



Buffalo Sabres

Daily Press Clips

December 27, 2013

Sabres-Maple Leafs Preview

By Nicolino DiBenedetto

Associated Press

December 27, 2013

The Buffalo Sabres haven't won on the road in almost two months, and visiting the Toronto Maple Leafs may not provide a solution.

Getting some players back healthy would improve their chances.

The Sabres hope to have up to five players back from an illness, as they try to end an eight-game road losing streak by winning in Toronto for just the second time in nine tries Friday night.

Buffalo (10-24-3) owns the fewest points in the NHL, and the team is 3-12-1 on the road. The Sabres last won as the visitor on Nov. 5, when Cody Hodgson netted the decisive shootout goal in a 5-4 win at San Jose.

Since then, they've been outscored 26-9 in eight road games, their longest losing streak as the visitor since a team-record 12-game slide from Dec. 17, 2011-Jan. 21, 2012.

Buffalo, though, has created some momentum at home, going 4-0-1 while winning three in a row after beating Phoenix 2-1 on a bizarre goal in overtime Monday. Mark Pysyk's shot deflected into the air and landed on the back of Coyotes goaltender Mike Smith, who retreated into his net and unknowingly crossed the line with the puck.

"People out there want to see hard work and results. I think hard work is the formula to get results," Pysyk said.

Healthy players also help. The Sabres were reduced to 16 skaters versus Phoenix after a virus sidelined Hodgson, Linus Omark, Ville Leino, Marcus Foligno and Alexander Sulzer, causing them to recall Pysyk from Rochester of the AHL.

Hodgson leads the Sabres with 19 points, but he has just three assists over his last nine road games. One of those points came on Tyler Ennis' goal in a 4-2 loss at Toronto on Nov. 16.

The Sabres have dropped seven of their last eight visits to Toronto since a 3-2 shootout victory on Nov. 6, 2010.

Ennis, who is tied for the team lead with eight goals, has three goals and one assist over his past four contests in Toronto.

The Maple Leafs (18-16-5) may be thrilled to host the Sabres since they're 4-6-1 at home after winning eight of their first 10.

The venue, however, hasn't mattered much of late. Toronto is 2-5-2 in its last nine games, with three in a row going to shootouts and the last two ending in defeats. In Monday's 2-1 road loss to the New York Rangers, Nazem Kadri salvaged a point by tying the game with 1:24 left in regulation.

"I don't think we played our best game, but we hung in there," goaltender Jonathan Bernier said. "We stole a point probably."

It's unclear if Bernier will be back in net since he's lost all three of his meetings with the Sabres behind a 3.39 goals-against average. However, he's stopped 67 of 69 shots through overtime while losing the last two games via shootouts.

James Reimer has won all four home games against Buffalo with a 2.50 GAA, but he's 1-1-0 with a 3.77 GAA while being pulled from two of his last four starts.

James van Riemsdyk has scored two goals in each of the past two home matchups with the Sabres. However, he hasn't scored at the Air Canada Centre since the Nov. 12 meeting with Buffalo, spanning 12 games.

Surging Sabres' next challenge, win away from home

By Amy Moritz

Buffalo News

December 26, 2013

When last we saw the Buffalo Sabres on the ice, they were earning an overtime win with the now infamous "ButtGoal."

It was humorous and joyous and cause for celebration as the team went on a three-day holiday break. The win gave the Sabres three wins in their last four games, a veritable surge for a club that's in last place in the NHL.

And now they return to the ice for a game against the rival Toronto Maple Leafs at 7:30 p.m. in Air Canada Centre.

While the Sabres have seven points in their last five games, the road has not been a kind place. The last time the team earned a point away from First Niagara Center was an overtime loss at New Jersey on Nov. 30. Its last road win was Nov. 5 in a shootout at San Jose.

The Sabres, however, are facing not just a rival but the equivalent of their literary foil. The Leafs tend to bring out the best in the Sabres. With Buffalo playing some of its most inspired hockey this season, and Toronto seemingly imploding, the set-up for tonight's game puts the Sabres in a good position to create results from their newly inspired play.

The Maple Leafs have gone to a shootout in their last three games, suffering back-to-back losses to Detroit and the New York Rangers to slide into the holiday break. Their last win in regulation came Dec. 14, a 7-3 explosion at home against the Chicago Blackhawks. In fact, the Maple Leafs have only won three games in regulation since late October.

Of course one of those was against the Sabres, a 4-2 win in Air Canada Center on Nov. 16.

The Maple Leafs' free fall has been captured on film as HBO's documentary series 24/7 has been following the club around for weeks as part of the buildup to the Winter Classic with Detroit. The show has caught gems, such as coach Randy Carlyle yelling at the team, "we suck."

Two episodes have already aired with the final two scheduled for this Saturday and for Jan. 4.

The Sabres, meanwhile, seem to have hit bottom in their free fall, finding a new sense of confidence and work ethic under new management.

“Before a lot of games we mailed in or were so down in the hole we felt like we couldn’t climb out of it,” Sabres captain Steve Ott said last week. “To see us finally come out of it ... is huge for the character in this dressing room and collectively to have those feel-good moments makes you better. The last three weeks we’ve been a totally different team. You can see it slowly changing and it all starts with the work.”

Interim coach Ted Nolan took over the team when the Sabres first faced Toronto this season and promptly earned a 3-1 win on Nov. 15. The Leafs won the next night in Toronto, but the Sabres nabbed a 3-2 overtime win on Nov. 29.

The key, as it is for so many of the Sabres’ wins, has been goaltender Ryan Miller.

He’s been even better in last five starts, going 4-1-0 with a 1.56 goals against average and a .952 save percentage. Miller has not allowed a third-period goal in the last five games (59 saves) nor a power-play goal (16 saves).

Let’s not forget Miller’s history against Toronto.

This year he is 2-0 with a 1.49 goals against and .947 save percentage. In his career, he is 31-15-1 against the Leafs with a 2.44 goals against average and .922 save percentage. He has four shutouts against the Leafs, the most he has in his career versus any opponent.

...

The Rochester Americans weren’t successful in their opening overseas venture. The Amerks lost their first game of the Spengler Cup, 5-0, to Geneve-Servette of the Swiss-A league.

Matt Hackett recorded 32 saves for the Amerks who next play CSKA Moscow in the second round of the pre-semifinals at 3 p.m. today.

The six-team tournament held in Davos, Switzerland, was first held in 1923 and is considered the oldest and one of the most prestigious invitational hockey tournaments.

Improving Sabres travel to Toronto

By Brian Hunter

NHL.com

December 26, 2013

SABRES (10-24-3) at MAPLE LEAFS (18-16-5)

TV: TSN, MSG-B

Last 10: Buffalo 4-4-2; Toronto 3-5-2

Season series: This is the fourth of five games between the Buffalo Sabres and Toronto Maple Leafs. The Sabres have won two of the first three, most recently 3-2 on Nov. 29 courtesy of an overtime goal by Christian Ehrhoff. Ryan Miller has won both his starts against Toronto with a 1.49 goals-against average and .947 save percentage.

Big story: As the Christmas break ends, the final countdown to the 2014 Bridgestone NHL Winter Classic is on for the Maple Leafs. But before they face the Detroit Red Wings in front of more than 100,000 fans at Michigan Stadium, there are a couple of indoor games to be played and the Sabres have already proven they can't be taken lightly.

Team Scope:

Sabres: No one is getting ahead of themselves and talking Stanley Cup Playoffs just yet, but Buffalo entered the break with three wins in four games, at least a mini-hot streak. And the players' efforts are being noticed. In the Sabres' 2-1 home win against the Phoenix Coyotes on Monday, the fans at First Niagara Center were at their loudest when Tyler Ennis scored late in the third period to set up an eventual overtime triumph.

"It was fantastic," forward John Scott told the Buffalo News. "I know our record. I know where we are. But to have the crowd behind us like that is unbelievable. It's something you can't describe on the ice. You get goose bumps and you feel the energy in the crowd."

Maple Leafs: A 2-1 shootout loss at the New York Rangers on Monday was the seventh in nine games for Toronto, which currently holds fifth place in the Atlantic Division and seventh in the Eastern Conference. A number of competitors have been closing ground fast, however, and the Maple Leafs understand they need to find the level of consistency shown early in the season if they want to ensure a second consecutive postseason berth.

"We've been good and then we've been not so good," forward Nazem Kadri told Sportsnet. "The bottom line is that we've got to find consistency. In this League,

you've got to win a few games in a row to kind of give yourself some breathing room."

Who's hot: Sabres rookie Zemgus Girgensons has three goals and three assists in his past nine games. Miller has won four of five starts, allowing two goals or fewer in each game. ... Maple Leafs goalie Jonathan Bernier stopped 42 of 43 shots against the Rangers and has a .960 save percentage over his past three appearances.

Injury report: Buffalo forward Cody Hodgson (upper body) is day-to-day. Forwards Cody McCormick (upper body) and Kevin Porter (lower body) are on injured reserve. ... Toronto forwards Dave Bolland (ankle), Tyler Bozak (oblique) and Trevor Smith (hand) are on injured reserve.

Maple Leafs-Sabres: Friday NHL game preview

Toronto Star

December 26, 2013

The Maple Leafs (18-16-5) return from the Christmas break Friday to host division rival Buffalo (10-24-3) at the Air Canada Centre. (7:30 pm, TSN). Five things to know about the Sabres:

1. In Ted Nolan's debut as coach with the Sabres, he led his team to a 3-1 victory over the Leafs on Nov. 15 in Buffalo. Nolan's record is 6-11 since taking over. The Sabres went into the holiday break with a 4-0-1 record in their past five home games. They are much worse on the road, with a 3-12-1 record. In their last 10, the Sabres are 4-4-2 and have scored a league-worst 66 goals this season.
2. Buffalo's 2-1 OT win over over the Phoenix Coyotes on Monday was a strange one in many respects. The flu-ravaged Sabres dressed only 16 skaters, the first time the club has had so few skaters since Jan. 7, 1981, according to Elias Sports Bureau. John Scott, very familiar to Leafs fans, played almost nine minutes and was even used on the power play as a big body in front of the net. He has no points in 19 games.
3. The Sabres are expected to start Ryan Miller in goal. Miller has 30 career wins vs Toronto, the most he has against any NHL team.
4. Cody Hodgson, the team's leading scorer with eight goals and 11 assists for 19 points, is sidelined with an upper-body injury. He was injured early in a Dec. 19 game against the Bruins. Tyler Ennis has five points (3G, 2A) in the past eight games.
5. Former Leaf forward Mike Zigomanis was run over in a collision with Lake Erie's Michael Tam in an AHL game last week for the Rochester Americans, Buffalo's farm team. He left the ice under his own power, but later went to a Rochester hospital for observation with a neck injury.

Gameday: Sabres at Maple Leafs

By Ian Shantz

Toronto Sun

December 26, 2013

SABRES AT MAPLE LEAFS

Friday, 7:30 p.m., Air Canada Centre

TV: TSN, Radio: 1050 AM

FIVE KEYS TO THE GAME

1. Home power -- sort of

The Sabres reside in the league's basement, yet as winners of three of their past four contests could be considered the favourite against the stuck-in-a-big-funk Leafs. The good news in the bad stretch for the Leafs? Three of their four wins over a disastrous 16-game stretch have come at home.

2. Tame Teddy

Ted Nolan hasn't led the young Sabres to a complete turnaround since taking over behind the bench last month -- the Sabres are 6-9-2 with Nolan as coach -- but two of those wins have come against Toronto, the first one in his season debut. Nolan seems to have his group on the same page lately. It will be up to Randy Carlyle and Co. to keep Nolan on his toes with the power of last line changes at the ACC.

3. Kiss this

Keep It Simple, Stupid. Easier said than done at times, but so much of the Leafs' success hinges on a simplified game -- at both ends of the ice. Take shots through traffic. Forecheck. Stay north-south. Dump. Chase. Clear the zone. We've seen just how quickly things can turn ugly -- remember the Detroit game last Saturday -- when the Leafs go cutesy. Solution: Stick to the basics.

4. Cody derailed, Zemgus on track

It's expected the visitors will be without the services of Toronto native Cody Hodgson, as the team's leading scorer broke a finger blocking a shot a week ago against Boston and is sidelined indefinitely. But the Leafs will want to keep a close eye on the Latvian Locomotive, 19-year-old Zemgus Girgensons, who appears to be a favourite of coach Nolan's.

5. Stick to hockey

While Leafs toughguy Colton Orr made his way back into the lineup on Monday and with Fraser McLaren in tow, the Leafs again have some fists available to them. Still, the hosts would be advised to stick to hockey against a Sabres team that features big John Scott -- he of the infamous pre-season incident involving David Clarkson. The after-the-whistle stuff needs to take a back seat, considering the circumstances.

THE BIG MATCHUP

Phil Kessel vs. Ryan Miller

Kessel hardly has been a thrill lately with just two goals in his past 11 games. Miller's stats have taken a nose-dive playing on a weak Buffalo team, but he is keeping his team competitive. Kessel has one goal in three games vs. the Sabres this season.

SICK BAY

Toronto -- Tyler Bozak, Dave Bolland

Buffalo -- Cody Hodgson, Cody McCormick, Kevin Porter, Ville Leino, Alexander Sulzer

SPECIAL TEAMS

Toronto -- PP 22.4% (4th), PK 78.4% (26th)

Buffalo -- PP 12.0% (28th), PK 81.4% (19th)

Toronto Maple Leafs, Buffalo Sabres followed by fireworks this season

By Sean Fitz-Gerald

National Post

December 26, 2013

On Friday, the Toronto Maple Leafs will return from a three-day Christmas break to face a team that has only been good in one area lately: annoying the Leafs. Some of the more unusual recent storylines around the Leafs have unfolded with the Buffalo Sabres nearby, from goalie fights and line brawls to name-calling and untimely losses. Buffalo owns the worst record in the NHL (10-24-3), but two of its wins have come against Toronto. What should be an easy game to begin the sprint to the Olympic break might not be as easy as the records suggest. Each of their five meetings have been newsworthy:

Sept. 21, 2013: A pre-season marathon

Looking back, it seems possible that some of the bad blood spilled later was first boiled in this initial pre-season meeting. The teams endured overtime, followed by a 15-round shootout. The Leafs won, and seemed to leave hard feelings behind in Buffalo. Veteran defenceman Paul Ranger tried a trick shot deep in the shootout — kicking his stick with the puck on the blade — that earned smiles on his bench, but a slash from Sabres goaltender Jhonas Enroth. Leafs captain Dion Phaneuf unleashed a slap shot from the high slot in the next round, prompting the next shooter, Sabres defenceman Christian Ehrhoff to fire from even closer range on the Toronto net, in apparent retribution. “When Paul Ranger kicked his stick, that signals, ‘anything goes,’” Hockey Night in Canada announcer Jim Hughson said.

Sept. 22, 2013: A pre-season brawl

A threat from Sabres enforcer John Scott lit the fuse with 10 minutes to play in what was an otherwise forgettable pre-season game at the Air Canada Centre. Scott was threatening Phil Kessel, the Leafs winger. “He said he was going to jump me,” Kessel said later. Scott stands 6-foot-8, 259 pounds. A brawl ensued. Kessel took two hard whacks at Scott’s legs with his stick. Leafs forward David Clarkson lunged off the bench. Soon, the goalies were fighting. The crowd roared. What happened that night lingered. Kessel was suspended for the rest of the pre-season, while Clarkson earned a 10-game ban for leaving the bench. “Old time hockey, right?” Sabres goaltender Ryan Miller said, in *The Buffalo News*. “That’s part of the game sometimes.”

Nov. 15, 2013: A special loss

Toronto and Buffalo were linked through a pair of coincidences after the lockout. On Jan. 21, the second game of the lockout-shortened season, it was the Sabres who were visiting Air Canada Centre when the Leafs invited Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield to drop the ceremonial pre-game puck, from space. And on Feb. 21, it was a game in Toronto where the Sabres played their first game in 16 years without Lindy Ruff, who had been fired as head coach one day earlier.

Coincidental timing struck again this season, when the Leafs faced the Sabres on Nov. 15, which was Ted Nolan's first game behind the bench as the team's interim coach, two days after Buffalo fired the man (Ron Rolston) who replaced Ruff. The Leafs lost, giving the Sabres just their second regulation win of the season.

Nov. 16, 2013: Royal name-calling

Sabres enforcer John Scott dominated the news cycle in Toronto for the second time this season, for comments made about Leafs captain Dion Phaneuf following a 4-2 loss to the Leafs. "He's Princess Phaneuf," Scott said. Sabres captain Steve Ott was still being asked about it two weeks later, telling The Toronto Sun that Scott is "pretty funny off the ice," and that he suspected Phaneuf "has been called worse things in his career."

Nov. 29, 2013: A cross-border protest

Buffalo was on a five-game losing streak. Worse, the Sabres had been held to only a goal in the last four of those losses. It was already becoming clear that Sabres fans were facing a long, cold winter. The Leafs provided a reprieve. Toronto led twice, but surrendered their lead both times, capitulating for good when Buffalo defenceman Christian Ehrhoff scored in overtime. It was the second time in two weeks that the Leafs had lost to the worst team in the league, and as the teams left the ice in Buffalo, several fans threw cans onto the ice in apparent protest. "We know there's always going to be a rambunctious crowd coming down from Ontario to watch these games, so we wouldn't expect anything less," Buffalo forward Drew Stafford said, in The Buffalo News. "Maybe not beer cans and pop cans on a home-ice win, but we won. Nothing else matters."

Medford hockey coach Joe Sacco looks to bolster Buffalo Sabres

By Christopher Hurley

Medford Transcript

December 26, 2013

Boston, MA — It was more than just another day on the job for Joe Sacco.

The Medford native and Buffalo Sabres assistant coach was back in Boston Saturday night, for a rematch with the Bruins, Dec. 21 at the TD Garden.

A longtime NHL player-turned-coach, the Medford High and Boston University product was thrilled to be back in his old stomping grounds.

“It’s always nice,” said Sacco, 44, who made the transition from player to coach nearly a decade ago. “It’s a different position now, but it’s always a great time to come back here, especially this time of the year to see family and friends.”

Arriving in town a day early, Sacco made the most of his layover. He made a trip to Weston, where he got to see his oldest son Joe, 17, play hockey at Rivers Prep School.

“The timing worked out really well,” said Sacco. “My family and I got to see him play last night and this morning, which was nice.”

It was a brief respite in what has been a rollercoaster ride for Sacco and the Sabres this season.

Fresh off a four-year stint as head coach of the Colorado Avalanche, Sacco signed on as an assistant coach with Buffalo, last July. The team struggled right from the start going 4-15-1 over its first 20 games, culminating with the firing of general manager Darcy Regier and head coach Ron Rolston.

Now working alongside newly appointed President of Hockey Operations Pat LaFontaine and interim coach Ted Nolan, Sacco is looking to help get the team back on track.

“It’s been really good,” said Sacco, on making the move Buffalo. “Obviously it was a tough start here as everyone knows, that makes it more difficult. We started out with a very young team, and when you do that you pay the price in the wins and loss column. There are a lot of good young players in the organization moving forward. We made some changes, but we’re starting to play a lot better now.”

Sacco pointed to the Sabres recent 4-2 upset over the Bruins, Dec. 19, as proof positive that things are headed in the right direction.

“We have a little bit more of an experienced line-up now, which allows us to play tighter games and be more involved,” he said. “The guys have responded pretty well.”

Unfortunately Reilly Smith spoiled Sacco’s homecoming.

The Bruins right winger scored a pair of goals as Boston beat the Sabres, 4-1, Dec. 21. Although it was the latest setback in a challenging season, Sacco remains confident that his team can still turn it around.

“We need to continue to compete at a higher level,” Sacco said. “The guys are working extremely hard here night-in and night-out. We’re just trying to find a way to claw our way back. We need some wins to get the guys feeling good about themselves. That’s the most important thing as a player. You want to feel good about yourself and obviously winning helps, that along with just trying to make sure that we do a good job of preparing them.”

As assistant coach, one of Sacco’s biggest tasks has been organizing the team’s penalty killing unit, and working with the team’s forwards, but it’s a joint effort.

“We all kind of do a little bit of everything together,” Sacco said. “Since Teddy [Nolan] has taken over some of the responsibilities have changed a little bit, but I’m just making sure the guys are always prepared, so before they hit the ice they know what’s going on.”

According to Buffalo Sabres team captain Steve Ott, Sacco’s approach has been motivating.

“For me personally, he’s been awesome,” Ott said. “You can tell his experience from being a head coach. He reads the game extremely well. For myself, I’m hands-on with him so much because of the penalty kill. He’s put me in one of the top slots in the penalty kill and has really taken charge of it.”

“With the lack of [penalty] killers that we’ve had, we’ve done a pretty good job,” Ott added. “He’s well prepared. He does a lot of meetings with us. It’s nice because I think him and Teddy have a good chemistry.”

Homegrown product

A former Medford High School Mustang and Boston University Terrier, Joe Sacco, was originally drafted by the Toronto Maple Leafs in the fourth round (71st overall) of the 1987 NHL Entry Draft.

He enjoyed a 13-year professional hockey career playing for five NHL teams, including the Mighty Ducks of Anaheim, New York Islanders, Washington Capitals and Philadelphia Flyers. He scored 94 goals and 213 points in 738 NHL games before hanging up the skates following the 2002-03 season.

Sacco began the next phase of his hockey career serving as an assistant coach of the Lowell Lock Monsters in 2004-05. After serving two years as an assistant, Sacco was named head coach of Colorado's AHL franchise, the Lake Erie Monsters, May 7, 2007. Sacco led the Monsters for two seasons before being promoted as the head coach of the Avalanche in 2009.

In his first season at the helm, Sacco led the Avalanche to an 43-30-9 record and a trip to the playoffs in 2009-10. He was also named as a finalist for the Jack Adams award as the NHL's top coach.

He spent the last four seasons as head coach of the Colorado Avalanche, before being relieved of his duties in April, following a disappointing 16-25-7 finish last season. In four years as head coach Sacco compiled a 130-134-30 record with the Avs.

Sacco was named an assistant coach by the Buffalo Sabres, July 2.

A Mustang Hall of Famer, Sacco spearheaded a Medford hockey movement in the mid-80s, leading a handful of local products into the Division I college ranks and ultimately the NHL.

Following Sacco's lead were Keith Tkachuk, Shawn Bates, Mike Morrison and even Joe's younger brother, David Sacco, who got to play with his big brother during stops in Toronto and Anaheim.

Sacco certainly left his mark at Medford High. From 1984-87 he was the school's all-time leading scorer in boys hockey with 230 career points, Bates would eventually eclipse Sacco's milestone with 242 points in 1993.

Ironically enough, Bates is once again following in Sacco's footsteps joining the coaching ranks as head coach of the Medford High boys hockey team this season.

"I think it's great," said Sacco, noting that he last spoke with Bates about two weeks ago. "I was excited to see that he took over there. It's good for the city, good for the community obviously. Hopefully he can get that program up and running again."

When asked if he had any words of wisdom for the incoming Mustang coach, Sacco responded.

"My advice, stay in high school hockey," said Sacco, with a laugh.

Once a Mustang, always a Mustang.

Sabres fondly recall world junior championship memories, believe tournament shaped their careers

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 27, 2013

TORONTO – Five years ago, Buffalo Sabres center Tyler Ennis figured he had a good chance to earn a coveted spot on Team Canada’s world junior championship squad.

The 24-year-old was one of his country’s most electrifying junior talents, a first-round draft pick in the midst of a dynamic 43-goal, 85-point season with the Medicine Hat Tigers. He felt he had enjoyed a strong training camp.

But, Ennis said, “Anything can happen.” Canada always has a wealth of elite junior players.

“They said, ‘If you get a phone call in the night, you’re cut,’” Ennis, whose Sabres face the Maple Leafs tonight at the Air Canada Centre, said earlier this month.

The phone rang during the night.

“They’re like, ‘Is Tyler there?’” Ennis recalled. “I was like, ‘Which Tyler?’”

Ennis’ roommate was Tyler Cuma, a defenseman Minnesota selected 23rd overall in 2008, three spots before Buffalo grabbed Ennis.

“They said, ‘Tyler Cuma,’ and I was like, ‘Oh, God, thank God,’” Ennis said. “But I felt bad for my roommate because he got cut. I was a little nervous. But it was a real special feeling to make it.”

Ennis wound up dazzling, scoring three goals and seven points in six games as Canada won gold in Ottawa.

The Edmonton native called making the team and winning his “biggest accomplishment ever.” He grew up watching the tournament, a collection of the best hockey talent under 20 in the world.

“One of our Christmas traditions,” Ennis said.

Fifteen current Sabres, including center prospect Mikhail Grigorenko, who was loaned to Russia for this year’s tournament in Malmo, Sweden, played in the world juniors as youngsters.

“To be able to make that team was so cool,” Ennis said. “I remember as a kid just thinking it was cool to make your top team in the city. To be amongst the top

players in your age group in the country, especially a country where hockey means everything, was very special and twice as special to win it.”

Players still sound nostalgic about an experience many of them said was career-changing.

“At the time, that’s the pinnacle of a lot of guys’ careers because that’s the best level you’ve played at,” said Sabres winger Drew Stafford, who won a gold medal 10 years ago and represented Team USA twice. “That’s the best level they’ve played at because you’re playing against the best in your age group in the world.”

That taught Stafford he belonged with the best.

“World juniors was definitely a test of, ‘OK, all these other guys are slotted to play in the NHL, here I am playing right with them,’” he said. “Definitely a confidence booster when you’re playing against a lot of guys ... that are all hyped up and supposed to be top guys. You fit right in. I can definitely understand what a lot of guys are going through.”

Like Ennis, Sabres defenseman Tyler Myers, who also won gold with the Canadians five years ago, remembers “the trial process being pretty stressful.”

“That last night, whether you get the phone call or the knock on the door ... I don’t think many guys get much sleep that night,” Myers said. “To have represented your country in a tournament like that, not only represent it but to come together and win as a group, it was a pretty special moment for me.”

Those players on the 2008-09 Canadian team, which also includes Sabres center Cody Hodgson, share a special bond. Myers still stays in touch with those teammates.

“If we would’ve lost, I don’t think a lot of us would be in touch with each other as much as we are now,” Myers said.

Sabres defenseman Mark Pysyk endured a night similar to Ennis’, although he wasn’t as fortunate.

“The night when you wait for the phone call in the morning, it’s pretty nerve-racking,” Pysyk said.

Pysyk was rooming with Sabres forward Marcus Foligno during Team Canada’s camp prior to the tournament in Buffalo three years ago.

“They called and asked if Mark was there, and I was just hoping they were asking for Marcus,” Pysyk said.

They wanted to speak with Pysyk, though.

“He made it and I got cut,” he said.

Pysyk said the two laugh about it now.

“He was pretty excited that he made the team, but he was trying not to show it to me,” Pysyk said about Foligno, who was, as a dual citizen, representing Canada in Buffalo, his hometown. “I could tell he was excited and he could tell I was disappointed.”

Pysyk made the team the next year.

“I didn’t get the call,” he said. “You wake up and you made the team. It’s a blast, pretty special.”

Notes: The Sabres have sent Johan Larsson back to Rochester after one game. The forward played in Thursday’s 5-0 loss at the Spengler Cup in Switzerland. ... Grigorenko had a goal and three points in Russia’s 11-0 win Thursday against Norway. Sabres prospects Gustav Possler (Sweden), Rasmus Ristolainen (Finland) and Nikita Zadorov (Russia) are also participating in the tournament. ... The Sabres had the last three days off for Christmas.

Sabres prospects at World Junior Championships

By Howard Simon

WGR 550

December 26, 2013

The Buffalo Sabres should have a keen eye on the 2014 World Junior Championships which opened up in Sweden on Thursday. There are three Sabres prospects competing in the event and players who are expected to be at the top of the next two drafts are participating as well.

As far as the Sabres prospects, Mikhail Grigorenko and Nikita Zadorov are both playing for Russia while Rasmus Ristolainen is on Finland's roster. Grigorenko, who has appeared in 18 games with the Sabres this season, will be playing in his third World Juniors. He was part of a bronze medal winning team last year and a silver medal winner in 2012.

Zadorov dressed in seven games with the Sabres before being sent back to London in the Ontario Hockey League. The big defenseman was playing very well for the Knights with two goals and six points in eight games. Zadorov was also a plus eight.

Ristolainen is returning to the ice after missing some time in Rochester due to a concussion. After starting the season in Buffalo and playing in 19 games, Ristolainen appeared in just five games with the Amerks before getting injured. This will be his third World Juniors for Finland.

Two other Sabres prospects would have played in the tournament had it not been for injuries. 2013 draft pick JT Compher was a lock to make Team USA but he broke a foot during practice last week and was released out of their camp. Compher, who will be sidelined for three to four weeks, will return to the University of Michigan where he was tied for the team lead in scoring when he left for the U.S. pre tournament camp.

Fellow 2013 pick Gustav Possler was going to suit up for Sweden but lingering pain from a knee injury prevented him from playing. In fact, Possler's season back in the Swedish Elite League is over since he will undergo season ending surgery on his knee.

The Sabres will be busy scouting at this tournament watching players who should be available for Buffalo at the top of the 2014 draft, should the team end up there.

Sam Reinhart, a forward from Kootenay of the Western Hockey League will be playing for Canada along with defenseman Aaron Ekblad, who plays for Barrie in the OHL. Other top draft prospects include Leon Draisaitl, a center for Germany and Swedish winger Anton Karlsson.

But the biggest name in the tournament will likely be Connor McDavid from Canada. He's the player many are touting as the next Sydney Crosby and the reason why teams would love to have the top pick in the 2015 draft when McDavid will be available. The U.S. will also feature a player who is being mentioned as a top level choice in 2015. Forward Jack Eichel is currently in the U.S. National Team Development Program.

All of Team USA's games will be seen on NHL Network. You can also watch McDavid, Reinhart, Ekblad and Canada play the Czech Republic on Saturday, Slovakia on Monday and the U.S. on Tuesday.

2014 WORLD JUNIOR CHAMPIONSHIP DAY ONE

By Kris Baker

Sabres.com

December 26, 2013

Two Buffalo Sabres prospects helped Russia steamroll Norway on the first day of the IIHF World Junior Championship in Malmo, Sweden.

Defenseman Nikita Zadorov scored a pair of goals Thursday and center Mikhail Grigorenko added a goal and two assists as Russia struck five times in each of the first two periods to cruise to an 11-0 win over Norway in their opening game of the tournament.

Zadorov put the Russians ahead 2-0 at 6:26 of the opening frame when he accepted a centering pass and buried a wrist shot from the left faceoff circle high over the shoulder of the Norwegian netminder.

Grigorenko earned a secondary helper on the Zadorov marker.

Russia kept their foot on the gas with two more first-period goals before Grigorenko got one of his own. Cruising through the neutral zone, the talented centerman took a feed at the blue line, skated in 1-on-1 with a defender and quickly released a wrist shot to give Russia a 5-0 lead.

With Russia well in control of the action, Zadorov put forth a great individual effort to score his second goal of the game, stealing the puck in his own zone while on the penalty kill and skating all the way down the left side to score a short-side marker and give Russia a 9-0 lead with 2:42 to play in the second period.

In addition to notching three points, Grigorenko would finish the game with a plus-4 rating and six faceoff wins on 14 tries. Zadorov scored on both of his shots on goal while logging a plus-3 rating.

Russia, who dominated all facets of the game including a 35-14 shot advantage, moves on to face an underrated Switzerland squad on Saturday.

USA VS. CZECH REPUBLIC

Elsewhere, Jon Gillies (Calgary) stopped 23 of 24 shots as the United States began defense of their gold medal with a 5-1 triumph over the Czech Republic.

Riley Barber (Washington) and Will Butcher (Colorado) put the Americans in front 2-0 at the first intermission, while Hudson Fasching (Los Angeles), Jaccob Slavin (Carolina) and Vince Hinostroza (Chicago) provided additional goal support over the final 40 minutes. USA continues pool play Saturday against Slovakia.

CANADA VS. GERMANY

Anthony Mantha (Detroit) snatched a hat trick and 2014 NHL Draft-eligible forward Sam Reinhart recorded a goal and a helper as Canada got their World Junior Championship off on the right foot with a 7-2 victory over Germany.

Canada led 4-2 after the opening 20 minutes, but locked it down defensively the rest of the way while limiting top draft prospect Leon Draisaitl to just two shots on goal. Next up for Canada is a Saturday date with the Czech Republic. The Germans will look to even their record Friday when they take on Slovakia.

SWEDEN VS. SWITZERLAND

In the final opening day tilt, Filip Forsberg (Nashville) scored a goal and two assists as host Sweden earned a hard-fought 5-3 decision over Switzerland. Defenseman Christian Djoos (Washington) potted a power play marker to break a 3-3 tie early in the third period before Andreas Johnson (Toronto) bagged the insurance goal with under three minutes left in regulation. Sweden gets a day off before battling rival Finland on Saturday.

On Friday, Rasmus Ristolainen is expected to be in the lineup as Finland opens round robin play against Norway. The smooth defensive anchor – who hasn't seen any game action since sustaining an upper-body on while playing for the Rochester Americans of the American Hockey League – should play a pivotal role for Finland's Under-20 squad for the third straight year.

HarborCenter's hockey academy gearing up

By Amy Moritz

Buffalo News

December 26, 2013

'Twas the day after Christmas and all through the land, little boys and girls went to sleep with new hockey sticks in their hands.

But there's more to developing into a good hockey player than shiny new equipment and a few puck-handling skills.

That's where the HarborCenter Academy of Hockey comes into play.

The academy is a part of the HarborCenter project, currently under construction in front of First Niagara Center in downtown Buffalo.

While the construction includes two NHL-sized rinks and a world-class fitness center, the Academy of Hockey is about more than just your typical hockey drills and off-ice training.

It's about innovation, technology and making Buffalo a global destination for cutting-edge hockey training.

"We want to be known as the development destination for hockey players," said Kevyn Adams, HarborCenter Vice President and Director of the Hockey Academy. "We want this to be a place not only to develop the talent we have in Western New York and Southern Ontario but a destination for people from all over the world to come, train and share knowledge. Simply put, we want to be at the forefront of a player identifying how can I get better at hockey? I want to come to the academy."

It begins with state-of-the-art facilities at HarborCenter including the rinks and fitness centers. But it also includes theater-style classrooms, video and other technology to get the most out of training. (Want to see how hard you're really working? Try hooking up a heart rate monitor and having your numbers displayed on the big board.)

The buzzword is "innovation." The academy wants to be innovative in its approach to developing hockey players and that means looking at the hockey athlete, not just the hockey player.

"It's not just on-ice skills," said former Buffalo Sabre Adam Mair who has agreed to join the Academy of Hockey as a primary coach. "It's also about nutrition, working with strength and conditioning coaches and experts to develop hockey-specific off-ice conditioning. When they go into the fitness center, we want it to be very hockey-specific, something that's different than if you just go into a gym. We want to develop the athlete and not just hockey skills."

But part of the development of the complete hockey player includes specific hockey knowledge, which is where the “academy” part comes in making the venture more than just a training facility. The plan, according to Adams, includes a research component while reaching out to the best coaches and programs around the world.

“We may look at Swedish players and wonder why they’re so good at controlling the puck,” Adams said. “Coaches on our staff will do research, talk to coaches and players from Sweden, see what they’re doing and bring it here.”

That also opens up the possibility for exchange programs, sharing knowledge and making Buffalo the focal point for a range of hockey development.

“We’re going to be able to touch everybody from youths to pros. That’s the goal,” Mair said. “Boys and girls. Players and coaches. We want to raise the learning curve of hockey and hockey development in the region.”

Programming will be roughly divided between in-season and off-season. In-season programs geared more toward supplemental sessions while off-season programs will be geared toward intensive development.

And while the academy will be researching and bringing innovative training techniques to players, it also will be coaching the coaches. The academy will provide programming to coaches to help them raise their level and ability allowing the innovation at HarborCenter to have a further reach.

“We want to raise the level of coaching,” Adams said. “We want the coaches that we help educate to understand the game, the practice plans, all the things that go into coaching. We feel by them having that knowledge they go back to their programs, they’re going to certainly help develop their players and it’s just going to help more players in the area.”

While HarborCenter is still under construction, youth teams can already benefit from the expertise of the Academy of Hockey.

“If you can’t come to us, we’ll come to you,” said Nik Fattey, vice president and director of hockey at HarborCenter. “There are opportunities right now for youth teams to get involved. And we’re always ready to listen to ideas and to answer any questions about how we can help a team or league.”

Right now, youth hockey teams (ages 8-16) in Western New York and Southern Ontario can win a practice with the Academy of Hockey’s staff along with tickets to a Buffalo Sabres game as part of the Team of the Month contest.

To enter, participants should go to www.Facebook.com/HARBORCENTER to submit a nomination. In 300 words or less teams should list on-ice accomplishments, scholastic achievements and community involvement.

Entries are due by midnight, Jan. 12 with the top three teams announced on Jan. 13. Of those top three, the team with the most Facebook “likes” by 9 p.m. Jan. 17 will be the winner.

...

The Sabres did not practice on Wednesday and will also have today off as part of the three-day NHL holiday shutdown. The team will reunite for a morning skate Friday morning in Toronto before taking on the Leafs that night.

...

It looks like the Sabres will be missing forwards Matt Ellis and Johan Larsson on Friday. According to the Rochester Americans’ website, the two, who played in Buffalo’s 2-1 overtime win over the Phoenix Coyotes Monday night, were en route to Switzerland to join the team for the Spengler Cup. The Amerks are playing in the six-team tournament beginning today.