



Buffalo Sabres

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Sabres-Senators Preview

Associated Press

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The Ottawa Senators have gone to shootouts in three straight games - the last two on back-to-back nights - and only have four points to show for it.

They may want to avoid another tiebreaker against the Buffalo Sabres as the teams close out a home-and-home set at Ottawa on Thursday night.

The Senators (12-14-6) fell 2-1 to the Sabres on Tuesday, losing in a 10-round shootout after failing to capitalize on a disallowed Buffalo goal in the second period.

Milan Michalek broke a nine-game goal drought in the first for Ottawa, but rookie Zemgus Girgensons responded in the second - when Buffalo held an 18-9 shots advantage.

Ottawa, playing its third game in four nights, couldn't score again despite outshooting the Sabres 16-7 in the third period and overtime. Girgensons went on to score the winner in the shootout.

"We created things and we played fast and we played more like we want to play and we didn't put them in the net," Senators coach Paul MacLean said. "But any time you come on the road and get a point, it's usually a pretty good trip so it could be a big point at the end of the year."

At 1-0-2 in its last three, MacLean's team has at least been consistently earning points after going 3-7-0 in the previous 10.

Despite its NHL-worst record of 7-22-2, Buffalo is 4-0 in shootouts - with Ryan Miller in net for all of those wins. Miller made 35 saves to help the Sabres snap a three-game skid while taking sole possession of first place with his 46th career shootout victory. He had been tied with the New York Rangers' Henrik Lundqvist.

"He's always battling and he made some huge saves again," defenseman Christian Ehrhoff said. "He's been great every game, so it's definitely a broken record."

Miller has gone 2-0-1 with a 1.31 goals-against average in his last three starts against Ottawa.

The 19-year-old Girgensons scored for the second straight game, giving him points in his last three. The Sabres hope the 14th overall pick in the 2012 draft can continue to help provide a boost, as they're by far the lowest-scoring team in the NHL with 53 goals.

"He's getting rewarded for his work," coach Ted Nolan said. "He's always worked and good things happen when you do that. It's a good reward for a kid who's worked so hard."

Robin Lehner turned in a strong game with 35 saves for Ottawa, which would like to take advantage of a lesser opponent Thursday before matchups with Western Conference powers Los Angeles and St. Louis close out its three-game homestand.

While Lehner could be back in net for this game, Craig Anderson has posted shutouts in his last two matchups with the Sabres, the most recent a 1-0 road victory Oct. 4 in which he stopped 35 shots. Anderson, though, struggled again his last time out, allowing four goals on 29 shots in a 5-4 shootout loss to Philadelphia on Sunday. He has a 3.40 GAA compared to 2.36 for Lehner.

The Senators have gone 7-1-2 in the past 10 games in this series and 3-0-4 in the last seven at home.

Sabres generating hope; will the goals follow?

By Mike Harrington

Buffalo News

December 12, 2013

At this point, the Buffalo Sabres have to avert their eyes from the standings because the picture is pretty much always going to be ugly. They have to break the season down and chew on smaller nuggets.

Finally, the Sabres might be on to something. They are 2-2-1 in their last five games heading into tonight's rematch with the Ottawa Senators in Canadian Tire Centre.

It's by far their best five-game segment of the season, and it's allowing shreds of belief to slowly creep into their locker room.

"There's something different that's been going on here the last couple of weeks. I'm sure everybody can feel it," captain Steve Ott said after Tuesday's 2-1 shootout win over the Senators in First Niagara Center.

"We're close. We're in games. We're not getting the scoring but we're getting good opportunities. If we start scoring goals, that's a real difference-maker. When you're scoring 3-4 goals a night, that's where we need to get to because of the great goaltending we're getting."

The Sabres are still struggling mightily to score, with just seven goals in the five games. But they've only given up 10 goals, killed eight of nine penalties and dramatically cut down their shots on goal against.

Opponents are outshooting them by just 134-133 in the five games. The average of 26.8 against is nearly 10 fewer than the previous 27 contests, when Ryan Miller and Jhonas Enroth must have felt they were in a county fair shooting gallery at times.

Buffalo held Montreal to 19 shots in Saturday's 3-2 loss, its fewest by an opponent this year. On Tuesday the Sabres equaled their season high for a game (36) and set a season mark for shots in a period (18 in the second).

"Moving your feet better leads to a lot of things," Drew Stafford said. "It leads to more chances. It leads to taking less penalties. When you're not moving your feet, you end up getting your stick in places it shouldn't be. Our discipline has been better. We've improved in a lot of areas. We just have to keep at our goal scoring."

Interim coach Ted Nolan, who gave his team off Wednesday, has been suitably impressed as well.

“The one thing I’ve really noticed the last week or so is the good guys are starting to rise a little bit and the guys not putting that effort in game in and game out are starting to stick out too,” Nolan said. “We’re in a production business and you have to perform.

“Everybody who plays in the National Hockey League has a certain level of talent. Not everybody has a certain level of grit. Grit is that perseverance when obstacles present themselves, you don’t stop pursuing your vision. It’s that grit factor that separates. We have to get to that level where we have people with some grit.”

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The Senators will be without defenseman Jared Cowen tonight after he was suspended by the NHL for two games for nailing Zemgus Girgensons with a shot to the head just inside the Ottawa blue line with 1:58 left in the third period Tuesday.

There was no penalty on the play and Girgensons was not injured. He went on to score the shootout-deciding goal.

Cowen will forfeit \$31,794.88. The money goes to the Players’ Emergency Assistance Fund.

Cowen avoided a suspension after an elbow to the head of Detroit star Pavel Datsyuk on Nov. 23. Datsyuk wound up missing seven games with a concussion. He returned to the Red Wings’ lineup Tuesday night in Florida, recording a goal and an assist.

Brendan Shanahan, the NHL’s vice president of player safety, admitted last week on NHL Network that the hit was probably suspendable but Datsyuk finished that game. He developed symptoms afterward and did not travel to Buffalo for the Red Wings’ game on Nov. 24.

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The Sabres improved to an NHL-best 4-0 in shootouts with Tuesday’s win. The 10-round affair was their longest ever in a victory; the franchise record of 11 rounds was set in a 4-3 loss to Colorado in 2010 with Patrick Lalime in goal.

Miller made seven saves Tuesday, snapping a tie with New York’s Henrik Lundqvist for the most career shootout wins in NHL history. Miller is 46-27, including 24-13 at home, while Lundqvist is 45-30.

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Former Sabres forward Adam Mair has joined the HarborCenter Academy of Hockey staff as a coach, academy director Kevyn Adams announced Wednesday.

Mair, who played 498 games for the Sabres from 2002-2010, has spent the past two years as the director of player development for Canisius College. He will lead clinics while also providing on-ice instruction and classroom teaching.

The Academy of Hockey will provide development programs, on and off-ice training lectures and private classes for coaches and players. It is a key component of the Sabres' new complex slated to open next fall adjacent to First Niagara Center.

Senators seek split of home-and-home with Sabres

By Brian Hunter

NHL.com

December 11, 2013

SABRES (7-22-2) at SENATORS (12-14-6)

TV: MSG-B, BELL TV, SNET-OTT

Last 10: Buffalo 2-7-1; Ottawa 4-4-2

Season series: This is the third of four games this season between the Buffalo Sabres and Ottawa Senators, and the completion of a home-and-home that began Tuesday at First Niagara Center in Buffalo. Zemgus Girgensons scored the game-tying goal in the second period and connected in the 10th round of the shootout as the Sabres edged the Senators 2-1. Ottawa won 1-0 back on Oct. 4.

Big story: If you want to beat the Sabres, do it before the shootout. Buffalo is 3-22-2 in games that end in either regulation or overtime, but a perfect 4-0 in the penalty-shot tiebreaker. Matt Moulson, Brian Flynn and Steve Ott also scored prior to Girgensons, while Mika Zibanejad, Kyle Turris and Milan Michalek answered for Ottawa.

Team Scope:

Sabres: Girgensons, the 14th pick in the 2012 NHL Draft, had one goal in his first 28 games but now has goals in consecutive games and a three-game point streak overall.

Ryan Miller helped Buffalo make it as far as a shootout by stopping 35 shots during regulation and overtime. His teammates picked him up a bit from there. Flynn and Ott gave the Sabres leads in the shootout, scoring in the sixth and seventh rounds respectively, but Miller allowed goals to Turris and Michalek that kept the game going. After Girgensons scored in the 10th round, Miller denied Erik Condra to secure the second point.

"We haven't had a chance to win a lot of games," Miller said after his 46th career shootout win, tops in NHL history. "I want to win some games. So, if this is going to be my opportunity to win a game for any number of games, I got to take it and give these guys some confidence."

Senators: At the opposite end of the spectrum, Ottawa dropped to 1-5 in shootouts. The Senators hadn't even scored in the skills competition prior to Jason Spezza connecting in a win against the Philadelphia Flyers on Monday, and despite putting three pucks past Miller on Tuesday they were unable to make it two in a row.

Robin Lehner had been excellent up to that point, like Miller turning aside 35 shots. But the Senators were never able to build on the lead Michalek established by scoring 6:25 into the game.

"We tried, but unfortunately it comes down to a shootout, and that's not my best right now," Lehner said in the Ottawa Sun.

Who's hot: Miller continues to give the Sabres a chance on a nightly basis, recording a save percentage above .900 in 16 of 22 appearances, including six in a row. Christian Ehrhoff has one goal and three assists in his past five games.

Injury report: Buffalo defenseman Alexander Sulzer (undisclosed) is on injured reserve.

Jared Cowen suspended 2 games for hit on Sabres' Zemgus Girgensons

By Bill Hoppe

Olean Times Herald

December 11, 2013

BUFFALO – The NHL has suspended Ottawa Senators defenseman Jared Cowen two games for an illegal check to Zemgus Girgensons' head late in the Sabres' 2-1 shootout win Tuesday.

In a video explaining the ban, NHL disciplinarian Brendan Shanahan noted that while Cowen had tucked in his elbow, he drove his left shoulder into Girgensons' head, the main point of contact, as the winger entered the Ottawa zone. Girgensons made no sudden movements, Shanahan said.

Girgensons stayed in the game, scoring the 10th-round shootout winner.

Cowen hasn't been fined or suspended in his 121-game NHL career. He forfeits \$31,794.88 in salary. The Sabres play Thursday in Ottawa.

Stats Say Girgensons Has Been Even Better Than You Think

By Matthew Collier

WGR 550

December 11, 2013

Over his last stretch of games, Buffalo Sabres' forward Zemgus Girgensons has caught the attention of Sabres' fans who are desperately looking for signs of light in a rebuilding year.

There was an boost of energy around the franchise when Pat LaFontaine took over as head of Hockey Operations, but the team has only scored 16 goals in 11 games under interim head coach Ted Nolan and is 3-7-1.

But one thing Nolan has done is put Girgensons in position to succeed. He's given the the Latvian native top minutes with quality players and it's shown results on the score board.

Girgensons has two goals and two assists in 11 games since Nolan took over. A closer look at his season and recent results show that the young forward has been even better than the traditional numbers suggest.

The Sabres' power forward has risen to the top of the chart in puck possession. His Corsi % (a possession measure that uses shot attempts for and against at 5v5) is 47.0%, which ranks No.1 amongst Buffalo forwards with over 200 minutes played.

When he's on the ice, the Sabres improve greatly in terms of possession. His Corsi % Relative to teammates is +4.4%, which basically means the team is 4.4% better in terms of possession when he's on the ice than when he's off. In terms of shots that reach the netminder, the 19-year-old has the best on-ice percentage of the game's shots on goal at 48.2%

Basically, Girgensons is the best possession player on the team and his rise to the top of the chart has happened mostly under Nolan. In the last 10 games, he's posting a whopping 57% Corsi%. To give some context to that figure: If everyone on the Sabres repeated it, they would be a top five possession team. The best possession players in the NHL (Anze Kopitar, Zach Parise etc.) are around 60%.

And his success isn't based on getting easy minutes. He's often been matched against second lines and second pairings and has an offensive zone start percentage of 48.9%, which is a little above average and a lower percentage of total faceoffs taken in the O-zone than Ville Leino and Tyler Ennis.

The question mark around Girgensons from Day 1 has been if he could score goals. Certainly THIS goal against Montreal suggests he can. But do the stats back up that he can be an effective scorer?

Small sample size is in play here. He's only played 30 NHL games and 2/3rds of an AHL season as a pro. Girgensons hasn't gone wild with posting points in either league. But one underlying stat might suggest good things: His 5v5 scoring rate.

His Even-Strength scoring rate (points per 60 minutes) is No. 1 on the Sabres – ahead of Cody Hodgson, ahead of Tyler Ennis, Drew Stafford, Matt Moulson...everyone. The rate isn't blow-you-away great at 1.64/60 (top 5v5 scorers are around 3) but considering he hasn't spent much time with the Sabres with some offensive talent, that's darn impressive.

Scoring ceiling will continue to be a debate with the 19-year-old. Depending on his usage, circumstances and development, he could follow a similar path to St. Louis' David Backes or Colorado's Ryan O'Reilly – neither of which scored big in their early years, but turned into quality offensive talents. Or he could remain a 20-30 point type player.

But considering he's posted the best rate at 5v5, it might be time to give him a shot on the power play. I mean, what's the worst that can happen? He might be the type who could post up down low and slam pucks into the net off of rebounds.

There's another factor that may come as a surprise from a player who is third on the Sabres in hits: According to ExtraSkater.com, Girgensons has a +5 penalty ratio. He's drawn six penalties this season and only taken one. So he's playing hard, but not stupid.

By comparison, Tyler Ennis has taken eight penalties and only drawn four.

So there's little question Girgensons has been great under Nolan. How good can he be? You have to look to scouting to take a guess, but there's never a guarantee of any player turning into a star.

That said, scouts and hockey people are blown away by his work ethic. It's elite. His defensive skills have the potential to be elite. Girgensons' backchecking ability is already as good as the best defensive forwards in the NHL and his skating is well above average and improving all the time.

There's more to his makeup than just hard work. He wants to be great and he wants more than anything to win. You would think this would come standard with pro athletes, but anyone whose covered minor league sports will assure you that it does not.

After the Amerks lost in the playoffs last year – a series in which Girgensons scored three goals in three games – the young forward (the league's youngest player at the time) refused to talk about his own performance out of disgust for losing the series. Mark down: “Hates to lose.”

Following the Sabres' loss to Montreal – a game in which he scored a beautiful goal – he barely acknowledged his goal in a post-game TV interview and did NOT say the team “needs to get some bounces.” He's got a captain's mentality at a young age. That's not easy to find.

Should we all buy in? To him as a leader and a major part of the future, yes. To him being a top liner and offensive threat, go with maybe for now. As a puck possessing, dominant defender who opponents hate to play against? Absolutely.

Not a bad guy to start a rebuild around, huh.

Another candidate for Sabres General Manager

By Howard Simon

WGR 550

December 11, 2013

Add another name to the list of candidates for the job of Buffalo Sabres General Manager.

TSN's Bob McKenzie reports the Sabres have asked the Los Angeles Kings for permission to speak with Mike Futa, the Kings Director of Amateur Scouting. There was no word as to whether or not the permission had been granted.

The 45 year old Futa is in his seventh season with the Kings hockey operations department. Prior to coming to LA, Futa spent five years as General Manager of Owen Sound in the Ontario Hockey League. The native of Toronto was also Assistant Coach and Assistant GM in Oshawa for two years.

McKenzie believes there are six to 10 names on LaFontaine's list and that he's probably spoken to two thirds or three quarters of those candidates.

McKenzie thinks the Sabres won't have a GM in place until the New Year at the earliest and perhaps closer to the Olympics.

The Ottawa Sun reports Senators Assistant GM Tim Murray did interview with LaFontaine on Tuesday. The Sun quotes a Sabres insider as saying "He's(LaFontaine) waiting for someone to knock his socks off."