



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*January 14, 2021*

## **Sabres prepared for new 'norm' of playing in front of no fans**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 14, 2021

The puck will drop on a 56-game season Thursday night inside KeyBank Center, 10 months after the Buffalo Sabres last played a game.

A back-to-back series against the Washington Capitals will begin a truncated schedule in which the Sabres compete against the same seven divisional opponents eight times apiece until the regular-season finale May 8. When the puck drops at 7 p.m., Jack Eichel and company will be playing to a different soundtrack than the one they have grown accustomed to in the National Hockey League.

After the pregame music playlist is done and the national anthems are played, the Sabres will face Alex Ovechkin's Capitals with the audio of crowd noise blaring inside the arena. The sounds of clattering sticks, skates stopping on freshly cut ice, pucks slamming against the boards and trash talk will be enhanced without fans in the building.

The eerie scene will prevent the Sabres from feeding off the crowd's audible gasps and raucous cheers, creating another potential challenge while playing amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's very intimate," said Sabres center Cody Eakin, who played in front of no fans while in the playoff bubble with the Winnipeg Jets. "In there you can hear the skates cracking, guys chirping. You don't have the fan support to give you that momentum off the kill, the power play or some zone time, but you have to generate that off the bench. I think there are pros and cons. You can hear linemates talking and on the other side of that you can hear guys talking back and stuff like that."

For the Sabres to snap their nine-year playoff drought, they must maintain their home-ice advantage. There is a competitive edge for the home team, with or without fans. Coach Ralph Krueger can dictate matchups by having the second line change and any opportunity to not travel during the pandemic should be viewed as a plus.

The Sabres' 20-11-4 record at home ranked 11th in the NHL last season. Their struggles on the road, though, were an area of focus for Krueger this offseason, as his players went 10-20-4 away from KeyBank Center before the season was halted March 12.

The challenge ahead is exacerbated by the unprecedented, long offseason and a short training camp, as the Sabres have only been on the ice together since Jan. 1. There haven't been exhibition games and the second intrasquad scrimmage was mostly noncontact in response to the season-ending injury suffered by Zemgus Girgensons.

Krueger had to quickly implement any adjustments to his systems and introduce those principles to his new players, most notably Eakin, Taylor Hall and Eric Staal. Those three, along with Tobias Rieder, competed in the most recent Stanley Cup Playoffs and can provide their teammates with insight into how to navigate an unusual game environment.

Krueger also had fake crowd noise played during the Sabres' scrimmage on Saturday.

"I think it will take a few minutes to kind of get acclimatized to that, but psychologically, we're ready," said Krueger. "We've spoken about it a lot. ... We didn't play in the playoffs, but there isn't a player that didn't watch multiple playoff games and kind of got used to what that means. In the end, we know our fans, Sabres fans, will be watching and will be glued to their TV sets.

"The competitive spirit will rise and will become the norm – which we would prefer it not to be, but it is for now and let's deal with it."

The Sabres have 10 games in 18 days during January – their first road series begins Monday in Philadelphia – and will include four games in 11 days against the Capitals, who have a new head coach in Peter Laviolette and a familiar addition on the blue line in former Boston Bruins defenseman Zdeno Chara.

The focus, though, will be on the Sabres' new-look roster, most notably the union of Eichel and Hall on the top line. Eichel, entering his third season as team captain, cautioned that it's impossible to predict what lies ahead.

"I think first, it's important to not have too many expectations on what you think things are going to be like, because I find that in a situation like this, and a world we're living in, there's obviously going to be a lot of curveballs thrown at us throughout the season," said Eichel. "It's definitely going to be different. I'm just trying to help our team prepare as much as we can, just try and be as good as we can on opening night."

#### Injury updates

Center Curtis Lazar (lower body) returned to practice Wednesday and is expected to be in the Sabres' lineup for the season opener. Kyle Okposo (lower body), on the other hand, remains day to day and his status for the game is uncertain. Krueger told reporters Okposo will be evaluated Thursday morning.

The Sabres' coaches also don't plan to reveal their starting goaltender until after the morning skate.

#### Taxi squad

Casey Mittelstadt won't be heading to Rochester when the Sabres' season begins.

Mittelstadt, drafted eighth overall by the Sabres in 2017, was one of five players assigned to the team's taxi squad, joining forward Rasmus Asplund, goalie Jonas Johansson and defensemen Brandon Davidson and Will Borgen.

Every NHL team can carry a four-to-six-man taxi squad this season. These players will serve as reinforcements in the event of a Covid-19 positive test or injury. They will practice and travel with the team, although every player will not be taken on road trips.

Jack Quinn, the Sabres' most recent first-round draft pick, was notably absent from the taxi-squad additions and practice Wednesday. Instead, the 19-year-old skated with a small group at LECOM Harborcenter while team brass decides what's next for Quinn.

"Again, right now, the full focus is on the roster for tomorrow and trying to figure out the health situation around players, but we're keeping everybody fit in and around different ways with Harborcenter and Rochester is kicking off Friday, so lots of options," said Krueger. "But we haven't made a final decision yet on Jack. ... He did skate with the taxi squad, where we will have him positioned eventually."

#### Number changes

Dylan Cozens took a page from the Eichel rookie handbook Tuesday when the 19-year-old forward officially changed his number from 42 to 24, which Cozens wore during his junior career with the Western Hockey League's Lethbridge Hurricanes.

Cozens, drafted seventh overall by the Sabres in 2019, has worn 42 with the Sabres since he first arrived in Buffalo for development camp. He is expected to make his NHL debut against the Capitals on Thursday night.

Riley Sheahan, who recently signed a one-year contract with the team, changed his number from 38 to 15. Sheahan initially joined the Sabres on a player tryout contract.

#### Letters

The Sabres announced Wednesday Eichel will remain captain, while defenseman Jake McCabe and right wing Kyle Okposo will serve as alternate captains for the 2021 season.

Okposo replaces Marcus Johansson, who was traded to the Minnesota Wild in exchange for Staal.

## **Mike Harrington: Another drought? Sabres on edge of dubious NHL history**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 14, 2021

A News staffer since 1987, I'm a Baseball Hall of Fame voter, a 2013 inductee into the Buffalo Baseball HOF and the Buffalo chapter chair of the Professional Hockey Writers Association. And I insist only Chicago & New York can come close to Buffalo pizza.

I'm open for the Sabres to prove people wrong. It's just hard to see it, so tough to picture them avoiding a dubious piece of NHL history that this franchise shouldn't have to live with.

They can't realistically be expected to do much in the made-for-2021 East Division and that word – that head-to-desk-inducing, seven-letter word – is thus a major player in our sports lexicon again.

Drought.

If the Sabres don't make the Stanley Cup Playoffs come May, that will mark 10 straight years outside the NHL's postseason party. And that would tie the league's all-time record set by the Florida Panthers in 2011 and matched by the Edmonton Oilers in 2016.

Until Terry Pegula bought the team in 2011, the Sabres had never gone more than three years without making the playoffs. It's hard to accept what's happened.

I was catching up with Mike Robitaille a couple of weeks ago and the legendary Sabres analyst was utterly incredulous talking about it. I said one thing and he got so riled up, I had to just let him go. It was like having a personal edition of Empire's old "Hockey Hotline" postgame show.

Said Robitaille, his rant reaching a crescendo: "Look through the numbers. Nine years now. The amount of teams. You would think you would just trip into the playoffs at some point, right? Just by accident – by accident! – you're going to get in. And they haven't.

"We've seen it here how the management can be deadly to a team. That GM has to bring in the right players. He has to. You can't coach a medium bunch of players. You can bring them along a little bit, make them a little bit better. But there are other teams that grow year after year, they get better.

"It's not just the top guys. Everybody knows about them. It just continues here. Changing managers, changing coaches. Why so many changes? You didn't make the right decision. When that happens once or twice, it's understandable. You can't be perfect. But you're bound to get the right guy. When will that happen?"

(You read all that and you can just picture the voice, right? Man, how we miss Roby on TV.)

Longest playoff droughts in NHL history

Seasons Team Years

10 Florida 2001-2011\*

10 Edmonton 2007-2016

9 Buffalo 2012-2020

9 Colorado-NJ 1979-1987

8 Cali-Cleveland 1971-1978

8 Boston 1960-1967

8 Washington 1975-1982

7 8 teams tied

\*includes 2005 lockout

Source: NHL.com

Right guys in charge?

Like Brandon Beane and Sean McDermott with the Bills, the Pegulas think they have the boffo combination they need in new GM Kevyn Adams and second-year coach Ralph Krueger. But the owners have thought that before, too.

Adams and Krueger always say the right things about understanding the fans' frustration and Adams clearly did a speed-up this offseason by bringing in veterans Taylor Hall, Eric Staal, Cody Eakin, Tobias Rieder and Matt Irwin.

"I don't wake up every day thinking about the past," Adams said. "I don't think about the nine years. I wasn't in this role. But what I do have an understanding of is asking questions about why didn't things work out a certain way before, about what decisions were made that we can learn from."

A major issue for the Sabres has been goaltending and that continues as Linus Ullmark and Carter Hutton start the season as underwhelming choices. Since Ryan Miller was traded in 2014, the Sabres have had 15 players appear in net for at least one game.

"In my mind, there's no more important position and they haven't had it," Robitaille said. "Just like finally getting the quarterback. I mean, you have no chance without goaltending. No chance. None."

Goaltending can quickly torpedo the team, no matter how good the lineup. Jack Eichel has evolved into a Hart Trophy-level talent but he made it clear in the offseason he's increasingly frustrated by the losing. Every other team in the league has been in the playoffs at least once since Eichel was drafted in 2015. And in back-to-back years, he's watched close friends Ryan O'Reilly and Zach Bogosian leave the team and immediately win a Cup.

"Jack has been very vocal and he's been ticked off. So is the rest of the team," said NHL Network analyst Mike Rupp, who scored the Cup-winning goal for New Jersey in Game 7 of the 2003 final against Anaheim. "I hope this year with a shortened schedule helps them. They certainly have some nice pieces coming along the way, with Dylan Cozens in the world junior tournament and moving forward. I think the future is bright, but Buffalo fans want the future now."

So do the players. Jeff Skinner has played the most games of any active player in the NHL (720) without reaching the playoffs. While only 141 of those were in Buffalo, look at the games played by guys whose entire careers have been spent here with no playoffs. Rasmus Ristolainen is at 493 games and he's far from alone when you consider the injured Zemgus Girgensons (489), Sam Reinhart (400), Eichel (354) and Jake McCabe (340).

"I'm looking forward to that storyline sort of coming to an end," Skinner said during training camp. "I think as you get older ... obviously a window is closing. Hopefully, it's still got some room there. But every season you come into, you should expect to make the playoffs. Otherwise, you probably shouldn't be playing hockey. That's the goal. You do everything you can in offseason to prepare yourself for that."

Current droughts in the 4 major sports

Years Team Sport Last appearance

19 Seattle Mariners MLB 2001

14 Sacramento Kings NBA 2006

10 Phoenix Suns NBA 2010

10 New York Jets NFL 2010

9 Buffalo Sabres NHL 2011

9 Philadelphia Phillies MLB 2011

Source: Buffalo News research

Year 3 has to be Dahlin's time

What else do the Sabres need? To Robitaille, Rasmus Dahlin has to keep growing as a No. 1 overall pick.

"He has to be phenomenal. He can't be above average," Robitaille said. "There's a lot of attention about Eichel but Dahlin could make the difference from the defensive position, can make everybody look good by getting the puck out of his own zone and playing with authority instead of just 'teeter-tottering' on his skates back there."

Dahlin and defense partner Brandon Montour are likely to spend a lot of time on the ice with Eichel's line. And Robitaille says it's exactly the play the Sabres should make.

"I almost wouldn't put Eichel on the ice unless they're joined together almost every shift," Robitaille said. "They can do so much damage. Dahlin gets you excited for three or four games. And then he disappears for another three or four games. In his third year, he should start feeling more maturity. Like you're one of the main guys."

'Hellacious' new division

The Sabres were done no favors when they were put into a division this year with Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Pittsburgh and the New York Islanders.

"That's a murderer's row," NBC's Pierre McGuire said on the network's preseason conference call Monday. "Buffalo is improved but that East Division is just going to be hellacious."

Fellow NBCer Ed Olczyk had praise for the Pegulas and Eichel and said it's interesting to watch the Sabres keep trying to build a supporting cast.

"You're going to need a little luck on your side," Olczyk said on the same call. "You're also going to need your best players to be just that and other guys to step up. A guy like Eric Staal coming in has been around the block a few times. He can help a guy like Jack Eichel.

"At the end of the day, it's going to be a big ask. Do I expect them to make the playoffs? No, I don't. ... But we've seen them in the last couple years go on some nice runs, go on a real heater and be able to get 18 of 20 points in a 10-game stretch. You're probably going to need more than one of those."

Tough to think that's likely. A big ask indeed.

"They're certainly going in the right direction," added Olczyk. "Get some stability up top, let 'KA' do his thing as the general manager and figure this out. We've seen what's happened there with the football team. They've got it going after some tough years. The 'Bills Mafia' is pretty excited right about now and I'm sure everybody is hoping the Sabres can follow suit. Hopefully sooner than later."

## **'Batman needs Robin:' How Sabres' Jack Eichel, Taylor Hall could be elite duo**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 14, 2021

The spin of a draft wheel in 1970 earned the expansion Buffalo Sabres the right to draft Gilbert Perreault, eventually the face of the franchise and now a Hockey Hall of Famer.

The Sabres' transformation from afterthought to Cup contender, though, did not occur until Perreault was given two talented, complementary running mates on the top line: Rick Martin and Rene Robert.

The French Connection, immortalized with a statue at KeyBank Center's alumni plaza, was one of the most feared forward lines in the National Hockey League, accounting for most of the Sabres' scoring during its seven years of existence. Then came the duo of Alexander Mogilny and Pat LaFontaine, whose wizardry on ice produced a combined 275 points during the 1992-93 season.

No Sabres line since has featured two players with the same blend of otherworldly speed and playmaking ability. Until now.

When the Sabres host the Washington Capitals in front of no fans Thursday night, Jack Eichel, a third-year captain who totaled a career-high 36 goals last season, will skate alongside newly acquired left wing Taylor Hall, the 29-year-old former Hart Trophy winner who shocked the hockey world in October by signing a one-year contract to join the Sabres.

"Having played with Patty and Alex, there are a lot of similarities with Eichel and Hall," said Matthew Barnaby, a winger with the Sabres from 1992-99. "They will be one of the most exciting duos in the league. And to me, it's about duos."

While Eichel has played alongside talented forwards in the past – including Jeff Skinner and Sam Reinhart – none had the resume or skill set of Hall, a former first overall draft pick who willed the New Jersey Devils to an unprecedented playoff run to win the Hart Trophy for 2017-18.

When Hall was set to become a free agent this past offseason, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger imagined how a potential pairing with Eichel would help both players. Krueger, always effusive in his praise for Eichel, coached Hall in Edmonton from 2010-13 and called the two forwards the only "two players that I've coached that have the combination of elite skill and competitive level that is world elite."

All involved were forced to wait for the top line's debut in training camp because Eichel missed the first three practices with an upper-body injury. It did not take them long to show why the Sabres could be mandatory viewing for this 56-game season.

"There's a ceiling a player can get to by himself," said Brian Burke, former NHL executive and current analyst for Sportsnet. "A great player can only accomplish so much by himself and I've always had stars on my teams. I've always had more than one. We don't know what Jack Eichel can be yet. Obviously, he's one of the top 10 players in the NHL, and I think no one talks about him enough. But Batman needs Robin and to give him an elite winger who can skate with him. What people don't realize because Jack has such an efficient skating style is how fast he is. He can take three strides and go from blueline to blueline at top speed. He's a very efficient skater and now to have someone who can keep up with him, make plays and finish plays, it makes a lot of sense for me."

During the first period of the Sabres' second intrasquad scrimmage of camp last Saturday, Eichel skated with the puck behind the net and, using his right-handed stick blade, fired a no-look, pass on his forehand and behind him to the front of the net, where Hall one-timed a shot past an unsuspecting Linus Ullmark.

"When players like Jack have the puck, you just want to get open any way possible," said Hall. "I've never scored a goal like that before. I've seen it happen many times, but credit to him that he can make a play like that. ... He's a really fun player to play with."

It's possible the NHL has not seen Hall at his best. Drafted first overall by the Oilers in 2010, Hall has never skated alongside an elite centerman at even strength or on the power play. His MVP season occurred on a Devils

team that was expected to miss the playoffs. Hall's 93 points were 41 more than any of his teammates and he played most of his even-strength minutes with center Nico Hischier, then an 18-year-old rookie.

Yet, Hall injected the Devils into the playoff race with his 26-game point streak – the eighth player in NHL history to achieve that feat and only the second in 22 years – that included 18 goals and 38 points.

Eichel, then amid his third season with the Sabres, marveled at Hall's ascent from afar.

"He's somebody who obviously has super high-end talent, but I think one thing that goes unnoticed is his work ethic," Eichel said. "He's able to track down a lot of pucks, he's hard on the forecheck, he can be physical at times. I think he creates a lot by himself by just how fast he is, how strong he is on the puck. I think it's going to be really important for our team to get a guy like that."

The Devils reached the playoffs that season with a 11-3-1 record over their final 15 games, a stretch in which Hall totaled nine goals with 12 assists for 21 points. He finished with a career-best 39 goals, his sixth season of 20 or more. Hall also had six points in five playoff games that spring.

Hall is out to prove he's still an elite player. He has totaled only 27 goals over the past two seasons because he suffered a knee injury during the 2018-19 season and recovery prevented him from having a proper summer of training ahead of 2019-20.

Eichel's status as one of hockey's elite centers was among the primary reasons why Hall chose the Sabres over offers from more established teams. The two have more in common than their desire to win. As one of Hall's former teammates can attest, the Sabres' top offseason acquisition, like Eichel, is obsessive about hockey and the pursuit to be the best.

"I think they will complement each other incredibly well," said retired defenseman Ben Lovejoy, a teammate of Hall's in New Jersey from 2016-19. "I think Taylor realizes that even if he's playing at a Hart Trophy level, you still need other players on your team to be successful and his job will be much easier now that he can play on the wing with Jack Eichel.

"The game, so much about it now is speed and Taylor can fly with the best of them, but he's one of the few players who can skate a million miles per hour at top speed and still make plays. There are a lot of guys in the league, particularly now, that can skate really well. Taylor can make plays going that fast and, when a guy is coming at you with that much speed, it's incredibly hard to stop as a defenseman and you have to respect that speed coming at you. It forces you to back up and that will open time and space for Jack and their other linemate."

Last season, Eichel's primary linemates, Reinhart and Victor Olofsson, were not lacking talent. Reinhart has scored at least 22 goals on four occasions and Olofsson had 20 as a rookie. But Hall is at another level and his arrival should allow Krueger to finally balance the lineup.

Eichel was in the Hart Trophy conversation last winter when he compiled a 17-game point streak in which he scored 16 goals and added 15 assists. The run ended because of an upper-body injury that forced him to miss a game in Philadelphia and his streak was one game shy of Perreault's franchise record from 1971.

In addition to his career-high 36 goals last season, Eichel had 20 multipoint games and became the first Sabres player in eight years to total at least 30 goals and 40 assists. Before the coronavirus pandemic halted play in March, Eichel was on pace for 42 goals and 93 points, the highest totals by a Sabre since Thomas Vanek (43 goals) and Daniel Briere (95 points) in 2006-07.

"Over the last 24 months, Jack has gotten his game to a different level," said retired NHL forward Mike Rupp, now an NHL Network analyst. "There's always going to be the comparisons in the draft with Connor (McDavid). Jack had a really great start to his career, but there was a significant gap between Connor and him for the first few seasons. I don't think that gap is that wide now. It's narrowed quite a bit.

"I think Jack is going to be a league MVP some year. ... The biggest thing is this team making the playoffs. If (Hall and Eichel) can play together with the speed they have, they're going to be really dangerous. They're going to have a great top line."

Eichel is tired of losing. His comments to reporters in May sparked speculation that he could want out of Buffalo following another dismal season. The losses have worn on the three-time all-star, as he shoulders the weight of a playoff drought in what's unquestionably one of the top NHL markets in the United States.

Eichel, the second overall draft pick in 2015, has not been able to lift the Sabres into contention. Despite totaling 137 goals and 337 points in five seasons, Eichel has yet to experience the playoffs.

Not a single skater in the Hockey Hall of Fame whose career began in the post-1967 expansion era missed the playoffs in the first five years of his career. Among No. 2 overall draft picks since the Sabres' expansion season in 1970, only one has played more career games than Eichel without reaching the playoffs: Reinhart.

Now Eichel has a supporting cast that includes Reinhart, Hall, Olofsson, Skinner, former Stanley Cup champion Eric Staal, Rasmus Dahlin and notable young prospects such as Dylan Cozens. Most Stanley Cup champions, though, need multiple stars.

"I was very lucky that I played with some of the best players in the world for a long time and I don't want to downplay the rest of the talent that was on the Devils, but (Sidney Crosby had Evgeni Malkin)," added Lovejoy. "Ryan Getzlaf had Corey Perry. Other players that I played with had other superstars to complement them. Taylor didn't have that. Taylor scored 40 or 50 more points than the second point-getter on our team and really carried our Devils team to the playoffs that year. He was so good and is so good and truly all he thinks about is hockey."

At the end of an unprecedented offseason that included another change at general manager, the addition of Hall has brightened Eichel's outlook and provided the Sabres with a second superstar talent in their pursuit to bring a Stanley Cup to Buffalo.

"In terms of signing Hallsy, it was obviously an exciting moment for our franchise, for the city," said Eichel. "He's in the top caliber of players in our league and MVP for a reason. ... I was probably as excited as everyone else was. I think it's going to be a huge help for us."

## **Forecasting where the Sabres will finish in the rugged East Division**

By Mike Harrington and Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 14, 2021

Odds makers have not provided a promising forecast for the Buffalo Sabres during this 56-game season.

The Sabres will play the same seven East Division opponents eight times apiece: Boston, New Jersey, the New York Islanders, the New York Rangers, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Washington.

It is unquestionably the most difficult division during this unprecedented sprint to the Stanley Cup Playoffs. The Buffalo News' Mike Harrington and Lance Lysowski predict whether the Sabres will snap their nine-year playoff drought:

Mike Harrington

If we can't see playoff games here, we have to see fun. I think the Sabres can at least provide more of that this year than in previous seasons.

There will be goals, probably more than any year we've seen since Jack Eichel arrived. Legitimate NHL veterans Taylor Hall and Eric Staal are here. So is a future franchise cornerstone in Dylan Cozens.

Goaltending is an obvious issue that we have to see improve. The bigger one is the East Division. Which big-name team(s) are the Sabres going to finish in front of to make the playoffs? Can't see any frankly. They might only finish in front of New Jersey. Whereas they would have pushed for the playoffs in the old Atlantic setup, this is unfortunately going to have to be a transition season for first-year GM Kevyn Adams. Too tough a schedule. Call it 23-27-6 for 52 points.

Lance Lysowski

Any doubts about Kevyn Adams' qualifications as general manager should have been erased with a promising offseason that had the Sabres acquire Eric Staal – the second-line center this team has needed since Ryan O'Reilly's departure – and sign the top available free agent in former Hart Trophy winner Taylor Hall.

Finally, the Sabres have a strong supporting cast for Jack Eichel, and Ralph Krueger may be able to use four lines that are capable of scoring. In addition to the prolific pairing of Eichel and Hall on the top line, the Sabres have Jeff Skinner, Sam Reinhart, Victor Olofsson and a wave of promising young players, most notably Tage Thompson and Dylan Cozens.

Goal prevention is the reason why I'm predicting the Sabres to miss the playoffs. Zemgus Girgensons is injured, Johan Larsson left in free agency and four of the top-six defensemen are right-handed. The logjam will force someone, likely Colin Miller, to play out of position. Additionally, there is a notable question mark in goal, given that neither Linus Ullmark nor Carter Hutton have been the starter for a playoff team. Considering the strength of the East Division, I have the Sabres finishing sixth, two spots out of the postseason, with a 26-24-6 record for 58 points.

## **Casey Mittelstadt among five assigned to Sabres' taxi squad**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 13, 2021

Casey Mittelstadt won't be heading to Rochester when the Sabres' season begins Thursday night.

Mittelstadt, drafted eighth overall by the Sabres in 2017, was one of five players assigned to the team's taxi squad, joining forward Rasmus Asplund, goalie Jonas Johansson and defensemen Brandon Davidson and Will Borgen.

Mittelstadt, 22, has totaled 17 goals and 22 assists in 114 games since making his debut with the Sabres in 2018. He spent the second half of last season in Rochester, where he collected nine goals and 16 assists in 36 games.

Every NHL team can carry a four-to-six-man taxi squad for the 56-game season. They must have a third goaltender on either the active roster or taxi squad.

These players will serve as reinforcements in the event of a COVID-19 positive test or injury. They will practice and travel with the team, although every player will not be taken on road trips.

## **Sabres roundtable: Answering lingering questions ahead of the 56-game season**

By Lance Lysowski and Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 13, 2021

There won't be fans inside KeyBank Center when the Sabres open the season Thursday night in Buffalo.

Covid-19 protocols have prevented the Sabres from spending much time together off the ice. A 56-game schedule against the same seven East Division opponents adds another unusual challenge to Ralph Krueger's second season as coach.

Jack Eichel acknowledged the Sabres will have to handle "curveballs" as a result of playing during the pandemic. While all the unknowns may make predictions futile, what's clear is Krueger's roster now is better than the one he had last fall.

With that in mind, The Buffalo News' Mike Harrington and Lance Lysowski answered eight lingering questions ahead of the Sabres' season opener against the Washington Capitals:

Aside from Jack Eichel and Taylor Hall, which player is most important to the Sabres' playoff chances?

Harrington: Rasmus Dahlin. The offensive numbers have been historic for a teenager over his first two years but his overall play has not been. Dallas' Miro Heiskanen, the No. 3 pick in 2017, has already played in a Stanley Cup final and is pushing Norris Trophy candidacy. Dahlin needs to become more of a game-changer like that in year three. Get the puck out of the zone and up the ice more and get the goalies out of trouble.

Lysowski: Linus Ullmark. If the Sabres are to emerge as a playoff team in what's unquestionably the top division, they'll need a capable No. 1 goaltender. Ullmark, a 27-year-old whom Krueger has referred to as a "centerpiece" of the team, is in the final season of his contract and showed for a two-month stretch in 2019-20 that he can be the guy for Buffalo.

His .924 save percentage in 23 games from Nov. 24 until his lower-body injury last January ranked third in the NHL during that span.

Who should skate at right wing next to Eichel and Hall on the Sabres' top line?

Harrington: Based on camp, I'm OK with Tage Thompson. He's easily been one of the standout forwards. He's a big body who can skate, so he won't get left behind, and he has good hands. At the start of camp, I was all for Victor Olofsson. Nice experiment from Krueger to shuffle things and land on Thompson. Hall said Saturday he knew nothing about Thompson when camp started. He's learning fast. Good reviews.

Lysowski: Olofsson. Sure, Thompson has been outstanding in camp and, like his teammates, I'll be keeping an eye on the 23-year-old's development this season. Thompson, though, is far from a finished product and has played only one NHL game since March 2019.

The Sabres likely will have Hall for only one season. Now is not the time to experiment with the top line. Olofsson can handle the assignment, as illustrated by his 20 goals as a rookie, and his lethal left-handed shot at right wing would pair nicely with the playmaking ability of Hall and Eichel.

What does Ralph Krueger need to do to coax more production out of Jeff Skinner?

Harrington: Skinner isn't playing with Eichel so he needs to get over that (and so do folks on social media, for that matter). There's some guy named Hall here now in that spot. Krueger should get Skinner more power-play time but I don't think the coach needs to coax anything out of Skinner. To me, a \$9 million player needs to go out and score but Skinner seems to need a setup man. This looks like a Jason Botterill overpay they'll never get over.

Lysowski: Play Skinner with Eric Staal and allow your former 40-goal scorer to receive top-six minutes at even strength. Burying Skinner on the depth chart isn't the answer. Skinner's imaginative style of play doesn't work well when he's forced to play with so much structure. Allow the 28-year-old some freedom you may not afford

other forwards on the team. After all, he is making \$9 million and the team's success hinges on his ability to deliver offense.

Which player in the bottom-six is going to surprise fans with secondary scoring this season?

Harrington: Cody Eakin is a clear offensive upgrade from Johan Larsson and is just two years removed from a 22-goal season in Vegas. He's had four NHL seasons of 16-plus goals and is going to look to score from the center slot. Has to justify that two-year contract, too.

Lysowski: Eakin. Sabres fans won't forgive Adams for allowing Larsson to walk to Arizona unless Eakin lives up to the two-year contract. Eakin can't be a one-dimensional player, either. His role is the same as Larsson's last season: provide shutdown defense and a relentless forecheck while winning faceoffs, particularly on the penalty kill.

Yet, Eakin has the speed and skill that Larsson lacks. Eakin, 29, has a track record of scoring goals, including 22 in 2018-19, and adds a different element to the penalty kill, an area the Sabres need to improve.

Among the players likely to begin the season on the taxi squad or in Rochester, who will have the biggest impact for the Sabres this season?

Harrington: Arttu Ruotsalainen will get his chances. There will be injuries or ineffectiveness (or Covid) and the Sabres will turn to the 5-foot-9 Finn to see what they have. The tight training camp prevented some learning about his skill set and positional preference but there will be more looks.

Lysowski: Will Borgen. The Sabres are finally prepared to give Borgen an NHL opportunity this season. The 24-year-old developed into a sound defenseman by playing 140 games with the Rochester Americans. He can provide a physical presence on the back end and always seems to make the smart, easy play on the breakout.

The Sabres' crowded depth chart will force Borgen to wait on the taxi squad. But once Borgen gets in the lineup, his skill set is a perfect fit for how Krueger wants this team to play.

Now that we know the final roster, what are your thoughts on Kevyn Adams' first offseason as general manager?

Harrington: What a fascinating mixed bag. A clear mandate to get veterans (thank you, Eichel). Utilized Krueger to reel in Hall. Great trade to get Staal, great trade to move up in the draft to take JJ Peterka. Out-of-the-box pick at No. 8 for Jack Quinn, goofy three-year deal for Zemgus Girgensons, hard-to-figure dumping of Dominik Kahun. No pattern or predictability to any of his moves so far. Hey, there's nothing wrong with that.

Lysowski: Promising. On one hand, Adams secured Hall in free agency, traded for Staal and made the wise decision to sign Thompson to that three-year contract. Early returns on the Sabres' most recent draft are also promising, as we saw at the IIHF World Junior Championship. But some of their offseason moves, particularly walking away from Larsson, make me question if this team is truly applying analytics when making roster decisions.

Aside from goaltending, is there an obvious hole on this roster that Adams needs to address before the trade deadline?

Harrington: This team still has too many forwards and not enough veteran defensemen. They're high on blueline kids like Mattias Samuelsson, Jacob Bryson and Borgen but could use another veteran pickup. Still can't believe Botterill essentially traded Marco Scandella last year for Michael Frolik. And I haven't given up on the goaltending either. Hutton has had a good camp and the organization's confidence in Ullmark is high. But you know what I say: Make. A. Save.

Lysowski: Proven secondary scoring. This team needs goals out of the bottom six and it likely lost double digits with Girgensons' season-ending injury. Rieder will be asked to match that output, but he's one season removed from scoring zero goals in 67 games with Edmonton.

Which Sabres player other than Skinner is your top candidate to have a bounce-back season?

Harrington: I'm intrigued to see what production they get – both offensively and on the penalty kill – from Tobias Rieder. He doesn't seem to have the Frolik/Vladimir Sobotka drag to his game where nothing happens and has been active all camp. He had just four goals over the last two seasons but suddenly scored three for Calgary in the bubble, and seems really comfortable here thanks to his previous relationship with Krueger.

Lysowski: Colin Miller. The right-shot defenseman was a healthy scratch 18 times during his first season in Buffalo, despite the Sabres having traded two draft picks, including a second-rounder, to Vegas. Miller is skating on the left side, a significant adjustment that could impact his game in the defensive zone, but this could help him produce more offense. In 2018-19, Miller totaled 10 goals with 31 assists for 41 points.

## **OPINION: After 10 long months...**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 13, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres' last game was March 9, 2020 against the Washington Capitals. Buffalo won the game 3-2 in a shootout, and then the National Hockey League paused its season due to the COVID-19 pandemic three days later.

Over 10 months later, the Sabres will finally be back on the ice as the Capitals come to town on Thursday to open the 2020-21 season.

Things will look very different than back in March as no fans will be in the building, and the team has made some changes.

Another thing that will look different this season is the Sabres' division.

Gone are the Tampa Bay Lightning, Toronto Maple Leafs, Montreal Canadiens, Ottawa Senators, Florida Panthers and Detroit Red Wings after the NHL agreed to temporarily re-align the divisions for the 2020-21 campaign.

Now Buffalo has to play the Pittsburgh Penguins, Philadelphia Flyers, New York Rangers, New York Islanders and New Jersey Devils as part of the newly formed East Division. The only team remaining with the Sabres from the Atlantic Division, now in the East Division is the Boston Bruins.

It's hard to rate the division, because there are some question marks.

I thought Pittsburgh declined just a little bit last season, so where are the Penguins? Will they be better, or since they're starting to get older, is the window closing.

Washington has a big question mark in goal. Their goaltending with Ilya Samsonov and Vitek Vanecek is unproven, so can they be had?

Boston has a huge question mark because superstar winger David Pastrnak had hip surgery and won't be ready for the start of the season. All-Star winger Brad Marchand should be ready to play starting Game 1, but he had sports hernia surgery and likely isn't 100%.

The Bruins were tops in the NHL last season with a .714 points percentage, and a big reason is because they were second in the NHL on the power play with a 25.2% success rate. A huge reason for that success was defenseman Torey Krug, who was the quarterback from the point. Krug was sixth in the NHL in power play points with 28, but Boston lost Krug to the St. Louis Blues in free agency.

In addition, captain Zdeno Chara left the team after 14 seasons to sign with Washington.

The Rangers have had some high draft picks lately, getting winger Alexis Lafrenière first overall in the 2020 NHL Draft and winger Kaapo Kakko second overall in the 2019 NHL Draft. New York also signed forward Artemi Panarin before last season and he was a Hart Trophy finalist.

Last season, center Mika Zibanejad put up 41 goals and 75 points in just 57 games. The season before, it was 30 goals and 44 assists for 74 points in 82 games, so there is talent there.

I think the question mark for the Rangers has to be on defense and in goal.

So how much better are the Sabres, and can they break a nine-year string of no playoffs this season?

Taylor Hall made Buffalo instantly better when new general manager Kevyn Adams signed him to a one-year contract back on Oct. 11.

I think the team got hugely better by acquiring Eric Staal from the Minnesota Wild. Yes, Staal is 36-years-old, but he was still producing for the Wild, and finally gives the Sabres a center to play behind Jack Eichel.

Just as important, he's here to mentor rookie Dylan Cozens. I think Tage Thompson can also benefit from having Staal on the team, and even Eichel can learn from a former captain and Stanley Cup winner.

The Sabres got some depth that has played in the playoffs in Cody Eakin, Tobias Rieder and Matt Irwin, but there are two glaring parts of this team's game that must improve if there's going to be a playoff run.

Neither Linus Ullmark nor Carter Hutton performed as a No. 1 goalie last season. Both had their moments, but they have to be better at making the big save at the key time of the game.

I think there's still more that Ullmark can do to be a No. 1 in the NHL. He's pretty good when the team is at even strength, but he was just part of the reason why the Sabres were 30th in the league on the penalty kill.

That is the other area that has to improve - special teams.

Buffalo was 30th in the penalty kill and 20th on the power play. I can guarantee that if the penalty killing doesn't improve, the Sabres will be at the bottom of the division again.

If the Sabres can get into the top-10 in both categories, they have a good chance to make the plays. Last year, that would've meant 14 fewer goals-against and five more goals-for. That means the Sabres would improve their goal differential by 19 goals.

Buffalo took steps to improving the penalty kill by bringing in Eakin, Rieder, Irwin and Riley Sheahan. Sheahan is excellent on the penalty kill, and Rieder did a great job in the playoffs for the Calgary Flames, even scoring three shorthanded goals in 10 games.

I think adding Staal to the second power play unit will help it become more dangerous right away.

The Sabres open the season with four-out-of-six games against Washington. What if the Sabres were to get six of the eight points available? That would give them a huge advantage very early in the season. Now that's not going to be easy, because they've never even shown an ability to slow down Alex Ovechkin.

The lines have become an issue with the fans, but that's nothing new. They've been an issue with every coach since Lindy Ruff. Some fans demand Ralph Krueger be fired as soon as he constructs lines that differ, but I've learned there are no possible line combinations that will satisfy fans. It's always the coach's fault, and players are never held accountable for their own play.

Jeff Skinner is the guy now.

Most fans tell me it's not Skinner's fault he only scored 14 goals last season. It doesn't matter that he had more Grade-A chances than almost anybody else on the team, it's up to Ralph Krueger to make sure Skinner scores on those chances.

This season, he started training camp on a line with Staal and Sam Reinhart. After awhile, Krueger got tired of Skinner always being on the wrong side of the puck and not battling hard enough.

Skinner was then put on a line with Riley Sheahan and Curtis Lazar, with Krueger saying he's going to stay there until he starts adhering to the team's principles. Krueger mentioned that the coaches are working hard with Skinner to get him playing an all-around game instead of hanging around hoping the puck will find him.

It's similar to what Sean McDermott did with the Buffalo Bills in 2017. He got rid of some very good football players in wide receiver Sammy Watkins and defensive tackle Marcell Dareus, because they hadn't bought in to the team concept the head coach was selling.

There's a reason Carolina let a 30-goal scorer go for next to nothing. The Hurricanes couldn't live with the one-dimensional game.

Jason Botterill was in a bad spot when Skinner was about to become a free agent in 2019. The general manager had done really nothing to improve the team, and the backlash over losing Skinner would've been immense. So he way-overpaid, getting him on an eight-year, \$72 million deal.

If you want to get into the unrestricted free agent market, you must overpay. More times than not, you regret the contract by three years in.

In the end, I think it's impossible to predict if the Sabres have a chance for the playoffs.

To do that, I'd need to know how the Bruins, Penguins, Capitals and Rangers are going to do. I need to know if the Flyers and Islanders are as good as advertised.

The one thing I do know, if the Sabres start off slow, we'll know by the end of February if they have any chance.

We'll have coverage of all 56 games on WGR Sports Radio 550 this season.

Mike Schopp and the Bulldog get you started Thursday night at 6 p.m. EST with the pregame, followed by the play-by-play with Rick Jeanneret and Rob Ray. Brian Koziol is back for in-game and postgame coverage, and, of course, I'll be there with interviews and analysis throughout game nights.

I can't wait to get it all started.

## **Sabres piece lineup together ahead of Thursday's season opener**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 13, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres held their final practice before Thursday's first game against the Washington Capitals on Wednesday at KeyBank Center.

Forward Curtis Lazar returned to practice after missing two days due to a lower-body injury. Kyle Okposo left practice early on Tuesday with a lower-body injury and didn't practice.

Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger said Lazar is feeling good and ready to play, while adding that they will make an assessment on Okposo on Thursday morning.

The Sabres had to jump through some hoops with their roster to get salary cap compliant for the 2020-21 season.

Forward Brandon Biro was called up at 5 p.m. EST on Tuesday, but he wasn't at practice on Wednesday.

Jack Quinn is not on the Sabres' taxi squad, and he didn't practice with the main group. Instead, was over at Harborcenter practicing with Amerks players waiting for the beginning of their training camp on Friday at Blue Cross Arena in Rochester.

"We're keeping him fit around the Harborcenter, and Rochester is kicking off [training camp] Friday, so we haven't made a final decision yet on Jack," said Krueger following Wednesday's practice. "He did skate with the taxi squad, where we will have him positioned eventually."

Forward Riley Sheahan is listed at CapFriendly as a NHL non-roster player, and he did not have a line to play on in practice.

Here's a look at Wednesday's lines:

### Forwards:

Hall - Eichel - Thompson  
Olofsson - Staal - Reinhart  
Rieder - Eakin - Cozens  
Skinner - Lazar - Asplund  
Sheahan

### Defense:

McCabe - Ristolainen  
Dahlin - Montour  
Miller - Jokiharju  
Irwin - Borgen

The Sabres weren't on the ice as long on Wednesday with off-ice meetings after practice being stressed.

Krueger wasn't about to say whether Linus Ullmark or Carter Hutton will be in goal on Thursday, but it sounds like both will play in the two-game series against Washington.

Check back later at WGR550.com for my Sabres season preview.

## **Sabres roster for 2020-21 season is set**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 13, 2021

With training camp over, the Buffalo Sabres are now in regular season mode, getting ready for Thursday's season opener against the Washington Capitals at KeyBank Center.

Injuries are starting to creep in with this group as Curtis Lazar didn't practice for the second straight day, and Kyle Okposo went about 40 minutes into Tuesday's practice before leaving. Both have lower-body injuries and both are day-to-day.

The team must have its roster and taxi squad into the NHL by 5 p.m. EST on Tuesday, and head coach Ralph Krueger confirmed that their 2020 first round pick, Jack Quinn will be a part of the group in Buffalo. Quinn looked very good in practice playing with Casey Mittelstadt and Rasmus Asplund.

The winger's speed and puck handling skills were evident, and he was good at both ends of the ice.

The lines have only had minor tweaks to them since training camp opened back on Dec. 31.

"The way the lines have evolved, especially [Cody] Eakin, [Jack] Eichel and [Eric] Staal; you look at those groups, they're clearly feeling synergy with each other," Krueger said following Tuesday's practice. "We see offensive upside with all the lines, and the group we have as a taxi squad is ready to jump into opportunities."

The 23-man roster will include:

### Forwards:

Hall - Eichel - Thompson  
Olofsson - Staal - Reinhart  
Rieder - Eakin - Okposo  
Skinner - Sheahan - Cozens

### Defense:

McCabe - Ristolainen  
Dahlin - Montour  
Miller - Jokiharju

### Goalies:

Ullmark - Hutton

From there, they'll carry three more roster players in Quinn, Lazar, and defenseman Matt Irwin.

Meanwhile, the Sabres officially announced their five-man taxi squad roster on Wednesday, consisting of Mittelstadt and Asplund, defensemen Will Borgen and Brandon Davidson, as well as goalie Jonas Johansson.

Dylan Cozens was one of the best players at the 2021 IIHF World Junior Championship, and it looks like he'll get a chance to play.

"We recognize where he's come from, the game pace he's been on," Krueger said of Cozens. "He's got a lot of confidence, he's looking good on the ice, he's game shape ready, and we'll take our time with how we take him to the next step."

Things are different for the Sabres when they're on the road, and you will see a different taxi squad for both.

"All those players are available to us when we are home on a same day call-up, whereas when we move on the road, the group that we take, that's it," Krueger mentioned. "So if we're going away for four games, we need to decide before that trip because we cannot call up from Rochester."

This season will be like no other played in the NHL. You only play teams in your division and there are numerous back-to-backs.

Eric Staal has played 16 years, and he has to prepare for something different this upcoming season.

"There's so many factors to go along with a lot of games that are unknown," Staal said following practice. "There are no fans, travel restrictions, what we can do when we're on the road. There's a lot of things that will be a lot different."

Staal played when the 2012-13 season started in January after the lockout. He compared this upcoming campaign to that, saying, "I liken it to the 48-game season. There was a lot of hockey and a lot of games, but once you get into the routine and the process day-by-day, you just do your best to perform."

The team will have one more practice on Wednesday before the Capitals come to town to open the 2020-21 season.

## **No high fives from Sabretooth: How the NHL's new protocols impact the Sabres**

By John Vogl

The Athletic

January 13, 2021

Doug Allen singing and pointing from the ice. Sabretooth banging on the glass. Rob Ray between the benches.

Gone. All gone.

While COVID-19 can sneak through the cracks of nearly any defense, the NHL hopes it has fortified KeyBank Center against unnecessary health threats. The league has issued 213 pages of protocols for this season, ranging from penalty box water bottles to Rick Jeanneret's microphone to cars on the ice during intermission.

If there was a stone left unturned, that pebble rocks at hiding.

Some of the protocols are easy to assume – masks, sanitizing, social distancing – but there's a laundry list of others. It includes laundry.

"Each visiting team shall be provided a minimum of 100 clean towels for use on the bench during each game."

Fans will have to grab their own towels. The season is starting with only three clubs permitting fans (Florida, Arizona and Dallas), but others hope to open their arena before the Stanley Cup is awarded in July. The protocols state that fan giveaways such as rally towels, bobbleheads or game rosters should be contactless. The teams will place the items on seats, in cup holders or at physically distanced distribution tables.

T-shirt cannons are on hiatus. So are Zamboni rides, the high-five rope line near the dressing room and youth games during intermission. The ice and locker-room level are basically off-limits to everyone but players, referees and ice technicians.

Since money talks – NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman said the league's losses will be at least \$1 billion – advertisers have an end-around to the playing surface.

Showcasing a vehicle on the ice during intermission is permitted, so long as all windows and doors are closed for the entirety of the programming, including when the vehicle moves through the back of the arena toward the ice.

National anthem singers and honor guards will be permitted to perform only from a platform built over unused seats or in a concourse entranceway, provided they are at least 12 feet from the ice, fans and arena personnel. Singers may remove their face mask during the performance.

Mascots must wear a mask under their furry head, provided they're allowed in the building. Clubs wishing to use mascots or cheer teams need to submit a plan that details the proposed locations and logistics to the league for review and written approval. Mascots and entertainers must be at least 12 feet away from the glass and fans.

Regardless of crowd size, there will be crowd noise. Teams will be required to provide an operator responsible for programming synthetic crowd noise. The sounds will be piped through arena speakers and will be provided to television and radio rightsholders.

Those broadcasts will have a new look and feel. Normally, home and road teams have their own production truck, cameramen and replay technicians. This season, a single NHL-designated, on-site broadcast production known as a "host feed" will be assigned to each game. When the Sabres host the Capitals, viewers in Buffalo and Washington will see the same camera angles during play.

The host feed is responsible for producing arrival interviews with one player from the home and visiting teams. They will also have a first intermission interview with a player from the home team, a second intermission chat with a player from the visiting club and a postgame interview with someone from the winning team.

The obligatory shots of players walking down the hallway in their suits or taping sticks outside the dressing room may be few and far between. Only unmanned cameras controlled from outside the restricted area can be used for player arrivals or pregame shots. Cameras will not be allowed in the dressing room or between the benches.

Announcers can be between the benches provided they aren't claustrophobic and have the dexterity of Spider-Man. That broadcasting spot can be used only if the position is fully enclosed by shielding on the front, sides and top. Access to this location will not be permitted if the talent has to go on the ice or through a team's bench, which leaves climbing over the seats.

The Sabres will station Ray upstairs in the broadcast booth rather than that customary spot. For Ray and Jeanneret to remove their masks during the call, they must be seated at least 6 feet apart with a plexiglass divider between them. If there are fans in the stands, there must also be plexiglass in front of the booth.

Wireless microphones will be delivered in a disinfected, sanitized container and must be labeled with the user's name. All personnel must wash their hands or use an approved alcohol-based disinfectant prior to and following any contact with the microphones or the container that houses them.

The press box has always been a place to schmooze and catch up, but not anymore. There is to be no direct, in-person interaction between media and team members, including anyone on the club's playing, management, coaching and support staffs.

In addition, no one who has direct, in-person contact with media members (such as the media relations staff) can have direct, in-person contact with players or coaches. The Sabres have three media relations staffers. Two are embedded with the players and one works with media members, assignments they will maintain all season.

There will be 12 individuals on the ice cleaning crew and they must shovel the shavings in an assigned formation. All members, including the Zamboni drivers, are required to properly wear a mask over their mouth and nose at all times.

While the ice is shoveled, players can take a drink at the bench. Clubs are required to supply player-specific water bottles for both home and visiting teams. The bottles and their corresponding tops should be labeled for each individual player with his name or number on both pieces.

Water bottles will be filled once before being washed. New, labeled water bottles shall be placed on the benches between each period. Each club will need three sets of water bottles for the home and visiting teams.

Gatorade bottles must also be labelled with each player's name or number. These may not be reused.

The penalty boxes, meanwhile, shall be void of squeeze bottles. All penalty boxes must contain 12-ounce bottles of Aquafina water and 12-ounce bottles of Gatorade. Once a player has vacated the penalty box, the attendant must dispose of used bottles in a trash can.

If used, the penalty boxes must be properly disinfected between periods. At minimum, this includes the floor, bench, glass, water bottle storage area and dasher boards.

Penalties could be severe for teams that break the new rules. But the reward for following them should be a healthier season.

## **Sabres' Tage Thompson showcasing talents of future star after long layoff**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 13, 2021

BUFFALO – Taylor Hall knew nothing about Tage Thompson before the first day they practiced together as Sabres teammates Jan. 1.

But right away, Hall said he was taken aback by watching the 6-foot-7 winger up close.

The size. The ability to handle and shoot the puck. The speed.

Hall quickly learned why Thompson, 23, is such an intriguing talent.

"You see why he was drafted in the first round and why they're so high on him here to play at a higher level," Hall said on a recent Zoom call. "I think he can do it."

Thursday's season opener against the Washington Capitals at KeyBank Center will be Thompson's first game at any level since Nov. 17, 2019. The 425-day wait has been excruciating for the American, who separated his right shoulder in his only NHL appearance last season and underwent surgery a year ago.

But Thompson took advantage of the extra time his rehab and the COVID-19 pandemic offered him. He returned to the Sabres a stronger, more mature player.

"It was kind of a blessing in disguise, that injury," said Thompson, the 26th overall pick by the St. Louis Blues in 2016.

He established himself as one of the Sabres' standouts early in training camp and earned a plum promotion to the No. 1 line beside Hall and captain Jack Eichel last week.

"We couldn't quite guess where he would be after more than a year off and he has truly come in ready to grab a higher role, and he will get that opportunity beginning on Thursday," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "We have a strong competition within the group and (Tage) has earned the opportunity to play with Jack and Taylor at the moment."

Thompson, of course, has been expected to morph into a top-line player since the Sabres' old regime insisted the Blues include him in the Ryan O'Reilly trade.

The Sabres, perhaps to show off what they received in the disastrous deal, kept Thompson in the NHL for nearly all of 2018-19. He struggled for much of his 67-game run, playing short minutes and producing just seven goals. They finally demoted him to the AHL with a few weeks left in the season.

Thompson thrived with the Rochester Americans, performing like a prized prospect over the rest of that campaign and into 2019-20. He scored 14 goals in 27 total appearances with the Amerks. But he lasted just one game after forcing his way back to Buffalo.

"It's been a long grind," Thompson said of his rehab. "I think more so mentally than anything else, not playing hockey (for) over a year is obviously tough. Everyone wants to be on the ice and help their team. So having to watch most of last season and this season being delayed it's been a grind mentally and physically."

Still, before the pandemic ended the Sabres' season in mid-March, Thompson remained in Buffalo to rehab and also used the time to get to know his teammates.

"I'm a little more comfortable in the locker room, talking to guys and kind of just speaking my mind," he said. "It's allowed me just to relax a little bit on the ice."

Thompson said he was cleared to skate and "really start working" in June.

"June is really where I started to put the full throttle down and started to gear back up getting toward the season shape," he said.

The Sabres list Thompson at 219 pounds, four pounds heavier than last year.

"I feel like he's even more powerful this year," Sabres winger Victor Olofsson said. "He really uses his size and his strength out there combined with his skill."

Thompson impressed new general manager Kevyn Adams so much the Sabres awarded him a three-year, \$4.2 million contract in October.

"It means a lot," Thompson said of the deal. "Obviously, it means they got a lot of faith and trust in me to be willing to sign me to three years. I'm excited to be here. I love organization, I love the staff. I just got to do my part now, work and make sure I'm living up to their expectations."

Thompson's assignment Thursday for his 108th NHL game, a spot at right wing beside Eichel, a burgeoning superstar, and Hall, the 2017-18 NHL MVP, proves he's starting to live up to those expectations.

In Saturday's scrimmage, Thompson looked comfortable on the line, scoring on an early feed from Hall before returning the favor.

"He can play with pace, I think he can play with players that have a lot of skill and speed, and really it's up to him to want to shoot the puck, to want to go to those harder areas," Hall said. "And as he gets older and kind of figures it out more, he's got all the potential in the world."

## **Prospect Jack Quinn still with Sabres, will be assigned to taxi squad**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
January 13, 2021

BUFFALO – On Wednesday morning, rookie Jack Quinn wasn't among the five players the Sabres assigned to their new taxi squad.

But instead of practicing with the team's main group at KeyBank Center, Quinn joined the taxi-squad players across the street inside LECOM Harborcenter.

Meanwhile, taxi-squad forward Rasmus Asplund skated with the Sabres' main group.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said last week the practice groups would be adjusted every morning, so expect regular movement between them all season.

Krueger said Quinn, a winger the Sabres drafted eighth overall in October, will be assigned to the taxi squad at some point.

"We haven't made a final decision yet on Jack," Krueger said on a Zoom call Wednesday. "He's done a really good job staying with us. He did skate with the taxi squad today, where we will have him positioned eventually."

The Sabres could also send Quinn, 19, to the Rochester Americans. Normally, as a junior-age player, Quinn would be ineligible to play in the AHL. But the Ontario Hockey League hasn't started its season. The Amerks open training camp Friday.

The NHL implemented the taxi squad this season because the COVID-19 pandemic has created the need to have extra players close by.

In other news, Krueger said center Curtis Lazar "is good to go" for Thursday's season opener against the Washington Capitals. A lower-body injury sidelined Lazar twice earlier this week.

"(Lazar) is feeling the best he's felt in training camp thus far," Krueger said.

Meanwhile, Krueger said winger Kyle Okposo, who left Tuesday's practice with an undisclosed injury, is day-to-day. Okposo missed Wednesday's session.

"We'll make a decision tomorrow morning," Krueger said of Okposo's status for the Capitals.

The Sabres named Okposo an alternate captain on Wednesday to replace Marcus Johansson, who was traded to the Minnesota Wild.

–

Sabres center Cody Eakin experienced playing games in an arena without fans in the Edmonton bubble during the summer.

Eakin called it "very intimate."

"In there you can hear the skates cracking, guys chirping," said Eakin, who finished last season with the Winnipeg Jets. "You don't have the fan support to give you that momentum off the kill, the power play or some zone time, but you have to generate that off the bench.

"I think there are pros and cons. You can hear linemates talking and on the other side of that you can hear guys talking back and stuff like that."

Right now, the pandemic will prevent fans from attending games in Buffalo and throughout most of the NHL.

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Captain Jack Eichel on forgetting about the Sabres' past disappointments: "This isn't last year or any of the past years, so that's my mindset going into it. This is a completely new season with new players, a fresh, clean slate. So I don't speak of past years, and I think when I'm speaking with you guys this year, I'd prefer if you didn't as well. This is a new season and I'm not going to relate back to what's happened in the past."

—

Sabres forward Dylan Cozens has switched from No. 42 to 24. Meanwhile, forward Riley Sheahan has changed from No. 38 to 15.

## **Casey Mittelstadt among five players assigned to Sabres' taxi squad**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 13, 2021

**BUFFALO** – Forward Casey Mittelstadt was among five players the Sabres assigned to their taxi squad this morning.

The Sabres also assigned center Rasmus Asplund, goalie Jonas Johansson and defensemen Will Borgen and Brandon Davidson to the taxi squad, which the NHL implemented this season because of the COVID-19.

Mittelstadt, the eighth overall pick in 2017, has played 114 NHL games. He ended last season with the Rochester Americans.

Stay tuned for more roster updates.

The Sabres open the season Thursday against the Washington Capitals at KeyBank Center.

## **Dylan Cozens, Jack Quinn make opening night roster for the Buffalo Sabres**

By Anthony Reyes

WKBW

January 13, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — The Buffalo Sabres have announced the players who were assigned to its taxi squad ahead of the team's season opener Thursday.

Forwards Rasmus Asplund and Casey Mittelstadt, defensemen William Borgen and Brandon Davidson and goaltender Jonas Johansson were assigned to the taxi squad.

This announcement means Dylan Cozens and Jack Quinn have made the Sabres opening night roster. Cozens and Quinn were selected by the team in the first round of the 2019 and 2020 NHL Drafts.

## **Fan cutouts to fill stands at Sabres games**

WIVB

January 13, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) — The Buffalo Sabres are back in action, and so is a local printing company that was able to strike an incredible deal with the team.

We first met Gene Szerbiak when the Toronto Blue Jays came to town. He put his business out there, hoping to do the fan cutouts at Sahlen Field.

It didn't work out then with the MLB, but he found out just two days ago that the Sabres have picked his business, Print2Web, to make the fan cutouts that will fill KeyBank Center through the NHL season.

"I took my swings at bat for the Bisons and the Blue Jays," Szerbiak said. "I was rounding third, heading for home, and it didn't work out, but I had some contacts with the Bills. I had a referral at the Bills to the Sabres, and I made the connection that way, so it's never giving up, and you never fail as long as you try."

Szerbiak says he's grateful for this big boost to business. He says it's a big undertaking with a process that includes downloading images and lots of cutting.

This all happened so quickly that we might not see the cutouts on Thursday night, but they'll be there in the coming days.

## **Sabres stress importance of fast start this season**

By Paul Stockman

WIVB

January 13, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – Just one day left until the Sabres and the Washington Capitals drop the puck on brand new season. It's the first of only 56 games, and a lot of teams cannot afford to fall behind since there isn't as much time to catch up.

"I think it's just taking it a game at a time," winger Tage Thompson said. Obviously our schedule is pretty compact and we've got a lot of games back to back and a lot of games in a short amount of days so I think not looking too far ahead, just focusing on the now and making sure we are taking it a a game at a time, day at a time is going to give us our best chance. And then having a short memory. If you're running into a rest rough patch throughout the season, they are going to happen, you're going to face some losses and I think just blocking that out and moving forward is going to be a big thing as well"

In talking with the Sabres earlier this week, they said the importance of that fast start is the same no matter how long the season is. Their biggest focus is on the day-to-day and taking it one step at a time and dealing with potential setbacks throughout the year.

"You always want to get that energy out of the starting gate, so I think that philosophically that doesn't change," head coach Ralph Krueger said. "What's important is with all the distractions that we have in this new environment or things we don't have, like the fans. It's being able to focus on what we can control, what we can influence within that framework of the game. That continues to be the way that we are going to operate. Keeping the picture small, focusing on the next task, dealing with setbacks if they come, when they come in a constructive way so that's a given. Right now the picture I have to tell you it's just on Thursday and nothing else and it's getting smaller and smaller and smaller."

Buffalo's had a solid start each of the past two seasons. They won four of their first five games last year and three of their first five the year before. The puck drops on a brand new season at the KeyBank center Thursday at 7 o'clock against the Washington Capitals.

## **With every Sabres assist, National Grid will donate to 100 Club of Buffalo**

By Evan Anstey

WIVB

January 13, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) — As part of the "Teamwork for Safety" program, National Grid will donate \$25 to the 100 Club of Buffalo every time the Sabres get an assist this season.

"It's been a long offseason, but throughout, our first responders have never stopped keeping our community safe," said Sabres General Manager Kevyn Adams. "As we prepare to drop the puck tomorrow night, the Sabres players and organization are proud to join National Grid in supporting first responders and their families."

The 100 Club offers help to first responders and their families. Since 1957, they have given financial assistance to families of police officers killed in the line of duty. They have also provided awards, scholarships and educational assistance to first responders and their families.

"National Grid appreciates the dedication of our first responders," said National Grid Regional Director Ken Kujawa. "And when the Sabres score, the Teamwork for Safety program will prompt a celebration that extends beyond the ice. That's because it recognizes the ultimate team players in our communities, those who selflessly and tirelessly step up and put the needs of others ahead of their own, each and every day."

## **Sabres assign five to taxi squad**

By Mary Margaret Johnson

WIVB

January 14, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) — The Buffalo Sabres have assigned five players to the team's taxi squad for the season. The NHL allowed four to six players on the taxi squad this season for a pandemic-friendly way for call-ups to ensure teams have enough players on the ice in case of a last minute COVID-19 positive test or separate injury.

Forwards Rasmus Asplund and Casey Mittlestadt, defensemen William Borgen and Brandon Davidson, and goaltender Jonas Johansson are the five Sabres chosen for the taxi squad for the 2020-21 season.

The players will practice and travel with the team, but will earn the same salary they would make in the AHL.

## **Hamilton Take2: Keys to Sabres ending the playoff drought**

By Paul Hamilton

WGRZ

January 13, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The Sabres are about to get it going on Thursday, and if I'm being honest, I didn't think owners would actually play without fans or the promise of fans.

The Sabres have had to change divisions because of COVID, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's impossible to make the playoffs. Two things that I've said on the air many times MUST happen.

They must improve their special teams. Being ranked 30th on the penalty kill and 20th on the power play isn't going to cut it.

As he constructs the power play, Ralph Krueger has to understand that teams are going to take away Jack Eichel and Victor Olofsson shooting one-timers from the circle. Rasmus Dahlin will have the responsibility at the point to quarterback the whole thing and make use of Sam Reinhart in front and Taylor Hall in the high slot.

Rasmus Ristolainen will QB the second unit, and having Eric Staal out there should help. The problem is Ristolainen plays the game the way he thinks it should be played and it doesn't always work. Staal will also have Jeff Skinner with him, but two youngsters have also been on the ice during practice in Dylan Cozens and Tage Thompson.

Both those kids intrigue me this season, and for the Sabres to be in contention, they'll need Thompson to hit his stride. Playing a regular shift with Eichel and Hall should help him.

Olofsson was not a good 5-on-5 player last season, and he only had nine even-strength goals and 25 even-strength points.

Skinner lost his chance to play on a line with Staal because Ralph Krueger said he wasn't playing within the principles of the team. Does that remind you of something? How about Sammy Watkins and Marcell Dareus being shipped out of town by Sean McDermott of the Bills because there wasn't a buy-in.

Skinner had the most Grade-A chances on the team last season, yet only scored 14 goals. Somehow fans want to make that Krueger's fault. How about holding the player accountable for his own play for a change?

Players were brought in to help the penalty kill. If you can get into the top 10 in the league, you'll cut 14 goals against off the Sabres total last year. That has to do with everybody.

First, they wouldn't get the big save. Second, the defensive coverages led by Ristolainen were horrendous. And third, the players up front didn't seem to know who they should be on which led to gaps with the D. Kevyn Adams made no changes to his goaltending and no changes to his top-six defensemen, so if nothing improves here, that's on the new GM.

I agree with the decision to bring Dylan Cozens along slowly. It worked for Chicago last season with Kirby Dach and by the playoffs, he was off the wing and playing center doing a great job. Dach was the third overall pick in 2019 while Cozens was seventh overall.

So hockey is back in Buffalo after a 10-month absence. Fans won't be able to be there, but it's just nice to have the distraction of a season.

## **Sabres Put High Expectations on Dylan Cozens' Rookie Year**

By Ted Goldberg

Spectrum News

January 13, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Some 19-year-olds would be thrilled just to make an NHL roster on opening night.

Dylan Cozens has loftier expectations.

### What You Need To Know

- A year and a half after he was drafted by the Sabres, Dylan Cozens has made the NHL roster and projects to begin the season with a sizable role
- Head Coach Ralph Krueger says Cozens is responsible and smart enough to merit early playing time, and he's in the best game shape of anyone in camp
- Cozens has skated with 40-goal scorer Jeff Skinner throughout camp, and now is slated to play with veterans Cody Eakin and Tobias Rieder

"I want to prove that I can play in the NHL, and I want to help this team win," says the Sabres rookie. "I think the biggest thing for me is just to be ready whenever. Whenever they want me to play, just be ready. Could be any day."

It looks more and more likely that "any day" will be opening night — Cozens has spent most of this year's training camp skating with NHL regulars, and has even secured a spot on the team's second power-play unit.

"It's pretty awesome for me to be out there," he says. "I've played that position before a few times as a young guy in the WHL. I've learned how to play that spot. Everyone else on the unit, they're all great players so that definitely helps. Helps me do my job, which is just hang around there and hopefully bury some rebounds."

Head Coach Ralph Krueger says Cozens is in better shape than any other skater in camp. Cozens is coming off a silver-medal performance with Team Canada at World Juniors, where he impressed Krueger and fans watching at home.

"We think he's ready for a pretty big load right off the hop, but only time will tell for all of us," says Krueger. "It'll be the first game in a long time. There are a lot of unknowns going into this game. We're excited to finally get going. Dylan is one of the many pieces we're looking forward to seeing in action."

The Sabres start the season Thursday when they host Washington at 7 p.m.

## Five things to know about Sabres' home opener vs Capitals

By Alex Brasky

Batavia Daily News

January 13, 2021

BUFFALO — Finally, hockey has returned to Key Bank Center as the Sabres get ready to begin their 2021 regular season schedule with a two-game set against the Washington Capitals. Tonight's matchup with the Caps kicks off what is expected to be a long, arduous journey toward what the Sabres hope is their first playoff appearance in a decade.

Buffalo has been placed in the challenging Eastern Division, which features six playoff teams from a season ago, making its road toward ending its postseason drought a daunting one. But with several new pieces in place, a head coach in his second season and a new general manager at the helm, Sabres' fans remain optimistic that this could be the year Buffalo finally punches its ticket to the playoffs.

### NEW SEASON

During a Zoom conference with the media on Wednesday, Sabres captain Jack Eichel spoke of a new season and his reluctance to rehash the team's past failures.

"This isn't last year or any of the past years. So that's my mindset going into it," said Eichel. "This is a completely new season with new players and a fresh, clean slate."

During Eichel's five-years in the NHL, Buffalo has never made the playoffs, let alone finish the season with a plus-.500 record. However, the Buffalo captain says he is determined to set a new course for this franchise into the future, and in doing so, Eichel says it's vital that the Sabres become a more consistent team.

"I think you find a bit of consistency through the season. There's going to be a lot of hockey in a short amount of time," he said. "So, just trying to stay healthy and we know that there's going to be nights we're not at our best. It's just going to be how you bounce back."

The NHL has introduced a 56-game schedule this season that includes 10 games over the final 18 days of January, leaving little time in terms of a ramp-up period for players to begin the year.

"There's not too many opportunities to rest on your victories or celebrate them," said Eichel. "So it's going to be important for us to win hockey games and then move on to the next task at hand."

During the abbreviated regular-season slate, teams will only face opponents from their respective divisions and will do so as part of several multi-game sets in a given city. To limit travel, the NHL has adopted one, two and in some cases three-game sets at one arena rather than having teams travel back and forth to each other's home rinks continuously.

Eichel is excited about the challenge that the newly aligned schedule presents.

"I think there is probably going to be some extra animosity and if tempers are higher (in one) game, (then when) you see someone the next day, it probably carries over," said Eichel of the impact the multi-game sets may have. "So I mean, I'm sure that the games are going to be competitive as they always are and I'm excited for it."

After all, it's been 11 months since Eichel played competitive hockey and he is chomping at the bit to get back on the ice.

"Obviously it's been awhile. And this is what I love to do," he said. "So, yeah, obviously excited to get the season kicked off tomorrow night and start competing again."

### FANLESS

As of today, the Sabres will be forced to play in front of a crowd-less arena, at least to begin the year. However, as we saw with the Buffalo Bills in their recent playoff run, there is always hope that things will change and fans will at some point be permitted inside Key Bank Center.

"It's good to see some fans at the Bills games. I thought that was the highlight for all of us to see real people in the crowd instead of cardboard people," said Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger on Wednesday. "And I think that gives us hope that somewhere in the near future we'll allow fans into our building. I don't know even what that process is, but it will be exciting for us if we can make that step."

Buffalo has never played in front of a crowd-less arena, as they were one of the few teams to miss out on the 2020 NHL 'bubble'. That leaves several Sabres' players set to take in a new experience tonight, but Krueger says he isn't worried about his players' ability to adjust.

"I think it'll take a few minutes to just kind of get acclimatized to that, but psychologically, we're ready," said Krueger. "I'm expecting the group will get it really fast because within the game, and you saw that in the playoffs, that competitive spirit of the individuals will rise."

In the end, whether it be in front of fans or not, Krueger says he hopes his team can continue to give the city of Buffalo something to root for over the next several months.

"Buffalo's sports world is in a good place right now," said Krueger. "We want to keep that momentum from the Bills going here in Sabres' land."

## NEW PIECES

To help ensure that Buffalo is a more competitive team this season, new GM Kevyn Adams went out and acquired several prized targets, including former Hart Trophy (MVP) winner Taylor Hall who is expected to skate on the Sabres top-line with Eichel this season.

"You know Hallsey brings a special dynamic part to his game where he can make a lot of things happen by himself. And he creates a lot, and he puts the defense on their toes a lot," said Eichel of Hall. "So he's a creative player who can make a lot of plays at a really high speed. So I'm really excited to get the opportunity to play with him. I think we'll be able to push the pace pretty well."

Joining Eichel and Hall on the Sabres top-line appears to be Tage Thompson, who is coming off a season-ending injury that ended his '20 campaign after just one game in Buffalo.

"A guy like (Thompson) I think it's important for him to be able to utilize his size, his shot and his ability to finish plays," said Eichel. "I think the three of us hopefully will develop some chemistry, click and you know, just keep getting better every game."

Eichel finished last season with 78 points (36 goals, 42 assists) and will be looking to up that total this season alongside Hall. The former Coyote, Devil and Oiler is coming off a 16-goal, 36-assist season with New Jersey and Arizona, but playing with Eichel this season, Buffalo is hoping Hall can rekindle his MVP-level ability.

Another piece added to the Sabres' puzzle, veteran Eric Staal will likely center the Sabres' second line surrounded by Victor Oloffson and Sam Reinhart, per Lance Lysowski of the Buffalo News. Following the injury to Zemgus Girgensons (hamstring), Tobias Rieder was promoted to the team's third line next to Cody Eakin and Kyle Okposo, but an injury to Okposo has put that trio in jeopardy. Okposo is currently day-to-day with an undisclosed injury, and Krueger did not say one way or the other if the veteran forward would play tonight against Washington. One may be wondering where Jeff Skinner is, and on Wednesday and the past several days, he was practicing on the Sabres' fourth line, per Lysowski (@Llysowski), alongside Curtis Lazar and Rasmus Asplund/Riley Sheahan. Skinner had a disappointing season last year, and it appears as if he will begin this season in the doghouse.

The Sabres averaged just 2.8 goals per game a season ago, a number they will be desperate to increase this year. The additions of Hall and Staal are good starting points. But Buffalo will need increased production from several returning players if they hope to make the postseason.

## SPECIAL TEAMS

Buffalo is hoping that a few of the new pieces added during the offseason will help improve a few areas in which the team struggled last season, such as the penalty kill, where they ranked second to last in the league at

74.59%. Making matters even more dire for Buffalo, one of the team's best penalty killers, Girgensons is out for the year after undergoing surgery on his injured hamstring.

"Our penalty kill. I think, you know, we need to improve that as well... It's such an important part of a winning hockey games," said Eichel. "And so it's a tough loss not having one of our best-penalty killers in Zemgus but it's an opportunity for guys to step in and have more of a role and make more of an impact."

One of those expected to fill an increased role on the penalty kill is Rieder, who recorded three short-handed goals in last year's postseason alone. During the entirety of the '19-'20 regular season, the Sabres only managed five short-handed goals as a team.

"I think special teams is so important in this league, and I think it can help you a lot when maybe you're five-on-five game is not doing as well," said Eichel. "Whether it's your penalty kill stepping up big or your power play scoring a big goal for the team. So, I think you look at some of the best teams in the league and it seems like they always have good special teams and it's going to be a big focus for us this year."

Another player expected to have an increased role on special teams is third-year defenseman Rasmus Dahlin who, per Lysowski, has been practicing with the Sabres' first power play unit and will likely get plenty of opportunities this season.

"With (Dahlin), obviously he's super young but he's played two years already and he's starting to learn the ways of the league and grow into his body a bit and get stronger," said Eichel of his teammate. "But I think he's doing a lot of the right things and he's taking the right steps in the maturity process. And for him, I think it's just continuing to be confident in his ability and knowing how good he is and how dominant he can be and just expecting that out of himself every night."

"Ras is a special player, and we're going to need a lot out of him this season if we want to have success, and I think he knows that. But he's a competitor, so he works extremely hard on and off the ice and I think he's ready for a big role."

Dahlin finished last season with just two power play goals, a number he will almost surely increase this season with added opportunities alongside Eichel and Hall.

## BETWEEN THE PIPES

By all accounts, it seemed as if Linus Ullmark was set to enter training camp as the Sabres' bona fide starter before an immigration issue delayed his arrival. In his absence, Carter Hutton stepped up and performed well over camp practices and Buffalo's two intrasquad scrimmages, drawing praise from Krueger.

While it once appeared as if Ullmark was destined to take to the crease for the team's first game of the season, Krueger left that open to question after Wednesday's presser.

"(Hutton) was in here a little bit earlier than Linus," said Krueger. "So we'll see. We'll see how the two of them are (Thursday) morning."

Ullmark finished last season with a .915 save percentage and 2.69 goals-against average with one shutout over 34 starts. After enduring some early-season struggles, Hutton finished last year with a .898 save percentage and a goals-against average of 3.18.

In front of Ullmark and Hutton, the Sabres have rotated defensive pairings, per Lysowski, but it appears as if Jake McCabe and Rasmus Ristolainen are set to pair up, while Dahlin seems ready to play alongside Brandon Montour.

## **Sabres Hope To Begin Turnaround Tonight**

By Matt Spielman

The Post-Journal

January 14, 2021

Jeff Skinner, pictured, and Tage Thompson are two Buffalo Sabres forwards battling for coveted ice time with center Jack Eichel. AP file photo

High hopes and low expectations.

The Buffalo Sabres season must be close.

Ralph Krueger's team will begin its 56-game 2021 campaign tonight against the Washington Capitals at KeyBank Center.

Already there are question marks around the team.

The biggest surrounds Jeff Skinner. Just 10 months after trading for the high-scoring winger, then-general manager Jason Botterill signed him to an eight-year, \$72 million extension. That was on the heels of a 40-goal season playing predominantly alongside Jack Eichel.

Jeff Skinner and Tage Thompson, pictured, are two Buffalo Sabres forwards battling for coveted ice time with center Jack Eichel. AP file photo

But last season, Skinner's production fell off under Krueger, the team's new head coach, to the tune of 14 goals and nine assists in 59 games.

And now it appears he'll begin the season in the doghouse, practicing on a line with bottom-six forwards like Curtis Lazar and Rasmus Asplund.

A contract is just a number, but in today's NHL your highest-paid players need to play like it and be treated like it.

Skinner's best production with the Sabres came with the help of Eichel and that's where he should stay. Right now, Tage Thompson is playing in a top-six forward role with Eichel and Taylor Hall while Eric Staal is centering Victor Olofsson and Sam Reinhart.

It seems like there should be a fit somewhere in there for Skinner.

Jeff Skinner and Tage Thompson are two Buffalo Sabres forwards battling for coveted ice time with center Jack Eichel, pictured. AP file photo

Top prospect Dylan Cozens is the X-factor. The seventh overall pick in 2019 is coming off a tremendous World Junior tournament and wants to prove he belongs in the NHL. If can anchor a third "scoring line" for the Sabres, it could make them that much more dangerous.

### **GOALTENDING**

One issue with the Sabres underperforming last season was their goaltending and they didn't do anything to change that situation in the offseason. Carter Hutton was a career backup who was signed to start in Buffalo and to date he hasn't performed up to that status.

In two seasons with the Sabres, Hutton is 30-39-9 with a .904 save percentage and a 3.07 goals against average. Those numbers just aren't good enough in the NHL.

His backup — who will likely get a bulk of the starts this year — is Linus Ullmark and he outperformed Hutton a season ago when he went 17-14-3 with a .915 save percentage and a 2.69 goals against average.

The Sabres and their fans are hoping Ullmark takes another step forward this year and takes control of the Buffalo crease. He looks to have the size and athletic ability to be an above-average NHL goaltender and at his age of just 27 years old should be coming into the prime of his career.

As can be the case with most goaltenders, his play can very well make or break the Sabres' season.

## DEFENSE

Buffalo looks to have a good mix of veterans, players entering the prime of their career and youth on the back end, but they still need to play better if the Sabres expect to make a jump in the East Division standings.

Former No. 1 pick Rasmus Dahlin is still just 20 years old and, hopefully, on his way to becoming one of the best defensemen in the league. He put up 40 points in 59 games last season and was only a minus-7 on a pretty bad team.

He'll be joined by former No. 8 pick Rasmus Ristolainen, who has been the subject of trade talk multiple times in his young career, but at 26 years old can still be a dominant force for the Sabres with his 6-foot-4, 218-pound frame.

Brandon Montour was a shrewd acquisition by Botterill and is playing on a one-year "show me" contract that should force him to put his best foot forward for the Sabres this season.

Throw in Henri Jokiharju, Colin Miller and Jake McCabe, and the Sabres look to have at least a solid defensive corps to help out Ullmark and Hutton.

## PREDICTION

With COVID-19 forcing the NHL into a new divisional alignment to keep Canadian teams on their side of the border, the Sabres will compete in a fairly tough East Division this year.

The New Jersey Devils look like the only pushover team in the division and with only four of the eight making the postseason, Buffalo has its work cut out.

With a top-six forward group of Eichel, Hall, Reinhart, Staal, Skinner and Olofsson, the Sabres seem like they should be able to make a jump in the standings.

If Dahlin and Montour can produce offensively from the back end and Krueger can discover some kind of lockdown pair between Ristolainen and the other three blue-liners, things could be looking up at KeyBank Center.

I'll be optimistic and say the Sabres squeak into the playoffs as the East Division's No. 4 seed, which hopefully is enough to convince Hall to sign a long-term deal with general manager Kevyn Adams next offseason.

## **Taylor Hall, Among NHL Players On Hot Seat, Starts His ‘Show-Me Deal’ With Buffalo Sabres**

By Matt Kalman

Forbes

January 13, 2021

From the time he signed a one-year contract as an unrestricted free agent with the Buffalo Sabres, Taylor Hall knew how people were going to characterize his new deal.

But he had other ideas about what to call the contract that will count for \$8 million against the Sabres' salary cap this season.

"I don't want to call it a 'prove it' deal. It's a little bit of a 'show me' deal," Hall told reporters after he signed in October. "Obviously, I'm betting on myself, but I'm betting that the Sabres can improve and have a good hockey season. If I didn't, I wouldn't be here."

Hall, the No. 1 overall pick by Edmonton in the 2010 NHL Draft, is definitely one of a handful of players on the hot seat as the NHL opens its truncated 56-game season Wednesday.

He'll be reunited in Buffalo with his former Oilers coach Ralph Krueger. Hall calls the one season he played for Krueger with the Oilers — the lockout-shortened 2013 season — his second-best season of his career, just behind his Hart Trophy season of 2017-18 with New Jersey.

The 29-year-old Hall better hope he's able to recreate at least the magic of that 2013 season, when he had 50 points (16 goals, 34 assists) in just 45 games. His career is in danger of falling into a strange category of "superstar journeyman" — a guy with a ton of talent, who produces when healthy, but can't be a guy teams build around. He'll be playing on his fourth team in six seasons.

The Sabres are at a more crucial point in their franchise rebuild (which has seemingly been going on for a decade) than Hall is in his career. They haven't reached the Stanley Cup playoffs since 2011, haven't won a playoff series since 2007. Franchise cornerstone Jack Eichel is 24 and he's never been surrounded with enough talent to help Buffalo even sniff a postseason berth. He's signed through 2026, but how much longer will he put up with losing before he asks out?

With Hall around the Sabres having the makings of a legitimate top line — Hall, Eichel and Victor Olofsson, Tage Thompson or Sam Reinhart. Disappointing Jeff Skinner gets to look for revitalization without the first-line spotlight on him. The addition of Eric Staal gives Buffalo the beginning of a decent second line that could finally take some heat off Eichel.

Any hope of the Sabres contending this season, though, starts with Hall. He didn't make enough of a difference after his trade from the Devils to Arizona last season (27 points in 35 regular-season games; six points in nine playoff games). His next payday will be hanging in the balance every shift. Teams will be watching whether he produces and how he might help the Sabres become respectable again. Among them will be the Sabres, who might have found a long-term sidekick for Eichel or might just be dabbling in another failed experiment in their long-time attempt to provide Eichel a supporting cast.

Here's a look at a few other players on the hot seat this season:

**Alex Pietrangelo, D, Vegas Golden Knights**

The Golden Knights gave the former St. Louis captain a seven-year contract worth an average annual value of \$8.8 million as a UFA at 30 years old. They had to rework their roster to make cap space — Paul Stastny was traded back to Winnipeg — and might not be done trimming some talent to create more room. If that's not pressure on Pietrangelo to be an instant success and carry Vegas back to the Cup final, then there's no such thing as pressure.

**Mike Hoffman, F, St. Louis Blues**

The 31-year-old scored 29 goals in the shortened regular season last year, after scoring 36 the year before. And all he got was a measly one-year, \$4 million deal from the Blues after he skated in their training camp on a

tryout. Hoffman needs to prove that he be a great teammate in addition to a high-end scorer if he wants to get more stability and cash in his next contract as a UFA next offseason.

Tuukka Rask, G, Boston Bruins

He left the bubble last summer and no one should begrudge him wanting to be there for his family during an emergency. But fandom makes people have irrational thoughts, and some will always blame Rask for the Presidents' Trophy-winning Bruins getting dumped in the second round of the playoffs by Tampa Bay. The 33-year-old is in the last year of his contract, and so there's a lot up in the air. He's stated he doesn't want to play anywhere but Boston, but how he plays this season will determine whether the Bruins want to keep him and also whether another team might make him an offer he can't refuse.

## **'We have a great group here' | Irwin talks first camp in Buffalo**

By Matt Irwin

Sabres.com

January 13, 2021

In an ordinary training camp, teammates usually get to know each other during time spent away from the ice. Maybe it happens in the locker room, putting your gear on before practice. Sometimes it's in the meal room over breakfast or lunch.

Obviously, this year was no ordinary camp. Locker rooms and workouts were split up into smaller groups and post-practice meals were taken to go. There were times when I literally introduced myself to guys on the ice just because it was our first chance to actually meet in person.

It's all part of adjusting to the new normal. I think we've been able to do that during these past two weeks, and I think the culture here is a big reason for it.

Talking with Ralph Krueger and Kevyn Adams during the offseason, the mindset they were trying to establish in Buffalo was something I felt excited to be a part of. I can honestly say that I see it coming to fruition already. I think we have a great group here with a common goal.

The No. 1 thing that has stood out is the open communication. It starts with Ralph and his staff and flows through the locker room. Everyone is encouraged to get to know one another as human beings first and foremost, from the top down.

It started for me during the offseason. Multiple players reached out after I signed, which made the transition that much smoother. Before I even got to the city of Buffalo, I felt like I knew these guys.

That bond will be what makes us successful this season. With the way the world is right now, you have to show up to the rink every day expecting something to change. We want to play for each other and make the most out of every situation. We need to stay disciplined away from the rink not only for our own health, but for the best interest of the organization.

We're ready for whatever the season throws at us.

## Coming this season: Taylor Hall

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 13, 2021

Taylor Hall signed a one-year deal to join the Sabres in hopes of helping the team's young core take the next step under coach Ralph Krueger, whom Hall had played for previously in Edmonton.

He saw the pieces falling into place upon arriving at training camp on Jan. 1.

"Just the way Ralph wants us to play, with pace, offensively, a team that really attacks and when we don't have the puck, obviously, a team that needs to get the puck back as quickly as possible and play to our strengths," Hall said following his first practice with the team. "That's a big reason why I wanted to come here was I saw that. I saw that building and I saw that firsthand today."

Here's a look at the Sabres forward entering 2020-21.

One big question: How quickly will Hall mesh with new teammates?

The abbreviated training camp left only 14 days for newcomers to become acclimated with new linemates. That number was less for Hall, who spent the first four practices skating without Jack Eichel while the Sabres captain nursed an upper-body injury.

The duo did play together during Saturday's intrasquad scrimmage and managed to connect on a goal. Eichel fended off a defender behind the net before turning and passing to Hall, who buried a one-time shot parallel to the goal line.

"When players like Jack have the puck, you just want to try and get open any way possible," Hall said afterward. "I've never scored a goal like that before. I've seen it happen many times. It's a credit to him that he can make a play like that. It's just up to me to put it in the open net."

We covered the statistics that make Eichel the most productive centerman Staal has played with in our profile of the captain.

Number to know: 1.05

Hall's points per game average over the past three seasons ranks 17th in the NHL. Since entering the league in 2010-11, he ranks 23rd in points (563) and 32nd in goals (218).

Quotable

Jack Eichel on what he's learned watching Hall over the years: "I think Hall's an interesting player. He's somebody who obviously has super high-end talent, but I think one thing that goes unnoticed is his work ethic. He's able to track down a lot of pucks, he's hard on the forecheck, he can be physical at times. I think he creates a lot by himself by just how fast he is, how strong he is on the puck. I think it's going to be really important for our team to get a guy like that. I think it'll be good in all aspects of the game."

Watch this

Check out Hall's goal from Eichel below in the highlights from Saturday's scrimmage.

## Lazar 'good to go' for Thursday's opener

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 13, 2021

Curtis Lazar returned to practice Wednesday and is ready for Thursday's season opener against the Washington Capitals, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. Lazar had missed the past two practices with a lower-body injury.

Kyle Okposo remained absent and is considered day-to-day. Krueger said his status for the game against Washington will be re-evaluated on Thursday morning.

"Curtis Lazar is good to go," Krueger said. "He had a really good skate, is feeling the best he's felt in training camp thus far. So, the medical team did a really good job and he's back in the fold."

The Sabres took a step toward their regular-season roster prior to the skate, assigning five players to the taxi squad: forwards Rasmus Asplund and Casey Mittelstadt, defensemen William Borgen and Brandon Davidson, and goaltender Jonas Johansson.

That said, as a nod to the fluidity of the roster this season, the practice group did not necessarily reflect those transactions. Asplund and Borgen skated with the main roster. Rookie Jack Quinn, who remains on the roster, skated with the taxi squad at LECOM Harborcenter.

"Right now, the full focus is on the roster for tomorrow and trying to figure out the health situation around players," Krueger said. "... Lots of options. We haven't made a final yet on Jack, but he's done a really good job staying with us. He did skate with the taxi squad today."

Here's how the Sabres lined up.

### Forwards

4 Taylor Hall - 9 Jack Eichel - 72 Tage Thompson  
68 Victor Olofsson - 12 Eric Staal - 23 Sam Reinhart  
53 Jeff Skinner - 27 Curtis Lazar - 74 Rasmus Asplund  
13 Tobias Rieder - 20 Cody Eakin - 24 Dylan Cozens

Rotating in: 38 Riley Sheahan

### Defensemen

19 Jake McCabe - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen  
26 Rasmus Dahlin - 62 Brandon Montour  
33 Colin Miller - 10 Henri Jokiharju  
44 Matt Irwin - 3 William Borgen

### Goalies

35 Linus Ullmark  
40 Carter Hutton

### Preparing for no fans

The Sabres will play for the first time without fans when they host the Capitals Thursday, a situation they simulated through their intrasquad scrimmage on Saturday. As such, Krueger said he expects a short acclimation period for his players.

"I think it will take a minute to just kind of get acclimatized to that," Krueger said. "But psychologically, we're ready. We've spoken about it a lot and it is a reality that we were a part of in the playoffs. Now, we didn't play in the playoffs, but there isn't a player who didn't watch multiple playoff games and kind of got used to what that means."

"In the end, we know our fans, the Sabres fans will be watching. They'll be glued to their TV sets and they'll be supporting us. In that vein, we want to be playing. We want to be playing knowing the fans are not live but they are connected to us as we begin the challenging season ahead."

Up next

The Sabres host the first of back-to-back games against the Capitals on Thursday night. Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30 p.m. with puck drop set for 7.

## **Sabres announce initial taxi squad roster**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

January 13, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres announced Wednesday that the following players have been assigned to the team's taxi squad:

Forwards Rasmus Asplund and Casey Mittelstadt  
Defensemen William Borgen and Brandon Davidson  
Goaltender Jonas Johansson

This season, the NHL roster limit will remain 23 players with a salary cap of \$81.5 million, but each team will also have a taxi squad of 4-6 players that can practice and travel with the players on the NHL roster. Any team not carrying three goalies on its NHL roster must have at least one goalie on its taxi squad.

To be eligible to play in an NHL game, a player on the taxi squad must be recalled to the active roster by 5 p.m. ET on the date of the game. Goalies can be recalled after 5 p.m. ET if fewer than two goalies on the team's NHL roster are available to play.

Players required to clear waivers to be assigned to the American Hockey League also require waivers to be assigned to the taxi squad. Players assigned to the taxi squad will receive the salary they'd receive playing in the AHL and the impact on the team's salary cap will be the same as if the player is in the AHL.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger has said that each morning, he and general manager Kevyn Adams will discuss the taxi squad and any other roster moves that need to be made, so many changes are to be expected throughout the season.

Also, due to the club's proximity to its AHL farm team in Rochester and the protocols that will be followed there, it wouldn't be uncommon for a player not on the taxi squad to be called up to the NHL roster on any given night.

Buffalo opens the 2020-21 campaign tomorrow night at 7 p.m. with a back-to-back set against the Washington Capitals at KeyBank Center.