the most part we knew what kind of game they play and it's definitely, as far as the d-men, you can solve pressure a little bit easier."

Helm's second goal in the second period put Detroit up 2-1 thanks to a defensive lapse when Rasmus Ristolainen and Brandon Montour, along with Jack Eichel, tried to get the puck from Mantha behind the net. Instead Mantha found Helm alone in front for a backhand goal. But it was Marcus Johansson who tied it again nearly eight minutes later after a setup by Rasmus Dahlin.

"We've been struggling here at home lately so the confidence level isn't extremely high," coach Ralph Krueger said. "I think going down 1-0, getting it back quick, going down 2-1 and sticking with our plan and staying calm on the bench and getting that one back, grinding it out, it was that kind of game and in the end, we end up on top. But the first one was extremely important the way (Curtis) Lazar, Johansson, and Sheary worked that one into the net definitely got a good feel on the bench."

It's no secret Johansson's shots on the power play haven't been impressive, but when his feet are moving and he's able to use his foot speed to generate shot power he's been more dangerous. This leads to the next observation ...

Playing Marcus Johansson on the wing was an easy, great idea

It had been seven years since Johansson played center with the Washington Capitals. When he signed in Buffalo, it seemed far-fetched he'd play center here. After all, he had his best success on the wing with the Capitals as well as the Devils and Bruins. All season he's been a center for the Sabres and it's forced him to be more mindful defensively as well as being forced in the faceoff circle, where he's struggled during his career.

Playing on the wing next to Lazar with Sheary on the other wing turned that line into one of the more dangerous units in the game. Sheary had a goal as well as a penalty shot (which he missed badly) and Johansson tied the game 2-2 in the second period on a nice play by Dahlin. Johansson had four shot attempts and one on goal that wound up in the net.

"That line in general with Lazar and Sheary gave us some good energy and they played an important part in us getting this win today," Krueger said. "But especially Marcus was certainly freed from his defensive responsibility and I thought Lazar had a really good game up the middle today."

Via NaturalStatTrick.com, that line was on-ice for 13 shot attempts at 5-on-5, 10 of them were theirs (76.9 percent CorsiFor). Shots on goal were 4-2 in their favor and scoring chances were 5-1 to go with the goal with Sheary's goal in the first.

The Sabres have been forced to use Johansson as a center and it has caused him and others around him to suffer offensively. The lack of center depth has shown to be a problem all season, but it was good to see in a semi-controlled setting against the NHL's worst team that Johansson would be better off doing his work on the wing. It's a small sample size, but we'll take it.

The story behind shortening the bench

Krueger made it clear he was pleased with the way all 12 forwards played against Detroit. Once Buffalo snagged the lead early in the third period when Sam Reinhart poked in a loose puck, it was a matter of time before the bench got shorter.

Those whose time dropped in the third were both unsurprising and a bit disappointing. According to the NHL, the line of Jeff Skinner (2:31 in the third)-Evan Rodrigues (1:42)-Michael Frolik (3:00) was kept out of the rotation. Rodrigues' final shift ended with 10:12 to play in the third; Frolik's final shift ended with 7:54 to go; Skinner played one 41-second shift in the final 10:12 and didn't play again in the final 4:12.

What's disappointing is Skinner made a poor turnover late in the second period that led to a Red Wings 2-on-1 opportunity that resulted in GM Jason Botterill audibly slamming his table in the Sabres' management suite next to the press area. Frolik made a turnover midway through the third period that led to another Red Wings scoring chance. It was Skinner's 19th straight game without a goal, now the longest drought in his career. The dam will break eventually but plays like that won't help him earn more trust.

On defense, it was Dahlin and Colin Miller who wound up out of the mix. Miller's final shift ended with 6:14 to play. Dahlin played four shifts in the third period for 4:28. The last of those was a 1:35 beast that ended with 1:18 to play. Krueger leaned hard on the Montour-Ristolainen pairing (30.8 CF% at 5-on-5) but mixed in the pairing of Jake McCabe and Henri Jokiharju (67.9 CF%) much more.

"We just try to make the simple plays and not play too long of a shift," Jokiharju said. "The key is to make more small, simple plays and be dialed in on the D zone."

Dahlin and Miller were 47.3 CF% as a pair which is average-to-below-average, but it's clear the guys who visibly show a more physical edge get the benefit of the doubt late in games when protecting a lead. In this case, leaning more on McCabe and Jokiharju wasn't just warranted, it was needed.

Attaboys

- It's three wins in the last five appearances for Hutton after his 27-save victory against Detroit. His save percentage in those five starts is .909 and while that's not very impressive, he did well to hold the game down Tuesday with 10 saves in the third period after a start that could've gone sideways immediately. After going 0-7-4 with a .867 after his 6-0-0 .943 start to the season, he's due some dap for rebounding.
- Weird to not really mention Eichel more for cracking 70 points this season after he assisted on Reinhart's game-winner. He's the first Sabres player since Derek Roy to get 70 or more in consecutive seasons. That he did it this season in 56 games makes him the 10th fastest in team history to reach that mark.
- Many of my colleagues at The Athletic are very proud of the young defensemen on the teams they cover because there are a lot of good ones, but Dahlin tied Rick Hampton for third all-time in points by a teenage defenseman with his assist to Johansson. He won't turn 20 until after the Sabres season is over. No biggie, right?

Colin Miller finally adjusting to Sabres, earning more playing time

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 13, 2020

BUFFALO – For the first time in three months, Sabres defenseman Colin Miller has developed some rhythm, playing eight straight games.

In mid-November, the Sabres started scratching their biggest offseason acquisition, and he sat out 16 of the next 32 games, never playing more than four straight contests.

Following two terrific seasons with the Vegas Golden Knights, Miller has adjusted to the Sabres' system slowly.

But Miller, 27, has been performing better since the NHL All-Star break ended, displaying "confidence playing within our principles," coach Ralph Krueger said.

Not surprisingly, that has generated Miller, whose Sabres host the Columbus Blue Jackets tonight, more ice time and offensive chances.

"When you're in and out of the lineup and all that, it can be hard to kind of find that consistency," Miller said following Wednesday's practice inside KeyBank Center. "I don't think that's an excuse. You still got to play well and play your game. But I think it's definitely easier when you have those reps kind of back-to-back-to-back and you're not missing them."

Miller skated a season-high 22 minutes, 24 seconds on Feb. 6 and pumped a season-high five shots on goal Saturday afternoon. He registered an assist in two straight games last week for the first time since early October.

"Offensively, he's much more relaxed of late, and we can see his offensive upside, which is something we definitely need to do again against a team like Columbus," Krueger said. "We just didn't create enough the last time we played them here (Feb. 4, a 2-1 overtime win). We need those skill players like Colin to be able to step up into those spaces and have some deception and add to our offensive power now that we're understanding what we need to do defensively.

"It's the offense that needs to grow out of that, and Colin is one of those players that can definitely help our offense create more opportunity."

Still, given the Sabres' defense depth, Miller's opportunity could end. They've carried eight defensemen nearly the entire season. Krueger has options at his disposal.

Youngster Lawrence Pilut has been sitting out games with veteran Zach Bogosian.

"We still got eight defensemen – eight good defensemen – on this team," Miller said. "I think it was figuring out pairings and all that stuff. It's not an easy decision for Ralph to be in, so I understand that."

Miller has sometimes been the odd man out when the Sabres use seven defensemen.

"The healthy scratches have hurt his confidence," said one scout who has watched Miller regularly over his career, including this season. "(He) is probably wondering where he fits in the organization's plans."

Krueger recently reunited Miller and Rasmus Dahlin, his early-season defense partner.

"I like playing with him," Dahlin said. "You learn to play with everyone, so it doesn't really matter who you play with, but Colin especially, he's a very good shooter, he's passing the puck quite well, skating well. So we compare to each other good."

Dahlin, 19, is one of the NHL's most dynamic young stars. His abilities could certainly help Miller unleash some of his offensive talents.

Miller possesses a lethal shot that ranks among the game's elite. He compiled 10 goals and 41 points in 82 games in 2016-17 and three goals and 29 points in 65 appearances last season.

He has only recorded one goal and nine points in 41 outings this season. He also endured a 15-game point drought earlier this season.

"He is an offensive defenseman with a heavy shot," the scout said. "(I'm) not sure why (the Sabres) have not deployed him more in this role."

He added: "(It) has been somewhat of a head-scratcher for me the way they have used him this season."

Miller has started only 47.1% of his even-strength faceoffs in the offensive zone this season, according to hockey-reference.com. In his first four seasons that number was at least 61%.

Sabres' Victor Olofsson, Kyle Okposo could return from injuries Thursday

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 12, 2020

BUFFALO – When Sabres winger Victor Olofsson started practicing again Saturday, coach Ralph Krueger said the rookie might need another week before he could play.

But Olofsson went full tilt this afternoon, taking reps in his normal spots beside captain Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart and down low on the power play.

Meanwhile, Kyle Okposo, who returned for Tuesday's morning skate, practiced in his regular spot at right wing with center Johan Larsson and Zengus Girgensons.

Krueger said Olofsson and Okposo could both play in Thursday's game against the Columbus Blue Jackets at KeyBank Center.

"It looks like they're an option already for tomorrow," Krueger said.

A lower-body injury has sidelined Olofsson the last 15 games. An upper-body injury has shelved Okposo the past six contests.

When Olofsson was injured Jan. 2, the Sabres estimated he would be sidelined five or six weeks.

Krueger said the Olofsson and Okposo will be evaluated Thursday morning.

"I felt pretty good today," said Olofsson, who wouldn't pronounce himself ready to play.

Olofsson quickly morphed into one of the NHL's top rookies, scoring six goals in the first seven games and establishing himself as a Calder Trophy candidate. Overall, he has compiled 16 goals and 35 points in 42 outings.

The Sabres have compiled a 7-7-1 record without him.

In other injury news, an upper-body injury forced Sabres forward Marcus Johansson to have a maintenance day today.

"He's definitely in a day-to-day category again," Krueger said. "It's not a concern long-term, big picture. If anything, it would be one game."

After moving from center to wing, Johansson scored and added an assist in Tuesday's 3-2 win over the Detroit Red Wings, ending a 14-game goal drought.

Krueger said Johansson's injury isn't related to the hit he took along the boards Tuesday. Illness kept Johansson from playing in Sunday afternoon's 3-2 loss to the Anaheim Ducks.

Victor Olofsson, Kyle Okposo could return to Sabres lineup Thursday night

By Heather Prusak

WGRZ

February 12, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The biggest setback of Victor Olofsson's career might be just about over.

He's been out since January 2 with a high-ankle sprain but returned to practice on Saturday morning. He then skated again with the team Tuesday morning and at practice Wednesday afternoon.

In addition to Olofsson, the positive news continued as Kyle Okposo is also making progress towards returning. He skated with the team Tuesday morning then again Wednesday afternoon. Okposo has been dealing with an upper-body injury since January 30.

Head coach Ralph Krueger said both Olofsson and Okposo could return to the lineup as early as Thursday night as the Sabres host Columbus.

"Victor Olofsson and Kyle Okposo both show good signs here today," Krueger said. "We're gonna assess post-practice and take a final look in the morning, but it looks like they're an option already for tomorrow but we'll make that final call again tomorrow."

"It's close," Olofsson said. "I felt pretty good today and we'll see how I react tomorrow so it's hard to say but we'll see tomorrow how I feel and we'll decide then."

Olofsson is eager to get back in a game but doesn't want to rush anything if he's not 100 percent ready.

"I'm looking forward to it. I'm real excited but at the same time I've gotta be patient and feel like I'm ready so we'll see. I'm getting closer," Olofsson said.

Even with the setback, Olofsson is still having a Calder Trophy type season. He's still second among NHL rookies with 16 goals and 35 points in 42 games.

"What we like is just how good the rehab's worked here and how fit they feel within a couple of days," Krueger said. "I've seen this multiple times this year so it's just a compliment to the work that's being done in the preparation for these players' returning and we just like where they're at right now and it's looking good."

Carter Hutton thinking of his former teammate, Jay Bouwmeester after scary incident

By Heather Prusak

WGRZ

February 12, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Sabres goaltender Carter Hutton is thinking about more than just hockey after his friend and former teammate suffered a "cardiac episode" Tuesday night.

Blues defenseman Jay Bouwmeester collapsed on the bench during Tuesday's game against the Ducks.

"Thankfully, with the quick response of our medical trainers, Anaheim medical trainers and their team physicians, they were able to stabilize Jay. He was alert and moving all of his extremities as he was transported to UC Irvine Medical Center. Currently, Jay is conscious and alert as he undergoes further testing by Anaheim's physicians. We will update Jay's condition on Wednesday morning," Blues general manager Doug Armstrong said in a statement.

Hutton said he found out about the incident from Sabres defenseman Colin Miller who texted him last night.

"He told me what happened so I texted Colton Parayko [Blues defenseman] and he kind of filled me in a little bit," Hutton said. "At that point they still didn't know and he said he was kind of still shook up obviously and that's all he said. It's obviously pretty scary stuff."

Before signing with the Sabres, Hutton was teammates with Bouwmeester in St. Louis having spent two years with the Blues and still has a ton of respect for him.

"He was a guy, I think just as a friend too just the ultimate pro," Hutton said. "He takes unbelievable care of himself and obviously that shows, you see a guy getting the Cup first that's kind of the ultimate respect in hockey and a guy I think the whole hockey world shakes up."

This incident certainly puts things into perspective for some as Hutton reflects on the important things in life.

"We spent time at their house with their kids, he's got three little girls at home and we'd go over there for dinners all the time and stuff like that so you start thinking about the bigger picture," Hutton said. "Hockey's just a sport, there's a lot more to life than that."

Carter Hutton stays positive through Sabres challenging season

By Heather Prusak

WGRZ

February 12, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Things seemed pretty bad when Sabres starting goaltender Linus Ullmark went down. Carter Hutton was struggling and even went through a 12-game winless streak.

But lately things are looking up for Hutton as he has three wins in the last four starts. Part of that turnaround comes from staying positive even during another tough Sabres season which could be hard for some guys to do.

"I think the toughest thing sometimes is you can get surrounded with some of the pressures that come with it and the outside noise and just staying in the moment," Hutton said after practice on Wednesday. "There's a lot of positivity out there as well and I think that's what I try to revolve myself around."

Hutton showed resiliency and bounced back on Tuesday night against Detroit after the Red Wings scored 27 seconds into the game. He made 27 saves and stopped all 10 shots he faced in the third period.

"That game is a bit of a mirror image of his season actually where he showed us with some struggles in the middle of just being able to close out games together with us as a team," said head coach Ralph Krueger. "How he fought and worked hard off the ice and on the ice to get himself back into a space to compete at the level he's doing now and within that game yesterday it just shows the person he is. He's been a real important voice in our room."

"It's the best league in the world so there's gonna be times where even when you are working hard you're not getting the result so I think the biggest thing is just staying positive," Hutton said. "You can't really let things crack your shell."

Hutton was also thinking of his friend and former teammate, Blues defenseman Jay Bouwmeester after he collapsed last night on the bench with a cardiac episode.

Olofsson, Okposo could return Thursday

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

February 12, 2020

Victor Olofsson and Kyle Okposo could both be back in the lineup for the Buffalo Sabres against the Columbus Blue Jackets on Thursday, coach Ralph Krueger said.

Olofsson, who positioned himself as a potential Calder Trophy candidate with 16 goals and 35 points in 42 games, has been out since Jan. 2 with a lower-body injury. Okposo has missed six games with an upper-body ailment sustained on Jan. 30.

Both were in their regular homes for practice on Wednesday: Olofsson on the left wing alongside Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart, Okposo on the right wing next to Zemgus Girgensons and Johan Larsson. Olofsson was also back on the first power-play unit, manning the right flank.

"Victor Olofsson and Kyle Okposo both showed good signs here today," Krueger said. "We're going to assess post-practice and take a final look in the morning, but it looks like they're an option already for tomorrow. But we'll make that final call, again, tomorrow."

Olofsson returned to practice Saturday, while Okposo first joined the team for its morning skate on Tuesday. In each case, Krueger originally expected multiple practices to be necessary before the players would be reacclimated for game action.

"What we like is just how good the rehabs work here and how fit they feel within a couple of days," Krueger said. "I've seen this multiple times this year, so it's just a compliment to the work that's being done in the preparation for these players returning. We just like where they're at right now and it's looking good."

The Sabres did practice without forward Marcus Johansson, who took a maintenance day after tallying a goal and an assist in the win over Detroit on Tuesday. Krueger said Johansson is day-to-day with an upper-body injury and will be re-evaluated prior to Thursday's game.

Next up, Columbus

While the Sabres are getting healthier, the Blue Jackets have been struck hard by injuries.

It was announced Tuesday that All-Star defenseman Seth Jones will miss eight to 10 weeks after undergoing surgery to repair a fractured ankle. Today, forward Cam Atkinson was ruled out two to three weeks with an ankle sprain.

The Sabres will host the Blue Jackets looking to build on their 3-2 win over Detroit, which saw them erase deficits of 1-0 and 2-1 before pulling ahead in the third period. Krueger was pleased with the resiliency, but said the greater lesson is the need for a better start against a Blue Jackets team that ranks second in the NHL in goals against (137).

"We can't be accepting falling behind at home over and over again," Krueger said. "So, working for a lead tomorrow against a team as defensively powerful as Columbus will be extremely important. But we love the resiliency of the group yesterday and the reaction."

2000s Night is Thursday

The Sabres will celebrate the decade that brought us memorable back-to-back runs to the Eastern Conference Final, the Presidents' Trophy, and the inaugural Winter Classic.

Seventeen alumni are scheduled to attend, including Daniel Briere, Brian Campbell, Tim Connolly, Paul Gaustad, and Jason Pominville. Find the full list of alumni and more information on the festivities [here](#).

In the meantime, get in the spirit with looks back at some of the memorable moments from the decade:

Lines at practice

68 Victor Olofsson - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
13 Jimmy Vesey - 27 Curtis Lazar - 43 Conor Sheary
53 Jeff Skinner - 71 Evan Rodrigues - 67 Michael Frolik / 20 Scott Wilson
28 Zemgus Girgensons - 22 Johan Larsson - 21 Kyle Okposo

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

40 Carter Hutton
34 Jonas Johansson