



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*January 18, 2021*

## **Philadelphia hosts Buffalo after Konecny's 3-goal game**

Associated Press

January 17, 2021

Buffalo Sabres (0-2-0, seventh in the East Division) vs. Philadelphia Flyers (2-0-0, first in the East Division)

Philadelphia; Monday, 7:30 p.m. EST

**BOTTOM LINE:** The Buffalo Sabres visit Philadelphia after Travis Konecny scored three goals in the Flyers' 5-2 victory over the Penguins.

Philadelphia went 41-21-7 overall and 16-4-4 in division play a season ago. The Flyers scored 47 power play goals on 226 power play opportunities last season.

Buffalo finished 10-12-2 in division games and 10-20-4 on the road a season ago. The Sabres scored 37 power play goals with an 18.9% success rate on power play opportunities last season.

The matchup Monday is the first meeting this season between the two teams.

**INJURIES:** Flyers: Shayne Gostisbehere: out (health protocols), Sean Couturier: out (chest).

Sabres: None listed.

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## Vanecek makes 30 saves in NHL debut, Capitals sweep Sabres

By Jonah Bronstein

Associated Press

January 15, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Vitek Vanecek made 30 saves in his NHL debut, Tom Wilson had a goal and an assist and the Washington Capitals beat the Buffalo Sabres 2-1 on Friday night to sweep the season-opening series.

"The dream came true," Vitek said before Wilson threw a towel full of shaving cream in his face during the goalie's postgame interview. "I'm just so happy we won."

The 25-year-old Vitek, a second-round draft pick of the Capitals in 2014, made his first NHL start after five seasons in the minor leagues. With Vitek backing up 23-year-old Ilya Samsonov, the Capitals have the league's youngest goalie tandem.

"He won the game for us," said Capitals forward Nicklas Backstrom, who assisted on Wilson's winning goal. "He's been in the minors a couple years. He's got some experience here. But coming in on this stage, I think Buffalo played way better than us and they really attacked him tonight."

Jakub Vrana scored his second goal of the season for the Capitals, 6-4 winners over the Sabres on Thursday night.

Rasmus Ristolainen scored for Buffalo, and Linus Ullmark stopped 19 shots.

"We beat them in pretty well every category except for scoring," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "We just ran into an extremely hot goaltender on the other end."

Wilson gave Washington the lead for good midway through the third period. Nicklas Backstrom dropped the puck off in the right circle for Wilson, and he flung a wrist shot over Ullmark's glove.

Ristolainen tied it for Buffalo in the opening minute of the third. His snap shot from the blue line wiggled underneath Vanecek's glove after deflecting off the lower leg of Wilson, who was defending Buffalo's Sam Reinhart in front of the net.

"So I think Vitek actually hasn't had another team score on him yet," Wilson said. "He played a great game. It was kind of unfortunate that bounce when in on him."

Washington went ahead early in the second period on Vrana's partial breakaway. Wilson took the puck from Buffalo's Rasmus Dahlin in the Capitals zone before setting up Vrana.

### PENALTY KILLERS

Vitek shut out the Sabres on five power-play chances. Buffalo did not commit a penalty.

"We didn't do too much to draw penalties," Capitals defenseman Justin Schultz said. "We got to work on that. Move our feet and we'll get calls. Maybe a couple of those against us were a little soft. But that's the way it goes sometimes. You just have to deal with it and Vitek did a great job for us on the kill."

### RETURNING TO THE LINEUP

Sabres C Eric Staal was back on the ice after leaving in the third period Thursday following a hit to the head from Capitals C Nick Dowd. Staal was listed as a game-time decision.

Taylor Hall and Reinhart both went to the dressing room before returning to the Buffalo bench. Reinhart tripped and slid into the end boards during the second period, and Hall took an errant puck to the face in the third. Hall, Buffalo's marquee offseason acquisition, assisted on Ristolainen's goal.

### SCHEDULE SHUFFLE

Both teams had games rescheduled after the postponement of Friday's matchup between the Dallas Stars and the Nashville Predators due to positive COVID-19 tests.

Buffalo will now play March 26 at Pittsburgh on March 26 and at home against Pittsburgh on April 19. Washington will play April 10 at Boston. All three games were originally scheduled for the following date.

**WHAT'S NEXT:**

Capitals: At Pittsburgh on Sunday.

Sabres: At Philadelphia on Monday and Tuesday nights.

## **Sabres looking to reverse trend of not taking kindly to the road**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 17, 2021

Both in the wake of last season and going into this one, Buffalo Sabres coach Ralph Krueger made it one of his key talking points.

The Sabres were a Jekyll-and-Hyde outfit last season, going 20-11-4 at home but ruining their hopes with a 10-20-4 road record that ranked 28th out of the 31 teams in points away from home.

They have to be better away from KeyBank Center or they go nowhere. Period.

Krueger says his club's better depth at forward should lead to better matchups on the road, where the home team's last change allows it to maneuver more freely. He's got tough lab tests for that theory to run this week.

The Sabres play Monday and Tuesday nights at Philadelphia, which opened the season with two impressive wins over Pittsburgh and is the pick by many to win the East Division. Then, they play Friday and Sunday at Washington, which just took the opening two games in Buffalo. Since 2014, the Sabres are 0-6-1 in their last seven games in Philadelphia and 0-6-2 in their last eight in D.C. They've been outscored 63-22 in the 15 games.

"The biggest thing is simplicity, and the ability to stick with your game, regardless of what's going on around you," Sabres center Eric Staal said Sunday. "I think it's obviously different now with no fans and no energy and momentum that way. But there's still momentum shifts and gains. And I think on the road, the ability to stick within your structure and your game and believe in doing the simple things consistently, you'll find results."

Over the last four seasons, the Sabres have the NHL's fewest road wins (49), and their 49-86-22 record leaves them with a .382 points percentage that's ahead of only Ottawa (.379) and Detroit (.376). The Sabres have a goal differential of minus-132 in that span.

They ended last year with five straight losses on the road, including four in a row on a Western trip that snuffed their playoff hopes.

"I really think with our depth, we will be able to shake (tough) matchups easier," Krueger said. "And there will be times where you'll see an 11-forward rotation, even if we have 12 forwards on the bench, just to make it more difficult for the opposition to get what they want."

"And the defensive trust we have in all four lines right now is quite big. We kept Washington down to 10 scoring chances in the last game (Friday's 2-1 loss). That was a really good defensive performance. That was what was different last year on the road. I think our strong 5-on-5 game at home was not equal on the road."

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Taking the road

Road records of NHL teams since 2016-17

Five Best – W-L-O – Pct.

Tampa Bay – 95-49-15 – .645

## **Sabres Notebook: Dylan Cozens gets a bigger role with move to second line**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 17, 2021

Three games into his rookie season and less than two weeks after he left the World Junior Championships. That's apparently how long it's taken for 19-year-old Dylan Cozens to push into the top-six group of the Buffalo Sabres' forward lines.

Cozens was on right wing Sunday with Eric Staal and Victor Olofsson, and it appears he will open there Monday night in Philadelphia.

The Sabres' top draft pick in 2019 averaged 12 1/2 minutes over the first two games against Washington, playing with Tobias Rieder and Cody Eakin. He collected his first NHL point (an assist on a Rieder goal), and played to a 52% Corsi rating and an even plus-minus. Cozens said the size and strength of NHL players has been a quick eye-opener, but he's ready to take on a bigger role.

"They're a lot stronger than what I'm used to, so that's a big adjustment there," he said. "But I think the biggest thing I've picked up on is just how much guys take care of their bodies. Especially in a year like this, where there's so many games in such a short period of time, I think the biggest thing is just ensure I take care of my body."

Players and coaches have been impressed with Cozens' on-ice maturity since he arrived in camp, and there's no question already being in game shape for the World Juniors has given him a quick boost at the start of his NHL career.

"It was definitely a big for me to go skate in a competitive environment for two months, and then play those games and get myself back in game shape," Cozens said. "Being able to come into camp here at the top of my game, top of my conditioning. I think it was really big for me. I'm happy that I got to get that tournament in."

"I think it's his mind and his brain for the game. You can just see it at work daily," Staal said. "Whether it be practice or even in games, if something didn't go right, the next time he does it, he does it differently and gives himself a better result. As a young player, it's a whirlwind. There's a ton of things going on ... but he's handled it all really well. And he looks comfortable."

Coach Ralph Krueger said Cozens' off-the-puck game has been impressive as well.

"What stands out truly is his ability to take care of the gritty work that needs to be done to play in the National Hockey League and to not be a risk," Krueger said. "He enjoys the coverage role, he enjoys getting back, his tracking is very strong, he finds his inside position naturally. And we were actually positively surprised at how he dealt with one-on-one battles. Even against (Zdeno) Chara, he had a couple of situations where he was able to make something out of it. So that stands out."

The Sabres have put Cozens' stall in the dressing room between Staal and Jack Eichel. Cozens said he's keeping a low profile and trying not to pepper Staal with a lot of questions.

"It's scary to think that I was him back in the day," Staal said. "Time goes fast."

Taken No. 2 in the 2003 draft by Carolina, Staal sat by current Seattle GM Ron Francis in his first year ("pretty phenomenal"), and then current Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour in his first couple of NHL seasons.

"Any little questions or any little things to Dylan, I'm always willing to talk and mostly it's been fun to kind of come this full circle," Staal said. "But hopefully the circle continues for me for a little while."

Krueger on the Bills

Krueger, who regularly texts with Bills coach Sean McDermott, was thrilled by the team's victory Saturday over Baltimore and joined assistant coach Steve Smith in talking about it with the Sabres before practice Sunday.

"I live in Elmwood Village and there were some horns probably until the middle of the night, so I'm happy for the people of Buffalo," a smiling Krueger said. "Lots of sound, lots of people running around with flags in the Village, so that buzz was terrific to feel. It's a good learner for us too to see the passion of the Buffalo sports fan. It was fantastic for me to witness that on the pick-six (the 101-yard touchdown return by Taron Johnson). I think the whole city just exploded."

On the air

To avoid conflict with the AFC Championship Game – and undoubtedly avoid a ratings disaster for the Sabres' MSG telecast – the NHL and Washington Capitals have moved the start of time of Sunday's game in Capital One Arena from 7 p.m. to 3 p.m. The Bills' game in Kansas City will be kicking off at 6:40 p.m.

Monday's game in Philly is on NBC Sports Network with the No. 1 team of Kenny Albert and Pierre McGuire on the call from the network's studio in Stamford, Conn. They will be calling two of the four games of a Martin Luther King Jr. Day quadrupleheader, starting with Columbus-Detroit at noon.

## **Sabres coach Ralph Krueger on the pick-six: 'I think the whole city just exploded'**

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 17, 2021

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger regularly texts with Bills coach Sean McDermott, Buffalo players are often seen at Bills Stadium during normal times when a full house is in the stands and many of the players have become big fans.

So the Bills' victory Saturday night over Baltimore that landed them in the AFC Championship Game for the first time in 21 years resonated in the Sabres' locker room as well. Krueger and assistant Steve Smith both made it a talking point prior to practice Sunday in KeyBank Center.

"I live in Elmwood Village and there were some horns probably until the middle of the night so I'm happy for the people of Buffalo," a smiling Krueger said. "Lots of sound, lots of people running around with flags in the Village so that buzz was terrific to feel. 'Smitty' in his presentation started with the Bills and how they've evolved and grown from being thrashed by the Patriots in big games a few years ago and how they're learning and growing. It is a buzz in our room. We're all big Bills fans and we couldn't be more pleased for Kim and Terry Pegula and the whole organization for the opportunity that lies ahead.

"It's a good learner for us too to see the passion of the Buffalo sports fan. It was fantastic for me to witness that on the pick-six (the 101-yard touchdown return by Taron Johnson). I think the whole city just exploded. Wherever you were, you knew that was going on and it's such a nice thing to see."

On the ice, the Sabres practiced for an hour before heading to Philadelphia for Monday night's road opener against the Flyers. They did it without Sam Reinhart, who is day to day after suffering a lower-body injury in a collision along the boards during Friday's 2-1 win over Washington. Reinhart will travel and his status will be determined during Monday's morning skate.

Casey Mittelstadt held Reinhart's place with Taylor Hall and Jack Eichel during Sunday's practice. Kyle Okposo will not travel as he continues to work on his lower-body injury but Krueger said his goal is to have the veteran back for Friday's game in Washington.

There was no major line-shuffling at practice, with the most notable move seeing rookie Dylan Cozens move up to the second line with center Eric Staal and winger Victor Olofsson.

The Sabres have four difficult roadies this week, with Monday's game in Philly nationally televised on NBC Sports Network. They will be trying to avoid their first 0-3 start since 2014. Buffalo meets the Flyers again Tuesday before a return matchup in Washington Friday night and Sunday night.

## **Tobias Rieder 'can fly,' provide spark for Sabres all over the ice**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 16, 2021

Tobias Rieder wasn't signed by the Buffalo Sabres to provide offense.

The 28-year-old winger doesn't have much of a track record scoring goals in the NHL, especially at even strength. Rieder is one season removed from totaling zero goals in 67 games with the Edmonton Oilers and hasn't reached double digits since he had 16 with the Arizona Coyotes in 2016-17.

Yet, there was Rieder on opening night in KeyBank Center, outmuscling Washington Capitals defender John Carlson for the puck, circling behind the net and scoring on a wraparound in what was unquestionably the Sabres' best even-strength shift Thursday.

"He can fly," said goalie Carter Hutton prior to the 6-4 loss.

Despite some lean offensive seasons, Rieder was among the Sabres' top targets when free agency opened in October and General Manager Kevyn Adams signed the penalty-kill specialist to a one-year, \$700,000 contract. Rieder was among the standouts in training camp, providing the straight-line speed this team has lacked in the bottom six.

Rieder is an anchor on the Sabres' energy line, pairing with center Cody Eakin and rookie Dylan Cozens, all of whom are in their first year with the team, to control the puck in the offensive zone. The trio was held off the scoresheet Friday night, but their responsible play earned Ralph Krueger's trust.

"Some new guys coming in and the goal will be to be reliable, to be responsible, to provide energy and try to be the hardest working line and team on the ice, no matter who is out there or who is filling that role," said Eakin. "You want to do it with speed, lots of talk and you want to make sure you're doing it well."

The group is essentially a replacement for the trio of Zemgus Girgensons, Johan Larsson and Kyle Okposo, among the top defensive lines in the NHL last season. Larsson is now in Arizona, Girgensons will miss the next six months following surgery on his hamstring and Okposo is day to day with a lower-body injury.

Krueger told reporters following the 2-1 loss Friday night that his lineup will change for the back-to-back series against Philadelphia. Rieder, though, is expected to be a constant in the Sabres' lineup. After all, his worker-bee-like approach, paired with top-end speed, is a significant upgrade for a penalty kill that ranked 30th in the NHL last season. His impacted has extended to even strength, too.

When asked late Friday night about a sequence in which the Sabres had the puck for approximately two minutes in the offensive zone, Sam Reinhart credited Rieder's line for controlling play on the previous shift. Across two games to start the season, Rieder leads all Sabres forwards in on-ice 5-on-5 shot differential.

"Obviously, a great skater, real smart player, in the right spots," said center Eric Staal. "I think he'll be an important part to our penalty kill and overall team speed, the ability to get on the forecheck, create some O-zone time for his linemates."

After Girgensons was lost for the regular season, Krueger told reporters Rieder is capable of double-digit goals. The confidence in Rieder is a product of the veteran winger's performance in the most recent Stanley Cup playoffs, as he matched an NHL record with three shorthanded goals in the same postseason.

"His defensive speed needs to be impactful in our game," said Krueger. "His penalty killing is definitely something where he's embraced that over the last few years and is somebody who understands what needs to be done and the sacrificing in the way he gets into shot lanes defensively. ... So just somebody who under these circumstances will automatically increase in value for us as we move forward."

Rieder came to Buffalo because of Krueger. The two have a relationship that dates back at least a decade, according to Krueger, who coached Rieder with Team Europe at the 2016 World Cup of Hockey.

The Sabres play a brand of hockey that suits Rieder's skills. His previous teams in the Western Conference did not have the same attacking style that has become synonymous with Krueger since his lockout-shortened season as coach of the Edmonton Oilers in 2012-13.

"He wants to play fast," said Rieder of Krueger. "I think that's my best attribute, to play fast, to use my skating and that style of play helps my game out a lot. It's no sitting back. It's always going and I think that's what helps me out the most."

#### UPL incoming

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen is on his way to Rochester.

Luukkonen, the Sabres' top goalie prospect, completed his loan with TPS of Finland's Liiga and will join the Amerks' training camp as soon as possible. The 21-year-old recorded a .908 save percentage and 2.52 goals-against average in 13 games with TPS.

Rochester's season can start as early as Feb. 5. The American Hockey League has yet to release a schedule or playoff format.

Luukkonen, a second-round draft pick of the Sabres in 2017, appeared in 33 games between Cincinnati and Rochester last season – his first since undergoing hip surgery. Though Luukkonen was among the top goaltenders in the ECHL, he struggled transitioning to the AHL. He recorded an .874 save percentage in 10 games with the Amerks.

Luukkonen is expected to start most games for Rochester during this shortened season. He won a gold medal with Finland at the IIHF World Junior Championship in January 2019.

#### Huglen's impact

Aaron Huglen, a fourth-round draft pick of the Sabres in 2019, is back on the ice after missing last season with a back injury that required surgery this summer. Huglen underwent a microdiscectomy, the surgical removal of abnormal disc material that places pressure on a nerve root or the spinal cord.

Since returning to the ice recently, Huglen has totaled three goals with four assists for seven points in six games while centering the second line for Fargo of the United States Hockey League.

#### Schedule

The Sabres will practice Sunday afternoon in preparation for their back-to-back series against the Flyers in Philadelphia on Monday and Tuesday. The game Monday night will be broadcast NBC Sports Network and puck drop is 7:30 p.m. EST.

## **Sabres goalie prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen reporting to Rochester**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 16, 2021

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen is on his way to Rochester.

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## **Mike Harrington: Sabres coach Ralph Krueger needs to make quick pivot with Jeff Skinner**

By Mike Harrington  
The Buffalo News  
January 15, 2021

What we have with Jeff Skinner is the chicken and the egg.

I say he's got to play better. You say he can't do much with the players he's with (no offense to Curtis Lazar and Riley Sheahan). I say they paid Skinner \$9 million a year, he should be able to make plays. You say, again, he can't do much with the players he's with. I say he was invisible during training camp, you say that shouldn't matter. Then why have camp if that's the case?

Around and around we go. Where we stop, nobody knows.

This corner is not a fan of the daily crabbing from fans about what line Skinner is playing on. What's far more important is this: In six periods over two games, Skinner's play has gotten progressively better and what he showed Friday night against Washington has to give Ralph Krueger lots of food for thought.

One problem with a 56-game season is it's a sprint. There's not nearly the time to let rhythms build and for things to evolve. You have to make decisions fast and, if the need arises, pivot away from them fast.

That's where Krueger is now. Krueger stubbornly wouldn't put Skinner with Jack Eichel last season – after Skinner scored 40 goals on Eichel's wing two years ago. That spot is gone now, taken by Taylor Hall. But Krueger pivoted in the third period Friday and put Sam Reinhart with Hall and Eichel in place of Tage Thompson.

And when Hall left for a couple of shifts after taking a puck to the mouth he had Skinner on that line.

It seems simple really. Monday in Philadelphia, Krueger needs to roll Hall-Eichel-Reinhart and Skinner with Eric Staal and Victor Olofsson. Don't overthink it.

Skinner had a lousy training camp and Thompson had a really good one, leading Krueger to start the season with Thompson on the top line and Skinner on the fourth one. I get it.

But the game is already proving to be too big in that spot for Thompson, who was dropped a line during Friday's 2-1 loss to Washington. Skinner, meanwhile, had his feet moving and was a pest in the Caps' zone all night. But he only played 11 minutes at even strength, well short of the total of Thompson (16:13) and even newcomers Tobias Rieder (12:36) and Cody Eakin (12:11).

Skinner got 3:29 on the power play and didn't score. Of course, nobody else did either. But one of the league's top 5-on-5 scorers in recent seasons simply has to get more time at even strength if the Sabres want any bang for their buck.

What worked for Skinner on Friday?

"I feel like I'm a pretty decent player. Maybe that could be a part of it," he said cryptically. "Second game of the season. Haven't played in 10 months but I'm pretty confident in what I can do in this league, how I can produce and how it can help the team, and our whole line played well."

Then what do you need to show the coach?

"The conversations between coaches and players in my opinion should be kept in the room," he said. "I think personally I feel like that's the way it should go. My job is to play hockey. His job is to worry about 23 guys and making a lineup. A lot more than me. I'm focused on trying to help the team win as much as I can."

Krueger was diplomatic. He doesn't coach in a vacuum. And he didn't only score 14 goals last season, Skinner did. Still, Krueger knows what the talking points are about his team and a big theory is the coach's defensive-minded structure stifles the offensive creativity of players like Skinner. And it was pretty obvious listening to Skinner they've had The Talk a lot the last couple of seasons.

"Where Jeff lands in the whole thing, we've got a couple of days here to regroup and we will make some changes in the lineup," Krueger said. "... I have to look at the group as a whole and how it comes together. The important thing is that Jeff showed us a level today that we need to hold as an expectation every night and then we'll see how it evolves."

There are flags around Skinner that are hard to ignore. Most games in the league with no playoff appearances among active players. Carolina in the East final the year after it traded him to Buffalo – only getting Cliff Pu in return.

Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour, of course, captained them to their 2006 Stanley Cup so he knows what it takes to win. He clearly didn't think Skinner had it.

By the end of last season, it didn't seem that GM Jason Botterill and Krueger were on the same page on certain items. You wonder how the GM who gave out an eight-year, \$72 million deal felt about his first-year coach not playing a 40-goal scorer with Eichel, let alone even further down the lineup.

That little issue, of course, is gone now with Botterill out of the way. Kevyn Adams isn't going to tell Krueger where to play Skinner to justify a trade. And Krueger has a deeper forward lineup to work with. It's not bad to have guys who can score on lines 3-4. Have you watched the playoffs the last few years?

But where this team is right now, let's see Skinner get the chance and see if he produces. And if he doesn't put the puck in the net, he'll have no gripe. Nor will any of you.

## **Wraparound: Capitals 2, Sabres 1**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 15, 2021

The Sabres earned a victory before stepping onto the ice Friday night in KeyBank Center.

Eric Staal, a 36-year-old acquired this offseason to center the team's second line, returned to the lineup after he sustained a hit to the head during the third period of the season opener.

The former Stanley Cup champion and his new teammates proceeded to show fans why this is unquestionably the most hyped Sabres team Buffalo has seen in recent years. The end result, however, was the same.

Washington Capitals forward Tom Wilson scored on a wrist shot over Linus Ullmark's glove in the third period to deliver the Sabres a 2-1 loss, spoiling what was otherwise an impressive showing to cap the first East Division series of Buffalo's season.

After peppering rookie goalie Vitek Vanecek with 26 shots through two periods, the Sabres finally broke through with Rasmus Ristolainen's wrist shot going off a Capitals defender and into the net to tie the score, 1-1, only 31 seconds into the third period. The Sabres' push continued, but Washington took the lead when Wilson was left alone in the right circle to uncork a shot that beat Ullmark with 12:13 remaining in regulation.

Jakub Vrana also scored for Washington, which had only 13 shots through two periods. This is the first time since 2015-16 that the Sabres have started the season with consecutive regulation losses. Buffalo was unable to score with an extra attacker on the ice in the final seconds. Ullmark made 19 saves in his first start since March.

Skinner shines: Jeff Skinner made an impact on almost every shift Friday night. He fooled Capitals defenseman Dmitry Orlov with a spin move, out-muscled defenders in the offensive zone and created offense despite playing on the fourth line.

When Sam Reinhart left briefly, Skinner was elevated to the second line and earned more ice time as the game went along.

Reunion: Jack Eichel and Reinhart were reunited on the top line late in the second period, as coach Ralph Krueger searched for a spark on offense. The two paired, along with Taylor Hall, applied pressure on Washington by controlling the puck in the offensive zone. Jake McCabe nearly scored the tying goal when he had a chance in front.

The Sabres outshot the Capitals, 26-13, through two periods. Eichel and Reinhart also skated with Skinner in the third period while Hall was having an equipment issue resolved in the dressing room.

More growing pains: Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, now in his third NHL season, made another mistake that resulted in a Washington goal. Dahlin mishandled a pass at the point, creating a rush chance for the Capitals that ended with Vrana beating Ullmark for a 1-0 lead at 1:34 into the second period.

Not-so-special teams: The Sabres' power play went 0 for 3 in the first period, recording only four shots on goal when on the man advantage during that span. However, Buffalo outshot Washington, 11-6, in the first and outplayed the Capitals in every phase.

Among the notable scoring opportunities, Hall hit the post during a 2-on-1 with Tage Thompson, and Brandon Montour had a wrist shot that went past Vanecek and through the crease. The start was in stark contrast to the third period Thursday, when the Sabres allowed two goals.

The power play was also unsuccessful in its fourth opportunity, though Victor Olofsson nearly tied the score with a point-blank chance.

Lineup: Sabres defenseman Matt Irwin was a healthy scratch for a second consecutive game and right wing Kyle Okposo remained out of the lineup with a lower-body injury. Krueger told reporters Friday morning that Okposo may be able to return for the team's road trip to Philadelphia.

Schedule changes: The Sabres had two of their games against the Pittsburgh Penguins moved to different dates, as the teams will now play March 26 and April 19. The games were previously scheduled for March 27 and April 20.

Departure: Casey Nelson, a defenseman who opted out of the Sabres' season, took to Instagram on Friday to announce his retirement.

Nelson, 28, signed a one-year, two-way contract worth \$700,000 with the Sabres in October and had been with the organization since 2016. The right-shot defenseman may have been a candidate for the team's taxi squad during this 56-game NHL season, but he chose to opt out of playing amid the pandemic.

Nelson, who joined the Sabres as an undrafted free agent out of Minnesota State Mankato, spent last season with the Rochester Americans, where he skated in 48 games and totaled 12 points.

Next: The Sabres have back-to-back games against the Flyers in Philadelphia on Monday and Tuesday. Puck drop Monday at Wells Fargo Center is scheduled for 7:30 p.m., and the game will be aired on NBC Sports Network.

## **Sabres' improved firepower stifled by Capitals' rookie goalie in 2-1 loss**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 15, 2021

Jack Eichel, the Buffalo Sabres' third-year captain, stood behind the Washington Capitals' net, leaned forward and shook his head in frustration at the end of regulation Friday night.

A few feet away, Washington Capitals players began to swarm their rookie goalie, Vitek Vanecek, to celebrate the 25-year-old's first career NHL victory, a 2-1 win over the Sabres in KeyBank Center to sweep the two teams' first East Division series of the 56-game season.

Though the expressions of disappointment mirrored those we've seen following so many losses during the team's playoff drought, the narrative around these Sabres is far different. For the first time since Eichel arrived as the face of the franchise in 2015, Buffalo may finally have the roster depth to compete with some of the NHL's elite teams.

When a puck to the mouth forced Taylor Hall to miss time in the third period, coach Ralph Krueger replaced the former Hart Trophy winner with Jeff Skinner, a 40-goal scorer only two seasons ago. At the first sign of trouble in the second period, Krueger swapped Tage Thompson with Sam Reinhart on the top line.

Unlike last season, Krueger did not have to worry which center was on the ice against the Capitals' Nicklas Backstrom. The Sabres' coaches now trust Eichel, Eric Staal, Cody Eakin and Curtis Lazar to handle the assignment.

"We played free today," said Krueger. "We beat them in pretty well every category except for the scoring. It was excellent to see the execution, extremely painful to see the final result. But what changed was we outskated them, we put pucks into places where we created foot races and they really struggled with that. We just ran into an extremely hot goaltender at the other end."

The storyline is familiar. Many of the NHL's top goaltenders play well against the Sabres, who have scored the fourth-fewest goals in the league since Eichel was drafted second overall. But they outplayed the Capitals for most of the night and did so at 5 on 5 by using all four lines, including a bottom unit that featured Skinner, Lazar and Riley Sheahan.

The Sabres out-shot the Capitals, 31-21, and had 17 more shot attempts. Unlike Thursday night, when the Sabres' neutral-zone turnovers fueled the Capitals' offensive attack, Buffalo played the sort of simple game Krueger wants at even strength. Hall hit the post on a 2 on 1, Thompson had an odd-man-rush opportunity stopped and Brandon Montour had a wrist shot roll through the crease.

"I think we came out a lot quicker to the battles," said Reinhart. "A lot more urgency from our group. I think that led to a lot more time in their end for sure."

The difference, Krueger said, was Buffalo's inability to capitalize on the power play, as Eichel and company went 0 for 5 on the man advantage. The Sabres weren't able to retrieve the puck after losing possession on the power play and rarely seemed comfortable trying to find space in the offensive zone, as they buckled under pressure created by the Capitals.

The closest the Sabres came to scoring on the power play was in the second period when Victor Olofsson's point-blank chance hit Vanecek's outstretched leg pad. A breakthrough finally came 31 seconds into the third period when a Reinhart screen allowed Rasmus Ristolainen's wrist shot to beat Vanecek and tie the score, 1-1.

"I feel like we're way more confident when you sign those big names who have been around a lot and they won something," said Ristolainen, referring to Hall and Staal. "So, you always stay more confident. I like the lineup we have. It's four lines and everyone can score."

The Sabres did not commit any penalties and handled their defensive assignments well, as illustrated by Alex Ovechkin finishing with only two shots on goal. But two mistakes were enough to lead to a second consecutive regulation loss.

Rasmus Dahlin, now 20 years old and amid his third season in the NHL, mishandled a pass at the point and the puck was corralled by Jakub Vrana, who bolted down the right wing and beat Linus Ullmark with a shot over the glove for a 1-0 lead at 1:34 into the second period.

With the score tied in the third period and the Sabres controlling play, Colin Miller fell in the corner of Buffalo's defensive zone. Backstrom gathered the puck and passed back to Tom Wilson, whose shot from the right circle went over Ullmark's glove for a 2-1 lead with 12:13 remaining in regulation.

"You're going to have good games where you don't win and maybe this was one of those for us tonight, but this game is about results," said Skinner. "This league is about results. We need to get back at it, keep working and try to get a win next game."

This game showed the Sabres' promise at even strength, a significant development considering they've routinely been a one-line team in recent years. Buffalo also has the talent up front to score goals at a higher rate – the Sabres' were impressive in that regard Thursday night – but Krueger's next task is fixing a power play that was among the worst in the NHL following the first month of last season.

There's little time for adjustments, as the Sabres' next games are a back to back in Philadelphia on Monday and Tuesday.

"You can take a lot of confidence out of that game and hopefully the guys, they're able to absorb this pain properly and continue with the process," said Krueger.

## **Ex-Sabres defenseman Casey Nelson announces retirement**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 15, 2021

Casey Nelson, a defenseman who opted out of the Buffalo Sabres' season, took to Instagram on Friday to announce his retirement.

Nelson, 28, signed a one-year, two-way contract worth \$700,000 with the Sabres in October and had been with the organization since 2016. The right-shot defenseman may have been a candidate for the team's taxi squad during this 56-game NHL season, but he chose to opt out of playing amid the pandemic.

Nelson, who joined the Sabres as an undrafted free agent out of Minnesota State Mankato, spent last season with the Rochester Americans, where he skated in 48 games and totaled 12 points.

Nelson has not played a game with the Sabres since the 2018-19 season, when he skated in a career-high 38 games under former coach Phil Housley. Across parts of four seasons in Buffalo, Nelson played in 93 NHL games and totaled four goals with 14 assists.

## **Sabres in line to start Linus Ullmark, awaiting word on Eric Staal's availability**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

January 15, 2021

Any analysis of the Buffalo Sabres' season-opening loss to Washington inside KeyBank Center should include the caveat that most of Ralph Krueger's roster had not played an NHL game in 10 months.

Almost every returning player on the roster needed at least one period to adjust to the Washington Capitals' speed. And although the Sabres opened with a 6-4 defeat, Krueger was encouraged by a third period in which Buffalo scored twice, including a goal by Victor Olofsson with an extra attacker on the ice.

The Sabres reconvened Friday morning for video meetings in which Krueger likely explained a need to be better defensively. Unlike previous seasons, though, opponent-specific adjustments will need to be implemented immediately because the Sabres host the Capitals for the second game of a back-to-back at 7 p.m. Friday.

"Again, a bit of a stony, rough start can also clarify a lot of things quicker," said Krueger. "Maybe last year things got off a little bit too easy and we didn't have pain or adversity for too long, and then we went into a deep dive. We're expecting a much better game tonight and one of the reasons is what happened in the second half of the game when we got our legs under us and we simplified things."

Krueger was referring to the Sabres' 8-1-1 start to last season, which preceded their tumble down the standings. His second season will include a 56-game schedule in which Buffalo will face the same seven opponents eight times apiece. The top four teams in the temporarily aligned East Division will make the playoffs. Patience will also wane quickly because the Sabres' January schedule includes 10 games in 18 days.

The Sabres appear to have the top-six talent to match their division opponents. Taylor Hall, the former Hart Trophy winner who joined the team as a free agent in October, scored a power-play goal in his debut. Jack Eichel assisted on two goals, including a cross-ice pass on Jake McCabe's one-timer early in the third period, and Olofsson showed he has returned to form after missing time with a lower-body injury last season.

Even Dylan Cozens, the 19-year-old rookie who made his NHL debut Thursday, added to the offense by assisting on Tobias Rieder's second-period goal. But the Sabres' personnel could change Friday as Krueger awaits word on Eric Staal, who did not return to the game after taking a hit to the head from Nic Dowd in the third period.

Krueger told reporters Staal, a 36-year-old center, will be a game-time decision. If Staal is unavailable, the Sabres will move Riley Sheahan to center and could promote a player from the taxi squad before 5 p.m. Right wing Kyle Okposo, who is day to day with a lower-body injury, will miss his second consecutive game.

Linus Ullmark, who has played only one NHL game since suffering a lower-body injury Jan. 28, 2020, is expected to start in goal for the Sabres. He was a late arrival to training camp because of an immigration issue.

"It was just unfortunate I came in later," said Ullmark. "But, I mean, I've been away from the game for 10 months. So a couple days here and there doesn't really matter. It's still the same game. It's like riding a bike, you know? You just got to go out there, play my heart out and just enjoy the moment."

## **Sabres juggle lines with Reinhart and Okposo missing practice**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 17, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres had a day off on Saturday before getting together for practice on Sunday.

Sam Reinhart missed practice after leaving the ice briefly during Friday's game.

"Sam is day-to-day with a lower-body injury that appears to be manageable, so he'll come with us on the trip and we'll make that final decision at the pregame skate," said head coach Ralph Krueger after practice.

The Sabres left for Philadelphia right after practice on Sunday. Kyle Okposo also missed practice, and he was not on that plane.

"Kyle will stay here and rehab," Krueger said. "He'll be hitting the ice tomorrow and we hope to have him back for Washington."

With Reinhart missing, Casey Mittelstadt came up from the taxi squad and filled in on right wing with Jack Eichel and Taylor Hall.

Dylan Cozens found himself on a new line, as he was on right wing with Eric Staal and Victor Olofsson. Cozens sits next to Staal in the locker room, but he said he doesn't say too much because he doesn't want to bother him.

"I don't ask him too many questions because I don't really want to bug him too much," Cozens said. "He's a guy that's been in the league a long time, he knows a lot, he's won a Stanley Cup and he knows what it takes. There's a lot of things I can learn from him, and he's always helping me out and giving me advice."

Staal seems to enjoy working with younger players. He said,

"For me, I sat beside Ron Francis, and then after that it was Rod Brind'Amour," Staal said. "I had two pretty good mentors to follow, and if there are any little questions or any little things I can do for Dylan, I'm always willing to talk."

Tage Thompson was moved to the right wing on Sunday with Cody Eakin and Tobias Rieder.

The final line didn't change, with Curtis Lazar centering Jeff Skinner and Riley Sheahan.

Krueger always enjoys talking about the Buffalo Bills when they have success. The head coach seems to be enjoying the ride the Bills are on just as much as the fans are.

"I live in Elmwood Village, and there were some horns until the middle of the night, so I'm happy for the people of Buffalo," Krueger said. "There was a lot of sound and people running around with flags in the village so that buzz was terrific. We're all big Bills fans, and we couldn't be more pleased for Kim and Terry [Pegula] and the whole organization for the opportunity that lies ahead."

Krueger said there are also things the players can learn from the Bills run.

"It's a good learner for us too, to see the passion of the Buffalo sports fan. I mean, it was fantastic, and on the pick-six, the whole city just exploded."

The Sabres have only played two games, but are already five points behind the Washington Capitals, who lost in a shootout to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Sunday afternoon.

Buffalo will play the Philadelphia Flyers on Monday and Tuesday, before traveling to Washington for games Friday and Sunday.

Thanks to the AFC Championship Game, which includes the Bills, being scheduled for 6:40 p.m. EST, the NHL announced on Sunday that the time for Sunday's game between the Sabres and Capitals has been moved from 7 p.m. EST to 3 p.m. EST.

## **OPINION: Sabres play well, but lose again to Washington**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 16, 2021

Before the season started, I said the Buffalo Sabres have no chance of making the playoffs if they don't improve their special teams. Buffalo has opened the season with two home losses to the Washington Capitals, and is tied for last in the National Hockey League on the penalty kill at 50% and is 19th on the power play at 12.5%.

The Sabres outplayed the Capitals on Friday night at every turn, but still lost to a goalie playing in his first NHL game, 2-1.

Washington never went on the power play in the game, while the Sabres went 0-for-5 with the man advantage. That means in two games, the Sabres are 1-for-8 with the extra man.

Buffalo outshot the Capitals, 31-21, and defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen said after the game that they made goalie Vitek Vanecek look good. I wouldn't argue with that.

I remember two real quick arm saves on Dylan Cozens and Jack Eichel, but Taylor Hall hit the post off a 2-on-1, and Brandon Montour had a puck get behind Vanecek, roll on the goal line and go out the other side.

Tage Thompson, who has struggled mightily trying to please Eichel, did his toe drag move and was face-to-face with Vanecek, but shot it right into him. He looks very nervous playing with Eichel, and just doesn't seem up to the challenge. I think he earned the chance in training camp, but it didn't work.

I think you get the idea.

It also doesn't help that guys that are counted on to score goals have none in two games. That would include Eichel, Sam Reinhart, Jeff Skinner and Eric Staal.

Before the game, head coach Ralph Krueger said he asked his team to be better defensively and they did just that. As soon as the Sabres lost possession of the puck, they lined five guys up in the neutral zone and waited for Washington to come at them. They funneled the Capitals to a certain area and kept the scoring chances to zero in the first period.

Buffalo had numerous opportunities throughout the night, but couldn't break through Vanecek.

Just 1:34 into the second period, Rasmus Dahlin couldn't handle a pass across the blue line and Tom Wilson put Jakub Vrana in on Linus Ullmark. He, of course, scored on his team's first scoring opportunity. I thought to myself, the Sabres could've really used a big save from Ullmark there.

By the end of the second period, it was still 1-0 Washington and the shots were 26-13 in favor of Buffalo.

Near the end of the second period, Krueger stopped being bullheaded and took Thompson off Eichel's right wing and inserted Reinhart. For two shifts, they absolutely dominated, buzzing all over the Capitals. And just 31 seconds into the third period, Ristolainen scored from the point, using a Reinhart screen in front.

Skinner welcomed himself to the 2020-21 season by having a very good game on Friday. I thought he was moving his feet and was dangerous throughout the night. Skinner wouldn't say if he's talked to Krueger about playing on lower lines, because he feels all discussions like that should stay behind closed doors.

When he was asked why he had such a good game Friday, Skinner said, "I feel like I'm a pretty decent player. Maybe that's part of it."

Krueger said he liked what he saw from the group, and to expect changes when the team returns to practice on Sunday.

With the game tied at 1-1, it took seven minutes for Buffalo to give up the game-winning goal when defenseman Colin Miller fell down and Nicklas Backstrom shoveled a pass to Wilson in the right circle. Wilson snapped a shot over Ullmark's glove and that was it. Ullmark has to stop that shot.

So the Sabres have not gotten better goaltending, they are not getting key saves when they need them, especially from Ullmark, and the special teams are dismal again.

It's only two games, but now they've put themselves in a position to have to win some games in Philadelphia and Washington next week.

If the Sabres want that to happen, key players need to produce, not just play well.

## **OPINION: Three observations: Sabres try a little bit of everything in loss to Capitals**

By T.J. Luckman

WGR 550

January 15, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres gave themselves a lot more chances on Friday night than they did Thursday, but they couldn't capitalize in a second straight loss to the Washington Capitals, 2-1 at KeyBank Center.

Let's take a look at three observations throughout the game.

### 1.) Power play struggles to find the net

Buffalo had plenty of chances with the man advantage on Friday, but they couldn't really get much going from either five-man unit.

Even though they had a lot of trouble sustaining pressure in the zone, the Sabres were still able to generate seven shots on goal. However, none of those seven chances were all that dangerous.

On their last power play opportunity late in the third period, they could not get a single shot to hit the net. It ended up being Buffalo's last gasp in their effort to tie the game at 2-2 late.

The Sabres finished the night going 0-for-5 on the man advantage after going 1-for-3 on Thursday.

### 2.) Krueger still feeling out his lines

Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger started the game with the same lines he rolled with Thursday night. The only difference was Linus Ullmark manning the net in place of Carter Hutton.

While the Sabres had a better time generating pressure at 5-on-5 on Friday, they still had trouble finishing off scoring chances.

Krueger started juggling the lines a little bit at the end of the second period and found a combination he liked with forwards Taylor Hall, Jack Eichel, and Sam Reinhart.

Those three helped get the Sabres on the board early in the third period, setting up a goal from Rasmus Ristolainen to tie the game at 1-1, at the time.

### 3.) After two strong periods, Sabres falter in third

The Sabres held the shot advantage against the Capitals for, practically, the entire night. However, they couldn't get that to translate into goals.

A good portion of their shots came from outside the slot on Friday, many of which from the point. Buffalo needs to start figuring out ways to generate pressure closer to the net, especially on a green goaltender like Capitals rookie Vitek Vanecsek, playing in his first career NHL game.

While they were able to finally score 31 seconds into the third period, they were only able to muster four more shots at the net in the final 19:29 of regulation.

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The Sabres will next head to Philadelphia to take on the Flyers on Monday night in Game 3 of this 56-game 2020-21 season. Faceoff on Monday is set for 7:30 p.m. EST and can be heard on the Radio Home of the Sabres - WGR Sports Radio 550.

Also be sure to check back for more observations after each game this season available at [WGR550.com](http://WGR550.com).

## Washington holds on for second straight night against Sabres

By Pat Malacaro

WGR 550

January 15, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres had several scoring chances in all three periods against the Washington Capitals, but suffered a 2-1 defeat on Friday night at KeyBank Center. Buffalo dropped both games of the two-game series to open the 2020-21 season.

The Sabres enjoyed three power play opportunities in the opening 20 minutes, but failed to capitalize on any of their chances. Buffalo outshot the Capitals, 11-6, in the first stanza, giving Linus Ullmark a chance to get back into game action between the pipes with relative ease.

Jakub Vrana broke the scoreless tie with his second goal in as many games for Washington just 1:34 into the second period. Vrana managed to gain a step on the Buffalo defenders entering the offensive zone, and he was able to fire his shot over the glove hand of Ullmark.

Capitals winger Tom Wilson received the lone assist on the game's first goal. It came just moments after Sabres forward Sam Reinhart left the ice in pain and went to the dressing room.

Reinhart returned to the ice soon after the play and did not miss much game action. He would eventually join Jack Eichel and Taylor Hall on the Sabres' top line late in the second period.

Once again, Buffalo outshot the visitors with a 15-7 advantage in the period, and 26-13 overall in the game through 40 minutes. However, Buffalo failed to find the back of the net.

Buffalo's top line scored less than a minute into the third period to tie the score at 1-1 with the Capitals. Defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen notched his first goal of the season as his wrist shot from the point went off the leg of Wilson in front of the net and in.

The Sabres scored early in the third period on Thursday night as well, but the team managed to avoid a Washington response moments later on Friday.

However, it was Wilson who took advantage of a Colin Miller turnover in the defensive zone to give the Capitals a 2-1 lead partway through the third period. After Miller lost an edge going after the puck, he skated back into position to try and block Wilson's shot. But instead, he may have screened Ullmark from seeing the shot the entire way as it beat the Buffalo goalie to the top-left corner of the net.

The blue and gold had a fifth power play chance late in the third period thanks to a Zdeno Chara holding minor penalty, but Buffalo was unable to score. Buffalo went 0-for-5 overall on the man advantage for the night, while also registering seven shots on goal.

The Capitals did not have a power play chance in the game, scoring both of their goals at even strength.

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### GAME SUMMARY

Goal Summary:

First Period:

BUF: NONE  
WAS: NONE

Second Period;

BUF: NONE  
WAS: 1:34 - Jakub Vrana (2) (Tom Wilson)

Third Period:

BUF: 0:31 - Rasmus Ristolainen (Taylor Hall, Jack Eichel)

WAS: 7:47 - Tom Wilson (Nicklas Backstrom)

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Penalty Summary:

First Period:

BUF: NONE

WAS: 5:57 - Brendan Dillon (Hooking - 2 min.); 10:23 - Conor Sheary (Tripping - 2 min.); 16:35 - Evgeny Kuznetsov (Holding - 2 min.)

Second Period:

BUF: NONE

WAS: 12:23 - John Carlson (Slashing - 2 min.)

Third Period:

BUF: NONE

WAS: 15:47 - Zdeno Chara (Holding - 2 min.)

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STATS OF THE GAME:

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Losi and Gangi Three Stars of the Game

- 1.) Jakub Vrana - WSH
- 2.) Lars Eller - WSH
- 3.) Rasmus Ristolainen - BUF

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What's Next:

The Sabres will go on their first road trip of the 2020-21 season, starting with a two-game series against the Philadelphia Flyers on Monday, Jan. 18 at Well Fargo Center. Faceoff on Monday is set for 7:30 p.m. EST and will be telecast on NBCSN. The only place to catch all the local play-by-play action will be on WGR Sports Radio 550.

## **NHL reschedules a pair of Sabres games against Pittsburgh**

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

January 15, 2021

The National Hockey League announced on Friday a total of 10 games have been rescheduled for the 2020-21 regular season. Half of the games rescheduled this season is as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak that affected the Dallas Stars during their training camp.

As part of the schedule changes, the Buffalo Sabres will have a pair of games against the Pittsburgh Penguins later in the season rescheduled.

The first game that was rescheduled was originally set to take place on Saturday, March 27 at PPG Paints Arena in Pittsburgh. That game will now be played on Friday, March 26 at 7 p.m. EST.

Buffalo's second game with the Penguins that has been rescheduled this season was set to be played on Tuesday, April 20 at KeyBank Center. That contest will now take place on Monday, April 19 at 7 p.m. EST.

There was no explanation given for why the league rescheduled both games.

The Sabres and Penguins will meet eight times this season with the first contest scheduled for March 11 in Buffalo.

## **The Sabres get a second chance against the Capitals**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 15, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres didn't hold a morning skate on Friday as they prepare for Game 2 of their back-to-back series with the Washington Capitals at KeyBank Center.

Ralph Krueger has been throwing out hints that both of his goalies will play in the two games. Carter Hutton played on Thursday night in a 6-4 loss, and it could be Linus Ullmark's turn on Friday.

"I don't want to confirm anything until game-time, but you guys could take a pretty good guess there that we'll be splitting most of the back-to-backs this year, but we'll finalize that at game time," the Sabres head coach said with a wry smile in his Zoom conference call.

Last season, Ullmark was 17-14-3 with a 2.81 goals-against average and .911 save percentage.

Eric Staal left Thursday's game after being hit in the head by Nic Dowd. Dowd received a two-minute penalty for the hit, but will not be suspended by NHL's Department of Player Safety. Krueger said he wouldn't rule Staal out for the game, but did say if he doesn't go, Riley Sheahan will move to center.

Kyle Okposo will miss his second straight game with a lower-body injury.

"We're hoping he gets back in the next few days, so he could be day-by-day or he could be three or four days, somewhere in that range," Krueger said.

Rasmus Dahlin played more minutes on Thursday than any other Sabres player. Dahlin skated 25:25, which was over three minutes more than Rasmus Ristolainen. Krueger thinks they got carried away with how much he played.

"Dahls [Dahlin] ended up with a lot of minutes because we were down and he is that creative spirit with his offensive strength," Krueger said. "You could see some fatigue on some of the shifts defensively, but those minutes were decided primarily by the score and what we were pushing for."

You could tell on Thursday that the Sabres were rusty after having 10 months in-between games.

Dylan Cozens played mostly on the right wing in his NHL debut, but he did get a few shifts late in the game at center. Krueger thought his rookie showed quite well.

"We loved the way Dylan entered yesterday," Krueger said. "He was extremely responsible, you could really see how smart he is in both directions and you could see the center experience in him."

The Sabres did score four goals against the Capitals, and there are going to be some games where that should be more than enough.

"We've talked about being able to claw back and score, so we're expecting a much better game tonight, and one of the reasons is the second half of the game when we got our legs under us and simplified things," Krueger said.

By the end of the game, Krueger felt the scoring chances were about even and he credits the firepower the team has.

Buffalo will have to do a much better job against the Nicklas Backstrom line on Friday. Backstrom had a goal and an assist, while T.J. Oshie had a goal and two assists and Alex Ovechkin had two assists.

Join Mike Schopp and the Bulldog for the Paul William Beltz Pregame Show starting at 6 p.m. EST, when they'll be joined by Krueger, Ullmark and Tobias Rieder.

## **OPINION: Three observations: Sabres start off sluggish against high-flying Capitals**

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

January 15, 2021

It has felt like a long time coming for Buffalo Sabres hockey to return to the ice.

After more than 10 months from playing in game action back on March 9, the Sabres were back to work on Thursday to kick off the 2020-21 season against the Washington Capitals at KeyBank Center.

However, the contest did not get off to a great start for Buffalo with the first 40 minutes of action being primarily dominated by Washington. By the time the Sabres showed some life in the third period, it was already too late.

Washington jumped right out of the gate with the game's first goal just 5:43 into the game, and eventually grew their lead to 4-1 at the 13:23 mark of the second period. The Sabres got the gap as close as 4-3 just 20 seconds into the third period, but a mistake by Eric Staal in the Buffalo zone just 26 seconds later ended up being the undoing for Buffalo's chances.

While the 2020-21 season did not get off to the start many around the Sabres had hoped for, the team has the chance to make up for the loss on Friday night as they close out their two-game set with the Capitals at KeyBank Center.

Here are three quick observations from Thursday night's contest:

### 1.) Thursday's performance felt like a preseason game

With a long layoff from game action, it should have been expected there would be some sloppiness and mistakes made by the Sabres to start the contest.

With no exhibition games for the Sabres to get in after their 14-day training camp, it is understandable that it took Buffalo nearly a full game to get their feet under them. There's often nothing that a team can do in training camp practices or scrimmages that can replicate the pace of game play.

Many of the players on the Sabres have not even gotten a chance to play a game since March, and it showed right off the bat on Thursday.

Buffalo's foot speed lagged for a good chunk of the night against a high-flying Capitals offense, while it looked like the mental crispness of the group was not quite up to par. Passes were not hitting the mark, decision making was shotty, at times, and it seemed like Buffalo was always just one step behind Washington in every facet of the game.

In the opening 40 minutes, Buffalo was out-shot 23-17 by the Capitals, while also getting out-chanced by a good amount.

However, Buffalo rebounded well in the third period as they tried to fight back and tie the game. The Sabres went on to out-shoot the Capitals in the final 20 minutes, 9-5, and they were able to net two goals. However, the effort was all for naught once the clock struck 0:00.

We'll see how well the team can respond on Friday night, and maybe that strong third period can carry over into the next game.

### 2.) Impressive first game in Buffalo for Taylor Hall

Along with linemate Jack Eichel, Hall is the type of player that is worth the price of admission every single time. That was no exception on Thursday.

In the first period of his first game in Buffalo's new royal blue and gold, Hall found the scoresheet with a power play goal to tie the game at 1-1. The 29-year-old was camped in the slot on the top power play unit when he was on the receiving end of a beautiful passing play with Eichel and Victor Olofsson.

Later in the game when Buffalo made its final push to tie the contest, Hall picked up his second point of the night as he collected a loose puck in the slot and passed it over to Olofsson to register the primary assist.

Hall finished his first game with the Sabres with his goal and assist, while also registering two shots on goal in 19:30 of total ice-time.

While Buffalo's top line did not have the greatest of showings on opening night of the season, Hall looked to be playing well on the left wing with Eichel and Tage Thompson. He skated well, controlled the puck and protected it well on his stick, and was getting into open areas to try and make a play.

Maybe it helped that Hall had a chance to play this summer in the Return To Play plan with the Arizona Coyotes, but Buffalo will certainly reap the benefits if he continues to have outings like he did on Thursday. And just think, he's probably not quite up to his regular pace yet either.

### 3.) Dylan Cozens looks like he belongs in the NHL

One player who should be as close to complete game shape heading into the 2020-21 season on the Sabres roster is Cozens, who is coming off a stellar performance at the 2021 IIHF World Junior Championship in Edmonton.

The 19-year-old was quite noticeable in his first-ever NHL game on Thursday. Cozens was able to keep up with the pace of play with relative ease, he was not afraid to get physically engaged to get in position or win a puck battle, and he looked very comfortable in his own skin.

Late in the second period with the team down 4-1, Cozens and his line of Tobias Rieder and Cody Eakin went to work in the offensive zone and put up some quality pressure on the Capitals. After a net-front scramble that the youngster was right in the middle of, Rieder came up with the loose puck and was able to tuck the puck in under goalie Ilya Samsonov and in for his first goal with his new team.

In the process, Cozens was credited with the primary assist on the goal, giving him his first career NHL point.

Overall, Cozens looked impressive in his first game with the Sabres, picking up the assists while putting up a shot on goal and a hit in 12:09 of total ice-time.

The Sabres are clearly intent on bringing Cozens in slowly to the NHL game, but he already looked like he was ready to dive nose-first into the action. If he continues to play at this pace, Cozens will earn his keep at the pro level in no time.

## **Sabres brace for road trips that will be ‘a lot different’ than they’re used to**

By John Vogl

The Athletic

January 17, 2021

The first time I covered a Sabres game in Philadelphia in the early 2000s, I traveled with the team. As the shuttle bus from the airport reached the hotel, I noticed a limousine waiting out front. A group of guys quickly dropped their bags in the hotel and hopped in.

“Where are they headed?” I asked.

“Atlantic City.”

Those days are over.

The Sabres’ first road trip of 2021 is to Philly, but a 60-mile jaunt to New Jersey’s casinos is out of the question. So is a 60-foot hike to a steakhouse or seafood place. Even elevators are off-limits.

“We got a rundown of how the road’s going to work this year,” Sabres center Eric Staal said Sunday. “It definitely is going to be a lot different.”

The road is traditionally a place for players, coaches, equipment guys, announcers and writers to unwind, eat well and sightsee.

“Being on the road’s a chance for us to usually go out, grab a bite to eat, get to know one another on a personal level,” center Curtis Lazar said. “This season, safety comes first.”

The NHL’s COVID-19 protocols are very specific as to what’s allowed, discouraged and downright banned when teams leave town.

It starts when clubs head to the plane. They should use smaller private airports such as Buffalo’s TAC Air (formerly Prior Aviation).

The only personnel allowed to board are players, coaches, general managers, athletic trainers, equipment managers, massage therapists, physicians, COVID-19 testers, dentists, media relations staff, social media personnel, travel coordinators and IT support.

Noticeably absent are owners, team presidents, scouts and broadcasters. The Sabres’ announcers will call road games from Buffalo while watching on a monitor.

All members of the traveling party are required to wear face coverings. Everyone will be assigned a specific seat on the flight, and that seat will be used for the duration of the trip. Except to use lavatories, everyone must remain seated for the entire flight. Though not every member of the taxi squad is required to travel, coach Ralph Krueger said the Sabres will bring all their extra players this season.

In-flight catering has been eliminated on short trips to avoid interactions between flight attendants and players. If there is food, people have been advised to avoid eating and drinking at the same time as others in their row.

A single bus company in each city will be designated for all of the visiting teams so that league standards for COVID-19 prevention can be consistently applied. There must be at least two buses, each filled at no more than 50 percent capacity, for rides to the hotel, arena and airport.

A single hotel will be assigned to all visiting teams. Players, coaches and staff will get to know that hotel very well.

They cannot enter any building other than the hotel, practice facility, arena and medical facility. They are not permitted to eat or drink in restaurants or bars that are open to the public. No one can pick up food from restaurants unless there is “curbside pickup.”

Team members can walk around outside as long as they are properly masked and distanced. They can't engage with the general public, except for immediate family members who live in the city.

All hotel rooms will be single occupancy with no visitors allowed. Teams will reserve rooms in blocks to ensure they are isolated from other hotel guests. They must hold at least two rooms past their scheduled checkout date in case anyone tests positive for COVID-19 or shows symptoms.

Use of the hotel fitness center, pool, lobby, lounge, restaurant and bar is prohibited. The group should avoid elevators used by the public and will instead have access to a dedicated elevator. If the stay is shorter than three days, housekeeping will not be provided.

Clubs must make their best efforts to arrange for a hotel lounge to be used exclusively by the players. It must be big enough for social distancing and has to be equipped with a refrigerator that is stocked with single-use snacks and beverages.

"They're trying to keep you pretty separated, which is difficult, especially when you're a new guy," Staal said. "When you're a younger guy, you like to be around the group. But it's the world we're living in now and we'll deal with it."

Teams will reserve a private meal room at the hotel. Food must be served buffet-style, and servers will have a barrier between themselves and club personnel. Self-serve buffet dining is prohibited. Like the plane, there will be assigned seats for the duration of the stay.

Players and staff are not obligated to participate in these team-organized dinners. They can order room service or use third-party food delivery services, provided there is contactless delivery to a designated drop-off location in the hotel.

For trips longer than three nights, teams will arrange for one dinner to be catered by a local restaurant chosen in consultation with the players. There will be two of those dinners for trips longer than six days.

Though those meals will give players a chance to chat and bond, they're certainly not the same as trips to Atlantic City, five-star restaurants or high-end nightclubs.

"But it's been good around the room," Staal said. "Guys are upbeat. Guys are getting to know each other well. We'll do our best to do the same on the road."

## **As Sabres look for right moves, should Jeff Skinner get a bigger role?**

By John Vogl

The Athletic

January 15, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Jeff Skinner may not skate on Buffalo's top two lines, but he certainly hasn't lost his confidence.

He made that very, very clear Friday night.

The winger stood out during the Sabres' 2-1 loss to Washington, drawing two penalties, attempting five shots and, aside from not scoring, looking a lot like the player who buried 40 goals two seasons ago.

How come?

"I feel like I'm a pretty decent player. Maybe that could be part of it," Skinner said.

On their own, those are plucky yet mundane comments. But there's history attached.

Skinner scored his 40 goals alongside Jack Eichel. Last season, coach Ralph Krueger rarely put the players together, leaving Skinner with lesser offensive talents. The left winger plummeted to 14 goals.

Krueger lined Skinner to the left of second-line center Eric Staal when training camp opened this month, then bumped him to the bottom six while saying Skinner needed to "play within the principles" of Buffalo's defensive mindset.

Skinner, who was an on-ice chatterbox early in camp, has been largely silent since then. That changed when he stepped in front of the Zoom camera Friday night.

"Conversations between coaches and players, in my opinion, should be kept in the room," Skinner said in KeyBank Center. "I personally feel like that's the way it should go.

"My job is to play hockey. His job is to worry about 23 guys, making a lineup and a lot more than me. I'm focused on trying to help the team win as much as I can."

Though the Sabres failed to beat the Capitals, Skinner helped as much as he could.

"Jeff showed us a level today that we need to hold as an expectation every night and then we'll see how it evolves," Krueger said of Skinner's line placement. "Jeff played a good game. He was moving a lot, creating some opportunities and made some good defensive decisions and steals.

"Jeff is a scorer and always a scoring threat. We'd like to see him ignite soon."

The question: Should Krueger help light that fuse? Skinner's linemates are Curtis Lazar and Riley Sheahan, dependable NHL veterans who have never been offensive weapons.

Meanwhile, the other three lines boast Eichel, Staal, Taylor Hall, Sam Reinhart, Dylan Cozens and former double-digit scorers Cody Eakin and Tobias Rieder. Skinner's skills would be better complemented with one or more of those guys.

"I'm pretty confident in what I can do in this league and how I can produce and how I can help the team," Skinner said.

The Sabres have two days off before visiting Philadelphia on Monday. It could give the coach time to rethink his use of Skinner.

Then again, maybe it won't. Despite Skinner's contributions Friday, he ranked ninth of the 12 forwards in even-strength ice time, just 10:59.

"Where Jeff lands in the whole thing, we've got a couple of days to regroup," Krueger said. "We will make some changes in the lineup, though."

Skinner's ability to rebound from his subpar year was one of the Sabres' biggest preseason questions. There were others. Here's how they're trending after two games, both of which the Sabres lost to Washington.

Will special teams improve?

The first impression was awesome. It took just 18 seconds of the initial power play for Hall to strike.

The power play has gone 0 for 7 since.

"We needed more speed on the breakout," defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen said. "Then when we got in there, we didn't really help each other."

The power play was a crushing force Friday. There was an 0-for-3 showing in the first period against Washington goalie Vitek Vanecek, who was making his NHL debut.

"We're going to dive as deep as we can to make that's more productive in the future," Krueger said.

There's potential with Eichel, Hall, Victor Olofsson, Reinhart and Rasmus Dahlin on the first unit and Skinner, Staal, Cozens, Tage Thompson and Ristolainen on the second. The Sabres got just six goals from their No. 2 group last year, and this one should easily surpass that total.

"We have an NHL-level second unit to us," Krueger said. "That's really where you can see the offensive power of a group when that second group comes out and snaps it around and moves it similar to what the first group had been doing."

The Sabres' penalty killers, meanwhile, were historically bad last season. They stopped just one of two chances in the opener, making the unit a 50-50 proposition.

Buffalo didn't take a penalty Friday, which may be the best penalty-kill strategy of all.

"We had unbelievable discipline," Krueger said, "but all those power-play opportunities and then the six-on-five at the end, coming out empty-handed is certainly why we lost this game."

Is Cozens ready?

The 19-year-old has been saying he's ready for the NHL for almost a year now. He wasn't lying. Coming off a nice World Juniors, he has seamlessly integrated into the Sabres lineup on a line with Eakin and Rieder.

"We all watched the World Juniors. He was outstanding there," Rieder said. "It's fun to play with him. A young fresh player, great hands. He understands the game."

There's often a major learning curve on the defensive side for young players, but Cozens has impressed Krueger with his two-way game.

"You could really see how smart he is in both directions," the coach said.

The stats don't stand out yet — Cozens has one assist and two shots while skating 12:29 per night — but the rookie hasn't looked out of place.

Who's the No. 1 defensive pair?

In ice time, it's Dahlin and Brandon Montour. Dahlin leads the team at 23:28 per game. Montour tops everyone at even strength with an average of 19:26.

But they've been getting buried. Despite starting in the offensive zone about 60 percent of the time, Dahlin has the blue line's worst Corsi (37.8) and Montour ranks fifth of six (41.2). Montour has been on the ice for three goals against and none for.

The pairing of Jake McCabe (61.5) and Ristolainen (60.4) leads in Corsi and has contributed to three Buffalo goals.

While the Sabres would like Dahlin and Montour to ascend to top-pair status, that certainly hasn't happened yet. Colin Miller and Henri Jokiharju are also struggling, so a pairing change could be on its way.

Will the goaltending stand up?

Carter Hutton and Linus Ullmark haven't been bad. They haven't been great, either.

Hutton gave up five goals on 27 shots in Thursday's 6-4 loss, but who's going to blame him for goals like this?

Ullmark stopped 19 of 21 shots Friday.

The goalies aren't the reason Buffalo is 0-2.

Will the offensive additions make a difference?

Hall has a goal and three points. Rieder scored. Eakin has helped generate six high-danger scoring chances while giving up three. We've already mentioned Cozens.

Staal has had a rough go with the turnover, a shot to the head that forced him to leave Thursday's game and a minus-3 in even-strength scoring. But, for the most part, the new guys have been good.

The brightest moment was a reunion of longtime faces.

Midway through the second period Friday, Krueger put Reinhart on a line with Hall and his old buddy Eichel. The Sabres dominated after that. Reinhart finished with 17 shot attempts and only six against.

"Yeah, that chemistry doesn't go away overnight," he said.

Krueger said there will be changes. Does he keep Reinhart and Eichel on separate lines, knowing he can reunite them for a kick-start? Or does their obvious connection force the coach to put them together?

It might be worth trying this:

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

Whatever the Sabres opt to do, they need to start winning. Losing the opening two won't kill them, but 18 percent of the schedule will be gone by the end of the month. They can't waste time in finding the right combinations.

"The point of the game is to win," Skinner said. "We haven't won one yet, so we keep working on our game to accomplish that."

## **Sabres rookie Dylan Cozens earns fast promotion to Eric Staal's line**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
January 17, 2021

BUFFALO – Seventeen years ago, Sabres center Eric Staal lived what Dylan Cozens, his new linemate, is experiencing right now as a teenage rookie.

"It's scary to think I was him back in the day," Staal said on Zoom call after the Sabres prepared for Monday's road game against the Philadelphia Flyers. "Time goes fast."

In 2003-04, Staal, now 36, was a neophyte learning the rigors of NHL life. To boost his development, the Carolina Hurricanes gave him a locker next to captain Ron Francis, who was playing in his 23rd and final season.

"Pretty phenomenal," Staal said of being so close to Francis.

The next season, Staal sat beside Rod Brind'Amour. The opportunity to learn from Francis, who would be inducted into the Hall of Fame, and Brind'Amour, who could land there someday, helped shape Staal's career.

"I had two pretty good mentors to follow after," Staal said. "It was one of those things, as a young guy, for me, I just watched how they prepared, how they went about their business, how they responded to certain things.

"(I) still was trying to be myself but trying to learn what it takes to be a regular, an everyday NHLer consistently for a long career."

Not surprisingly, the Sabres have given Cozens, 19, a prime spot in the dressing room between Staal and captain Jack Eichel.

Cozens, who was playing junior hockey two weeks ago, understands Staal's wealth of knowledge can be an invaluable resource. Still, he doesn't want to ask the 17-year veteran too many questions.

"I don't really want to bug him too much," Cozens said following Sunday's practice at KeyBank Center. "But obviously he's a guy who's been in the league for a long time, he knows a lot, he's won a Stanley Cup, he knows what it takes. So there's a lot of things I can learn from him just helping me out, giving me advice."

Cozens, the seventh overall pick in 2019, can even seek advice from Staal on the ice Monday.

After Friday's 2-1 loss to the Washington Capitals dropped the Sabres to 0-2, coach Ralph Krueger said he would make changes. On Sunday, he promoted the 6-foot-3, 188-pound Cozens to right wing beside Staal and Victor Olofsson.

Cozens' defensive and physical talents – rookies often struggle away from the puck and against older opponents – helped him earn a promotion to the second line.

"What stands out truly is his ability to take care of the gritty work that needs to be done to play in the National Hockey League and to not be a risk (defensively)," Krueger said.

Staal said Cozens' "mind and his brain for the game" have helped him acclimate to the NHL.

"You can see it at work daily, whether it be practice or even in games," Staal said. "If something didn't go right, the next time he does it, he does it differently and gives himself a better result. I think he's always engaged, you can tell he's taking a lot in."

Cozens had to be engaged during his battles with Zdeno Chara on Friday. Krueger said Cozens' fared well against the 6-foot-9 Capitals defenseman.

"He had a couple of situations where he was able to make something out of it," Krueger said. "So that stands out, his ability to read the game and then also his calm and confidence. You can feel it on the bench, during practice now, he's very quickly part of the group and part of the team and has integrated himself as a person.

"His offense and his ability to create and/or to score is certainly going to evolve off of this platform."

Cozens said "the speed of the game and the size and strength of players" have been his biggest adjustments.

"I've put in work to become stronger so I can battle these guys and stuff but obviously, they're a lot stronger than I'm used," he said.

Through two outings, Cozens has registered one assist and averaged 12 minutes, 29 seconds of ice time. Krueger started him on the third line beside center Cody Eakin and Tobias Rieder. Cozens also played on the second power-play unit.

The Sabres want to ease Cozens into the NHL. That's why he was shifted to right wing instead of being utilized as a center, his natural position.

Krueger doesn't want to overwhelm Cozens. At some point, Krueger said the Sabres could tap into their forward depth and sit out Cozens or other young players.

"Three forwards share two spots for a stretch," Krueger said. "It's gonna be very important to get that right and it's not easy because we've never quite been in this territory before. But a scratch of a Dylan in the future or of any of our other evolving players shouldn't be a surprise to anybody. We need to make sure we don't give anybody too much too quickly that they fall right off the cliff."

## **Sabres' Ralph Krueger on Bills' win, INT return: 'The whole city just exploded'**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 17, 2021

**BUFFALO** – Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said he heard horns honking outside his home in the Elmwood Village into the middle of the night after the Bills advanced to AFC Championship Game on Saturday.

"Lots of sound, lots of people running around with flags in the village," Krueger said on a Zoom call following this afternoon's practice at KeyBank Center. "So that buzz was terrific to feel."

Krueger and his coaching staff wanted to share the excitement the Bills generated by beating the Baltimore Ravens 17-3. So Krueger said assistant coach Steve Smith started his presentation by talking about the Bills' ascension to the top tier of the NFL.

"How they've evolved and grown from being thrashed by the Patriots in big games just a few years ago and how they're learning and growing," Krueger said. "So it is a big buzz in our room. We're all big Bills fans and we couldn't be more pleased for (owners) Kim and Terry (Pegula) and the whole organization for the opportunity that lies ahead."

The Bills will play in the AFC Championship Game for the first time since the 1993 season next Sunday. Krueger said their success provides a terrific example of the passion the Buffalo sports fan possesses.

Taron Johnson's 101-yard interception return for a touchdown, which essentially cemented the victory, has quickly become an iconic moment in franchise history.

"It was fantastic for me to witness that on the interception, the pick six, I think the whole city just exploded and wherever you were you knew that was going on," Krueger said. "It was a nice thing to see."

## **Sam Reinhart misses practice with lower-body injury**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 17, 2021

BUFFALO – Sabres winger Sam Reinhart, who briefly left Friday's 2-1 loss to the Washington Capitals, is day to day with a lower-body injury, coach Ralph Krueger said.

Reinhart did not practice Sunday but accompanied the Sabres to Philadelphia, where they begin a two-game series Monday against the Flyers.

Krueger said Reinhart's injury, which he suffered in a collision behind the net, "appears to be manageable."

"We will do a pregame skate again tomorrow where we can then decide our roster after that," Krueger said on a Zoom call following this afternoon's practice at KeyBank Center.

Casey Mittelstadt, who's on the taxi squad, practiced in Reinhart's spot at right wing beside top center Jack Eichel and Taylor Hall.

Krueger also moved Tage Thompson, who started the season as Eichel's right winger, to the third line beside center Cody Eakin and Tobias Rieder. Winger Jeff Skinner, who enjoyed a strong outing Friday, remained on the fourth line.

In other news, Krueger said winger Kyle Okposo, who's missed both games with a lower-body injury, will stay in Buffalo and rehab.

"We're optimistic about the direction but feel he'll get better rehab skates and he'll be on the ice tomorrow," Krueger said. "We hope to have him back for Washington."

That game in Washington next Sunday, which was scheduled to start at 7 p.m., has been moved to 3 p.m. so it doesn't conflict with the Buffalo Bills' appearance in the AFC Championship Game, which will start at 6:40 p.m.

## **Sabres goalie prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen to join Amerks**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 16, 2021

Top Buffalo Sabres goalie prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen will be joining the Rochester Americans, his Finnish team announced today.

The Sabres loaned Luukkonen, 21, to HC TPS, a Liiga team, in August and have extended the loan agreement throughout the season.

The Amerks, the Sabres' AHL affiliate, opened training camp Friday. The AHL season is scheduled to start Feb. 5.

In 13 games with HC TPS, Luukkonen compiled a 6-3-4 record with a 2.52 goals-against average and a .908 save percentage, according to eliteprospects.com.

The Amerks also have goalies Michael Houser and Dustin Tokarski on the roster. Jonas Johansson, an AHL All-Star last season, earned a spot on Buffalo's taxi squad.

The 6-foot-5, 220-pound Luukkonen shuttled between the AHL and ECHL as a rookie in 2019-20, playing 33 total games before the COVID-19 pandemic forced the leagues to cancel their seasons.

Luukkonen spent most of last season with the Cincinnati Cyclones, compiling a 12-7-3 record with a 2.24 goals-against average and a .912 save percentage in 23 games. The Cyclones have opted not to play this season because of the pandemic.

The Sabres rewarded the ECHL All-Star with recalls to the AHL, where he registered a 3-4-3 mark with a 3.15 goals-against average and an .874 save percentage in 10 appearances with the Amerks.

The Sabres drafted Luukkonen in the second round in 2017, 54th overall.

## **Sabres outplay Capitals, can't exploit rookie goalie: 'We made him look good'**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
January 16, 2021

**BUFFALO** – A night after the Sabres looked like they hadn't played a game in 10 months, they settled down defensively, generated offense and outplayed the Washington Capitals.

Of course, it did not result in a win for the Sabres, who couldn't exploit Capitals goalie Vitek Vanecek in his NHL debut.

"I think we made him look good," defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen said on a Zoom call after Friday's 2-1 loss at KeyBank Center dropped the Sabres to 0-2 this season.

The Sabres pumped 29 shots on Vanecek, a Czech in his sixth pro season. Only Ristolainen's wrist shot from the point 31 seconds into the third period beat him.

"Vanecek plays the game of his life here tonight and congratulations to him," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "I mean, he really played well. I thought we were bringing pucks to the net, we had traffic to the net, we hit metal, we hit the posts, we hit feet. What's important is that we did create opportunity."

The Sabres, fresh off Thursday's season-opening 6-4 loss to the Capitals, "played free today," Krueger said.

"We beat them in pretty well every category except for the scoring," he said. "It was excellent to see the execution, extremely painful to see the final result. But what changed was we outskated them, we put pucks into places where we created foot races and they really struggled with that. We just ran into an extremely hot goaltender at the other end.

"There's not much of the five-on-five game that we didn't like tonight. You can take a lot of confidence out of that game and hopefully the guys, they're able to absorb this pain properly."

The most painful moment occurred 7:47 into the third period, when Washington's Tom Wilson broke the tie. After Sabres defensemen Colin Miller fell down in his own zone Wilson beat goalie Linus Ullmark from the right circle.

The Sabres now have two days off until they begin a two-game road set against the Philadelphia Flyers. Expect to see some line changes before those contests.

During Friday's game, Krueger moved Sam Reinhart to right wing beside top center Jack Eichel and Taylor Hall. Meanwhile, Jeff Skinner subbed for Hall when he missed a few shifts after a puck hit him in the mouth.

"The biggest move we made was Sam Reinhart with Taylor Hall and Jack Eichel," Krueger said. "It was a pity that Taylor took that puck in the mouth. We lost him for about three shifts. It stopped the momentum that really came out of that line coming together just after the mid-point of the second period.

"We'll have to take a close look at that as an option with Eichel. Where Jeff lands in the whole thing, we've got a couple of days here to regroup."

Skinner, of course, has been skating on the fourth line. But he enjoyed a terrific game Friday, creating offense and drawing a penalty through his tenacity.

"He was moving a lot, created some opportunities, made some good defensive decisions and steals," Krueger said. "Throwing him in different spots is something you do when you try to score.

"I mean, Jeff is a scorer and always a scoring threat. We'd like to see him ignite soon."

Skinner, who scored 40 goals two years ago, said he's "pretty confident in what I can do in this league and how I can produce and how I can help the team."

"Our line played well," he said. "I thought (Curtis) Lazar and Riley (Sheahan) were hunting pucks down and we were able to generate some offensive zone time and, as a result, draw some penalties and get some good chances."

The Sabres did not generate many good power-play chances. The units struggled, going scoreless in five tries, including an opportunity in the waning minutes.

"Our power play just didn't get the job done today," Krueger said. "That's really where we're going to dive as deep as we can to try to make that more productive in the future."

The Sabres did not take any penalties. Jakub Vrana scored Washington's other goal.

## **Sabres notes: Eric Staal plays after taking elbow to jaw**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
January 16, 2021

BUFFALO – When Nic Dowd elbowed Eric Staal in the jaw late in Thursday's 6-4 season-opening loss, it looked like the Sabres center could be sidelined for a while.

The Washington Capitals center knocked the 6-foot-4, 195-pound Staal to the ice and out of the game.

But Staal, who has remained remarkably durable over his 17-year NHL career, played in Friday's 2-1 loss to the Capitals at KeyBank Center, pivoting the second line.

On Friday morning, Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said Staal would be a game-time decision.

If Staal couldn't have played, Krueger said the Sabres would've moved Riley Sheahan to center. Sheahan has been playing right wing beside center Curtis Lazar and Jeff Skinner.

Krueger said rookie Dylan Cozens, who made his NHL debut Thursday at right wing, could've be an in-game option to play center, his natural position.

"We love the way Dylan entered yesterday," Krueger said on a Zoom call. "He was extremely responsible, being able to break down video now last night and this morning. You could really see how smart he is in both directions and you can see the center experience in him."

Staal has played 81 or more games 11 times in his career. He missed one game in his first five NHL seasons.

–

A lower-body injury forced Sabres winger Kyle Okposo to miss his second straight game.

"We're hoping he gets back in the next few days," Krueger said. "It could be day-by-day or it could be three or four."

The Sabres will assess Okposo again before they play road games against the Philadelphia Flyers on Monday and Tuesday.

"He's recovering," Krueger said. "It's been a positive couple of days and we do expect him back soon."

–

On Thursday, Sabres defenseman Rasmus Dahlin skated a game-high 25 minutes, 25 seconds in his first game in more than 10 months.

"Dahls ended up with a lot of minutes because we were down and he truly is that creative spirit in the group in his offensive strength," Krueger said. "The minutes were a little bit high for somebody coming out of a 10-month break and you could see some fatigue on some of the shifts defensively. But his hands, his offensive vision, some of the playmaking was outstanding."

–

Sabres goalie Linus Ullmark, who missed the first four sessions of training camp because had to quarantine, made his season debut Friday,

"I've been away from the game for 10 months," he said. "So a couple days here and there doesn't really matter. It's still the same game. It's like riding a bike, you know? You just got to go out there, play my heart out and just enjoy the moment."

–

Two years ago with the Edmonton Oilers, Sabres winger Tobias Rieder scored zero goals in 67 games. Last season with the Calgary Flames, the German scored four times in 55 regular-season outings.

Then Rieder, 28, scored three short-handed goals in 10 playoff appearances. That outburst ignited his confidence, and he has carried it into this season.

Rieder, who enjoyed a two-goal night in the Sabres' second scrimmage, scored in Thursday's opener.

"It started with the playoffs last season with Calgary," Rieder said. "It was nice to pick up right where I left off in the scrimmages and obviously get the first one out of the way."

—

Cozens, the seventh overall pick in 2019, on his first NHL game: "There was some nerves. I think after I got that first shift out of the way and got my legs under myself, I think that's when I started to settle down just after that first shift."

—

The Sabres scratched defenseman Matt Irwin (healthy) for the second straight game.

## **Ex-Sabres defenseman Casey Nelson retires from hockey**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 16, 2021

Former Buffalo Sabres defenseman Casey Nelson, who opted out of the season last month, has retired from hockey.

Nelson, 28, announced the news in an Instagram post this afternoon. He signed a one-year, two-way contract with the Sabres on Oct. 22.

"Stay tuned for the next chapter!" Nelson wrote in his post.

Nelson spent all of last season with the Rochester Americans, compiling four goals, 12 points and a team-high plus-18 rating in 48 games. He was expected to be a depth defenseman this season, possibly on the new taxi squad the NHL implemented because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

He often shuttled between Buffalo and Rochester throughout the last four seasons. He played a career-high 38 NHL contests in 2018-19.

Nelson registered four goals, 18 points and a minus-15 rating in his 93-game NHL career. He compiled 13 goals, 45 points and a plus-21 rating in 151 career AHL contests.

The Sabres signed Nelson as a college free agent out of Minnesota State in 2016.

## **Sabres' Eric Staal to be game-time decision against Capitals**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

January 15, 2021

Buffalo Sabres center Eric Staal, who left Thursday's 6-4 loss to the Washington Capitals after getting elbowed in the jaw, will be a game-time decision for tonight's rematch, coach Ralph Krueger said.

Update: Staal will play tonight.

If Staal can't play, Krueger said newcomer Riley Sheahan will be moved to center. Sheahan played right wing beside center Curtis Lazar and Jeff Skinner in the season opener.

"We've got a backup plan," Krueger said on a Zoom call this morning from KeyBank Center. "We'll probably make that call before five o'clock."

Krueger said rookie Dylan Cozens, who made his NHL debut Thursday at right wing, could be an in-game option to play center, his natural position.

"We love the way Dylan entered yesterday," Krueger said. "He was extremely responsible, being able to break down video now last night and this morning. You could really see how smart he is in both directions and you can see the center experience in him."

"Depending on what happens here, that could even be in-game again, a situation where you might want to push for a little more offense and he does give us that option. Initially, we would want to be a little more stable defensively down the middle."

Halfway through the third period Thursday, after Staal backhanded the puck into the Washington zone at center ice, Nic Dowd hit him high, knocking him to the ice.

Dowd was only penalized two minutes for an illegal check to the head.

The Sabres acquired Staal, 36, from the Minnesota Wild on Sept. 16 to center the second line.

In other injury news, Krueger said winger Kyle Okposo will miss his second straight game tonight.

"We're hoping he gets back in the next few days," Krueger said. "It could be day-by-day or it could be three or four."

The Sabres will assess Okposo again before they play road games against the Philadelphia Flyers on Monday and Tuesday.

"He's recovering," Krueger said. "It's been a positive couple of days and we do expect him back soon."

While Krueger wouldn't officially reveal tonight's starting goalie, he has said action will likely be split for back-to-backs, meaning Linus Ullmark will almost certainly start.

## **Sabres move up game against Capitals next Sunday to avoid conflict with AFC Championship Game**

By Paul Ross

WKBW

January 17, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — The Buffalo Sabres have moved up their game next Sunday against the Washington Capitals, in order to avoid conflict with the Buffalo Bills and the AFC Championship Game.

The Sabres game was scheduled for 7 p.m., but has since been moved up to 3 p.m. so it doesn't interfere with the AFC Championship game.

The Bills are waiting on playing the winner of Kansas City and Cleveland, and will play them at 6:40 p.m. on Sunday.

## **5 Observations: Sabres drop a close one to Washington 2-1**

By Adam Unger

WKBW

January 15, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WKBW) — The Sabres fell to 0-2-0 on Friday night as the Washington Capitals came out on top 2-1. An early second period goal from Jakub Vrana opened up the scoring. Rasmus Ristolainen tied the game early in the third, but it didn't last long.

A spill in the defensive end led to the eventual game-winner: Tom Wilson scored from the circle and the Sabres didn't have another equalizer in them.

5 observations from Friday night's game:

Hall doing the little things:

He's a Hart Trophy winner. He's been a perennial all-star. We all know what Taylor Hall can bring to the table, and he already put it on display in his debut. But tonight, two plays that Hall made that won't show up on a stat sheet stood out.

When the Capitals were already up 1-0 in the second period, they had a great chance to double their lead in an unsettled rush that led the puck below the goal line. Hustle and back checking from Hall broke up a pass towards the crease and kept the wind out of Washington's sails.

The other was during an extended offensive possession late in the second period. It's small, and it's subtle, but he fully extended to knock an errant puck back to a teammate and keep things going.

The new spark plug line:

On that late possession, the Sabres' puck possession was firing on all cylinders. There was nothing to show for it, at least not yet, but the strong results came from a line tweak: Sam Reinhart joined Jack Eichel and Taylor Hall for the shift.

That same trio led to the tying goal early in the third period. Similarly to the Skinner-Eichel-Reinhart line last year, this could prove to be Ralph Krueger's secret sauce when the original lineup isn't getting it done.

Eichel will almost always be with Hall or Reinhart this season if I had to guess. But if he gets both of them at even strength for long stretches, buckle up.

Free Jeff Skinner:

But the formation of the spark plug line provided an opportunity to elevate Jeff Skinner. It was ripe for the picking. But the \$9 million forward was still with Curtis Lazar and Riley Sheahan.

On the second power play, alongside the likes of Dylan Cozens, Eric Staal, and Tage Thompson, Skinner looks much more at home. Without them, he looks like he's playing 3D chess in the offensive zone.

With the emergence of Victor Olofsson last season, Skinner found himself in forward purgatory often last season. There were times where he didn't have a complete line when Buffalo went with seven defensemen.

Sloppiness kills:

Linus Ullmark played a solid game between the pipes. He backed up the claim that goaltending is like riding a bike for him. His only goals allowed came after bad Sabres mistakes.

Early in the second period, a perfectly timed zone entry combined with a mistake by Rasmus Dahlin led to all the time and room in the world for Jakub Vrana. High, glove side.

Then, after the Sabres found a tying goal early in the third, Colin Miller fell over and lost the puck in his own end. Nicklas Backstrom found Tom Wilson. Guess where he put it? Up high, glove side.

Steps in the right direction:

On Thursday night, the Capitals allowed the Sabres to hang around. On Friday, the Sabres kept themselves in it. There's no doubt about that. Ralph Krueger found his spark plug line. Jake McCabe and Rasmus Ristolainen got involved on offense. Rookie Dylan Cozens was finding good looks. And Ullmark was solid.

It might be like riding a bike, but the Sabres are just getting warmed up. And the Capitals, at least on paper, are one of the best teams in the new-look East Division. Two games in, there's a lot more to like about this year's squad as opposed to 2019-20.

Buffalo has the weekend off before heading to Philadelphia for a pair of games against the Flyers on Monday & Tuesday. Puck drop on the 18th is at 7:30 p.m.

## **NHL moves up Sunday's Sabres game, avoids overlap with Bills AFC Championship game**

By Patrick Ryan

WIVB

January 17, 2021

(WIVB)— The Buffalo Sabres announced their January 24 game against the Washington Capitals has been rescheduled to begin at 3 p.m. to avoid a scheduling conflict with the Bills AFC Championship Game being played the same day.

The Sabres road game was originally scheduled to begin at 7 p.m.

The Buffalo Bills are scheduled to play their AFC Championship Game at 6:40 p.m. on January 24.

## **Drawing a blank: Sabres 0-for-5 on Power Play in 2-1 loss to Capitals**

By Paul Stockman

WIVB

January 15, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – Missed opportunities. That was the story for the Sabres tonight. 0-for-5 on the powerplay including three separate chances in the first period. Score on just one and it's a different game, but no luck on the man advantage and that made a difference.

Buffalo went 0-for-3 on the power play in the opening period. They scored zero goals despite outshooting the Capitals 11-6.

Washington got on the board first with a goal in the second period. Once again, the Sabres outshot the Capitals, 15-7, but had no goals to show for it. They trailed 1-0 after two.

Just 31 seconds into the third, Rasmus Ristolainen scored to tie it up, but the Capitals scored again later in the period to retake the lead.

That made the difference as the Sabres fell 2-1.

Buffalo moves to 0-2-0 on the season. They face the Philadelphia Flyers next Monday at 7:30 on the road.

## **Sabres game time moved, avoids conflict with AFC championship game**

WGRZ

January 17, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — The Buffalo Bills' run to the AFC championship game has had an impact on the Sabres' schedule.

The Sabres' game with the Washington Capitals next Sunday has been moved up, from 7 p.m. to 3 p.m.

That change, announced by the NHL on Sunday afternoon, was made to avoid a conflict with the AFC championship game, which will start at 6:40 p.m. next Sunday. The Bills will play either the Cleveland Browns or the Kansas City Chiefs, which is the No. 1 seed and last year's Super Bowl champion.

The Sabres have lost their first two games of the 56-game regular season, both at home to the Capitals.

## **Skinner effective in Sabres' second straight loss to Capitals; Changes could be coming to Buffalo lineup**

By Alex Brasky  
Batavia Daily News  
January 16, 2021

BUFFALO — After an offseason during which he was much maligned, Jeff Skinner entered the 2021 season on the Sabres' fourth line - an apparent demotion. On Friday, the veteran forward seemed determined to work his way back into the good graces of Buffalo head coach Ralph Krueger and toward a boost in the lineup.

"I feel like I'm a pretty decent player," said Skinner when asked what led to his productive night in the Sabres' 2-1 loss to the Capitals. "Maybe that's part of it."

Skinner had a disappointing season a year ago, but on Friday, he was back to doing what he does best - creating opportunities, making good defensive plays, drawing penalties and contributing in a meaningful way. Despite his solid performance in the Sabres' second straight home loss against Washington, the former 40-goal scorer says he's focused on one game at a time rather than trying to regain his All-Star form all at once.

"It's a long grind. You can't get hung up on a good game and you can't get hung up on a bad game," added Skinner. "You just keep working every day. Every day you get back to work, and you try and go after that next win."

He could not find the back of the net, but Skinner was effective enough on Friday that there are sure to be those calling for Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger to move him up in the lineup. When asked about that, Skinner says conversations about where he fits moving forward will remain in-house.

"Conversations between coaches and players, in my opinion, should be kept in the room," said Skinner. "My job is to play hockey. His job is to worry about 23 guys, and making a lineup and a lot more than (just) me."

The Sabres shifted their lines a bit on Friday against the Caps, and Krueger said during the postgame that more changes may be coming to the Sabres' lineup, which could open increased opportunities for Skinner.

"Jeff played a good game. He was moving a lot, created some opportunities and made some good defensive decisions and steals," said Krueger about his veteran forward. "The important thing is that Jeff showed us a level today that we need to hold as an expectation every night and then we'll see how it evolves."

Another move the Sabres made on Friday was to place Sam Reinhart alongside Jack Eichel and Taylor Hall on their top line, which led to a few productive shifts. In the postgame, Krueger was glowing about that grouping's effectiveness.

"We'll have to take a close look at that (grouping) as an option (moving forward) and where (Skinner) lands in the whole thing," added Krueger. "We've got a couple of days here to regroup (before our next game) and we will make some changes in the lineup."

While drawing praise for his play against the Capitals, Skinner is searching for his first point of the season. Though, Skinner says he remains determined to help the Sabres achieve their first victory of the season.

"I'm focused on trying to help the team win as much as I can," said Skinner. "We didn't get the job done tonight. So we go back to the drawing board and keep working."

What Buffalo displayed tonight is a sign of better outcomes in the future, concluded Krueger.

"No points yet, but as a head coach, I'm really excited about the potential of this," he said. "Of what we're seeing here developed."

While Krueger does his best to remain optimistic, the Sabres better get it going quickly, as it's going to get late very early during this abbreviated NHL season. Solid performances from Skinner are nice to see, but a few goals or assists would be better from the \$9 million man.

A few wins wouldn't hurt either.

Things won't get any easier for the Sabres (0-2), as they hit the road for two games against the Philadelphia Flyers (2-0) and two more against the Caps (2-0) next week.

## **Sabres' Dylan Cozens is Riding a Wave of Momentum**

By Steven Ellisjan  
The Hockey News  
January 15, 2021

Had Finland edged out the United States to make the final of the World Junior Championship earlier this month, we'd likely be talking about Dylan Cozens' recent MVP effort.

Instead, he fell short of the title thanks to Trevor Zegras and didn't get to bring home a gold medal, either, despite an incredible 16-point run that will be remembered as an all-time great performance for Team Canada.

But that's in the past, and Cozens is in the big leagues now. His junior career is over. And that should get Sabres fans absolutely pumped about the future, especially after watching his debut on Thursday. Cozens assisted on Tobias Rieder's goal in the second period to make the most of his 12:09 of ice time while looking noticeably like one of the best players on any given shift for the Sabres in a 6-4 loss to the Washington Capitals.

"Dylan played a very good first game, very calm," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "He never looked overwhelmed. I saw even a situation in the third period, he got hit by (defenseman Zdeno) Chara, no problem, he bounced right back at it."

Yeah, imagine having to match up against a 6-foot-9 future Hockey Hall of Famer in your first game after playing against your teenage peers for a couple of weeks. But Cozens handled the challenge and simply didn't look out of a place for a 19-year-old.

"I put in a lot of work this offseason to gain weight, get stronger so I can battle with guys at this level," Cozens said. "I think I did pretty good out there. Obviously, guys are bigger, stronger, but I think I held my own in battles."

Cozens' situation would have been a challenge in a normal season. Had he made the Sabres out of camp, he likely wouldn't have been given the opportunity to represent Canada internationally and build an even stronger resume. But had he not made the team, he would have been too young for the AHL's Rochester Americans and would have been sent back to the WHL, where he had 222 points over 179 games. There simply wasn't much left for him to prove at the junior level.

With nowhere else to go, Cozens joined Canada and was one of the tournament's most outstanding players, and the clear No. 1 star for his country after the loss of Kirby Dach following a pre-tournament game. That ability to play in high-octane games while the rest of his Sabres teammates were preparing for training camp definitely helped him gain some confidence ahead of a rookie season that will see him compete against the likes of Alexis Lafreniere, Tim Stützle and Kirill Kaprizov for the Calder Trophy in one of the most stacked battles we've ever seen.

Of course, we're talking about just one game here, but Cozens was ranked No. 7 in our annual Future Watch issue last year for a reason.

"The competitiveness, mixed with his size and speed, make him really special," said Andre Tourigny, Cozens' coach at the world juniors. "When you see a big boy like that who can move, who is so driven and plays with that pace..."

"We could say that about a lot of players: They're big, fast and skilled. But that doesn't mean they play with pace. It doesn't mean they play with that speed and desire to make plays. Dylan has that, though."

It's only a matter of time until Cozens moves from the third line and gets a shot to play on the wing of either Jack Eichel or Eric Staal. Cozens can play down the middle, too, but his versatility from both the wing and center positions makes him easy to move around the lineup. It's a good place to start him, though, given his status as a rookie, so easing him in is the right call.

But Cozens isn't going to let that happen for long. Once he's comfortable, Cozens projects to be a top-six forward that can potentially play on the top line with Eichel and Taylor Hall later on. In Cozens, think Sam Reinhart, but

faster and smarter away from the puck, and you've got a guy in Cozens that can provide a ton of value – and I believe at a much bigger scale, too.

You've got something here, Sabres fans.

## **Vanecek makes 30 saves, wins NHL debut for Capitals against Sabres**

By Heather Engel

NHL.com

January 15, 2021

**BUFFALO** -- Vitek Vanecek made 30 saves for the Washington Capitals in his NHL debut, a 2-1 win against the Buffalo Sabres at KeyBank Center on Friday.

Vanecek was selected by the Capitals in the second round (No. 39) in the 2014 NHL Draft. The 25-year-old from the Czech Republic played the previous five seasons for Hershey in the American Hockey League.

"I think it was a good game; the dream came true. I'm so happy we won," Vanecek said. "I was a little bit nervous [the first] couple of minutes. But when they shoot the three shots early, I [was] just feeling better and better. When they had their power plays, I was feeling good."

Tom Wilson had a goal and an assist for the Capitals (2-0-0), who won their second straight against the Sabres under new coach Peter Laviolette.

"I think we've changed a lot of things and there's definitely been that buy-in," Wilson said. "Yesterday was a great team effort. Tonight a little slow to start, but I think we got there in the third, and we're just going to keep building on it because it's a new system and just trust the guy next to you to go out there and get it done."

Rasmus Ristolainen scored, and Linus Ullmark made 19 saves for the Sabres (0-2-0), who were 0-for-5 on the power play.

"I think the disappointing thing for all of us would be the power plays we were able to get," Buffalo coach Ralph Krueger said. "We had unbelievable discipline again today with no penalties taken, but all those power play opportunities, then the 6-on-5 at the end, coming out empty-handed is certainly the reason we lost this game. I thought the 5-on-5 game was outstanding. We'll take that on any night. Our power play just didn't get the job done today."

Buffalo forward Jeff Skinner said, "You're going to have good games where you don't win and maybe this was one of those for us tonight, but this game is about results. This league is about results. We need to get back at it, keep working and try to get a win the next game."

Jakub Vrana put the Capitals ahead 1-0 at 1:34 of the second period when Wilson sent him in on a break at the blue line.

Ristolainen's shot from the point tied it 1-1, beating a screened Vanecek 31 seconds into the third period.

"There's not much of the 5-on-5 game that we didn't like tonight," Krueger said. "You can take a lot of confidence out of that game, and hopefully the guys, they're able to absorb this pain properly and continue with the process. Really, really good skating, lots of puck pressure, good puck movement, support, all the things we've been trying to get here already in game two. Pleased with the execution."

Wilson made it 2-1 from the right circle at 7:47.

"Where we weren't quite on point where we needed to be, I thought that Tom was on point from start to finish," Laviolette said. "The way he worked and the way he competed, the way he skated; his strides were meaningful, his battle level was high, his physicality was high. He had a huge goal to get us back on top in the third, but I really liked the way Tom played tonight."

**NOTE:** Capitals defenseman Brenden Dillon played his 600th NHL game. He had two hits and one shot on goal in 19:25 of ice time.

## **Sabres to join NHL in wearing 'Celebrating Equality' helmet decals**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

January 18, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres are proud to join the NHL by paying tribute to Willie O'Ree, who broke the color barrier in hockey. All players throughout the League will wear "Celebrating Equality" helmet stickers through the end of February.

The decals feature an image of O'Ree wearing his trademark fedora and the words "Celebrating Equality." The players will wear the stickers from Jan. 16 until the end of February, which is Black History Month.

O'Ree played his first NHL game on January 18, 1958 and this year, the anniversary coincides with the celebration of Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the United States.

O'Ree, born in Fredericton, New Brunswick, played 45 NHL games over two seasons (1957-58 and 1960-61) with the Boston Bruins, despite being blind in his right eye. He also played in over 1,100 games over 23 seasons in other professional leagues, mostly in the old Western Hockey League.

He will have his No. 12 retired by the Bruins on February 18.

NHL players will wear helmet decals in celebration of the 63rd anniversary of Willie O'Ree becoming the first Black player in the League and to observe Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a United States national holiday that honors the late civil rights leader.

"When I reminisce back, I say, 'Oh my goodness, 1958. Time flies,'" O'Ree, 85, said. "I'm thrilled, overwhelmed about the stickers."

He was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2018 for his off-ice accomplishments that helped cultivate a new generation of players and fans as the NHL's Diversity Ambassador. He has also helped establish 39 grassroots hockey programs in North America as part of the NHL's Hockey is for Everyone initiative and has inspired more than 120,000 boys and girls to play the sport.

O'Ree opened the door for other Black players to play in the NHL, including Sabres alumni Val James and Tony McKegney.

James became the NHL's first Black player born in the United States when he made his debut with the Sabres on November 1, 1981. Born in Florida and raised on Long Island, where he learned to skate as a teenager, James developed a reputation as one of the toughest fighters in professional hockey.

"When you're persevering through uncharted territory, there are going to be a lot of people that are going to come out to your aid to help you, and in my case that's exactly what happened," James told NHL.com. "I appreciate all the help these people gave me because they took a hell of a chance coming out to help a Black person at that point in time."

James skated in 10 NHL games, including three in the Stanley Cup Playoffs, with Buffalo in 1981-82, and another four regular-season games with the Toronto Maple Leafs in 1986-87.

In 1983, he scored the goal that clinched the Calder Cup Trophy for the Rochester Americans.

"Val James advanced the sport of hockey in a very important way," Sabres president Kim Pegula said on the anniversary of James' achievement last year. "As we work to create greater opportunities for people of all backgrounds across all walks of life, we continue to be influenced by Val's accomplishments. We are proud to have him as a member of the Buffalo Sabres family."

The organization is working with the club's S.C.O.R.E. ball hockey program to award 10 scholarships to the Sabres' Learn to Play program in James' honor to give kids their first opportunity to play hockey.

"Val James once said that he never thought of himself as a trailblazer - but the entire hockey world should recognize that he is one," Kim Davis, NHL senior executive vice president, social impact, growth initiatives and legislative affairs, said. "As the first Black American player to make the NHL, Val has inspired Black boys and girls across the United States to play hockey and to follow their dreams."

He detailed his experiences in his memoir *Black Ice* with John Gallagher.

In an episode of "Sabres Memories" that debuted last season, McKegney explained that his path to the NHL was influenced by racism.

He said he was originally going to sign with the Birmingham Bulls of the World Hockey Association, but complaints from season-ticket holders about a Black hockey player coming to town combined with rumors that the WHA would soon be folding led him to Buffalo after he was drafted by the Sabres in the second round of the 1978 NHL Draft.

McKegney scored in his NHL debut on October 12, 1978.

"I felt so lucky to come to a team where it was established and I got to play with some great hockey players," he said. "I was very much accepted here in Buffalo, not only by the fans, but the teammates and the management. It felt like a family."

McKegney, who grew up in Sarnia, Ontario, also noted, however, that in all the games he played to that point, he was the only Black player on the ice.

McKegney scored 37 goals in 1980-81, his third season with the Sabres, and became the first Black player to score 40 when he was with the Blues in 1987-88. He finished his career with 320 goals and 639 points in 912 games. All the while, he had to deal with racist taunts hurled his way.

"I was out there in some situations in Philadelphia and people [were] screaming at me, [in] Pittsburgh, Atlanta," he recalled. "But at the same time, it drove me to be better, to be consistent."

McKegney and James were both featured in *Soul On Ice: Past, Present and Future*, a 2017 documentary in which they described the challenges they faced as Black players in a predominantly white sport in the '70s and '80s.

Buffalo will wear the special "Celebrating Equality" stickers starting tonight when they take on the Philadelphia Flyers at 7:30 p.m. at Wells Fargo Center. The game can be seen nationally on NBCSN and heard locally on WGR 550.

## **Cozens earns promotion, skates with Staal & Olofsson**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 17, 2021

Eric Staal came into the NHL as a 19-year-old first-round draft pick with the Carolina Hurricanes in 2003. He leaned on captain Ron Francis, 40 years old and in his 16th and final season, as an example to guide him through those early days.

Staal, now 36 and in his 17th year, laughed Sunday at how things have seemingly come full circle. The veteran has been situated in the Buffalo dressing room next to Dylan Cozens, a 19-year-old first-round pick currently navigating his own rookie season.

"It's scary to think I was him back in the day," Staal said. "Time goes fast."

Cozens was promoted to a line with Staal and Victor Olofsson during practice on Sunday, a testament to the rookie's strong first two games. Playing alongside Cody Eakin and Tobias Rieder, Cozens impressed coach Ralph Krueger with his defensive commitment and his ability to hold up physically against Washington.

"He enjoys the coverage role," Krueger said. "He enjoys getting back. His tracking is very strong, he finds his inside position naturally. We were actually positively surprised with how he dealt with 1-on-1 battles.

"... His offense and his ability to create and/or to score is certainly going to evolve off of this platform. First, we need to see the platform, and the platform is exciting. One of the bright spots, for sure, of our first two games."

Cozens was a late addition to camp after making a run with Team Canada at the World Junior Championship, where his 16 points in seven games marked the highest total by a Canadian since Brayden Schenn in 2011. His involvement there allowed him to show up to camp already in game shape at a time while the majority of NHL players are shaking off rust.

Cozens has also benefitted from the long offseason, which he used to add on muscle after getting a taste of NHL physicality during the 2019 preseason. So far, he's been able to hold his own.

The most eye-opening aspect so far for Cozens has been the off-ice preparation of the players around him. It's the same lesson Staal picked up being around Francis and then Rod Brind'Amour during those early Carolina days.

"I think the biggest thing I've learned, picked up on is just how much guys take care of their bodies," Cozens said. "I think that's the biggest thing especially in a year like this [with] so many games in such a short period of time. I think the biggest thing is just trying to take care of my body."

His aptitude has already made a strong impression.

"You can see it at work daily, whether it be practice or even in games," Staal said. "If something didn't go right, the next time he does it, he does it differently and gives himself a better result. I think he's always engaged, you can tell he's taking a lot in.

"As a young player, it's a whirlwind. There's a ton of things going around, whether it's where to be at certain times, meetings; there's so much that goes along with it but he's handled it all really well and he looks comfortable. He's quiet, but I'm sure as time marches on he'll open up a little bit more. It'll be fun to see because he's going to be a great player."

Sunday's practice

Kyle Okposo and Sam Reinhart were both absent due to injuries. Okposo, who has not yet played this season, will not travel for the team's back-to-back games in Philadelphia but will skate on his own in Buffalo. Krueger said he is optimistic Okposo can return for the following series against Washington.

Reinhart is day-to-day with a lower-body injury after a collision into the boards sent him briefly into the tunnel during the second period against Washington on Friday. He returned and finished the game, skating 21:25. Krueger said Reinhart will travel to Philadelphia.

"It's lower-body that appears to be manageable so he'll come with us on the trip and we'll make that final decision," Krueger said. "We will do a pregame skate again tomorrow where we can then decide our roster after that."

Here's how the Sabres lined up Sunday.

4 Taylor Hall - 9 Jack Eichel - 37 Casey Mittelstadt  
68 Victor Olofsson - 12 Eric Staal - 24 Dylan Cozens  
13 Tobias Rieder - 20 Cody Eakin - 72 Tage Thompson  
53 Jeff Skinner - 27 Curtis Lazar - 15 Riley Sheahan

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

35 Linus Ullmark  
40 Carter Hutton

## **Sabres' road game against Washington on January 24 moved up to 3 p.m.**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

January 17, 2021

Get ready for a Buffalo sports doubleheader next Sunday.

The NHL announced today that the Buffalo Sabres' game on Sunday, January 24 against the Washington Capitals at Capital One Arena will now be played at 3 p.m.

The game was originally scheduled for 7 p.m., which would've been at the same time as the NFL's AFC Championship Game. The Buffalo Bills advanced to the AFC Championship Game (set for 6:40 p.m. next Sunday) after defeating the Baltimore Ravens last night.

The Bills will face the winner of today's Kansas City Chiefs/Cleveland Browns playoff game. If Cleveland prevails, Buffalo will host the game at Bills Stadium. If the Chiefs win, the game will be played in Kansas City. The winner of the AFC Championship Game will clinch a berth in Super Bowl LV in Tampa on February 7.

Earlier this week, the NHL rescheduled a pair of Sabres games against the Pittsburgh Penguins. Buffalo's match at Pittsburgh, originally set for March 27, is now scheduled for Friday, March 26 at 7 p.m. And the game between the two clubs originally scheduled for April 20 at KeyBank Center, will now be played on Monday, April 19 at 7 p.m.

The Sabres will next play on Monday in Philadelphia at 7:30 p.m. That game can be seen nationally on NBCSN. Dan Dunleavy and Rob Ray will be broadcasting the game on WGR 550.

## Capitals 2 - Sabres 1 | Takeaways from Friday's game

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 15, 2021

Twenty-four hours removed from a season-opening loss to the Washington Capitals, the Sabres came out strong for their rematch on Friday and showed signs they had shaken off the rust.

Buffalo outshot Washington, 31-21, and made a habit of generating shifts in the offensive zone, drawing five penalties in the process. They were unable to capitalize on any of those five power plays, which proved to be the difference in a 2-1 loss.

"I thought our 5-on-5 game in the first couple of periods was outstanding but then we get the power plays, we didn't have the same work ethic as we had 5-on-5 and they outworked us," coach Ralph Krueger said.

Rasmus Ristolainen scored the only goal against Capitals goaltender Vitek Vanecek, who made 30 saves in his NHL debut. Jakub Vrana and Tom Wilson scored goals for the Capitals.

Here are five takeaways from the loss.

### 1. Missed opportunities on the power play

The Sabres' revamped power-play units showed promise during the opener on Thursday. Taylor Hall scored 18 seconds into their first chance of the season and Victor Olofsson buried a 6-on-5 shot that offered a glimpse of the possibilities at 5-on-4.

Sam Reinhart echoed his coach in attributing Friday's 0-for-5 performance to over-complication with the puck. The Sabres generated seven shots on goal in their five attempts.

"I think they executed their game plan better than we did on their penalty kill," Reinhart said. "They were winning the battles, they were getting to the puck. We were chasing a bit too much. Instead of making the easy play, we were playing into their hands and weren't able to turn it around."

### 2. Line change ignites offense

While the Sabres did open the game strongly in terms of possession, it was a second-period adjustment that ended up leading to their first goal of the night. Reinhart moved up alongside Jack Eichel and Taylor Hall with Tage Thompson joining a line with Eric Staal and Victor Olofsson.

The trio of Hall, Eichel, and Reinhart opened the third period after a couple of dominant shifts to end the second. Their work in the offensive zone led to Ristolainen's goal, a shot from the point that deflected off the leg of Capitals forward Tom Wilson as he battled Reinhart in the slot.

Krueger credited the switch as a difference maker in the game and said the team will make changes to the lineup following the 0-2-0 start.

### 3. Skinner's strong night

Jeff Skinner drew the penalty that gave the Sabres their first power play of the night, then proceeded to have an active shift with the man advantage. On that power play, Skinner gained possession for the team in the offensive zone, won a battle behind the net, and got off a backhand shot from in tight.

It ended up being a precursor to a strong night for the forward, who drew another penalty later in the game and was credited with three individual scoring chances, according to Natural Stat Trick.

"I'm pretty confident in what I can do in this league and how I can produce and how I can help the team," Skinner said. "I thought our line played well. I thought (Curtis) Lazar and Riley (Sheahan) were hunting pucks down and we were able to generate some offensive zone time and, as a result, draw some penalties and get some good chances."

Krueger said it was the sort of performance Skinner is capable of on a nightly basis.

"The important thing is Jeff showed us a level today that we need to hold as an expectation every night, and then we'll see how it evolves," he said.

#### 4. Staal plays after hit to head

Eric Staal was labeled as a game-time decision Friday morning after taking an elbow to the jaw from Capitals forward Nic Dowd on Thursday. He was back in the lineup for Game 2, skating 17:43 and tallying two shots.

#### 5. What's ahead

The Sabres have two practice days before heading on the road for another two-game, back-to-back set in Philadelphia beginning Monday. After that, it's a two-game set in Washington on Friday and Sunday.

Krueger said the even-strength game Friday can be a template moving forward.

"We played free today," he said. "We beat them in pretty well every category except for the scoring. It was excellent to see the execution, extremely painful to see the final result. But what changed was we outskated them, we put pucks into places where we created foot races and they really struggled with that."

## **At The Final Horn: Capitals 2 - Sabres 1**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

January 15, 2021

After a 10-goal game on opening night, the offensive chances were replaced by defensive efforts.

The Buffalo Sabres looked like a more cohesive unit, but were unable to convert on their quality chances at 5-on-5 or on the power play in their 2-1 loss to the Washington Capitals on Friday at KeyBank Center. Buffalo went 0-for-5 with the man advantage, matched up against a tough Washington unit penalty kill unit.

While Buffalo outshot the Capitals throughout the night, they were stymied until Sabres coach Ralph Krueger shifted the lines. In the second period he moved Sam Reinhart onto a line with Jack Eichel and Taylor Hall and they found success to start the third when Rasmus Ristolainen scored to tie the game.

Jakub Vrana and Tom Wilson scored for the Capitals to lift them to their second win as many night against the Sabres.

While Buffalo outshot the Capitals 31-21 on the night, they also missed 14 shots and had another seven blocked.

Linus Ullmark stopped 19 shots in his season debut. Vitek Vanecek made his NHL debut between the pipes and registered 30 saves for Washington.

What happened

The Sabres outshot the Capitals 11-6 in the first period, but went 0-for-3 on the power play.

Washington struck first 1:34 into the second period when Jakub Vrana went top shelf on the rush. Tom Wilson forced a turnover in the neutral zone and sprung Vrana for a break.

The Capitals were strong in their defensive zone and helped limit dangerous scoring opportunities on their rookie netminder.

Buffalo's best pressure of the game came in the last stages of the second period when their No. 1 power play unit was able to settle in and generate some chances. On one particular opportunity, Victor Olofsson was denied in tight.

For the second night in a row, the Sabres came out strong to begin the third period. Reinhart helped generate Buffalo's first goal by setting a high screen as the puck zipped by and into the back of the net. Eichel worked the puck to Hall, who fed Ristolainen and his shot made its way past Vanecek.

Washington responded, however, with a goal by Tom Wilson at the 7:47 mark of the third to regain the lead. After Wilson forced Colin Miller down to the ice in the corner, Nicklas Backstrom took advantage of the defensive mismatch and set Wilson up for a shot that beat Ullmark.

Buffalo had one final chance on the power play with 4:13 remaining and kept the pressure on with the extra attacker in the final minutes but were unable to tie the game.

Roll the highlight film

Here's Ristolainen's first of the season:

Worthy of a mention

Eric Staal was a gametime decision before the game after sustaining an upper-body injury in the home opener when he was checked in the head by Capitals forward Nic Dowd. Staal skated 17:43 and recorded two shots on goal.

Up next

The Sabres have a back-to-back set against the Philadelphia Flyers on the road starting Monday. That game will air on NBCSN at 7:30 p.m. Dan Dunleavy and Rob Ray will have the call on WGR 550.

## **NHL announces date and time changes for pair of Sabres games**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

January 15, 2021

The NHL announced today that two games between the Buffalo Sabres and Pittsburgh Penguins this season have been rescheduled.

Buffalo's match at Pittsburgh, originally set for March 27, is now scheduled for Friday, March 26 at 7 p.m.

Then the game between the two clubs originally scheduled for April 20 at KeyBank Center, will now be played on Monday, April 19 at 7 p.m.

The Sabres and Penguins will meet eight times this season with the first contest scheduled for March 11 in Buffalo.

Stay tuned to Sabres.com and the team's official social media channels for breaking Sabres news all season long.

## Morning Skate | Staal a game-time decision vs. Capitals

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

January 15, 2021

Eric Staal will be a game-time decision for the Buffalo Sabres against the Washington Capitals on Friday night, coach Ralph Krueger announced.

Krueger said a decision on Staal will likely be made before 5 p.m., which is the deadline to activate a player from the taxi squad. The available forwards on Buffalo's taxi squad are Casey Mittelstadt, Rasmus Asplund, and rookie first-round pick Jack Quinn.

In the event Staal does not play, Krueger said that Riley Sheahan will slide from the wing to center. Dylan Cozens saw some shifts at center Thursday as the Sabres looked to climb back from a two-goal deficit during the third period.

"Depending on what happens here, that could even be in-game again a situation where you might want to push for a little more offense and [Cozens] does give us that option," Krueger said. "But initially, we would want to be more stable defensively down the middle so Sheahan would slide in."

Staal sustained his injury during the third period of Buffalo's loss to Washington on Thursday after taking an elbow to the jaw from Capitals forward Nic Dowd. Dowd was assessed a two-minute minor for the play, which occurred in the neutral zone. Staal did not return.

"Quite surprised that a hit to the head gets two minutes but it is what it is and we're disappointed with that finish stretch there for sure," Krueger said afterward.

### The lineup

The Sabres did not hold a morning skate Friday, meaning lines will be revealed during pregame warmups. Kyle Okposo will remain absent but is still considered day-to-day, with a decision on his availability for the team's next series in Philadelphia expected this weekend.

"He's recovering," Krueger said. "It's been a positive couple of days, and we do expect him back soon, but like I said it's more one of those true day-to-day kinds of injuries where we're definitely holding him out today."

Krueger did not confirm his starting goaltender but hinted that the nod would go to Linus Ullmark after Carter Hutton started the first game of the back-to-back set on Thursday.

Ullmark missed the first four days of training camp after an immigration issue delayed his quarantine but joined the team in time for their second intrasquad scrimmage last Saturday. He was optimistic about his readiness to step back into game action.

"It's still the same game," he said. "It's like riding a bike, you know? You just got to go out there, play my heart out and just enjoy the moment."

### Previewing the rematch

The old cliches held true on Thursday. The veteran Capitals moved the puck north-south with speed through the neutral zone and forechecked aggressively to sustain long offensive-zone shifts. The Sabres found their game late but felt they overcomplicated their play in transition early. Defensively, Krueger felt his team was tentative at times as opposed to playing the aggressive style he expects to establish as a hallmark of Sabres hockey.

It almost didn't matter. Buffalo's revamped offense nearly erased a 4-1 deficit, twice coming within a goal of the Capitals in what ended as a 6-4 loss.

"We're expecting a much better game tonight and one of the reasons is what happened in the second half of the game when we got our legs under us and we simplified things," Krueger said.

"... We really see a lot of skill in our lineup that is a threat to score at all times. What we need to have today is a much better defensive game. We need to be more aggressive defensively. We gave them too much space and

too much room early, but I agree, your main question was about the offense and we are excited about the tools we have in that box this year."

Tune in

Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30 p.m. with puck drop set for 7. You can listen to the game live on WGR 550.