



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*April 29, 2021*

## **Sam Reinhart's successful transition to center strengthens Sabres' depth**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

April 28, 2021

BOSTON – Pavel Buchnevich's desperate lunge for the puck had the New York Rangers in position to kill precious time off the Buffalo Sabres' power play in a one-goal game Tuesday night.

Then Sam Reinhart knocked the puck away from Buchnevich, skated around the unsuspecting opponent, avoided another defender to give possession to Casey Mittelstadt and positioned himself in the slot.

Reinhart, almost seven years removed from his selection second overall by the Sabres, one-timed a shot over goalie Igor Shesterkin's glove to tie the score with 3.2 seconds remaining in the second period.

The goal was Reinhart's team-high 22nd of the season – the fastest he's ever reached the 20-goal mark – and was the latest reminder of what the 25-year-old can accomplish in the middle of the ice. It was the type of sequence that interim coach Don Granato envisioned when he moved Reinhart back to center on March 31.

In 16 games since switching to his natural position, Reinhart has 10 goals with five assists for 15 points. Of all Reinhart has accomplished in his sixth full NHL season – including an expanded leadership role – he cited comfort at center as a primary area of growth.

"It's allowed me – really, forced me – to move my feet a little bit more," said Reinhart, who was drafted as a center. "I think it was an adjustment at the start of my career, having to force myself to do it more moving over to the wing and having to bring that part of it, and this part is almost more natural for me for my professional career. So, it's been fun for me to kind of go back to that and play that different a little bit."

Moving Reinhart to center was initially done out of necessity because Eric Staal was traded to Montreal and rookie Dylan Cozens suffered a minor upper-body injury. Jack Eichel also was recovering from a herniated disk in his neck that eventually ended his season.

However, the bold move by Granato and General Manager Kevyn Adams has given the Sabres intriguing options entering a pivotal offseason for the franchise. It also likely increased the cost of a potential long-term contract for Reinhart, who is a pending restricted free agent for the second consecutive year.

Entering Thursday, Reinhart's 22 goals were tied for 10th in the NHL, only six fewer than Edmonton Oilers superstar center Connor McDavid. Goals and assists don't properly show Reinhart's production, either.

According to Evolving-Hockey.com, Reinhart ranks third on the team in generating on-ice shot quality at 5-on-5 since transitioning to center. His 6.2 goals above replacement, a metric that illustrates a player's overall value to his team, ranks first on the Sabres this season. Remarkably, Reinhart hasn't struggled in the faceoff circle, either, as he's won 46.2% of his draws.

Reinhart is one of 15 players in franchise history to have at least five 20-goal seasons with the Sabres. With Eichel out, Reinhart has started to ignite the Sabres' power play with three goals over the past three games.

Moving Reinhart off the right wing equates to taking the restrictor plate off a sports car. Playing down the middle has given him more room to distribute the puck to his teammates.

"What I really like about him, Sam is not only a great goal scorer, he has more room to find different pockets because he's not wedged against the wall half the game," Granato said. "He can move east-west, left-right, and he has a creative side to him as well, very deceptive and creative player. He has more opportunity offensively in that position. I feel we've seen that and we've been able to take advantage of that. As he's re-acclimated to that position, he shows signs of continuing to get better and more dangerous."

For whatever reason, past coaches and management have declined to play Reinhart at center, a position he had not played full-time since the early weeks of the 2017-18 season. He had strong underlying numbers while skating alongside mostly bottom-six-type wingers in a small sample size at the position under former coach Phil Housley, but the Sabres preferred to have Reinhart paired with Eichel on the top line.

When the Sabres traded Ryan O'Reilly to St. Louis in June 2018, Mittelstadt, not Reinhart, was the top candidate to center the second line. Perhaps management was hesitant because Reinhart has been productive on the wing, totaling 20 or more goals in five of his six full NHL seasons.

"It is a different challenge, for sure," Reinhart said. "There's no surprise it's more a demanding position, I think how the defensive side of it and a different kind of game from a skating standpoint as well. Yeah, I've enjoyed that part of it, too."

The defensive aspect has been an adjustment. Opponents have the advantage in 5-on-5 shot-quality share with Reinhart on the ice at center, according to NaturalStatTrick.com. But Reinhart has evolved into an exceptional defensive player. It's likely he and his linemates will allow fewer quality shots in time.

The Sabres suddenly have four dynamic center options for 2021-22: Eichel, Reinhart, Mittelstadt and Dylan Cozens, all of whom were selected in the top 10 in their respective draft. Cody Eakin is under contract through next season, although he has only two goals in 44 games this season. Arttu Ruotsalainen and Rasmus Asplund are possible options at center.

Adams likely will receive calls from other teams to gauge the Sabres' interest in trading Eichel and/or Reinhart. Eichel, 24, is under contract for five more seasons, but he has been the subject of trade rumors since last fall. Reinhart, meanwhile, is approaching unrestricted free agency and his versatility will be coveted by teams.

The Sabres, though, could choose to keep both and have Reinhart at center or right wing. The latter position is easier to upgrade through trades or free agency. Cozens can play right wing and Jack Quinn, the Sabres' most recent first-round draft pick, is closer to filling the void there as well.

Regardless of Adams' plan, Reinhart's successful transition to the position he excelled at in junior hockey is one of the few silver linings in another non-playoff season.

"I think he sort of naturally slows the game down," Sabres winger Jeff Skinner said of Reinhart. "He's got good poise with the puck, he makes great plays because he sort of is aware of where everyone is on the ice. ... sort of whether he's on the wing or at center, it's nice to play off a guy like that, because he kind of draws guys to him and it opens up space for his linemates."

## **Sabres rookie Dylan Cozens turns to fighting to try to ignite his own game**

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

April 28, 2021

BOSTON – Dylan Cozens was already agitated by his own performance when he saw Buffalo Sabres teammate Drake Caggiula hit from behind by New York Rangers forward Kevin Rooney in the third period Tuesday night.

Seeking a way to get involved in a tie game at Madison Square Garden, Cozens bolted toward his fallen teammate and the 20-year-old rookie center grabbed Rooney, 27. For approximately 10 seconds, Cozens threw punches and even put Rooney in a headlock.

Cozens did not connect with any significant right hooks but the message was sent. The fight had little impact on the outcome as Rangers rookie winger Alexis Lafreniere scored the go-ahead goal with Cozens in the penalty box and the Sabres lost, 3-1, at Madison Square Garden.

"I think after you drop the gloves, the adrenaline boost is something you can't really get from anything else," Cozens said following practice Wednesday at Boston's Warrior Ice Arena. "I do think after a fight it does give me a huge boost. It's definitely something I think I'll do when I'm not happy with my game and not happy with how I'm feeling."

Cozens hasn't been playing poorly. He logged 19:42 of ice time Sunday in New York and had seven assists in his previous 10 games. The former seventh overall draft pick was promoted to the Sabres' top power-play unit and has solidified the team's depth at center with Jack Eichel out for the season.

The Cozens line, which also featured Anders Bjork and Arttu Ruotsalainen, even finished the game Tuesday with a 50% shot-attempt differential at 5-on-5. The group, though, was not creating enough scoring chances and struggled to contain the Rangers' second forward line, led by winger Chris Kreider.

Cozens had performed well against elite players in recent games, and he's an easy mark for an opponent trying to send a message to the Sabres. When Rasmus Ristolainen irritated the Boston Bruins with a hit on David Pastrnak, Cozens was the target of a late check by Nick Ritchie.

Now opponents may think twice about trying to push around the rookie. Despite handling himself well in two fights this season, Cozens has little experience dropping the gloves. His only scrap in junior hockey occurred in a Western Hockey League preseason game on Sept. 14, 2018, when he fought Sam Pouliot of the Swift Current Broncos.

"They didn't really want me to fight down there," said Cozens. "I think I was too much of an asset to them. Up here, I know as a young guy it's something that, like I said before, it's an easy way to gain respect and it's just something I think I can do to help the team, especially when I'm not doing good, I'm not feeling good."

Even when Cozens is not at his best, he's a valuable part of the Sabres' present and future. Losing him late in a tie game is not ideal. His first fight, a spirited bout in which he held his own against Rangers defenseman Ryan Lindgren on March 2, occurred three minutes before New York scored another goal in a 4-3 loss.

There's also the risk of injury or an additional penalty for instigating. Yet, interim coach Don Granato told reporters Wednesday that he has not had an issue with either of Cozens' fights.

"With Dylan and fighting, that's a quick choice and decision for each guy and each player," said Granato. "We would never advocate anything like that but, you know, he's in the emotion of the moment and to this point I've been fine with anything he's done with the emotion of the moment. He's a passionate guy."

### Goalie plan

The Sabres will start Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen in goal against the Bruins on Thursday night in TD Garden. Luukkonen, 22, had 38 saves in the loss to the Rangers on Tuesday and owns a .914 save percentage in two games with Buffalo.

Previously, Granato preferred to sit Luukkonen for the first game of a series. This provided the rookie with an opportunity to watch the opposition and achieve a better understanding of what to expect. However, Luukkonen had 36 saves to win his first career NHL start against the Bruins last Friday.

"He's good to go now," said Granato. "I think he's settled in. It's great."

This puts Dustin Tokarski on track to play the series finale Saturday afternoon. Tokarski, 31, has allowed 10 goals on 66 shots over his past two starts, but he has a .908 save percentage in 12 appearances this season.

#### Lesson learned

Tage Thompson's assignment to the Sabres' fourth line was not a form of punishment for the 23-year-old winger's cross-checking penalty that preceded the Rangers' go-ahead goal in the third period Tuesday.

Granato, though, expressed his disappointment to Thompson because retaliating against 32-year-old Rangers defenseman Brendan Smith contributed to the Sabres' demise.

"There was no question that that was an impact," said Granato. "I felt that an experienced player and that player in Smith, he did a nice job of baiting, I felt, that penalty. He's a tough player and he could've easily stood and not fallen down on that play but he knew he was drawing a penalty. So, it's a learning moment."

#### Another absence

Sabres center Cody Eakin returned to Buffalo to be with his wife for the birth of their child, Granato told reporters.

Eakin, 29, has two goals with four assists for six points in 44 games this season. He's a reliable presence on the penalty kill and has won a team-best 54.37% of his faceoffs. Eakin has been a health scratch for each of the past five games.

## **Cozens wanted to do something to help his team Tuesday**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

April 28, 2021

(WGR 550) – Dylan Cozens' errant pass went from behind his own net, up the slot and out to New York Rangers defenseman Brendan Smith at the point. Smith's screen shot went in, giving the Rangers a 1-0 lead on Tuesday night.

The Buffalo Sabres rookie was upset with that play and some others over the past few games, so when Kevin Rooney rammed Drake Caggiula into the boards from behind, the youngest player on the team showed up to defend him.

Cozens felt he needed to do something to help the team.

"The hit didn't look too good and I wasn't too happy with my own play these last couple of games, and especially that game. So I thought I needed to get myself involved some way, so I saw it as a good opportunity to do so," the 20-year-old said following Wednesday's practice.

The next obvious question, of course, is what is it in his game he's not happy with?

"I've been fighting the puck lately," Cozens said. "I haven't been able to get into a rhythm at all, and I think the biggest thing is to just simplify and not try to do too much."

Cozens hasn't scored a goal in 14 games, but he has seven assists in that span.

Sam Reinhart has been on fire lately, scoring five goals in his last three games.

Don Granato moved Reinhart to center 16 games ago. Overall, Reinhart has scored 10 goals and five assists for 15 points in those games, but only six of those points (four goals and two assists) have come when he was actually playing the position.

In that time, Reinhart has six points on the power play when he's on the wing. He scored one goal from the wing off a faceoff. He was on the wing and Casey Mittelstadt was at center when he assisted on Tage Thompson's 6-on-5 goal to tie a game, and he was on the wing with Mittelstadt at center for his empty-net to complete his hat-trick and clinch the win against the Boston Bruins this past Friday.

Reinhart has played much better at center this time than when he was there in the first few years of his career.

"It's forced me to move my feet a little bit more," Reinhart said on Wednesday.

"I think it was an adjustment at the start of my career, having to force myself to do it, and then moving over to the wing and bring that part of it. This part of it is almost more natural to me, so it's been fun for me to go back to that and play that different style."

Interim head coach Don Granato has liked what he's seen from Reinhart when you get down to the nuts and bolts of why he is playing well at center.

"Sam is not only a great goal scorer, he has more room to find different pockets because he's not wedged against the wall," Granato explained on Wednesday. "He can move east-west, left-right and he has a creative side to him as well, so as he's reacclimated to that position and he shows signs of continuing to get better and more dangerous."

Tage Thompson took a bad penalty with only 8:02 left in the game on Tuesday. He cross-checked Smith after Smith had knocked him down. On Wednesday in practice, Thompson found himself off the Mittelstadt line and with Caggiula in his spot. Granato made no bones about how unhappy he was with that penalty.

"I expressed to him that I did not like that penalty at all, and it contributed to us having less of an opportunity for us to comeback and win that game. So there's no question that was an impact," Granato said.

Cody Eakin missed practice on Wednesday because he was back in Buffalo for the birth of his child.

Granato did confirm that Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen will be in net Thursday in Boston.

## **Report: 2021 NHL Draft Lottery to take place June 2**

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

April 28, 2021

After agreeing to change the NHL Draft Lottery format back in March, the National Hockey League has reportedly set a date for the 2021 NHL Draft Lottery.

TSN hockey insider Frank Seravalli reported during Tuesday's edition of "Insider Trading" that the 2021 NHL Draft Lottery will take place virtually on Wednesday, June 2.

This year's draft lottery will have a couple of nuances, with the most notable one being just the top-two picks being drawn in the lottery process. This change comes after the league agreed to draw the first three picks for the lottery starting in 2016.

The other noticeable difference coming to the 2021 NHL Draft Lottery is the inclusion of the league's 32nd franchise, the Seattle Kraken. Seattle will have the third-best odds of winning the first overall pick in the 2021 NHL Draft.

There are two more changes to the draft lottery format slotted to take place starting in 2022:

1.) The maximum amount of slots a team can move up by winning the draft lottery will be 10. Instead of all 16 teams being eligible to win the No. 1 overall pick, only the top-11 teams will be eligible.

2.) To limit the same teams winning the NHL Draft Lottery in multiple years (i.e., the Edmonton Oilers, New Jersey Devils and New York Rangers), no team can win the lottery more than twice in a five-year period.

As of right now, the Buffalo Sabres hold the best odds to win the 2021 NHL Draft Lottery with the worst record in the NHL. The Sabres currently hold a 13-30-7 record through 50 games with 33 points in the standings. They are two points behind the Ducks in the overall standings, while the Devils are ahead of Anaheim by just one point.

With the Kraken entering the picture next season, the Devils now hold the fourth-best odds to win the draft lottery, while the Ottawa Senators, at the time being, hold the fifth-best lottery odds.

One team who could be in the running for the 2021 NHL Draft Lottery is the Arizona Coyotes, but they currently sit just one point out of a playoff spot in the Pacific Division. However, the Coyotes were forced to forfeit their 2021 first round pick due to penalties handed down by the NHL for violating the NHL combine testing policy.

According to Seravalli, if the Coyotes were to win one of the top-two picks in the 2021 NHL Draft, the league will re-draw the pick that Arizona happened to win in the lottery.

The 2021 NHL Draft is also set to be held virtually with Round 1 of the draft on Friday, July 23 and Rounds 2-7 to take place on Saturday, July 24.

More details of the 2021 draft lottery, including odds for each team's chances of winning the first and second overall pick, are expected to be released some time in the near future.

## **Sabres' Sam Reinhart morphing into star as center**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 28, 2021

As Sam Reinhart's career progressed and he stayed put at right wing, the odds of the Buffalo Sabres moving him back to center, his natural position, seemed low.

Reinhart, 25, established himself as a perennial 20-goal scorer as a winger. Even after the Sabres traded No. 2 center Ryan O'Reilly in 2018, creating a huge void in the lineup, they kept Reinhart beside top center Jack Eichel.

But a major injury and trades have forced interim Sabres coach Don Granato to rework his lineup. Eichel hasn't played since hurting his neck March 7. The Sabres also dealt centers Curtis Lazar and Eric Staal, leaving them woefully thin down the middle.

So Granato shifted Reinhart and Casey Mittelstadt, another natural center who had been playing wing, back to the middle.

Moving Reinhart was the genesis of his torrid, career-best stretch. In 16 games back at center, he has morphed into the Sabres' top offensive threat, compiling 10 goals, 15 points and a minus-2 rating.

That goal total ranked sixth in the league over that stretch prior to Wednesday's games. He has scored six times during a three-game goal streak entering Thursday's contest against the Boston Bruins at TD Garden.

He recorded his fourth career hat trick in Friday's 6-4 win over the Bruins.

"(Playing center has) allowed me, really forced me to move my feet a little bit more," Reinhart said on a Zoom call following Wednesday's practice at Warrior Ice Arena in Boston. "I think it was an adjustment at the start of my career, having to force myself to do it more moving over to the wing and having to bring that part of it and this part is almost more natural for me for my professional career.

"So it's been fun for me to kind of go back to that and play that different a little bit."

Reinhart, the second overall pick in 2014, enjoys the challenge of switching to a position that has more responsibilities during the season.

"It is a different challenge, for sure," Reinhart said. "There's no surprise it's more a demanding position, I think the defensive side of it and (it's) a different kind of game from a skating standpoint as well. Yeah, I've enjoyed that part of it, too."

Reinhart's hockey IQ, of course, is a major asset. His ability to quickly process information has helped him adapt on the fly.

"Sam at center, I think he's been very comfortable," Granato said. "He's been great from the coaching side because like I keep saying about talented players, you can give them input, feedback, and they correct fast."

Granato said playing center has given Reinhart, a terrific net-front presence, extra space to operate. Instead of being wedged against the wall as a winger, he has more room to find pockets.

"He can move east-west, left-right, and he has a creative side to him as well, very deceptive and creative player," Granato said. "He has more opportunity offensively in that position. I feel we've seen that and we've been able to take advantage of that. As he's re-acclimated to that position, he shows signs of continuing to get better and more dangerous."

Overall, Reinhart has compiled 22 goals, 36 points and a wretched minus-25 rating in 48 outings this season. His 14 road goals are tied for first in the NHL. His 10 power-play goals are tied for third.

The Sabres' leading scorer has cracked the 20-goal mark five times and four straight seasons. He scored 22 times in 69 games last season and 22 times in 82 contests in 2018-19. He registered a career-high 25 goals in 82 games in 2017-18.

Reinhart signed a one-year, \$5.2 million contract before the season and can become a restricted free agent again following this campaign. Given his output, he could earn a lucrative long-term contract.

## **Sabres rookie Dylan Cozens wants to use fights as tool to ignite own game**

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

April 28, 2021

Over the past couple of games, Buffalo Sabres rookie Dylan Cozens said he has been battling the puck and unable to find any rhythm.

So when an opportunity materialized late in Tuesday's 3-1 road loss to the New York Rangers to stick up for a teammate and fight Kevin Rooney after he boarded Drake Caggiula, Cozens pounced on it.

"The hit didn't look too good and I wasn't too happy with my own play these last couple of games and especially that game, so I felt I needed to get myself involved some way," Cozens said on a Zoom call following Wednesday's practice at Warrior Ice Arena in Boston.

Cozens, 20, wants to use fighting as a tool to ignite his game.

"After you drop the gloves, the adrenaline boost is something you can't really get from anything else," he said. "I do think after a fight it does give me a huge boost. It's definitely something I think I'll do when I'm not happy with my game and not happy with how I'm feeling."

Cozens rarely fought before this season, scrapping just once in his junior career, according to hockeyfights.com. But the 6-foot-3, 188-pound center has already fought twice in 35 NHL games.

"They didn't really want me to fight down there," he said of his career with the Lethbridge Hurricanes. "I think I was too much of an asset to them. Up here, I know as a young guy it's something that ... it's an easy way to gain respect and it's just something I think I can do to help the team, especially when I'm not doing good."

Cozens also fought March 2 at Madison Square Garden, going toe-to-toe with Ryan Lindgren. He said following that fight he wanted to spark the Sabres.

The Yukon native is only Sabre who has fought twice this season.

"I've been fine with anything he's done with the emotion of the moment," interim Sabres coach Don Granato said. "He's a passionate guy. ... He's had a couple of fights. I thought both of them were inspiring to his teammates, to our team, and they were great. They were for good reason."

While Cozens is a neophyte, he has handled himself well in his bouts.

"Just natural instinct, I guess," Cozens said with a laugh. "I don't really know how else to put it."

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Granato said rookie goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen will start Thursday's game against the Boston Bruins at TD Garden.

Luukkonen, 22, beat the Bruins in his NHL debut Friday, stopping 36 shots in a 6-4 win. The Finn made 38 saves Tuesday.

The Sabres eased Luukkonen into the NHL by letting him watch the opening game of his first two series as a backup.

"He's seen Boston, he's comfortable," Granato said. "You know I gave him that chance to see Boston initially and New York. I felt that was appropriate to do that, a way we could help him. He's good to go now. I think he's settled in. It's great."

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With the Sabres trailing 2-1 Tuesday, winger Tage Thompson was penalized for cross-checking Brendan Smith 11:08 into the third period.

"I expressed to him that I did not like that penalty at all, and it contributed to us having less of an opportunity to come back in that game or at least tie that game," Granato said. "There was no question that that was an impact."

He added: "I'm very disappointed in what happened last night. He knows that."

On Wednesday, instead of practicing in his usual spot at right wing beside center Casey Mittelstadt and Rasmus Asplund, Thompson skated on the fourth line beside center Riley Sheahan and Tobias Rieder.

"I'm not punishing Tage by putting him on a line with Riley Sheahan, I don't believe that's punishment, because Riley and that line did well last night and generated some real good scoring chances last night," Granato said.

Rookie Arttu Ruotsalainen replaced Thompson beside Mittelstadt, according to The Buffalo News. Caggiula, meanwhile, skated beside Cozens and Anders Bjork.

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Granato said Sabres center Cody Eakin missed Wednesday's practice for the birth of his child.

## **Fight night, round 2: Cozens again shows willingness to get physical**

By Paul Stockman

WIVB

April 28, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – Maybe it has something to do with the Rangers, or maybe he just loves to throw hands, but Dylan Cozens has shown twice this season that he's not afraid to drop the gloves on any given night. Tuesday night's scrap against Kevin Rooney was the second fight in the last two months by the Sabres rookie. Both came against New York.

His most recent fight on Tuesday came after Rooney hit Drake Caggiula in the 3rd period. Cozens took it upon himself to correct Rooney, but also used it to try and help his own game.

"The hit didn't look too good and I wasn't too happy with my own play these last couple of games and especially that game, so I felt the need to get myself involved some way, so I saw that as a good opportunity to do so," Cozens said.

Rooney received a two minute minor penalty for boarding, and was also assessed five minutes for fighting. Cozens also received a five-minute major penalty.

Dylan got another five on Wednesday, as in five questions asked to the rookie were all about fighting. The youngster said the two fights he's gotten in have given him a surge of energy for the rest of the game.

"I think after you drop the gloves, the adrenaline boosts," Cozens said. "It's something you can't really get from anything else. I think after a fight it does give me a huge boost and it's definitely something I'll do when I'm not happy with my game, and not happy with how I'm feeling."

He mentioned he wasn't happy about his game, and that's part of why he threw down on Tuesday night.

"Just been kind of fighting the puck lately," Cozens said. "Haven't been able to get into a rhythm at all. Our line especially, we talk about it. We just haven't been able to get into a rhythm lately. I think the main thing is just simplify and just go back to simple things and not try and do too much, that's when it gets worse."

Cozens also had a fight on March 2nd against Ryan Lindgren, which was his first NHL fight at the time. He didn't do much fighting before coming to Buffalo, but the rookie is also showing he won't back down from confrontation either.

"I only had one other fight in juniors," Cozens said. "They didn't really want me to fight down there. I think I was too much of an asset for them and up here I know as a young guy it's something that, like I said before, it's an easy way to get respect and something I can do to help the team especially when I'm not doing good, I'm not feeling good."

Cozens has held his own in both fights so far, and when asked about it, he

"Honestly most of it's just kind of instinct, just natural instinct, I guess," Cozens said. "I don't know how else to put it."

We've seen a lot more fight on the ice from the Sabres the last half of the season, and now Cozens is bringing his own fight to these games.

## **Cozens sought to provide spark on otherwise off night vs. Rangers**

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

April 28, 2021

Dylan Cozens only fought once during his junior career with Lethbridge, in part due to a mandate from the coaching staff to keep its top player out of the penalty box.

It has taken less than a full season for Cozens to double that total in the NHL. So far, interim head coach Don Granato has had no qualms with the rookie's decision making.

"That's a quick choice and decision for each guy and each player," Granato said. "We would never advocate anything like that but, you know, he's in the emotion of the moment and to this point I've been fine with anything he's done with the emotion of the moment.

"... He's had a couple of fights. I thought both of them were inspiring to his teammates, to our team, and they were great. They were for good reason."

Cozens' rookie season will be the subject of the latest episode of "Buffalo Sabres: Embedded," premiering tonight at 7 p.m. on YouTube and Facebook. The episode can be found on Sabres.com later in the evening.

Cozens' first fight came against New York Rangers defenseman Ryan Lindgren on March 2, a spirited bout that earned praise from his veteran teammates. He dropped the gloves again at Madison Square Garden on Tuesday, this time prompted by a Kevan Rooney hit on Drake Caggiula.

"I mean, the hit didn't look too good, and I wasn't too happy with my own play these last couple of games and especially that game so I felt I needed to get myself involved some way," Cozens said. "So, I saw it as a good opportunity to do so."

Cozens chalked up his success through two bouts as a matter of instinct.

"It's an easy way to gain respect and it's just something I think I can do to help the team, especially when I'm not doing good, I'm not feeling good," he said.

Reinhart continuing to develop at center

Sam Reinhart has increased his team-leading goal total to 22 in 48 games, just three shy of the career-best mark he set in 82 games in 2017-18. Five of those have come in the past three contests, including a hat trick against Boston on April 23.

Reinhart said part of his success can be attributed to moving back to his natural position over the past month. He entered the league as a center but spent recent seasons playing full-time on the wing, often alongside Jack Eichel.

"It's allowed me, really forced me to move my feet a little bit more," Reinhart said of the move back to center. "I think it was an adjustment at the start of my career, having to force myself to do it more moving over to the wing. ... This part is almost more natural for me for my professional career."

Granato said the position has given Reinhart more room to roam offensively, allowing his creativity to flourish.

"Sam is not only a great goal scorer, he has more room to find different pockets because he's not wedged against the wall half the game," Granato said. "He can move east-west, left-right, and he has a creative side to him as well, a very deceptive and creative player.

"He has more opportunity offensively in that position. I feel we've seen that and we've been able to take advantage of that. As he's re-acclimated to that position, he shows signs of continuing to get better and more dangerous."

Luukkonen to start Thursday

Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen will make a second straight start in goal when the Sabres open their two-game set with the Boston Bruins on Thursday, Granato confirmed. Luukkonen made 36 saves to earn the victory in his NHL debut against the Bruins last Friday.

#### Wednesday's practice

Caggiula skated on a line with Rasmus Asplund and Casey Mittelstadt, taking the spot formerly occupied by Tage Thompson. Thompson replaced Caggiula alongside Tobias Rieder and Riley Sheahan.

Thompson tallied four shots on goal and seven attempts during Buffalo's loss to the New York Rangers on Thursday but took a cross-checking penalty during the third period. Mika Zibanejad scored on the ensuing power play to extend New York's lead to 3-1.

"I expressed to him that I did not like that penalty at all, and it contributed to us having less of an opportunity to come back in that game or at least tie that game," Granato said. "There was no question that that was an impact."

Granato said he felt Rangers defenseman Brendan Smith baited the penalty.

"It's a learning moment," he said. "I'm not punishing Tage by putting him on a line with Riley Sheahan, I don't believe that's punishment, because Riley and that line did well last night and generated some real good scoring chances last night."

Granato also announced that Cody Eakin is not with the team on its road trip and remained in Buffalo for the birth of his child.