



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres notebook: Leino's status for opener uncertain

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

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Winger Ville Leino sat out the Buffalo Sabres' practice Saturday in First Niagara Center and his status for today's season opener against the Philadelphia Flyers is uncertain.

Coach Lindy Ruff did not disclose the nature of Leino's injury but it was believed to be related to his lower leg. Leino left the ice just before the end of Friday's practice and did not skate Saturday.

"We'll have him skate early [today] and we'll see where he's at," Ruff said. "He's a question mark. My discussions with him are that if he feels like he's good and ready to roll, we'll get him in. If he's not, we'll adjust the lineup."

Jochen Hecht skated at wing in Leino's spot on a line with rookie center Mikhail Grigorenko and veteran Steve Ott. Ruff said he might go with that alignment or move Patrick Kaleta up to the Grigorenko line. Either way, Matt Ellis will make the lineup on the fourth line if Leino is a scratch.

Injuries during the short camp were a huge fear for every NHL team. Forwards Nathan Gerbe (back) and Cody McCormick (finger) entered camp injured and will start the season on injured reserve but both are improving. Leino was the only Sabre to get dinged during camp.

"I tried to look into that week and make sure we didn't do anything that would put us in a real tough spot," Ruff said. "The day off [Thursday] was real important from a hydration standpoint and staying away from muscle pulls, to even not a lot of extra skating at the end to fatigue the players. We've come through it OK."

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Grigorenko said he's been thrilled with the way teammates have been helping him all week and doesn't feel he'll be nervous in his NHL debut.

"Hopefully after warmup, I'll be good," Grigorenko said. "I don't think nerves will last more than 1-2 shifts."

"I've liked the way he's played," said goaltender Ryan Miller. "Skates well. He's a good-sized kid. It appears like he understands what it takes to be a professional. He's in the weight room doing what he needs to do. He's on the ice trying to learn, paying attention."

"He's trying to get up to speed on some of the things we do here. I think he's been pretty solid. I don't know which way it's going to go but he'll slot in. It's good to have a young guy with energy."

On draft night last June in Pittsburgh, Grigorenko said he was hoping to prove the Sabres right and many other teams wrong for passing him up until Buffalo took him at No. 12.

“I don’t care about other teams now,” he said Saturday. “I just want to prove to the Sabres they made the right choice in drafting me.”

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Mike Weber and T.J. Brennan are going to be the healthy scratches on defense. The Sabres are going to start their defense pairs with Robyn Regehr playing with Tyler Myers, Andrej Sekera paired with Jordan Leopold and Alexander Sulzer working with Christian Ehrhoff.

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The Sabres remind fans that season tickets for today’s game were originally printed with a noon start time before the league finalized the national television schedule and changed the game to 12:30. Tickets marked for a noon start remain valid.

Gates open at 10:15 a.m. The Sabres Store will open at 9 a.m. for the last day of the 50 percent off merchandise sale. There will be fan-friendly prices on some concessions (\$1 popcorn, \$2 peanuts, \$3 hot dog/potato chip combo and \$4.25 souvenir Sabres soda).

The Sabres said Saturday that the Feb. 3 Super Bowl Sunday matinee against the Florida Panthers is a sellout, the fifth one the team has announced out of the 24-game home schedule.

No middle ground for Sabres' Cup hopes

By John Vogl

Buffalo News

January 20, 2013

It is a good thing there's more to people than first impressions. Because when it comes to those, Tyler Ennis and Cody Hodgson have a keen ability to completely underwhelm.

Ennis, with a slight frame, wavy long hair and baseball cap pulled low to cover his baby face, looks like a laid-back college kid who decided to take the semester off. "He's kind of like a small child," Drew Stafford said of his Buffalo Sabres teammate and road-trip roommate. "The guy doesn't really know how to clean his house yet, doesn't know how to really take care of things."

Hodgson, meanwhile, initially blends into the crowd on and off the ice. For a 22-year-old who's been gracing hockey magazine covers for years, that's not the ideal impact.

"I saw him in the summer," Sabres defenseman T.J. Brennan said, "and to be honest my first thought was like, 'This guy maybe has too much hype.'"

Once people dig deeper, admirable traits emerge.

Behind Ennis' carefree smile and whispery baritone is an intense competitor who lives for a challenge.

The 5-foot-9, 160-pounder has already absorbed blasts from the NHL's biggest players, and he's bounced up ready for more. "He's like a 12-year-old sometimes, but he's pretty much a hockey savant," Stafford said. "Give him a stick and a pair of skates and he's a genius."

Brennan took a closer look at Hodgson during the last four months in Rochester. They played together with the Sabres' minor-league club during the lockout, and the experience made Brennan believe the hype. Now he's adding to it.

"Getting a chance to play with Cody on the power play was almost like an honor," said Brennan, who led the Amerks with 14 goals and 35 points in 36 games. "Some guys are asking me, 'How are you getting off to a good start, this and that,' and it's easy when Hodgson's on the other side and everyone's worried about him. He just throws it through two or three guys to me, and I have an empty net.

"He's really impressive. He just loves the game. When you have passion like that, it almost makes it easy."

With their talent and competitiveness, Hodgson and Ennis have convinced the Sabres they are ready to become top centers in the NHL. They'll direct the first and second lines starting today in the season opener against Philadelphia.

"It's their turn," coach Lindy Ruff said. "It's their turn to move up the ladder. It's their turn to help push us even higher. I know that's a big load, but they welcome the opportunity. They welcome the ice time.

"I believe both of them can do it."

It is the first time Ennis and the 6-foot, 197-pound Hodgson will be front and center in the NHL. Once again, they'll have to overcome underwhelming first impressions.

Ennis, who turned 23 in October, has just 140 games on his resume. Hodgson, who will turn 23 next month, has played only 91. Their short careers have featured flashes of stardom and stretches of mediocrity.

They have not proven they're ready for the spotlight. They haven't shown they can handle the daily dose of the opponents' best, a list that starts with Flyers center Claude Giroux and continues with the likes of Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin, Steven Stamkos, Eric Staal, Brad Richards and John Tavares.

There are doubters. The duo is ready for them.

"The thing is with Hodgie, we're both like the same age and we're both hungry to be great hockey players," Ennis said. "It's kind of fun for both of us just to be in the position where if we both succeed and we both play well then the team is going to play well and succeed.

"It's fun. We like the challenge. Myself, I like adversity, I like trying to beat it. A lot of people probably are thinking smaller, young centers are not going to work, but I'm looking forward to the challenge."

Experience necessary

Ennis is half right about what challenges await. Smaller centers can have success, but young centers often do not, at least when it comes to the ultimate achievement.

In the era between lockouts, the top two centers on Stanley Cup winners entered the season with an average of 638 games played. Combinations such as Pavel Datsyuk and Henrik Zetterberg of Detroit (643 games), Crosby and Malkin of Pittsburgh (373), and Anze Kopitar and Mike Richards of Los Angeles (846) learned how to excel through the years and used that experience to earn a championship.

The runners-up from 2006 to 2012 also relied on veteran middlemen in their quest for hockey's holy grail. Their first- and second-line centers combined for 692 games played. Duos such as Shawn Horcoff and Michael Peca of Edmonton (890 games), Richards and

Danny Briere of Philadelphia (881), and Henrik Sedin and Ryan Kesler of Vancouver (1,130) traversed the sport's ups and downs before reaching the finals.

The Sabres are asking Hodgson and Ennis to help carry them to the promised land after just 231 games.

"It is a pivotal position," said Sabres left wing Steve Ott, who played in Dallas alongside Mike Modano, one of the all-time great centers. "It's hard because you're going into other buildings where you have a Brad Richards in New York or Sid and Geno Malkin, and those guys are more veteran-based, older guys. They've learned the position well.

"Hodgie and Enzo are top-skill level guys. I think you surround those guys with good, veteran players, and it makes their center position a lot easier. I think we have very, very strong wingers that can kind of help out those young centermen as they learn this experience."

Hodgson is in an enviable spot. He'll line up in the middle of left wing Thomas Vanek and captain Jason Pominville, the Sabres' two proven point producers and the leading scorers from last season.

"It's pretty incredible, a couple of All-Stars," Hodgson said. "Van and Pommer are at the top of their game, and they're the ultimate professionals. It's a pleasure to play with them. They work so well together, and I'll just try to complement them as much as possible."

Ennis is excited to be back with Stafford and rookie left wing Marcus Foligno. In 13 games at the end of last season, they combined for an astonishing 21 goals and 49 points.

"The challenge for that line is they're on the radar now," Ruff said. "They snuck up on some teams, and they're on the radar now. The challenge is to push through all that." Comfort zone found

Hodgson begins this season more comfortable than he ended the last one. Acquired from Vancouver at the trade deadline, he skated in 20 games with Buffalo and put up three goals and eight points in a whirlwind month.

"It's nice to have a place and be ready to go and not have to worry about things to start off the year, where you're going to be and that type of stuff," Hodgson said. "I'm happy to get going and start new."

He learned more about the organization and its style of play during the lockout. He excelled in Rochester, recording five goals and 19 points in 19 games.

More important, he got a glimpse of being a No. 1 center in the pros. Vancouver used him on the third line, but the Amerks lined him up against the best in the American Hockey League.

“He’s a game changer,” said Foligno, Hodgson’s linemate in Rochester. “He makes plays at crucial times.”

Observers have been critical of Hodgson’s speed, but he appears to have added quickness.

He was noticeably faster during training camp and the intrasquad scrimmage, which he attributes to working with trainer Gary Roberts and Sabres skating consultant Dawn Braid.

“It was awesome just to get a full regimen under my belt this summer and just come in in great shape,” said Hodgson, who was plagued by back trouble in prior offseasons. “Working with Dawn Braid helps a lot, too. In Rochester, she would come in basically once a week and work with the guys.”

Speed, elusiveness and creativity remain Ennis’ forte. He just needs to stay healthy. He missed 34 games because of ankle sprains last season and had his lockout time in Switzerland cut short with a shoulder injury.

The converted left winger is excited about his season in the middle.

“I just feel kind of free out there,” Ennis said. “Sometimes as a winger I felt kind of limited. I still enjoyed both positions, but being a centerman I just feel like it’s more creative, and that just suits my game.”

Ruff is going to give Ennis and Hodgson all the freedom they can handle. They will be power-play quarterbacks. They will kill penalties. They will be used for the opening faceoff and sent over the boards during the final minute.

Despite their youth and inexperience, they’re going to be the top two centers. Now they have to prove they can do it.

“It’s everyone’s dream to play in the NHL and play a big role in the NHL,” Ennis said. “The fact that we have two guys that are up-and-coming and excited to play and want to get better every day is pretty exciting. I’m focused, and I can’t wait to play.”

Sabres make offseason moves to bring more fire to the ice

By John Vogl
The Buffalo News
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The Sabres' task this season is to prove they are tougher. Tougher to play against. Tougher to score on. Tougher to beat in Buffalo.

And for fans hoping to see a big increase in goals? Tough.

The Sabres expect their identity to include blue-collar buzzwords like grit, determination and stinginess. They want to wipe away their reputation as pushovers with a thick piece of sandpaper.

They began their transformation in the offseason by adding fiery Steve Ott and 6-foot-8 heavyweight John Scott. They hope the influx of toughness permeates the dressing room.

"You have to look at the overall picture where you bring in a few guys who will bring grit, who will bring toughness, who will bring team toughness," Sabres captain Jason Pominville said. "In our conference and our division, we're going to need that to be able to win. By adding those guys, I think I like our team."

The grit comes with a price. As General Manager Darcy Regier acknowledged when he acquired Ott for playmaking center Derek Roy, the Sabres' skill level likely will be lower.

"The goal scoring has been pretty tight and got even tighter last year," coach Lindy Ruff said. "I don't see that changing."

Likely hindering the offense will be Buffalo's youth and inexperience down the middle. Tyler Ennis, 23, is the elder statesman among the top three centers with 140 games of experience. Cody Hodgson is 22 and first-round pick Mikhail Grigorenko is 18.

"We've placed a few gambles," Ruff said.

The Sabres are betting their defense and goaltending can carry them. They return seven blue-liners and have added T.J. Brennan, who blossomed in Rochester during the lockout. Ryan Miller finished last season on a 20-6-5 run.

"I'm hoping we're a team that is better defensively," Pominville said. "If we play well defensively with the goalie we have, we give ourselves a tremendous chance of winning."

"Ryan likes to know what he's going to see in front him and know what his defensemen are going to do. He can read off that easily, so if we can bring that to him I think it will definitely benefit our game. The end result is going to be us winning more games."

Offense

Since this is Buffalo, it makes sense that wings take center stage.

Pominville and Thomas Vanek will flank Hodgson after combining for 56 of Buffalo's 211 goals last season. Grigorenko will look left and see Ott, who has 19- and 22-goal seasons on his resume. On the rookie's right will be Ville Leino, who is eager to bounce back after a torturous first season in Buffalo that included a failed experiment at center.

"I like playing the right wing," Leino said. "I get a little more time on the offense. I can do my cycle game, work in the corners, hold on to the puck. That's where I'm best at.

"I like a guy like Otter. Big body, good shot, knows how to score, goes to the net, knows how to make plays. He's exactly the type of player you want to play with."

The make-or-break line is Ennis between Marcus Foligno and Drew Stafford. They combined for 21 goals and 49 points in just 13 games together at the end of last year. Duplicating that will be nearly impossible, but the Sabres need significant offense.

"One of our strengths as a line is taking advantage of other teams' turnovers and having that quick-strike offense, that quick transition getting going the other way," Stafford said. "We have the speed and skill to make those kind of plays."

Defense

The Sabres hope 6-8 Tyler Myers stands out. Injuries limited the defenseman to 55 games last year. When the soon-to-be 23-year-old is healthy, he can be a game changer.

"When he is real fresh and strong, he is a dominant force out there," Ruff said. "You don't have to get much heavier, but you need to put some stamina in your tank and you probably need to get stronger."

Christian Ehrhoff, who had at least 42 points in each of the previous three seasons, slipped to 32 last year. He and Andrej Sekera need to provide more offense.

Robyn Regehr and Alexander Sulzer should be more comfortable playing in front of Miller during their second seasons in Buffalo.

"If we can keep our goals against down and get up around three goals for, that's a pretty good picture," Ruff said. "I see a defense, when it was healthy, our record was really good. I think that's our strength. I think our unknown maybe is the youth we have at center ice right now, but that youth could really serve us well."

Streaks big in a short season

By John Vogl
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Pat LaFontaine's lockout-shortened season was shorter than most. The Hall of Famer was coming off major knee surgery and played just 22 of the Buffalo Sabres' 48 games in 1995.

It was still chaotic. He recalls traveling from games to airplanes and back to games, with little in between.

"I do remember that's all we did," LaFontaine said. "I don't remember practicing as much because we were trying to make up for some games."

It will be even more frenzied this season.

The 1995 Sabres had one additional back-to-back situation (10-9), but this edition will have fewer days off. The 1995 Sabres had two days between games 11 times, and they had four three-day breaks. This year, Buffalo has two days between games seven times and only two three-day breaks.

"Rest will be important," Sabres coach Lindy Ruff said. "It really is a light practice, real meaningful practices this time of year. ... The players will need a day of rest during the week, so it's going to be a lot about playing."

Once the games started in 1995, for the Sabres in January and LaFontaine in March, there was a sense of urgency.

"It was almost like playoff time all the time," LaFontaine said. "In many ways, if you have a 48-game season, you don't have a lot of time to waste. You want to grab the points."

The Sabres started 3-0, but they quickly transformed into a .500 team. The importance of streaks in a short season came to light during the final few weeks.

The Sabres were 17-18-6 on April 19. The division-rival Hartford Whalers were 18-18-5. Buffalo closed with a 5-1-1 run to finish in seventh place and make the playoffs, where it lost to the Flyers in the first round. Hartford went 1-6 and missed out.

As could be expected with less time for teams to distance themselves, the playoff races were tight. Only five points separated seventh place from 12th in the Western Conference. The fifth-place team in the East earned 52 points, while the ninth had 46 and the 11th 43.

The 1995 season can also be remembered for a major dip in scoring. Teams combined for 6.48 goals per game in 1993-94. They averaged 5.97 in 1995. Goals returned the following season with 6.29 per contest.

Ruff, who as an assistant with the Florida Panthers in 1995, wants the Sabres to remain levelheaded despite the increased significance of every goal, point and streak.

“What I think you really have to be careful of,” Ruff said, “is not putting too much into the wins and not too much into the losses.”

Sabres must avoid another slow start at home

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

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From five games in the first eight days to 48 games over 97 days, the Buffalo Sabres have one crazy-busy schedule this season in the wake of the NHL lockout.

Sabres coach Lindy Ruff was an assistant with the Florida Panthers during the 1995 shortened season and said he expects the every-night intensity to match that one.

“You thought every game meant so much,” Ruff said. “Every game, someone was jumping up [the standings] or falling down.”

Ruff said he’s not treating the schedule any different than he would a regular, 82-game slate. From today to the end of the original schedule, the Sabres had 38 games. That included an eight-day break for an All-Star Game in Columbus that’s been canceled and replaced by three games, and this schedule has been extended by 13 days (from April 13 to April 26) to accommodate the remaining games.

“Rest will be important. Trying to stay healthy,” Ruff said. “Rest ties into that, nutrition, how we travel. We’ve talked about all those situations.”

For some perspective on 48 games, consider this nugget: When the Sabres hit game 48 last year after a January loss in St. Louis, they were 19-24-5 and in 14th place in the Eastern Conference. On that date, 15 of the 16 playoff teams were already in place — including all eight in the East. Only Phoenix, which eventually passed Colorado, snuck in from outside.

So if virtually all of the playoff teams are in order after 48 games of an 82-game schedule, is it reasonable to think it will be hard to overcome deficits after 30 or 35 games this year?

Perhaps. Still, the simple time frame means teams will likely be closer together. And so will the fact that all play will be within conferences. No games against the West means every game is essentially a four-pointer for every team. It could allow more of a chance for teams to make up deficits.

Some items to watch on the schedule:

The start

No team is going to want to fall into an 0-4 hole out of the gate, a 2-6-1, a 4-9-3. For the Sabres, the real key has to be to figure things out at home quickly.

Buffalo has gone just 5-8-1 in its first 14 home games each of the last two seasons — including 0-6-1 in the first seven two years ago. And this year, remember, those 14 games would represent more than half of the home schedule.

The Sabres have seven games in the 12 January days on the slate. You would think anything less than eight of those 14 points would be considered immediate trouble.
Home vs. road

Much has been made about the fact the Sabres finish with 10 of their final 14 games at home and that could certainly help. But it also means the team has 20 of its first 34 on the road.

January and February are pretty balanced with 10 home games and 11 road games. March is where the Sabres need to stay afloat, with nine of the month's first 13 games on the road.

If the Sabres can get to the final week of the season intact, they should be golden. The last two games are at home against Winnipeg (April 22) and the New York Islanders (April 26). And if the finale becomes an absolute must-have, the Sabres will have the advantage of one of just two three-day breaks between games all season.

Back-to-backs

For a team that played 22 sets of back-to-backs two years ago — more than half the schedule — the Sabres get some reprieve on that this year with just nine sets. And two come without travel as the March 30-31 games against Washington and Boston and the April 13-14 matchups against Philadelphia and Tampa Bay are all in First Niagara Center.

Perhaps of more concern will be the fact the Sabres will play three games in four days eight times. Still, the team's lack of extended travel mitigates a lot of the trouble spots. Buffalo leaves the Eastern time zone for just one game, the April 9 trip to Winnipeg.

"We don't have the back-to-backs we always did," said captain Jason Pominville. "You have to get your rest but it's something that's better than in the past. The good thing is our travel. You're talking a lot of quick trips in and out of places. It's always been an advantage for us and this year it might help even more."

Missing time

The Sabres have been quick to point out how injuries were a major factor in their demise in recent seasons, especially last year. They'll be magnified this time around.

"If you do get hurt, if you miss 3-4 weeks for something, you're going to miss a quarter of the season," said Thomas Vanek. "That's going to be a frustrating part. At the same time, it's a sprint. For fans, it's going to be better than anything. If you go on a five-game winning streak, it's going to show in the standings and the same the other way."

Similarly, NHL discipline could have a big impact on things. The league says suspensions won't be cut back due to a short schedule. A six-game ban last year will be a six-game ban this year but that would be a dramatically larger portion of a team's schedule.

In shortened season, a hot goalie could be difference

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

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There's that old hockey adage about a goalie "stealing" a game for his team or maybe even an entire playoff series. But as we move into a regular season that is going to be just 48 games, at a time when the NHL is filled with stars in net all over the map, could a goalie steal an entire season for his team?

There's plenty of big names that could. It's plausible one of them is Ryan Miller.

Think of the goalies who dominated the stat sheet last year. Los Angeles' Jonathan Quick won the Conn Smythe Trophy (playoff MVP) after a regular season in which he finished with a 1.95 goals-against average and .929 save percentage. St. Louis had a lights-out tandem in Brian Elliott (1.56/.940) and Jaroslav Halak (1.97/.926). Cory Schneider of Vancouver and Henrik Lundqvist of the New York Rangers were both under 2.00 in goals-against average.

Detroit's Jimmy Howard and Boston's Tuukka Rask, who will take over this year from Tim Thomas, were both under 2.10. And any talk of goaltending these days has to include the likes of New Jersey's Hall of Fame bound Martin Brodeur, who led the Devils to the Stanley Cup finals.

"That's a school of thought for a lot of teams with their main guy," Sabres coach Lindy Ruff said when asked about the steal-a-season theory. "If that guy gets on a real good roll, it can push your team ahead of another team and gain you a little space [in the standings]. Ryan is more than capable of doing that. All those guys are capable of doing it. But part of getting on that roll is playing well in front of your goaltender, too."

Miller's overall numbers suffered badly last season in the wake of the Milan Lucic incident in Boston and the resulting concussion that dogged him for the better part of two months. Miller finished 23rd in the NHL in goals-against average (2.55) and 20th in save percentage (.916), and both figures were his worst in four years.

Miller is now 32 years old and he hasn't played in a competitive game in more than nine months. It might be tough to ask him to carry a team at this point, even while the Sabres are still planning to play him in at least 36 of the 48 games.

"Everybody took a different approach to be best prepared for a shortened season," said Miller, who spent the lockout working out in Southern California and at an NHL Players' Association camp in Phoenix. "In my case, I didn't see an opportunity at a high enough level to play. Insurance policies were awfully high. Plus it probably helps me coming off a season where I had a few incidents off the ice where I just let everything settle down." Stretch runs

Miller is three years removed from the high point of his career, the 2009-10 campaign after which he won the Vezina Trophy and during which he starred for Team USA at the Vancouver Olympics. He set career-bests with a 2.22 GAA and a .929 save percentage — figures not approached neither before nor since.

But his reputation remains as one of the best goalies in the world even if the numbers didn't back it up again until last February.

Miller has carried the Sabres for long stretches since becoming the regular goaltender in 2005. And one of them was last year, when a 14-2-3 burst put Buffalo in the thick of the playoff race.

Dogged by the concussion, Miller combined to go just 8-9-2 in December and January of last season, with a 3.06 GAA and .897 save percentage. But in February and March, with his health no longer in question after two concussions in less than a year, Miller's numbers soared to 17-5-5, 2.02 and .935.

Imagine if Miller put together a similar run in a 48-game season.

"You see people's stats over there in the West. You're paying attention," said new Sabres winger Steve Ott, who came from Dallas. "It's no surprise what he did with Team USA, what he did with his Vezina and his whole career. He had strong streaks last year and he's a first-class goalie in this league. We're very lucky to have a top-end goalie like him."

"You know goalies can get hot and we've seen Ryan have those stretches where he's just about unbeatable," said captain Jason Pominville. "Then you start talking about 20 games or so, even a little more, and if you have a run like that, it's almost half the season this year. So great goalies are capable of that and certainly Ryan fits into those names."

Miller doesn't necessarily subscribe to the theory that a goalie can win more than a few games on his own.

"You need some help," Miller said. "You need the boys scoring some goals and I'll try to keep them out. I guess it's fair to say if you do have a really good stretch in these 48 games, it could be the difference maker. But we're going to need that team game if we want to win a championship. We need to build that to get ourselves in good playoff position."

Numbers consistent

When you study Miller's career, the consistency in some of the numbers is mind-boggling.

- His goals-against average at home is 2.54 and his save percentage is .913. On the road: 2.60/.916.

- Prior to all-star or Olympic breaks, his numbers are 2.57/.914. After the breaks: 2.56/.915.

But there are other numbers that stand out as red flags:

- In his wins, Miller's numbers are 1.88/.937. In the losses, 3.50/.886.
- His numbers in March are 2.82/.907 — coming after a career full of solid play in January (2.38/.922) and February (2.49/.918).
- And then there's this: Miller's career numbers against the Northeast Division are average (2.46/.920) and his numbers against the Atlantic (2.80/.902) are downright poor. There are no games against the West this year and Miller's numbers against the Pacific (1.94/.935) really boost his overall profile.

The Sabres often run Miller into the ground (he's averaged 66 games the last five years) and his March numbers show fatigue. While this year's compressed schedule will be difficult, there won't be the cumulative effect of 82 games or long runs of travel out west that can wear down a goalie.

Even though he last played more than nine months ago, the Sabres hope a healthy Miller comes back this season as he finished the last one in passing Dominik Hasek to become the Sabres' all-time victory leader.

Miller posted a 19-6-5 record after the All-Star break, including a record of 15-4-3 over his last 22 games. He became just the sixth goalie in NHL history to get 30 or more wins in seven straight seasons and set a career high with six shutouts.

And the Sabres' rush to try to sneak into the playoffs was largely based on Miller's play in February and March.

"It's going to be different. This whole thing has kind of been about sustaining yourself," Miller said. "Everything about this year has been about a false start. You get your hopes up around November, you get your hopes up around December, the end of December. You tried to ramp up for each of those.

"For me, it was just about staying pretty level and skating 3-4 times a week at least. Hockey-wise, I'm in a pretty good spot. Mentally, I always kind of knew it would be a short sprint kind of situation."

Net play crucial

The top goalies in 1994-95, the last 48-game season, were Sabres standout Dominik Hasek (2.11/.930), Detroit's Chris Osgood (2.26/.917), Chicago's Ed Belfour (2.28/.906) and Quebec's Jocelyn Thibault (2.34/.917). Quebec and Detroit won their divisions and the Red Wings lost to New Jersey in the Stanley Cup final.

That's not real different than any other season. Top teams have top play in the net. Teams that are strong in some areas but weak in goal usually go nowhere. Think Toronto. The Sabres, a team hoping its offense will come around, will have to rely on their goaltender. Again.

"If he plays Ryan Miller hockey like he always has, the rest of it will take care of things in front of him," said Ott. "We're all committed to helping him out. It's a big team mind-set to add to team toughness with defense, forwards. He's capable of winning games himself and everyone knows that but we need to help him as much as we can."

"It's going to be an interesting situation," Miller said of the tight schedule. "Focus on game to game, week to week. Break it down to 2-3 week segments and try to win those. I hope we're focused on the balance of the game. We have to be good on offense, we have to be good on defense and our transition game either direction has got to be really good."

Winning Cup etched on Ruff's clean slate

By Bucky Gleason

The Buffalo News

January 20, 2013

In case anyone forgot the goal, it's inscribed on a glass plaque a few feet from the dressing room door as a reminder for every player heading toward the ice and anyone entering their locker area. It reads: "Starting today, the reason for the Buffalo Sabres' existence will be to win the Stanley Cup." — Terry Pegula, Feb. 22, 2011.

Certainly, you remember the words after Pegula purchased the franchise and established their tangible purpose. Nowhere does it say, "Missing the playoffs three times in five years is acceptable so long as you're a good guy." You're not going to find a sign that reads: "When in doubt, blame injuries."

The Stanley Cup is every team's goal, but it's more attainable when the owner removes all financial restrictions and tells his organization to win a championship. It calls for cold and calculating decisions to be made with Belichickian detachment and giving your team a chance by every means necessary.

Look at the Los Angeles Kings.

Last year, they had a good team that underachieved for various reasons for a good part of the season. They weren't playing to an accepted standard, so they fired a good coach and a respected man in Terry Murray. Darryl Sutter came aboard, maximized their talent and guided them to the Stanley Cup.

Last week, Lindy Ruff stumbled over softball questions that he normally would handle like belt-high fastballs. He was asked what his standards were for the Sabres. Rather than stand up and insist they make the playoffs, and put his own job on the line, he offered a vague and uninspiring response.

"The standard for us is the level we want to play at and holding each other accountable for it," Ruff said. "This is the level we want to play, this is the effort that we have to put into it, this is the discipline we need in the game. It comes from your peers. It's all around you, and that's the acceptable standard."

Ruff was reminded that accountability, effort and discipline have become buzzwords in recent years. Translation: shallow rhetoric. He was asked about the playoffs. "Oh, yeah, playoffs, for sure," he said. And he was asked about ramifications if the Sabres didn't reach them, widely viewed as the minimum standard.

"I don't even want to really go there," he said. "I know what you're talking about, but I really just want to focus on the positive."

Ruff has known me long enough to complete half of my questions before I'm finished asking them. I can do the same with many of his answers. Our unspoken familiarity

allows us to understand one another through subtleties of our personalities, our job descriptions and the tone of our voices.

So, yes, without me bluntly asking the question, he knew I was talking precisely about him getting fired if the Sabres missed the postseason again.

Ruff has been here for nearly 16 years and has missed the postseason three times in five seasons, six times in 14 seasons. He has said numerous times, usually when explaining his decisions to change forward lines, that he's not one to bang his head against the wall when things aren't working. I completely agree with him.

But the same approach applies to him.

Last season, he used injuries as an excuse with uncharacteristic regularity. His message became contagious within the organization and spread to apologists in the community. Injuries were a factor, but to suggest they were the biggest reason the Sabres failed would have been closing your eyes to the obvious.

"It wasn't all about injuries," goaltender Ryan Miller said last week. "Definitely, a lot of us were not playing the best hockey we could play. I don't think we were as sharp as we could be. I don't think we were playing to our strengths until late in the season. We'll see what kind of team we are real quick."

Miller coming clean was one encouraging sign if the Sabres are going to turn things around. Another was hearing Drew Stafford speak of frustration that had boiled over after the Sabres cleaned out their lockers. Out of desperation, during meetings with Ruff and Darcy Regier, they presented their unfiltered opinions.

Stafford was part of a free-speech group that addressed problems that had festered all season. They threw everything on the table. Ruff and Regier did the same. The healthy conversations left everyone involved feeling better afterward. Stafford found the new rules of engagement "a breath of fresh air" and "rejuvenating."

It sounded liberating.

Frankly, it was about time.

"I'll put it this way: the communication level is the best it's been since I've been here," Stafford said. "What happens next, we'll see. But we're all on the same page with preparing what we need to do and raising the level of communication and trust in one another. There's really no elephant in the room anymore. There's progress."

Stafford wouldn't reveal details of the meetings, but it's safe to assume the elephant in the room was Ruff relentlessly riding his players. Derek Roy was an entirely different animal. He never was the most charming teammate, but he stood up and spoke for many when criticizing Ruff for how he handled his troops.

“We met with our leadership group, and we went through everything — the good, the bad and the ugly,” Ruff said. “We tried to come up with a group solution. We took their input, and they took our input and tried to build for this year.”

The most important aspect of the meetings wasn't reaching terms of endearment with Ruff and Regier but moving forward with them. Now, with the slate clean, consciences cleared, expectations clarified and Roy gone, it's time for the Sabres' new attitude to start producing before the good turns bad and bad turns ugly.

Let's face it, Ruff and his players need one another. They're running out of time. If anything, they're fortunate only Roy was sent packing after last season. Ruff and Regier have beaten incredible odds to keep their jobs this long. Both could have been canned numerous times over the years. If Ruff were running the show and adhered to the same approach he's had with coaching, he would have fired himself and Regier.

Instead, Regier winds up with a contract extension.

Incredible.

The Sabres aren't going to turn into a conference contender with a few meetings. They need improvement across the board. Regier made a few moves to stiffen their backbone and adjust their attitude. Steve Ott is a gamer who should help, but to say Regier upgraded the roster would be a stretch.

For the most part, especially after their answer to a lingering problem at center was re-signing Jochen Hecht, the Sabres look the same as they did at the end of last season. Ruff will need to alter his coaching style to keep the Sabres' collective attention. Several players acknowledged that a large percentage of his team tuned out Ruff last season.

At some point, it was bound to happen.

Looking for a prediction? Try seventh in the conference. That's assuming they have a strong start and don't get comfortable. Fifth is possible, but so is 10th.

It's time for the Sabres to give back a sliver of what they have received from their absurdly loyal fan base. Forget the money. The people here deserve a return on their emotional investment. Too often, they've hit the exits feeling as if they spent more time and energy than the team they support.

Only in Buffalo do 10,000 people attend an intrasquad scrimmage and thousands more watch routine practices. Only in Buffalo do a measly 12,000 tickets remain unsold for a season compromised by a third lockout in 18 years. Only in Buffalo do fans wait in long lines to buy jerseys for a team that missed the playoffs three times in five years.

Only in Buffalo can Regier and Ruff survive without a championship, a goal that has been etched into words for a team not always sure whether it's coming or going.

John Vogl's reasons for optimism and pessimism

By John Vogl

The Buffalo News

January 20, 2013

Four reasons for optimism

1. **Strong beliefs:** The Sabres acknowledged probably their greatest weakness – toughness – by adding Steve Ott and John Scott. It's not just fighting. Ott can instill a fiery attitude on a team that showed as much emotion as a loan officer. Scott can allow others to act bigger knowing he's got their back.

2. **Cash in the rebound:** Ville Leino is not as bad as he played last year. Nearly everything that could go wrong did, some of it his own doing. He should bounce back. He has returned to the wing, his overwhelmingly preferred spot. He's more comfortable in his second year here. He'll make the offense better.

3. **Healing power:** For two of the last three years, the Sabres have used injuries as the excuse for not making the playoffs. The best way to overcome injuries is to have depth. The Sabres' player pool is deeper. They can go 10 deep on defense and 17 deep at forward, so it's time to retire the injury crutch.

4. **Defense mechanisms:** The ideal mix of skill, physicality and defensive awareness seems in place on the blue line. Christian Ehrhoff and Tyler Myers have top-pair talent. Jordan Leopold is consistent all-around, Alexander Sulzer was a revelation after a late-season trade and Robyn Regehr still scares opponents.

Four reasons for pessimism

1. **Middle ages:** There's no denying the talent possessed by centers Cody Hodgson and Tyler Ennis. Equally as noticeable is their inexperience. They are being thrust into top-line roles with limited resumes. If they're not ready to handle the likes of Crosby, Malkin, Giroux and the Staal brothers, the Sabres are in trouble.

2. **Slow to start, quick to fail:** The Sabres have been quiet out of the gate the last two seasons. It cost them a postseason spot last year, and only a historic rally saved them in 2010-11. There's no time to waste this year. With only 48 games on the schedule, another early season crawl will leave them crying.

3. **Drawing a blank:** Buffalo relies on puck possession more than most teams in order to create offense. It starts with the faceoff, and the team could have trouble at the dot. Only winger Steve Ott won more than 50 percent of his draws last year. Hodgson and Ennis combined to win 46.2 percent.

4. **Low net worth:** The Sabres struggled to find the net last season, ranking 17th. There's little reason to expect that to change. The Sabres gave up Derek Roy's skill for Steve Ott's grit, and it's unreasonable to expect Marcus Foligno-Tyler Ennis-Drew Stafford to continue their late-season tear of four points per game.

Sabres GM Regier receives extension; Pegula apologizes for lockout

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 20, 2013

BUFFALO – To his supporters, Darcy Regier's a victim. Poor ownership handcuffed the general manager multiple times. Look at the Sabres teams he built, they say. The 1998-99 club came within two games of the Stanley Cup. Two dynamic post-lockout teams also nearly won it all.

If he had been given more tools or just some help re-signing his own talent, who knows how far the Sabres could've gone?

Regier's detractors believe he should've been axed 10 years ago. He's too enamored with his own players and afraid to make bold moves, they say.

They wonder why he's still in charge after more than 15 years. The Sabres have missed the playoffs six times in 10 seasons, including last year.

Regier's this city's most polarizing sports figure, a title he likely won't shed until the Sabres win a Cup. Luckily for Regier, he has strong support where he needs it most – ownership.

He's working for his third owner now, and Terry Pegula doesn't want to let him go.

On the eve of the Sabres' season-opening home tilt against the Philadelphia Flyers, Pegula announced Saturday the team has signed Regier to a contract extension. No details were provided. Regier last inked an extension in the fall of 2010.

"I am very grateful and honored to be able to continue in this capacity working with this ownership," Regier said inside the First Niagara Center's Lexus Club. "... I think the beautiful thing about this organization is we continue to grow, continue to improve."

In his first chat with local reporters since the summer of 2011, Pegula said he approached Regier about the extension. They reached an agreement well before Saturday's official announcement.

"Darcy's a talented guy," Pegula said. "I know from some of the stuff I read not everyone agrees with that. But he's got all the resources now. We work very well, and we look forward to the future. We have a great communication in our hockey department. No egos. Everyone's pulling in the same direction, and it's a very good situation. ... It really runs very well behind curtains."

But that hasn't translated to the ice yet. The high-priced Sabres finished a disappointing ninth in 2011-12, Pegula's first full season as owner.

Regier said the pressure he feels to win is "more intrinsic than it is external."

“The intrinsic relates to Terry and ownership,” he said. “As everyone has spoken to, there’s a very strong family unity within this group. It’s more connected. And I think the other part of it, quite honestly, is when you’re involved with the team in this community, having lived here as long as I’ve lived here, you’re no longer an outside-hired GM. You feel an obligation. ...

“Quite honestly, it’s a good pressure to have.”

But is there a mandate this season? Do they need to at least make the playoffs? Pegula famously said the “Sabres’ existence is to win a Stanley Cup” when he bought the team almost two years ago.

“You’ve got to look at every season to try to win the Stanley Cup,” Pegula said. “Look what happened last year. Since I’ve been owner I’ve watched two teams win the Stanley Cup (Boston and Los Angeles). Both of them took about 40 years to do it. It’s not something you win every year as an organization.

“I think that our team is a lot different than the team I inherited when I bought it. I would say it’s got a new imprint on it, new mark. It looks like a good hockey team.”

Sabres coach Lindy Ruff, Pegula said, will adapt to anything.

“He’s pretty opened-minded,” Pegula said. “It seems right before you talk about saying maybe we need to do this or that, he’s already thought about it. He’s very perceptive in what his shortcomings or obligations have to be moving forward.”

Did Pegula tell Ruff he had to make changes this season?

“No, he just seems to be able to juke and jive and do it on his own,” he said.

Before Pegula began fielding questions, he apologized for the 113-day NHL lockout, something the Sabres have said they supported. Team president Ted Black also apologized earlier this month.

“We apologize to the whole hockey fan base – the media, our sponsors and our supporters – for the hardship we may have put people through,” Pegula said. “But sometimes things happen that you don’t plan for in life.”

Pegula believes the work stoppage “was worth it for the health of keeping a 30-team league.” He felt all owners needed stay united.

“You got to help some of these teams that are really struggling financially,” he said. “That’s how you keep a league, or we’ll be back to the original six before we know it. I don’t know of anybody in our group that was calling to just go ahead and settle.”

Pegula said he spoke with NHL commission Gary Bettman frequently during the lockout to share things and get updates. But he wasn't among the league's vocal owners.

"I'm a new owner, so I'm not about to go in there and say, 'OK, here's what we're going to do, guys,'" Pegula said.

He relayed one story he told Bettman, though. Following the 2004-05 lockout, Pegula swore he'd never watch another hockey game. He couldn't believe the NHL said it was stronger than before after losing a full season.

"I said, 'I know one guy you didn't come out stronger with. It was me,'" Pegula said. "My daughters actually got me back watching hockey again. I said, 'I'm sick of these situations.' ...

"I can understand that some fans are extremely upset because I was one of them at one time. We have to do our best to win those people back and try to get them under our wing again."

Local bars hope end of NHL lockout will bring back customers

By Jeff Gillette

Niagara Gazette

January 20, 2013

Niagara Gazette — The end of the NHL lockout couldn't come at a better time for the folks at Honey's.

With the NFL playoffs wrapping up today, kitchen manager Tyrone Washington says the return of hockey will bring a boost to the business.

The Buffalo Sabres return to the ice today to host the Philadelphia Flyers — and local bar and restaurant owners are hoping Sabres fans return with the team.

Washington said the lockout didn't really impact business on Honey's, a sports bar on Niagara Falls Boulevard in Niagara Falls.

"(The lockout) hasn't hurt us at all," he said.

But Washington knows hockey's return will be a good thing for the Niagara Falls Boulevard sports bar. "During hockey games this place is jam packed," he said. "The customers are excited for it."

Tom Proctor of the Falls is one of those excited customers.

"This is a great place to go for a Sabres game," he said. "I watch a lot of games here and they have so many TVs that you can see the game from anywhere,"

When it came to the actual business of the lockout, most fans said it hasn't soured them towards the NHL or the Sabres.

One fan at Honey's, Kyle Laughlin of Niagara Falls, said he is definitely back as a fan, and even found a positive in the lockout.

"I like the idea of the short season," he said. "I feel baseball and hockey seasons are too long."

Many fans felt the shortened 48-game season made it hard to predict how the Sabres would fair. But at least one fan thinks the Sabres are heading in the right direction.

"They're building a team around Miller," Proctor said. "and that is a formula for the Stanley Cup."

Sabres fever returns to Buffalo

By Kevin Oklobzija
Democrat and Chronicle
January 20, 2013

BUFFALO — More than nine months have passed since the Buffalo Sabres last played a game, yet the bitter taste of losing hasn't gone away.

In hockey, the only thing that cleanses away previous failure is the drop of the puck on a new season.

For the Sabres, and other teams as well, the bad taste has lingered a whole lot longer than usual. The NHL lockout, the second labor-strife shutdown in the past eight years, pushed back the start of the season to this weekend.

That's a long time for the Sabres to dwell on what they didn't do right a year ago. A long time to keep remembering the stretch drive, when they lost four of the last five games and missed the playoffs by three points.

A long time to remember the hit goalposts, the hits they didn't make and the pucks that eluded shot-blockers and goaltenders.

"Everyone in this sport is here for one reason: we hate losing," center Tyler Ennis said. "It sucks to lose.

"You can just feel it in our room now, how excited we are."

So, too, are western New York hockey fans. Angry as they may have been about the work stoppage and delayed start, the fans here apparently aren't holding any grudges.

"They live it, that's what they expect," said Ashley Pridmore, a Sabres fan from Branchport who wore her Jason Pominville jersey to Friday's Amerks game. "Maybe other places aren't as true or loyal to their team.

"I was actually very depressed that they were not playing. The Sabres are just my die-hard team."

More than 10,000 people showed up at the First Niagara Center to watch an intrasquad scrimmage on Monday night. Lines at the team store were 18 and 20 people deep during daytime hours earlier in the week. As of Friday, there were only around 10,000 tickets left for the entire 24-game home schedule.

"They love their hockey here and we're excited to be back," said right winger Pominville, the Sabres captain. "Our fans have been great throughout this whole process."

That's because they sense this season will be different. General manager Darcy Regier gave his team a makeover. Not at a day spa, either; he went to a construction site.

He traded center Derek Roy to the Dallas Stars for left winger Steve Ott on July 3. What they lose in points they'll more than make up for in abrasive and ornery play.

Ott defines snarl and provides energy for his teammates — and in the stands — from his hustle and grit.

But Regier wasn't done. He signed free agent winger John Scott, who at 6-foot-8, 270-pound can deter any of those bowling-for-goalies tactics opponents — such as Boston Bruins winger Milan Lucic — sometimes like to play.

“A nuclear weapon sitting on the bench,” is how Jamie Russell, Scott's coach at Michigan Tech in the early 2000s, described the hulking tough-guy forward to Bill Hoppe, who covers the Sabres for the Olean Times-Herald.

“He makes everyone in this room bigger,” Ott said.

Scott became a Sabre on July 1, when the free-agent signing period began. He isn't the typical first-day signing but the Sabres knew they were deficient in team toughness.

“More than anything else, we needed to move the balance of skill vs. the physical nature of our team,” Regier said. “We need to be tougher to play against.”

It seems pretty clear these won't be the Sabres you've been accustomed to watching.

“There's going to be some punishing hits,” coach Lindy Ruff said. “There'll be some penalties of aggression we'll have to live with.”

They will also have some on-ice puck artistry to admire. Cody Hodgson and Tyler Ennis will be the top two centers. Neither are proven front-line centers, but the Sabres expect them to prove they belong there.

“It's their turn to move up the ladder, it's their turn to push us even higher,” Ruff said.

Eager for a chance to do the same is 18-year-old Mikhail Grigorenko, the Sabres' first pick in the draft in June. He was chosen 12th overall and considered by most analyst to have been a terrific draft-day steal.

The Russian-born Grigorenko is big (6-foot-3, 200 pounds), skilled and driven.

He isn't assured a permanent spot on the roster yet, though. After five games, the Sabres can still return him to the Quebec Remparts of the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League if they decide he's not ready for the NHL.

It will be a difficult decision to make. As a youngster on the grand stage, he'll be riding a wave of euphoria and adrenaline. He also has had the advantage of playing half a junior

season, plus in the World Junior Championship with Russia, while half of his teammates and opponents haven't played a game since last spring.

If Sabres fans could vote, they'd have him skating a regular shift and playing the power play, too.

You may need to go back 25 years — to Pierre Turgeon — to find an NHL rookie who has generated more preseason excitement in Buffalo.

The team store sold out of the 50 Grigorenko sweaters that were in stock on Monday and had orders for 100 more by the time the night-time scrimmage was over.

And yet while change is in order, familiar faces return. Wingers Thomas Vanek, Drew Stafford, Ville Leino and Pominville must score up front, and Tyler Myers and Christian Ehrhoff remain the cornerstones of the defense.

In goal, Ryan Miller and his backup for the past season and a half, Jhonas Enroth, return.

But with 48 games crammed into a 97-day calendar template, Ruff doesn't believe Miller can again play the vast majority of games. Last spring he started 13 in a row down the stretch until the Sabres were eliminated.

Not this year, Ruff says. They start with six games in the first 10 days. They will play three games in four days on eight different occasions.

"We're going to have to use both goalies," said Ruff, who begins his 16th season as head coach. "Both guys are going to have to win games."

The entire organization shares that responsibility. The fans like their hockey, but they like winning hockey a whole lot more.

Which is why unfinished business could very well be the motivating factor.

Short NHL season will be intense

By Leo Roth

Democrat and Chronicle

January 20, 2013

After losing the entire 2004-05 season in a labor dispute, the National Hockey League roared back like Maurice Richard on a breakaway.

Seven years of labor peace, a better television deal and a more exciting brand of hockey helped league revenues balloon to a record \$3.3 billion. Not a bad enterprise built around grown men chasing a little piece of vulcanized rubber.

And how did NHL owners react to this growth surge?

By locking out players from their facilities for 119 days starting in September, costing the league 40 percent of the season, about 500 games total, \$1 billion in revenues and seven years of momentum and goodwill since the last time we heard the terms “lockout” and “NHL” in the same sentence.

I don't pretend to believe everything was fine in the NHL as we had come to know it.

When most of the money is still concentrated in cities such as Toronto, Montreal, New York, Vancouver and Edmonton (see a pattern?) and the average player salary had blossomed to an unsustainable \$2.4 million a year, it was time to revisit the business model.

But a contentious lockout where so many people suffered? Ever hear of negotiating while working? Not when Gary Bettman, the Lord of the Lockout, is still commissioner. He's presided over three work stoppages totaling 2,178 games.

I'm just spitballing here, but sticking Bettman cutout figures in net for a between-periods shooting contest may not be a bad idea. Wait, why use a cutout?

“The best thing to do is acknowledge that it was stupid,” said Buffalo goaltender Ryan Miller, who gets back to work Sunday when the Sabres host the Philadelphia Flyers at First Niagara Center. “I appreciate their (fans) patience. I know it's a hard situation. I still don't even know the right message because it was just a stupid, useless waste of time.”

Scholars won't likely use the words “stupid, useless waste of time” when theses are written on the 2012-13 NHL lockout. But Miller is so right.

Now we embark on a condensed 48-game regular season where nobody can afford a slow start, an off night or even one key injury and expect to challenge for Lord Stanley's cup.

The owners, of course, aren't concerned about players' health because there are always more where they came from. Fans will love it because every game will be contested with playoff intensity, something you don't always get on a Tuesday in February during a normal 82-game season.

Any concerns that Lockout III would finally turn fans off completely have already been swept aside.

Last Sunday, the Sabres sold 31,213 tickets — a franchise single-day record by nearly six-fold. Their season-ticket renewal rate is 99 percent, capped at 15,400, with 3,000 on a waiting list.

Forget backlash. Fans are lining up to give the Sabres a backslap, a high five and a thumbs up. It's the fraternity paddle scene from Animal House using a hockey stick. "Thank you sir, may I have another?"

"The extraordinary fan response makes us humble, grateful and even more committed to our core mission," Sabres president Ted Black said.

I'm assuming that core mission is to win the Cup.

These high-priced Sabres closed last season like a panicked college student pulling an all-nighter. Still, a 15-5-4 roll left them three points shy of a playoff berth. The lockout stole whatever carryover effect there might have been, so these Sabres start from scratch.

On paper, Lindy Ruff's club, retooled with the additions of rugged forward Steve Ott, a pest who can play, and 6-8, 270-pound John Scott — the size of two Nathan Gerbes — seems better equipped for the rigors of the short-season schedule.

Ruff's got Miller to ride in goal and Ron Rolston's phone number in Rochester when the injury bug arrives. And with seven four-game weeks, the injuries will come.

For one more time in history, the NHL season is a sprint, not a marathon. Gentlemen, start your ice packs.

Sabres GM Darcy Regier receives contract extension

Associated Press

January 19, 2013

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) -- Sabres general manager Darcy Regier received a contract extension just as the lockout-delayed NHL season is set to start.

The deal had been agreed to before Saturday's announcement by team owner Terry Pegula. Buffalo will open its shortened season Sunday at home against Philadelphia.

Regier, entering his 16th season as Sabres general manager, has overseen a franchise that has reached the Eastern Conference finals four times, most recently in 2007. However, Buffalo has missed the playoffs in three of the past five seasons.

No terms of the extension were released.

"He's a talented guy," Pegula said. "From what I read, maybe not everyone agrees with that, but he has all the resources now. We work very well together and we're looking forward to the future."

Regier was humbled by the announcement.

"I'm very grateful and honored to be able to continue in this capacity," Regier said, "working with this ownership and people that I've had the honor to work with for a lot of years. We continue to grow and improve."

Sabres owner Pegula apologizes for lockout

Associated Press
January 19, 2013

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) -- Buffalo Sabres owner Terry Pegula had more to say than usual heading into the new - and shortened - hockey season.

On Saturday, Pegula first apologized to all those affected by the nearly four-month lockout, and then announced a contract extension with general manager Darcy Regier, who is about to begin his 16th year in the position.

"We apologize to the whole hockey fan base, the media, our sponsors, and our supporters for the hardship we may have put people through," said Pegula, whose team will open the season Sunday at home against Philadelphia. "Sometimes things happen that you don't plan for. I can tell you this, we truly are excited about being back."

Pegula then threw his support behind Regier, who has led the Sabres to four appearances in the Eastern Conference finals - most recently in 2007. However, Buffalo has missed the playoffs in three of the last five seasons.

"He's a talented guy," Pegula said. "From what I read, maybe not everyone agrees with that, but he has all the resources now. We work very well together and we're looking forward to the future."

Terms of the agreement, that Pegula said was in place for quite some time, weren't announced.

"I'm very grateful and honored to be able to continue in this capacity," Regier said, "working with this ownership and people that I've had the honor to work with for a lot of years. We continue to grow and improve."

Pegula also backed the stance taken by NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman and the other club owners during the lockout that forced the season to be cut from 82 games to 48.

"I'm part of a team of owners, so I definitely felt we all needed to be united in the things we wanted to get for the league," Pegula said. "Deep down inside, you have to help some of these teams that are really struggling. That's how you keep a league, or we'll be back to the Original Six before you know it. It was worth it for the health of keeping a 30-team league. I told Gary some things that I'll keep to myself."

But he did disclose one thing he told Bettman.

"After the last work stoppage (which canceled the entire 2004-05 season), I swore I'd never watch another hockey game again," Pegula said. "I said that to (him) before this all started."

Now with the labor issues resolved, Pegula is looking forward to the on-ice developments, including the never-ending analysis of coach Lindy Ruff's performance.

"The one thing I noticed about Lindy is that he can change," Pegula said. "He coached the highest scoring team in the league a few years back and can also coach a team that is responsible defensively. He's pretty open-minded."

Pegula and Regier also looked beyond this current season, when three of their most-productive players - goalie Ryan Miller, captain Jason Pominville, and forward Thomas Vanek - will have one-year remaining on their contracts.

"We've had some conversations about the direction of the team, and obviously those players and others are involved," Regier said. "It'll be something we'll continue to work on and review as we move forward. It's obviously in our focus."

Making Buffalo a place that players will want to play in and remain in is also on Pegula's agenda.

"We do a lot of talking about how (team president) Ted (Black) mentions (us as) a hockey destination," Pegula said. "We want players to come here and stay here. We work on not only Ryan (Miller) but the guys you want to be here. We're always working on that."

Sabres Give GM Regier Contract Extension

WGR 550

January 19, 2013

The Buffalo Sabres announced today they have awarded GM Darcy Regier with a contract extension. Team owner Terry Pegula made the announcement at a press conference held on Saturday afternoon at First Niagara Center.

Pegula told the media assembled that he approached the general manager about extending his contract, and it is something they discussed, and agreed to, prior to today's gathering. Pegula adding that, "both sides are happy with the arrangement, and we look forward to continuing to work with Darcy into the future."

Regier thanked Pegula for the extension, and quickly pointed out that, "I think the beautiful thing about this organization is we continue to grow, continue to improve...The focus today is on the hockey department, but, you know, I've worked with a couple of the people here from the time I got here and it's an honor to continue that relationship." Regier is in his 13th year as general manager, the longest tenure of any Sabres GM.

The general manager admitted there is extra pressure going into the lockout-shortened season that begins tomorrow against the Philadelphia Flyers. Not because the team did not make the playoffs last season, but because of the faith ownership has placed in him, and due to the amount of time Regier has spent with the organization, saying, "when you're involved with the team in this community, having lived here as long as I've lived here, you are no longer an outside hired GM. You feel an obligation to the community, and so...it creates more internal pressure to get the job done, and, quite honestly, it's a good pressure."

Sabres Pegula knew what had to be done

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 19, 2013

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- Terry Pegula spoke Saturday for the first time since the lockout ended. Pegula voted with the other owners across the National Hockey League in favor of the work stoppage. Pegula said, "My stand was I'm part of the team of owners, so I definitely felt that we all needed to be united in the things we wanted to get for the league. I don't know of anybody in our group that was calling for just go ahead and settle."

Some owners talked to Gary Bettman and Pegula was no different, "I told Gary some of the things I thought that I'll keep to myself, but I'm a new owner, so I'm not about to go in there and say 'Here's what we're going to do guys'." In addition to that, he did have something else to say to Bettman, "I can tell you after the last work stoppage, I swore that I'd never watch another hockey game and I said that to Gary Bettman before this all started because one of the comments that I heard was that we actually came out of the last work stoppage stronger than before and I said, 'I know one guy you didn't come out stronger with and that was me'. My daughters actually got me back into watching hockey again." Going through all that, it gives Pegula a better understanding, "I can understand if some fans are extremely upset because I was one of them at one time so we have to do our best to win those people back and try to get them under our wing again."

Many fans felt Pegula would be against the lockout and all he wanted to do was play hockey. That actually isn't right. The Sabres owner said, "I think it was worth it for the health of keeping a 30 team league so my quick answer is yes."

Jordan Leopold and Lindy Ruff have both dropped hints that the players complaints at the end of the year about Ruff being too hard on the team were heard. Ruff said earlier this week that he and the players cleared the air. Pegula said he did not speak to his head coach about it, "The one thing I've noticed about Lindy is he can change, he does change. He's pretty open minded and it seems right before you say maybe we need to do this or that, he's already thought about it. He's very perceptive in what his shortcomings or obligations have to be."

One last thing the Sabres owner wanted to do is speak to the fans, "The Sabres as an organization are glad to be playing hockey again. We apologize to the whole hockey fan base, the media, our sponsors and supporters for the hardship that we may have put people through, but sometimes things happen that you don't plan for in life, but I can tell you this, we truly are excited about being back."

Let the fun begin

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 19, 2013

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- I didn't think we'd get here until next October, but we made it, game one has finally arrived Sunday at 12:30.

Seven players that started with the Sabres last season are not in the lineup and if Ville Leino isn't able to go, it's eight.

Gone are the annoying plays of Derek Roy. Yes, he could produce some offense, but he rarely did it Lindy Ruff's way and when he freelanced, he was usually awful. Steve Ott is not going to produce the points Roy did, but he's going to have the back of young Mikhail Grigorenko and he's going to be hard to play against. Don't worry about Ott with a potential offensive star. He played three seasons on a line with Mike Modano and Jere Lehtinen.

So with Ott and goon John Scott on board, how does that translate into wins? Lindy Ruff said, "When you look at contested puck battles, going through bodies on a more consistent basis, this is a tougher team. I think when you have guys that can play more physical, you should win more of those situations."

For me there are two players that I think can be the key to whether the Sabres are a better team or not. Ryan Miller and Tyler Myers must be on top of their games. Stealing a line from Niagara's coach Dave Burkholder, your best players must be your best players.

Starting with Miller, Ruff knows this team is built around him, "Your goaltender is the strength of your team. It allows you to sometimes take some calculated risks where you're giving up some opportunities. It allows a lot of situations for some players to be able to play and even young players to be able to play because you've got a goaltender that can clean up some situations for you. We need him to be the way he finished the year which was his A game and I think for the most part I think he's there."

Myers was drafted the same year as Drew Doughty and Erik Karlsson. Doughty was key for the Kings winning the Stanley Cup and Karlsson has won the Norris trophy playing for Ottawa. Myers was very inconsistent last season and Ruff knows that has to change, "The answer to that question is yes. He got off to a good start. His play dipped a little in a portion of play. I think in this schedule, we're not going to try to over play any defense pair which should bode well for him. Typically a heavy schedule is where we've seen a little bit of a drop off so we're trying to balance it a little bit better so Tyler should be able to handle it."

Ruff was an assistant coach last time there was a 48 game season so he's been through it. Ruff has ideas on how to handle it, "For us it's going to be trying to keep it simple, trying to keep the energy level consistent, don't get too high, don't get too low, you will

pitch the odd real stinker and it's really to bury it and move on to the next one because the next one's going to be coming in a day or two and the focus is going to have to be on paying attention to detail for that game, that night, for that team you're playing and their key personnel."

The Sabres are very young up the middle. Grigorenko is 18, Cody Hodgson is 22 and Tyler Ennis is 23. There's no question all three have the talent to be a number one center in the NHL, but they have to do it. Hodgson was a 10th overall pick, Grigorenko was 12th while Ennis was 26th. The Sabres have gotten rid of Roy, Tim Connolly and Paul Gaustad and handed the keys over to the youth. It's dangerous, but in my mind it was needed. This team was never going to go anywhere with that rotten core group it's had since Chris Drury and Daniel Briere left. If this team's going to win it's going to be with those three players and names like Myers, McNabb, Pysyk, Girgensons, McCabe, Armia and of course Foligno. Those are players every GM in the NHL are trying to pry away from the Sabres. Those are also the names that will be on the Stanley Cup should the Sabres ever win it.

Top pick Grigorenko on board

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 19, 2013

On the ice, 18-year-old Mikhail Grigorenko has spent the week on the Buffalo Sabres' third line between veterans Steve Ott and Ville Leino. In the crowded dressing room, he's spent it on a chair in one corner as the only player without his own stall.

But after practice Friday in First Niagara Center, veteran assistant equipment manager George Babcock was putting the nameplate "Grigorenko" over the stall of departed defenseman Adam Pardy and moving some equipment into the locker.

"Doesn't mean anything, doesn't mean anything," Babcock said as some television cameras started shooting the empty locker. "Just not sitting at a chair."

Uh-huh. A few minutes later, General Manager Darcy Regier walked into the media room unannounced and told reporters that Grigorenko will be on the roster to start the season and whether he plays in Sunday's opener against Philadelphia will be a "coach's decision."

Lindy Ruff, standing on the side of the room, failed to hide his smirk. The kid is playing.

"I'm real happy that I'm on an NHL team now," Grigorenko said a few minutes later when told of the team's decision by The News. "I'm really excited."

Grigorenko has looked completely comfortable in camp all week, showing good hands, strong skating ability and a solid shot. Ott and Leino have said how impressed they've been with him, with Leino even making some comparisons to former Detroit teammate Pavel Datsyuk. A crowd of more than 10,000 gave Grigorenko the loudest cheer during the shootout of Monday night's open scrimmage.

"I feel really comfortable with them," Grigorenko said of Ott and Leino. "Ville is a real skilled guy and he can give you amazing passes. Steve is a real good player, really tough. I feel he'll protect me. He plays amazing defense. I really enjoy playing with him."

"Mikhail has had a good week," said Ruff, who won't commit to playing Grigorenko Sunday.

Asked for an analysis of what he's seen, Ruff said, "Good playmaker. He defends well for a young player. He's defending against his teammates. You'd love the opportunity to see him in an NHL game against other players but he does have awareness. He understands the game. His strength is his playmaking. He's shown that. You wish you had time to see him in games but you don't."

Grigorenko can play five games before the Sabres have to make a real decision on him. Either they keep him and kick in the first year of his entry level deal or they send him back to junior hockey, where he posted 50 points in 30 games for the Quebec Ramparts.

Martin Biron and Jay McKee both appeared for the Sabres as 18-year-olds in 1995-96, Biron for three games and McKee for one. But as far as regulars go, the last 18-year-old with a consistent spot in the Buffalo lineup was Pierre Turgeon, who had 14 goals and 28 assists in 76 games in 1987-88 after being taken No. 1 overall in the draft.

“I don’t think somebody should wait for me to score five goals or something,” Grigorenko said with a laugh. “Every time I’ll be on the ice all shift long I need to do my best. Don’t do something I can’t do. Play good defensively. As soon as I have the puck, try to create something offensively.”

The Sabres set their 23-man roster Friday by putting Nathan Gerbe (back) and Cody McCormick (finger) on injured reserve. Pardy cleared waivers and reported to Rochester. Kevin Porter and Nick Tarnasky, who were playing with the Amerks, also cleared and will continue AHL play.

The Sabres are hoping to catch some lightning in a bottle with Grigorenko, given that he’s played all season in juniors and was a star for Russia in the World Junior Championships. Many NHL veterans, of course, have not played a game since April.

“I have game shape. I wouldn’t say it’s an advantage over them but I’m sure it will help me and be easier for me,” Grigorenko said. “Those first games not all the guys will be in this game shape.”

When the Sabres took Grigorenko 12th overall last June in Pittsburgh, it was considered a steal because most draft experts had him labeled as a top-5 pick. Grigorenko said his goal would be to prove the Sabres right for taking him and other teams wrong for passing him up. He’s about to get his chance in front of the home fans.

“It’s going to be a great, great crowd here,” Grigorenko said. “Hopefully I will score and it would be awesome to hear my name.”

Sabres notebook: With extra day, Ruff to watch referees closely

By Mike Harrington

The Buffalo News

January 19, 2013

The Buffalo Sabres are the only team in the Eastern Conference not opening its season today and coach Lindy Ruff said he's OK with yet another day without a game after waiting since April 7 to play one.

Ruff revealed Friday that NHL teams got a video presentation and memo from the league about some rules of emphasis for the new season and he'll be paying close attention to what referees whistle today.

"There are a lot of things we'll look at," Ruff said. "How the games are being called, what's being called. At least we get a one-game look to try to prepare our team for some calls."

Specifically, Ruff said the NHL is cracking down on players using their hands to get better position on faceoffs, players covering the puck with their hands in the defensive zone and enforcing more awareness on slashing.

"I like the fact we're going to get to watch what's in the league one night," Ruff said. "I'm anxious to play. There's a little bit of nervousness and you might find that hard to believe after all these years but I'm ready to get going."

Why is the NHL's longest-tenured coach nervous?

"There's nothing to base this off of," Ruff said. "No preseason games to say we did this good or that good, this guy looks good or that guy looks good. Sometimes your guys look really good against each other in practice then they don't look so good against other NHL players."

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Sabres owner Terry Pegula will hold a season-preview news conference today at noon in the Lexus Club with team president Ted Black and General Manager Darcy Regier.

Pegula spoke briefly in the fall at a news conference announcing the team's plans for the \$123 million construction on the Webster Block in front of First Niagara Center. He has not done a news conference regarding the Sabres since the end of the 2010-11 season, his first as the team's owner.

Pegula stepped out of the media limelight in the months after he took over the team, with Black acting as the club's official spokesman on most league and off-ice matters. In his role as team governor, Black cast the Sabres' vote in favor of ending the lockout when the NHL Board of Governors met Jan. 9 in New York.

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The Flyers officially ruled out former Sabres co-captain Daniel Briere for their two weekend games, today's opener against Pittsburgh and Sunday's game here.

Briere is recovering from a hairline fracture of his wrist but the Flyers are hopeful he could return as soon as next week.

Former Sabres center Tim Connolly cleared waivers Friday and the Toronto Maple Leafs sent him and his \$4.75 million salary to the Toronto Marlies of the AHL. Oddly enough, Connolly has never played a game in the minor leagues; he went directly from the Erie Otters of the Ontario Hockey League to 81 games with the New York Islanders as an 18-year-old in during the 1999-2000 season.

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The Sabres will wrap up training camp with another public practice today at 10:30 a.m. Admission is free and so is parking in the arena ramp. Fans should note, however, that today's session will be a normal day-before-game practice, which means activity will be ramped down and the workout will only last for about 45 minutes. Other practices this week have ranged from 90 minutes-2 hours.

There were about 1,500 fans in the stands Friday morning and more are expected today. The 50 percent off sale continues in the Sabres Store.

Gates will open Sunday at 10:15 a.m. for the season opener. Concession stands will offer family-friendly pricing on the following items: popcorn for \$1, peanuts for \$2, a hot dog/potato chip combo for \$3 and a souvenir Sabres soda for \$4.25.

Top prospect Grigorenko makes 23-man roster; Sabres mum on status for opener

By Bill Hoppe
Olean Times Herald
January 19, 2013

BUFFALO – The Sabres first planted the seeds almost seven months ago inside the Consol Energy Center. Mikhail Grigorenko, the slick center that had just fallen to them 12th overall at the NHL Entry Draft, would be given every chance to play in the big leagues immediately, they said.

The strong words from the team's brass that June night in Pittsburgh resonated. The Sabres hadn't had an 18-year-old play regularly for them since center Pierre Turgeon, the No. 1 overall pick in 1987-88.

Today, fresh off five impressive training camp sessions, Grigorenko's on the cusp of making his NHL debut. Not surprisingly, the Russian made the Sabres' 23-man regular-season roster on Friday.

But will Grigorenko be in Sunday afternoon's opening-day lineup against Philadelphia?

"I could've stepped up here and asked that question," Sabres coach Lindy Ruff joked as he began answering questions Friday inside the First Niagara Center. "Mikhail's had a good week. Obviously, I'm not going to give you that decision right now. We got another practice day."

Is Ruff leaning one way?

"I'm not going to tip my hat right now," he said.

While the Sabres won't say it, all signs point to Grigorenko playing immediately. He's been centering the team's third line all week between Ville Leino and Steve Ott.

The Sabres can play Grigorenko five times before the first year of his entry-level contract kicks in. The youngster knows expectations could be low as he's acclimating himself to the NHL.

"I don't think that somebody waits for me to score ... like five goals every game or something," said Grigorenko, who was informed by a reporter he had made the roster.

Clearly, Grigorenko, who torched QMJHL opponents for 29 goals and 50 points in only 32 games this season, has been showcasing his entire skill set throughout camp.

"He defends well for a young player," Ruff said. "He's defending against his teammates. You'd love an opportunity to see him in preseason games against other NHL players. But still, he does have real good awareness. He understands the game. His strength really is his playmaking, quick hands."

As Ruff said, the Sabres' evaluation of Grigorenko has been a bit tougher because the NHL couldn't play preseason games during the lockout-shortened camps. Ruff played Tyler Myers nearly every exhibition contest in 2009 as the defenseman was vying to make the team as a 19-year-old.

"You're going to have a lot of teams in the same situation that are trying to judge young players," Ruff said. "You just want to make the right decision that's going to set him up for his career. You wish you had more time, we don't. But you like what you've seen."

Teammates, Grigorenko said, have been helping him feel comfortable from the get-go.

"You really can see that it's such a good team, everybody helps each other, almost all the guys, they wanted to help me, support me," he said. "They kind of made a good atmosphere for me."

Grigorenko could have one huge advantage over other players, at least early on. He's been going full-tilt and playing games since August for the Quebec Remparts and Team Russia. He just finished a strong performance in the world junior championship.

"I think it's good for me because I have game shape," Grigorenko said. "I wouldn't say I'd take some advantage from them, but it would ... help me and it would be kind of easier for me because those first games not all the guys will be in game shape."

Sabres winger Drew Stafford believes Grigorenko's "definitely ahead of the curve for 18."

"He's a heck of a player and he's got a really good future ahead of him," he said. "Hopefully, he can continue to develop."

If that happens, Grigorenko could stick around. Turgeon played 76 games 25 years ago, scoring 14 goals and 42 points. Other appearances by 18-year-old Sabres have been sparse. Goalie Martin Biron played three games in 1995-96, the same season defenseman Jay McKee played once.

"Everything's going really well for me," said Grigorenko, who's excited to hear his name announced after his first goal. "I really like being here, and I hope I'm going to be staying here."

Meanwhile, defenseman Adam Pardy and forwards Kevin Porter and Nick Tarnasky cleared waivers Friday. Pardy, a veteran of 183 NHL games, played for Rochester later in the day. Porter and Tarnasky have been with the Americans all season.

The Sabres kept defenseman T.J. Brennan, who would've had to clear waivers.

The team reached the 23-man roster by placing forwards Nathan Gerbe (spine) and Cody McCormick (finger) on injured reserve. Both are practicing.

Sabres general manager Darcy Regier said Pardy, who was looking forward to a fresh start following a rough season in Dallas last year, handled the situation “very professionally.” A short camp hurt Pardy’s slim chances of making the Sabres.

“He’s very disappointed,” Regier said. “But given the amount of time we had, no exhibition games, familiarity with the group we have, level of confidence in that group, unfortunately, Adam became the odd man out.

“But on the other side of it, he’ll have every opportunity in Rochester to play, to play a lot in situations that will benefit his style of play, and we’ll keep an eye on him. He’s someone with NHL experience, and organizationally that’s a good thing to have.”

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Ruff’s glad the Sabres aren’t one of the 26 teams in action today. He plans to spend the day scouting other NHL contests and watching the officiating.

The league recently sent a memo and a video outlining some new rules, Ruff said. He mentioned no-hand faceoffs, players covering the puck with their hand in the defensive zone and more awareness on slashing.

“I like the fact that we’re going to get to watch what’s going on in the league one night,” Ruff said. “I like that. I mean, (I’m) anxious to play, a little bit of nervousness. You may find that hard to believe after all these years, but a little bit of nervousness. But (I’m) ready to get going.”

Sabres' top draft pick, 18, makes Buffalo's cut

Associated Press

January 19, 2013

BUFFALO (AP) -- Mikhail Grigorenko, the Sabres' first-round draft pick last summer, has made Buffalo's active roster.

Grigorenko, 18, has been skating on a line with veterans Steve Ott and Ville Leino all week after posting 29 goals in 33 games in the Quebec Major Junior Hockey League during the NHL Lockout. With Buffalo forwards Nathan Gerbe and Cody McCormick headed to injured reserve, a spot was open on the 23-man roster for the youngster.

Meanwhile, forwards Kevin Porter and Nick Tarnasky as well as defenseman Adam Pardy all cleared waivers and were assigned to Rochester of the AHL.

The Sabres open the shortened season at home Sunday against the Philadelphia Flyers. Buffalo is coming off a disappointing 39-32-11 season in which it did not qualify for the postseason.

Sabres Stafford glad his linemates are back

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

January 19, 2013

Buffalo, NY (WGR 550) -- Drew Stafford scored 20 goals and 50 points last season, but it wasn't a good year for him at all until the end.

Stafford went into multiple slumps and many fans wanted him gone. Everything went wrong until two events happened. First, Lindy Ruff moved Tyler Ennis to center and second, the Sabres called Marcus Foligno up from Rochester.

Stafford then scored seven goals and nine assists for 16 points in just 10 games. Chemistry is a hard thing to explain, but Stafford says with Ennis, it exists off the ice too, "It helps, we're great friends off the ice. We have the ability to communicate with each other very easily. At the same time, I can get on him, I can constructively criticize him, he can on me as well, it's a two way street as well as with Marcus, there's always that open door for communication and I think that's the most important thing."

It's been over nine months since this line has played in a game together. The question to Lindy Ruff is can they continue the chemistry after such a long time off? "They like playing with each other, they did have great chemistry, they've got size, they've got some creativity, they've got Staff who's a good shooter, that line has everything." Ruff added, "I think the early read on it is have a little early success, they just continued to have success through that last part of the year and that will bred a little bit of confidence and if they get rolling right away, I think they could be a real dangerous line for us."

Ennis went to center and put together 24 games where he scored 11 goals and 15 assists for 26 points. In 12 games inside the streak he had eight goals and 11 assists for 19 points. Foligno came up and in 12 games had six goals and seven assists for 13 points. He's just a 21 year old kid too and Ruff said, "Probably the first four weeks in Rochester I thought he was a dominate player that dominated games, but went through a little bit of a lull down there. I think he went maybe 11 games without scoring which isn't usual for him, but is something that most players have to deal with, you just don't keep rolling night after night. In his case, he's come a long ways from his first prospects camp until now."

Stafford never went to Europe to play. He said that was not by choice, "I tried, it's just there were so many guys looking for spots and an opportunity never really came up that I felt was good for me and my family, so I felt it would be more productive staying here and working with the guys."

The Sabres will practice Saturday at 10:30 in the arena, but if you're planning on coming, it'll be a shortened 30 minute skate.

What Advanced Stats Say About The 2013 Sabres Pt. 1

By Matthew Coller

WGR 550

January 19, 2013

A 48-game season can be weird. One hot streak can turn a good player into a league MVP and some bad bounces can make a good player look replacement level. It can also lead to statistical anomalies. In 1995, during the 48-game, lockout-shortened season, Peter Bondra led the league with 34 goals. Of course, he only racked up nine assists and finished 27 points behind Jaromir Jagr for the league lead. So things can be pretty unpredictable.

But even though we might end up with some weird stats, the advanced statistics from the past can tell us much about where a player will land this season. Combine his scoring rates with past usage (offensive, defensive, PP, PK) and add that with how that player will be used this season and we can put together an educated guess about how things will go this year.

So as Part 1 of 2, (part 2 will feature defenseman) here is a look an advanced stats breakdown of each Sabres forward with a projection about their scoring. The projections are based on super-stat guy Robert Vollman's (Hockey Prospectus, ESPN Insider) projection combined with knowledge of how each player will be used this season.

Enjoy!

Tyler Ennis – Finally at home playing center, Ennis went wild in the last 20 games of the season scoring eight of his 15 goals. His overall totals were swayed heavily by a ridiculously high shooting percentage of 18.3. That will be impossible to maintain, especially if his power play time is limited. However, he will presumably shoot the puck more this season. He shot only 82 times last year. The biggest question is whether he can handle No. 1 center assignments. Last year he ranked 7th in Quality of Competition – meaning he was put in easier situations than most No. 1 centers who face top competition.

Projection: 10 goals, 20 assists

Marcus Foligno – Foligno burst on the scene while playing with Stafford and Ennis. He scored 13 points in 14 games and registered 44 hits. The scoring rate will be near impossible to repeat over an entire season. His shooting percentage was 26.1 percent, which is about 15 percent above what top-line wingers usually shoot. He was also sheltered last year in his span (understandably so) ranking 12th amongst forwards in Quality of Competition and 1st in Quality of Teammates. He'll face harder competition this year, no doubt. Foligno's numbers were in a small sample last year, but taking into account his skill set, Steve Ott-type scoring seems plausible.

Projection: 9 goals, 13 assists

Drew Stafford – While he may be a streaky player, Stafford ran into some bad luck with an extremely low shooting percentage last season. His shooting percentage dropped from 17.9 percent in 2010-11 to 8.9 percent last season. He still finished the season with a solid 2.16 points per 60 minutes at even strength. Interestingly, Stafford was a much more physical player last year than he was in the past with 102 hits – nearly double the previous two seasons. Two things to watch: Whether his line with Ennis and Foligno plays against top competition (it shouldn't) and whether one hot or cold streak defines his season.

Projection: 15 goals, 15 assists

Cody Hodgson – Hodgson is hard to get a grasp on because he only played 22 games with the Sabres last season and in Vancouver he was used in every role imaginable. Keep an eye on him on the power play. Last year in limited minutes, he scored at an elite 5.62 per 60 minute rate. It's tough to keep that up, but even if it drops around 4.50, that's still a solid power play forward. His two-way game is still a question mark and he rarely faced top competition (10th amongst Sabres forwards). However, power play time and playing with Pominville and Vanek should have an extremely positive affect on his numbers.

Projection: 8 goals, 25 assists

Thomas Vanek – The Sabres' best power play producer (and among the league's best) at 5.40 points per 60 minutes. Decent puck possession vs. Quality of Competition, but has ranked behind Pominville for most of their careers. Solid 2.12 points per 60 at 5-on-5 last year, but below players with comparable contracts. Had below team average Quality of Teammates last season, which could certainly be a criticism of Lindy Ruff.

Projection: 17 goals, 20 assists

Jason Pominville – Phenomenal two-way forward. Top-level puck possession stats, used in offensive and defensive situations, solid 2.24 points per 60 minutes at even strength, top power play producer and penalty killer. All-around All-Star talent.

Projection: 14 goals, 25 assists

Steve Ott – The newly-acquired Ott is an all-around player who has exceeded 250 hits the past three seasons in a row. He has also been amongst Dallas's best puck possession players and defensive forwards. Two seasons ago, he started only 31 percent of the time in the offensive zone and still managed 32 points. Last year, he only saw 47.4 percent O-zone starts. Don't be surprised if that figure goes up if he stays on a line with Grigorenko, who Lindy Ruff will want to put in advantageous offensive situations. Ott is also very good at faceoffs and can chip in on the power play.

Projection: 9 goals, 13 assists

Ville Leino – Scored only eight goals, but shockingly only took 78 shots in 71 games last season. That's with a fairly high offensive zone start percentage of 54.5. Lack of power play time accounts for some drop in total shots, but still should be a major concern. It's hard to even say he'll score more when playing with Grigorenko because he had a solid Quality of Teammates stat last season and didn't score.

Projection: 7 goals, 15 assists

Patrick Kaleta – A lock-down defensive forward, Kaleta was asked to shut down the league's best last year and performed well. He started only 41.9 percent in the offensive zone and faced fairly good overall competition. His possession statistics weren't overwhelming but decent considering he had never played a lock-down role before. Kaleta also drew the most penalties on the Sabres last season – something that is sorely missing from the lineup.

Projection: 2 goals, 5 assists

Nathan Gerbe – Depending on health and role, Gerbe could have a bounce-back season. He was used in a defensive role last season more often than the year before and performed fairly well. He rarely had the benefit of quality teammates, ranking 11th amongst forwards in QoT. His shooting percentage was a lowly 4.4 percent, which seems primed to go up.

*Projection: 9 goals, 12 assists

*starting the season on IR. Projection based on 48 games

Jochen Hecht – A versatile two-way player, it's hard to know exactly what to expect from Hecht. Over the past few seasons, he's been one of the best possession players on the Sabres' roster. He has also been one of the most used penalty killers. Expect to see him in limited minutes unless there is an injury and add solid depth at multiple positions.

Projection: 4 goals, 10 assists

John Scott – Will fight a few times. You already knew that.

Projection: 0 goals, 1 assist

Matt Ellis – Played limited minutes against low quality opponents last season. Will likely do the same this season.

Projection: 2 goals, 4 assists

Mikhail Grigorenko – There aren't advanced junior stats, but he scored well over a point per game in the Q. He's a top-level talent and will be put in every situation to succeed this year. If the Ott, Leino combo stays, he'll have two capable (but not elite) offensive

talents by his side. It's reasonable to project he'll get a ton of offensive zone time and power play time.

Projection: 9 goals, 20 assists