



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Eichel vows ‘wheels won’t fall off’ Sabres as in past years

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

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BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Sabres captain Jack Eichel is doing everything within his power to prevent his team from falling into an all-too-familiar late-season rut.

The fifth-year player is enjoying a breakout season with a career-best 31 goals — seven of them game-winners — as he displays on-ice consistency.

And then there are continuing signs that the 23-year-old is maturing into a well-rounded leader.

Eichel might still show an occasional outburst of frustration, such as when he smashed his stick over Buffalo’s net in the closing moments of a 3-1 loss to Montreal last week. What’s been more apparent is the self-restraint Eichel has displayed in not allowing his emotions to roil into the following day.

“The biggest thing I think is being able to regroup,” he said, before pausing to gather his thoughts a day after the loss to Montreal.

“It’s not like last year,” Eichel said, referring to how Buffalo unraveled by turning a 17-6-2 start into a 33-39-10 finish that led to coach Phil Housley’s firing.

“We’ve been through these times where we take a couple of hits at this time of year ... and then all of a sudden the wheels fall off,” he added. “That’s not happening here.”

The following day, Eichel backed up his words by scoring 36 seconds into overtime of a 2-1 victory over Columbus.

The win might mean little in the big picture for a Sabres team that at 23-22-7 opened this week 10 points out of contention and is in jeopardy of extending the NHL’s longest active playoff drought to a ninth year.

And yet, the victory over Columbus was significant in how it briefly silenced a disgruntled fan base voicing its displeasure over a team displaying modest hints of development under its fifth coach and third general manager in six years.

Goalie Carter Hutton acknowledged the importance of the win by saying: “Everyone knows what’s going on. We’re not stupid. The outside, and the pressure that comes with the situation we’re in: So it was a big answer today.”

The Sabres spent much of last week careening toward a state of crisis after coming out of a 10-day break with home losses to Ottawa and Montreal.

The disgruntled masses gained a voice when 32-year-old fan Duane Steinel phoned into the Sabres’ flagship station, WGR-Radio, to deliver a three-plus-minute tirade on the franchise’s shortcomings. His criticisms ranged from questioning the Sabres’ inconsistencies to citing issues beyond the team’s control, such as an inability to print out-of-stock jerseys as part of the franchise’s silver anniversary celebrations.

The clip went viral on social media and was picked up by radio stations in Canada.

“I just want (the Sabres) to care. I just want them to matter again,” Steinel told The Associated Press on Monday, saying his frustrations were prompted by Buffalo’s 5-2 loss to Ottawa. “It was depressing. I just looked around in the arena, even when the game was tied, there was nobody cheering. The atmosphere was so bad, and it’s been like this for so long, man.”

Two nights later, the Sabres were booed off the ice against Montreal.

First-year coach Ralph Krueger can feel the fans' pain, even though he's trying to block it out so as not to distract from his message to the team.

"It's not that we're sticking our heads in the sand, and whatever noise is out there is out there," Krueger said.

"But I really don't let it into my head or my space because I need to work with this group on a daily basis as constructively as possible," he added. "Do fans deserve to boo us after games like Ottawa and Montreal? Yes. Do we need to take that? Yes. And it should fuel us to continue to work in the right direction."

Buffalo's season has been a series of peaks and valleys, with the Sabres following a 9-2-1 start with a 1-7-2 slump, before going 13-13-4 since.

Krueger blames the inconsistencies on the team failing to stick to fundamentals.

"Sometimes it takes pain like we're feeling right now to implement those (fundamentals) to become normal for us, and they aren't yet," Krueger said.

Eichel has been the Sabres' one consistent bright spot and is getting mentioned as an NHL MVP candidate despite Buffalo's struggles. He's fourth in the league in scoring and tied for seventh in points.

Eichel has been held without a point 12 times this season, and just three times in his past 33 games – a stretch in which he's combined for 23 goals and 23 assists.

Difficult as it might sound, Eichel insisted he can do more.

"Everyone needs to kind of look in the mirror and expect more out of themselves going forward. That includes me," he said.

Though hopeful about the future, Eichel acknowledged the team's inconsistencies have worn on him.

"Wouldn't it wear on you?" Eichel said. "Yeah, I think it wears on everyone. But that's my job as a hockey player, as a leader, as a person, to be able to find a way to regroup every day, come to work and get better."

Jimmy Vesey remains focused on helping Sabres as trade deadline approaches

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

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Jimmy Vesey is accustomed to the pressure and scrutiny. The 26-year-old winger was detested by fans in Nashville and Buffalo before he ever played an NHL game because he chose to sign with the New York Rangers as a free agent out of Harvard University in August 2016.

Vesey then played three years under the bright lights of the Big Apple, where he reached the second round of the Stanley Cup playoffs as a rookie. Yet even Vesey is learning to navigate the pressure-packed situation in Buffalo.

"We're looking still to find secondary scoring here," Vesey said following practice Monday. "Everyone wants to chip in. When it's not going your way, it's easy to try to cheat for offense and just worry about trying to score, but there's a lot of other areas of the game that are important."

Vesey got lost in his pursuit at addressing one of the Sabres' weaknesses. Cheating for offense made him less effective and resulted in him being a healthy scratch Jan. 12 in Detroit. He has since rediscovered the dog-on-a-bone relentlessness that made him first in line to play with Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart when training camp opened almost five months ago.

Now, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger is hoping Vesey can man the left wing on the top line until Victor Olofsson returns from a lower-body injury. The early returns are promising.

Vesey had three shots on goal in 17:56 of ice time in a 2-1 overtime win over the Columbus Blue Jackets on Saturday. He made precise passes, including one to Eichel in the slot with seven minutes remaining in regulation, and he created chaos by driving to the net. Vesey skated down the left wing and chipped the puck wide on a cross-ice pass from Eichel in the first period.

The Sabres have a 55.28% 5 on 5 shot differential with Vesey, Eichel and Reinhart on the ice together this season, compared to 44.29% when Zemgus Girgensons was on the top line. In addition to being a reliable defender, Vesey had 50 goals, 43 at even strength, during his three seasons in New York.

"It's always a combination of all the lines and the final picture we end up with, but we feel that Jimmy this time around really is relaxed and just playing his game," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "Seems to be settling in to that kind of a role, where he might have catered a little bit too much to Sam and Jack and gave up his own game. I just think what we saw was something he can build on and we can build on here until we get Olofsson back."

Vesey has six goals with eight assists for 14 points with a plus-12 rating in 48 games. His average ice time (13:43) is the lowest since his rookie season, and he has a career-low shooting percentage (8.3). Vesey didn't score a goal until his 21st game as a Sabre, and three of his six goals occurred in a three-game span from Nov. 25-29.

Earlier this season, Krueger often defended Vesey's production by citing the forward's impact without the puck, particularly on the penalty kill. One mistake illustrated how Vesey was struggling last month and may have resulted in him watching a game from the Little Caesars Arena press box.

During the third period of a 6-3 loss to Vancouver on Jan. 11, Vesey missed a poke check in the defensive zone and was slow to cover Brock Boeser on what turned into a one-timer goal. Vesey was scratched the following day against the Red Wings.

Injuries and roster construction have prevented the Sabres from having continuity within their lines and defense pairs. Krueger has used lineups featuring seven defensemen with 11 forwards and six defensemen with 12 forwards.

Vesey wouldn't use unpredictability as an excuse, though. He quickly pinpointed the reason behind his struggles, and he scored in the first period of a 4-1 win at Dallas on Jan. 16.

"The last couple games before break I was really skating better," Vesey said. "I think it's just sometimes you have to square yourself and get back to the basics, what got you here. It's such a long season. It can be easy sometimes to let your mind take over. When that happens, when you're worrying about everything else, it takes away from your game. Just try to put my head down and get back to work, and I think the best thing for me is when I'm skating and moving my feet, that's when I'm most effective."

Vesey has proven he can be a consistent threat at even strength. His 12.61 expected goals at 5 on 5 last season ranked second on the Rangers behind Chris Kreider. Vesey also logged the third-most 5 on 5 ice time among the team's forwards.

The Sabres' 5 on 5 play has fallen off since Olofsson's injury. Jeff Skinner, one of the NHL's top 5-on-5 goal scorers over the past nine seasons, has logged most of his ice time with Marcus Johansson and Michael Frolik since returning from an upper-body injury.

Skinner has zero goals in his past 14 games, and Krueger has been reluctant to reunite the \$72 million winger with Eichel and Reinhart. In addition to Skinner, Johansson and Conor Sheary are marred in slumps. The Sabres have scored two or fewer goals in each of their last four games.

"I think when you get down to this point in the season, teams tighten up," Skinner said. "You have to make sure you're trying to find ways to bury (chances), but in some situations, we have been generating quite a bit. Now it's just a matter of finishing those chances that we're creating."

Sabres General Manager Jason Botterill is scouring the trade market for a forward, particularly one with speed. Botterill already gave up assets for two rentals – Vesey and Frolik, both pending unrestricted free agents – over the past seven months. The former was acquired last July for a third-round draft pick in 2021.

A surge from Vesey could keep the Sabres' season afloat or it could lead to his early exit from Buffalo. He insists he hasn't given any thought to the Feb. 24 trade deadline. His focus is on building off what he showed Saturday against Columbus.

"No, it hasn't really crossed my mind," Vesey said when asked about the possibility of being traded again. "I'm just worried about the rest of the season with this team. We have 30 games left, and it's time for us to make a push. Everyone here is buying in. We're going to dial ourselves in to make a push."

Rasmus Dahlin, Johan Larsson miss Sabres practice for 'maintenance'

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

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The Sabres were missing two more players when they practiced Monday in KeyBank Center.

Defenseman Rasmus Dahlin and center Johan Larsson, both of whom were in the lineup for a 2-1 overtime win over Columbus on Saturday, sat out the on-ice session for "maintenance," according to coach Ralph Krueger.

Both players' availability will be determined Tuesday morning, hours before the Sabres face the Colorado Avalanche in KeyBank Center. The maintenance designation is noteworthy since Brandon Montour was a late scratch Saturday against the Blue Jackets after sitting out practice for the same reason Friday.

Montour (lower body) and Zach Bogosian (illness) both practiced Monday and could be available against the Avalanche. Winger Kyle Okposo (upper body), meanwhile, is "weeks away" from returning, Krueger said.

Dahlin had one assist and a shot on goal in 17:10 of ice time against the Blue Jackets, while Larsson won 10 of 13 faceoffs during his 14:07 of ice time. Their absence Monday forced Krueger to throw together make-shift lines and pairings in preparation for Colorado (28-16-6), which is second in the Central Division and has a plus-33 goal differential this season.

Dahlin, 19, has one goal with eight assists in his last 10 games, and his 74 points through his first 126 games are the fourth-most by a teenage defenseman in NHL history. He trails Phil Housley (132), Ray Bourque (79) and Rick Hampton (76).

Dahlin also is on pace for the first 50-point season by a Sabres defenseman since Garry Galley (54) in 1995-96, and he quarterbacked Buffalo's power play, which scored in back-to-back games before it did not receive an opportunity Saturday against Columbus.

Larsson, meanwhile, is arguably the Sabres' top forward option on the penalty kill and has shown significant improvement under Krueger. Larsson has four goals with eight assists and a plus-12 rating in 46 games. He has zero points in his last 17 games.

Krueger told the media following practice Monday that Montour was being assessed to determine his status, but the Sabres' coach expressed optimism that the 25-year-old defenseman will be able to face Colorado. Montour participated in warmups Saturday, only to be replaced in the lineup by Lawrence Pilut.

Montour has three goals with 10 assists and a plus-5 rating through 37 games. He missed the first 14 games of the season with a hand injury. Bogosian, meanwhile, was unavailable against Columbus because of an illness.

Forwards Vladimir Sobotka (knee) and Tage Thompson (shoulder), and defenseman Matt Hunwick (neck) are likely out for the season. Victor Olofsson and Linus Ullmark, both of whom are recovering from a lower-body injury, will not be available for the Sabres this week.

Olofsson is still week-to-week, and Ullmark is out the next three to four weeks. The Sabres have four games in six days this week: at home against Colorado on Tuesday, at home against Detroit on Thursday, at New York to play the Rangers on Friday and at home against Anaheim on Sunday.

Fan frustrations

Krueger has stressed the importance of the Sabres keeping the "picture small." He doesn't want them looking too far into the future or dwelling on past failures.

Jake McCabe repeated the sentiment, albeit with a different message, when he said following a 3-1 loss to Montreal last Thursday that the Sabres needed to "tune out" the media. Jeff Skinner explained Monday how each player has their own method of blocking out criticism.

Krueger is practicing what he's instructing his players. The Sabres' coach said Monday that he hasn't heard about the recent surge in fan outrage, though he acknowledged he heard the boos following losses to Ottawa and Montreal last week.

"I don't hear it," Krueger said. "I don't read or follow anything outside of what I know, which is what's going on here. I think the fans have been fantastic. They've been angry when we haven't played well. They deserve to do that, and they've been great when we're playing well. I don't spend any of my free time doing anything but working on the things in my control, and I'm the only one in this space with all the information. So, I know exactly what's going on within our group. I continue to enjoy the energy and the work ethic, but whatever noise is out there -- they're passionate, probably, but it doesn't get to my desk."

Award recipient

The Sabres announced Monday that Chris Panek was named the 35th recipient of the J. Michael Duffett Memorial Award, which is presented annually to the coach whose contributions to amateur hockey in Western New York "best exemplify the knowledge, teaching, love of the game and gentle humanity of Mike."

Panek will be presented with the award before puck drop Tuesday night in KeyBank Center. According to a news release, Panek's coaching career has spanned 25 years, with his experience ranging from the midget to high school levels. In addition to his players reaching the college level, Panek has worked with three who reached the professional level: Tim Kennedy, Chris Mueller and Mike Ratchuk.

Panek played at SUNY Plattsburgh before competing in the ECHL and AHL. He was selected by the Los Angeles Kings with the seventh pick in the 1987 NHL Supplemental Draft. Panek's father, Frank, was the sixth recipient of the J. Michael Duffett Memorial Award.

Mike Duffett, a coach with the Buffalo Bisons and the Amherst Hockey Association, was working in the Sabres' hockey department under Scotty Bowman at the time of his death. The team established the award in 1984.

Montour returns to practice on Monday

By Brayton Wilson

WGR 550

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After missing Saturday afternoon's matchup with the Columbus Blue Jackets with a lower-body injury, Buffalo Sabres defenseman Brandon Montour was back on the ice with his teammates for practice on Monday.

The 25-year-old took Friday's practice off for a maintenance day, and ended up taking the ice for the pregame warmup on Saturday. However, he ended up being a late scratch, which resulted in Lawrence Pilut being a late addition to the lineup in a 2-1 overtime win at KeyBank Center.

After a day off for the team on Sunday, Montour was feeling a little better as he took to the ice for Monday's session.

"I think it's something that's a little [bit of a] weird issue, but I think we're going to take it day-by-day here and see how we feel," Montour said after practice.

While we may never know what is ailing Montour, he is not sure whether or not that this injury will be a short-and-sweet recovery, or it will be something that will have to be managed for the rest of the season.

"Obviously [if it's] short-term, I want to get in this as quick as I can," Montour said. "Obviously I want to get into a game and feel the most comfortable as I can and to be able to contribute and play my best hockey."

Montour missed the start of the 2019-20 season after a hand injury forced him out of the first 14 games. Saturday was the first game Montour had missed since returning from his early season injury.

In 37 games played this season, Montour has three goals and 10 assists for 13 points, and has shown his potential of being a long-term solution for the Sabres on the blue line. His ability to move the puck in transition, his offensive instincts, and to plug him in to just about any role, even at forward, has his coaches liking what his future has in store in Buffalo.

"Brandon is one of the really good stories of the aggressive gapping game that we want to play, the pressure we want to put on people defensively all over the ice, and we do it when we do it well. Everybody in this room feels it when that's happening down there on the ice," Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger said of his young defenseman after practice. "Does it always lead to wins? No, but you can start to feel the Sabres hockey we want to play defensively. Offensively his mobility, his skating, his willingness to attack is exciting, but for us a coaches, it's not the part that the fans necessarily study is the game away from the puck. That's where his improvement has been amazing. He's got a total buy-in here to what we're doing. He's an unbelievably conditioned athlete, so he's not only athletic but his work that he does, his conditioning base is at a high level too. We've got a great future with Brandon."

As a group defensively, the team has been challenged throughout the season with a number of NHL defensemen that have been looking for that chance to get into the lineup. There have been a number of players on the blue line that have come in and out of the lineup, whether it is injury based or just one player's time to come out of the lineup for a game or two.

On Monday, the Sabres were without defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, who was given a maintenance day. Krueger said following practice that this is just minimal management of his body at this point of the season, and that he would be further evaluated on Tuesday.

With bodies coming in and out of the lineup, the group is constantly getting a new taste of playing with different pairings and switching things up.

"I think we're learning," Montour said. "It's a long season, you've got ups-and-downs. The consistency with playing fast, playing aggressively could be a little better, but that's something with a new team and younger guys and trying to get that experience to compete with the best teams every night I think is a big thing. It's one thing

that we need to realize that there's 30 games left and every game is important. We need to find a way to manage that and play our best hockey.

"I think guys should be used to it by now. You never know what the lineup might be or who's not practicing or who's not playing, but I think you just play with what you've got. If you're short on a man or you're up a man, it is what it is. So I think guys do a pretty good job of managing that."

Also missing from practice on Monday was forward Johan Larsson, who was also given a maintenance day to manage his body at this stage of the season.

With Dahlin and Larsson missing from practice on Monday, practice saw a lot of the lines and defensive pairings rotating. The only two lines that were consistently working together on Monday were:

Vesey - Eichel - Reinhart
Sheary - Johansson - Frolik

The Sabres will meet Tuesday morning before their evening matchup with the Colorado Avalanche at KeyBank Center. Faceoff is set for 7 p.m. on WGR.

As trade deadline approaches, Sabres' pending unrestricted free agents face uncertain futures

By John Vogl

The Athletic

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BUFFALO, N.Y. – The smile spread across Michael Frolik's face as he thought back to the summer of 2015. The Florida resident was an unrestricted free agent for the first time, and all the NHL general managers were camped out nearby for the draft.

Quite a few wanted to talk to him, so Frolik and his agent visited hotels for chats about contracts and team fit. The right winger parlayed his 19-goal outing with Winnipeg into a raise of \$1 million per season, signing a five-year, \$21.5 million deal with Calgary.

"I had one of the better seasons for me and the summer was fun," Frolik said. "I signed for five years and it goes by quick, you know? Definitely, the time flies. Here I am again."

As Frolik approaches UFA status for the second time, he admits he's uneasy. It's been a rough year with a lack of playing time in Calgary and a trade to Buffalo that hasn't yet yielded success. He has one goal and one assist in his first nine games with the Sabres, giving him six goals and 12 points through 47 games this season.

At this rate, the number of GMs scheduling hotel talks with the 31-year-old will decrease.

"It's in your head a little bit, for sure," Frolik said in KeyBank Center. "You've got it in the mind."

Frolik is not alone. The Sabres have six other pending UFAs – Conor Sheary, Jimmy Vesey, Zemgus Girgensons, Johan Larsson, Zach Bogosian and injured Vladimir Sobotka – and the final 30 games will help determine their future.

"It's obviously something you think about, but you don't think about it every day," Sheary said. "It's important that you try to play your own game and be consistent in your game. I think I've been trying to do my best at doing that.

"Everything will fall into place when it's supposed to whether it's here in Buffalo or somewhere else. You're kind not in control of that until the summer, so it's something you don't want to worry about right now."

That's easier said than done, especially with the trade deadline looming Feb. 24. Sabres center Marcus Johansson went through the anxiety of being a UFA last year, and he admits life is different when someone is playing for a contract.

"You try not to think about it," Johansson said. "All you can do is play hockey, and whatever happens, happens, I guess. But it's definitely a little different."

The fact is players need to perform during the final year of their deal, especially in Buffalo. Since 2013-14, there have been 32 Sabres who never saw NHL rinks again after their contract expired. Players such as Andrej Meszaros, Benoit Pouliot, Victor Antipin, Jacob Josefson, Matt D'Agostini and Linus Omark failed to stand out on the struggling Sabres and had to find work overseas or hang up their skates completely.

This year's crop of UFAs isn't performing much better than any of those players. Only Girgensons and Larsson are on pace to have better numbers than last year, and that's still only about 20 total points.

"It is my first time being a UFA at the end of the year, and I just think when you worry about stuff outside of your control then it only gets in the way," Vesey said. "I've tried to just keep my nose the grindstone and keeping grinding out the year. I can only control how I play the last 30 games, so that's what my focus is."

In order to stay in the league or avoid a big pay decrease, the production is going to have to rise. Vesey is on pace for 10 goals after averaging 17 during the previous three seasons. Sheary is heading toward 12 goals, which would be a drop for the fourth straight year. Bogosian has sat out 12 of the past 20 games. Larsson and

Girgensons have performed their roles well, but the middle class is disappearing in the NHL as teams look to get younger and cheaper on their bottom six.

"You just play good and see what happens," Larsson said.

The opportunity to finish strong is there. Frolik is getting second-line minutes next to Johansson after being an afterthought in Calgary. Sheary filled out that line during Monday's practice. Vesey is again skating next to Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart.

"When you're in a contract year, you don't want to be playing eight minutes and not have much opportunity to do something," Frolik said. "So far, the ice time is much higher for me than I was used to this season. It's actually nice when you can be sweating after the game, you know? It feels good.

"Your role feels a little meaningful here and a little bigger. Hopefully, I can prove to everybody that I can do that."

Frolik needed a trade to get a bigger role, and that's a possibility for the other UFAs. Though only Bogosian made The Athletic's latest "NHL Trade Big Board" at No. 23, maybe teams will take a chance on him or the others.

"Every year, I think it's the same: The deadline is the deadline," Girgensons said. "At any moment during a season you can be traded, and I never really pay attention too much to it. I don't look for it. I don't search for it. Whatever happens, happens."

While that's true, the UFAs still have some say in their future. Certainly, none of them want this to be the end.

"I still feel I can play for years in this league," Frolik said, "and I just want to give myself a little better opportunity to have a better second half in the season, and hopefully I will here."

DGB weekend power rankings: Escaping the mushy middle, the Battle of Alberta erupts and Buffalo loses hope

By Sean McIndoe

The Athletic

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We're a week clear of the All-Star break, which means we're officially done with bye weeks for another year. We're into the homestretch, where seasons are made or lost, and that should mean some movement in the rankings. This week, though, not so much, hopefully for the last time.

We've touched on this before, and it's become a season-wide trend. This time last year, there were only six teams that had yet to appear in either ranking. This season, there are an even dozen. The top five have been stable, with just 11 teams showing up. But the bottom five has been a virtual log jam, with just eight entrants all season long.

What's the deal? I think there are three options. The first is that I'm bad at this; I'm being overly conservative, too reliant on preconceived expectations and too slow to react to what teams are doing. The second is that I'm actually good at this, and unlike last year I'm not overreacting to short-term streaks and narratives that don't last. And the third is that this has just been a weird season in the parity era, with even more teams than usual crammed into the middle of the pack. My vote is with option three, but your mileage may vary.

But here's a more interesting question: Which of those dozen no-shows has the best chance of showing up in the top or bottom five at some point during the rest of the way?

I think we can divide our candidates into four tiers. The first are the teams that could conceivably make a push into the top five by stringing together a few strong weeks down the stretch. The strongest of those nominees are the Stars, who were right around the top five in the standings in terms of total points a few weeks back before cooling slightly. They had a lousy start, nearly cracking the bottom five a few weeks in, which means they've been great ever since. If they can make a late run at the Blues on top of the Central, they've got a real shot.

If we're feeling especially optimistic, other candidates to make a case for the top five could include the Canucks and Flames, either of whom could still pull away in the Pacific and maybe the Panthers, who've been quietly solidifying their playoff credentials over the last few months (but are stuck in a brutal division and will find it tough to even get home ice, so they're a serious long shot).

Tier two are the teams who could make a run at the bottom five, and they're a little easier to find. The Sabres are the obvious candidate, and we'll have more on them in a bit. The Rangers are right in the same points range, although without as much sky-is-falling momentum. And then there's the Canadiens, who continue to wallow and have now apparently reached the stage of hopelessness where they're sending a key piece of the future out of town for a reset.

Tier three are the teams that just seem locked into the middle of the standings. They're good enough that they're unlikely to collapse down to the depths, but also don't seem like threats to shoot up the standings, partly because they've already given up too much ground. I'd put the Flyers and Coyotes there, and after some early-season stumbles the Hawks probably deserve a spot too. I'm also going to somewhat hesitantly put the Jets in this tier; despite lots of signs that they're a bad team being held up by excellent goaltending, they've banked enough points that they should be safe barring a total collapse.

That leaves just one team for tier four: The Oilers. I have no idea. Could they win the Pacific going away? Absolutely – they're playing well lately and they have Connor McDavid. Could they blow a tire and plummet down the standings? Absolutely – they're the Oilers. I've pretty much given up on trying to figure out what this franchise will do. You're on your own, Edmonton fans.

(And for those about to ask "What about my team ...": The Knights, Hurricanes, Leafs and Predators all cracked the top five in October but not since, while the Avs and Islanders have been in recently. And the Blue Jackets made a single bottom-five appearance in Week 1, the Wild made several in the first half and the Ducks were in just a few weeks back.)

There's your look at our dirty dozen of season-long ranking no-shows. At least you can't say we never mentioned you. Now on to the real thing ...

Road to the Cup

The five teams that look like they're headed towards a summer of keg stands and fountain pool parties.

This moment from Saturday night looked like it could have big implications not just for the Rangers, but several potential trade partners on our top five list and beyond:

Early reports are that the injury may not be serious, meaning everyone can breathe a little easier.

5. Pittsburgh Penguins (33-14-5, +31 true goals differential*) – I haven't been able to get them any higher than fifth yet, but at some point, they may leave me no choice. Yesterday's win in Washington was impressive and is the kind of statement game you can only have when everyone is giving 100 percent on every play.

OK, fine, almost everyone ...

4. Tampa Bay Lightning (32-15-5, +41) – They've rolled off three more wins, although those came during their California road trip. Go pick on someone your own size. This week it's back home for a bit of a test against the Knights, Penguins and Islanders.

3. St. Louis Blues (31-14-8, +20) – They drop out of the top spot after three weeks, taking regulation losses in three of four. They've now won just five of twelve in the second half, flipping the script on last year's run. There's no need to panic since 5-5-2 isn't exactly going ice cold and the Avs and Stars haven't gained all that much ground, so the Central still feels relatively secure. But we're keeping an eye on the champs.

Also, this piece from Thomas Steen on his son's 1000th game was excellent.

2. Boston Bruins (31-10-12, +47) – I keep looking for reasons to sneak the Lightning ahead of them, and the Bruins keep doing just enough to hold them off. This week, that meant looking impressive coming off the break, with a pair of road wins in Winnipeg and Minnesota and just two goals allowed. They've got a hot Canucks team tomorrow but then hit a two-week stretch where none of the opponents are all that scary. If they're going to manage to pull away in the Atlantic, this might be the time.

1. Washington Capitals (35-13-5, +34) – We don't overreact to single-game outcomes when we're 50+ games into a season, so we won't panic over yesterday's loss to the Penguins. The rose-colored glasses view is that it was two good teams, it was a close game, Matt Murray played great and the Pens got the one extra bounce. But the result left the Caps with just a four-point cushion on top of the Metro, and Pittsburgh has a game in hand. They've got what should be a gimme against the Kings tomorrow, then it's onto a tough-ish stretch of schedule, so buckle up.

*Goals differential without counting shootout decisions like the NHL does for some reason.

Not ranked: Flames and Oilers – But if it were a top-five list for entertainment value, they'd be pushing for top spot.

Any concerns that Wednesday's showdown between Zack Kassian and Matthew Tkachuk had snuffed out the rekindled rivalry were put to rest on Saturday. You've seen the highlights by now, but let's enjoy it one more time.

Somewhat amazingly, it was the first goalie fight in Battle of Alberta history, and the first in the NHL at all since 2013. All part of a night that saw 11 goals, three fights, one penalty shot and some petulant goalie-chirping. Not bad for an evening's entertainment.

The Oilers won, by the way. That mattered too since it moved them up to second in a Pacific where the log jam is starting to separate just a bit.

We get one more Flames/Oilers game during the season, although we'll have to wait until the final weekend for that one. After that, we get seven games in the first round. No, I don't care what the standings say, just make it happen. We haven't had a Battle of Alberta playoff series since 1991 and it's time for the NHL to do the right thing. Give us these two teams for seven games. I don't even care if one of them sweeps, make them play the full seven and let's see how crazy it can get.

The bottom five

The five teams that are headed towards the best lottery odds and lots of Alexis Lafreniere junior highlight reels.

I'm going to throw this out there because I found it interesting. My old pal Bill Barnwell asked this question on Twitter on Friday:

The answer for the NHL is "nobody," right? I'm not even sure I can imagine that many scenarios in the recent past where you'd pick a coach over a player. Maybe Mike Babcock in that first year in Toronto where he'd just arrived and the team didn't have any good players, but that might be it. And that doesn't mean that coaches aren't important, because they are. They're just not as important, or as hard to find, as elite talent. There are guys you could name in the NBA or NFL that probably pass this test, but hockey? Nope.

I said as much in a reply to Bill, and a few fans pushed back. The most common suggestion was Barry Trotz, and yeah, I can kind of see it. But are you really going to take the 57-year-old Trotz over 22-year-old Mathew Barzal if you had to pick one? I don't think I would. I'm not taking Joel Quenneville over Jonathan Huberdeau. Rod Brind'Amour? Craig Berube? Maybe you have to at least think about it, but in the end, it's easier to find a new coach than a new top-line player.

Am I wrong? A few people think I am, so I'm willing to hear the case. Would you keep your team's coach over its very best player?

5. San Jose Sharks (22-27-4, -42) – Just a brutal week all around, with losses in two of three and another major injury to a key star. This time it's Tomas Hertl, out for the year with a torn ACL. He joins Logan Couture on the sidelines as a nightmare season somehow keeps finding a way to go from bad to worse.

4. Ottawa Senators (18-24-10, -30) – OK first of all, they played the Leafs on Saturday and this happened during that game and even though it doesn't directly involve a Senators player we need to talk about it:

I'm pretty sure I've never seen a player do that during the play before. I'm not sure I thought it was possible. But I'm vaguely impressed. I can't get my kids to tie their boots before they leave for school, so apparently, Marner had better parents.

In actual Senators news, this piece from Hailey Salvian was an excellent look at Mark Borowiecki, the life of an NHL family and what it means to be on the block at the trade deadline.

3. New Jersey Devils (18-24-9, -46) – I thought that this was a lot of fun. It's been a rough season for Devils fans, so why not spend some time getting mad about Jason Arnott and backup goaltenders?

2. Los Angeles Kings (19-39-5, -34) – Kings fans, how would you feel about this happening?

I mean, the first response is obviously "good luck with that, Montreal," because a second-round pick to rent a 36-year-old with eight goals seems silly. But a few weeks from now, in what figures to be a slow market, I guess you never say never. If you're a Kings fan and you see that deal materialize, are you ticked off that your team couldn't extract any value from the situation? Or do you just shrug and accept that it wasn't working in L.A., the relationship had to end, and whatever comes next isn't worth worrying about?

1. Detroit Red Wings (12-37-4, -93) – The Wings haven't been in the playoff race since October, so their fans have had plenty of time to look ahead to the trade deadline. With three weeks to go, the consensus seems to be that everyone other than the young core is available – we're just not sure if anyone wants to bother making a bid. Max Bultman dove into who makes the most sense to move. It's an interesting read, featuring some old names (the annual Luke Glendening watch) and some new (raise your hand if you completely forgot Robby Fabbri was a Wing now), but only one veteran that seems like a sure thing.

Not ranked: Buffalo Sabres – This week felt like a tipping point. The Sabres have been bad for a long time, and are headed towards missing the playoffs for a ninth straight year. That's not good, and nobody was going to be happy with the result. But up until this week, it felt like they might be able to ride it out, and at least get to the offseason without the torches and pitchforks coming out.

That won't happen now, partly thanks to Duane, the frustrated fan whose sports radio rant seems to have struck a nerve. The Sabres' apparent attempt to go on the defensive has, predictably, only made things worse.

The local media has already got the knives out. So what's next for what now looks like, as our own John Vogl put it, a broken organization?

Not the playoffs, barring a miracle, although a late-season run would certainly take some of the pressure off. But what if the Sabres continue to fade, and Jack Eichel spends the last two months of a breakout season that should have him in the Hart race playing meaningless games while fans check the lottery odds instead of the standings?

I'm not sure. I don't think anybody is. Most of the anger from the fan base is being directed to the very top, at Terry and Kim Pegula, but they're not going anywhere. Jason Botterill might be, after almost three years on the job. Ralph Krueger is presumably safe after just one season, although a new GM might want his own guy. For most teams, the playbook here is to bring in some popular former player to serve as a team president or figurehead and deflect some of the criticism with memories of happier times. Would Sabre fans fall for that old trick? I'm not sure they would. It didn't work with Pat LaFontaine a few years ago, but maybe Chris Drury or somebody else shakes free.

We'll see. There's a strong appetite for change in Buffalo, and the Pegulas may find that standing pat isn't an option. Blockbuster trades are hard to make when you don't have much value to offer. Free agency hasn't worked out great for this team in the Pegula era. Marketing slogans aren't going to cut it. And they can't make this all go away by ordering people not to talk about it.

In the short term, nothing's going to help apart from winning. They took a step in that direction with Saturday's overtime upset of the red hot Blue Jackets, so maybe that's something they can build on. It's not much, but it's progress. This week brings a tough one with the Avs tomorrow, but that's followed by a string of four very winnable games featuring the Ducks, Rangers and Red Wings twice. Win all of those and ... well, you're still too far out to pretend it's a race. But at least the Duane's of the world may not be as tempted to pick up the phone.

Good luck, Buffalo. The fans deserve better. It's just getting hard to see a clear path to them getting there.

Jimmy Vesey focused on Sabres, not thinking about trade deadline

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 3, 2020

BUFFALO – The left winger beside top center Jack Eichel and Sam Reinhart has become a revolving-door position since Victor Olofsson suffered a lower-body injury last month.

Rookie Rasmus Asplund started off subbing for Olofsson. Jimmy Vesey took a brief turn before Zemgus Girgensons enjoyed the longest run.

Last week, Evan Rodrigues and Jeff Skinner, Eichel's partner most of last season, moved up for about a period.

Now, Vesey, 26, is back on the No. 1 line filling in for Olofsson, one of the NHL's top rookies.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger promoted Vesey for Saturday afternoon's 2-1 overtime victory against the Columbus Blue Jackets, skating him 17 minutes, 56 seconds, his third-highest total this season. The American will likely play there again Tuesday against the Colorado Avalanche inside KeyBank Center.

During his short stint on the top line in January, Krueger said Vesey got away from the style that made him successful.

"Jimmy, this time around, is really relaxed and just playing his game and seems to be settling into that kind of a role where he might've catered a little bit too much to Sam and Jack and gave up his own game," Krueger said following Monday's practice. "I just think what we saw was something he can build on and we can build on here until we get Olofsson back."

Olofsson, who has scored 16 goals in 42 games this season, is still week-to-week, meaning Vesey, an unrestricted free agent following the season, has an opportunity to remain with Eichel for a notable stretch.

Perhaps that will ignite Vesey. This could be his best chance to impress the Sabres before the Feb. 24 trade deadline.

Vesey said getting dealt "hasn't really crossed my mind."

"I'm just worried about the rest of the season with this team," said Vesey, whose Sabres rank sixth in the Atlantic Division. "We got 30 games left, and it's time for us to make a push. Everyone here is buying in. We're gonna dial ourselves in to make a push."

Vesey's first season here has been a bit underwhelming. When the Sabres traded the New York Rangers a third-round pick in 2021 for the Harvard product on July 1, he was expected to provide offense and showcase growth.

He scored 17 goals, including 16 at even strength, in each of the last two seasons. In a contract season with new opportunities available, his first 20-goal campaign seemed possible.

So far, Vesey's biggest impact has been on the defensive side, killing penalties and developing into one of the Sabres' top checkers.

He did not score his first goal until Nov. 25, his 21st appearance. He has scored six times in his last 28 appearances, a pace in line with his normal production.

"In the last 25 or so games, I think I'm starting to put up better numbers," said Vesey, who has a team-high plus-12 rating this season. "Obviously, at the start of the year, I think I would've liked to chip in more, but the team was winning.

"Now we're looking for secondary scoring. I think I'm focused on that but also my consistency defensively has been sound all year."

Consistent offensive contributions from Vesey could help the Sabres get back in the playoff chase. Eichel, Olofsson, Reinhart and Skinner have combined to score 51% of the Sabres' goals this season.

Vesey, a healthy scratch Jan. 12, has looked better since sitting out for the first time this season.

"The last couple games before break I was really skating better," he said. "But, yeah, I think ... sometimes just square yourself up and get back to the basics that got you here. I think such a long season, it can be easy sometimes to let your mind take over. I think when that happens, when you're worrying about everything else, then it takes away from your game."

Vesey, like most of the Sabres, has moved around the lineup since their scorching start ended in early November.

For the opening month, the Sabres enjoyed remarkable stability, showcasing the same lines and defense pairs most games. Since then, however, Krueger has constantly mixed up his trios and combos, often dressing an extra defenseman.

"It seems like we've gone 11 and seven a lot," Vesey said. "But it's more ice time for the forwards so there's no excuses. We're all playing at a high level. We got to block that stuff out and whoever we're on the ice with we have a job to do. I think going we got to dial ourselves in and grind out some points."

Sabres' Rasmus Dahlin, Johan Larsson miss practice

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 3, 2020

BUFFALO – Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin and center Johan Larsson had maintenance days today and will be evaluated prior to Tuesday's home game against the Colorado Avalanche, coach Ralph Krueger said.

Meanwhile, defenseman Brandon Montour, a late scratch with a lower-body injury for Saturday afternoon's 2-1 win over the Columbus Blue Jackets, practiced today.

"Montour, we gave it a good shot today, and he's just being assessed right now," Krueger said inside KeyBank Center. "But these are all minimal management of body situations. Everybody has the possibility of being available tomorrow, but we won't know until the morning."

In other injury news, Krueger said he spoke to Kyle Okposo, who suffered an upper-body injury Thursday, earlier today.

"We're optimistic that these last few days have gone well," he said. "But we're definitely still a few weeks away."

Krueger said last week Okposo, who has a scary history of concussions, did not suffer another head injury.

Sabres defenseman Zach Bogosian, who was sick last week, practiced today.

Frustrating times for Sabres fans

By Stu Boyar

WGRZ

February 3, 2020

BUFFALO, N.Y. — These are frustrating times for Sabres fans once again. The team is ten points out of the last playoff spot with 30 games left in the regular season.

Unless the Sabres get red hot they will miss the playoffs for the ninth straight season.

Fans have voiced their displeasure in several ways, and at least two have gone viral. One a song to Jason Botterill by Melody Martin and in a rant on WGR radio by a caller name Duane Steinel.

The Sabres understand the frustration; however, they simply cannot afford to pay too much attention to it as their focus remains on trying to get into the playoffs.

There are 30 games left in the regular season for the Sabres, 15 at home including six of the next seven.

Positive attitude, extra work prepared Hutton to resume starting role

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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Following Carter Hutton's 23-save victory over the Columbus Blue Jackets on Saturday, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said the win itself was secondary to the work the goalie had put in to prepare for it.

Hutton had only made three starts since the beginning of December prior to Linus Ullmark's injury, which occurred during the third period against Ottawa last Tuesday. He's stopped 49 of 52 shots in two starts since, good for a .942 save percentage.

The results, Krueger said, are a testament Hutton's attitude and work with assistant coach Mike Bales.

"A lot of time talking about solutions," Bales said when asked about the process. "Looking at different things on ice, different stuff from technical, tactical [standpoints] and a few off-ice things. ... It was definitely a plan and a process in place to help Carter get back to where he wanted to be."

Hutton opened the season with a 6-0-0 record, including back-to-back shutouts (one of which set a franchise record), but a road loss to the New York Rangers on Oct. 24 began a stretch of 12 starts without a win for the goaltender. The run coincided with strong play from Ullmark, who took on the No. 1 role.

There were other factors at play outside of Hutton's individual performance. He had multiple 40-save performances decided in overtime. Team defense is always an influence on a goalie's statistics, which Krueger has noted.

All that said, Hutton spoke repeatedly about controlling what he could control and supporting Ullmark to the best of his ability. That wasn't just talk.

"He was a really good teammate, first and foremost," Bales said. "He's a really good person and obviously he'd like to be in the net, but both goalies understand there's one net and when they're not in the net, they're cheering the other guy on. I know sometimes for people it's hard to believe that you're sitting there on the bench and you're hoping your partner does well, but we talk about focusing on stuff he can control.

"If you're sitting there worrying about how the other guy's playing or hoping he has a bad game, I mean, that's just negative energy and that doesn't help you out any. Just going in and controlling what you can control, which is showing up every day and being a good teammate, working hard, and treating your practices like they're games so when your chance does come, you're prepared and you're ready to perform."

Staying prepared in the meantime meant, as Hutton put it, "chipping away" at different areas every day to continue building his game. Work for a goalie includes video sessions and pre- and post-practice drills. Even during in-practice drills, a goaltender might have a particular skill he's working on.

Bales thought Hutton looked particularly strong in the two practices when the team returned from the All-Star break. He stepped in for Ullmark during the team's first game back, stopping all four of the shots he faced.

"When Carter went in, I knew he was going to do the job for us," Bales said.

Johansson staying ready

While Hutton has assumed the starting job, backup duties have belonged to 24-year-old Jonas Johansson. The Sabres have back-to-back games on Thursday and Friday, at home against Detroit and in New York against the Rangers, signaling a potential opportunity for the rookie to make his NHL debut.

Bales spoke about the process of readying Johansson, who was an All-Star in the AHL this season, for that possibility.

"He has some confidence coming up here," he said. "I think it's just working with him to maintain that confidence. JJ works so hard in practice and he tries to stay really sharp with that.

"I think the main thing is just let them go out and play and be themselves, try not to tinker it too much and just let them get comfortable a little bit with the NHL and the speed and the releases and how are things a little bit different. But you're obviously not trying to stress him out too much about anything, just let him go out and be himself and there's a reason he's under contract with the Sabres because everybody believes he can play. He's here and he's looked really good in practice."

Monday's practice

Rasmus Dahlin and Johan Larsson stayed off the ice for maintenance days. Brandon Montour did participate in practice after being a late scratch for the game against Columbus.

The status of all three players for Tuesday's home game against the Colorado Avalanche will be determined in the morning, Krueger said.