



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

May 4, 2021

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

Associated Press

May 4, 2021

New York Islanders (31-16-5, fourth in the East Division) vs. Buffalo Sabres (14-32-7, eighth in the East Division)

Buffalo, New York; Tuesday, 7 p.m. EDT

FANDUEL SPORTSBOOK LINE: Sabres +224, Islanders -275; over/under is 5.5

BOTTOM LINE: Buffalo hosts the New York Islanders after Sam Reinhart scored two goals in the Sabres' 4-2 win against the Islanders.

The Sabres are 14-32-7 against the rest of their division. Buffalo serves 6.3 penalty minutes per game, the fewest in the NHL. Steven Fogarty leads them averaging 0.9.

The Islanders are 31-16-5 against the rest of their division. New York averages 2.8 penalties per game, the fewest in the league. Ross Johnston leads the team averaging 0.9.

The teams meet for the second game in a row.

TOP PERFORMERS: Reinhart leads the Sabres with 25 goals and has 40 points. Arttu Ruotsalainen has four goals and one assist over the last 10 games for Buffalo.

Brock Nelson leads the Islanders with 16 goals and has 29 points. Anthony Beauvillier has five goals and four assists over the last 10 games for New York.

LAST 10 GAMES: Sabres: 3-7-0, averaging 2.5 goals, 3.9 assists, 2.9 penalties and 6.1 penalty minutes while giving up 3.6 goals per game with a .906 save percentage.

Islanders: 4-5-1, averaging two goals, 3.3 assists, 2.6 penalties and 5.7 penalty minutes while giving up 1.6 goals per game with a .948 save percentage.

INJURIES: Sabres: Carter Hutton: out (lower body), Jake McCabe: out (knee), Jack Eichel: out for season (neck), Linus Ullmark: out (lower body).

Islanders: Ross Johnston: out (undisclosed).

Houser wins in NHL debut as Sabres rally past Islanders 4-2

By Joe Yerdon

Associated Press

May 4, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Michael Houser stopped 34 shots in his NHL debut, Sam Reinhart scored twice in Buffalo's three-goal third period and the Sabres beat the playoff-bound New York Islanders 4-2 on Monday night.

Tage Thompson and Rasmus Asplund also scored for Buffalo, which trailed 2-0 early in the second period.

"It's super exciting. I'm not really in that great of game shape either, I'll admit that," the 28-year-old Houser said. "After the game celebrating and everything, I could barely breathe so I'm just trying to catch my breath right now, give my parents a shout after this and see what their take is on it."

Houser spent the past 8 1/2 seasons in the minor leagues. It was his first game since March 7, 2020, with Cincinnati of the ECHL.

"A very special night, special person," Sabres coach Don Granato said. "So, great to be a part of it. And the locker room was even better. The rallying in the locker room was very, very enjoyable for all. What a moment."

Adam Pelech and Oliver Wahlstrom scored for the Islanders. Semyon Varlamov, coming off three straight shutouts, finished with 36 saves.

The Islanders fell to fourth place in the Eastern Division — one point behind Boston, which beat New Jersey 3-0. The Bruins also have a game in hand on the Islanders.

"I thought we played with a little bit of arrogance," Islanders coach Barry Trotz said. "You know, let's get in the inside, play our game and we were just saying, 'oh it's going to be easy, we've got a lead,' and then we just made it easy for them."

The teams finish their season series Tuesday night in Buffalo.

Thompson's power-play goal got the Sabres on the scoreboard with 5:56 left in the second period and ended Varlamov's shutout streak at 248 minutes.

Asplund tied the score with 8:35 remaining in the third.

Reinhart gave the Sabres a 3-2 lead with 4:04 left and sealed the win with an empty-netter, his career high-tying 25th, with 52 seconds to go.

"A hundred percent (disappointing)," Islanders defenseman Adam Pelech said. "Even though we clinched a playoff spot and had an emotional weekend (against the New York Rangers), that's not an excuse. ... We need to be better tomorrow night and going forward for the rest of the season here heading into the playoffs."

SABRES ADD A GOALIE

Buffalo signed goalie Stefanos Lekkas to a professional tryout deal on Monday. Lekkas was the backup for the Sabres AHL team in Rochester and is 1-4-1 with a .863 save percentage with a 4.32 goals-against average. He backed up Houser on Monday night due to injuries to goalies Dustin Tokarski, Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, Carter Hutton, and Linus Ullmark.

LINEUP NOTES

Sabres: Tokarski did not dress. Interim coach Don Granato said Monday morning they wanted to give Tokarski a day off.

Islanders: Forward Jean-Gabriel Pageau was replaced by Travis Zajac in the lineup. Pageau missed part of the third period of the Islanders' 3-0 win against the Rangers on Saturday.

Michael Houser's 'special night' following difficult road ends with a Sabres win

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

May 3, 2021

Monica Houser was on the phone with a customer service representative Monday morning in her Pittsburgh-area home when a text message flashed across the screen that filled her with pride, joy and a sense of urgency.

Her 28-year-old son Michael, a professional goaltender whose National Hockey League dream never wavered while competing for eight different minor-league teams across nine years, sent a three-word message: "I'm starting tonight."

Monica apologetically interrupted the conversation and explained why she had to hang up: her son was making his NHL debut with the Buffalo Sabres.

"She probably thought I was nuts," Monica joked.

Monica frantically awoke her 26-year-old son Alex, a doctorate student at the University of Michigan, and began to pack a bag for Buffalo. She soon learned fans were not permitted to attend the game inside KeyBank Center against the East Division's third-place New York Islanders, but the Houser family still had a day they will never forget.

After some difficult moments to begin his first game at any level since March 7, 2020, Michael stopped all 15 shots he faced in the third period, standing tall to help the Sabres rally from a two-goal deficit to defeat the New York Islanders 4-2.

"It's so exciting," said Houser, who planned to call Monica and his father, Bill, immediately after his postgame news conference. "I've worked my whole life for this. For it to happen and just to play a game is really special."

Houser's circuitous journey included three consecutive NHL drafts in which he was not selected and 283 games between the American Hockey League and ECHL.

He was the sixth goalie to appear in a game for the Sabres this season, tied for the most in franchise history (2013-14 and 1988-89). Linus Ullmark, Carter Hutton and Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen are unavailable because of injury. Dustin Tokarski did not play while dealing with a "family matter," according to interim coach Don Granato, and Jonas Johansson was traded to the Colorado Avalanche in March.

With no additional goalies on an NHL contract, the Sabres were granted an exception by the league to add Rochester's Stefanos Lekkas on a professional tryout to back up Houser. This unprecedented goalie situation is one of many calamitous moments in a trying season for the franchise.

Yet, for all that needed to occur for Houser to finally receive his NHL call, he never doubted this day would arrive.

Houser's story of perseverance began long before he joined the Sabres organization ahead of the 2018-19 season. He was born with bilateral club feet, a congenital deformity that affects a child's bones, muscles, tendons and blood vessels. Houser underwent a series of corrective procedures before the age of 2, followed by one more at around 12 years old.

The condition was rarely discussed in the Houser family. His doctor inspired confidence and hope by reminding Houser's parents that it would have no impact on his quality of life or ability to perform any activity. The diagnosis was rarely discussed by the family, unless a young Michael had questions. It also had no bearing on his ability to perform on the ice, but Michael described his beginnings as a source of motivation.

"It's kept me going, for sure, it's made me work I think a little bit harder knowing that I have to keep up, that I'm not as naturally I guess gifted as some others in terms of maybe footwork or height for sure, but it's definitely made me work harder," Houser said.

Houser went on to have an outstanding junior career for the Ontario Hockey League's London Knights. He was the rock for a 2011-12 team that reached the Memorial Cup and included multiple future first-round draft picks.

He was named the OHL's Most Outstanding Player and became the first American-born athlete named the Canadian Hockey League's goalie of the year.

For all Houser accomplished in the top junior league, he was never drafted by an NHL team. Houser bounced around the minors with stops in San Antonio, Ontario, Manchester, Cleveland, Tucson, Fort Wayne, Rochester and Cincinnati. He hasn't played more than six AHL games in any season since 2014-15.

There were long bus rides to small rinks for scarcely attended games across North America while hoping that dedication and success would get noticed by decision-makers around the NHL. But no matter where Houser played, his family always made trips to watch in person.

"He had that passion, that goal, that maybe someday, maybe, he would get there," said Monica, who planned to watch the game at home with Bill and Alex. "And here's that someday."

With two notable prospects in the pipeline, the Sabres signed Houser to be what Cincinnati Cyclones coach Matt Thomas called a "competitive mentor." They wanted Houser to push for the job while mentoring young goalie partners such as Johansson and Luukkonen. Thomas recalled Houser always being first on the ice for practices or morning skates, routinely arriving at the rink early with a request for Thomas to construct team drills that would help him improve a specific area of his game.

Houser was the backbone of the Cyclones during a 2018-19 season in which Johansson missed significant time with a knee injury. He had a .922 save percentage in 41 games and earned the title of ECHL goalie of the year.

"Man, the hardest working guy," Thomas said. "I've never seen a more popular player as a goalie. All the guys love him. He's so well-liked. He's got that great balance of making sure he's keeping everybody working. He's just a leader. I'll tell ya right now, I think JJ and UPL owe a lot to Michael Houser. ... He showed them how hard you have to work every day to get to the NHL."

Patience can be difficult for a player in Houser's position. He was talented enough to pursue a more lucrative opportunity overseas. Houser, though, earned enough on AHL contracts to have financial stability, which allowed him to spend his summers training rather than working a second job.

He remained resolute in his pursuit for an NHL opportunity and, until this season, continued to hone his craft by working with Sabres goalie development coach Seamus Kotyk, whom he described as a mentor.

"Every year, I thought he would leave for a job overseas and Michael would say, 'I'm not ready,' " recalled Thomas. "He always believed all he ever needed was a chance."

Houser savored every moment, but he wasn't simply happy to be in this position. He regretted both goals against, although his 34 saves gave Buffalo its first win over the Islanders this season. But after Sam Reinhart's two goals completed the comeback and time expired, the Sabres' bench cleared to congratulate Houser.

Granato stopped in his tracks to watch the celebration from the bench. The dream isn't over. Houser is expected to start against Tuesday night, another chapter in his tale of perseverance.

"What an opportunity and an incredible job to seize an opportunity," Granato said. "Very special night. Special person. ... What a moment."

The Wraparound: Sam Reinhart helps Sabres rally from 2-goal deficit in win

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

May 3, 2021

The celebratory shouts from the Buffalo Sabres' bench could be heard in an eerily quiet KeyBank Center.

Rasmus Asplund had just scored on a loose puck to tie the score in the third period against the New York Islanders, a team the Sabres had yet to beat in six meetings during this shortened season.

At the other end of the ice was Michael Houser, a 28-year-old rookie making his NHL debut after having played only two games above the ECHL since 2015-16. Houser turned his back to the play and got ready to try to help the Sabres spoil the Islanders' desperate push for two points.

His teammates ensured he would walk away with a win, rallying from a two-goal deficit to defeat the Islanders 4-2 on Monday. Sam Reinhart's goal with 4:04 remaining in regulation stood as the game-winner.

The Sabres (14-32-17) lost seven of their previous nine games and avoided clinching the NHL's worst record, which would ensure that they have the best odds of selecting first overall in the 2021 draft.

Houser, who was called on to start with Dustin Tokarski and Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen unavailable, made 34 saves.

Tage Thompson cut the deficit to 2-1 with his power-play shot in the second period to snap the Sabres' skid on the man advantage. Asplund tied the score with 8:35 remaining on a loose puck in front of the net. Reinhart then tipped a point shot by Rasmus Ristolainen in for the 3-2 lead, and he added his second of the game on an empty-netter for his 25th of the season, which matches his previous career high.

Adam Pelech and Oliver Walstrom scored for the Islanders (31-16-5), who had shutouts in each of their previous two games and have clinched one of four playoff spots in the East Division. New York entered Monday with a 15-0-1 record when leading at the second intermission.

On an island: The Sabres did little to help Houser in the first period. While Granato had his players tighten their coverage in the defensive zone, it allowed the Islanders too much time to move the puck and find open lanes for shots.

Opening salvo: The Islanders took a 1-0 lead when Pelech's shot from near the half wall deflected off Sabres defenseman Henri Jokiharju's stick and past Houser, who was in the middle of gliding to his left when the puck changed directions.

The Sabres have allowed the first goal in eight consecutive games. Entering Monday, the Islanders were 22-1-3 when scoring first.

More issues: Buffalo had two shots on goal during a pair of power plays in the first period. New York, meanwhile, had one shot during that four-minute span.

Close call: It appeared that the Islanders took a 2-0 lead when Ryan Pullock's shot from near the blue line was tipped by Mathew Barzal. However, the goal was overturned after a coach's challenge by Granato because officials determined that Casey Cizikas' contact with Houser prevented the Sabres' goalie from making the save.

Response: The Sabres had six consecutive shots on goal during a stretch in the second period, including one by Casey Mittelstadt that went off goalie Semyon Varlamov's glove during a 2-on-1 rush.

Another one: Wahlstrom tipped a Pelech shot from the point between Houser's legs for a 2-0 Islanders lead at 10:42 into the second period.

Breaking through: Varlamov's shutout streak ended at 248 minutes, with Thompson scoring at 14:04 into the second period on a power-play shot from the right-wing circle, cutting the Sabres' deficit to 2-1. Asplund tied the score in the third period after Sam Reinhart extended his arm to poke the puck to the slot.

Roster moves: Ahead of puck drop Monday, the Sabres assigned forwards C.J. Smith and Steven Fogarty from Rochester to the taxi squad. Stefanos Lekkas, a 25-year-old goalie, served as Buffalo's back up after joining the team on a professional tryout. Lekkas had an .863 save percentage in seven games with the Amerks.

Defensemen Colin Miller and Matt Irwin were healthy scratches for Buffalo.

Next: The Sabres are scheduled to host the Islanders for the final game of their season series Tuesday night at 7.

Sabres Notebook: Linus Ullmark rejoins team for first time since injury

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

May 3, 2021

The outlook in goal for the Buffalo Sabres might have brightened Monday with the surprising return of Linus Ullmark at the morning skate in KeyBank Center.

Ullmark, 27, practiced with the Sabres for the first time since he suffered a lower-body injury in a game against the Boston Bruins on April 13. It was an unexpected development after interim coach Don Granato told the media last week that Ullmark was not an option for the Sabres anytime soon.

However, Ullmark felt well enough to take shots from teammates and received medical clearance to rejoin the team. The Sabres will monitor Ullmark's health to determine if he can be an option before the season ends with a game Saturday in Pittsburgh.

This was a second unrelated lower-body injury for Ullmark, who has missed a combined 26 games in 2020-21.

"It certainly was a very frustrating thing to happen, especially when you've gone through a bigger one beforehand," Ullmark said following the skate. "If I can rewind and obviously do something different I would've done it, but looking back at it at the time, I did what I had to do to be ready for the game and to play like I normally do. It was kind of a weird thing that just happened and I'm standing here now."

The injury occurred during the first period in Boston's TD Garden. Ullmark appeared to be experiencing some discomfort upon standing up from the butterfly position after making a save on defenseman Mike Reilly. Ullmark remained in the game before he skated to the bench and was replaced by Dustin Tokarski.

Ullmark, a pending unrestricted free agent, has a .917 save percentage in 20 games. General Manager Kevyn Adams opted to not trade Ullmark before the April 12 deadline, as both sides plan to continue to discuss a new contract for the starting goalie.

"It was all right," Ullmark said of his first skate with the team. "It's the first practice back and it was certainly enjoyable. I had fun out there skating around with the boys. And regarding the future, there's still things that need to be done beforehand but we'll see."

UPL update

The Sabres are still awaiting word on the severity of the ankle injury rookie goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen suffered in the final moments of the second period Saturday in Boston.

Luukkonen, 22, dropped to the ice in pain after gliding to the left post while tracking the puck in what would be a 6-2 loss to the Bruins. He managed to scramble in the crease until time expired, when he was then helped off the ice and did not return.

A second-round draft pick in 2017, Luukkonen has a .906 save percentage in four games with Buffalo. His backup in those games, Tokarski did not skate with the Sabres on Monday morning for what Granato later said is a "family matter" to tend to.

Sabres game day: With UPL out, Michael Houser to make NHL debut vs. Isles

By Lance Lysowski

The Buffalo News

May 3, 2021

Matchup: Buffalo Sabres (13-32-7) vs. New York Islanders (31-15-5)

Where: KeyBank Center

When: 7 p.m.

TV: MSG

Radio: WGR 550

The goalie carousel continues to turn for the Buffalo Sabres, causing Don Granato to use an unlikely starter Monday night in KeyBank Center.

Michael Houser, a 28-year-old with zero games of NHL experience, will receive his first career start against the New York Islanders. He has not appeared in more than six American Hockey League games in any season since 2014-15.

Much of Houser's professional career has been spent in the ECHL, where he was the league's goaltender of the year while playing for the Cincinnati Cyclones in 2018-19.

"In situations like this you certainly hope and expect the players to rally around and fight a little harder net-front and to clean things up and to get him more of a look at shots, more shots to the outside, all of those things," Granato said. "Manage the puck better. So, those will be points to be made this evening and points of emphasis for us."

Dustin Tokarski is not available. The Sabres are monitoring Tokarski's status after he was hit hard on a collision with Boston Bruins winger David Pastrnak on Saturday. Tokarski replaced rookie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, who had started each of the past three games.

Luukkonen, 22, suffered a lower-body injury late in the second period of the 6-2 loss to the Bruins. The Sabres are awaiting word on the severity of the injury, as Luukkonen was evaluated by a doctor Monday.

Linus Ullmark rejoined the team Monday morning after being out with a lower-body injury since April 13. The 27-year-old is not ready to appear in a game and it's unclear if he'll be able to return before the season finale Saturday in Pittsburgh. Granato told reporters the Sabres will evaluate Ullmark following the skate.

"We come back, he had a couple skates on his own and wanted to jump in, felt comfortable enough on the medical side with him to jump into the skate today," Granato said of Ullmark. "So, we're gathering more information on that to see how he responded and felt with regard to the skate today to see if there's more reason to be optimistic on him in the next few days."

Houser has not appeared in a game since March 7, 2020, when he earned his second consecutive shutout with 24 saves for the Cyclones. He had a .902 save percentage in 26 games with Cincinnati last season.

This is the first time since 2013-14 the Sabres will use six different goalies in a season.

Lineup: Cody Eakin, a healthy scratch in each of the past seven games, is expected to draw into the lineup and will center a line alongside Riley Sheahan and Drake Caggiula.

Granato also reunited Tage Thompson with Casey Mittelstadt and Rasmus Asplund at the morning skate, while Arttu Routsalainen took line rushes with Dylan Cozens and Anders Bjork.

Here's how the Sabres lined up:

Looking ahead: The Islanders enter Monday third in the East Division, only four points behind the first-place Pittsburgh Penguins. New York is 4-2-1 in its last seven games and has won each of its six games against Buffalo this season, outscoring the Sabres, 24-9.

The Sabres have lost seven of their last nine games.

OPINION: Michael Houser beats odds, then beats Islanders

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

May 4, 2021

Buffalo, N.Y. (WGR 550) – It's stories like what we got Monday night that makes the job I have so rewarding.

Michael Houser hadn't played a professional hockey game since March 7, 2020, and had never played in a National Hockey League game in his life. Houser played 65 American Hockey League games in his first two seasons of pro hockey, and then only had eight more in the next six years.

The Sabres already had five goalies start a game for them this season, but injuries to three of them and personal reasons for Dustin Tokarski put 28-year-old Michael Houser in the Buffalo net.

The kid took a deep breath and only need one minute to make his first NHL save against the New York Islanders. It was a shot from the left point from Nick Leddy that he easily kicked to the corner. Houser was so steady, and made some big early saves on Anthony Beauvillier in the slot, and even got fortunate when a Brock Nelson shot hit the crossbar.

It took an Adam Pelech shot to go in off of Henri Jokiharju's stick to beat Houser the first time on Monday. You know what I always say: Either block the shot or get out of the way and let your goaltender handle it.

The Islanders just went about their business and do what they do. Another Pelech shot was tipped in by Oliver Wahlstrom, and the Islanders had a 2-0 lead halfway through the game.

No team in the NHL is better at taking the air out of a game and protecting a lead as the Islanders. All season long in six games, they had done it to perfection against Buffalo.

Semyon Varlamov was in net, working on three-straight shutouts and a shutout streak of over 213 minutes.

A funny thing happened on the way to the end of the second period: Buffalo fought back. They didn't allow New York to swarm them. They made Mathew Barzal pretty much a non-factor.

They also had some luck on their side.

Will Borgen pushed Casey Cizikas into Houser, knocking him out of the crease as Andy Greene's shot from the point went in. Honestly, I would not have challenged this, because Borgen clearly pushed Cizikas into his goalie. However, Don Granato did and he won the challenge, wiping the goal off the board. It was a key factor in this game.

Tage Thompson returned to the Casey Mittelstadt line and took complete advantage.

Starting with the second period, Thompson was hard to handle inside the offensive zone. Granato said the winger played a north-south game and he dominated. On a power play opportunity with 5:56 to go in the period, Thompson got the puck in the right circle and ripped one past Varlamov, ending his shutout streak at 248 minutes.

It was important to only be behind one goal after 40 minutes.

The Islanders usually choke you to death with the lead, but Buffalo had its feet moving and had 14 shots in the second period, then 17 more in the third.

The Islanders never lose coming into the third period with a lead, but that streak is over too. Houser was strong, making 15 saves of his own in the period, and also had the post and the crossbar on his side too.

Sam Reinhart is having the best season of his career, and he took this game over in the final 20 minutes.

In 19 games since being switched to center, Reinhart has seven goals and three assists for 10 points. He has six goals and three assists for nine points playing from the wing. Overall, that's 13 goals and six assists for 19 points in 19 games.

Reinhart's 25 goals ties a career high, and that's in just 51 games. Reinhart had 25 goals in the 2017-18 season, but that was in 82 games. This season, he's on a pace for 40 goals in 82 games.

In this game, Reinhart did a great job of keeping a play alive in the left circle, and then sending a backhand pass across the crease to Rasmus Asplund to tie the game at 2-2.

Then, with just 4:04 left in regulation time, Reinhart won a big faceoff from Barzal and went straight to the net. Barzal just stood and watched him, and Reinhart screened Varlamov and tipped in Rasmus Ristolainen's shot from the right point. Reinhart also scored the empty-net goal.

Houser was just brilliant throughout, making 34 saves to leave the arena with his first NHL win. His teammates absolutely mobbed him after the win.

"It felt a little sloppy in the beginning, which was to be expected, I think," Houser said in his postgame comments. "I just felt a little bit loose, which goes hand-in-hand with not playing for so long, but I told myself this afternoon just battle. Just find the puck and fight for your ice and stay with the play."

Houser said that practicing and playing in games are two different animals.

"I'm not really in that great of game shape either, so I'll admit that," he said. "After the game, celebrating and everything, I could barely breath. So I'm just trying to catch my breath."

Tokarski is away from the team having to deal with a family issue, so Houser will be back in goal Tuesday against the Islanders.

OPINION: Three observations: Sabres reverse fortunes late against Islanders

By TJ Luckman

WGR 550

May 3, 2021

A ridiculous Sam Reinhart play brought the Buffalo Sabres back to life on Monday night, pulling them even at 2-2 more than halfway through the third period against the New York Islanders at KeyBank Center.

Reinhart then got a ridiculous tip in front of the Islanders net with just over four minutes to go to put the Sabres ahead. He then add an empty-net goal for some insurance to hold their lead the rest of the way in Buffalo's first win of the year in seven tries against the Islanders.

It was a tough situation for Sabres rookie goaltender Michael Houser, making his National Hockey League debut in a year he's seen no action and hasn't even played in a professional game since March 7, 2020 in a 1-0 shutout win for the ECHL's Cincinnati Cyclones against the Toledo Walleye.

Let's take a look at three observations from Monday night's win against the Islanders:

1.) Houser the obvious great story from this one

Houser has spent a good part of his year splitting time between the Rochester Americans and, most recently, spending most of his time on the Sabres' taxi squad. Houser hadn't played in an American Hockey League game since the 2017-18 season with the Tucson Roadrunners.

Those things didn't really matter, as Houser was rock solid in his NHL debut.

For not having played in a game all season, Houser seemed focused, and only got beaten by deflected shots by the Islanders.

Houser made 34 saves on 36 shots, and gave the Sabres every opportunity to win this game. In the end, the Sabres came through for Houser.

Sabres interim head coach Don Granato announced in his postgame press conference that Houser would be the starter in Tuesday's matchup against the Islanders. With Dustin Tokarski away from the team and the Sabres not rostering another healthy goaltender with Linus Ullmark still on the mend, why not go with Houser again?

2.) Reinhart makes dreams a reality for Houser

The Sabres went down by two early in the second period. Normally, a 2-0 lead for the Islanders is enough for them to hold things there until the end.

However, the Sabres forced their hand midway through the third when Reinhart worked the puck toward the net, falling to the ice as he found an open Rasmus Asplund in front to tie things up at 2-2.

Reinhart's heroics didn't stop there.

Later in the period, Reinhart cleanly won a draw against Islanders center Mathew Barzel and headed for the net unchecked. The puck slid back to Sabres defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen, who waited and fired a wrist shot through an open, shifting lane that deflected off Reinhart's stick and in. Reinhart's goal gave the Sabres the 3-2 lead with just over four minutes to go.

The Islanders pressed, but Houser made a couple of key saves before Reinhart sealed the game with his empty-net goal.

Reinhart hit the 25-goal mark with his empty-netter, tying a career high he hit in the 2017-18 season in 82 games played. He hit that mark this season in Game 51 of 56.

3.) Asplund finding his way as a net-front presence

Asplund scored his eighth goal of the year on Monday night. The 23-year-old has played in just 25 games this season, starting the year on the Sabres' taxi squad and getting some sprinkles of action from former Sabres head coach Ralph Krueger.

Since Krueger's dismissal, Granato has relied on Asplund for his offense, consistently playing on a line with Sabres forward Casey Mittelstadt over the past month or so.

Since getting a more regular spot in the lineup, Asplund has scored five goals in 18 games. His impacts show that he is a great net-front presence with decent finishing ability.

If he provides NHL level defense, Asplund will be a good depth player for the Sabres to rely on in the future.

The Sabres will get just one more opportunity to spoil some points for the Islanders in the 2020-21 season. That opportunity comes on Tuesday night at KeyBank Center in Buffalo.

We'll get things kicked off with the Paul William Beltz Pregame Show hosted by Mike Schopp and the Bulldog at 6 p.m. ET. The action gets underway shortly after 7 p.m. ET on the radio flagship station of the Sabres - WGR Sports Radio 550.

Reinhart, Houser steal show against Islanders

By Kyle Powell

WGR 550

May 3, 2021

Sam Reinhart and Michael Houser seized the spotlight on Monday night against New York, as the Buffalo Sabres scored four unanswered goals on a stout Islanders team en route to a 4-2 victory. Reinhart posted two goals and three points, while Houser won his National Hockey League debut at KeyBank Center.

The first goal-against of Houser's career came 9:15 into the contest, when Islanders defenseman Adam Pelech's shot was deflected on its way in for a 1-0 New York edge. The puck changed direction off the stick of Henri Jokiharju.

With 10:42 gone in the second period of play, the Islanders' lead became two. Pelech was involved again for the Islanders, though this time his point shot was tipped in by his own teammate. Forward Oliver Wahlstrom deflected the puck past Houser for his 11th goal of the season.

The Sabres broke through a little over three minutes later on a power play, when Tage Thompson scored his seventh goal of the campaign.

Thompson received help from Jacob Bryson and Rasmus Ristolainen on the man advantage, as Buffalo scored the first goal against Islanders netminder Semyon Varlamov in over three games, dating back to April 20.

The blue and gold found the equalizer against the stingy Islanders defense with 8:35 left in regulation, when Sam Reinhart threw a puck in on net that was banged home by Rasmus Asplund parked on the doorstep.

Reinhart set the scoring play up with a neat dangle on Islanders defenseman Scott Mayfield.

Reinhart then gave the Sabres their first lead of the night four-and-a-half minutes later. After winning an offensive zone faceoff, Reinhart showed off his incredible net-front skills by deflecting a Rasmus Ristolainen shot in behind Varlamov for the go-ahead tally.

The run of goals for Buffalo didn't end there, as Reinhart put the finishing touches on a three-point night with an empty-net goal inside the final minute. It was his 25th goal of the season, equaling his career-high from three seasons ago in the 2017-18 campaign. It took Reinhart just 51 games to match that feat in the 2020-21 season.

Also starring in victory was Houser, who won in his debut in the NHL after years in the American Hockey League and ECHL. The Youngstown, Ohio native stopped 34 of 36 Islanders shots after joining the Sabres on a one-year contract in March.

STATS OF THE GAME:

Losi and Gangi Three Stars of the Game:

- 1.) Michael Houser - BUF
- 2.) Tage Thompson - BUF
- 3.) Sam Reinhart - BUF

What's Next:

The blue and gold host the Islanders again Tuesday night for the final meeting of the season between these two teams. It will also be the final home game for the Sabres of the 2020-21 season.

Puck drop at KeyBank Center is set for 7 p.m. ET with the Paul William Beltz Pregame Show with Mike Schopp and the Bulldog starting at 6 p.m. ET on the radio home of the Sabres - WGR Sports Radio 550.

Michael Houser becomes sixth goalie to play for Sabres this season

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

May 3, 2021

Buffalo, N.Y. (WGR 550) – When the Buffalo Sabres face off against the New York Islanders on Monday, they will have their record-tying sixth goalie in the crease.

Linus Ullmark practiced for the first time on Monday, but isn't ready. There is some sort of problem with Dustin Tokarski, so he didn't participate in the morning skate. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen was seeing the doctor about his injury, so Michael Houser will get his first National Hockey League start.

Houser started the season as the No. 3 goalie in Rochester and hasn't played a game all season. Houser's last action came in the 2019-20 season when he played 26 games for the Sabres' ECHL affiliate, Cincinnati Cyclones.

Houser went 16-5-5 with a 2.27 goals-against average and a .902 save percentage with the Cyclones.

Early in his career, Houser played 65 games in two seasons with the American Hockey League's San Antonio Rampage, but he's only played eight AHL games in the six years since then.

The 28-year-old was never drafted after three years with the London Knights of the Ontario Hockey League. He found out Monday morning from goaltending coach Mike Bales that he would be starting.

"It's exciting. It's been awhile since I've played, so I'm just going to try to get into the game as quick as possible to get a couple of touches," Houser said following the morning skate on Monday. "I've waited for this a long time, and worked extremely hard for it."

Houser knows that having NHL players with him will make things look a lot different from the crease.

"An exciting thing too is I've never played a game with all NHL defensemen in front of me," Houser said. "Being able to work with them tonight and go back to play a puck and watch them break it out it's going to be fun."

Houser is confident that once the puck drops and he settles in, he calls it, "Just another hockey game."

Houser's mom wanted to drive up from Pittsburgh for the game, but due to COVID-19 restrictions, she can't get into the building.

Don Granato knows what it's like to be the underdog in the game of hockey. He is pleased that hard work is paying off for his goalie.

"I'm very happy for Michael to get this opportunity," the interim Sabres head coach said on Monday. "He's a worker, and everybody that knows his history and has followed his career is excited for him, because he is such a dedicated athlete, good teammate and good person."

Don Granato updated the whole goaltending situation on Monday. There's something going on with Tokarski, and he didn't seem like he could go into it.

"Tokarski was not out there, but we gave him the rest to gauge where he's at," Granato said. "Right now we're sorting through some information with Tokarski."

"Linus [Ullmark] was out there and that was a very pleasant surprise. He had has a couple of skates on his own and felt comfortable enough on the medical side to jump into the skate today, so we're gather more information on the to see how he felt to see if there's more reason to be optimistic on him."

As far as Luukkonen goes, Granato did not have much of an update on his status.

"UPL' [Luukkonen] was seeing the doctor this morning, and I don't have any information back on that yet."

The Sabres are on their sixth goalie with Houser, Ullmark, Tokarski, Luukkonen, Carter Hutton and Jonas Johansson. In the 2013-14 season, they also used six goalies with Ryan Miller, Jhonas Enroth, Nathan Lieuwen, Matt Hackett, Connor Knapp and Michal Neuvirth. Granato said he has gone through a similar situation once in his coaching career.

"There was a year in St. Louis where I think we had six, but this is an odd one," he recalled. "This is another challenge, and we know how challenging this year has been for us."

There are four more games to play as the Sabres enter the final week of their season. Saturday against the Bruins in Boston was, by far, the team's worst game under Granato. So where will they find motivation in this final week?

"There's four games left. They've worked hard and had to fight through a lot, and we have to find the real internal motivation to play," Granato said.

"On the simplest side of it, I can tell you in two weeks when the season ends, these guys will be dying to get on the ice, dying to play a game. So here we are. You can look at it as the end and how do we find motivation. It's the love of the game and the passion, so that is a question to be answered. We didn't look good in Boston in that last game. We looked extremely tired, so it's a legitimate question going forward."

The Islanders have clinched a playoff spot, but are still jockeying for position in the East Division. Currently they're in third, one point in front of the Bruins, two points behind of the Washington Capitals and four points behind the Pittsburgh Penguins.

New York has only won two of its last five games, but are 6-0-0 against the Sabres this season. Buffalo has only scored nine goals in those six games against Semyon Varlamov and Ilya Sorokin. Those two have split the six games against Buffalo.

Overall, Varlamov has played four of the last six games and given up just one goal. In the last two games, Varlamov has shut out the New York Rangers 4-0 and 3-0.

Monday's lines:

Forwards:

Skinner – Reinhart – Olofsson
Asplund – Mittelstadt – Thompson
Bjork – Cozens – Routsalainen
Sheahan – Eakin – Caggiula
Rieder

Defense:

Bryson – Borgen
Samuelsson – Ristolainen
Dahlin – Jokiharju

Join Schopp and the Bulldog for pregame coverage on WGR starting at 6 p.m. ET when they'll be joined by Granato, Houser and Ullmark.

Goalie Michael Houser wins his NHL debut with Sabres: 'I've worked my whole life for this'

By John Vogl
The Athletic
May 3, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. – There were times when Michael Houser felt the NHL was out of reach.

"Anytime you're in the East Coast League, it seems like it's quite a jump to get there," the 28-year-old said.

But nine years after signing his first pro contract, after 210 games in the ECHL, 73 games in the American Hockey League and zero games anywhere for 14 months, Houser's time finally arrived Monday. The Sabres goalie skated to an NHL crease for the first time in his life, and he skated out of it with a 4-2 victory over the Islanders.

He left with a game puck and memories that made those seemingly endless bus rides worth it.

"I know it's so cliché, but they always tell you to stay ready, and I've taken that to heart the last few years," Houser said in celebratory KeyBank Center. "It's so exciting. I've worked my whole life for this to happen. Just to play a game is really special, but to win, winning's always the goal."

In another lost season for Buffalo, any win is memorable. But as the players smiled and mobbed Houser at the crease and in the dressing room, it was easy to tell this was a different kind of day.

"The boys are really fired up for him," forward Tage Thompson said. "I don't think there's too many more deserving guys."

Thompson praised Houser's work away from the spotlight, which is the only place Houser has been working for 14 months. His last game was March 7, 2020, for Cincinnati of the ECHL. But a run of injuries, trades and absences finally opened the door to his dream.

"What an opportunity and an incredible job to seize an opportunity," Sabres interim coach Don Granato said.

Houser stopped 34 of 36 shots, shutting the door after New York took a 2-0 lead midway through the second period. Buffalo rallied with four straight goals, including three in the final nine minutes.

As the players looked to the scoreboard in anticipation of the final buzzer, Houser tapped his stick off both posts and readied for the mob scene.

The party may have been more strenuous than the game.

"I'm not really in that great of game shape, I'll admit that," Houser said, "so after the game I was celebrating and everything, I could barely breathe. I'm just trying to catch my breath right now."

He'd better hurry. Granato announced Houser will start Tuesday's rematch, too.

The Islanders have yet to beat Houser with a clean shot. The first goal came with 9:15 gone, and there was nothing Houser could do. New York's Adam Pelech sent a pass toward the front that bounced off the stick of Sabres defenseman Henri Jokiharju and redirected past the goalie.

The second goal was also a redirect as Oliver Wahlstrom tipped Pelech's point shot midway through the second period.

"I really wasn't thrilled about either goal, but I was happy how I responded," Houser said.

Houser became the sixth goalie to appear in Buffalo's crease, tying the franchise's single-season record. The Sabres also used six goalies in 1988-89 — Tom Barrasso, Daren Puppa, Jacques Cloutier, Clint Malarchuk, Darcy Wakaluk and Darren Eliot — and again in 2013-14 with Ryan Miller, Jhonas Enroth, Michal Neuvirth, Nathan Lieuwen, Matt Hackett and Connor Knapp.

The difference is those were full seasons. This year features a truncated 56-game schedule played in four months.

"This is an odd one," Granato said. "We know how challenging the year's been for so many teams but, yeah, this is certainly an odd one."

The backup situation Monday was just as strange. The Sabres signed 25-year-old Stefanos Lekkas to a professional tryout contract before the game and dressed him as the backup. Buffalo designated assistant coach Mike Bales, 49, as the emergency backup goalie.

Lekkas has 19 games of professional experience while Bales hasn't played since 2009-10 when he was with the Straubing Tigers in Germany.

So, how'd the Sabres get here anyway?

- No. 1 goaltender Linus Ullmark has been out with a lower-body injury since April 13. He practiced for the first time since the ailment Monday.
- No. 2 goalie Carter Hutton suffered a lower-body injury March 22.
- Buffalo traded No. 3 goalie Jonas Johansson to Colorado on March 20.
- No. 4 goalie Dustin Tokarski is away from the team to deal with a family matter.
- Top prospect Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen suffered a lower-body injury Saturday during his fourth career start.

Houser was next on the roulette wheel.

"I'm very happy for him," Ullmark said. "It's a great opportunity for him to play at the top level, playing against one of the best teams in the league, as well. I'm just happy for him, you know?"

Ullmark was not alone. This is Houser's third season in the organization and he's made plenty of friends among prospects, minor-league coaches and the player development staff, most notably traveling goalie coach Seamus Kotyk.

"As we talked as a staff about the potential of putting him in, the guys that have known his history and followed his career are really excited for him because he is such a dedicated athlete and good teammate, good person," Granato said.

Houser was penciled to play this year with Cincinnati, but the Cyclones opted out of the ECHL season. He began as the Amerks' No. 3 goalie behind Luukkonen and Tokarski but never got a game. The Sabres signed Houser to an NHL deal when they traded Johansson and assigned him to the taxi squad to fulfill COVID-19 roster requirements.

"It's not an easy spot for any of the taxi guys to grind through this every day," Granato said. "It becomes monotonous for them because they're not in the lineup, and he's been outstanding through that."

Houser's professional journey to the NHL was arduous enough, but he had personal travails to conquer. The Ohio native and Pittsburgh-area resident was born with bilateral club feet and underwent more than a dozen surgeries on each foot before age 2.

He wanted to join his brother, Nick, in youth hockey leagues, but the surgeries affected his skating ability. Houser was just fine in net, though. He excelled in the famed Little Caesars program in Detroit and was the Ontario Hockey League Goalie of the Year in 2011-12.

"I was born with club feet, and it's never really hindered me at all," Houser said. "I've been able to perform and perform at a high level at various times.

"It's made me work a little bit harder, knowing that I have to keep up, that I'm not, I guess, as naturally gifted as some others in terms of maybe footwork."

On this night, one that was nine years in the making, he was gifted enough to appear in an NHL game and win it. He was eager to call the people who helped make it happen.

"My parents are basically the only ones who have seen my entire career," Houser said. "I'm sure this is just as special for them as it is for me, and I'm really excited to talk to them."

Sabres goalie Michael Houser shines in NHL debut: 'A very special night'

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

May 4, 2021

BUFFALO – Eight teams, nine seasons and 284 games into his pro career, Sabres goalie Michael Houser made his NHL debut, stopping 34 shots in Monday's 4-2 come-from-behind win over the New York Islanders.

In a dreadful year in which the Sabres could finish dead last again, Houser's first big league start created a feel-good story that provided some excitement and intrigue to a meaningless late-season game.

Houser, 28, has spent most of his career toiling in the ECHL, playing only 73 AHL contests, including just two in the last five seasons. He hadn't played a game at any level since March 7, 2020 with the Cincinnati Cyclones, the Sabres' ECHL affiliate.

Despite the nearly 14-month layoff, Houser he looked terrific Monday, stopping all 15 shots he faced in the third period as the Sabres roared back to beat the Islanders for the first time in seven meetings this season.

When Sabres center Sam Reinhart's empty-net goal, his second of the third period and 25th this season, sealed the victory, Houser said he felt a sense of "huge relief."

"It's so exciting," Houser said on a Zoom call. "I've worked my whole life for this, for it to happen. Just to play a game it's really special, but to win, winning's always the goal, that's why we play."

When the horn signaled the end of the game, Houser's ecstatic teammates streamed off the bench and embraced him.

"It was very cool," interim Sabres coach Don Granato said. "Special. Special. It was fun."

Granato said he was walking to the dressing room but stopped to watch the on-ice celebration inside KeyBank Center.

"What an opportunity and an incredible job to seize an opportunity," he said of Houser. "A very special night, special person. So, great to be a part of it. And the locker room was even better. The rallying in the locker room was very, very enjoyable for all. What a moment."

Sabres winger Tage Thompson said of Houser: "It was awesome, the boys are really fired up for him. He stood on his head, played a great game. I don't think there's too many more deserving guys. He's one of the hardest-working players and goalies I've ever been with."

Houser will have another chance to play tonight. Granato said the rookie will start the home finale against the Islanders. He said Sabres goalie Dustin Tokarski is attending to a family matter and unavailable to play.

Perseverance and a run of goalie injuries helped Houser, who has spent much of this season on the Sabres' taxi squad, earn Monday's nod.

Right now, Carter Hutton, Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen and Linus Ullmark are all injured.

Houser, who was recalled from the taxi squad Monday afternoon, became the sixth Sabres netminder to start a game this season.

After beginning the season with Rochester Americans, Houser signed a one-year contract with the Sabres on March 19, his first NHL deal in six years. He has spent most of the past seven weeks on the taxi squad. He has dressed as a backup five times.

Houser, who was informed by assistant coach Mike Bales on Monday morning he would be starting, said he felt a little sloppy in the beginning of the game.

"Which was to be expected, I think," he said. "I just felt a little bit loose, and I think that goes hand-in-hand with not playing for so long. I told myself this afternoon I would just try find the pucks that were in tight and fight for your ice and just try to keep going.

"I really wasn't thrilled about either of the goals, but I was happy how I responded after the second."

Adam Pelech's first-period goal deflected in off Sabres defenseman Henri Jokiharju's stick before Oliver Wahlstrom's redirection 10:42 into the second period made it 2-0.

In between, an Islanders goal was called back for goalie interference.

Thompson's second-period power-play goal gave the Sabres life before winger Rasmus Asplund tied it 11:25 into the third period.

Reinhart's goal at 15:56 put the Sabres up. His empty-netter tied his career high set in 2017-18.

By then, the 6-foot-1, 185-pound Houser was exhausted.

"It's super exciting," Houser said after the Sabres' four-game losing streak ended. "I'm not really in that great of game shape, either, I'll admit that. So I ... could barely breath, so I'm just trying to catch my breath right now, give my parents a shout after this and see what their take is on it."

Sabres sign Amerks goalie Stefanos Lekkas to PTO, make other moves

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

May 3, 2021

BUFFALO – The Sabres this afternoon signed Rochester Americans goalie Stefanos Lekkas to a professional tryout contract and he will back up Michael Houser tonight against the New York Islanders.

Sabres assistant coach Mike Bales, a former NHL goalie, will serve as the emergency backup, according to the team.

Goalie Dustin Tokarski, who was expected to start tonight, did not skate this morning. Tokarski relieved goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen when he was injured in Saturday afternoon's 6-2 loss to the Boston Bruins

The Sabres this afternoon also recalled Houser from the taxi squad.

The 6-foot, 181-pound Lekkas, 25, has compiled a 1-5-1 record, a 4.32 goals-against average and an .863 save percentage in seven games with the Amerks. The rookie earned his first AHL win Saturday.

The Vermont product compiled stellar numbers – 7-2-2, 2.15 and .914 – in 11 outings with the ECHL's Fort Wayne Komets earlier this season.

In other news, the Sabres recalled forward C.J. Smith from the Amerks to the taxi squad and sent forward Jean-Sebastien Dea from the taxi squad to the AHL club.

Sabres goalie Michael Houser to realize dream with first NHL start

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

May 3, 2021

BUFFALO – Sabres goalie Michael Houser toiled nine years in the minors, playing 283 games, most of them in the ECHL, for seven teams before an opportunity to start an NHL game materialized.

Tonight against the New York Islanders at KeyBank Center, Houser, 28, will make his NHL debut, interim coach Don Granato said. Houser will be the sixth Sabres goalie to start a game this season.

Houser has spent most of the past seven weeks on the taxi squad and dressed as a backup five times.

Incredibly, he hasn't played a game at any level this season. His last appearance came March 7, 2020 with the Cincinnati Cyclones, the Sabres' ECHL affiliate.

"It's been a while since I played, so I'm just going to try to get into the game as quick as possible and get a couple touches," Houser said on a Zoom call this morning. "It's exciting. I've waited for this for a long time and worked extremely hard for it. It's an exciting opportunity for myself."

Houser said assistant coach Mike Bales, who's in charge of the goalies, told him when he arrived at the rink this morning he would be starting tonight.

The Sabres gave goalie Dustin Tokarski, who replace an injured Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen in Saturday afternoon's 6-2 loss to the Boston Bruins, the morning off.

Linus Ullmark skated with his teammates this morning for the first time since suffering a lower-body injury April 13. Carter Hutton, meanwhile, is still recovering from a lower-body injury.

So Houser, who signed his first NHL contract in six years on March 19, will go tonight.

"It's a little nerves right now but I think after the puck drops, settle in, hopefully get a quick touch and then it is just another hockey game," said Houser, who began this season with the Rochester Americans. "I'm going to have to tell myself I played a million of these before, just different players on the ice. But it's exciting. There's nothing to back down from. I've been waiting for this for a long time so just ready to get going tonight."

Houser said he "always viewed myself as a hockey player" and simply kept plowing ahead.

"That's always been my job ever since I turned pro when I was 20, I've just been working for this moment," he said. "The work never changes based on where you're playing, whether it's Cincinnati, Rochester or Buffalo. It's always the same work, I practice the same way and just have different players playing against me and in front of me."

"So I think the exciting thing too is I've never played a game with all NHLers, all NHL defensemen in front of me. So being able to play with them tonight, go back and play the puck and watch them break it out, it's going to be fun."

Granato said those familiar with Houser's path "have been really excited for him because he is such a dedicated athlete and a good teammate, good person."

"Everybody that knows him is excited for this opportunity for him as I am, based on all that and what I see from him too," he said. "He's been great. It's not an easy spot for any of the taxi guys to grind through this every day. It becomes monotonous for them because they're not in the lineup and he's been outstanding through that."

Granato did not have an update on Luukkonen, who was being examined this morning.

Sabres goalie Linus Ullmark's return to ice 'very pleasant surprise'

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

May 3, 2021

BUFFALO – After a lower-body injury sidelined goalie Linus Ullmark 15 games, he returned in late March and quickly morphed into the Sabres' backbone again.

Then on April 13 in Boston, Ullmark, in his eighth appearance back, suffered a lower-body ailment stretching to make a save in the opening minutes. At first, he tried to play through the pain.

"When the pain never subsided and it was getting worse and worse, I couldn't find any strength in my pushes and it was like, 'OK, let's shut it down. I'm not going to be able to go out there and compete against Boston and do a good job of doing that,'" Ullmark said on a Zoom call this morning after skating with his teammates.

Interim Sabres coach Don Granato said Ullmark's first team skate since suffering the injury was a "very pleasant surprise."

On Tuesday, Granato said Ullmark wasn't "in the picture" to return.

"He had a couple skates on his own and wanted to jump in, felt comfortable enough on the medical side with him to jump into the skate today," Granato said this morning. "So we're gathering more information on that to see how he responded and felt with regard to the skate today to see if there's more reason to be optimistic on him in the next few days."

The Sabres have three games remaining this season following tonight's contest against the New York Islanders at KeyBank Center. Michael Houser will start tonight, his first NHL appearance.

"It's the first practice back and it was certainly enjoyable," said Ullmark, who has missed the last 10 games. "I had fun out there skating around with the boys. And regarding the future, there's still things that need to be done beforehand but we'll see."

Ullmark has performed at a high level all season, compiling a 9-6-3 record with a 2.63 goals-against average and a .917 save percentage in 20 games.

"It certainly was a very frustrating thing to happen, especially when you've gone through a bigger one beforehand," Ullmark said of the injury. "If I can rewind and obviously do something different I would've done it, but looking back at it at the time, I did what I had to do to be ready for the game and to play like I normally do. It was kind of a weird thing that just happened."

–

The Sabres will make one lineup change against the Islanders, inserting center Cody Eakin for winger Tobias Rieder.

With Eakin back after sitting out seven straight games as a healthy scratch, Riley Sheahan will move from center to left wing on the fourth line.

Houser lifts Sabres in his first NHL game as Sabres top Isles 4-2

By Matt Bove

WKBW

May 3, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. [WKBW] — In his first-ever NHL game, 28-year-old Michael Houser made 34 saves as the Buffalo Sabres topped the New York Islanders 4-2.

"It's so exciting, I've worked my whole life for this, for it to happen and just to play a game is really special but to win, winning is always the goal, that's why we play is to win the game and I'm happy we were able to do that," Houser said after the game.

"I was walking off the bench and I had to stop and watch the celebration, and the excitement," interim head coach Don Granato said. "What an opportunity and incredible job to seize the opportunity. It was a very special night for a special person and it was great to be a part of it."

Houser, who is in his ninth season as a pro, hadn't started a professional game in more than a year. His last professional start was in the ECHL with Cincinnati in 2020.

"I'm just extremely happy for him," defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen said. "Good things happen to good people."

"The boys are really fired up for him," forward Tage Thompson added. "He was prepared for this opportunity and he took advantage of it."

Despite trailing 2-0 in the second period, the Sabres scored the next three goals to ultimately take the lead and earn their 14th win of the season.

Tage Thompson scored the Sabres' first goal on the power play in the second period to bring the home team within one. Rasmus Asplund later tied the game in the third period making it a 2-2 game with 8:35 left to play.

Less than five minutes later, Sam Reinhart redirected a shot from Rasmus Ristolainen to give the Sabres a 3-2 lead. Reinhart added the empty-netter to seal the win for the Sabres.

With his two goals on Monday, Reinhart now has 25 goals this season.

The Sabres have only three games left this season and take on the Islanders once again on Tuesday evening. Buffalo closes out the season with two road games against the Pittsburgh Penguins.

Houser wins NHL debut in first game since March 2020

By Paul Stockman

WIVB

May 3, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – Fourteen months ago, Michael Houser was playing for the Cincinnati Cyclones in the ECHL. That was the last time he saw the ice for a competitive game.

Monday night, in his first NHL game ever, Michael Houser did just what he needed to do in net for the Sabres, and his team helped him big time in the third by scoring three goals to get the 4-2 win. It wasn't just his first NHL game, it was his first game since March of 2020.

Houser made 34 saves on 36 shots, and despite trailing 2-0 at one point, his team didn't give up.

Buffalo couldn't get much going in the offensive zone in the first two periods, only scoring one goal on a Power Play from Tage Thompson. Then in the third, Rasmus Asplund got the game-tying goal, and Sam Reinhart redirected the go-ahead goal later in the period.

They added an empty-netter to take the 4-2 lead and eventually the victory. As the clock ran down to zero, Houser hit his stick against both posts on the goal and celebrated immediately with his teammates.

Players all congratulated their goaltender as he picked up his first win in his first game in the NHL.

Houser gave up his first goal in the first period when a shot from the Islanders' Adam Pelech ricocheted off the stick of Houser's teammate Henri Jokiharju, and it put New York in the lead.

The second goal came off another redirect, this one actually came from the Isles as Oliver Wahlstrom put one in the back of the net.

The Sabres face the Islanders again Tuesday night in the home finale at 7 p.m.

Michael Houser to make NHL debut for injury-riddled Sabres

By Paul Stockman

WIVB

May 3, 2021

BUFFALO, N.Y. (WIVB) – Just four games left for the Buffalo Sabres, and in keeping with the theme of the season, they're dealing with another injury in the net. Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen went down in Saturday's game and did not return. Dustin Tokarski was not on the ice Monday, which means the Sabres will start their sixth different goaltender of the season when Michael Houser makes his NHL debut.

"It's a little nervous right now, but I think after the puck drops, settle in, hopefully get a quick touch and then you know it's just another hockey game," Houser said.

Houser hasn't played in a competitive hockey game in nearly 14 months. His last game was for the Cincinnati Cyclones in the ECHL on March 11th, 2020. He's not backing down from the challenge, though.

"I'm going to have to tell myself I've played 1 million of these before, just different players on the ice, but it's exciting," Houser said. "There's nothing to back down from. Been waiting for this for a long time so just ready to get going to it tonight."

Houser went 16-5-5 in Cincinnati in the 2019-2020 season. He's spent the past nine seasons in either the AHL or the ECHL.

"It's still hockey," Houser said. "I've always viewed myself as a hockey player and that's always been my job. Ever since I turned pro at 20 I've just been working for this moment. The work never changes based on where your playing whether it's Cincinnati, Rochester or Buffalo, it's always the same work. I practice the same way and just have different players against me and in front of me."

Interim head coach Don Granato spoke positively of the goaltender as he steps into a tough spot.

"Everybody that knows him is excited for this opportunity for him as I am," Granato said. "Based on all of that and what I've seen from him too. He's been great. It's not an easy spot for any of the taxi guys to grind through this every day, it becomes monotonous for them because they are not in the lineup and he's been outstanding through that."

The Sabres play the Islanders at 7 p.m.

Houser, ECHL goalie, wins NHL debut for Sabres against Islanders

By Heather Engel

NHL.com

May 3, 2021

BUFFALO -- Michael Houser made 34 saves in his NHL debut for the Buffalo Sabres, who rallied for a 4-2 win against the New York Islanders at KeyBank Center on Monday.

The 28-year-old hadn't started a professional game since March 7, 2020, with Cincinnati of the ECHL, making 24 saves in a 1-0 shutout against Toledo.

"It's super exciting," Houser said. "I'm not really in that great of game shape either, I'll admit that. So, I was like after the game celebrating and everything, I could barely breathe, so I'm just trying to catch my breath right now. [I'll] give my parents a shout after this and see what their take is on it."

Sam Reinhart deflected a Rasmus Ristolainen point shot to make it 3-2 at 15:56 of the third period, then made it 4-2 with an empty-net goal at 19:08.

Tage Thompson had a goal and an assist for the Sabres (14-32-7), who trailed 2-0 in the second period but ended a four-game losing streak.

"After I saw [the empty-net goal] went in, it was a huge relief," Houser said. "It's so exciting, like, I've worked my whole life for this, for it to happen. Just to play a game it's really special, but to win, winning's always the goal. That's why we play."

Semyon Varlamov made 36 saves but had his shutout streak end at 248:00 for the Islanders (31-16-5). Adam Pelech had a goal and an assist.

The teams play here again Tuesday.

"I thought we played, and I'll use a term I used with the players, I thought we played with a little bit of arrogance," New York coach Barry Trotz said.

The Islanders clinched a berth in the Stanley Cup Playoffs on Saturday but fell to fourth place in the MassMutual East Division following the Boston Bruins' 3-0 win at the New Jersey Devils on Monday.

"Even though we clinched a playoff spot and had an emotional weekend, that's not an excuse," Pelech said. "We're definitely disappointed with how we played, and we're aware of that. I thought we came out sluggish today when this is an opportunity to fight for positioning in the standings, play for home-ice advantage. We just we didn't play our game tonight and we need to get back to it tomorrow."

Pelech's pass attempt from the left circle deflected off Sabres defenseman Henri Jokiharju's stick and over Houser's pad to give the Islanders a 1-0 lead at 9:15 of the first period.

Ryan Pulock scored 35 seconds into the second period, but the Sabres won a challenge for goalie interference.

Oliver Wahlstrom made it 2-0 at 10:42 when he redirected Pelech's shot from the slot.

"It took us a while to get to our game," Sabres coach Don Granato said. "... It was big that the non-goal was called the way it was. You don't want to fall behind 2-0 at that point, and so that was a key moment. But our guys stayed on it and, again, it was nice to see because of last game and we actually responded and had that in mind where we didn't shoot the puck and we knew we had a tall task today in that regard."

Varlamov's shutout streak ended when Thompson cut it to 2-1 from the right circle at 14:04 of the second period.

Rasmus Asplund tied it 2-2 when he took a pass from Reinhart at the side of the net at 11:25 of the third period.

Houser made 15 saves in the third.

"It was very cool. Special. Special. It was fun," Granato said. "I was halfway, I was walking off the bench and I had to stop and watch the celebration and the excitement. What an opportunity and an incredible job to seize an opportunity. A very special night, special person. So, [it was] great to be a part of it.

"And the locker room was even better. The rallying in the locker room was very, very enjoyable for all. What a moment."

NOTES: Varlamov's shutout streak is the 12th-longest in NHL history. Alec Connell has the longest at 460:49, set from Jan. 28-Feb. 22, 1928 with the Ottawa Senators. ... New York center Jean-Gabriel Pageau did not play after he missed most of the third period against the New York Rangers on Saturday. Trotz said it's a minor injury and Pageau should be able to play Tuesday. ... It was the Islanders' first regulation loss this season when leading after two periods (15-1-1), and the Sabres' second win when trailing after two (2-27-2). ... Stefanos Lekkas signed a professional tryout contract with Buffalo prior to the game and was Houser's backup. Lekkas had been playing with Rochester of the American Hockey League.

Undrafted 9-year pro Michael Houser earns 1st career start for Sabres

By Sean O'Leary

The Score

May 3, 2021

Houser's been on the Sabres' taxi squad for much of the 2021 season but had yet to play a game. The 28-year-old was never drafted, and his last professional appearance came on March 7, 2020, for the ECHL's Cincinnati Cyclones, according to Jourdon LaBarber of the Sabres website.

He's played only one game above the ECHL level since the 2016-17 campaign - a one-save effort in relief with the Tucson Roadrunners.

"It's a little nerves right now," Houser said per The Athletic's John Vogl. "But I think after the puck drops, settle in, hopefully get a quick touch, and then it is just another hockey game. I'm going to have to tell myself I've played a million of these before and it's just different players on the ice."

Houser got his long-awaited chance as the Sabres deal with numerous injuries between the pipes. No. 1 starter Linus Ullmark remains sidelined and rookie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen is awaiting his own injury diagnosis. Dustin Tokarski is getting a rest day.

Houser is the sixth different goalie to start a game for the last-place Sabres this season.

AROUND THE PROS: Michael Houser nets long-awaited NHL debut

By Ryan Pyyette

Regina Leader-Post

May 4, 2021

It's always a joy to see an ex-Knight or London and area player realize their NHL dream.

The Michael Houser graduation, though, stands out because of the journey.

The 28-year-old finally got his shot Monday because the Buffalo Sabres officially run out of other options due to injury and availability. He delivered with a 34-save, first-star performance in a 4-2 victory over the New York Islanders.

This is hardly a David Ayres-beats-the-Leafs emergency situation, though. Houser has been a professional goalie for nine years and one of the better ones at the ECHL level.

Before that, he established himself as one of the best netminders in Knights history. The workhorse owns the franchise wins record and backstopped the club to the 2012 Memorial Cup final on the heels of an OHL MVP and Canadian Hockey League award-winning season.

Houser never got picked in the OHL or NHL drafts. He was routinely ignored by USA Hockey.

Not a lot of people believed he would make it as far as he did. But he overcame being born with club feet to make a career out of the game to now earn the crease at the highest level.

"It's an absolutely fantastic example that if you stick with it and work hard, you'll finally get your chance," said Bill Dark, the Knights goalie coach when Houser was here. "He has continued to be a soldier who has gone back between the ECHL and the American league and keeps going.

"You're proud and excited to see a former player get this sort of opportunity. Your chances sometimes come out of the craziest situations."

It was an unenviable one, for sure.

The Sabres threw him in net despite having not played a single game all season. His last real contest was March 7, 2020, before the pandemic started, and he boasted only 29 minutes of action above the ECHL level since 2016-17.

The organization originally expected him to provide depth for their American league affiliate in Rochester, so he didn't get any time there or in Buffalo as the third-string goalie mostly assigned to the taxi squad simply because the roster rules in the COVID-19 era demanded it.

As the injuries mounted, Houser's first chance to back up was at home in Pittsburgh with parents Monica and Bill in the stands. The only thing that would've made this better would have been the chance to play there.

But this is a major win for anyone who works diligently at their craft and has enough pride to keep at it when there doesn't appear to be any more ladder rungs left. Houser's competitive thirst perfectly fit with the approach of Mark and Dale Hunter — a quality shared by 2016 Memorial Cup champ Tyler Parsons and current Knights goalie Brett Brochu.

Houser was the best goalie in the OHL in an era when his foes included John Gibson, Jack Campbell, Matt Murray, Petr Mrazek, Mark Visentin, Garret Sparks, Malcolm Subban and Scott Wedgewood.

"It's the top class of goalies that have ever played in the OHL at the same time," Dark said.

There are a lot of NHL stoppers in that group.

Now, Houser is counted among them — and deservedly so.

And who knows where this goes?

He will start in the rematch with the Isles Tuesday and go for win No. 2.

AROUND THE PROS: Houser's old goaltending partner Igor Bobkov was part of the KHL champion Omsk Avangard that hoisted the Gagarin Cup last week. The big Russian had a 2.01 goals against average and .928 save percentage this season, but yielded the net to Simon Hrubec in the march to the title . . . Knights grad Billy Moskal made his pro debut Saturday with Cleveland in a 5-2 American league loss to the Texas Stars. His Monsters teammates in the game included Will Lothead and Cliff Pu. Brandon Crawley is also on board. Liam Foudy piled up three goals and 16 points in 11 games with Cleveland before rejoining the struggling Columbus Blue Jackets . . . Jeff Carter has fit right in offensively with the Pittsburgh Penguins. He should be a lethal option in the tightly contested playoffs . . . Former Knights co-captain Alec Regula was called up to the Chicago Blackhawks. He's up after ex-mate Adam Boqvist was shut down for the season with a broken wrist.

Michael Houser gets first NHL start, first NHL win and is named game's first star

By Mike Stubbs

Global News

May 3, 2021

Monica and Bill Houser were at home Monday morning when both of their phones went off at the same time.

Both of them received the same text from their son. It contained three words:

"I'm starting tonight."

The words sunk in immediately.

Hours after that text arrived, Monica and Bill and Michael's brother Alex watched as Michael made 34 saves in a 4-2 victory over the New York Islanders.

Then they watched as their son was named the game's first star.

"He has never been a doubter," says Monica. "The kid works so hard. He would never bring up that he wanted to make it to the NHL but you knew that was his vision."

Houser is a battler.

He battled as the Islanders buzzed early in the game on Monday.

He battled with four minutes and 30 seconds remaining in the third period when New York's leading scorer Mathew Barzal snagged a puck off a turnover, curled into the slot and fired.

Houser made the save.

There were the three saves in succession in the first two minutes of the game. The lightning-quick leg stop on a wrap-around chance by Anthony Beauvillier. He even got some help from a goal post on a breakaway opportunity by Brock Nelson.

But Houser settled right in and his teammates seemed to settle with him. Buffalo fell behind 2-0 but battled back. They managed tie tie the game on goals by Tage Thompson and Rasmus Asplund and then went ahead to stay 30 seconds after the Houser stop on Barzal when Sam Reinhart deflected a puck into the Islanders net.

The only pucks to find their way past Houser came on deflections. One hit the stick of Sabres defenceman Henri Jokiharju and the second was tipped home in front of the Buffalo net by Islanders forward Oliver Wahlstrom.

Houser did what he has done in so many games outside the NHL. He gave his team a chance to win. Something London Knights general manager Mark Hunter got very used to seeing when Houser was playing for the Knights from 2009-2012.

"He just oozed that love of the game and the will of the game," remembers Hunter. "That's what kept him going here to battle himself out of the minors to get into the National Hockey League. It's a lot of making sure that you don't quit on yourself and he didn't."

That was a trait that Hunter really liked about Houser's game from the first time he watched Houser in goal.

"I heard that a good goalie was playing in an Under-17 program from Pennsylvania. I drove up on a Sunday morning and was impressed."

Michael Houser was not an Ontario Hockey League draft pick. He was not selected in any of the National Hockey League Drafts that he was eligible for. Over nine professional seasons Houser played 210 games in the ECHL and 78 others in the American Hockey League and now, at 28 years of age, he was going to make his first start in the NHL. Like Houser's parents, Hunter was able to watch with pride on Monday.

"I'm so proud of where he came from and how he fought his way to the National Hockey League," admits Hunter.

The story of Houser's foot surgeries early in life is now well known. He was born with bilateral clubbed feet but never let that stop him from playing hockey.

Houser was the CHL goaltender of the Year in 2012. He won the OHL's Red Tilson Trophy as the league's Most Outstanding Player that same season.

His resume racked up eight stops in his nine year pro career before that road led to a new contract. A two-way deal between Buffalo in the NHL and Rochester in the AHL.

Even with two places to play, Houser didn't see action in a single game in 2020-21 before facing the Islanders. His last game was March 7, 2020 when he made 24 saves for a shutout win for the ECHL's Cincinnati Cyclones in a game against the Toledo Walleye.

Before the game Houser told sabres.com, "I've always thought that I'll just be patient, work hard and hopefully I get my chance. I've certainly gotten it tonight."

Then he went out and made that chance count.

Youngstown native makes NHL debut

By Ryan Allison

WKBN

May 3, 2021

BUFFALO, New York (WKBN) – Youngstown native Michael Houser made his National Hockey League debut on Monday night.

The 28-year old goaltender got the start for Buffalo and stopped 34 of 36 shots, helping the Sabres beat the playoff-bound Islanders 4-2. With the win, Buffalo improves to 14-32-7 on the season.

Browns sign free agent with troubled past

Houser went undrafted by the NHL and has spent most of his nine-year pro career in the ECHL. He's been on Buffalo's taxi squad for most of the 2021 campaign.

Houser started his career in the USHL. He played 32 games with the Des Moines Buccaneers back in 2008-09.

Former Cincinnati Cyclones goalie Michael Houser wins first NHL game for Buffalo Sabres

By Dave Clark
Cincinnati Enquirer
May 4, 2021

Former Cincinnati Cyclones goalie Michael Houser made his National Hockey League debut on Monday night for the Buffalo Sabres, making 34 saves and allowing just two goals in a 4-2 win against the playoff-bound New York Islanders.

More from the Cyclones about Houser's experience:

Houser made his professional debut with the Cyclones during the 2012-2013 season and posted a 17-10-2 regular season record and a 9-8-0 post season record. Houser has appeared in 75 total AHL games and 255 total ECHL games. He has spent the majority of the 2020-2021 season as a part of the Buffalo Sabres Taxi Squad. His last game action was a March 7, 2019 1-0 shutout for the Cyclones where he stopped all 24 shots by the Toledo Walleye.

During his career, Houser has spent parts of five seasons in Cincinnati with the Cyclones posting a 103-56-13 all-time record with the Cyclones'. His best season in Cincy was the 2018-2019 campaign where he posted a 29-7-5 regular season record with a 2.13 goals against average and .922 save percentage earning him First Team All-ECHL Team and Goaltender of the Year accolades.

"Michael has been the model of consistency throughout his career," said Cyclones head coach Matt Thomas. "To see him earn this opportunity is no surprise to his teammates and coaches over the years. He constantly strives to improve and is as competitive a goalie as I have ever seen."

Ex-K's goalie Houser wins in his NHL debut

By Justin A. Cohn

The Journal Gazette

May 4, 2021

Goaltender Michael Houser banged both posts with his stick, a ritual he performs when completing a period without allowing a goal. Houser, the former Komets goalie, was sparkling in the third period Monday night, stopping all 15 shots to give him a total of 34 saves as the NHL-worst Buffalo Sabres defeated the playoff-bound New York Islanders 4-2 in Buffalo, New York.

For Houser, who led the Komets to overtime of Game 7 of the Western Conference finals in 2018, it was the end of a wild Monday. He had never played in an NHL game before, hadn't played in any game in 14 months (he was on the Sabres' taxi squad), yet he led Buffalo back from a two-goal deficit.

Rasmus Asplund scored in the third period and Sam Reinhart netted two.

"It's so exciting. I've worked for this my whole life for this to happen," Houser said. "Just to play a game here, it's really special. But to win, winning is always the goal. That's why we play is to win the game. I'm happy that we were able to do that."

As an added bit of local intrigue, Stefanos Lekkas, a rookie who began this season with the Komets, was called in to be Houser's backup. Lekkas had been with Rochester of the American Hockey League, going 1-5-1 with a 4.32 goals-against average and a .863 save percentage in seven games.

Houser, 28, was 28-11-4 with a 2.73 goals-against average, a .909 save percentage and two shutouts for Fort Wayne in 2017-18, then in the playoffs he was 10-7 with a 2.44 GAA and a .914 SP.

He spent the last two seasons with the ECHL's Cincinnati Cyclones. He is the sixth goalie used by the injury-riddled Sabres, joining Linus Ullmark, Dustin Tokarski, Carter Hutton, Jonas Johansson and Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen.

"Anytime you're in the East Coast League, it seems like it's quite a jump to get (to the NHL). But being a goalie, the position's a little different thing," Houser said. "You never wish for injuries, but a couple injuries here and there and all of a sudden you're either starting in the American League or called up to the NHL.

"I know it's so cliché, but they always tell you to stay ready, and I've taken that to heart the last few years, mostly for a chance to play for (Rochester) and take that net if I ever had the chance to do that. This being a weird year, I got to skip that stuff and got this game."

Semyon Varlamov stopped 36 shots for the Islanders.

'That's why we play' | Houser makes 34 saves to win long-awaited debut

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

May 3, 2021

Michael Houser was still catching his breath when he arrived for his media session after playing the game of his life on Monday. Going fourteen months between games will do that a goaltender.

"I'm not really in that great of game shape either, I'll admit that," the 28-year-old journeyman said after his NHL debut. "... After the game celebrating and everything, I could barely breathe."

Houser became the sixth goalie to start a game for the Sabres this season and turned in a steady 34-save performance to earn a 4-2 victory over the New York Islanders at KeyBank Center. It was Houser's first game since March 7, 2020, a pre-pandemic shutout for ECHL Cincinnati.

Sam Reinhart tallied two goals and an assist during the third period to complete a comeback after New York took a 2-0 lead. Tage Thompson and Rasmus Asplund also scored goals.

Afterward, they rallied around their goaltender and celebrated the odds he had overcome, nine seasons into his professional career.

"I'm just extremely happy for him," Ristolainen said. "Good things happen for good people."

Our takeaways begin with Houser's unforgettable night.

1. "They always tell you to stay ready"

Houser admitted Monday that there were times when his NHL dream felt further away than the seven-hour drive between Cincinnati and Buffalo. He last appeared in an AHL game during the 2017-18 season, spending the last two years on an AHL contract with the Rochester Americans but playing exclusively for ECHL Cincinnati.

But the goaltending position is unique. He told himself that he was an absence or two away from getting a shot in Rochester. From there, who know?

"I know it's so cliché, but they always tell you to stay ready," he said. "I've taken that to heart the last few years, mostly for a chance to play for the Amerks and take that net, if I ever had the chance to do that. Just being a weird year, I kind of skipped that step and got this game."

The Sabres signed Houser to an NHL contract on March 19 as injuries to their goaltending corps mounted. He backed up a few games but mostly spent his time with the Sabres on the taxi squad, leaving an impression with his attitude and work ethic.

"There's not many times he says no," Thompson said. "If I want to do breakaways with him after an hour practice and he's gassed, he'll still say yes. He's always looking to get better."

The opportunity to play arose Monday with Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen (injury) and Dustin Tokarski (personal reasons) both unavailable. Houser called to alert his parents, the two people he says have seen every game since he was five years old.

He stepped in and looked the part, limiting rebounds and keeping the Islanders at bay long enough for his teammates to mount the comeback. The two shots that beat him were both deflections, including one off the stick of his own defenseman.

"It's so exciting," he said. "Like, I've worked my whole life for this, for it to happen. Just to play a game is really special. But to win, winning is always the goal. That's why we play."

2. Houser to start again Tuesday

Granato said Houser will get a second straight start against the Islanders on Tuesday. Tokarski is unavailable due to a family matter.

3. Reinhart leads comeback

Reinhart had a four-game goal streak snapped during a loss to Boston on Saturday. He made up for it during the third period, tallying two goals and an assist to turn a 2-1 deficit into a 4-2 lead.

Reinhart ignited the comeback when he deked around Scott Mayfield and sent a pass through the crease to set up Asplund's tying goal with 8:35 remaining. He deflected a point shot past Semyon Varlamov for the go-ahead goal with 4:04 on the clock.

Finally - as he had to seal Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen's first NHL win last month - he lofted a shot from his own end into the empty New York net to add cushion during the final minute.

The two-goal outing ups Reinhart's total to 25, matching the career-best mark he set in 82 games in 2017-18.

4. Thompson fires away

Thompson scored his power-play goal on a shot from the right faceoff circle, one of a game-high seven shots on goal he tallied against Varlamov. The goal snapped an eight-game drought.

"I thought he was outstanding tonight," Granato said. "He had great jump and great energy but played with a lot more intent. ... He dominated a straightforward, hard-nosed game and when you combine that with his skill set and his size and reach, it's very impressive."

5. Up next

The Sabres play their final home game of the season against the Islanders on Tuesday. Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30 p.m. with puck drop set for 7.

At The Final Horn: Islanders 2 - Sabres 4

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

May 3, 2021

Michael Houser made 34 saves to earn a victory in his NHL debut.

Behind Houser's stellar performance, the Buffalo Sabres defeated the New York Islanders 4-2 on Monday at KeyBank Center.

With every other goaltender under contract unavailable, Houser, 28, appeared in his first professional game since March 7, 2020 - a 24-save shutout for Cincinnati of the ECHL. Houser last played in the AHL during the 2017-18 season and had never stepped onto the ice for an NHL game until Monday night.

Sam Reinhart had a three-point night against the Islanders with two goals and an assist. Tage Thompson recorded a goal and an assist, and Rasmus Asplund also scored for Buffalo.

Adam Pelech and Oliver Wahlstrom were New York's goal scorers. Semyon Varlamov made 36 saves.

Buffalo's power play went 1-for-3 and the Sabres' penalty kill finished 1-for-1.

What happened

The Islanders scored the game's first goal at the 9:15 mark of the opening period when Pelech's shot deflected off the stick of Henri Jokiharju and in past Houser.

Houser stopped 10 of 11 shots in the first period, but allowed the first shot against in the second period. With Casey Cizikas setting up a screen at the top of the crease, Roman Pulock's shot was deflected by Matt Martin and found its way in.

Buffalo challenged the call on the ice and upon further review, the officials determined that Cizikas interfered with Houser, negating the goal. The score remained 1-0.

The Islanders eventually scored again when a shot by Pelech was deflected in front by Wahlstrom with 9:18 left in the second.

Thompson rifled a shot from just above the right faceoff dot on the power play with 5:56 remaining in the middle frame to make it 2-1.

With 8:35 left in the third period, the Sabres tied things up. Reinhart worked around the defense and one-handed a pass to the front of the net. The puck made its way to Asplund, who buried it for his seventh goal of the year.

Reinhart tipped in a shot by Rasmus Ristolainen with 4:04 left in regulation to put Buffalo ahead for the first time all game.

Reinhart buried an empty netter with 51.2 seconds left to seal the victory.

Worth mentioning

-Houser signed a one-year contract with the Sabres on March 19. He had previously been on an AHL deal with the Rochester Americans.

Since signing an entry-level contract with the Florida Panthers on July 9, 2012 as an undrafted free agent, Houser played eight seasons in the ECHL and AHL.

Following the 2018-19 season with the Cincinnati Cyclones, he was named the 2018-19 ECHL Goaltender of the Year and an All-ECHL First Team selection after leading all netminders with a record of 29-7-4-1.

-Stefanos Lekkas signed a professional tryout contract with the Sabres before the game and served as Houser's backup. He's 1-5-1 with the Amerks this season.

He began the 2020-21 season with the Fort Wayne Komets (ECHL), posting a 7-2-2 record with a 2.15 goals-against average and a .914 save percentage in 11 games. He led all ECHL rookie goaltenders in goals-against average while ranking third in wins and fourth in save percentage when he signed a PTO with Rochester on April 13.

-The Sabres are dealing with injuries to Linus Ullmark (who took the ice with the team during the morning skate since sustaining a lower-body injury on April 13), Carter Hutton and Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen. Dustin Tokarski was unavailable to play or back up.

-The Sabres have used six goaltenders in a season only twice before.

In 1988-89, Tom Barrasso, Jacques Cloutier, Darren Eliot, Clint Malarchuk, Daren Puppa and Darcy Wakaluk all played.

And in 2013-14, Ryan Miller, Jhonas Enroth, Michael Neuvirth, Nathan Lieuwen, Matt Hackett and Connor Knapp saw game action.

This season, Houser, Hutton, Ullmark, Tokarski, Luukkonen and Jonas Johansson (who was traded to Colorado on March 21) have started games for Buffalo.

-Sabres goaltending development coach Seamus Kotyk joined Brian Duff and Martin Biron on the pregame show to talk about the organization's netminders:

Coming up

The Sabres and Islanders will go head-to-head for the final time tomorrow night. Faceoff from KeyBank Center is set for 7 p.m. on MSG and WGR 550 with pregame coverage on MSG starting at 6:30.

Sabres sign goaltender Lekkas to PTO

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

May 3, 2021

The Sabres have signed goaltender Stefanos Lekkas to a professional tryout contract, the team announced Monday. Forwards C.J. Smith and Jean-Sebastien Dea have been reassigned from the taxi squad to the Rochester Americans.

Lekkas joined Rochester on a professional tryout on March 17 and has posted a .863 in seven appearances. The undrafted 25-year-old had previously played 12 games with the ECHL's Fort Wayne Komets after finishing his collegiate career at the University of Vermont in 2020.

Buffalo will turn to 28-year-old Michael Houser to make his NHL debut against the New York Islanders on Monday night. Interim head coach Don Granato said the backup position was still being discussed after both Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen and Dustin Tokarski missed the morning skate.

Houser will become the sixth goaltender to start a game for the Sabres this season. You can read more about his story [here](#).

Morning Skate | Houser to make NHL debut with Luukkonen out

By Jourdon LaBarber

Sabres.com

May 3, 2021

Michael Houser always kept an eye on his NHL dream, regardless of how the circumstances stacked against him.

Houser went undrafted out of OHL London, where he received the Red Tilson Trophy as the league's most outstanding player in 2011-12. He signed an entry-level deal with the Florida Panthers organization, splitting time between the AHL and ECHL.

It was his first and only NHL contract before this season. Houser never considered playing overseas, instead signing a series of AHL deals with the thought of being a call away from the NHL.

"I've always thought as long as I have that I'll just be patient, work hard and hopefully I get my chance," Houser said. "I've certainly gotten it tonight."

The 28-year-old will make his NHL debut for the Sabres against the New York Islanders on Monday, becoming the sixth goaltender to start a game for the team this season. Dustin Tokarski did not participate in the morning skate, but interim coach Don Granato said the team was gauging his availability to serve as backup.

Tokarski entered during the third period in Boston on Saturday following an injury to rookie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen, who was still being evaluated by the medical staff as of Monday morning. Linus Ullmark, who has missed the past 10 games with a lower-body injury, participated in the morning skate but will not play.

"We're gathering more information on that to see how he responded and felt with regard to the skate today to see if there's more reason to be optimistic on him in the next few days," Granato said regarding Ullmark.

The Sabres signed Houser to an NHL deal on March 19 as injuries mounted in net. He began the year as a backup in Rochester after spending the past two seasons with Buffalo's ECHL affiliate in Cincinnati. Since then, he's either been on the taxi squad or on the bench as backup to Tokarski.

Houser has not appeared in a game since March 7, 2020, a 24-save shutout for Cincinnati before the ECHL season ended due to COVID-19. He last played in the AHL during the 2017-18 season.

"It's still hockey," he said. "Like, I've always viewed myself as a hockey player. That's always been my job ever since I turned pro when I was 20, I've just been working for this moment. The work never changes based on where you're playing, whether it's Cincinnati, Rochester or Buffalo."

The lineup

Here's how the team lined up Monday morning:

53 Jeff Skinner - 23 Sam Reinhart - 68 Victor Olofsson
74 Rasmus Asplund - 37 Casey Mittelstadt - 72 Tage Thompson
96 Anders Bjork - 24 Dylan Cozens - 25 Arttu Ruotsalainen
15 Riley Sheahan - 20 Cody Eakin - 91 Drake Caggiula

26 Rasmus Dahlin - 10 Henri Jokiharju
54 Mattias Samuelsson - 55 Rasmus Ristolainen
78 Jacob Bryson - 3 William Borgen

Final stretch

The game begins the final week of the season for the Sabres, who play back-to-back at home against the Islanders before finishing with a two-game set in Pittsburgh on Thursday and Saturday.

Granato said he expects his young lineup to continue to use the games as an opportunity to improve coming off a 6-2 loss in Boston on Saturday.

"Four games left, they've worked hard, they've had to fight through a lot which we all know, and we have to find a real internal motivation to play," Granato said. "On the simplest side of it, I can tell you in two weeks when the season ends these guys will be dying to get on the ice, dying to play and dying to play a game. So, here we are"

Tune in

Coverage on MSG begins at 6:30 p.m. Puck drop is scheduled for 7.