



# **Buffalo Sabres**

## **Daily Press Clips**

*April 5, 2016*

## Sabres-Devils Preview

By Tom Castro

AP

April 5, 2016

Though it's often difficult to put much stock into strong late-season results from a team eliminated from playoff contention, the Buffalo Sabres' surge seems very promising for 2016-17 and beyond.

The New Jersey Devils don't appear nearly as inspired as they play out the string.

The Sabres look to win their third straight and end a five-game losing streak against the Devils as the teams close out their season series Tuesday night.

Buffalo denied the New York Rangers a chance to clinch a playoff berth Saturday, holding on to win 4-3 after taking a 3-0 lead and chasing goaltender Henrik Lundqvist early in the second period. Ryan O'Reilly scored twice and Chad Johnson stopped 15 of 16 shots faced in the third for Buffalo, 6-2-2 in its last 10.

The Sabres (33-35-11) neutralized a late two-man, two-minute disadvantage with New York looking for the equalizer. They've killed off 24 of the last 25 power plays faced.

"We're doing everything," said Johnson, who had 33 saves and is expected to make his ninth straight start Tuesday. "We're trying to be spoiler, we're just trying to play our game. We had a tough start and we are just jelling as a group now.

"You're starting to see it all come together, the chemistry, the compete we have. It doesn't matter where you are in the standings. You want to win."

O'Reilly has three goals and three assists in a four-game point streak for Buffalo, which has made a 10-win improvement - and counting - from last season. He's recorded three goals and six assists in nine contests since returning from a lower-body injury that kept him out 11 games.

O'Reilly became the fourth Sabres player with 20 goals this season, joining fellow 20-somethings Evander Kane and Sam Reinhart and 19-year-old Jack Eichel. It's the first time Buffalo has had four 20-goal scorers age 25 or younger since 1987-88.

"We made our chances and we buried them early," O'Reilly said. "(Johnson) is one of the best goalies in the league. For us to do that, it gives confidence to our offense."

The Sabres will need it against the Devils (37-34-8), who have outscored Buffalo 15-6 in winning the last five meetings. Cory Schneider made 25 saves in the most recent one, a 2-0 victory at Buffalo on Dec. 15.

New Jersey has won four in a row at home in the series and gone 5-0-2 in the previous seven matchups there.

Schneider made 33 saves in his return from a sprained knee that kept him out 11 games but suffered his fifth straight loss and eighth in nine starts Saturday, 3-1 to Tampa Bay. The Devils have dropped four of five.

"I thought he came back and played well," coach John Hynes said.

New Jersey has averaged 1.40 goals in the past five games and is in danger of finishing last in the league with a 2.20 season mark. Adam Henrique scored his 28th on Saturday, but leading goal scorer Kyle Palmieri (29) has gone five in a row without one.

Four of the Devils' last five goals have come on the power play over the past three games.

## **Sabres take aim at .500 points percentage**

By Mike Harrington  
Buffalo News  
April 5, 2016

NEWARK, N.J. – The Buffalo Sabres were a 30th-place team each of the last two seasons, mired in the netherworld of the NHL standings. As they head into the final week and the final three games of this campaign, they have a tangible and realistic goal within their grasp.

No, it's not the playoffs. The Sabres will be shut out of the postseason party for the fifth straight year and seventh time in nine seasons. But from the Walk Before You Run Department comes the following slice of numerology:

The Sabres enter Tuesday's game against the New Jersey Devils with a 33-35-11 record for 77 points. If they go 2-0-1 in their final three games, they would finish 35-35-12. That would be 82 points in the 82-game schedule, or a points percentage of .500 that could push them up eight or nine slots in the standings from a year ago.

And that would make for quite a good-looking transition season.

(Some would be quick to say that would actually be a won-lost record of 35-47 but points percentage is what drives hockey coaches and statisticians alike. This is not a strict W-L like the NFL, NBA or Major League Baseball. The Sabres would have exactly half of the 164 possible points for the season.)

"That would be huge," center Ryan O'Reilly, who missed practice Tuesday with an undisclosed injury, said after Saturday's 4-3 win in New York. "One thing we know here is you don't just add one player, make a couple adjustments and you're a contending team. You have to chip away at it and get better. So that's a good goal for us."

"It's not where we're trying to go but when you're looking at where we've been, it's definitely a step in the right direction," added defenseman Josh Gorges. "We're not there yet. We don't want to count any chickens before they hatch. We have to take these last three games, do things the right way and we'll see where we stand at the end of it.

"I definitely think this team has taken a step in the right direction. You look at the way we've played in the last two months and if we played this way all year, we're in much more of a playoff position than we are now."

The Sabres will finish the season with a home game Friday against Columbus and a road game Saturday at the New York Islanders. They need three points to forge a 26-point improvement over last season, which would be the third-largest in franchise history.

Of course, that comes with the caveat the team was set up to fail last year by a management group obsessed with getting the No. 1 pick in the draft. That didn't materialize but the Sabres still landed Jack Eichel at No. 2 and he's become a 20-goal man in his first season and the first Buffalo rookie to crack the 50-point mark since 1994.

The Sabres were 15-22-4 in the first half of the season and have improved to 18-13-7 in the second half, including 6-2-2 in their last 10 games. Their goal differential for the season, eliminating shootout winners, is minus-16. Last year, it was an astonishing minus-116.

"We had a tough start and we are really just getting it now," said goaltender Chad Johnson. "We had a new coach, new faces and I think you are seeing it all come together. The chemistry, the compete we have, sort of buying into our system. Guys are more comfortable with that."

"We've come a long way," added first-year coach Dan Bylsma. "I maybe underestimated the distance we had to travel to get to that mentality where we thought we could win games. ... We feel that's the case right now. We've got that in our team."

Look no further than the club's road record. The Sabres are 17-17-5 away from First Niagara Center. Their record on the road the last two years combined? A hapless 17-59-6.

Bylsma said this year's road record could be even better were it not for a couple of disheartening losses earlier in the season to returning Stanley Cup finalists Tampa Bay and Chicago. And there was last week's shootout defeat in Pittsburgh in a game Buffalo led, 3-0, after the first period.

"There's a few games out there, so we should be even better on the road," he said. "But I do think it plays to the mentality of our team. We've shown we're going to be a relentless team that keeps working, playing regardless of the situation."

Indeed, there is no longer panic when games start to go awry. The Sabres nearly blew a pair of three-goal leads Saturday in Madison Square Garden but again got strong work from Johnson and got a clutch penalty kill of a two-minute, five-on-three situation late in the third period.

"Our details and the way we're playing the system have really helped," said winger Marcus Foligno. "We have a lot of belief in the older guys, a lot of belief in 'Johnny.' We have a lot of trust. The previous two years, it seemed we didn't want to play an offensive game so you're sitting there on defense a lot and you can't do that against a team like the Rangers.

"We want to go out and win these next three games. It's nice to see it turning and you can really see it now. We're competing. We're a hockey club that next year can really be a good hockey club. It starts now."

## **Sabres notebook: Ryan O'Reilly's status in doubt for game**

By Mike Harrington  
Buffalo News  
April 5, 2016

NEWARK, N.J. – The Buffalo Sabres' top two centers both sat out practice here Monday, and it appears Ryan O'Reilly is definitely questionable to play in Tuesday's game against the New Jersey Devils.

O'Reilly and Jack Eichel both missed practice for what coach Dan Bylsma termed maintenance days. Bylsma was coy about who could be in danger of missing the game but noted that O'Reilly was injured during Saturday's 4-3 win over the New York Rangers in Madison Square Garden while Eichel was simply dealing with ongoing issues.

The tea leaves thus surround the status of O'Reilly, especially when Bylsma said it's possible the team could call up a forward from Rochester for the game. It could mean the return of Justin Bailey, who has 19 goals and is the first Rochester rookie to crack the 40-point mark in four years.

O'Reilly played only 18 minutes, 24 seconds in Saturday's game, nearly three minutes under his season average of 21:45 that leads all NHL forwards. Still, O'Reilly played 7:02 in the third period, including the final 2:01 as the Sabres were protecting their one-goal lead.

O'Reilly scored a pair of first-period goals in the game, giving him 20 on the season for the second time in his career. O'Reilly joined the Sabres' under-25 quartet of 20-goal scorers that also includes Eichel, Sam Reinhart and Evander Kane.

It's the first time the Sabres have had four players 25 or younger hit the 20-goal mark since 1987-88, when Hall of Famer Phil Housley, Dave Andreychuk, Christian Ruutu and Ray Sheppard all accomplished the same feat.

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The Devils might get a big name back in their lineup against the Sabres as 40-year-old Patrik Elias could make his return from knee surgery that has kept him out of the lineup since Dec. 19.

Elias is the franchise's all-time leading scorer and a two-time Stanley Cup winner but is in the final season of his contract and this could be his final week with the team. Elias has one goal and four assists in 13 games this season - but has 407 goals and 1,022 points for New Jersey in a career that saw the first of his 1,237 games played way back in 1996. He has 45 playoff goals and assisted on Jason Arnott's Cup-clinching goal in double overtime of Game Six in the 2000 final in Dallas.

Coach John Hynes said forwards Joe Blandisi (lower body) and Sergey Kalinin (illness) are questionable after not practicing Tuesday, which could facilitate Elias' return. Cory Schneider will start in goal.

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Bylsma said the Sabres' 50-minute practice was reminiscent of what teams endure in the playoffs because there were so many players missing. Certainly in the not-drawn-up-in-October category was an April practice that did not include Eichel, O'Reilly, Kane, Tyler Ennis, Robin Lehner or Cody Franson.

"This time of year, you get short practices and guys are banged up, injured and not out there," said Bylsma, who has been a part of the postseason each of his first six years as an NHL coach. "You kind of feel like, even though it's our last three games, it's pretty normal to have guys banged up and maybe not practicing but being out there for the games.

The Sabres' practiced Tuesday in the Barnabas Health Hockey House, the Devils' practice rink located inside Prudential Center. The team dressed in the normal visiting locker room and simply took a long walk through the

building's corridors into the facility, which features large replicas of all the Devils' championship banners that hang in the rafters of the main arena. The Hockey House, which took its new corporate name two weeks ago is the rink the Buffalo Beauts and Boston Pride played in last month in the first championship series of the National Women's Hockey League. The Pride swept the series in two straight games.

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The Sabres reassigned defenseman Brendan Guhle, their second-round pick last June, to Rochester after his junior team was eliminated from the Western Hockey League playoffs. In addition, 2015 sixth-rounder Giorgio Estephan was named to an Amateur Tryout by the Amerks after his WHL squad was also eliminated.

Guhle, 18, appeared in 63 WHL games with the Prince Albert Raiders, posting a career-high 10 goals and 18 assists. Estephan, 19, had 30 goals and a career-high 74 points with the Lethbridge Hurricanes, and had four points in five playoff games.

## **Sabres prospect Bailey finishing strong with Amerks**

By Amy Moritz

Buffalo News

April 5, 2016

Justin Bailey's second-half surge continued for the Rochester Americans this week.

The right winger picked up two goals and an assist for the Amerks, moving him into the Top 10 in rookie scoring in the American Hockey League.

Bailey has 20 points in his last 16 games for the Amerks. On the season he has 43 points (19 goals, 24 assists) becoming the first Amerks' rookie to reach the 40-point mark since Johan Larsson had 41 in 2012-13. Larsson, however, played 62 games that season with the Houston Aeros before being traded from Minnesota to Buffalo. He played seven games with Rochester to close out his AHL rookie campaign.

Bailey, the Williamsville native drafted by the Sabres in the second round in 2013, has found his groove in his first professional hockey season.

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The results for the Amerks haven't been as strong.

Rochester defeated the Crunch, 5-1, in Syracuse on Saturday but bookended that with home losses to Grand Rapids (6-1 on Friday, 5-2 on Sunday).

The Amerks are now 33-34-2-1 with six games left in the season. They host Binghamton on Friday then have a home-and-home series with Lake Erie, starting in Rochester Saturday and moving to Cleveland on Sunday.

Rochester added two new players to the roster. Brendan Guhle was assigned to the Amerks by the Sabres after his junior hockey season ended this week. Giorgio Estephan, drafted by the Sabres in 2015, signed an ATO with the Amerks after his junior season with Lethbridge ended as well.

### Western Hockey League

Giorgio Estephan (forward, Lethbridge) had a goal and an assist but his team was eliminated from the playoffs, losing in five games to Regina. Estephan had two goals and two assists in five playoff games.

Brendan Guhle (defenseman, Prince Albert) had three assists in five games in the loss to Moose Jaw. Had six penalty minutes in the series and was a plus-one.

Brycen Martin (defenseman, Everett) had two points (goal, assist) and a plus-3 rating as Everett advanced to the second round by sweeping Portland in the best-of-seven series. The Silvertips meet Seattle in the next round which begins on Friday.

Devante Stephens (defenseman, Kelowna) has no points and an even rating as Kelowna faced Kamloops in a deciding Game Seven on Monday.

### Ontario Hockey League

Eric Cornel (forward, Peterborough) had a goal on Sunday as the Petes forced a deciding Game Seven in their series with North Bay. Cornel has five points (one goal, four assists) in six playoff games with 17 shots and a plus-3 rating. Game Seven is Tuesday.

### Quebec Major Junior Hockey League

Vaclav Karabacek (forward, Moncton) had two goals, including a power play tally, and one assist as Moncton advanced to the quarterfinals by defeating Victoriaville in five games. Moncton meets Gatineau in the quarterfinals.

#### College hockey

Christopher Brown (forward, Boston College) – The freshman gets his first taste of the Frozen Four when the Eagles meet Quinnipiac in the national semifinal on Thursday in Tampa. The winner will advance to Saturday's national championship game against the winner of North Dakota-Denver.

## Sabres' Eichel, O'Reilly questionable for Tuesday

By Joseph Calabrese

NHL.com

April 5, 2016

**SABRES (33-35-11) at DEVILS (37-34-8)**

**TV: 7 p.m. ET; BELL TV, MSG-B, MSG+, NHL.TV**

**Season series:** The New Jersey Devils have defeated the Buffalo Sabres at First Niagara Center twice. Adam Henrique had two goals and an assist in New Jersey's 4-3 win on Oct. 24. Cory Schneider made 25 saves and the Devils shut out the Sabres 2-0 on Dec. 15. Ryan O'Reilly has a goal and two assists for Buffalo.

**Sabres team scope:** Jack Eichel and O'Reilly did not practice Monday; it was a maintenance day for each. O'Reilly sustained an undisclosed injury in a 4-3 victory against the New York Rangers on Saturday. Coach Dan Bylsma hinted that one would be questionable and that a player could be recalled from Rochester of the American Hockey League if necessary. Two of Buffalo's final three games are on the road, the first at Prudential Center. "Good teams win two out of three. Good teams get four points in six games. Good teams win on the road and that's what we're trying to do," Bylsma said. "That's what we're trying to do these last three games." Buffalo is 6-2-2 in its past 10 games.

**Devils team scope:** Defenseman Jon Merrill (shoulder) will miss New Jersey's final three games, coach John Hynes said Monday. Schneider made 33 saves in his return from a lower-body injury in a 3-1 loss at the Tampa Bay Lightning on Saturday. The Devils failed to qualify for the Stanley Cup Playoffs for a fourth straight season. "If you don't make the playoffs it's not a success," captain Andy Greene told The (Newark) Star-Ledger. "We're building something here. Just like every other team, we had some injuries and lost some key guys for a while. Up until about game 60 or 65, we were right there. We just didn't do enough." New Jersey reassigned defenseman Seth Helgeson to Albany of the AHL on Monday. Kyle Palmieri (29) and Henrique (28), who have each set a career-high in scoring, have three games remaining to try and reach the 30-goal mark.

## **Sabres' Jack Eichel, Ryan O'Reilly questionable for Devils**

By Bill Hoppe  
Olean Times Herald  
April 5, 2016

Buffalo Sabres centers Jack Eichel and Ryan O'Reilly are both questionable for tonight's road game against the New Jersey Devils, coach Dan Bylsma told reporters in Newark.

Bylsma said Eichel enjoyed a maintenance from practice Monday. O'Reilly, meanwhile, rested something he hurt in Saturday's 4-3 win against the New York Rangers.

Bylsma said he expects one to play "for sure." That's likely Eichel.

The Sabres could recall a forward, Bylsma said.

In other news, the Sabres assigned defenseman Brendan Guhle, the 51<sup>st</sup> overall pick in June, from the Western Hockey League's Prince Albert Raiders to the AHL Rochester Americans on Monday.

Guhle, 18, impressed during NHL training camp in September, getting a long look from the Sabres. He recently finished his third junior season with 10 goals and 28 points in 63 games.

## **Sabres are missing two from practice**

By Paul Hamilton

WGR 550

April 5, 2016

Newark, NJ (WGR 550) -- After a day off, the Sabres practiced on Monday without two regulars. Jack Eichel and Ryan O'Reilly didn't even come to the rink for the practice. Eichel is expected to play on Tuesday, but O'Reilly is questionable. Dan Bylsma was very cryptic, "Both Jack and Ryan had maintenance days. I expect one of them to play for sure tomorrow and the other one is questionable and I'm not going to tell you which one."

That lasted for less than 30 seconds when he was asked if an injury happened in the Rangers game, "Yes for Ryan and not for Jack, Jack is just a maintenance day."

If O'Reilly can't go a forward will be called up from Rochester.

With the win at Madison Square Garden, the Sabres are 17-17-5 on the road. By comparison, the Rangers are 18-17-5. Personally I think that's better than anyone could've imagined for this team, but Bylsma feels it should be better, "We've been able to do it on the road in some tough places, but I think our record should be better than that on the road. We let a game slip in Tampa, the 2-1 game, Chicago's another example and the Pittsburgh game as well, we're still kicking ourselves over the Pittsburgh game, so I feel like we should be better than we are on the road."

There are parts of his team's game that he likes on the road. Bylsma said, "I think it plays to the mentality of our team where we've shown we're going to be a relentless team that keeps working and keeps playing regardless of the situation and it shows when we get down in the game as well, we're willing to keep fighting and keep battling and keep playing."

At the end of December and the beginning of January the Sabres had lost six straight. On January 10 they won in Winnipeg and have gone 18-13-7 in 38 games. That means they've picked up points in 25 of 38 games and have a point percentage of .556.

Overall that puts them in the middle of the league giving them 93 points over 82 games, but it's a big improvement for a team that picked up a total of 54 points last year. Dan Bylsma said, "Getting the points in the last 42 games has been a significant pace for our team and that's what good teams do, good teams win two out of three, they get four point in six games, they win on the road and that's what we're trying to do."

Just as any coach will do, Bylsma thought early on that his team could challenge for the playoffs. He said, "We've come a long way, I maybe underestimated the distance we had to travel to get that mentality where we thought we could win games, but I think we feel that's the case right now. We've got that on our team."

Sabres 2015 second round pick Brendan Guhle has been sent to Rochester. Sixth round pick Giorgio Estephan has signed an ATO with the Amerks.

Guhle had a great preseason before getting hit with his head down by Dion Phaneuf which ended his preseason.

In 63 games with Prince Albert he had 10 goals and 18 assists for 28 points.

Estephan put up terrific number in Lethbridge scoring 30 goals and 44 assists for 74 points in 59 games.

## **Nelson adjusting to life in the NHL**

By Brayton J. Wilson

WGR 550

April 5, 2016

Nearly two weeks ago, defenseman Casey Nelson decided to skip his senior season with Minnesota State University at Mankato to sign an entry-level contract with the Buffalo Sabres.

In five games since his arrival, Nelson has four assist and has set himself up for a possible future with the Sabres organization. But Nelson has had to adjust to the transition from the college game to the National Hockey League.

"[Hudson Fasching and I] got [to Buffalo] probably a day or two before the guys actually got into town," Nelson said to Howard Simon and Jeremy White this morning on WGR. "We got situated, started meeting everyone. I think that helped out a lot. It was nice that we didn't have to get thrown in right away, and it was nice to get a couple of practices in as well before we had a game."

"The guys have been unbelievable so far, and I don't think that's going to change. They took us in, me and Hudson, and they put us through the ropes and helped us out a lot. [But] I still think we have a lot of learning to do yet."

In his short time in the NHL, Nelson has had to face some of the league's best players, including Sidney Crosby, Pavel Datsyuk, and Rick Nash. In his game against Penguins, Nelson faced a player that he has idolized over the past few years in Kris Letang, and remembers facing him for the first time.

"I've been looking up to Kris Letang for many years," Nelson said. "I kind of idolized him for quite a while, and I think my biggest 'oh my God' moment was having him come down on me, almost one-on-one, and kind of rubbed him off into the boards."

## **Is Sabres season a success?**

By Howard Simon

WGR 550

April 5, 2016

As we enter the final week of the NHL regular season, the standings will say the Sabres are closer to last place overall than a playoff spot. But does anybody really think the season is more of a failure than a success?

I guess it depends on what you were expecting this season. I wasn't thinking this team would contend for a playoff spot. I was anticipating around 75 points but you could have twisted my arm and gotten me to say 80 points.

The Sabres have 77 points with three games left and have done this with the starting goaltender, Robin Lehner, playing just 21 games. The season has basically been a wash for Tyler Ennis who has three goals in 23 games and hasn't played since the end of December.

Zemgus Girgensons has taken a step back in terms of offensive production and Matt Moulson essentially fell off a cliff.

There are a number of reasons to feel good about the Sabres as the season comes to a close with Jack Eichel being at the top of the list. All that pain and suffering was worth it as Eichel has put together an impressive rookie campaign. His 23 goals leads the Sabres and is tied for 2nd most among NHL rookies. His 52 points is 2nd on the team and 2nd among rookies. Eichel also leads the team in power play goals and game winning goals and he's only going to get better.

While you might not be surprised by Eichel's performance, I'm guessing most of you didn't expect Sam Reinhart to look this good in his first full NHL season. Reinhart has been as advertised, showing off his smarts for the game, on ice vision and passing ability. But Reinhart has also contributed to the scoring with 22 goals, 2nd most behind Eichel.

Eichel and Reinhart are two of the Sabres four players to reach the 20 goal mark this season and all four are age 25 or younger. The last time that happened with the Sabres was the 1987-88 season.

Evander Kane, who never met a shot he didn't like, ended his first season in Blue and Gold with 20 goals in 65 games, the second best single season goal total in his career.

The fourth player to reach that 20 goal mark is Ryan O'Reilly. Thank you very much Colorado Avalanche. O'Reilly has done everything the Sabres could have asked for and more. His 20 goals are the 2nd best season in his career as are his 58 points. Whether its being on the number one power play, anchoring penalty killing or handling key faceoffs, O'Reilly has flourished in his many roles. He's also provided valuable leadership for the younger players on the team. The only negative in his first season as a Sabre was a 24 game goal scoring drought but O'Reilly still had 19 assists in that stretch.

Rasmus Ristolainen has taken over the role as top defenseman on this team. In his 2nd full season, Ristolainen has seen his average ice time go up from 20:37 a game last season to 25:17. After scoring 20 points last season( 8 goals, 12 assists), the native of Finland has 40 points this season( 9 goals, 31 assist). Its the most points by a Sabres defenseman since Tyler Myers six years ago.

Marcus Foligno has a career high 10 goals. Johan Larsson, after scoring one goal from October through January, has scored eight in his last 25 games.

Zach Bogosian got off to a slow start and a late start to the season due to an injury but has hit his stride with six goals and 15 points in his last 20 games.

Granted it is a small sample size but Lehner was solid with a .924 save percentage in his 21 games and backup Chad Johnson has recorded 21 wins and a save percentage of .919.

It took time for all the new parts to come together, for the young players to grow and for the team to learn the complexities of Dan Bylsma's system but you can definitely see the progress.

The Sabres are 18-13-7 in the second half of the season. That's 43 points in 38 games. If you project that over an 82 game season, it comes out to 92 points which, if you were wondering, would have the Sabres in 3rd place in the Atlantic Division today and in a playoff spot.

This doesn't mean General Manager Tim Murray doesn't have work to do. He still needs to improve the offense by bringing in another scoring winger for one of the top two lines and another top four defenseman would be nice too.

If that can be accomplished then we should be thinking playoffs next season.

## **O'Reilly, Eichel absent from practice as Sabres approach final 3 games**

By Chris Ryndak

Sabres.com

April 5, 2016

**NEWARK** – The Buffalo Sabres have been focused on three-game segments all year and they'll enter the final three-game segment of the season this week.

They prepared for their contest against the New Jersey Devils scheduled for Tuesday night with a practice Monday afternoon at Prudential Center. Centers Jack Eichel and Ryan O'Reilly were given maintenance days and were absent from practice.

Sabres coach Dan Bylsma wouldn't specify, but said that he expects one of them to play Tuesday. A recall from Rochester may be necessary if the other is unable to go.

The Sabres have been able to fill holes in their lineup all year and despite some key players missing time, they've been able to play some good hockey. The team is currently without the services of 20-goal scorer Evander Kane, No. 1 goalie Robin Lehner, last year's leading scorer Tyler Ennis and Cody Franson, who has been expected to provide some offense from the blue line.

However, even with those players out, the Sabres are 6-2-2 in their past 10 games and are coming off back-to-back wins over Toronto and the Rangers. Only Pittsburgh has more points in that span with 18.

The final three-game stretch begins Tuesday against the Devils, continues at home on Friday when the Blue Jackets come to town for Fan Appreciation Night and concludes on Saturday in Brooklyn against the Islanders.

"Good teams win two out of three. Good teams get four points in six games. Good teams win on the road and that's what we're trying to do," Sabres coach Dan Bylsma said. "That's what we're trying to do these last three games."

If Buffalo is able to pick up five points over its past three games, they can finish .500 with 82 points.

They've come a long way since starting the season 3-7-0.

"I maybe underestimated the distance we had to travel to get to that mentality where we thought we could win games whether we're on the road in a tough place to play, whether we're playing a tough opponent where we know we can go out and win a hockey game," Bylsma said.

"I think we feel that's the case now. I think we've got that in our team, we've got that in our mentality. We see it with different guys leaving our lineup."

After last-place finishes the past two seasons, the opportunity to hit that .500 mark is on their minds.

"It's a big change. The core of the team is looking really good. We try to build a team to win a championship and I think it's going in the right direction," Nicolas Deslauriers said. "Obviously it's sad to see we didn't make the playoffs, but we're progressing the right way. We need to come back next year and be way better."

For players like Deslauriers and Marcus Foligno, who have been through those rough patches, there's a lot at stake in these final three games.

"We want to go out and win these games. For myself, I've been here for awhile and it's nice to see it turning. You can really see it now," Marcus Foligno, who has set career highs with 10 goals and 23 points so far this season, said. "We're competing. We're a hockey club that next year is going to be a really good hockey club and definitely will hopefully have more points than 85 – that we're around 95 next year. But it all starts now."

Buffalo is 17-17-5 on the road this year, but Bylsma thinks that, had they held onto leads in some games or if things had gone their way in others, that record could be much better. Bylsma has made it a point of emphasis that his team goes out with the same style regardless of where they're playing or who the opponent may be.

Lately, the Sabres have been able to execute. Their win against the Rangers on Saturday was their first in 10 tries against New York and it came at Madison Square Garden.

"I think it plays to the mentality of our team. We've shown we're going to be a relentless team, a team that keeps working, keeps playing regardless of the situation. And it shows when we get down in a game as well. We are willing to keep fighting, keep battling and keep playing."

Pregame coverage Tuesday night begins at 6:30 p.m. on MSG and Bell TV. The match against the Devils can also be heard live on WGR 550.