



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Buffalo visits New York after Reinhart's 2-goal game

Associated Press

February 21, 2021

BOTTOM LINE: Buffalo visits the New York Islanders after Sam Reinhart scored two goals in the Sabres' 3-2 win against the Devils.

The Islanders are 8-6-3 against the rest of their division. New York has given up eight power-play goals, killing 81% of opponent chances.

The Sabres are 5-7-2 in division games. Buffalo averages 2.4 penalties per game, the least in the NHL. Brandon Davidson leads the team averaging 1.0.

In their last meeting on Feb. 16, New York won 3-0. Anders Lee scored two goals for the Islanders.

TOP PERFORMERS: Mathew Barzal has 15 total points for the Islanders, six goals and nine assists. Josh Bailey has seven assists over the last 10 games for New York.

Jack Eichel leads the Sabres with 11 total assists and has 13 points. Victor Olofsson has 9 points over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

LAST 10 GAMES: Islanders: 5-2-3, averaging 2.7 goals, 4.8 assists, 2.4 penalties and 6.7 penalty minutes while giving up 2.2 goals per game with a .918 save percentage.

Sabres: 4-4-2, averaging 2.2 goals, 3.9 assists, 2.8 penalties and 5.6 penalty minutes while allowing 2.8 goals per game with a .907 save percentage.

INJURIES: Islanders: Michael Dal Colle: out (undisclosed).

Sabres: Rasmus Ristolainen: out (health and safety protocols).

Sabres snap 4-game losing streak, end Devils 3-game run

Associated Press

February 20, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. (AP) — The Buffalo Sabres are a much better team when they get on the scoreboard first.

The Sabres got an early goal from defenseman Colin Miller and two more from Sam Reinhart in posting a much-needed 3-2 win over the New Jersey Devils on Saturday, snapping a four-game losing streak.

The Sabres have scored first in four of 14 games this season and have posted a 3-0-1 mark when they do. When they give up the first one, they are 2-7-1.

"There was just a real tone, tone, tone of joy, actually, after the 1-0," Buffalo coach Ralph Krueger said. "Guys were just like, 'Wow, when was the last time this happened?' And you can feel, without anybody really saying too much, that it really relaxed the group and we could settle into the game that we wanted to play."

Not only did the Sabres take the lead, Reinhart stretched the margin to 3-0 after 40 minutes and goaltender Linus Ullmark made 25 saves and fended off a third-period New Jersey push.

It was the Sabres' first win since beating the Devils in a shootout on Jan. 30, the last time they scored the first goal.

Jack Eichel added two assists for Buffalo, which returned to play this week after missing two weeks because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"I mean, every win is huge," Reinhart said. "You know, it obviously hasn't been going our way since we were able to come back. But, you know, I think getting on the road has been important for our guys. I would say that we can't go anywhere, so to spend some time traveling and in hotels has helped us."

Kyle Palmieri and P.K. Subban scored in the third period for the Devils, who welcomed center Nico Hischier for his first game this season by naming him captain. Mackenzie Blackwood (4-1-1) had 26 saves in losing for the first time in regulation this season.

"I don't think we skated very well," Devils coach Lindy Ruff said. "As a team, we were low on energy and got to give them credit, they beat us to a lot of pucks, they forced us into some turnovers. Their energy seemed to be better than us."

The Sabres opened a 3-0 lead after two periods and the faceoff circle was key. The goals came after faceoff wins in the Devils' end.

Miller beat a screened Blackwood after Eric Staal won a faceoff. Reinhart got his fourth and fifth goals of the season in the second period after faceoff wins by Eichel.

Palmieri closed the gap to 3-1 in the opening minute of the third period. Subban scored a power-play goal with 3:16 left in regulation and the Devils' net empty.

Miller blocked a last-second shot from between the circles by Pavel Zacha to preserve the win.

Sabres defenseman Jake McCabe was helped off the ice in the third period with an apparent knee injury. Krueger was concerned about the injury that he described as lower body.

"We don't have a final diagnose yet, but it rips my heart out to see what Jake has gone through," the coach said. "Also coming off of the COVID battle with having had symptoms and now there is a question for the future. There's a big, big ache in my heart right now which the win certainly can't neutralize."

COVID-19 LIST

Saturday marked the first time since Jan. 14 that the Devils have not had a player on the NHL's COVIDS-19 list for some reason. The team was forced to shut down for 15 days after a spike on Jan. 31 following a game with the Sabres. The high point was 19 players isolated on Feb. 8.

Sabres rookie Dylan Cozens returned to the lineup after missing three games because of the COVID-19 protocol. Forward Casey Mittelstadt and defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen each missed their fourth straight game.

ZAJAC 1000

Travis Zajac (COVID) returned to the lineup for the first time since Jan. 28 and played in his 999th regular season game. He will become the 66th player in NHL history to play 1,000 games with one team. The other Devils are Ken Daneyko (1,283), Martin Brodeur (1,259) and Patrik Elias (1,240).

UP NEXT

Sabres: At Islanders on Monday. Buffalo and the Devils will have home and home games on Tuesday and Thursday

Devils: Travel to Washington to face the Capitals on Sunday, before the Sabres again.

Krueger links Sabres' scoring funk to team's fragile psyche

By John Wawrow

Associated Press

February 19, 2021

The trouble with the Buffalo Sabres' sudden inability to score has more to do with players' heads than hands, as far as coach Ralph Krueger is concerned.

"One of my biggest takes out of that game yesterday was the fragile psychological state of the team right now," Krueger bluntly said Friday, a day after a 3-1 loss at Washington.

"They're fragile right now. They don't believe in themselves and they don't see themselves celebrating," he added. "They see themselves missing the net, hitting the shaft of the goalie, not finding the hole between the legs that they usually find."

Krueger spent a brief practice having players focus on puck-handling to work on their timing, while also preaching positive messages during numerous one-on-one conversations.

The Sabres are in a funk and there are few signs of when they'll climb out of it in preparing to play at the New Jersey Devils on Saturday.

In dropping three straight since returning from a two-week COVID-19-forced break, Buffalo has scored just twice — both power-play goals — and went an entire period without generating a shot on net in a 3-1 loss to the New York Islanders on Monday.

It's not as if the Sabres were over-powering opponents before their season was paused. In opening 4-4-2, Buffalo managed just 28 goals, with a league-low 15 scored in five-on-five situations. The lack of scoring has led to Buffalo giving up the first goal in 10 of 13 games this season.

The offensive outage is particularly apparent among Buffalo's top-paid forwards. In accounting for a combined \$38.2 million of the team's payroll this season, captain Jack Eichel, Jeff Skinner, Taylor Hall, Kyle Okposo and Sam Reinhart have combined for just six goals — with Reinhart scoring three.

Buffalo is instead led by third-year player Victor Olofsson's six goals, five of which have come on the man advantage.

Time is already beginning to run out in a shortened 56-game season in which Buffalo's troubles are further exacerbated by a constricted schedule which leaves little room for practice. As a result of having six games postponed, the Sabres are playing their final 46 games in 83 days, and won't enjoy their first multiday break until April 4-5.

Buffalo is in the midst of a nine-season playoff drought, the NHL's longest active streak, and one short from matching a league record.

The most troubling part of Krueger's assessment was the difficulty he had explaining how the confidence the Sabres' are generating from their power-play production isn't carrying over to even-strength situations.

"I'll be really honest with everybody here that I'm trying to figure that out," he said. "It's no easy fix, but if we do get that momentum, we will be strong."

Eric Staal, who has three goals, said it's important everyone simplifying their game.

"There's definitely some fragility there when teams are not finding success," Staal said. "There's guys pressing. There's guys that want it real bad. But there's a way and I think a simpler way that we can get there. Hopefully, that starts tomorrow."

RISTOLAINEN UPDATE

Krueger didn't provide a timetable in saying veteran defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen faces "a long process" before he can return after experiencing a severe bout with COVID-19. Krueger also said Ristolainen has experienced a setback in his recovery.

Of Buffalo's nine players affected by the recent outbreak, Ristolainen spent a team-high 14 days on the NHL's COVID-19 list. In being cleared to skate on Wednesday, he was not expected to join the team for its current four-game road trip, which closes at New Jersey on Tuesday.

On Friday, Ristolainen revealed he experienced chest pains and significant drops in oxygen levels in a story published by the Finnish newspaper Ilta-Sanomat.

"When there was chest pain, it felt like my heart was cracking as I walked up the stairs," Ristolainen said, according to a Google translation of the story printed in Finnish. "A couple of evenings there were such conditions when I went to bed that I didn't know if I woke up here anymore in the morning."

Defenseman Jake McCabe, who also tested positive, said he and Ristolainen texted each other while they dealt with the affects of the virus.

"Risto's probably the fittest guy on our team," McCabe said of his teammate, who normally leads Buffalo in ice time. "For him to battle like this, it's very tough and unfortunate. But knowing Risto, he's going to be just fine, and he'll be back here hopefully soon."

Sabres Notebook: Jake McCabe's injury could be season-ending

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 21, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. – The Buffalo Sabres are bracing for bad news on Jake McCabe. The veteran defenseman returned home Sunday for an MRI on his injured right knee, and the expectation is that the injury could be season-ending.

"I'll be honest with you. Not very optimistic about the diagnosis that will come out of this," coach Ralph Krueger said. "But let's let the medical team take a look at it and we'll give you a full report. The lower-body injury is serious."

McCabe was injured when his leg buckled during a third-period collision with New Jersey captain Nico Hischier. He joins fellow top pair defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen out of the lineup, with Ristolainen still battling the lingering effects of Covid-19. McCabe was averaging 19:11 per game this season while compiling a plus-2 rating. He had one goal and two assists.

"He's one of the main guys in the locker room and a main guy on the ice, so it's going to be a huge loss," Rasmus Dahlin said of McCabe. "Risto is gone, too. We just have to make the best out of it and try to compete. ... It's not fun for sure when those type of things happen."

Will Borgen may also be out of the lineup Monday on Long Island after blocking a shot with his hand Saturday. He did not skate Sunday, but Krueger termed him as day to day. Borgen played a career high 19:14 next to Dahlin, and the pair looked like a keeper.

"We complemented each other very well," Dahlin said. "We've been playing together in exhibition games and rookie tournament and I really enjoyed playing with him. He's so strong in the 'D' zone. He makes easy plays and it's very easy to read."

If Borgen and McCabe are both out, the Sabres would have to insert Henri Jokiharju and Brandon Davidson into the lineup Tuesday night.

Jacob Bryson and Casey Fitzgerald were called up from the Rochester defense to the Buffalo taxi squad Sunday.

Power play keeps rolling

Sam Reinhart's second goal Saturday pushed the Sabres' power play to third in the league at 32.6 percent heading into Sunday's games. The Sabres lead the NHL over the last nine games at 41.1% (12 for 29). They have scored at least once in eight of those games.

The Sabres and Chicago are tied for the NHL lead with nine different players holding power play goals. Victor Olofsson is tied for third in the league with five.

Quick bus jaunt

The Sabres are staying in Jersey City for a five-day stretch on this trip and will not take a morning skate Monday in Nassau Coliseum. They are simply going to bus to Long Island for the game and bus back immediately after, staying in place for Tuesday's rematch against the New Jersey Devils at Prudential Center.

Still stuck at no goals, Jeff Skinner may take a seat as Sabres meet Isles

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 21, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. – The Jeff Skinner crisis got more juicy here Sunday as the Buffalo Sabres took line rushes early in their practice in Prudential Center.

Suddenly, there was Casey Mittelstadt skating at left wing with Curtis Lazar and Riley Sheahan. In Skinner's spot.

Then came Skinner, taking a turn with taxi squad center Rasmus Asplund and right wing Tage Thompson, who was a healthy scratch here in Saturday's win over the New Jersey Devils.

The conclusion is clear: Unless coach Ralph Krueger has a sudden change of heart, Skinner is joining Thompson in the scratch brigade for Monday's game against the New York Islanders in Nassau Coliseum.

It's a step Krueger couldn't take lightly. Skinner, of course, is in the second year of an eight-year, \$72 million contract. But for \$9 million a year, you just can't give your team no goals.

"I have a lot of respect for the noise certain decisions will make," Krueger admitted. "And in the end, quite clearly, my role is not to be popular here but to be respected at the end of the day. Whenever reckoning is on the table, it's the way we like to lead out of the coaching room here. Striving for honesty within accountability and also hopefully getting players to their potential in the end is my job, is our job."

The numbers are obvious. Skinner has one point in 14 games this season, an assist in the Jan. 22 shootout loss in Washington. He has no points in the last nine games.

And while fans have been ultra-quick to lay the blame for Skinner's troubles at Krueger's feet, the fact is that this has been a two-year slump for the Buffalo winger that's led to the first scratch of his career.

Skinner has gone nearly a year without a goal, dating to his last score on Feb. 29, 2020, in Arizona. He has 14 goals in 73 games the last two seasons under Krueger, but finished the 2018-19 season under Phil Housley with just four goals in the final 25 games. He went 13 straight in one stretch of that season without a goal and you add it all up, he has just 18 goals in his last 98 games.

"This is my 11th year, over 700 games in the league and I don't think I've ever really felt like I needed a day off to relook at things," Skinner said. "I think I've seen a lot in this league. Run through adversity before my career. You just work, keep working and put your head down. And that's what I'll do."

Skinner played a season-low 11 minutes, 22 seconds in Saturday's game, but had four shots on goal. That makes 31 for the season, fourth among Buffalo's forwards – and tied for the most in the NHL among any forward without a goal.

"I think confidence comes and goes for every player, for any player," Skinner said. "I'm not happy with how things have gone so far. And I think when you're rolling, you have a different feel. How you go about sort of rekindling that and re-sparking that and changing the trajectory of that is a challenge."

Krueger pointed to Skinner's struggles in last week's pair of losses to the Islanders as one factor in the decision, giving some opening to the possibility this could be a one-game look at the game from a different view for Skinner.

"Hopefully it pushes the right buttons in the individuals to have them fulfill the roles that we expect," Krueger said. "We have expectations on each and every player in this group. The respect for players for their seniority is there. But at the same time, accountability needs to be at the top of the fold for us as we develop here."

Skinner isn't alone in his struggles. Kyle Okposo and Cody Eakin have not scored this year, while Taylor Hall's lone goal was Buffalo's first of the season Jan. 14.

"We're just trying to win hockey games as a group and we need everybody to contribute, we need everybody on board," Okposo said. "And I really do think that we have that, and there's going to be tough decisions. ... However (Krueger) sees fit to move forward, that's what we're going to do."

Asked point-blank if he's simply never going to produce in Krueger's system, Skinner refused to go down that road.

"I don't know. I've played for a lot of coaches. I don't know if it's that simple," he said. "I don't. Obviously I'm going through a little bit of a slump. And it's not something I'm used to. Especially 5-on-5. I think since I've come in a league, I've shown to have some pretty good success 5-on-5. It's just something that's not working, not going well right now. I just got to work my way out of it."

Krueger said he is dealing with each opponent as an eight-game standalone series and hoping to get the Sabres back into the mix against the Islanders after dropping the first two last week. Monday's game is the first of four in a two-week stretch on Long Island.

"Internal competition in a healthy way is excellent for a team," Krueger said. "We need that depth and we need that competition. And we have that right now."

Sabres update: Skinner might be healthy scratch, bad news expected on McCabe

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 21, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. -- Two major stories emerged from Sabres practice Sunday afternoon in Prudential Center:

- 1). It appears Jeff Skinner -- still with no goals and only one point in 14 games this season -- will be a healthy scratch for Monday night's game against the New York Islanders in Nassau Coliseum.
- 2). The Sabres don't have final word on defenseman Jake McCabe's right knee injury suffered in Saturday's win at New Jersey but the team is preparing to find out as soon as Monday that it is season-ending.

Coach Ralph Krueger sat out Tage Thompson and Henri Jokiharju Saturday and his lineup wheels are now pointing at Skinner. Casey Mittelstadt skated in Skinner's place Sunday with Curtis Lazar and Riley Sheahan, while Skinner skated with Thompson and taxi squad player Rasmus Asplund.

"This is my 11th year, over 700 games in the league and I don't think I've ever really felt like I needed a day off to relook at things," Skinner said. "I think I've seen a lot in this league. Run through adversity before my career. You just work, keep working and put your head down. And that's what I'll do."

Skinner had a team-high four shots on goal Saturday and Krueger said his decision came in part from Skinner's play in the two games against the Islanders last week.

Skinner played a season-low 11 minutes, 22 seconds Saturday but the four shots were one off his season high. He had only three shots in the two games against the Islanders, none in Tuesday's second half of the back to back.

"We will continue to analyze postgame what we feel and what we see," Krueger said. "And look for the mix that we believe gives us as a team within the roles we need the best chance to be successful. You saw a potential change in the mix today. We won't confirm it till tomorrow. But it's how we function here. We look honestly at production. We look honestly at the inputs in and around the team game that we need, and try and put that mix in place that gives us a chance."

Skinner has 14 goals in 73 games under Krueger and 18 goals in the last 98 games he's played for the Sabres dating to the 2018-19 season, when he struggled over the last two months but still finished with 40. He refused to point any fingers at Krueger.

"I don't know. I've played for a lot of coaches. I don't know if it's that simple," he said. "Obviously I'm going through a little bit of a slump. And it's not something I'm used to. Especially 5-on-5. I think since I've come in a league I've shown to have some pretty good success at 5-on-5. It's just something that's not working, not going well right now. I've just got to work my way out of it."

As for McCabe, the veteran returned home Sunday for an MRI after suffering the injury during a tie-up in the third period Saturday with Devils captain Nico Hischier. McCabe's knee buckled underneath him at an odd angle and he was helped off the ice with no weight on the leg.

"I'll be honest with you. Not very optimistic about the diagnosis that will come out of this," Krueger said. "But let's let the medical team take a look at it and we'll give you a full report. The lower body injury is serious."

Will Borgen also sat out practice after blocking a shot in the hand during Saturday's game. Krueger said he's day to day but might have to sit out Monday night.

If Borgen and McCabe are both out, the Sabres would have to insert Henri Jokiharju and Brandon Davidson into the lineup Tuesday night.

Mike Harrington: A nice win but the big picture under Terry Pegula remains cloudy

By Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
February 20, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. – Monday will mark 10 years since Terry Pegula – on his first day in the public eye in Buffalo – cried at the sight of Gilbert Perreault and told No. 11 he was his hero.

Pegula was maybe 30 feet in front of me in the KeyBank Center atrium on Feb. 22, 2011, with Perreault maybe 20 feet to my left sitting with other alumni. It's the moment everyone remembers from that first press conference when the White Knight was coming to town to open the checkbooks that Tom Golisano kept shut. It was thus going to guarantee a Stanley Cup for the Sabres. Maybe several Cups, as the thinking went. After all, that was the reason for the Sabres' existence, right?

New president Ted Black said a clarion call should go out that this is Hockey Heaven. Pegula said there would be no financial restrictions on the hockey department, that he could go make money by drilling another oil well.

Some of those quotes, of course, have been overplayed to the point of parody over the years, but there's no question there was a giddiness to that day which lasted a long time. I've thought a lot about that press conference the last two days with the anniversary approaching, as the Sabres sank deeper into a crisis that was hard to fathom.

Forget Stanley Cups. These days, the Sabres can barely score a goal. Now, they get full marks for Saturday's 3-2 win over the New Jersey Devils -- a game that saw them take their first lead in more than 255 minutes of play. They looked great well into the third period, making you wonder why they can't do that a lot more of the time. It's to the point where if they lay an egg Monday on Long Island, you won't be surprised.

If they don't make the playoffs this year – and it's already looking like a longshot – they'll tie the all-time NHL record of 10 straight misses.

This was not what Pegula had in mind when he took over. But from the stability of the early days, Ralph Krueger is his fifth head coach since Lindy Ruff, and Kevyn Adams his third general manager since Darcy Regier. Pegula's wife, Kim, is now the team president. Franchise legend Pat LaFontaine is estranged from the organization after his short-term run in the role seven years ago ended in murky circumstances.

Pegula has spent all kinds of money over time. There's been good dollars spent and some not so good (hello, Christian Ehrhoff, Ville Leino, Cody Hodgson, Kyle Okposo and Jeff Skinner). That \$7.5 million for Ryan O'Reilly looked mighty fine when he was holding the Stanley Cup and Conn Smythe Trophy. Too bad he was doing it in St. Louis. Pegula rubberstamped his franchise's galling tank too.

Still, I'm convinced he wants to win a Stanley Cup as much as he did the day he walked in. But times change and so do people. Pegula wasn't thinking about the Bills in 2011. Ralph Wilson, remember, was still with us. Now, Pegula has a football team that was one win from the Super Bowl.

As for hockey these days, the sense is Pegula really enjoys Krueger and how the coach talks a great game. But Rex Ryan did too.

Krueger is stubborn at times, even admitting Saturday he felt the best thing to do with his team was let it go. Still, Krueger said one thing and kind of did another that worked. Tage Thompson and Henri Jokiharju sat. Dylan Cozens was back off the Covid list and looked great, while Will Borgen is finally earning a regular role on defense. He's really going to become a key guy after the terrible-looking knee injury suffered in the third period by Jake McCabe, who was having his best season (Aside: This team can't have one fully good day without something catastrophic going on?)

"The first two periods truly showed the kind of game we want to play," Krueger said after the game. "We didn't give up much at all, and continued to create scoring chances and push forward as a group, it was certainly our best four line, forward line effort of the of the season so far, and that that's what you need in a compact schedule like this. We need everybody chipping in offensively and defensively and we felt it happened today."

The Sabres have still played only 15 games on their 56-game schedule. But it looks so daunting. There's 16 games left against Boston and Pittsburgh. Six more against the Islanders starting Monday. And this is a team that seems more decimated by Covid than any in the league. Most of these cases were guys with actual illness – including the head coach.

"Obviously, it's tough to take two weeks off and come back into game action and all that," said Taylor Hall, who might have played his best game as a Sabre. "But there's a lot of runway left. There's a lot of hockey games left. It's important for us to get wins whenever we can."

We know Pegula is engaged. We see the Sabres' social media videos. But he hasn't provided any real solutions. And his frustration over the team's struggles is clearly written by the litany of fired coaches and GMs.

He's not wrong if he thinks this team should be better. The Sabres took the ice Saturday with four wins – tied with Detroit and Ottawa for last in the league. There are five players on this club who were drafted first or second overall. Five others who were taken in the top 10. How does Jeff Skinner have no goals? How does Hall have one? How does Jack Eichel have two?

In the big picture, the players and coaches and GMs haven't been good enough but they're not alone. After all that's gone on in this crazy decade, don't forget the owner is the only one who's been here the whole time.

Sabres prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen making strides during 'long road' to NHL

By Lance Lysowski
The Buffalo News
February 20, 2021

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen was a wide-eyed 16-year-old when he first stepped onto the ice to face shots from professional players in Hämeenlinna, Finland.

One year earlier, Luukkonen did not even consider himself much of a goalie prospect. He had never worked with a position coach and was not selected to participate in any national team camp. Yet, Luukkonen developed into a teenager worthy of skating with HPK, a professional team in Finland's Liiga that counts former Buffalo Sabres winger Ville Leino among its NHL alumni.

Luukkonen was wowed by the talent and work ethic of HPK's players. It was at that first pro practice when Luukkonen first realized why patience would be necessary if he was to ever realize his dream of playing professionally.

"That helped me to realize it's not something that's going to happen overnight, to be a really good professional player," Luukkonen, now a 21-year-old Sabres prospect, said during a phone interview with The Buffalo News. "It's a long road. Getting to that environment early was eye-opening for me."

The lesson has served Luukkonen well during his journey from a raw, lanky netminder to one of the top drafted goalie prospects in the National Hockey League. He was selected in the second round, 54th overall, by the Sabres in June 2017, yet Luukkonen entered the weekend having played only 14 career games with the American Hockey League's Rochester Americans.

Teams typically want goalie prospects to play approximately 100 professional games, either in the minors or overseas, before making the jump to the NHL. Between Finland, Rochester and Cincinnati, Luukkonen has played 51. His progress since draft day – including a complete recovery from double-hip surgery – has his development trending upward during an important season with the Amerks.

"It's a lot better," Luukkonen said of his start in Rochester. "Of course, it was almost a year ago already that I played here, but coming here, starting and being with the team all the time makes a difference. We have a really nice group of guys and great coaching. Being part of this team makes it easier to play comfortable. It was a good summer for me."

The difference in Luukkonen's game is remarkable. He's quicker and more explosive in the crease, equipped now to use his 6-foot-5 frame to shut down shots from all angles. Luukkonen posted a .916 save percentage while winning each of his first three starts. His status as a top prospect created immense expectations last season, his first professionally in North America, but Sabres management planned for it to be somewhat of a transition year.

Luukkonen underwent double hip surgery in April 2019 to fix femoroacetabular impingement, a condition in which there is abnormal and wearing contact between the ball and socket of the hip joint. The problem typically begins when goalies in their early teens repeatedly drop to their knees to stop the puck. This causes a stress reaction and an extra bone forms along the head of the femur – which fits into the cup on the side of the pelvis to form the hip joint – and creates a square-peg-in-a-round-hole effect.

The procedure typically requires several months of physical rehabilitation. Luukkonen worked his way back in time to play his first game for the ECHL's Cincinnati Cyclones on Nov. 2, 2019. However, recovering from surgery prevented Luukkonen from being able to train properly off the ice. This wasn't ideal since he needed to build lower-body strength to improve his movement in the crease.

This had a negative impact on his performance in net, particularly in 10 games with Rochester. Luukkonen's raw talent allowed him to get by in the ECHL, as he totaled a .912 save percentage in 23 games with Cincinnati. But the deficiencies in his game were on display while with the Amerks, leading to an .874 save percentage and 3.15 goals-against average.

"There were games where, and not even a full game, but there were moments in the game where he would show a glimpse of the ability that he has and the projection that you see within him," said Sabres goalie development coach Seamus Kotyk, who has worked with Luukkonen since 2017. "But then there were also moments in games or long stretches of time in games or continuous games where he was behind the pace or he was just at the pace. He wasn't above it. That wasn't an area of concern whatsoever. It's something you expect and understand, and the hard part is he came in midseason and at that point the league is that much faster and you become a little more exposed and they are more noticeable ..."

When he was with Cincinnati his natural ability at the East Coast level kind of masked some of the technical areas that needed to be worked on and when you move up a level they can be exposed."

The unprecedented, long offseason during the Covid-19 pandemic provided Luukkonen with extensive time to train on and off the ice in Helsinki, Finland. He spent regular time in the gym to help him become faster and more powerful in the crease. Work in the gym was then put into practice with his offseason goalie coach, Jan Lundell, father of recent NHL first-round draft pick Anton Lundell.

Luukkonen faced plenty of shots during those summer sessions, as he was the only goalie for pro skaters that included Dallas Stars defenseman Esa Lindell, Carolina Hurricanes winger Teuvo Teräväinen and Montreal Canadiens center Jesperi Kotkaniemi.

When the start of the American Hockey League season was pushed back, Luukkonen found a temporary home this fall with TPS of Liiga in Finland. There were no promises for how long his loan would last or if he would even play a bulk of games. The coaching staff there told Luukkonen he would have to earn playing time.

He seized the starting job with strong performances in practice and exhibition games, using the time in Turku to work on Lundell's teachings during in-game situations. Luukkonen also benefited from the tutelage of TPS goalie coach Ari Moisanen, who has previously worked with the national team at the IIHF Men's World Championship.

"That's a really big thing, knowing you can be behind the puck and move well," said Luukkonen. "A guy the size that I am, it makes the game a lot easier for me being able to move and be behind the play and not having to kind of be stiff all the time. If that happens, it's hard to get into the games and feel confident if you don't feel that you're in front of the puck all the time. If you're a step behind all the time, it's really hard to be confident in net. It's a really big thing that I was able to take those steps forward."

Luukkonen wasn't a step behind with TPS, as he totaled a .908 save percentage in 13 games before his loan ended in December. He's becoming a tactician in net, no longer relying on raw skills and instincts. It's a promising combination when you consider what he accomplished prior to hip surgery.

Luukkonen was only the sixth goalie since 1979 to be named the Ontario Hockey League's most outstanding player, when he went 38-11-4 with a .920 save percentage in Sudbury during the 2018-19 season. He also led Finland to a gold medal at the IIHF World Junior Championship in January 2019 with a .932 save percentage in six games.

The mental aspect of the position has always been one of Luukkonen's strengths. Former Sabres General Manager Jason Botterill marveled over Luukkonen's ability to respond positively to adverse situations, particularly at world juniors in 2019, one year after the goalie floundered while making his debut at the marquee event. The trait was again on display with the Amerks on Feb. 12, as Luukkonen finished with 43 saves in a 7-3 win after allowing two goals in the first 14 minutes of a game in Cleveland.

"The way I try to describe it in layman's terms is he'll bend, but I don't believe he ever breaks," said Kotyk. "That is very valuable and I feel that's an asset and a skill set within goalies that is a separator. They are separators at every level. It's the difference between the good goalie and the great goalie at any age and at any level. I'm not saying he's guaranteed to become a great NHL goaltender, but I feel that it's going to be a skill set he has that's going to allow him to play at the NHL level – the strength he has in his mind."

Luukkonen understands he still faces a long road to the NHL, but he has finally found comfort on and off the ice. After spending most of last season living in a hotel, Luukkonen was able to move into a Rochester apartment since he knows he'll be in Rochester for the duration of the season.

The season is still likely to have ups and downs for Luukkonen. It's the nature of his position, particularly at this stage of development. But he is resolute in his pursuit of being ready for a full-time NHL job when the call to Buffalo finally comes.

"The only thing you can affect is what's going to happen next and what you're going to do about it," said Luukkonen. "You can't change anything if you had a bad game or gave up a bad goal. It's all about the next shift, next game or next practice. That's what matters. It's the mindset I've tried to have about anything in hockey and life. Don't worry about the past too much and learn from your mistakes. Try to work on those and be better the next day."

The Wraparound: Reinhart scores twice, McCabe hurt as Sabres run past Devils

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 21, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. – Even the Buffalo Sabres can put together dominant stretches of games once in a while.

The Sabres were better in every facet for 40 minutes Saturday and held on to beat the the New Jersey Devils, 3-2, in Prudential Center to snap their ugly four-game losing streak. New Jersey saw a three-game win streak end.

In the first meeting between the teams since the 5-3 New Jersey victory Jan. 31 in KeyBank Center that turned into a Covid-19 superspreader event and shut down both teams for two weeks, the Sabres got two goals from Sam Reinhart and 25 saves from Linus Ullmark. They are 2-1 against Lindy Ruff-led New Jersey this season and improved to 5-7-2.

The Sabres outskated the Devils all afternoon and finally started causing traffic around the net with regularity to build a 3-0 lead through two periods. The defense was crisp, and faceoff wins by Eric Staal and Jack Eichel directly led to the first two Buffalo goals.

The win came at a potentially large price, however, as defenseman Jake McCabe left with 11:03 to play with an apparent right knee injury after a collision in the corner with New Jersey's Nico Hischier. McCabe could put no weight on the knee as he was escorted to the dressing room.

"I'll be honest with you, I'm very concerned," said coach Ralph Krueger. "And we don't have a final diagnosis yet, but it rips my heart out to see what Jake has gone through. Also coming off of the Covid battle with him having had symptoms during that and now in question for the future. There's a big, big, big, big ache in my heart right now which the win certainly can't neutralize."

Any extended time out of the lineup from McCabe could cost Buffalo both halves of its top defense pair, as Rasmus Ristolainen continues to be out of the lineup while on the road back from his battle with Covid-19.

Finally in front: Defenseman Colin Miller opened the scoring at 5:26 of the first period, beating MacKenzie Blackwood from the right point after Eric Staal won a faceoff in the New Jersey end. It was Miller's second goal of the season.

The goal snapped the Sabres' streak of game time without a lead at 255 minutes, 45 seconds, dating to the 4-3 shootout win over the Devils Jan. 30 in KeyBank Center. It was just the fourth time in 14 games the Sabres have scored first and gave Buffalo a lead after the first period for only the second time, the other being the 6-1 win Jan. 18 in Philadelphia.

"There was just a real tone of joy actually after the 1-0," Krueger said. "Guys were like, 'Wow, when was the last time this happened?' And you can feel it without anybody really saying too much. It really relaxed the group and we could settle into the game that we wanted to play."

Sam I am times two: Reinhart scored at 8:07 of the second, deflecting home a Matt Irwin shot and added a power-play goal at 17:46, tapping home Jack Eichel's perfect goalmouth pass.

It was the fourth straight game against the Devils that Reinhart has scored, including all three meetings this year.

"We were able to kind of recognize early in the power play that they weren't really focusing on me too much," Reinhart said. "Eich kind of did two takes and on the second one, he was able to find the backdoor play after a little adjustment."

Ending the shutout: The Devils got within 3-1 at the 40-second mark of the third period on a Kyle Palmieri goal and made things nervous for the Sabres on P.K. Subban's power-play goal with 3:16 left. The Sabres' defense and goaltending has mostly held up its end since the club returned from pause, allowing 11 goals in the four games.

Afternoon delights: The Sabres improved to 10-3-2 in matinees in their two seasons under Krueger.

Ristolainen update: Asked for clarity on Rasmus Ristolainen's situation after the defenseman revealed to a Finnish outlet he had severe symptoms from his battle with Covid-19, Krueger gave a cautious report prior to Saturday's game.

"We're trying not to speculate and trying not to see anything as definite," Krueger said. "At any point in time we could have a relapse here (with players who were on the Covid list). We've been warned it can pop up a week, two weeks, three weeks later. We aren't done. The players who are here aren't done and 'Risto' is certainly not done with his process. ... I am concerned that it will take a while to get Risto back but I'm optimistic we'll have him back in a couple weeks. But again, that is just a guess."

The lineup: Dylan Cozens returned from the Covid list and took a spot on the second line with Taylor Hall and Eric Staal as Tage Thompson was a healthy scratch.

The big news was on defense, where Henri Jokiharju was a scratch for the fourth time in eight games. Will Borgen is grabbing on to a more regular role as he was on the lineup for the fourth straight game, taking a regular shift with Rasmus Dahlin and earning time on the penalty kill. Borgen blocked a shot by Kyle Palmieri early on one PK chance and needed some extra looks at his right hand after his shift ended.

Welcome back: The Devils played a fine welcome-back video for Taylor Hall, making his return to Prudential Center after he was traded last year from New Jersey to Arizona. The video included Hall's 2018 Hart Trophy season and speech at the NHL Awards Show, and ended with the public address announcer asking for the fan-less arena for a welcome. Devils players stood and tapped their sticks on the boards and a smiling captain Jack Eichel made sure to raise Hall's hand to acknowledge the scene.

"That was awesome. It was a long one. I kept waiting to give a wave," Hall said. "I had some great times here, there was a lot of growth in me as a person and as a player in my time in Jersey. Very nostalgic, just driving in yesterday and being around the arena today."

Next: The Sabres are staying in New Jersey for the entire five-day segment of this road trip and will practice in Prudential Center again Sunday. They will bus to Long Island for Monday night's game against the New York Islanders in Nassau Coliseum and return right after that game to prepare for another matchup with the Devils here on Tuesday.

Krueger on Ristolainen: 'I am concerned that it will take a while to get Risto back'

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 21, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. – A couple quick notes ahead of faceoff for the Sabres and Devils at 12:30 in Prudential Center.

- In a fast comment uttered at the end of Friday's briefing, coach Ralph Krueger said he didn't know how long Rasmus Ristolainen would be out of the lineup and made it sound questionable if the big defenseman would even return at all. I asked Krueger for clarity on that point in his pregame call today and the answer remained stark.

"We're trying not to speculate and trying not to see anything as definite," he said. "At any point in time we could have a relapse here (with players who were on the Covid list). We've been warned it can pop up a week, two weeks, three weeks later. We aren't done. The players who are here aren't done and 'Risto' is certainly not done with his process. ... I am concerned that it will take a while to get Risto back but I'm optimistic we'll have him back in a couple weeks. But again that is just a guess."

- Cozens back: Dylan Cozens will return to the lineup today after his stint on the Covid list. He estimated Thursday he's spent around 35 days since November in various quarantines with Team Canada and the Sabres.

"Although he's the youngest on the roster we all know he's the most experienced dealing with these kind of situations and Covid," Krueger said. "He's come out flying. He was outstanding in the skate yesterday, very very threatening."

Cozens will replace Tage Thompson in the lineup today.

- Based on the warmup, it looks like Henri Jokiharju will be a healthy scratch today for the fourth time in eight games. He's minus-2 with just two shots on goal in the three games since the Sabres returned from their Covid break.

Numbers game: Hoping to shake skid, Sabres meet Devils in matinee

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 20, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. – The Sabres look to snap their four-game losing streak with a 12:30 matinee Saturday against the New Jersey Devils in Prudential Center, but the numbers are certainly not in their favor.

As we head toward faceoff and coach Ralph Krueger's game day briefing (scheduled for around 11 a.m.), here are a look at some of the key points to know today.

Streaks: The Devils have won three in a row, including both games off their Covid pause, while the Sabres have dropped four straight. Buffalo is 0-3 since returning to the ice Monday – and has been outscored, 9-2, in that trio of games.

Catch-up I: The Sabres have not led for a second of any of their last four games and are on a streak of 250 minutes, 19 seconds without a lead, dating to the third period of their 4-3 shootout win over the Devils Jan. 30 in KeyBank Center.

Catch-up II: The Sabres are 2-7-1 when the opponent scores first, 2-5 when trailing after one period and 0-7-1 when trailing after two.

5-on-5 comparison: The Sabres' 15 goals at 5-on-5 in 13 games are last in the league and they're minus-12 in that area. The Devils, meanwhile, are plus-9 (22-13).

Offensive offense: Here's your roll call of disaster heading into this game:

Jeff Skinner, no goals, one assist, minus-1

Cody Eakin, no goals, one assist, minus-3

Kyle Okposo, no points (eight games), minus-2

Taylor Hall, one goal, minus-10 (no goals 5-on-5)

Rasmus Dahlin, one goal, minus-14

Jack Eichel, two goals, minus-9 (one goal, 5-on-5)

Sam Reinhart, three goals, minus-12

Victor Olofsson, six goals (but only one 5-on-5), minus-9

Silver lining alert: The Sabres are 9-3-2 in matinees in Ralph Krueger's two seasons as coach.

Silver lining alert II: The Sabres are fifth in the NHL on the power play (31.1%) – and lead the league over their last eight games at 39.3%.

Silver lining alert III: New Jersey is last in the NHL on the penalty kill at 64.9%.

Ralph Krueger admits he's coaching a fragile team as Sabres' funk continues

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

February 19, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. – Ralph Krueger has coached 82 games with the Buffalo Sabres. Exactly one full season. And when he hits the bench for No. 83 here Saturday afternoon against the New Jersey Devils, it will be with a backdrop of the biggest confidence crisis he has dealt with since he signed up for the job 21 months ago.

The Sabres are 4-7-2 and have lost three straight since returning from their two-week Covid-19 layoff. They're last in the East Division, 30th overall in the NHL in points and 28th in points percentage. In fact, they're tied for last in the league in wins with Detroit and Ottawa – two teams who were supposed to be terrible.

The Sabres lost Thursday in Washington, 3-1, and have just two goals since their return – both on the power play. The defense and goaltending have held up of late. The offense is lost.

"One of my biggest takes out of that game yesterday was the fragile psychological state of the team right now," Krueger admitted after practice here Friday in Prudential Center. "And managing that properly so that there is an edge, but that the edge doesn't go over to being too tight – which is exactly what is our biggest enemy at the moment. Everybody's trying to play within the right principles, they're trying to execute properly and almost squeezing our sticks too hard."

The Sabres' marquee players remain in a funk, as the team has an NHL-low 15 goals at 5-on-5 in the 13 games.

"They're fragile right now," Krueger admitted. "They don't believe in themselves and they don't see themselves celebrating, they see themselves missing the net, hitting the shaft of the goalie, not finding the hole between the legs that they usually find.

"There's definitely some fragility there when teams are not finding success and when a lot of your top guys are pressing hard to score and be difference makers and it's not working," admitted center Eric Staal. "Guys are working, guys are competing hard daily and wracking brains to try and get us out of this."

Krueger is 34-38-10 with the Sabres. In the 2018-19 season that was Phil Housley's last, the club went 33-39-10. So the coaching change made by ownership and former General Manager Jason Botterill has yielded one extra win so far.

The Sabres were pretty good at 5-on-5 in Krueger's debut season and terrible on special teams. Those trends have reversed this season.

The Sabres entered Friday fifth in the league on the power play at 31.1%. The four teams above them (Toronto, Dallas, Chicago and Washington) are 35-15-13. Buffalo has scored at least one man-advantage goal in seven of its last eight games, going 11 for 28 – and leading the NHL in that span at 39.3%.

It's meant nothing because of the 5-on-5 play. How stark is Buffalo's 15 goals in those situations? No other team has fewer than 20.

The Sabres were minus-31 at 5-on-5 in Housley's '18-19 swan song. They were minus-3 last year in Krueger's first campaign – and actually on the plus side until going 0-4 on their season-crushing Western road trip just before the season was cut short. They have slipped to minus-12 this season.

"I've always found power play is the driver of the offense of a group because your elite players get their confidence on the power play and usually that carries into our 5-on-5 game," Krueger said. "And this is one of the first times as a coach, I've seen that kind of control, that kind of domination, that kind of confidence on the power play to be one of the better power plays in the league right now. But it's not showing up at all in our five on five games. So I'll be really honest with everybody here, that I'm trying to figure that out."

Krueger said he spent more 1-on-1 time with players off the ice Friday. During the 40-minute practice, the Sabres did a lot of drills with the puck. They culminated in some 3-on-3 games played across the width of the ice at one end.

"It's important not to get overly frustrated because sometimes that can compound the issue and you're gripping your stick even tighter," said defenseman Jake McCabe. "I thought a practice like today, we were really crisp. Energy levels are up. That's a great sign."

Krueger is relentlessly positive with his team. A pair of six-game losing streaks ruined the Sabres last season and Krueger said he doesn't feel like this team is heading down the same road. The schedule might say otherwise. The Sabres have three games in four days on this trip, with two in New Jersey and another meeting with the New York Islanders on Monday in Nassau Coliseum.

"I feel so much better now after having had a lot of conversations, a lot of communication, a great practice," Krueger said. "And we're working again, and I believe the players are feeling that too. We move ourselves into a constructive, productive state, quicker than we did in the past, way quicker. It's that which gives me confidence moving forward, it's that which gives me a belief in this group."

Sabres' Rasmus Ristolainen endured intense chest pain during bout with Covid-19

By Lance Lysowski, Mike Harrington
The Buffalo News
February 19, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. -- Rasmus Ristolainen is not expected to join the Buffalo Sabres on their first road trip since a Covid-19 outbreak paused their season.

Coach Ralph Krueger told reporters Thursday morning the Sabres wished to provide Ristolainen more time to regain his energy following a 14-day stay on the National Hockey League's Covid-19 protocol list.

Now we know why.

In a vivid interview with the Finnish newspaper Ilta-Sanomat, Ristolainen, a 26-year-old defenseman who averages a team-high 23:34 ice time per game, described the various symptoms he experienced during a bout with the virus, including significant drops in oxygen levels and chest pain that made him wonder if he would awake the following morning.

"Sometimes there were quite disturbed states of being," said Ristolainen, according to Google translate. "When there was chest pain, it felt like my heart was cracking as I walked up the stairs. A couple of evenings there were such conditions when I went to bed that I didn't know if I woke up here anymore in the morning."

The chest pain that led to additional examinations by doctors have subsided and Ristolainen resumed skating Thursday, but he is suffering from fatigue.

Ristolainen, who co-hosts a fitness podcast and documents his intense offseason workout regimens on social media, was playing some of the best hockey of his career. The former first-round draft pick paired with Jake McCabe to form one of the top defense pairs in the NHL. Ristolainen's performance amid his eighth season in Buffalo was one of the bright spots in a disappointing start to Buffalo's season.

Then the New Jersey Devils arrived in Buffalo for a two-game series Jan. 30-31. The Devils placed a player on the Covid protocol list before each of those two games. Ristolainen had one goal and an assist in 28:11 during a 5-3 loss to the Devils on Jan. 31.

Two days after the Devils left town, the Sabres' season was paused, and Ristolainen, along with Taylor Hall, was placed on the Covid protocol list Feb. 2. Ristolainen went through a gamut of the typical symptoms before the chest pain worsened.

"I was texting with 'Risto' and we were both going through it together," McCabe said after practice Friday in Prudential Center. "So obviously, he had a little bit of a worse case than I did and maybe not even a little bit, a lot worse.

"It just goes to show how crazy and serious this virus really is. And Risto is probably the fittest guy on our team. For him to battle like this, it's very tough and unfortunate."

Ristolainen said he checked with other players around the league to see if they had similar symptoms and he could not find anyone who had. He hopes to possibly return to the lineup sometime next week.

"Sometimes there have been harsh conditions, but we are alive," he told the Finnish outlet.

Despite what Ristolainen said to the newspaper in his homeland, Krueger said Friday he has no idea when Ristolainen will be able to return.

"Ristolainen will be a long process to get back because of the setback that he's had and what he's gone through," Krueger said.

The Sabres have gone 0-3 since returning to the ice from their two-week layoff and Krueger said having five players with symptoms has made a major impact on the club.

"Every single player here that's returned who's symptomatic is feeling the effects of Covid in the game still," said Krueger, who was also bedridden by symptoms from the virus. "We're working through it. I'm working through it. I'll be honest with you, I'm not 100% up to speed, but I don't need to get my heartbeat up to 180 as a head coach, We have definitely got a physical component here that we're working on."

The Sabres and Devils meet here Saturday afternoon and New Jersey is 2-0 off its Covid pause, when it had as many as 19 players on the protocol list.

"We don't know what they've experienced behind the doors," Krueger said of the Devils. "And what I know is we've experienced something that definitely took our machine off track -- seriously off track -- in a way that's never happened in the National Hockey League before."

Jeff Skinner may be benched against Islanders

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 21, 2021

(WGR 550) - Jeff Skinner hasn't scored a goal in 14 games this season, and 18 games overall. Last year in 59 games, he had 14 goals, and in the final 25 games of his 40 goal season he netted four. That gives the left winger 18 goals in his last 98 games. In the season where he netted four goals in his final 25 games, he played with Jack Eichel in every game.

In what really should be no surprise, Skinner played on a line with two taxi squad guys on Sunday, while Casey Mittelstadt took his spot. Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger wouldn't confirm after practice if Skinner would be benched for Monday's matchup with the New York Islanders.

"We will continue to analyze what we see and what we feel, and look for the mix that we believe gives us, as a team, the best chance to be successful," Krueger said. "You saw a potential change in the mix today, we won't confirm it until tomorrow."

Krueger has a way he does things and is honest with the players, even if they don't want to hear it.

"It's how we function here," Krueger said. "We look honestly at production, we look honestly at the inputs in and around the team game and try to put that mix in place that gives us a chance."

Everybody keeps saying to me how soft Krueger is, but there are some players that would disagree.

"I have a lot of respect for the noise certain decisions will make," Krueger said. "In the end, my role is not to be popular, but to be respected."

"We strive for accountability and getting players to their potential, and in the end that's my job. When we make decisions, it's not will they make everybody happy, but hopefully it pushes the right buttons in the individuals to have them fulfill the roles that we expect."

Skinner has been around the NHL for 10 seasons, and Krueger says the respect for the seniority is there, but accountability has to be a top priority.

Skinner also has some thoughts on that.

"I'm in my 11th year and over 700 games (734), I don't think I've every really felt like I need a day off to really look at things," Skinner said after Sunday's practice. "I've seen a lot in this league, run through adversity before in my career, and you just keep working and put your head down and that's what I'll do."

Skinner is the first one to tell you that he hasn't done well in two years dating back to February of 2019.

"I'm not happy with how things have gone so far, but I try to bring a positive attitude to the rink because that's who I am," Skinner said. "I think it's fun to play hockey, and there's going to be times when it's more fun and times where it's going to be challenging."

Skinner's philosophy doesn't just apply to hockey.

"Everybody has it in life and every type of job," he said. "You go through ups and downs, and when you're in one of those down slumps you work hard, you work for solutions and work your way out of it."

Skinner was asked if it's been hard to get on the same page as Krueger. He paused a long time and took a deep breath during his answer,

"I don't know. I've played for a lot of coaches and I don't know if it's that simple," Skinner said. "I'm going through a bit of a slump, and it's not something I'm used to."

It's human nature to be mad when you're benched. A player wouldn't have gotten to the NHL if he wasn't mad about it, but Skinner said he doesn't know if that serves a purpose.

"I want to work hard, you try to work smart and think about what ways you can do things differently, how you can support your teammates. If it gets more challenging, you meet the challenge," he said.

The Sabres are starting to get thin on the blue line as Rasmus Ristolainen is still in Buffalo recovering from severe COVID-19 symptoms. Meanwhile, Jake McCabe and Will Borgen didn't practice Sunday in New Jersey.

McCabe had his right leg buckle under him in Saturday's game against the New Jersey Devils. McCabe is back in Buffalo on Sunday getting a MRI. Krueger did not sound optimistic about the injury, saying that his lower-body injury was "serious."

Borgen got hit in the hand with a shot and was shown on the bench trying to shake it off, but he did remain in the game. It's possible Borgen may have to miss a game.

"It's an upper-body [injury] from a shot, so it was better to take the day off today and we see. It truly is day-to-day," Krueger said.

"We will assess him tomorrow morning and then make the final call on [defense]. We hope to have him back soon, but there is a possibility that he might have to miss one game."

If Borgen can't play Monday in Long Island, both Henri Jokiharju and Brandon Davidson would have to play.

With McCabe and Borgen injured, the Sabres added Jacob Bryson and Casey Fitzgerald to the taxi squad.

OPINION: Sabres celebrate complete effort beating New Jersey

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 20, 2021

(WGR 550) - The Buffalo Sabres played the way Ralph Krueger has been begging them to play right from the opening faceoff on Saturday, and it resulted in a 3-2 win over the New Jersey Devils, breaking their four-game losing streak.

The game really wasn't that close, as the Devils scored two third period goals.

As soon as the puck was dropped, the Cody Eakin line went into the offensive zone and stayed there. What helped the attack is Jake McCabe was active from the defense, and New Jersey didn't know how to handle the attack.

On the second shift, Rasmus Dahlin activated, made a sweet move to cut into the slot and almost beat Mackenzie Blackwood between the pads.

Buffalo's defense was key all afternoon at both ends of the rink. I remember one play in the second period where there was a feed right off the post to Blackwood's left and it was Brandon Montour looking for the tap in. There was one time that both Montour and Dahlin were in the zone together.

The biggest key to this victory was Buffalo got on the board first. It was only the second time that happened all season. The first time was in a 6-1 win in Philadelphia.

Even though Buffalo was so good in the first period, the team only led 1-0, and you had that feeling that they blew so many Grade-A opportunities, something goofy would happen to let New Jersey score and the game would turn. Instead, Buffalo built on its first period and scored twice in the second and led 3-0, 40 minutes into the game.

The other thing that allowed the Sabres to dominate zone time is the fact there were Sabres around Blackwood for almost the whole game. On the first goal, Eric Staal won the faceoff and didn't stand there and admire his work, he went to the net so Blackwood never saw Colin Miller's shot from the point. The goal was Miller's first point in five games, and Staal's assist was his first assist in seven games. Taylor Hall got his first point in five games as he got the puck over to Miller.

On the second goal, Jack Eichel won the draw back to Montour. He went across to Matt Irwin, but while that was going on, Sam Reinhart sprinted to the slot and got there in time to tip in Irwin's shot. This was only the second time Reinhart had scored in nine games. It was Irwin's first point with the Sabres, and Montour's third point of the season.

Buffalo went 1-for-1 on the power play, and it was Eichel and Reinhart combining with Dahlin assisting. Dahlin now has points in four out of six games. This goal, again, was because of Reinhart's instincts in front of the net. He was alone in front, but realized he needed to move two steps over to give Eichel a clean passing lane and the captain made no mistake, providing the tap in for No. 23.

Buffalo generated numerous chances, including Jeff Skinner, who was back getting great opportunities because he was playing with Curtis Lazar and Riley Sheahan.

Two more things stuck out to me.

The Sabres blocked 18 shots to the Devils' three, including Miller, who threw his body down in front of Pavel Zacha's shot from right in front with just two seconds left on the clock.

The other was how only two players, Montour and Miller, played over 20 minutes. Krueger saw what was working and just rolled four lines. Of the forwards, Eakin had the most ice-time at 17:15, while Staal had the least at 10:36. That kind of even ice-time almost never happens.

Linus Ullmark had a few key saves of his own along the way. He came all the way across the crease to rob Janne Kuokkanen on a one-timer. This was only the third time all season Ullmark didn't give up three goals in a start.

Dylan Cozens played his first game since Jan. 31, where he contracted COVID-19. Cozens was a factor right away; playing fast, winning battles and, again, making the smart play to keep things going. On his first shift, he made a great backhand pass to Hall forcing Blackwood into maybe his best save of the game.

This was Hall's first time back in New Jersey since being traded to the Arizona Coyotes on Dec. 16, 2019, and he, by far, had his best game with the Sabres. He was all over the ice and was dangerous throughout.

Buffalo suffered a significant injury as McCabe had his right leg buckle under him as he tried to hit brand new Devils captain Nico Hischier. McCabe couldn't put any weight on that leg as he was helped to the room by Kyle Okposo and Eakin.

McCabe had been playing his best hockey as a professional all season long with Rasmus Ristolainen.

"I'll be honest with you, I'm very concerned," Krueger said of his defenseman following the win. "We don't have a final diagnosis yet, but it ripped my heart out to see what Jake has gone through coming off of the COVID battle, and now in question for the future. There's a big, big ache in my heart right now, which the win certainly can't neutralize."

The Sabres didn't get out of last place in the East because the New York Rangers won in Washington over the Capitals, 4-1. New York has a points percentage of .469, while the Sabres are at .429. The loss put the Devils points percentage at .583.

Buffalo will practice in New Jersey on Sunday and play the Devils again on Tuesday. In-between, though, the Sabres head to Long Island on Monday to play the Islanders. New Jersey plays in Washington on Sunday.

OPINION: Three observations: Cozens returns in Buffalo's most complete effort of season

By TJ Luckman

WGR 550

February 20, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres finally found themselves with the first goal of the game Saturday afternoon against the New Jersey Devils at the Prudential Center in Newark. They allowed themselves to play with a lead for most of the contest, and it helped the Sabres en route to a 3-2 win.

Buffalo did a great job of controlling play all game, and the Devils didn't have any answers offensively until late in the game.

The Sabres had quite a few things go their way on Saturday, something that hadn't been happening in their previous three losses coming back from their two-week pause. Let's take a look into this performance with three observations:

1.) Cozens energizes his line

Sabres rookie forward Dylan Cozens ended up on the NHL's COVID-19 Protocols list a little bit later than some of his teammates, so there was slight delay before his return to the lineup.

With the Sabres losing three-straight coming out of the break, it wasn't really worth the wait, but Cozens' return was a huge boost for linemates Eric Staal and Taylor Hall. Cozens was able to perturb Devils winger Janne Kuokkanen just enough for Taylor Hall to find Colin Miller at the point, who fired a wrist shot straight into the net for the Sabres' first lead in 255:45 of play.

Cozens looked like he never skipped a beat from being out for 20 days. His early success is one of the more positive developments for the Sabres this year.

2.) McCabe's injury bad news for the Sabres' defense

Sabres defenseman Jake McCabe's 2020-21 campaign may have come to a screeching halt late in the third period on Saturday afternoon.

McCabe skated into the corner trying to make a routine play on the puck, but on his way, Devils captain Nico Hischier tied him up. McCabe's right leg got twisted in the process and he went down hard in the corner, struggling to get up under his own power. He had to be helped off the ice by players and trainers.

McCabe has had a career-year for the Sabres thus far. While it doesn't show up on the offensive score sheet, his impact in the defensive zone has been invaluable for a team that has struggled to score goals and has to keep things close throughout.

3.) Borgen has arrived

Sabres defenseman Will Borgen has been a mainstay for the defense of the Rochester Americans for the past two seasons. He earned his first call-up to the NHL during the 2018-19 season, and earned himself an original spot on the taxi squad to start this season.

While Borgen was forced to wait for his first opportunity to get in some game action, he has consistently been impressing the Sabres' coaching staff.

Through four games, Borgen has shown that he belongs in the NHL.

Starting on the third pairing Monday night against the New York Islanders, Borgen found himself on the top defensive pairing Saturday afternoon with Rasmus Dahlin. The defensively-sound defenseman allowed Dahlin to contribute offensively on the rush.

If Borgen can maintain his level of play, the Sabres could be set for quite a while when it comes to their top pair.

Buffalo's road trip continues on Monday night when the team will make the short trek to Long Island to face the Islanders at the Nassau Veteran's Memorial Coliseum. It'll be the third of eight times this season where these two teams will square off.

Puck drop takes place at 7 p.m. EST on Monday, with the Paul William Beltz Pregame Show with Mike Schopp and the Bulldog starting at 6 p.m. EST on the radio home of the Sabres - WGR Sports Radio 550.

Sabres hang on for needed win in New Jersey

By Kyle Powell

WGR 550

February 20, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres bucked their losing ways on Saturday afternoon, as the blue and gold survived on the road, 3-2, against a rallying New Jersey Devils team at the Prudential Center in Newark.

It was Buffalo's first win this week; a span of four games following the team's two-week COVID-19 stoppage.

The Sabres grabbed an early 1-0 edge off a point shot from defenseman Colin Miller. It was the team's first goal from someone not named Victor Olofsson since Jan. 31 at home against this same Devils team, their first 5-on-5 goal since that same date, and, most importantly, their first lead in quite some time.

The Buffalo lead grew to 2-0 just over eight minutes into the middle frame when another point shot got by New Jersey goalie Mackenzie Blackwood. Jack Eichel won an offensive zone faceoff clean back to defenseman Brandon Montour, who immediately dished it off to partner Matt Irwin. Irwin then ripped the puck towards the net, where Sam Reinhart got a piece of the puck to extend the advantage.

A Sabres power play goal made the score 3-0 with less than three minutes left in the second period, when Reinhart cashed in, again, for his fifth goal of the season.

The Devils got on the scoreboard just 40 seconds into the third period, as Kyle Palmieri beat Linus Ullmark glove-side to break up the shutout bit for the Sabres netminder. It was Palmieri's third goal of the season.

New Jersey made it a one-goal contest at 3-2 when, on the power play and its net empty, P.K. Subban beat Ullmark with a blast in a 6-on-4 scenario and just 3:16 left to play.

The Devils kept on coming in the waning moments of regulation, but a couple of timely saves and big blocks in the defensive end helped the Sabres hang on for their fifth win of the year. It is also Buffalo's first victory in four games played since returning to play on Monday, Feb. 15.

The win came at a cost, though, as in the third period, the Sabres lost defenseman Jake McCabe to an awkward injury during a battle in the corner. McCabe went down hard on his knee fighting for a puck with Devils captain Nico Hischier and had to be helped off the ice by trainers and teammates, unable to put weight on his injured leg. He did not return to the game.

GAME SUMMARY

Goal Summary:

First Period:

BUF: 5:26 - Colin Miller (2) (Taylor Hall, Eric Staal)

NJ: NONE

Second Period:

BUF: 8:07 - Sam Reinhart (4) (Matt Irwin, Brandon Montour); 17:46 - Sam Reinhart (5) PPG (Jack Eichel, Rasmus Dahlin)

NJ: NONE

Third Period:

BUF: NONE

NJ: 0:40 - Kyle Palmieri (3) (Jack Hughes, Will Butcher); 16:44 - PK Subban (1) PPG (Pavel Zacha, Jesper Bratt)

Penalty Summary:

First Period:

BUF: 7:36 - Cody Eakin (Broken stick - 2 min.); 14:28 - Sam Reinhart (Slashing - 2 min.)

NJ: NONE

Second Period:

BUF: NONE

NJ: 17:16 - Dmitry Kulikov (Holding - 2 min.)

Third Period:

BUF: 15:16 - Jack Eichel (Tripping - 2 min.)

NJ: NONE

STATS OF THE GAME

Losi and Gangi Three Stars of the Game:

1.) Sam Reinhart - BUF

2.) Colin Miller - BUF

3.) Mackenzie Blackwood - NJ

What's Next:

The Sabres continue their road trip with a trip to Long Island to face the New York Islanders on Monday night.

The Sabres lost both meetings last week against the Islanders, scoring just a single goal in the process. Puck drop is set for 7 p.m. EST with the Paul William Beltz Pregame Show starting at 6 p.m. EST with Mike Schopp and the Bulldog on the radio home of the Sabres - WGR Sports Radio 550.

Four-game losing streak has Sabres near bottom of NHL

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 19, 2021

Buffalo, N.Y. (WGR 550) - If you want to know how badly the Buffalo Sabres' four-game losing streak has taken them out of the race, they can only catch the New York Rangers by winning all their games in-hand.

Buffalo's points percentage is .385, which is last in the East Division. The top-four teams are the Boston Bruins at .733, the Philadelphia Flyers at .679, the New Jersey Devils at .636 and the Washington Capitals at .633. The New York Islanders are fifth at .594, the Pittsburgh Penguins are sixth at .567 and the Rangers are seventh at .433.

Going into Friday's games, the Sabres are 28th in the NHL, only leading the Nashville Predators, Detroit Red Wings and Ottawa Senators.

Buffalo only averages 2.31 goals per-game (28th in the NHL), and that's with the league's fifth-best power play.

"I've always found the power play is the driver of the offensive part of the group, because your elite players get their confidence on the power play, and usually that carries onto our 5-on-5 game," said Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger after Friday's practice in New Jersey. "This is one of the first times as a coach I've seen that kind of control, that kind of domination, and that kind of confidence on the power play not showing up at all in our 5-on-5 game. I'll be really honest with everybody, that I'm trying to figure that out."

The Sabres have done so much better on special teams this season. They started this week in the top-10 in both power play and penalty killing. I thought, for sure, if they could do just that, they would either be in the playoffs or right on the brink. However, they're no better than they were before Jack Eichel was drafted.

It's not hard to figure out why the Sabres don't win. Jeff Skinner, Cody Eakin, Kyle Okposo, Tage Thompson and Brandon Montour have as many goals this season combined as Terry and Kim Pegula have.

Eichel has no goals in five games. Taylor Hall has one goal all season and hasn't scored in 12 games. Sam Reinhart has one goal in eight games. Eric Staal has one goal in seven games.

"For offensive players, sometimes you try to do too much or you're guilty of extending shifts or making plays that aren't there," Staal said after Friday's practice.

"There's definitely some fragility there when teams are not finding success. And when a lot of your top guys are pressing to score, it can be difficult. ... There's guys pressing, guys that want it real bad, but there's a simpler way we can get there. Hopefully, that starts tomorrow."

The only player scoring is Victor Olofsson, who has three goals in five games and points in eight out of nine.

Krueger said defensively, the players are doing well and are not a fragile group.

"When we speak about fragile, we're speaking about those final percentage points that separate the top scorers from the average players in the league," he said.

"We've got elite players in the group that in that final context of the game, they're fragile right now. They don't believe in themselves and they don't see themselves celebrating. They see themselves missing the net, not finding the hole between the legs that they usually find."

Linus Ullmark has given up three goals in six of his eight starts this season.

The Sabres split two games with New Jersey in Buffalo, winning 4-3 in a shootout and losing 5-3. The good news is in the two games, the Sabres scored five goals. The problem is they gave up eight.

New Jersey is a surprising 6-3-2 under its new coach, Lindy Ruff. The Devils have won three straight games and have points in four in a row.

Jack Hughes leads the team in scoring with nine points in 11 games. Miles Wood has five goals.

Mackenzie Blackwood missed some time in goal due to COVID-19, but he's back and is 4-0-1 with a 1.94 goals-against average and a .945 save percentage. Blackwood has only played against the Bruins and the Rangers this season, going 2-0-1 against Boston. The Devils rank seventh in the NHL with a team goals-against average of 2.55.

It's a little strange the Devils have done so well, because their penalty killing is awful. They're an NHL-worst 64.9%. The Devils' power play isn't much better at 12.5%, which is 26th overall.

Join Brian Koziol on Saturday morning for pregame coverage starting at 11:30 a.m. EST, when he'll be joined by Krueger, Staal and Jake McCabe.

Report: Ristolainen dealt with severe COVID-19 symptoms

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

February 19, 2021

(WGR 550) - Rasmus Ristolainen has told a Finnish publication that he had some severe and scary symptoms of COVID-19 during his battle with the virus.

The article was written by Sami Hoffren for Ilta-Sanomat. I had to translate the article to English, so I will do the best I can to pass on the highlights.

Ristolainen exited the NHLs' COVID-19 Protocols on Tuesday, and he skated for the first time on Thursday in Buffalo. His symptoms were so bad that he had low oxygen levels and heart problems, which are symptoms of COVID-19.

Both those symptoms puts a person in a very scary situation.

"When there was chest pain, it felt like my heart was cracking as I walked up the stairs," Ristolainen said.

The 26-year-old defenseman said his oxygen levels dropped quite badly, and he was tired all the time. He did say that the chest pain went away after a couple of days, so he thought he was getting better. However, they came back hard, as well as other symptoms.

Ristolainen is upset that the games against the New Jersey Devils were played nearly three weeks ago.

"It was a pointless infection in the sense that the New Jersey team had infections before those games, but we were still forced to play," Ristolainen said.

The defenseman is extremely upset at the timing of this, because he was playing such good hockey. Now he fears he's lost the momentum of the season. He said there was a good feeling to his play and that he couldn't fail.

"I played in both games for 27 minutes (26:50 and 28:11), and the playing felt good. I wasn't tired at all, and now I'm in this mess," Ristolainen said.

Ristolainen feels the worst cardiac symptoms are behind him, so he got on the ice on Thursday.

Ristolainen says he still wants to sleep all the time. He said after 12 hours of sleep, he feels like he only got five minutes.

Ristolainen doesn't want to get too far ahead of himself. He said if all goes well, he could probably think about returning next week, but his focus is training right now.

In the 10 games he played this season before testing positive for COVID-19, Ristolainen had scored two goals and registered four assists for six points. He also put up 20 shots on goal and was a plus-2, while averaging 23:34 of total ice-time.

Jake McCabe's injury brings up questions about Sabres' future on defense

By John Vogl

The Athletic

February 21, 2021

Jake McCabe's season may be over. If so, that could mean the end of his Sabres career.

The defenseman has returned to Buffalo for an MRI following Saturday's injury to his right leg. The hyperextension of McCabe's knee and coach Ralph Krueger's words combined for an ominous feeling.

"I'll be honest with you, not very optimistic about the diagnosis that will come out of this," Krueger said Sunday. "But let's let the medical team take a look at it."

The Sabres will announce the results Monday and are bracing for ligament damage, according to a source. ACL surgery has recovery time of up to a year. MCL surgery could put McCabe out for six weeks or longer.

"Big hole," right winger Kyle Okposo said following practice in Prudential Center. "He's going to be a guy that's dearly missed on and off the ice."

McCabe leaned in Saturday to hit Devils puck-carrier Nico Hischier, and his upper leg went left while the lower portion remained angled to the right. There was little either player could do to avoid the injury.

"The Jake McCabe hit was definitely just out of the course of play," Krueger said.

The next time McCabe plays, it could be in a different uniform. The 27-year-old is a pending unrestricted free agent and the Sabres have left-handed replacements in the pipeline.

Jacob Bryson is skating on Rochester's top pair after blossoming as a first-year pro last season. The 23-year-old has three assists in the Amerks' five games. Last year, he closed with four goals and 16 points in the final 21 games.

The 5-foot-9, 179-pound defenseman plays a disciplined two-way game but lacks McCabe's net-front toughness.

Mattias Samuelsson, meanwhile, is a 6-foot-4, 223-pounder with a stay-at-home mindset. The 20-year-old has joined the Amerks following two years at Western Michigan University. He's off to a solid start with one goal, three points, 13 shots and a plus-2 rating in Rochester's five games.

Samuelsson was the opening pick in the second round of the 2018 draft. He went 31 spots behind Rasmus Dahlin as the Sabres tried to solidify their future on the back end.

Buffalo used a 2019 first-round pick on another left-handed defenseman, selecting Ryan Johnson. The 19-year-old isn't expected to be ready for the NHL next season, but he could join the Amerks and allow the organization to promote Bryson or Samuelsson. Johnson played for the United States at the world juniors, winning a gold medal with four points in seven games while skating 16:04 per night. He has eight assists and a plus-7 rating through 20 games of his sophomore season at Minnesota.

In the immediate future, the Sabres will rely on Matt Irwin to fill McCabe's role. The 33-year-old has two assists in his six games while averaging 17:12 of ice time.

McCabe was skating 19:11 per game with a goal and two assists through 13 games. He and Rasmus Ristolainen were Buffalo's unquestioned top pair before the COVID-19 shutdown, but the team is now without both as Ristolainen remains out with the disease.

"With McCabe there, it's so unlucky," Dahlin said. "He's of the main guys in the locker room and a main guy on the ice. It's going to be a huge loss. With Risto, he's gone, too, so we just have to make the best of it and try to compete."

Selected in the second round in 2012, McCabe has played parts of eight seasons with Buffalo. The alternate captain signed following his junior year at Wisconsin and played seven games at the end of the 2013-14 season.

Since then, McCabe has skated in 353 games for Buffalo. Only Ristolainen (503), Zemgus Girgensons (489), Sam Reinhart (412), Johan Larsson (392) and Jack Eichel (368) have appeared in more.

McCabe ranks 22nd in the 2012 draft class in games while putting up 18 goals and 77 points.

The defenseman is finishing a two-year contract that pays \$2.8 million this season. He'll be part of a crowded offseason marketplace. There are 26 left-handed defensemen set to be UFAs, according to CapFriendly. The list includes Alec Martinez, Alex Goligoski, Ryan Murray, Derek Forbort, Alexander Edler, Marc Staal and Jamie Oleksiak.

An ACL surgical diagnosis for McCabe would carry past the free agency period and into next season.

"He's taken a lot of strides in the last couple years as a leader," Okposo said. "He's somebody that I have a ton of respect for and all the guys have a lot of respect for in that room.

"He's a high-character and he's going to be missed, for sure."

Sabres get needed win over Devils, await long return of Rasmus Ristolainen

By John Vogl

The Athletic

February 20, 2021

Rasmus Ristolainen is a 6-foot-4, 221-pound sculpture in the prime of his life. Sabres teammates jokingly call him an Instagram model, which is really no joke. His page features shirtless shots with bulging biceps and six-pack abs, no doubt created by the quarter-ton tractor tires and cast-iron weights he's lifting.

Yet an opponent that's one-millionth of a millimeter has knocked him out for a month, if not longer.

Ristolainen's fight with COVID-19 has been brutal, crushing a renaissance season for the 27-year-old. Placed on the NHL protocols list Feb. 2, Ristolainen has no timetable for his return to the Buffalo lineup.

"Ristolainen will be a long process to get him back because of the setback he's had and what he's gone through," coach Ralph Krueger said. "I am concerned that it will take a while to get Risto back, but I'm optimistic that we'll have him back in a couple of weeks.

"That is just a guess."

While Ristolainen is no longer in the league's COVID-19 protocols, that doesn't mean he's well.

The Finnish defenseman described his harrowing plight to a news outlet in his homeland, Ilta-Sanomat. While exact words get lost in translation, Ristolainen has gone to bed with worries he wouldn't wake up. His heart ached when he walked up stairs. Chest pain was a steady companion.

Ristolainen is extremely weak. Even when he sleeps for 12 hours, he arises exhausted. Though he's gone on the ice for a skate, he's nowhere near physically ready for a game.

"It just goes to show how crazy and serious this virus really is," Ristolainen's longtime defense partner, Jake McCabe, said. "Risto is probably the fittest guy on our team. For him to battle like this, it's very tough and unfortunate."

Ristolainen was one of nine Sabres who contracted COVID-19 after the infamous weekend series with New Jersey on Jan. 30-31. Dylan Cozens, Taylor Hall, Curtis Lazar, Casey Mittelstadt, Brandon Montour, Tobias Rieder, McCabe and Krueger have returned to the team while Ristolainen languishes.

"This thing's real. It's no joke," Lazar said. "Us guys who've had it, kind of talking about our symptoms and what we're going through, it's really interesting just the wide range of symptoms and how guys can be affected."

Lazar lost his senses of taste and smell while being congested and fatigued. Montour had a "pretty tough couple weeks." McCabe had symptoms for five days. Meanwhile, Mittelstadt had the sniffles and Hall was asymptomatic.

The uncertainty surrounding the disease is why the Sabres aren't putting a timeline on Ristolainen's return.

"We're trying not to speculate and we're also trying not to see anything as definite," Krueger said before Saturday's 3-2 win in New Jersey. "At any point in time, we could have a relapse here from one of the COVID players. We've been warned that it could pop up a week, two weeks, three weeks later.

"So, we aren't done. The players here aren't done and Risto is certainly not done in his process."

The only true concern is Ristolainen's short- and long-term health. But the Sabres' schedule moves on without him. After being the team's most valuable player through 10 games, Ristolainen has missed four. If he's out two more weeks, as Krueger suggested, that would be a dozen games.

McCabe could be joining him on the sidelines. The defenseman left Saturday's win with an injury to his right leg.

For two seasons, Krueger has steadfastly declined to provide postgame injury updates, usually saying players are still being evaluated. But his words from Prudential Center suggest McCabe's injury is significant.

"I'll be honest with you. I've very concerned," Krueger said. "We don't have a final diagnosis yet, but it rips my heart out to see what Jake has gone through, also coming off the COVID battle with having had symptoms during that. Now (he's) in question for the future.

"There's a big, big, big, big ache in my heart right now."

Injuries and COVID-19 have already forced the Sabres to use nine blueliners through 14 games. With Buffalo's top pair possibly sidelined indefinitely, the depth will continue to be tested. Matt Irwin has had good and bad moments. Brandon Davidson skated just 11 minutes in his lone appearance.

Rookie Will Borgen, meanwhile, has made a case to stay in the lineup even when everyone is healthy. He skated a career-high 19:14 against the Devils while paired with Rasmus Dahlin. Borgen's hard-hitting defensive acumen and Dahlin's offensive mind should make for a complementary pair.

"We just love the way Borgen has earned his spot here," Krueger said. "Especially with Jake and the potential injury there, we need him to be an 'A' player for us.

"The future potential of the Dahlin-Borgen pair is really something that excites us."

The pair made significant contributions to a game the Sabres needed to win. Buffalo jumped to a 3-0 lead and held off the Devils, ending a four-game losing streak. Here's the report card, based on Game Score by The Athletic's Dom Luszczyszyn.

Great

Sam Reinhart: The right winger scored twice in the second period, tipping a point shot while crossing through the slot and deflecting a power-play pass at the doorstep. His five goals are second on the team to Victor Olofsson's six.

Taylor Hall: The left winger, who won the Hart Trophy with the Devils in 2018, played his first game in New Jersey since being traded to Arizona last season. The organization welcomed him back.

"That was awesome," Hall said. "It was a long one. I kept waiting to give a wave. I had some great times here. There was a lot of growth in me as a person, as a player in my time in Jersey."

Hall had three shots and an assist in 13:27 of ice time.

Jack Eichel: The center set up Reinhart for the power-play goal. Eichel skated just 15:56, the 11th-lowest total in his 368 games with the Sabres.

Colin Miller: The defenseman opened the scoring, giving the Sabres their first in-game lead in 255 minutes, 45 seconds. When Reinhart made it 2-0, it was just the second time this season Buffalo led by two goals, matching the 6-1 win over Philadelphia in Game 3.

Rasmus Dahlin: He had an assist, three shots, two hits and a blocked shot in 18:24.

Good

Matt Irwin: The defenseman returned to the lineup in place of Henri Jokiharju, who was a healthy scratch after a string of bad games.

Eric Staal: He had one assist, three shots and went 6-1 on faceoffs. Staal skated just 10:36, the sixth-lowest total in his 1,254 games.

Brandon Montour: The defenseman skated a team-high 21:43, recording an assist and two blocked shots.

Dylan Cozens: The rookie had two hits in his first game back from the COVID-19 list while skating with Hall and Staal.

"He's a good hockey player," Hall said. "He thinks the game at a high level, and he's only going to get better and better as he plays more games. He just took 2 1/2 weeks off between games, and for a guy who did that, he looked great."

Fine

Jeff Skinner: He had a team-high four shots but remained stuck at no goals and one assist through 14 games.

Most of the Sabres' other big names reached the scoresheet, giving the Sabres a good feeling for Monday's game in New York against the Islanders.

"Right off the bat, we were connected as a group," Hall said. "We were enforcing our style of play on the game and it was evident right away."

Sabres' Jeff Skinner could be healthy scratch against Islanders

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 21, 2021

Over his first nine NHL seasons, Buffalo Sabres winger Jeff Skinner produced one season of at least 31 goals for each of the four head coaches he played under.

Skinner scored 31 times as a rookie 10 years ago for Paul Maurice. He enjoyed a 33-goal campaign in 2013-14 under Kirk Muller and recorded 37 goals in 2016-17 for Bill Peters.

Following his arrival from the Carolina Hurricanes in 2018, Skinner scored a career-high 40 goals for Phil Housley.

But Skinner, 28, has struggled so badly under Ralph Krueger, Housley's replacement, he could be a healthy scratch for the first time ever in tonight's road game against the New York Islanders.

Skinner, who has scored zero goals in 14 games this season, skated as an extra forward during Sunday's practice beside Rasmus Asplund and Tage Thompson, according to The Buffalo News.

Krueger acknowledged Skinner, who's in the second season of an eight-year, \$72 million contract, might be a spectator for tonight's contest at Nassau Coliseum.

"You saw a potential change in the mix today," Krueger said on a Zoom call Sunday. "We won't confirm it until tomorrow. But it's how we function here, we look honestly at production, we look honestly at the inputs in and around the team game that we need and try to put that mix into place that gives us a chance."

Skinner doesn't think a night off to reset and watch a game would help him.

"This is my 11th year," said Skinner, who has recorded just one assist this season. "I don't ... think I've ever really felt I need a day off to relook at things. I think I've seen a lot in this league, run through adversity before in my career. You just work, keep working and put your head down. That's what I'll do."

Other than a productive two-month stretch at the beginning of last season, Skinner has produced little offense under Krueger, registering only 14 goals in 73 games.

But Skinner scored 11 times in the first 28 contests a year ago, meaning he has mustered just three goals in his last 45 outings.

When asked if it has been hard to get on the same page as Krueger and play the style he expects, Skinner struggled to find the right words.

"I don't know," he said before pausing. "I've played for a lot of coaches. I don't know if it's that simple. Obviously, I'm going through a little bit of a slump and it's not something I'm used to, especially five-on-five. Since I've come in the league, I've shown to have some pretty good success five-on-five. It's just something that's not working or not going well right now and I've just got to work my way out of it."

Skinner has scored 205 even-strength goals since 2010-11, the NHL's seventh-highest total. He recorded 32 of them two years ago, a season in which he spent nearly every game playing with top center Jack Eichel.

Despite the chemistry Skinner and Eichel showcased, Krueger separated them at beginning of last season, electing to put Victor Olofsson on the captain's left wing. Other than a brief stretch at the end of the year, Skinner and Eichel stayed apart.

Krueger recently promoted Skinner to the top line beside Eichel before moving him back to the fourth trio, a spot where he has spent most of the season.

"He has been misplaced in the lineup again this year and he, I am sure, is wondering why," said one scout who has watched Skinner throughout his career. "Jeff Skinner is an offensive player. He will never be a complete player, but that's not what he's paid for."

"He is never going to be a defensive-minded player. Sometimes coaches just need to understand that and turn a blind eye to his deficiencies to get the positives. There are very few perfect players in the NHL. ... Skinner needs to play with somebody who can get him the puck."

Krueger understands scratching Skinner would be a big deal. Still, he has shown over his tenure that he's unafraid to bench established talent. He sat out defenseman Henri Jokiharju for Saturday afternoon's 3-2 road win over the New Jersey Devils.

Last season, he scratched defenseman Zach Bogosian, who was so infuriated he requested a trade hours later.

"My role's not to be popular here but to be respected at the end of the day, whatever reckoning is on the table," Krueger said. "It's the way we like to lead out of the coaching room here striving for honesty within accountability and also hopefully getting players to their potential, in the end is my job, is our job. ..."

"When we make hard decisions, they're not necessarily short-term, 'Will they make everybody happy?' But hopefully it pushes the right buttons in the individuals to have them fulfill the roles that we expect."

Sabres concerned about Jake McCabe's injury; Buffalo recalls defensemen

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 21, 2021

Sabres defenseman Jake McCabe, who left Saturday afternoon's 3-2 win against the New Jersey Devils after suffering a lower-body injury, has returned to Buffalo for an MRI, coach Ralph Krueger said.

Krueger said the Sabres will have an update on McCabe's status prior to Monday's road game against the New York Islanders.

"I'll be honest with you, (I'm) not very optimistic about the diagnosis that'll come out of this, but let the medical team take a look at it and we'll give you a full report," Krueger said on a Zoom call. "The lower-body injury is serious."

McCabe, 27, left Saturday's road game with 11:03 remaining after his right leg buckled when he tried to hit Nico Hischier in the corner. The American clutched his knee before being helped off the ice.

With McCabe likely sidelined and Rasmus Ristolainen still recovering from his bout with COVID-19, the Sabres' defense depth is being tested.

Winger Kyle Okposo said playing without McCabe, an alternate captain, would leave a "big hole."

"He's taken a lot of strides in the last couple of years as a leader and he's somebody I have a lot of respect for and all the guys have a lot of respect for in that room," Okposo said. "I don't know what the final prognosis is yet, but he's going to be a guy that's dearly missed on and off the ice. He does everything right. Blocks a lot of shots, he's there for guys, he's fought this year.

"I mean, he's just a high-character guy. He's gonna be missed."

Rookie Will Borgen looked impressive last week, playing four straight games following his promotion from the taxi squad. Borgen blocked a shot with his hand Saturday and could miss Monday's game. He did not practice Sunday.

"It was better to take the day off today," Krueger said. "We see it truly as a day-to-day (situation). ... There is a possibility that he might have to miss one game."

Defensemen Henri Jokiharju, a healthy scratch Saturday, and Brandon Davidson could move into the lineup.

The Sabres also added more defensemen Sunday, recalling Jacob Bryson and Casey Fitzgerald from the Rochester Americans to the taxi squad.

Sabres notes: Buffalo's early goal buoys win; Taylor Hall honored by Devils

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 20, 2021

When defenseman Colin Miller converted winger Taylor Hall's pass early in Saturday afternoon's 3-2 win, coach Ralph Krueger said joy swept over the Buffalo Sabres' bench.

For the first time in more than 259 minutes of play, Buffalo had finally seized the lead.

"Guys were just like, 'Wow, when was the last time this happened?'" Krueger said on a Zoom call after the Sabres defeated the New Jersey Devils.

It hadn't happened since Jan. 30, when winger Victor Olofsson's goal midway through the third period put them up 3-2 over the Devils.

Not coincidentally, that game, a 4-3 home shootout victory, was also the Sabres' last win before Saturday's at the Prudential Center.

The Sabres went into a tailspin after that triumph, dropping four straight games. So Miller's goal 5:26 into the contest, the Sabres' first five-on-five score in four games since their COVID-19 pause ended, infused some much-needed confidence.

"You could feel without anybody saying too much that it really relaxed the group and could settle into the game that we wanted to play," Krueger said.

Winger Sam Reinhart scored two second-period goals, including one on the power play, to help the Sabres build a 3-0 lead.

Despite the close margin, Saturday was the Sabres' best all-around effort since they shellacked the Flyers 6-1 on Jan. 18 in Philadelphia.

Since returning Monday, the Sabres had lost three games, scoring just two goals. Still, throughout the week, Krueger, Hall and some players insisted their game wasn't broken and a few fixes would get them going.

So what changed Saturday?

"Not much changed," Hall said. "I think we saw some pucks go in, we got a lead in the first period, we had a guy (Reinhart) go to the front of the net and screen the goalie and made it hard on him."

Right away, Hall said the Sabres "were connected as a group."

"D and forwards were making plays," he said. "There weren't a lot of bobbled pucks, there weren't a lot of guys rushing plays or just giving the puck up to another guy hoping he would make a play. We were enforcing just our style of play on the game and it was evident right away."

After the Devils roared back and scored two third-period goals, the Sabres held tight. Just before time expired, Miller blocked a shot in from of goalie Linus Ullmark to help preserve the win.

"I was very pleased with the reaction under pressure also in the third period, even surviving the stress that we were under," Krueger said. "But ... the first two periods truly showed the kind of game we want to play. We didn't give up much at all and continued to create scoring chances and push forward as a group. It was certainly our best forward line effort of the season."

—

Sabres rookie Dylan Cozens, 20, returned from a three-game absence Saturday, skating 10 minutes, 54 seconds, mostly at right wing beside Hall and center Eric Staal.

Cozens, who tested positive for COVID-19 earlier this month, looked engaged from the get-go.

"His responsible play that he showed us after the break he's had, almost three weeks, and (to) see that kind of performance is so encouraging for us," Krueger said. "He adds offense, he ends up with grade A scoring chances early in the game."

With Cozens back, Krueger reunited the trio of Olofsson, Reinhart and captain Jack Eichel. The Sabres' top line last season hadn't played together this year.

The Sabres scratched winger Tage Thompson to make room for Cozens.

—

Krueger said he believes Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen, who revealed to a Finnish newspaper Friday he has endured a difficult recovery from COVID-19, could play again next month.

"I am concerned that it will take a while to get Risto back, but I'm optimistic that we'll have him back in a couple weeks," Krueger said Saturday morning. "Again, that is just a guess."

Ristolainen, 26, told Ilta-Sanomat he experienced COVID-19 symptoms so severe he struggled to walk up the stairs in his home. The Finn starting skating again Thursday, according to the paper.

—

Hall, 29, blossomed as a player during his four-year stint with the Devils, earning the Hart Trophy as the NHL's MVP in 2017-18.

On Saturday, his first visit to Newark since he was traded to the Arizona Coyotes last season, the Devils welcomed him back by playing a tribute video.

"That was awesome," he said. "It was a long one. I kept waiting to give a wave. But I had some great times here. There was a lot of growth in me as a person, as a player in my time in Jersey and (I was) very nostalgic just driving in yesterday and being around the arena today."

Sabres' Ralph Krueger 'very concerned' about Jake McCabe's lower-body injury

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

February 21, 2021

Buffalo Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said he is "very concerned" about the lower-body injury defenseman Jake McCabe suffered in Saturday afternoon's 3-2 road win over the New Jersey Devils.

While Krueger couldn't offer a recovery time – "We don't have a final diagnosis yet," he said – his words painted a grim picture for McCabe, who recently recovered after testing positive for COVID-19.

McCabe, 27, left the game with 11:03 remaining after his right leg buckled when he tried to hit Nico Hischier in the corner. The American clutched his knee before being helped off the ice.

"It it rips my heart out to see what Jake has gone through, coming off of the COVID, battle with having had symptoms during that," Krueger said on a Zoom call. "Now in question for the future. There's a big, big ache in my heart which the win certainly can't neutralize."

McCabe, an alternate captain, has compiled one goal and three points in 13 games this season.

Sabres trying to generate offensive confidence: ‘Definitely some fragility’

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 21, 2021

In watching the Buffalo Sabres lose again and fail to score an even-strength goal, coach Ralph Krueger learned how fragile his team’s psychological state is right now.

Since the Sabres returned from a two-week COVID-19 pause Monday, they’ve showcased an anemic offense, recording zero even-strength goals and just two overall in their three games.

Winger Victor Olofsson has provided the Sabres’ only offense, scoring a power-play goal Monday and again in Thursday’s 3-1 road loss to the Washington Capitals.

“Everybody’s trying to play within the principles, they’re trying to execute properly and almost squeezing our sticks too hard once we have (an) offensive opportunity,” Krueger said on a Zoom call Friday.

Clearly, the Sabres’ biggest offensive threats – captain Jack Eichel and wingers Taylor Hall and Jeff Skinner – have been pressing. Eichel has scored only two goals this season and just one at even strength. Hall scored a power-play goal way back on opening night. Skinner, incredibly, is still goalless.

So \$27 million worth of talent has scored just three times this season.

“There’s definitely some fragility there when teams are not finding success,” Sabres center Eric Staal said. “When a lot of your top guys are pressing hard to score and be difference-makers and it’s not working, it can be difficult.”

The Sabres, who continue their four-game road trip this afternoon against the New Jersey Devils, have been forced to rely on the power play. They’ve mustered only 15 five-on-five goals in 13 games, including just five in the last eight outings.

A strong power play – the Sabres have converted 31.1% of their chances, scoring 14 times – usually acts as a catalyst for the five-on-five attack.

“I’ve always found (the) power play is the driver of the offense of a group because you’re elite players get their confidence on the power play and usually that carries into our five-on-five game,” Krueger said. “And this is one of my first times as a coach I’ve seen that kind of control, that kind of domination, that kind of confidence on the power play to be one of the better power plays in the league right now but it’s not showing up at all in our five-on-five game.

“So I’ll be really honest with everybody here that I’m trying to figure that out.”

Staal said: “Everyone knows the type of talent and the players that we have here. It’s just about finding solutions to having success. That’s not going to stop until it changes over.”

Krueger believes the fragility he sees is limited to the offensive side. He said, for example, the Sabres have held their opponents to an average of 10 five-on-five scoring chances game this week.

“There is definitely not a fragile mindset to the way we’re trying to play and why we’re trying to do what we’re doing,” he said. “We feel a total buy-in here on what was forever an Achilles in the organization and also last season at times, was the defensive structure of the group. So there is a commitment there to what we need to have happen without the puck.”

Krueger said when he speaks about fragility, it means confidence.

“We’re speaking about those final percentage points that separate the top scorers from the average players in the league,” he said. “And we’ve got elite players in this group. That are – in that final context of the game – they’re fragile right now.

"They don't believe in themselves and they don't see themselves celebrating. They see themselves missing the net, hitting the shaft of the goalie, not finding the hole between the legs that they usually find."

The Sabres have insisted throughout their struggles they've remained in a good place mentally. Krueger said he sees any frustration "staying in a very small picture and small moment."

"We move ourselves into a constructive, productive state quicker than we did in the past," he said. "Way quicker. It's that which gives me confidence moving forward, it's that which gives me a belief in this group, is how quickly we're able to move on within a shift, within a period, within a game, and between games."

"Again, results are what matter, they need to come, but that's what gives me the confidence that the results will come."

Sabres' Rasmus Ristolainen reveals difficult battle with COVID-19

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 19, 2021

In a harrowing story published in a Finnish newspaper Friday, Buffalo Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen reveals he experienced COVID-19 symptoms so severe he struggled to walk up the stairs in his home.

"When there was chest pain, it felt like my heart was cracking as I walked up the stairs," Ristolainen told Ilta-Sanomat, according to a Google translation. "A couple of evenings there were such conditions when I went to bed that I didn't know if I woke up here anymore in the morning."

Ristolainen, who was removed from the NHL's COVID-19 protocol-related absences list Tuesday, underwent further examination before the symptoms dissipated, according to the paper. The 6-foot-4, 221-pound Finn hasn't rejoined the Sabres. He skated on his own for the first time Thursday, according to the paper.

"Now the situation is quite good," Ristolainen told Ilta-Sanomat. "I got a clean bill of health from doctors, but I'm physically at the moment so weak that this is still a long way to get to playing condition."

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said Ristolainen won't join the Sabres on their current four-game road trip, which ends Tuesday.

"It just goes to show how crazy and serious this virus really is," defenseman Jake McCabe, who also tested positive for COVID-19, said on a Zoom call Friday. "Risto's probably the fittest guy on our team. For him to battle like this, it's very tough and unfortunate. But knowing Risto, he's going to be just fine and he'll be back here hopefully soon."

The league has removed every Sabres player from the list and Krueger has returned to the bench. Seven players and Krueger have said they tested positive for COVID-19.

Ristolainen and winger Taylor Hall were the first Sabres to land on the absences list Feb. 2, two days after they finished a weekend series against the New Jersey Devils. In less than a week, that number ballooned to nine.

Devils winger Kyle Palmieri, who played in the teams' first meeting Jan. 30, was the sixth New Jersey player added to the absences list the next day. Still, the game went on, and within days, the NHL paused the both teams' activities.

At one point, the Devils had 19 players on the absences list.

Ristolainen has enjoyed arguably the best start of his eight-NHL career, scoring two goals and six points while averaging a team-high 23 minutes, 34 seconds of ice time in 10 games.

Sabres prospect Jack Quinn wows in pro debut with Amerks

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
February 21, 2021

ROCHESTER – Seth Appert's gut told him rookie Jack Quinn deserved an opportunity to follow C.J. Smith in the shootout.

After starting his pro debut slowly, Quinn, 19, grew comfortable as Thursday's game progressed. Late in the third period, the Sabres prospect created Steven Fogarty's tying power-play goal for the Americans.

So when Appert needed a second shooter after Smith scored, he wanted to utilize Quinn, an ultra-talented winger Buffalo drafted eighth overall last year.

"I wasn't expecting to be selected but ... I was ready to go if I was called upon," Quinn said on a Zoom call following the Amerks' 4-3 victory over the Utica Comets.

Quinn seized his opportunity, faking a shot before slickly deking and tucking the puck by goalie Jon Gillies' left pad.

On the bench inside Blue Cross Arena, Amerks center Jean-Sebastien Dea turned and exchanged looks with Appert. Quinn's goal was that impressive.

"For Jack to handle the moment, the pressure in his first pro game with that kind of calmness, I thought said a lot about him," Appert said following the Amerks' third straight win.

Dea thinks Quinn's stint in the American Hockey League will be very short.

"He's got all the assets to be a great NHL player," said Dea, whose shootout goal sealed the victory.

In a normal year, the 6-foot, 176-pound Quinn would be starring for his junior team, the Ottawa 67s. But the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the Ontario Hockey League to keep delaying its season. Teenagers who play for Canadian Hockey League teams normally can't skate in the AHL until their team's season is over.

So right now, prospects like Quinn, who scored 52 goals in 62 games last season, have a special opportunity to develop against men.

"This is the best development league in the world for a reason," Appert said of the AHL. "Major junior hockey is extremely good, but sometimes when you get older and you're as talented as some of these guys are, maybe it isn't as challenging."

Appert said he's "a big believer that adversity fuels growth in your game and in your life."

"He and other 18-, 19-year-olds are going to face adversity, because this is a really good league and there's darn good players," he said. "They're stronger, older and more mature in their game. And he's going to have success, but there's going to be adversity that comes with being in the American League, and that adversity's going to force his game to grow."

Quinn hadn't played a game since Team Canada's loss in the World Junior Championship gold medal game Jan. 5 in Edmonton. He spent the early portion of this season on the Sabres' taxi squad before he was sent down Feb. 1.

But following his arrival, the Sabres began battling COVID-19 problems, so Quinn was forced to quarantine in Rochester.

"A bit of a wake-up call not playing for a bit, some big guys out there," Quinn said. "I thought I got a lot better as it went on and a lot better in the second and third. So I definitely feel a lot more confident now with one game under my belt."

Quinn wasn't very noticeable early Thursday. He even got stuck on the ice during a couple of shifts.

"That was a bit of an eye-opener in itself," he said. "And then I think sometime in the second our line had a good shift and I got a shot on net and kind of settled in from there."

Appert said: "He did a good job of staying with it, not getting frustrated when he had shifts where he didn't touch the puck."

Quinn started the game at right wing beside Dea and Remi Elie. But that line and the others weren't generating much, so Appert put Quinn beside Smith for two shifts in the second period.

"I felt a little something there," Appert said. "So we made that switch."

Quinn finished the game beside Smith and Brett Murray.

"His comfort grew," Appert said. "He even had to go down low as a center in the defensive zone a couple times, and I thought he handled game one very well."

Quinn showcased his soft hands and hockey IQ late during a late power play. After grabbing defenseman Oskari Laaksonen's at the right point and skating into the circle, he deftly fed the Finn a backhand pass back to the point.

Fogarty deflected Laaksonen's one-timer, tying the game 14:05 into the third period.

"I knew Laaksonen would be open since (an opponent) was pressuring me," Quinn said. "So I just kind of threw it back there."

Skinner replaced by Mittelstadt at practice on Sunday

By Adam Unger

WKBW

February 21, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. (WKBW) — After praising Saturday's four-line effort after a 3-2 win against the New Jersey Devils, Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger has mixed up the bottom six. And forward Jeff Skinner was the odd man out at Sabres practice on Sunday.

Skinner was skating alongside Rasmus Asplund and Tage Thompson. Former first round pick Casey Mittelstadt joined Curtis Lazar and Riley Sheahan, which has typically been Skinner's slot in five-on-five action.

"The competitiveness within the group is something I like to promote," head coach Ralph Krueger said about the change. "You saw, you know, a potential change in the mix today. We won't confirm it until tomorrow, but it's how we function here."

Skinner's first season in Buffalo led to a 40-goal campaign and a long-term extension worth \$9 million a season. After a subpar 2019-20 campaign, Skinner has yet to score and only has one assist in 2021.

"Obviously I'm going through a little bit of a slump, and it's not something I'm really used to," Skinner said. "It's just something that's not working and not going well right now, and I just have to work my way out of it."

Krueger didn't commit to taking Skinner out of the lineup for tomorrow night's tilt against the New York Islanders. But if Buffalo's skate in the Garden State is any indicator, Skinner might not get the chance to work out of it on Monday night.

"This is my 11th year... over 700 games, I don't think I've ever really needed a day off to re-look at things," Skinner said. "You just keep working, and put your head down, and that's what I'll do."

The Sabres start a stretch of five games in seven days when they play the Islanders tomorrow. Puck drop is at 7:00 p.m.

Five Observations: Sabres break skid with 3-2 win over Devils

By Adam Unger

WKBW

February 20, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. (WKBW) — For the first time since their COVID-19-related pause, the Buffalo Sabres got back into the win column Saturday afternoon. A pair of Sam Reinhart goals in the second period had the Sabres up 3-0 on New Jersey, which wound up being enough for Buffalo to hold onto a 3-2 win.

Even with the win, Buffalo sits last in the east in both points and point percentage. They visit the New York Islanders for their next game on Monday night.

Five observations from Saturday's game:

Breaking the skid

The first win back from a COVID-19 pause took much longer than it needed to. As frustrating as this week has been on the ice for the Sabres, the monkey is finally off their backs. The last time Buffalo scored multiple goals at even strength was also the last time they won a game. It's funny how those two correlate.

Sweating it out

The two-goal lead is the most dangerous lead in hockey; it's an age-old mantra. Once Sam Reinhart scored towards the end of the second period, it looked like Buffalo could at least cruise. But down the stretch, this team hit the brakes.

It's bad enough to shut down when you trail early. Head coach Ralph Krueger called it a psychology issue this past week. But a lead pretty much fell into this team's lap, and they almost gave it away. Clears for the whole game seemed sluggish and lazy still. But that was ramped up in the third period when it mattered most and the Devils brought on an extra skater.

Cozens adding a jolt

This afternoon's tilt was Dylan Cozens's first back since he was added to COVID-19 Protocol. It couldn't have come at a better time on several fronts: He was able to take the place of Tage Thompson after an abysmal outing on Thursday. The youthfulness of one of the NHL's few teenagers was something that head coach Ralph Krueger was looking forward to.

Clearly Cozens was looking forward to it, as well. He was able to rejoin veteran center Eric Staal and was playing well at both ends, and on neutral ice, all afternoon. To go back to the psychology of the team, the wide eyes and energy of a rookie could've been what the doctor ordered.

Reinhart returns to form

Two goals from the Sabres' mainstay winger elevated Buffalo to the win Saturday. Alongside Jack Eichel and Victor Olofsson, his linemates for most of the 2019-20 season, Reinhart was able to get to the net and win the battles down there. And those battles paid off both at even strength and with the man advantage.

Defensive depth going forward

The emergence of Will Borgen alongside Rasmus Dahlin today is a welcome surprise for Buffalo's blue line. Rasmus Ristolainen opened up to a Finnish news outlet about the long-term impact of COVID-19 on Friday. This morning, Ralph Krueger speculated that it'd be a few more weeks until he returns.

Then, against the Devils, Jake McCabe left the game with an apparent leg injury. Suddenly, the Sabres' best defensive pairing looks like they'll both be out for the foreseeable future. Henri Jokiharju will likely be let out of the dog house to get back into action, but the even strength production on offense will have even more pressure to continue until the Sabres get healthy on the back end.

Sabres' Ristolainen describes difficult fight with COVID-19 in Finnish newspaper

By Evan Anstey

WIVB

February 19, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) — Buffalo Sabres' defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen didn't have an easy battle with COVID-19, according to a recent report by Finland's Ilta-Sanomat.

According to the report, Ristolainen, a native of the country, suffered from heart and chest pain.

In an English translation on the Finnish news article, the 26-year-old said "Sometimes there were quite disturbed states of being. When there was chest pain, it felt like my heart was cracking as I walked up the stairs. A couple of evenings there were such conditions when I went to bed that I didn't know if I woke up here anymore in the morning."

Earlier this month, Ristolainen became one of the many Sabres players added to the NHL's COVID-19 protocol list. This not only put him out of play, but out of practice, too.

Because of how many players had to join the protocol list, a number of Sabres games ended up being rescheduled.

Sabres' Skinner potential healthy scratch Monday against Islanders

By Julianne Pelusi

WGRZ

February 21, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Sabres fans watched Jeff Skinner come to Buffalo and immediately produce a 40-goal season in 2018-2019, then sign an eight-year, \$72 million contract with the team, averaging \$9 million per season.

Now Skinner is in a self-proclaimed "slump," which could cost him a spot in Monday night's lineup against the New York Islanders. The Sabres winger did not practice with any of the regular four lines at practice on Sunday.

"I obviously am going through a little bit of a slump, and it's not something I'm used to," Skinner said Sunday.

"You just (work) your way out of it. ... Everybody has it in every type of job. You go through ups and downs, and when you when you're in one of those down slumps, you work hard for solutions, simplify things. ... There's a lot of clichés, but it really comes down to just working your way out of it."

Skinner now has gone almost a full calendar year, since February 29, 2020, without a goal. The coronavirus pandemic shutting down the Sabres' previous season for good in March 2020 is partially to blame, but over 14 games, Skinner has no goals and just one assist so far this year.

Coach Ralph Krueger would not confirm if Sunday's practice would confirm the Sabres' lineup for Monday night, but he said the line adjustments were a "potential change in the mix."

"When we make hard decisions, they're not necessarily short-term that will make everybody happy, but hopefully it pushes the right buttons in the individuals to have them fulfill the roles that we expect," Krueger said Sunday, while saying he respects the players' seniority in such decisions.

The veteran Skinner, asked if he could use rest on Monday night said, "It's my 11th year and I'm over 700 games. I don't think I've ever really felt like I needed a day off to relook at things. I think I've seen a lot in this week, run through adversity before in my career.

"You just work keep working and put your head down, and that's what I'll do."

The Sabres play the Islanders on the road Monday at 7 p.m.

Sabres snap four-game losing streak with 3-2 win over New Jersey

By Julianne Pelusi

WGRZ

February 20, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. — The Sabres 5-on-5 showed signs of life again, as Buffalo scored two even strength, goals and a third on their lethal power play in its 3-2 win over the New Jersey Devils.

Forward Sam Reinhart had the Sabres second and third goals, while Colin Miller tallied the first.

The Sabres had a 3-0 lead heading into the third, when the Devils got on the board 40 seconds into the period with a goal from Kyle Palmieri. The Devils were able to pull within one with a 6-on-4 power play goal from PK Subban with 3:16 remaining in the game.

The Sabres snapped a four-game losing streak with the win.

Sabres' Krueger admits concern for symptomatic players returning from COVID-19 protocol

By Julianne Pelusi

WGRZ

February 19, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — After the Sabres' Thursday night loss to the Washington Capitals -- their fourth straight, as well as their third straight since returning from a pause due to a COVID-19 outbreak -- coach Ralph Krueger admitted the team is in a psychological battle right now.

When asked about a physical battle, with eight of the nine players put on the NHL's COVID Protocol list confirming they tested positive for the virus, Krueger told 2 On Your Side's Julianne Pelusi, "every single player here that's returned who's symptomatic is feeling the effects of COVID in the game."

All nine players in the league's protocol have been removed, but six of the eight players who tested positive said they experienced some symptoms of COVID-19, ranging in severity.

Defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen is still not back playing with the team, after being the first of two players added to the list, along with forward Taylor Hall. Ristolainen was taken off the league's list Tuesday, three days after Hall returned to practice with the team, after testing positive.

Krueger said it will be a "long process" to get Ristolainen back after his setbacks and what he went through with the virus.

"It just goes to show how crazy and serious this virus really is and, you know, [Ristolainen] is probably probably the fittest guy in our team," defenseman Jake McCabe said on Friday. "For him to battle like this, it's very tough and unfortunate, but knowing [him], he's going to be just fine, and you know he'll be back here."

McCabe was back on the ice for practice on Monday, and he played Tuesday and Thursday nights with the Sabres. The 27-year-old said Monday he tested positive for the virus and experienced symptoms for about five days.

"I didn't really know what to expect frankly in that first game, but I felt really solid. The second period I got a couple longer shifts. ... I could tell my legs are getting pretty tired, but all in all, I've been feeling much better than I anticipated so that's been a real positive," McCabe said.

"It just keeps continuing to get better and better every day, but you know at least the first couple of games really I felt really, really good."

Despite McCabe's self-reported health, Krueger expressed concern about his players' health, after having the virus himself.

"I'm not 100% up to speed, but I don't need to get my heartbeat up to 180 [beats per minute] as a head coach... We have definitely got a physical component here that we're working on you need to know that we are monitoring players with sports science like never before," Krueger said Friday.

The Sabres' outbreak began on February 2, two days after back-to-back games against New Jersey. The Devils added a player to the NHL's COVID-19 Protocol list ahead of both games that weekend.

New Jersey ended up with 19 players on the list, then returned to action on Tuesday after their season was put on pause.

The Devils beat the New York Rangers 5-2 and Boston Bruins 3-2 since their return, while the Sabres haven't won in three games since coming back from their COVID outbreak.

"There is definitely a physical component here, but in no way shape or form can it be an excuse. ... The Devils have come out and won two games, good for them, but we don't know what they've experienced behind the doors, and what I know is we've experienced something that definitely took our machine off track, seriously off track, in a way that's never happened in the National Hockey League before," Krueger said on Friday.

After 10 games, we need to get back on track, and nobody's going to help us. I'm not saying anything other than ... the physicality this group and getting them 100% up to speed to where we were when we went into the COVID protocol is still a ways off, and the challenges we need to win games while we're doing this at the same time."

The Sabres and Devils meet again Saturday at 12:30 p.m. at the Prudential Center in Newark.

Reinhart scores twice, Sabres hang on against Devils

By Mike G. Morreale

NHL.com

February 20, 2021

NEWARK, N.J. -- The Buffalo Sabres spoiled Nico Hischier's debut as captain of the New Jersey Devils with a 3-2 win at Prudential Center on Saturday.

Sam Reinhart scored twice, Colin Miller scored, and Linus Ullmark made 25 saves for the Sabres (5-7-2), who ended a four-game losing streak, including three straight following a two-week pause due to NHL COVID-19 protocol.

"We were supporting the puck, we were moving our feet," Reinhart said. "I felt like we were getting everyone into the game, which was really important. And, you know, I think it showed you that energy levels lead to the kind of grind that went out.

"It obviously hasn't been going our way since we were able to come back, but I think getting on the road has been important for our guys. I would say that we can't go anywhere, so to spend some time traveling and in hotels has helped us."

Kyle Palmieri and P.K. Subban scored, and Mackenzie Blackwood made 26 saves for the Devils (6-4-2). It was their first loss in four games, including three since returning from 15 days off because of NHL COVID-19 protocol.

"I don't think we skated very well and, as a team, we were low on energy," New Jersey coach Lindy Ruff said. "Got to give them credit, they beat us to a lot of pucks, they forced us into some turnovers. They're energy seemed to be better than ours."

Hischier was named the 12th captain in Devils history prior to making his season debut. The 22-year-old center injured his foot this offseason and was in protocol since Feb. 8 before being removed Saturday. He had one shot on goal in 16:29 of ice time.

"He's behind when it comes to game conditioning, but his compete, level of energy, was great," Ruff said. "I think it's just going to take him a little bit to catch up, but he's a guy who's extremely positive and is doing the right things every time he gets out there. I really think it's important that Nico has to be Nico."

Miller gave the Sabres a 1-0 lead on a snap shot from the right point at 5:26 of the first period. Taylor Hall assisted on the goal; it was his first game in New Jersey since the forward was traded by the Devils to the Arizona Coyotes on Dec. 16, 2019. Hall signed a one-year contract with the Sabres on Oct. 11.

"We controlled play until about halfway through the third period ... they started to take over," Hall said. "But you knew they were going to push. I think we were connected as a group and forwards were making plays."

Reinhart scored on a deflection from the slot to give the Sabres a 2-0 lead at 8:07 of the second period. He scored his second of the game on the power play with a redirection from the slot at 17:46 of the second for a 3-0 lead.

"We were able to kind of recognize early in the power play that that they weren't really focusing on me too much," Reinhart said of his second goal. "I kind of did two takes, and on the second one, was able to find a backdoor play after a little adjustment."

Palmieri scored 40 seconds into the third period on a snap shot from the left circle to pull the Devils within 3-1.

"We knew they were going to be hungry team," Palmieri said. "We weren't playing our game and doing the things that made us successful coming out of the break. I thought the response in the third period was awesome, we pressed and had chances to tie the game."

Subban scored a power-play goal to make it 3-2 off a slap shot from the top of the right circle at 16:44 of the third. The Devils pulled Blackwood for a 6-on-4 advantage.

"It feels great to be back on the ice and battling with the guys," Hischier said. "When you look at the (third) period, that's how we should be playing for three periods. We know it's not enough ... one period. But it gives us something for tomorrow."

NOTES: Sabres defenseman Jake McCabe left the game after sustaining a lower-body injury at 8:57 of the third period. Buffalo coach Ralph Krueger said he was "very concerned." ... Devils forward Travis Zajac, who spent 19 days in protocol before being removed Wednesday, played 15:22 in his first game since Jan. 28. It was his 999th NHL game. ... Hall received a video tribute in the first period. He scored 208 points (76 goals, 132 assists) in 211 games in four seasons with the Devils from 2016-20 and was voted the Hart Trophy winner as NHL MVP in 2017-18. ... The start time for the Devils game at the Washington Capitals on Sunday was moved from 7 p.m. ET to 2 p.m. ET.

Is it time for Buffalo to trade Jack Eichel?

By Michael Traikos

National Post

February 20, 2021

If you want to know why the Buffalo Sabres have the second-worst record in the National Hockey League and are on pace to missing the playoffs for the 10th straight season, don't bother looking at the spotty goaltending or the leaky defence or an injury list that has been filling up with COVID-related absences.

Instead, gaze up at their fallen stars.

Is it time for Buffalo to trade Jack Eichel?

Close sticky video

Thirteen games in, Jack Eichel has scored twice. Taylor Hall has scored once. And Jeff Skinner hasn't scored at all.

Combined, a high-paid trio that is earning \$27-million this year has one even-strength goal and nine even-strength points.

That, more than anything else, is why the Sabres have gone four games without a win and are now nine points back of the Washington Capitals for the final playoff spot in the East Division. That is why they are rubbing shoulders with the rebuilding Ottawa Senators at the bottom of the overall standings.

And that is why the Eichel trade rumours are once again heating up.

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You need your best players to be your best players in order to win in the NHL. And in a salary cap world, it's even more important that your highest-paid players give you a return on your investment.

Edmonton is paying Connor McDavid, Leon Draisaitl and Ryan-Nugent Hopkins the exact same amount of money that Buffalo is paying its Big 3. Except, with the Oilers' Big 3 having scored 26 goals, they are getting more than their money's worth this year.

The same thing is happening in Toronto, where Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner and John Tavares have a combined salary of \$33 million and a combined goal total of 30. Meanwhile, Boston's Patrice Bergeron, Brad Marchand and David Pastrnak have combined for 22 goals with a cap hit that is \$7-million less than what Buffalo is paying its Big 3.

Eichel, who has 12 points in 13 games, might not be the problem with all that has gone wrong this year. At the same time, he hasn't been part of the solution in the way that he was a year ago, when he scored 36 goals and 78 points in 68 games.

None of the top earners have been.

Hall, who was signed to an \$8-million contract, was supposed to be the MVP winger that Eichel has never had. But he hasn't scored since the first game of the season. Skinner, who's \$9-million cap hit makes him the highest-paid fourth-line forward in the NHL, hasn't scored in almost 12 months.

And they are feeling it.

Thursday's 3-1 loss to the Capitals, following 3-0 and 3-1 losses to the New York Islanders, was the third straight game where Buffalo failed to score an even strength goal.

"One of my biggest takes out of that game yesterday was the fragile psychological state of the team right now," said head coach Ralph Krueger, who wants the players focused, but not squeezing. "And managing that properly so that there is an edge, but that the edge doesn't go over to being too tight, which is exactly what is our biggest enemy at the moment."

They are "squeezing their sticks too hard," added Krueger, who a day earlier was talking about "persistence and character" and "to stick with it."

Was that last part directed towards fans, who have already suffered through a decade's worth of failure? Or was it towards Eichel, whose impatience and frustration seems to be growing with every game and every wasted year that he continues to spend in Buffalo.

This is Year 6 for the No. 2 overall pick. He's yet to make the playoffs. He hasn't even come close. There's been no baby steps, no signs of growth. Nothing. And it's wearing on him.

At the end of last season, when Buffalo missed the playoffs that had been expanded from 16 to 24 teams, Eichel said, "I'm fed up with the losing and I'm frustrated. It's been a tough past couple of months and a tough past five years."

Eichel has not spoken to reporters since earlier in the week, but how do you think he is feeling now?

How long before he does what Patrik Laine and Pierre-Luc Dubois both did and tells his agent that he wants to be traded to a team that knows how to build around a superstar? And how long before GM Kevyn Adams decides to roll the dice and see what he can fetch for a 24-year-old who is in the prime of his career?

After all, it's not like Buffalo hasn't tried everything else.

Since selecting Eichel with the No. 2 overall pick in 2015, the Sabres have fired two coaches and two general managers. They've tried rebuilding through the draft and spending to the cap. They've signed veterans, reclamation projects and performed both major and minor surgery on a roster that simply refuses to get better.

When Eichel was a rookie, Buffalo acquired Ryan O'Reilly, Evander Kane and goalie Robin Lehner and finished 23rd-overall. Two years later, all three were gone and the Sabres ended up as the worst team in the league. After drafting Rasmus Dahlin with the No. 1 pick and trading for Skinner in 2018, they improved to 27th.

Last year, after finishing in 25th place, the Sabres signed Hall to a one-year contract and traded for Eric Staal in hopes of making Eichel happy and making a push for a playoff spot. But one month into the season, this team finds themselves itself in a familiar spot.

In a division that includes Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Pittsburgh and the New York Islanders, it's hard to see how Buffalo will sneak into a playoff spot. Right now, it's difficult to see them vaulting past the Devils or New York Rangers.

And if you're a fan of the team, it's becoming impossible to see how Eichel will stick it out for another five years.

The Jack Eichel Era is Heading Toward a Cliff in Buffalo

By Matt Larkin

The Hockey news

February 19, 2021

"Listen, I'm fed up with losing, and I'm frustrated. It's definitely not an easy pill to swallow right now. It's been a tough couple of months. It's been a tough five years with how things have went."

So that was Buffalo Sabres captain Jack Eichel on a Zoom call last May, in the weeks before the team's ownership began bending over backward in hopes of finally building a competitive team and getting their young superstar to the playoffs in his sixth season. That was Eichel, clearly disgruntled, before the Sabres fired GM Jason Botterill and signed Taylor Hall and traded for Eric Staal. Gulp. Imagine hopping in a time machine today and paying May 2020 Eichel a visit.

"Are we finally improving?"

"Well...realignment forced you to share a division with the Bruins, Penguins, Capitals, Flyers and Islanders, and only four of eight teams make the playoffs. And you're in last place. And you're 28th overall in points percentage. And you're 28th in offense. And you and Hall have combined for three goals in 13 games."

"...Oh."

The Jack Eichel trade talk was already fervent after last season. The captain couldn't hide his frustration with the direction of the franchise. Entering his age-24 campaign, he was burning through crucial prime years. He produced at a fringe-MVP-candidate level in 2019-20, with his pace pro-rated to 43 goals and 94 points in a full season, and the team only "improved" to a sixth-place finish in the Atlantic Division and a .493 points percentage, joining six other teams locked out of the 24-team bubble post-season tournament.

So, I'm sorry, Sabres fans, but we have to fire up the Eichel trade machine again. I know you don't want to hear it. I know you're among the most passionate fan bases in sports. You deserve to see your team succeed. But the Eichel situation appears to be hurtling toward a cliff. He was already unhappy at the end of 2019-20, not to mention the season prior, and we're getting so used to him smashing his stick in frustration after losses now that it'll be a .GIF soon. It's only a matter of time before teams start calling Sabres GM Kevyn Adams, wondering if they can pull a heist akin to what the San Jose Sharks did in November 2005, snatching Joe Thornton just as he reached the apex of his talent.

Sportsnet insider Elliotte Friedman reported this week that Eichel indeed was restless in his situation last summer and that, while he never requested a trade, teams came calling. The Sabres were simply not ready to give up on the Eichel era and start over. But how much more will Eichel be willing to take before he formally requests a trade? The Sabres' nine-year playoff drought is the league's longest – by five years. It appears the drought will reach 10 in 2020-21 and tie the NHL record for the longest ever, shared by the Edmonton Oilers and Florida Panthers. The way things are trending now, Buffalo seems poised to break the record next season with 11. It's becoming tougher and tougher to feel optimistic about this franchise's short- and medium-term future. So perhaps Adams has to seriously entertain the Eichel offers, not necessarily during this season but definitely come summertime. As The Athletic's John Vogl points out, Eichel is in the third year of his eight-year, \$80-million contract, and a no-movement clause kicks in after Year 4. Right now marks the perfect intersection of Eichel's prime skill years, his rising frustration and the flexibility to trade him to any team at any time.

The NHL's history of superstar sell-off deals isn't always kind to the team giving away the superstar. The Bruins infamously got Brad Stuart, Wayne Primeau and Marco Sturm for Thornton, who became the only player to win the Hart and Art Ross Trophies for a season during which he was dealt. The Pittsburgh Penguins got Kris Beech, Ross Lupaschuk, Michal Sivek – yes, those are real players – and future considerations for Jaromir Jagr. And on a smaller scale, it's understandable if the Sabres and their fans fear getting swindled after the St. Louis Blues torched them on the 2018 Ryan O'Reilly trade. But for every one of those flops, there's an Alexei Yashin trade, right? His situation became untenable with the Ottawa Senators, and they turned him into Zdeno Chara and Jason Spezza. Sometimes, you simply have no runway left with your star, he wants out, and you do the best you can to get a proper return.

Working in the Sabres' favor is the fact they still do have leverage before Eichel's NMC kicks in and, because he's absolutely still at the peak of his powers, or perhaps not even there yet, the offers would be extremely generous. The New York Rangers, owners of a loaded farm system, reportedly kicked the tires on Eichel last summer. The Kings have been mentioned as suitors and may have an even deeper youth crop. If the Sabres would consider doing business with their regular-format divisional neighbors, the Montreal Canadiens are loaded with assets, too. With a player as good as Eichel, we can consider almost every team in the league a suitor, as Buffalo may receive "hockey trade" offers with high-impact veteran players on top of big packages of prospects and picks. Any type of pitch is possible for a player of Eichel's caliber.

So the idea of moving Eichel hurts, yes. But if things aren't getting any better in Buffalo with him in town, maybe you start pondering what you could pull in for Eichel and pending UFA Hall. You hit the reset button and build your future around defenseman Rasmus Dahlin. It's not something Sabres fans likely want to entertain, I know, but the end of the Eichel era feels more inevitable with every loss, with every splintered stick.

NHL rumors: Ex-Devils MVP Taylor Hall, Sabres share interest in contract extension

By Chris Ryan
Newark Star Ledger
February 19, 2021

Taylor Hall turned plenty of heads during the offseason when the former Hart Trophy winner signed a one-year, \$8 million contract with the Buffalo Sabres. The former Devils winger opted for a short-term deal in free agency, rather than a multi-year contract.

That deal put Hall on course to become an unrestricted free agent again in 2021, and if the Sabres struggled to compete this season, Hall could have become a potential trade candidate for the second straight season.

The Sabres have struggled, currently sitting in last place in the eight-team East Division. But according to TSN's Pierre LeBrun, the Sabres currently don't have any intention of moving Hall during the season.

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LeBrun said the team remains focused on keeping him around for the long term, and Hall shares that desire.

"Right now there is mutual interest between Taylor Hall, his camp and the Buffalo Sabres to discuss an extension when the time is right," LeBrun said on TSN. "So that could be a big name off the market, if you will, given that he's UFA on July 28. That really has been the intention from the Buffalo Sabres since the get go, and that has not changed, despite the team's slow start. Again, Darren Ferris, the agent for Taylor Hall, he's notorious for normally bringing his clients to UFA. In this case, he also has interest in listening to the Sabres."

Because Hall signed during the offseason, he would not be eligible to sign a contract extension until March 12, which is one month before this season's trade deadline. If the Sabres retained Hall, they would have exclusive negotiating rights until the start of free agency on July 28.

Along with the team's struggles this season, Hall isn't off to a hot start offensively, either. He has nine points in 13 games, but he's scored just one goal with the Sabres.

Hall will return to New Jersey to play at Prudential Center for the first time since last season's trade when the Devils host the Sabres at 12:30 p.m. on Saturday.

Sabres reassign Bryson, Fitzgerald to taxi squad

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

February 21, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres have reassigned defensemen Jacob Bryson and Casey Fitzgerald from the Rochester Americans to the team's taxi squad.

Sabres coach Ralph Krueger announced Sunday that Jake McCabe had returned to Buffalo for an MRI after sustaining a lower-body injury during the third period against the Devils on Saturday. Fellow defenseman William Borgen was also absent from practice and is considered day-to-day with an upper-body injury.

The absences left the Sabres to practice with the following six defensemen in preparation for their game against the New York Islanders on Monday:

26 Rasmus Dahlin - 33 Colin Miller

44 Matt Irwin - 62 Brandon Montour

88 Brandon Davidson - 10 Henri Jokiharju

Bryson and Fitzgerald are both in their second professional seasons after careers in the NCAA. Bryson, a left shot, tallied 27 points as a rookie with Rochester last season. Fitzgerald's rookie campaign was listed to 25 games in part due to the injury.

The taxi squad now includes three defensemen in Bryson, Davidson, and Fitzgerald; two forwards in Rasmus Asplund and Casey Mittelstadt; and one goaltender in Jonas Johansson

The Sabres visit the Islanders on Monday and then conclude their road trip against New Jersey on Tuesday. The Amerks' next game is Wednesday at Syracuse.

McCabe returns to Buffalo for MRI

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

February 21, 2021

Buffalo Sabres defenseman Jake McCabe returned to Buffalo and is scheduled to undergo an MRI on Sunday, coach Ralph Krueger announced following the team's practice in New Jersey.

McCabe sustained a lower-body injury during the third period of the Sabres' win over the Devils on Saturday.

"I'll best honest with you, not very optimistic about the diagnosis that'll come out of this, but let the medical team take a look at it and we'll give you a full report," Krueger said. "The lower-body injury is serious."

The loss of McCabe would add another hole to the top of a defense corps already playing without Rasmus Ristolainen, who is working his way back from a severe bout with COVID-19. Krueger suggested Ristolainen could return "in a couple of weeks," though he stressed that the timeline is not definite.

McCabe and Ristolainen formed one of the NHL's most statistically consistent defense pairs to open the season despite routinely playing against opponents' top lines. To replace them will be a measure of the team's depth both on the back end and in the dressing room.

"Jake's a guy that, he's taken a lot of strides in the last couple of years as a leader and he's somebody I have a lot of respect for and all the guys have a lot of respect for in that room," said Kyle Okposo, an alternate captain along with McCabe.

"I don't know what the final prognosis is yet, but he's going to be a guy that's dearly missed on and off the ice. He does everything right. Blocks a lot of shots, he's there for guys, he's fought this year. I mean, he's just a high-character guy. He's gonna be missed for sure."

William Borgen has established himself as a promising candidate to step up in the meantime, though he was absent from practice on Sunday to nurse an upper-body injury. His status for the team's game against the New York Islanders on Monday will be determined in the morning, Krueger said.

Borgen paired effectively with Rasmus Dahlin against the Devils, with the former's physical, defensive-minded style complementing the latter's high-skill game. Dahlin eclipsed 25 minutes of ice time in three straight games before skating 18:24 on Sunday.

"He's had to step up and play big minutes," Krueger said of Dahlin. "He's had to step up and play against the top lines of the other teams since the injuries and COVID in a way that he never did in his career, and yet he's doing well with it."

Here's how the team practiced on defense without Borgen and McCabe on Sunday:

26 Rasmus Dahlin - 33 Colin Miller
44 Matt Irwin - 62 Brandon Montour
88 Brandon Davidson - 10 Henri Jokiharju

Left-shot options in Rochester include second-year pro Jacob Bryson and rookie Mattias Samuelsson. Montour, Miller, and Jokiharju have all played on their off side at various points in their careers.

"We just have to make the best of it and try to compete," Dahlin said.

Lines at Sunday's practice

Jeff Skinner skated on a fifth forward line alongside Rasmus Asplund and Tage Thompson, suggesting he could be a healthy scratch on Monday. Casey Mittelstadt took Skinner's place on a line with Curtis Lazar and Riley Sheahan.

Here's how the forwards lined up in full:

68 Victor Olofsson - 9 Jack Eichel - 23 Sam Reinhart
4 Taylor Hall - 12 Eric Staal - 24 Dylan Cozens
13 Tobias Rieder - 20 Cody Eakin - 21 Kyle Okposo
37 Casey Mittelstadt - 27 Curtis Lazar - 15 Riley Sheahan
53 Jeff Skinner - 74 Rasmus Asplund - 72 Tage Thompson

Krueger did not confirm whether the lineup would stick for the game against the Islanders but said decisions will be based on what the coaching staff deems best for the team.

"I have a lot of respect for the noise certain decisions will make," Krueger said. "In the end, quite clearly, my role's not to be popular here but to be respected at the end of the day, whatever reckoning is on the table. It's the way we like to lead out of the coaching room here, striving for honesty within accountability and also hopefully getting players to their potential in the end is my job, is our job.

"We do strive for that. When we make hard decisions, they're not necessarily short-term, 'Will they make everybody happy?' But hopefully it pushes the right buttons in the individuals to have them fulfill the roles that we expect. We have expectations on each and every player in this group and ... the respect for players, for their seniority, is there. But at the same time, accountability needs to be at the top of the fold for us as we develop here the Buffalo Sabres into that regularly competitive group."

5 Takeaways | Reinhart scores twice in win over Devils

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

February 20, 2021

Ralph Krueger felt the effect on the bench was tangible after Colin Miller saw his shot from the point find the back of the New Jersey Devils' net during the first period on Saturday.

The goal was the Sabres' first at 5-on-5 since returning from a two-week hiatus on Monday and gave them their first lead in that same span. They never looked back in a 3-2 victory at Prudential Center, snapping a four-game losing streak that extended back to Jan. 31.

"You could feel without anybody saying too much that it really relaxed the group and we could settle into the game that we wanted to play," Krueger said.

Sam Reinhart scored two goals in the victory while Linus Ullmark made 25 saves. Here are five takeaways.

1. The need for net-front traffic had become a consistent topic of conversation as the Sabres struggled to score at even strength during the past week. It was highlighted again Saturday morning given the fact the Sabres were facing a goaltender in Mackenzie Blackwood who entered the contest undefeated in regulation at 4-0-1.

Blackwood looked the part early, stopping grade-A chances by Rasmus Dahlin and Dylan Cozens during the first five minutes. When the Sabres finally beat him on Miller's shot, scored 5:26 into the contest, it came as the result of a crossing screen from Eric Staal.

"I think that's been an emphasis lately," Miller said. "You need to get bodies to the net. I think that's normally where you score the majority of the goals. ... Staalsy did a fantastic job on the one that went in for me."

A similar play led to the Sabres' second goal, which once again came on a shot from the point during the second period. This time, Reinhart tipped the shot from Matt Irwin as he skated through the slot.

2. The Devils made a push during the third period, striking early with a goal from Kyle Palmieri and cutting the deficit to one on a power-play goal by P.K. Subban with 3:16 remaining.

That said, the Sabres still finished the game with an 11-2 edge in high-danger shot attempts at 5-on-5, according to NaturalStatTrick.com. Krueger called it the forward group's most complete effort of the season.

"Right off the bat, I think we were connected as a group," said forward Taylor Hall, who tallied an assist in his return to New Jersey.

"D and forwards were making plays," he continued. "There weren't a lot of bobbled pucks, there weren't a lot of guys rushing plays or just giving the puck up to another guy hoping he would make a play. We were enforcing just our style of play on the game and it was evident right away."

3. Not all the news was positive. Defenseman Jake McCabe left the game during the third period after tangling his right leg with the leg of Devils forward Nico Hischier on an attempted hit in the corner. McCabe was tended to on the ice before being helped off by teammates.

McCabe, an alternate captain, has been a consistent presence for the Sabres on the back end. He spent the early part of the season as one half of a duo that performed among the NHL's best along with Rasmus Ristolainen, who is still set to miss time as he recovers from a bout with COVID-19.

"I'll be honest with you, I'm very concerned," Krueger said. "And we don't have a final diagnosis yet, but it rips my heart out to see what Jake has gone through. ... There's a big, big ache in my heart which the win certainly can't neutralize."

4. Krueger said before the game that Cozens was "flying" during the team's practice on Friday, suggesting the rookie could inject a bit of youthful energy in his return to the lineup. Cozens had not played since being removed from the COVID-related absence list on Wednesday.

The premonition was quickly vindicated when Cozens earned a chance on the rush and then helped create net pressure on Miller's goal. High-danger chances were in Buffalo's favor, 3-0, with the line of Hall, Staal, and Cozens on the ice.

"He thinks the game at a high level and he's only going to get better and better as he plays more games," Hall said. "He just took two weeks off, two and a half weeks off in between games and for a guy who did that, he looked great.

"He's such a good skater. He has a long reach. As a forechecker and as a puck battler, for such a young age he's very advanced there and that's what the NHL's about. That's probably the hardest thing to get used to is just playing against men and having to forced your will on games and he seems to be able to do that."

5. The Sabres power play entered Saturday having scored at least one goal in seven of its past eight games. Victor Olofsson factored in on a power-play goal in six of those contests.

The Devils must have been watching. With the penalty killers' attention focused on Olofsson, Jack Eichel hit a wide-open Reinhart at the backdoor early on the Sabres' lone power play of the afternoon.

"We were able to recognize early in the power play that they weren't really, you know, focusing on me too much," Reinhart said. "I think Eichel kind of did two takes and on the second one he was able to find the backdoor play after a little adjustment."

At The Final Horn: Sabres 3 - Devils 2

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

February 20, 2021

The Buffalo Sabres' offense finally broke through Saturday afternoon. After scoring just two goals over their last three games, Buffalo scored three against the New Jersey Devils in a 3-2 win at Prudential Center to snap a four-game losing streak.

Sam Reinhart scored twice and Colin Miller added another as Linus Ullmark made 25 saves to earn his fourth win of the season.

Kyle Palmieri and P.K. Subban scored for New Jersey in the third period, a period in which the Devils made a strong push to get back into the game. Mackenzie Blackwood stopped 26 shots for New Jersey.

Buffalo was credited with 18 blocked shots. Thirty-four percent of New Jersey's shot attempts ended up hitting a Sabres player and never reaching Ullmark. Fourteen different Sabres were credited with a block.

What happened

The Sabres got off to a 3-0 start, a welcome change from the past few games. Miller opened the scoring when his point shot through traffic beat Blackwood 5:26 into the game.

Reinhart scored his first of the game 8:07 into the second period when he tipped in a shot from the point by defenseman Matt Irwin.

His second of the game with 2:14 remaining on the second when, all alone in front of the net on the power play, he redirected in a pass from captain Jack Eichel to give Buffalo a three-goal advantage.

The Devils pushed back hard after that. Forty seconds into the third period, Palmieri roofed a shot over Ullmark and they pressured all period long. Subban made it a one-goal game when he scored on the power play with 3:16 remaining in regulation. New Jersey outshot Buffalo 13-6 in the third.

Roll the highlight film

Let's take a look at Reinhart's power-play goal, his fifth goal of the season:

Worth mentioning

Defenseman Jake McCabe left the game with 11:03 remaining in the third period with an apparent right leg injury. Going for a hit in the defensive zone corner, he fell awkwardly and needed assistance to get off the ice, putting little pressure on his leg as he skated off. He did not return.

Dylan Cozens made his return to the lineup, his first game since being released from the NHL's COVID protocols on February 16. He'd missed the past three games. He recorded one shot in 10:54 of action.

Coming up

Buffalo's road trip continues Monday night against the New York Islanders. Faceoff from NYCB Live is scheduled for 7 p.m. on MSG and WGR 550 with pregame coverage on MSG starting at 6:30.

Morning Skate | Cozens to return in New Jersey

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

February 20, 2021

Dylan Cozens will be back in the lineup for the Buffalo Sabres when they visit the New Jersey Devils at Prudential Center on Saturday afternoon.

Cozens has not played since the Sabres hosted the Devils on Jan. 31. The rookie was among the Sabres players who tested positive for COVID-19 during the ensuing two-week layoff, though he said was mostly asymptomatic.

He practiced Friday on a line with Taylor Hall and Eric Staal.

"He's come out flying," Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said. "He was outstanding in the skate yesterday. Very, very threatening. He has a youth and an exuberance to him that it'll be an easy step back in for him. But we'll need to keep an eye on the minutes, like with everybody."

The Sabres are looking to pull themselves out of a scoring drought that has extended through three losses since they returned to play on Monday. They have scored two goals in that span, both of which have come on the power play.

Players spoke Friday of approaching the game with simplicity, an ingredient that will be key against a Devils team that put its speed and transition ability on display during its visit to Buffalo last month.

"Their involvement of the D in the offense is league elite," Krueger said. "All six D extremely offensive and able to add to the attack. Also, ... their skill up front is a confident skill at the moment. You need to neutralize that. You need to take away that space that they so crave."

Scouting the Devils

New Jersey has won both its games since returning from its own 15-day hiatus, including a 3-2 victory over first-place Boston on Thursday. Pavel Zacha had goals in both games, extending his point streak to four contests.

Travis Zajac - who is two games shy of 1,000 for his career - was removed from the COVID-related absence list Wednesday and is expected to make his return to the lineup. Nico Hischier was the final Devils player removed from the list and is available to play, though coach Lindy Ruff did not announce whether or not the centerman will be in the lineup.

Goaltender Mackenzie Blackwood, who was in COVID protocol when the Sabres last met the Devils, is 4-0-1 this season with a .945 save percentage coming off the win over the Bruins on Thursday.

"Their goaltending has been absolutely outstanding," Krueger said. "It's been probably some of the best goaltending in the league to date. We need to find ways to create a strong presence today in and around him and disrupt him in his process of play."

Players to watch

Buffalo: Taylor Hall

The forward makes his first return to New Jersey since being acquired by Arizona last season. Hall spent parts of four seasons with the Devils, including his Hart Trophy campaign in 2017-18.

New Jersey: Miles Wood

The Buffalo native was a force the last time these two teams met, checking relentlessly and finishing the contest with three points (2+1) to show for it. Wood leads the Devils with five goals this season.

Tune in

Coverage on MSG begins at 12 p.m. You can also listen to the game on WGR 550 with puck drop scheduled for 12:30.

Sabres seeking confidence on offense heading into meeting with Devils

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

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Buffalo Sabres coach Ralph Krueger said he dedicated a large portion of practice on Friday to drills geared toward building players' confidence with the puck as the team worked to pull itself out of a scoring slump that has stretched through its past three games.

The Sabres have combined to score two goals - none at even strength - in a pair of losses to the New York Islanders and another to the Washington Capitals since returning from a 15-day hiatus on Monday. Buffalo held an edge in high-danger chances at 5-on-5 in the latter two games, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

With little time to catch their breath before opening a set of three games in four days in New Jersey on Saturday, Krueger said the balance Friday was addressing the issue in a way that would not force offensively struggling players to grip their sticks even tighter.

"It's a delicate balance that I find the best way to deal with this is lots of communication," Krueger said. "So, we're over-communicating right now, especially with the leaders and the key players, giving them opportunities of outlet.

"I'm getting into more one-on-one talks than I would usually have as a head coach to try and help work together on the solutions versus putting more pressure in a negative sense on the players. So, it is a fine line."

Almost to a man, the Sabres' top offensive threats have seen grade-A scoring chances go unrewarded over the past five days. Sam Reinhart and Jeff Skinner both hit posts during the first period on Thursday. On Tuesday, Taylor Hall was stopped on a breakaway and Victor Olofsson had a goal overturned.

"We feel a total buy-in here on what was forever an Achilles in the organization and also last season at times, was the defensive structure of the group," Krueger said. "So, there is a commitment there to what we need to have happen without the puck.

"Now, we need to get it right with the puck. ... They don't believe in themselves and they don't see themselves celebrating. They see themselves missing the net, hitting the shaft of the goalie, not finding the hole between the legs that they usually find."

Members of the team's leadership group echoed their coach in terms of solutions moving forward. Eric Staal stressed simplicity, which could be particularly relevant going into a matchup with a New Jersey team that used speed and relentless checking to feast on Buffalo mistakes in their last meeting. Both Staal and alternate captain Jake McCabe also mentioned positive reinforcement.

"At practice today I thought we were really crisp, energy levels were up," McCabe said. "That's a great sign, especially after another tough loss last night. So, just moving forward, continuing to be upbeat. If guys are doing good things out there, make sure they know it coming back to the bench.

"Just try to, I guess, integrate as much energy and positivity as you can on the bench, keep trying to pick each other up. ... You just can't keep continuing to compound the situation with frustration, as frustrating as it is."

McCabe: Ristolainen details show "how serious this virus really is"

Rasmus Ristolainen detailed his experience with COVID-19 to Finnish newspaper Ilta-Sanomat, revealing harsh symptoms including chest pains and low oxygen levels. The defenseman is still working his way back into playing shape and is not expected to join the Sabres on their current road trip.

McCabe said he and Ristolainen texted while they both dealt with the virus, though McCabe's symptoms only lasted for roughly five days.

"It just goes to show how crazy and serious this virus really is," McCabe said. "Risto's probably the fittest guy on our team. For him to battle like this, it's very tough and unfortunate. But knowing Risto, he's going to be just fine and he'll be back here hopefully soon."

McCabe has appeared in two games since returning from the COVID-related absence list and said he has been pleasantly surprised by his stamina.

"I didn't really know what to expect, frankly, in that first game," he said. "I felt really solid. In the second period, I had a couple longer shifts that I felt my legs were getting pretty tired. But all in all, I've been feeling much better than I anticipated. So that's been a real positive. It just continues to get better and better every day. But these first couple games I felt really good."

Up next

The Sabres visit the Devils, whom they will see three times in their next four games. Coverage on Saturday begins at 12 p.m. on MSG. Puck drop is scheduled for 12:30.