



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

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Jonas Johansson, Carter Hutton haven't bailed out Sabres' struggling offense

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 12, 2021

When many Buffalo Sabres players were still in their KeyBank Center dressing room Friday morning, goalie Jonas Johansson was already in net working with his position coach, Mike Bales.

Bales, along with Sabres goalie Carter Hutton, stepped on the ice early to school Johansson on how to correct a mistake that happened during a 5-2 loss to the Pittsburgh Penguins on Thursday night.

Johansson was positioned inside the crease while Penguins center Sidney Crosby corralled the puck behind the net. Johansson, a 25-year-old with only 12 games of NHL experience, was preparing for Crosby to either attempt a wraparound or pass the puck to a teammate.

Johansson was still deep in his net when Crosby passed the puck, providing Jake Guentzel plenty of open net to score with a shot inside the far post for a 3-2 Penguins lead.

"That's something we worked on because it happened yesterday," Johansson said following practice Friday. "We'll be better next time. I think that's a great example. We took the opportunity today to grow with that. Take those moments when we have them to grow and be better."

The goal against stifled the Sabres' momentum and was one of three Johansson likely wanted back in the team's ninth consecutive loss. A third-round draft choice in 2014, Johansson left his five-hole exposed on Brandon Tanev's breakaway goal and got beat by fourth-liner Anthony Angello on a shot from the right circle in the third period.

Goaltending hasn't been the primary reason for the Sabres sitting last in the NHL with 16 points in 25 games. However, mistakes on defense have been magnified recently because Buffalo isn't receiving enough bail-out saves from Johansson or Hutton.

Entering Friday, the Sabres' 5-on-5 save percentage (.903) ranked 29th in the league. With Linus Ullmark still weeks away from the returning to the lineup, Hutton will get the start Saturday night against Pittsburgh (16-9-1). Puck drop is scheduled for 7 p.m.

Hutton has won only two of his last 15 starts dating back to Feb. 18, 2020, compiling a 1-7-1 record and .883 save percentage this season.

The Sabres, though, seem more willing to let Johansson learn on the job than lean on Hutton with Ullmark out. Johansson has started four of the past five games, allowing at least four goals in each of those starts.

"It was good for him to see a few games in a row and also to see different opposition and get used to that, playing on the road, playing at home, dealing with everything that it takes to be a goalie in the National Hockey League," coach Ralph Krueger said of the decision to give Johansson consecutive starts. "I know he'll come out richer for this experience."

The Sabres need to see what they have in Johansson, who has appeared in 95 games between Rochester (41) and Cincinnati (54). He will become an unrestricted free agent in July if he does not receive 21 NHL appearances of at least 30 minutes.

Sportsnet's Elliotte Friedman reported recently that the Colorado Avalanche expressed interest in trading for Johansson.

Ullmark, 27, has been solid for the Sabres the past two seasons. The problem has been health, as Ullmark has missed a combined 25 games because of lower-body injuries. Ullmark's .919 save percentage in 12 starts this season, as well as a remarkable track record in shootouts, will likely make him a priority signing for the Sabres before he reaches unrestricted free agency in July.

With Hutton likely to depart this summer, and prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen at least one year away from the NHL, the Sabres can use the coming weeks to evaluate Johansson as a potential backup option for next season. He's shown enough promise that General Manager Kevyn Adams opted to not claim any of the several goalies that were placed on waivers the past two months, including Alex Stalock, a 33-year-old who had a .910 save percentage in 33 games for Minnesota last season.

"I think our goaltending has been solid," Adams said during a conference call with reporters last week. "Looking back, after the 18- or 19-game mark, we were probably in the middle of the pack with goaltending and I think in the top 10 in slot save chances. So, some of the data and analytics, the goaltending's been fine. I think Linus, before he got hurt, was playing at a very, very high level. We just flat out haven't been good enough around him."

According to Evolving-Hockey's metric goals saved above average, which accounts for the quality of shots faced, here is how the Sabres' goalies rank among the 62 to appear in at least five games this season: Ullmark (31st), Hutton (39th) and Johansson (43rd). Johansson and Hutton are tied for 58th in save percentage while combining for a 1-11-2 record.

The Sabres have struggled defensively over the past month. Since returning from the two-week Covid pause Feb. 15, Buffalo ranks last in the NHL in suppressing opponents' shot quality at 5-on-5, according to NaturalStatTrick.com.

Across his last six starts, Hutton has posted a 0-5-1 record with an .877 save percentage. There have been some promising moments. Johansson was one of the few bright spots during the Sabres' three-game series against the Islanders last week. Hutton stopped 36 of 39 shots in a 3-0 loss to Philadelphia at home on Feb. 27.

Steady goaltending could be a solution to the Sabres' confidence problem, particularly on offense. Buffalo has scored the fewest 5-on-5 goals in the NHL and has gone eight consecutive games without recording at least 30 shots on goal. Recent injuries to Jack Eichel and Dylan Cozens will further weaken Krueger's attack.

Hutton will have the opportunity to build on his sterling track record against the Penguins, a team he's controlled to the tune of a 5-1 record and .940 save percentage in eight career appearances. But Ullmark's extended absence, and the Sabres' spot in the standings, could mean more starts for Johansson, a goalie Krueger previously called a "project."

"I think it's important to analyze the game and then just let it go," said Johansson. "Take the positives with you, take the learners with you and when we have the opportunity to practice on the ice – whether it's a morning skate or a practice day like today – just be really sharp and do what I need to do to be prepared. Be really sharp when I have that opportunity. That's the biggest thing."

Sabres forward Dylan Cozens considered 'day to day' with upper-body injury

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

March 12, 2021

Dylan Cozens was undergoing tests on his upper-body injury Friday afternoon while the Buffalo Sabres practiced inside KeyBank Center.

Cozens, a 20-year-old rookie forward, is considered "day to day," according to coach Ralph Krueger, after suffering an injury on a hit by Pittsburgh Penguins forward Zach Aston-Reese during the third period of a 5-2 Sabres loss Thursday night.

Krueger told reporters following practice Friday that testing should provide the Sabres with more clarity regarding Cozens' status. It appears unlikely, though, that Cozens will be available to play in the rematch against the Penguins on Saturday night. Krueger and Sabres players expressed frustration that Aston-Reese was not penalized for what Victor Olofsson called a "bad hit."

Cozens, a former seventh overall draft pick, was slow to skate to the bench and needed help down the tunnel after the hit by Aston-Reese sent him tumbling into the boards at 2:27 into the third period. Sabres defenseman Colin Miller came to Cozens' defense, fighting Aston-Reese in a one-goal game.

This was another significant blow for the Sabres, who were already without first-line center and team captain Jack Eichel. Buffalo (6-15-4) will be without Eichel for at least 7-to-10 days after he sought a second opinion on the upper-body injury that's kept him out of the lineup for consecutive games.

Cozens suffered the injury during his second game centering the Sabres' top line alongside Sam Reinhart and Taylor Hall. Drafted in the first round by Buffalo in 2019, Cozens spent the first 18 games of his rookie season at right wing, a move that allowed him to learn the nuances of defending in the NHL.

When Eichel was lost to injury, Krueger moved Cozens to the middle and allowed the rookie to play alongside two of the Sabres' top forwards. Cozens assisted on the first of two Reinhart goals Tuesday night in Philadelphia and had two shots on goal Thursday before he was hit moments after dumping the puck from the red line into the offensive zone.

In 20 games this season, Cozens has totaled three goals with two assists and a minus-7 rating while averaging 13:38 of ice time. He was also playing on the second power-play unit and previously skated in the bottom six.

With Eichel and Cozens out, Riley Sheahan moved back to center to skate next to Reinhart and Hall during practice Friday. Sheahan, a 29-year-old who joined the Sabres on a professional tryout for training camp, has three goals with two assists in 24 games. A native of St. Catharines, Ont., Sheahan has been a key cog on Buffalo's penalty kill. His ability to play center or wing earned him a promotion to the second line when Eichel was lost to injury. Sheahan has won 57.3% of his faceoffs while averaging 12:22 of ice time per game.

For now, Krueger prefers to keep Casey Mittelstadt, who was drafted eighth overall in 2017 as center, at right wing.

"It's one of the things you enjoy having as a coach is the amount of centermen that we have in the lineup," Krueger said. "Casey Mittelstadt comes in and does excellent in the faceoff circle (Thursday), he fills a hole in the third period, although we do prefer Casey off the wing at the moment."

"Riley coming up the lineup, it's one of the beauties of Riley Sheahan. He's just such a good team player, solid, strong skater with a good vision of the game and he definitely helps solidify the defensive side of any line he plays with but he can add to the offense. He's been a real pleasant surprise and a utility kind of forward that every team needs a few of. So, Riley has been a bright spot in the season, a surprise."

Dahlin update

The Sabres received good news with Rasmus Dahlin apparently unscathed from the knee-to-knee collision with Penguins defenseman Chad Ruhwedel. Dahlin, a 20-year-old defenseman, did not miss a shift after the hit in the third period and practiced with the team Friday.

Defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen was absent from practice in what was likely a maintenance day. Ristolainen has totaled two points and a minus-12 rating while averaging 21:23 of ice time in eight games since returning from his bout with Covid-19.

Amerks paused

The Rochester Americans' game Saturday against the Utica Comets has been postponed because of the American Hockey League's Covid-19 protocols.

Sources confirmed to The Buffalo News on Friday that at least one Amerks player has tested positive for Covid-19. The team was running contact tracing and there is concern that more players and staff could be impacted in the coming days.

The Amerks are quarantining and their players cannot join the Sabres at this time.

"They are not available to us," Krueger said. "But they're going through the same protocol that we did here. We hope it doesn't affect the whole team."

Sabres move on to general public ticket sales for March 20 return of fans

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

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In what might rate as the least surprising thing that's happened to the Buffalo Sabres in recent weeks, season ticket holders did not snap up all the tickets for the March 20 game against the Boston Bruins -- the first in KeyBank Center open to fans in more than a year.

Season subscribers had the right of first refusal to the approximately 1,900 seats available to the game and claimed only a few hundred by Friday's deadline, so the team put them on sale to the general public.

Tickets are not available by phone or at the arena box office. They are only available online or through the Sabres app. Prices vary by seat locations, ranging from \$40-\$155, and tickets can only be purchased in pods of one to four seats.

One look at the standings -- where the Sabres are last in the NHL with a 6-15-4 record -- is the obvious first reason why a franchise that had a waiting list for season tickets just a few years ago couldn't get its most ardent customers to fill up 10 percent of its arena for its first game with fans since March 9, 2020.

But like any sport, season seats are purchased months in advance and are not an impulse buy. And these tickets cannot be forward or resold, which is a common use of them by Buffalo season ticket holders in recent years.

California substitute teacher living in car gets \$27K check from former student
There are other mitigating factors as well.

The added expense of Covid-19 testing is also a new wrinkle. Fans are required to have a negative PCR test for entry and the team has arranged for fans to be tested through Quest Diagnostics -- which puts an additional \$64 charge on top of the ticket price and parking.

Ticket holders can use credits on their account for their 2021-22 tickets rather than spend money now to watch a team mired at the bottom of the standings, and the Sabres also have many Canadian season subscribers. They are unable to cross the border to attend games while it remains closed.

Most NHL teams in the United States are starting to admit fans and the Sabres essentially were forced to join the party when the New York Rangers and New York Islanders were also given permission by the office of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo to welcome 10% of capacity to their games.

The Rangers have had 2,000 fans in Madison Square Garden, including for their 3-2 win over the Sabres on March 2. The Islanders will start to welcome fans next week to Nassau Coliseum and announced Wednesday they had sold out their allotment of 1,300 seats for the first seven home games they put on sale.

As has been the case all season, the Sabres will have no fans for Saturday's game against Pittsburgh, Monday's visit by Washington or Thursday's game against the Bruins.

The Sabres' initial announcement on tickets was that they would sell them for "select" games. They will have 12 home games left after the March 20 contest and are expected to keep their inventory to mostly weekend games.

Cozens' status still unknown; Eichel remains out minimum 7-10 days

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

March 12, 2021

Buffalo, N.Y. (WGR 550) – The Buffalo Sabres practiced on Friday without Dylan Cozens and Rasmus Ristolainen. Cozens suffered an injury Thursday after a big hit by Pittsburgh Penguins forward Zach Aston-Reese sent his head backwards into the boards. Ristolainen was likely just given the day off.

Ralph Krueger, of course, was asked about the status of Cozens, as well as Jack Eichel after Friday's practice, and didn't provide much of an update.

"With Dylan, we're still doing further evaluations today. He remains officially with an upper-body, day-to-day status," Krueger said.

"With Jack, it's still in that minimum 7-10 day [window], as we continue to work with the upper-body situation that he's dealing with."

The Rochester Americans are dealing with, what could be, a COVID-19 outbreak. Two games have been postponed, and the team is under complete quarantine and hasn't practiced for two days. That also means the Sabres cannot call up any players from the Amerks' roster.

The Sabres only have the taxi squad of Rasmus Asplund, Dustin Tokarski, C.J. Smith and Brandon Davidson to draw from. They also have one extra defenseman that's on the roster and one extra forward.

Krueger confirmed that Carter Hutton will be in goal Saturday against the Penguins.

Casey Mittelstadt has lately been playing right wing with Jeff Skinner and Curtis Lazar. Mittelstadt has almost always played center until this season. Krueger has told Mittelstadt that his days of playing center as a regular position in the NHL are over. Mittelstadt said he's OK with that.

"This year, I've been playing wing and playing well, so I understand for sure," the 22-year-old said on Friday. "I think it's nice to play with 'Lazar' [Lazar] because we have two centers on the line, and on the ice you're just playing. There's so many times that you end up lower in the middle of the ice, but I like the wing, because you're on the outside a little bit more and you get to carry the puck in on rushes. I've enjoyed it."

Mittelstadt has only taken 31 faceoffs this season, but he's fourth on the team, winning 54.8% of them. On Thursday, he won all eight draws that he took.

The kid said it's something that has become a focus for him.

"Last year in [Rochester], I worked on that a lot, because I was playing a lot more valuable minutes and taking a lot more valuable draws. But a lot of it is just a rhythm thing, where some nights you're just feeling it."

I know it sounds strange, but cutting back on the volume of faceoffs he takes in practice helps.

"I just make sure I do a little of it each day," Mittelstadt said. "I think sometimes in the past, I've done so much of it that and overthought it that I was trying so many different moves. For me, my strength is my quickness and reacting."

Since re-entering the lineup, Krueger has trusted Mittelstadt on the penalty kill. The former first round pick in 2017 said he appreciates the faith being shown in him.

"I did it quite a bit in 'Roch' last year, so I think any of the nerves or being uncomfortable I got out in 'Roch, and 'Tails' [Chris Taylor] worked with me a lot on it last year. So I've been comfortable, and it's been nice to go out there with 'Lazar' and I feel like we've worked well together."

Killing penalties in the AHL is one thing, but Mittelstadt knows it's a whole different animal in the NHL.

"It's a little bit more skilled in the NHL, and guys are looking a lot at the seems," Mittelstadt said. "Just having an awareness to that, and stay in shot lanes and trust my reads and trust my instincts."

With Cozens and Ristolainen out, more line-juggling went on at Friday's practice:

Forwards:

Rieder – Staal – Olofsson

Hall – Sheahan – Reinhart

Thompson (Smith) – Eakin – Okposo

Skinner – Lazar – Mittelstadt

Defense:

Bryson – Montour

Dahlin (Irwin) – Miller

Davidson – Jokiharju

Head coach Steve Ott? Who stays and goes? Where are the analytics? Sabres mailbag

By John Vogl

The Athletic

March 12, 2021

Hello from Sabreland, where the only boring moments are the games.

Let's get right to the latest round of craziness in the mailbag.

Some questions have been lightly edited for clarity.

If Ralph Krueger were to pull a George Costanza, badmouthing the Pegulas through a megaphone while the French Connection statue drags behind his car, would he be fired? Or is there nothing that would get rid of him at this point? — John P.

This was by far the most creative way to frame the most-asked question. And, yes, I can picture Krueger cruising Cobblestone District in his Mercedes, Rene Robert's bronze noggin bouncing off the bricks and Gilbert Perreault's fractured stick landing in the remnants of a snowbank.

The sight wouldn't be as ugly as most of these games.

The Sabres are trying their best (worst?) to wait for the offseason to make a coaching change, but it's a risk. The team shows few signs of being watchable. Young players are learning losing habits. Fans are incredibly furious or alarmingly apathetic.

Keeping Krueger until May could be a steep price to pay to save money.

There's more than just cash involved, though. This will be a huge coaching hire for general manager Kevyn Adams. He needs to get it right. Any hesitance he has on relying on Zoom interviews and references while rushing to find a coach is understandable. There are a couple of solid options now, but he'll have a much larger pool of candidates if he waits until the NHL, NCAA and junior seasons are over. While the short-term pain is real, suffering through it makes sense on a long-term level.

It'd be easier if the organization had an interim option. But with none available — unless Adams becomes coach and GM — Krueger probably will pull a Costanza and walk to the bench for two more months.

John, assuming that Krueger is done soon, or shortly after the season, what type of coach would you want to see the Sabres try next? A seasoned veteran who wins but wears out a welcome (Bruce Boudreau, for example) or a younger coach with energy (thinking of Ted Nolan in 1995 or Lindy Ruff in 1997)? — Ronald M.

A retired Sabres player sent me a text this week. It was only two words.

"Steve Ott"

The player went on to endorse the hiring of Ott, saying this group would benefit from the leadership of his former captain. Ott is in his fourth season as an assistant in St. Louis and helped the Blues win the Stanley Cup in 2019. He's 38, which is a year old than Ruff when that former captain took over in 1997.

The next coach doesn't have to be Ott, but it should be someone in that mold. Players found Dan Bylsma too egocentric, so the new guy should have a self-deprecating side (like Ott). The Sabres walked all over mild-mannered Phil Housley, so the new guy should have a mean streak (like Ott). The new guy should know X's and O's, too, since that's clearly lacking with Krueger and company.

Short answered made long, I'd go with a younger coach who has a strong cast of veteran assistants.

Do you think the season ticket holders will boo this team off the ice? If they do, what will the ramifications be? — Matt S.

Forget booing. The season ticket holders are speaking louder by doing nothing.

The Sabres put a mere 1,907 seats on sale to their season ticket holders this week for the March 20 game against Boston. Those fans — the team's most loyal — said no thanks.

I got access to the Sabres' seating chart Friday before it was released to the public. There were 1,051 tickets still available. So, for an organization that used to cap season ticket sales at 16,000 due to demand, they sold a measly 856 tickets to their best customers.

And that 856 assumes they are selling the entire 10 percent allotment of 1,907 and not saving any for players' families, employees or others. It might have been even fewer than 856.

Tickets range from \$40 to \$155, and fans must pay \$64 to get a COVID-19 test. The Sabres sold some in the 100 Level behind the benches and penalty boxes, and some in the 300 Level at center ice. Other than that, plenty of great seats were available. For a team that's 31st in the NHL.

These are dark, ugly times for the organization. While the pandemic and additional testing cost take some of the blame for the ticket debacle, most Sabres wounds are self-inflicted through awful hockey and years of horrible decisions.

Hello, John. Who in your opinion are your: Must Keep/Re-sign; Must Trade/Not Re-sign; Need more time before you decide? — James S.

I'm walking into this thinking no one will take the contracts of Jeff Skinner and Kyle Okposo (more on him soon), so they fall into the must-keep category.

So, to remold the team, I'd keep/re-sign Jack Eichel, Sam Reinhart, Dylan Cozens, Victor Olofsson, Rasmus Dahlin, Rasmus Ristolainen, Linus Ullmark, Will Borgen, Jacob Bryson, Skinner and Okposo.

Must-trade/not re-sign includes Eric Staal, Cody Eakin, Tobias Rieder, Brandon Montour, Matt Irwin, Carter Hutton and Jonas Johansson.

Need more time on Taylor Hall, Casey Mittelstadt and Henri Jokiharju. Will Hall re-sign for much less? Can Mittelstadt handle the everyday minutes he's about to get? Would a different coach help Jokiharju?

Anyone not mentioned is replaceable but doesn't quite fall into "must trade."

If you were the GM, would you trade Jack? — Joey M.

Only if the offer included a first-line center, another top-six forward, a legitimate prospect and two first-round picks. Otherwise, it's ride-or-die with Eichel for one more season.

What are the odds Seattle just passes on taking a Sabre this summer and they draft 29 guys instead? In all seriousness, though, who do you imagine the Kraken are going to take? — Dean H.

I almost tweeted a similar Kraken joke recently, so I like the way you think, Dean. We can all agree Seattle will not be looking at Buffalo's roster first.

I projected the expansion draft in December, but things have changed. I'd now opt to protect Borgen over Jokiharju. What will the Sabres do? We'll see. But Seattle could have a crack at Borgen, Jokiharju, Tage Thompson, Rasmus Asplund and Zemgus Girgensons.

Why has Kyle Okposo not been a buyout candidate as of yet? — Sean K.

The savings in cap space and real dollars simply haven't been worthwhile.

Okposo is signed for \$6 million per season through 2022-23. If the Sabres had bought out Okposo after last season, he still would have counted \$4 million toward this year's cap and \$5 million next season and would have remained on the books for varying figures through 2026.

If the Sabres buy out Okposo after this season, he'll still be on the cap for \$5 million next season, \$3 million in 2022-23 and \$1 million through 2025.

His guaranteed signing bonuses stymie the process. Okposo got \$3 million this season and will receive \$2 million for 2021-22. The Pegulas pay that whether Okposo is on the roster or is bought out.

There is no bonus for his final contract year of 2022-23, which is when a buyout makes the most sense. His cap hit would drop from \$6 million to \$3.33 million and add only one additional year at \$1.33 million.

Until June 2022, the fiscally prudent move for the Sabres is to give Okposo the Matt Moulson treatment and send him to the minors. The decision would open a roster spot, shave up to \$1.125 million off the cap and not cost any upfront money.

Which happens first – Sabres make the playoffs or Alex Mogilny finally makes it into the Hockey Hall of Fame? — Bob M.

At this rate, Mogilny's grandson will be in the Hall before Buffalo makes the playoffs.

After writers across the hockey world mocked last year's snub of Mogilny, I think he gets in during the next vote. So he wins.

What is the likelihood Taylor Hall is traded and what is the appropriate return? — James L.

Unless he agrees to a bargain-price extension before the April 12 deadline, he's 100 percent getting traded. Last year, New Jersey landed first- and third-round picks, a legitimate prospect, a fringe prospect and a minor-leaguer for Hall. The Sabres should aim for two legitimate prospects and a first- or second-round pick.

Does the Sabres organization know hockey analytics exist? Given they continue to keep the worst line in the entire league together every game, it would seem they don't. — Patrick O.

Jason Nightingale is the Sabres' director of analytics. In June, the team added assistant director of scouting to his title. I went back and read the quotes from that promotion. Everything revolved around helping the scouting and development staffs use analytics better.

I didn't see anything about him working more with Krueger. If Nightingale does have Krueger's ear, the nonstop usage of Okposo, Rieder and Eakin is a fireable offense.

I remember being excited about the Krueger hiring after hearing him speak, learning he wrote a book on motivation, hearing what former players had to say about him. Did I get conned into thinking he could turn the Sabres around? — Jordan B.

Yes. But you weren't alone.

What's the first fix you'd make here to ensure long-term success? As a fan, I feel like we're constantly in a "Charlie Brown kicks the football" situation. — Kenny G.

Adams needs someone not named Pegula. Not necessarily a president of hockey operations, but a senior adviser or assistant GM. Or both. Or multiples of both.

Every first-time GM will be in over his head at some point. Ownership immediately chucked Adams into the deep end, forcing him to fire scores of people on his first day. That left him to fix the roster, find coaching staffs, deal with a flat cap, handle players' unhappiness, lift a downtrodden fan base and do myriad other things with no help.

Get. Him. Help.

On the ice, a great goalie covers up a lot of problems. The Sabres might have a decent one in the injured Ullmark. They definitely have bad ones with Hutton and Johansson. They need a stud before next season.

Hey John, what do you think the atmosphere would be like at KeyBank Center right now if we weren't mid-pandemic? — Dean H.

Bitter and vile. From what I recall of the final games last season, the small number of fans who stayed until the final buzzer did so just to boo. This team is even worse.

The organization is way better off piping in synthetic noise. Fake applause is more soothing than real anger.

I'm to the point of hoping for a sale of the franchise. If this were to happen, how worried should we be that the team would move? — Brian D.

The Tom Golisano ownership group had flaws, but it had the city's best interests in mind. It prevented relocation by buying the Sabres out of bankruptcy, and it also included a clause in the sale to Terry Pegula that stops him from ever moving the team.

You'd think Pegula would carry that stipulation into his hypothetical sale. It's easy to forget, but he was a Sabres fan before an owner. He knows what the sports teams mean to this city (though he doesn't always show it). I don't think he could handle being thought of as an Art Modell, who ripped the Browns out of Cleveland. That's especially true since Pegula would still own the Bills.

Before Golisano stepped in, the NHL worked overtime to ensure it found a local owner who would keep the team in Buffalo. The league has done the same thing over and over in Arizona. A sale of the Sabres would not equate to relocation.

How challenging is it to cover this team? I get that you are not a fan and bad teams can create good stories to tell, but there are times when I question why this team is worthy of my attention or any reporter's time. — Hank G.

How do you stay sane covering this team? — Jason R.

Hank answered Jason's question. I'm not a Sabres fan. Otherwise, they would drive me crazy. I see what they do to my friends and family members.

While growing up in the Buffalo area, I started playing hockey in house leagues. I always liked my uniforms, so at various points, I backed the Whalers, Blackhawks, North Stars, Canadiens and Maple Leafs for a few months at a time.

By the time college arrived, Sabres games were just the distraction between pregame beers at Garcia's Irish Pub and postgame debauchery at Jim Kelly's Network.

So, I never had an emotional attachment to the Sabres. But I know what they mean to the people who love them. I've seen it up close throughout my life, which is why this is a sad, sad time. During a decade filled with rock-bottom moments, this year may be a new low.

But, as Jim Kelley told me in 2002, you want to cover either a really good team or a really bad one. Really bad is an understatement. The story ideas are on the rise this season and, according to the stats, so is your interest in reading them. That's really what makes it worth my time, so thanks to you for keeping me sane!

I wish the Sabres would do the same for you.

Sabres' Casey Mittelstadt developing into dependable forward

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
March 13, 2021

BUFFALO – Coach Ralph Krueger noticed it right away this season. Over the year winger Casey Mittelstadt spent away from the Sabres, he had matured.

Mittelstadt's 36-game stint in the minors last year and the COVID-19 layoff offered him a chance to revamp his body and mind. He arrived at training camp determined to earn back the spot he had lost.

"His attitude from the get-go was different this year," Krueger said on a Zoom call Thursday. "There was a fight and a bite, a fitness level, his foot speed has increased."

Mittelstadt, 22, has slowly worked his way back, starting the season on the taxi squad. He then parlayed some impressive spot duty into semi-regular action. He has played three straight games and eight of the last 11 entering Saturday's contest against the Pittsburgh Penguins at KeyBank Center.

"Last year, I kind of saw how quickly it can be taken away," Mittelstadt said last month. "I kind of took it for granted a little bit."

So Mittelstadt, the eighth overall pick in 2017, has evolved. These days, he showcases a more dogged, fast-paced style. Krueger even occasionally utilizes him as a penalty killer.

The 6-foot-1, 196-pound Mittelstadt, who has been switched from center to wing, has learned that embracing defense can help unleash his offensive talents.

"He's also showing up in these puck-pressure videos that we have here (as an) example of what we need to do right, there's Casey, here's Casey again," Krueger said. "He's really hungry on playing that game away from the puck and understanding the value of it as an offensive player that the better we pressure the puck, the more we take away the space from the opposition and the quicker we get it back and the genius of players like Casey can then grow out of that."

Sabres center Eric Staal, a 17-year veteran, said Mittelstadt has displayed "a little bit more of a competitive edge every time he's been out there."

"There's been pockets of his skill and talent that have come through, but I think it's that detail part of the game and those little wall battles or puck battles he seems to be growing stronger in day by day," he said. "For him to develop into an everyday and NHL player, it's those details you need to continue to work on and get stronger at, especially through practice and when your opportunity comes be ready."

Waiting for that opportunity was an unusual experience. Other than being scratched a few times before the Sabres demoted him to the Rochester Americans in December 2019, Mittelstadt had always played regularly.

But he sat out 12 of the first 14 games this season.

"It was tough," Mittelstadt said Friday of getting scratched. "I think just try to stay ready. Like, some days you're going to have to do extra work when you don't want to. Yeah, I think that's pretty much all it is, just doing the extra stuff, making sure you're getting ready, doing an extra workout or just working on your body, especially on the ice."

Changing positions, a move Krueger recently said could be permanent, has been much easier. Other than skating on the wing for his summer team and in a World Junior Championship camp, he said he had always played center.

"I've liked the wing just because you're on the outside a little bit more, you get to carry the puck in a little more on rushes," Mittelstadt said. "Obviously, when you're in the middle of the ice, you're kicking out and driving a lot."

Mittelstadt played left wing earlier this season before recently being shifted to the right side beside center Curtis Lazar and Jeff Skinner.

"It's nice to play with Lazar, we kind of have two centers on the line, two guys who can take draws and do things like that," said Mittelstadt, who filled in for injured center Dylan Cozens on the first line late in Thursday's 5-2 loss to Pittsburgh, the Sabres' ninth straight defeat.

Mittelstadt won all eight of his draws Thursday. He struggled in the faceoff circle as a rookie two years ago, winning just 39.7%.

He has worked – sometimes too much – to hone his faceoffs skills. He has improved to 54.8% this season.

"For me, more than anything, is just making sure to do a little bit of it each day," said Mittelstadt, who has compiled one goal and four points in 10 games this season. "I think sometimes in the past I've done so much of it and overthought it that I was trying so many different moves. Like, for me, my strengths are my quickness and just reacting and watching the ref drop the puck, so I think sometimes I've overthought it and worried too much what the other guy's going to do versus just going in there and winning the battle."

Sabres rookie Dylan Cozens undergoing further evaluations, day to day

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

March 13, 2021

BUFFALO – Sabres center Dylan Cozens, who left Thursday's 5-2 loss after getting hit into the boards, did not practice Friday and is day to day with an upper-body injury, coach Ralph Krueger said.

"We're still doing further evaluations today," Krueger said on a Zoom call.

Cozens' head bit the boards hard and he got up slowly after Pittsburgh Penguins center Zach Aston-Reese hit him 2:27 into the third period. The rookie left the game and did not return.

Just 20 games into his NHL career, Cozens, 20, has established himself as one of the Sabres' top players. He filled in for captain Jack Eichel as the No. 1 center twice this week.

Riley Sheahan, a fourth-line winger most of this season, subbed for Cozens between Taylor Hall and Sam Reinhart during Friday's practice inside KeyBank Center.

In other news, Krueger said goalie Carter Hutton will start Saturday's game against the Penguins. Hutton has compiled a 5-1-0 record, a .940 save percentage and two shutouts in eight career games against them. Jonas Johansson played Thursday's contest.

Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen missed Friday's session, possibly for maintenance. The Finn has played eight straight games after recovering from a difficult battle with COVID-19.

Brandon Davidson and Henri Jokiharju practiced among the top-six defensemen Friday. Jokiharju, a healthy scratch Thursday, could replace Matt Irwin on Saturday. Irwin skated as an extra defender.

Defenseman Rasmus Dahlin, who took a knee-on-knee hit from ex-Sabres defenseman Chad Ruhwedel on Thursday, also practiced.

Dahlin grabbed his left knee after the hit, got up slowly and appeared to be in pain when he returned to the bench.

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Saturday's Rochester Americans home game against the Utica Comets has been postponed to a later date "out of an abundance of caution in regard to league COVID-19 protocols," according to Buffalo's AHL affiliate.

At least one Amerks player has tested positive for COVID-19, according to The Buffalo News.

Krueger said the Amerks are quarantining and "going through the same protocol that we did here." Seven Sabres players and Krueger tested positive for COVID-19 last month.

Thursday's Amerks game was also postponed.

Tickets for March 20 Sabres-Bruins Game on Sale Thursday

Spectrum News

March 11, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Tickets go on sale Thursday for the Sabres March 20 game against the Boston Bruins.

Season ticket holders will be contacted directly with instructions on how to buy tickets. Then, on Friday, there will be a general sale starting at 2 p.m.

All fans will need a negative COVID-19 test within 72 hours of the game. The Sabres and Quest Diagnostics will offer testing for about \$64 per person.

After buying a ticket, fans will be emailed a link to a registration site and code that they can use to schedule their test.

Fans will then need to download the "Clear" app to get their test results, which they will need to bring the day of the game.

For more information, and to purchase tickets, [click here](#).

Cozens misses practice with upper-body injury

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

March 12, 2021

Dylan Cozens did not practice with the Buffalo Sabres on Friday and is currently considered day-to-day with an upper-body injury, coach Ralph Krueger announced.

Krueger added that assessments are ongoing concerning the rookie forward, who left during the third period of Buffalo's game against Pittsburgh on Thursday following a hit into the boards from forward Zach Aston-Reese.

"There are tests and evaluations going on today and we'll keep you posted," Krueger said.

Riley Sheahan replaced Cozens at the center position on a line with Taylor Hall and Sam Reinhart during practice. Sheahan previously moved to the top of the lineup in place of Jack Eichel against New Jersey on Feb. 25, when he skated a season-high 16:12 and scored a goal.

Sheahan has five points (3+2) in 24 games this season, including the primary assist on Victor Olofsson's goal Thursday.

"It's one of the beauties of Riley Sheahan," Krueger said. "He's just such a good team player. Solid, strong skater with a good vision of the game and he definitely helps solidify the defensive side of any line he plays with but he can add to the offense.

"He's been a real pleasant surprise and a utility kind of forward that every team needs a few of. So, Riley has been a bright spot in the season, a surprise."

Here's how the Sabres lined up at practice, with defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen also absent:

Forwards:

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

Rotating in: 49 C.J. Smith, 74 Rasmus Asplund

Defensemen (rotating pairs): 10 Henri Jokiharju, 26 Rasmus Dahlin, 33 Colin Miller, 62 Brandon Montour, 78 Jacob Bryson, 88 Brandon Davidson

Goalies:

31 Dustin Tokarski
34 Jonas Johansson
40 Carter Hutton

Amerks unavailable due to COVID-19 protocols

Krueger confirmed that players on the Rochester Americans are temporarily unavailable for recall as the AHL club navigates COVID-19 protocols. Rochester's game against Cleveland on Friday was postponed "out of an abundance of caution in regard to league COVID-19 protocols," the team announced.

"They're going through the same protocol that we did here just, you know, we hope it doesn't affect the whole team," Krueger said.

Up next

The Sabres conclude their two-game set with the Penguins at KeyBank Center on Saturday night. Krueger announced that Carter Hutton will get the nod in net.